**Catholic Education and the Great Books**

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One of the most obvious features of a school is its curriculum, and within its curriculum, the list of books read. Thus, when a school has a "Great Books" curriculum, it is almost inevitable that it should be characterized as *that kind* of school. In studying the nature and purpose of the school, one begins with this assumption, and tries to understand everything within its light. Accordingly, since Thomas Aquinas College has such a curriculum, it is frequently likened to other schools which use the same books, and its education program is assumed to be essentially the same.

**The Great Books** vs. **Text Books**

Such an assumption is reasonable, for not only is this reading list a true point of resemblance, but it is also based upon principles which are to a considerable extent held in common. In the first place, it is commonly held that the Great Books are intrinsically better than the multitude of textbooks which have replaced them in the curricula of colleges everywhere. These latter, indeed, have been introduced to make the former more accessible and to proportion them somehow to less able minds. They are the outgrowth of necessities imposed by universal education, and suffer from the dilution of content which inevitably characterizes such education. This is why a school which aims at the best will necessarily concentrate upon a study of the Great Books, and seek students with the ability and dedication to learn from them.

Another reason why the Great Books are preferred to textbooks is that the latter, almost without exception, are "secondary sources" - that is, they are two steps removed from reality. They are, as it were, thoughts about thoughts. The Great Books, by

contrast, are much closer to common experience in its fullness; they raise questions and pursue inquiries which arise directly from a wonder about things themselves. On this account, they are of the greatest importance to beginners, for they begin where thought itself must begin if it is to bear any fruit.

A third reason for the study of the Great Books is that students are thereby allowed and encouraged to become directly familiar with the greatest minds. They are not limited to what passes through the minds of their instructors and the authors of textbooks, which can hardly be more than diminished and perhaps distorted versions of the Great Books themselves. And when educators themselves have been educated in such a way, and for many generations, the original light can scarcely be seen. But with a study of the Great Books, students have a much better chance to encounter wisdom and to become wise themselves.

**The Great Books: A Great Defense**

Lastly, the careful study of the Great Books, especially at the beginning of one's education, is the best defense against the unreflective historicism which so burdens the modern mind. By "historicism" here we mean the insistence that every human work must be studied within its historical context, as a "moment" in some historical process. The consequence of this historicism is that every work is in fact read, if at all, in bits and

pieces, and within a framework peculiarly modem, imposed by contemporary assumptions which may be no more than fashions. This framework itself, because customary, is seldom noticed, and never examined. But when one has had independent access to the Great Books, this historicism becomes conspicuous, and is no longer assumed as a matter of course. One begins to read the books as they were written and consider issues on their own merits.

**The Same Means, But Different Ends**

Reasons such as these are common ground for most schools with Great Books programs. However, it is possible to overestimate these resemblances, and to be impressed by likenesses which, though true and significant, are quite secondary. One may be misled by the maxim, plausible enough in itself, that what is held in common is what is most important. In the present case, the application of this maxim would be seriously mistaken, for it would confuse a community of means with a community of ends. It would be like asserting that the common network of roads we all make use of is more important than the various destinations we reach along these roads. Or like assuming that since we are all using the same roads, we are all going to the same place. For the books will be read, not just to be read, but for some further purpose, and it makes no small difference- rather it makes all the difference- what this purpose is. Distracted by obvious but secondary points of resemblance, one may not discern significant differences in ends.

When one finds a Catholic school with a Great Books curriculum, one is inclined to suppose that Catholic belief is incidental to its educational program, and that (at most) it modifies but does not determine that program. This inclination is encouraged by Catholic educators themselves, who have by and large reduced Catholicism in their schools to some indefinable and insignificant "presence."

Catholicism, it seems, makes a difference, but not an educational difference. In this view, the end of a Great Books education, and perhaps of liberal education generally, would transcend such a difference. Yet since differences of this sort concern the greatest and most important truths, one might well wonder what this common end could be. If it does not arise from a common conviction concerning the highest matters, it must concern something inferior, perhaps trivial.

**Radical Disagreements**

A similar difficulty arises about the Great Books themselves. By what standard are they judged great? Is it that they contain a true doctrine about the highest matters? Perhaps some of them do, but taken as a group they disagree radically among themselves about these very matters, not only in regard to the truth about them but also in regard to the right method of pursuing that truth. They even disagree about what is worth studying and whether there are actually any "highest matters." If the end of liberal education is a kind of wisdom, however imperfectly achieved, most of these books must be judged failures.

Thus, when viewed as defining a certain kind of education, the Great Books cannot be regarded as teachers, nor their students as disciples. By their immense variety

and mutual opposition they exclude discipleship. Of course it is possible that discipleship to a particular master may come out of such a curriculum - one might, for example become a Cartesian through reading Descartes. But discipleship cannot be the intent of such a curriculum, nor can a school define itself by discipleship while still defining its educational program by the Great Books. Thus, for example, no school which defines its education program in this way could honestly describe itself as Catholic, since to a Catholic is to be a disciple of a very particular kind.

**The Catholic Intellectual Tradition**

The intellectual tradition of the Catholic Church contains a clear and detailed account of what education should be. Perhaps more than any other tradition, it insists that there are great books, but it goes much further than this. It explains why certain books are great, and it distinguishes among them as regards their excellence and authority. But it does not regard the understanding of great books as an end in itself. Rather, it orders the study of all such truth about reality - a truth of which it speaks with confidence, from the word of God it receives in faith.

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