

# Educating the person: a Catholic perspective

Thomas Carey



This article seeks to explore both theoretical and practical implications for Catholic education of official Church statements relating to the concept of 'person'. Informed principally by selected documents of the Second Vatican Council (but making only very limited reference to Gravissimum Educationis, the document relating specifically to education) and by The Catechism of the Catholic Church, it considers also aspects of both papal teaching and the thinking of St Thomas Aquinas.

Given that education in general is concerned with people in general, what happens in the classroom is concerned with making a difference of some positive sort to those involved directly in the educational process. The existence of a wide range of what purport to be explanatory or clarificatory models of the human person (including not only theological but also psychological, sociological and philosophical models) indicates the complexity of the subject matter. The Council clearly recognised the problem. In answer to its own question, "What is man?", it states: "About himself he...continues to express many divergent and contradictory opinions...The result is doubt and anxiety..." (Gaudium et Spes, 12). Whichever model is preferred, what the human person is understood to be will necessarily have significant implications for our understanding of not only what education is all about but also how it should be practised.

## The Catholic model

Identifying the whole man (sic) as one constituted of body, soul, heart, conscience, mind and will (GS,3), the Council affirms that the human spirit possesses the ability to wonder, to understand, to contemplate, to make personal judgements, and to develop a religious, moral, and social sense (GS,59). It accepts the key biblical understanding of people; they are created in the image of God (Gen 1;26) and are capable of knowing and loving their Creator. The human person is not a solitary creature, however, for God created both male and female, and their companionship "produces the primary form of inter-per-

sonal communion. **By his innermost nature man is a social being, and unless he relates himself to others, he can neither live nor develop his potential**" (GS,12).

The Catechism sheds much helpful light on this complex issue and, in so doing, illuminates avenues for further consideration of what a specifically Catholic approach to educating the person might be. It presents the Catholic model of the person within the following three-fold perspective: "Life in the Holy Spirit fulfils the vocation of man... This life is made up of divine charity and human solidarity ...It is graciously offered as salvation" (CCC,1699). So, to be a person is to embrace three possibilities: the intimacy of divine transcendence; the interconnectedness of divine love and shared human identity; and the potential to achieve completeness with God.

**Even at this early stage in our analysis, it is apparent that such a model of the person calls for a**

**clarification of the end purpose of education, such that the human subject, who is regarded as potentially capable of self-transcendence with God's help, may begin to realise that divinely-endowed potentiality.** The Catholic Christian conviction is that Jesus Christ is identified as the full and glorious image of God, and presents to us a model of that which we may become or, as Vatican 11 expresses it: "Christ ...fully reveals man to man himself and makes his supreme calling clear" (GS,22). Being endowed with three distinct but complementary human attributes of a spiritual soul, intellect and free will, the person is from the beginning "ordered to God and destined for eternal beatitude" (CCC, 1711). St. Augustine (354-430 AD) expressed it thus: "You have made us for Yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in You" (Confessions 1: 1).

## St. Thomas Aquinas

St Thomas Aquinas (1225?-74) has exercised such an extraordinarily important influence over so much Christian thinking that, in 1879, Pope Leo XXIII commended him to all Catholic thinkers. Influenced

***The ultimate purpose of a truly Catholic education is presented in this paper. Does it present a genuine challenge for your school? At the very least it should provide an excellent touchstone with which to judge how "Catholic" we are.***

*Thomas Carey has been teaching RE in England for twenty-eight years. He is Religious Education Coordinator at Barrow Hills Catholic Preparatory School, Witley, Godalming, Surrey GU8 5NY, United Kingdom.*

in part by the writings of Aristotle, Aquinas argued that human beings have a natural end which is commensurate with their true nature and that the Christian life is concerned with living in such a way that they seek to realise that nature. An exhaustive analysis of what this nature is lies outside the scope of this article but, as an important part of the answer, Aquinas proposed that we have the capacity to know and the capacity to choose. It is, therefore, important that education should address not only intellectual and physical faculties but also moral and spiritual ones if the whole person is to be developed.

True communion  
between  
persons is  
the deepest  
meaning of  
life.  
ca Aquinas.

