

Education and the Human Person:

Thinking about More Culture and Less about Content

Given at the Called to Love Conference on John Paul II's Theology of the Body for
Diocesan and Parish Educators

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Whether you're involved in marriage prep, RCIA, youth ministry, respect for life or CCD, you are an educator. Even if most of your work is tied up in administration and events coordination, you're still essentially a teacher. Your programs and events are designed to teach. Now if we think about the origin of the word "educate," it actually means "to lead." So actually you all are leaders; your task is to lead people to something—or rather Someone.

In this talk I want to reflect on the meaning of education in light of the human person and introduce a way of viewing education that might be new to you. In fact, it's my hope that you might even start thinking about your programs and events differently when we're done.

This is the basic scheme of my talk. First, I want to discuss a concept that has been articulated a long time ago. Second, I would like to present a concept that is very much at the heart of Pope John Paul II's approach to education and knowledge. Finally, I would like to present a few non-conventional ideas for you to consider for your work when you return.

Connaturality

The age-old concept that was most notably articulated by St. Thomas Aquinas is something called connaturality. Let's take a look at this passage from the *Summa*.

Now rightness of judgment is twofold: first, in accord with the complete use of reason, second, on account of a certain connaturality with the matter about which one has to judge. Thus, about matters of chastity, a man after inquiring with his reason forms a right judgment, if he has acquired the knowledge of ethics, while the one who has the virtue of chastity judges of such matter by a kind of connaturality. Accordingly it belongs to the wisdom that is an intellectual virtue to pronounce right judgment about divine things after reason has made its inquiry, but it belongs to wisdom as a gift of the Holy Spirit to judge aright about them on account of connaturality with them. Thus Dionysius says (Div. Nom.ii), "The man of God is complete in divine things, not only by learning, but also by suffering divine things (*patiens divina*).' Suffering with God and connaturality with God (*compassio et connaturalitas*) is the result of charity, which unites us to God, according to 1 Cor.6:17: Anyone united to the Lord becomes one Spirit with him. Consequently wisdom which is a gift, has its cause in the will, which cause is charity, but it has its essence in the intellect, whose act is to judge aright, as stated above." (*Summa Theol.*, II-II, q.45, a.2).

This passage is obviously very complex. We could easily spend a whole semester exploring the different aspects of connaturality, but I think there are a few simple things we can get from this passage that will serve us well for our discussion. The first thing to notice is that St. Thomas

clearly distinguishes connaturality from the “use of reason.” So we could say that gaining knowledge through connaturality would be different from textbook or classroom type of learning or instructional learning. Second, we should notice that connaturality is associated with virtue, which is doing things rightly, not necessarily just thinking rightly. Third, and perhaps most importantly, we should see that connaturality is a gift that comes from *compassio*, or a kind of suffering with God. This presupposes a receptivity to God’s gift. In other words, we have to be open to knowledge through connaturality.

So what’s the point of talking about connaturality in the context of education? The point is that the human person is not just a thinker; he is also a receiver. That’s not to say that knowledge through the use of reason is not also a gift. However, St. Thomas is pointing out that we receive knowledge in other ways besides from conventional instruction. Knowledge can come from a certain closeness or openness to God, which is lived out through virtue. Understanding the role connaturality can play in education can be a key that provides access to the concepts of wonder and mystery that the authors of *Called to Love* say is an essential beginning to the Theology of Body.

***Fides et Ratio* and the Cross**

Let’s go on to the second concept. Without using the exact term, I believe that John Paul II takes up the idea of connaturality and gives it a more complete meaning in the second chapter of *Fides et Ratio, Credo ut Intellegam*—I believe so that I may understand.

For many people the phrase, “I believe so that I may understand,” seems backwards. After all, aren’t we all striving to understand our faith better so that our faith will be stronger? It’s hard to believe something when we don’t understand it. This is obviously true, but John Paul II is trying to show that there is another way of knowing. He is insisting that belief can be a path to understanding. But when John Paul II is talking about believing, he is not just talk about mentally accepting, he’s talking about living it. In other words, we have to live something out before we can understand it.

Let’s take a look at a passage from *Fides et Ratio* that I think is the highpoint of chapter two and perhaps the whole encyclical.

The crucified Son of God is the historic event upon which every attempt of the mind to construct an adequate explanation of the meaning of existence upon merely human argumentation comes to grief. The true key-point, which challenges every philosophy, is Jesus Christ's death on the Cross. It is here that every attempt to reduce the Father's saving plan to purely human logic is doomed to failure... The preaching of Christ crucified and risen is the reef upon which the link between faith and philosophy can break up, but it is also the reef beyond which the two can set forth upon the boundless ocean of truth. (FR 23)

Here John Paul II is saying that the most important reality that is an object of knowledge requires something else than logic to process it. This reality turns logic on it head, especially the logic of our prevailing society.

This is crucially important for understanding what we face in our daily work and ministries. When we boil it down, no matter what we are involved in, our work is essentially “the preaching of Christ crucified and risen.” And because so many people are trying to use the logic of the world to process it, it fails to really take root in people’s minds and hearts. Let’s face it. The logic of the world is pervasive and powerful. We are all affected by it. The mentality of materialism and self-indulgence will always be rocky soil for the seeds of Christ crucified. This is the kind of challenge we face in our ministries.

It is worth going back to that passage from *Fides et Ratio*, because the Pope gives us a beautiful image that is meant to give us hope. For some the Cross can be a “reef” where our journey to the truth can break up, but it can also be the launching pad from which we set sail on the “boundless ocean of truth.”