St Irenaeus (c.140-202 AD) suggested that, it is in being rational that people are like God and, as Vatican II reminds us, it is by virtue of his soul and his spiritual powers of intellect and will that man is endowed with freedom, which is an "outstanding manifestation of the divine image" (GS, 17). The Catholic position on freedom is that it "attains its perfection when directed towards God, our beatitude" (CCC, 1731). The paradox of such freedom is that, once fully attained, the person will feel unable to choose that which is evil. In reality, however, people tend not to attain such freedom, not least because "the economic, social, political and cultural conditions that are needed for a just exercise of freedom are too often disregarded or violated" (CCC, 2108). **A necessary precondition for the full realisation of the Catholic vision of education must, therefore, be the actualisation in society of those social and political freedoms which allow people to make informed choices, including the freedom to choose to grow in faith.**

In seeking our own flourishing (i.e., the realisation of our nature), we seek fulfilment of both body and mind but, because the body is transient, it can only be the mind (in a broad sense) which is capable of achieving complete fulfilment or 'happiness'. The traditional Catholic understanding of 'happiness' is that it consists "in the knowing, loving and the serving of God" (*Earthen Vessels*, p.31). Catholic education is, therefore, concerned with enabling people to reach an understanding of what it means

to achieve happiness. Such achievement is possible in this world only through the conjoint activity of both body and mind (i.e., it is the whole person who acts) if we are to fulfil our natures.

Aquinas provides us with an important insight into the role which education may play in this activity. In his *Commentary on the Sentences*, he defines education as: "the advancement of the child to the state of specifically human excellence, that is to say, to the state of virtue" (quoted in *E. V.*, p. 43). 'Virtue' here means a settled disposition or an end result of a deliberate process of development, so that right behaviour is carried out. Catholic education is, therefore, nothing less than the preparation of the individual to give full service to God.

Given that it includes "intellectual learning [and] moral education of the will and appetites, or formation of character through doing" (*E. V.*, p.41), and given that its orientation is towards God as our final goal, Christian education must always seek to be inescapably spiritual in vision. It also requires us to reflect on moral issues, since this is an aspect of the important virtue of prudence. Indeed, the Council urged both parents and schools to work in harmony in order to promote the moral development of young people (*G.E.*, 6).

Aquinas believed that learning is best understood as a shared activity between teacher and pupil, so that the latter may grow in the apprehension of truth. **An important implication of this would seem to be that nothing should be falsely imposed upon the learner during the educational process**, for doing so would constitute both an implicit denial of the honesty of the enabling role of the teacher and an

**Catholic education is, therefore, nothing less than the preparation of the individual to give full service to God.**

explicit denial of the pupil's freedom to search. Not all searching will necessarily be positive or advantageous for the pupil, however, and it is here that the role of the Christian teacher becomes an important dual one of map maker and guide.

### 'Education'

A widely held assumption about how education should be practised stems from the long-standing belief that, etymologically, 'education' derives from the Latin verb *educere*, meaning 'to lead or draw out'. The educator is thus thought to be involved in drawing out, or enabling the development of, that which already exists within the child. But, as Pope Pius XI famously pointed out in his seminal Encyclical Letter *Divini illius magistri* (1929), such a model of education need have no intrinsic place for God, the "first principle and last end of the whole

universe". The fact is, *educere* leaves us with an entirely and inescapably secular view of education and, from a Catholic Christian perspective, any form of secular education can be at best only partial and at worst completely misguided. The entire Catholic view of life and of existence itself rests upon a belief that such realities find their ultimate meaning only with reference to the Transcendent. It is a perspective which is reflected in all informed Catholic talk about education. Pius XI's second reservation rested on the important Catholic Christian belief that what we find in the child is, in reality, fallen humanity. This is not to say, of course, that the child is to be held personally responsible for its self-centredness but, by virtue of being human, s/he necessarily participates in that wider human defect by which people invariably place God's wishes second to their own, a defect traditionally known as 'original sin'. **Secular education invariably seeks, therefore, to draw out and to develop that which is already profoundly distorted by original sin and, as such, is deeply flawed in both concept and practice, for it strives to augment and magnify fallen humanity.**

If, however, we consider *educare* as the correct Latin root for 'education', we find a quite different range of possibilities presented to us. The Christian vision of education as rearing incorporates an intentionally forward-looking and purposeful activity that takes place within a living and dynamic communal tradition. The encyclical makes the important point that such rearing "consists essentially in preparing man for what he must be and for what he must do here below, in order to attain the sublime end for which he was created. It is clear that there can be no true education which is not wholly directed to man's last end..." (p.2). It is a perspective that seeks to nourish and develop fully the life of the individual within the life of a type of community that looks beyond contemporary and contingent realities in its search for meaning and purpose.

In so doing, it draws on living Church tradition in order that its accumulated wisdom and understanding of what it means to be human may be best understood, so that a model of education can be constructed that will seek to fulfil humanity's deepest desires. The whole direction and purpose of the Tradition of the Church, which stems directly from God's self-revelation in Jesus Christ as Good News, has but one purpose: to bring people to God (c.f. CCC, 74- 79). This Tradition "transmits in its entirety the Word of God which has been entrusted to the apostles by Christ the Lord and the Holy Spirit...to the successors of the apostles so that...they may faithfully preserve, expound and spread it abroad by their preaching" (CCC,81).

### **A possible problem**

A caveat is appropriate at this point in the argument.

Students of comparative or international education are aware that recent decades have seen a variety of national governments exercising increasing influence over the curricula offered in their schools. Legitimate national curriculum arrangements must of course be respected and, where governed by statute, obeyed. **It is not always the case, however, that political perceptions of what is desirable within an educational system equate with the Church's understanding of what is desirable and necessary for the fullest possible development of the person.** In those situations where choosing not to follow a nationally-prescribed curriculum could be construed as a grave dereliction of professional duty (and it is usually the case that professionals work co-operatively with their governments because it is those same governments that legitimise professional standing), the Catholic school must seek to realise its vision of education by the ways in which it delivers the prescribed curriculum. An imposed curriculum model that does not set out to enable pupils or students to seek the highest possible good will need to be presented within the classroom in such a way that its mode of delivery reflects Catholic beliefs about the person and the value of education.

### **Conclusion**

The whole thrust of Christian education is to liberate and enhance the person so that the fullest and most positive realisation of the self may take place. Such education is, therefore, and regardless of curriculum subject, an essentially spiritual activity that will engage with the full range of human knowledge and possibilities. Within that extremely wide field, the task of Christian educators is to identify those particular forms of knowledge and experience which will contribute in the best possible way to personal and communal human development, and then to seek ways of delivering them that will best allow the pupil or student to attain and experience it.

The implications of all this for future Catholic education are evident. A very special type of curriculum will be necessary if it is to contribute to personal fulfilment. At the practical level, determining which particular curriculum subjects should be studied is a matter for local, national or regional debate, since it is undoubtedly the case that diverse subjects may be employed to develop, say, the body, mind or will so that, as the ultimate focus of concern, God may come to be known and loved. And, with the demands of the Great Commandment in mind, modern communication techniques mean that anyone anywhere in the world is now my neighbour, for whom Christian love compels me to show practical concern.

With regard to curriculum structures, and bearing in mind that education is always in part at least a political activity, a delicate balance needs to be achieved

***An imposed curriculum model that does not set out to enable pupils or students to seek the highest possible good will need to be presented within the classroom in such a way that its mode of delivery reflects Catholic beliefs about the person and the value of education.***

---

between legitimate aspirations aimed at fostering not only a constructive sense of national culture and identity but also inter-communal understanding and respect. Catholic education will necessarily be concerned, therefore, with enabling the profoundly challenging Catholic vision of the human person to become a living reality. Whichever curriculum is offered, it should be one that addresses directly and supports unequivocally this vision in order that both personal and communal development may be promoted. In what sometimes appears to be an increasingly fractured world, Catholic education offers a truly universal outlook.

#### References:

*Divini Illius Magistri* (Trans., reprinted 1954) His Holiness Pope Pius XI. London: The Catholic Truth Society.

*Earthen Vessels: the Thomistic tradition in education* (1999) J. Arthur, H. Walters and S. Gaine. Leominster: Gracewing.

*The Catechism of the Catholic Church* (1994). London: Geoffrey Chapman.