Cultivating Mystery: Some Unconventional Ideas

So in terms of our work and ministries, we need to develop some ideas that take into account some of these things. Even though the logic of the world can seem like an unrelenting beast, we know that the human person has the capacity for the mystery of Christ crucified through connaturality.

To help us fine-tune our focus a bit more, I want to introduce a quote from an English scholar named Stratford Caldecott. This is from an article titled, “A distinctively Catholic school.”

The purpose of education is not merely to communicate information, let alone current scientific opinion, not train future workers and managers. It is partly to teach the ability to think, speak and write. This was the function of the classical *Trivium* of Grammar, Dialectic and Rhetoric, the essential foundations for the study of the various subjects in the *Quadrivium*. Yet even this falls short of the goal. More important than the ability to think—or, if you prefer, the highest aim of thought—is the ability to find meaning. We must be able to perceive the inner, connecting principles, the intrinsic relations, the *logoi*, of creation. For this the eye of the poet, or of the mystic, is needed. Education should lead to contemplation. (Stratford Caldecott, “A distinctively Catholic school,” *Communio* 19, 274)

Caldecott makes a striking point here by saying that even the traditional ideals of education, like the *Trivium* and *Quadrivium*, are not enough for the fulfillment of the human person. Education should provide the person with the tools to find meaning. “Education should lead to contemplation.”

I think this is a good starting point from which to develop some unconventional ideas. We need to think of things that lead to contemplation. Of course, you can’t force someone to contemplate. You have to cultivate the desire. We need things that will cultivate fertile ground for the mystery of the Cross to take root. Cultivating brings us the notion of culture. The things around us basically cultivate us. This is for better or for worse. There are obviously many things in our prevailing secular culture that cultivate for the worse. But we can choose to surround ourselves with things that cultivate us for the better.

The first thing that can really help cultivate a sense of mystery is the Mass. I know this sounds obvious; the sacramental value of the Mass is beyond anything. But I think we underestimate the artistic value of the Mass when it's celebrated with reverence and care that is due when presenting the ultimate mystery. High liturgy with sacred music has the ability to impart the sacred mysteries through its sheer beauty.

At our school, we use an hour each day for daily Mass in Latin and our student choir sings at every Mass. Some parents have questioned this practice saying that a school should not be a seminary or a convent. I try to explain that daily Mass at school is not a matter of piety (not that there's anything wrong with piety). It's actually a matter of pedagogy. Discovering truth in the classroom is only enhanced by discovering Truth at the Altar. The old Jesuits knew this. When my father attended Georgetown University in the 1940's, daily Mass was required of all students, Catholics and non-Catholics alike.

The next idea that I would like you to consider is ballroom dancing. Aside from the current popularity of *Dancing with the Stars*, ballroom dancing has immense intrinsic value for what it can cultivate. In order to do it well, men must know their role and women must know their role. Their roles are different, but the roles are co-essential. They are complementary. This is the whole theology of man and woman in a nutshell.

I think this something that could be really effective with youth groups as well as pre-Cana classes. Our high school and junior high students love ballroom dancing. When you see them dancing, you can immediately tell that it's natural and not contrived. It's a stark contrast to youth dances with popular forms of dancing that is most often self-conscious and artificial.

Another idea: I truly believe a good old fashion feast can cultivate many important virtues. What I'm talking about is a multi-course meal always with good wine (with perhaps a different wine with each course) that lasts a long time. Ideally the participants should share a part in its preparation. And it doesn't have to be expensive. It does need care and love in every detail of its preparation. A true Catholic feast, especially one that celebrates a liturgical feast, can not only generate great fellowship, but it can be a powerful way to introduce a sacramental view of the world. The movie *Babette's Feast* is an example of what I'm trying to get across. In the movie, a spartan Protestant community is treated to an exquisite feast and the participants come to realize that our bodily appetites are meant to reflect our spiritual appetites. Both discipline and indulgence are important for the bodily appetites for they are meant to point us to a heavenly banquet. Feasting gives fasting meaning and vice versa. Because our faith in Incarnational, it is always good to be reminded that the good things of the world can be a vehicle for grace.

These three things that I just mentioned are actually the essential elements to any good wedding celebration. Any wedding that focuses on the Mass, dancing and feasting is bound to be a hit. I would like to suggest that if you can figure out some way to incorporate these elements into your various ministries, you are bound to have success.

Because the prevailing society is teaching the logic of the world, Catholics desperately need things in their lives that provide a context for living the Faith. If Catholics don't have concrete things in their lives that convey *Bonum, Verum et Pulchrum* (the Good, the True & the Beautiful)

that provide the context for the Gospel message, your ministries will be a losing battle. This is why I am suggesting that culture is just as important as content if not more so. Sometimes culture can impart more knowledge than standard methods of instructions.

I would like to conclude with one more example. It has been pointed out earlier in the conference that successful fatherhood requires an authentic understanding of sonship. In other words, in order to be a good father, you need to be a good son first. How exactly does one do this? What does this really mean? I think this is extremely hard to put into words. However, for me there is something that explains fatherhood through sonship perfectly and uses no words in the explanation. There is a brilliant sculpture by Gian Lorenzo Bernini in the Borghese Gallery in Rome of Aeneas carrying his father Anchises out of burning Troy with his son Ascanius walking by his side. One look at the sculpture and you know it's a masterpiece. You can also tell that Bernini has captured the essence of fatherhood perfectly. There are no words needed; you just know it.

Sometimes culture can be more powerful than conventional ways of teaching. I would like to encourage you to think about how you can incorporate culture that conveys *Bonum, Verum et Pulchrum* into your ministries. If you do this, you'll be incorporating the Person who identified Himself with the transcendentals when He said, "*Ego sum via, verita et vita.*" This is the goal isn't it?

Thank you very much.