



## Pontifical John Paul II Institute for Studies on Marriage and Family at The Catholic University of America

### Education and the Love of Form

It is common in our age to think of education as a means to some further end. Whether we take it to be the acquisition of knowledge and skills for a particular career, or preparation for some sort of ministry or simply to be a “productive member of society,” we tend to make education essentially a stage in our development, through which we pass on the way to something else. But this way of seeing things fails to do justice to the reality. However fruitful we can expect a real education to be, we deeply misunderstand its nature if we make it a mere instrument. Education is first of all a thing worth pursuing for its own sake. For the ancient Greeks, in fact, education was not only an intrinsic good, it was one of the very highest, a good to which society itself is subordinate. According to Plato, education is the only acquisition you can “take with you” when you die. The Fathers of the Church took over this Greek ideal and uncovered its theological roots. For Christians, who believe that “the glory of God is the living man,” the task of cultivating humanity is inseparable from the call to love God and love our neighbor as ourselves. Education, properly understood, lies right at the center of the Christian mission.

God “formed” man from the clay and charged him to “till and keep” the garden in which God placed him, or in other words to give form in turn to the world and the things in it. The task of education may be interpreted in the light of this commandment. On the one hand, if we are to tend to the world in a genuinely fruitful way, we must learn what it is and what it means. The health of our culture depends on a proper understanding of the meaning of nature and the world around us. On the other hand, even more fundamentally, our task of giving form has an internal end: man first gives form to himself, which is to say, he learns to cultivate and grow in the human ideal that he has received. The German word for education—*Bildung*, or form-ation—expresses the attempt to embody an ideal in ourselves and in a culture. We best till the world and keep it by learning about the whole and, in doing so, becoming whole ourselves.

Thus understood, education is not in the first place a program to be carried out, or a problem to be solved. Rather, it is a basic human activity. This activity is first of all and most essentially contemplative; it is an endeavor to understand and affirm the meaning of things, prior to any projects or plans we might hope to achieve. At the same time, genuine Christian contemplation always bears fruit in action. This is because the mind cannot be separated from the soul, any more than the soul can be separated from the body. Moreover, deep knowledge cannot be separated from love, nor love from knowledge. To come to understand, then, entails an entry into knowledge along with a formation of the soul, an ordering of desires, and a deepening of our love. An education is thus the planting of the seeds of a form of life.

Because it concerns the wholeness of a complete form of life, education requires a total engagement of the person in response to the total meaning of reality. To learn is to develop an interest in the whole, a desire to get to the very bottom of things, and to cultivate a devotion to truth, beauty, and

goodness, wherever it may be found. This cultivation is an attunement of judgment, by which we determine the meaning of things in relation to the whole and appropriate that meaning for ourselves. It also includes a deepening and ordering of imagination, which is in some sense a point of integration in the soul, the incarnation, so to speak, of the intelligence. An education has not yet fully taken root, we might say, until it has informed our imagination from its core. This deepening requires an interaction with others. We learn to love the whole, to see, to judge, and to “body forth” the truth above all in community with others, which is why education has always been a social act. The reading of literature, especially the great works of the past, is an indispensable part of learning. There are two reasons for this: first, we contemplate and penetrate the image of man from the roots of our culture’s history, attaching ourselves, so to speak, as branches to the vine of our tradition so that it may continue to bear fruit. But also, because these works come from places and times other than our own, contemplating them helps to set into relief the assumptions we have acquired regarding the meaning of existence that are so fundamental they might otherwise remain invisible. Reading and judging the great books, and judging ourselves in their light, develops and reinforces the habits that allow education to become concrete. In exploring the meaning of man, it is also essential to read the works of our own age that attempt imaginatively to embody that meaning, testing everything and holding onto what is best.

What is true for education in general is true for the study of theology in particular. The study of theology ought to be understood, not primarily as a specialization that isolates some particular field of investigation, but rather the consideration of the whole of reality from the highest and most comprehensive perspective possible. A theological education is conformity to the logos of God (*theon logos*). God is not just a being, but the source of all being. Indeed, he is not simply a transcendent principle, but has entered personally into history, first through the covenant he formed with a particular people and then definitively in the Incarnation. Theological education thus involves a concrete trans-formation: we are enraptured by beauty of Christ, engaged and called to decision by Trinitarian Love, and prayerfully drawn into the depths of the truth of God. There is nothing in the world, nothing in human history, that is not affected by that truth, and so the formation in theology necessarily has a universal scope. To be interested in theology, if the interest is true, entails a desire to engage also with philosophy and literature, and to measure our cultural practices and institutions by the form of Christ.

In his *Letter to the Romans*, St. Paul says: “Do not be conformed to this age, but be transformed by the renewal of your minds.” This exhortation sums up the aim of a genuine theological education: receive what is best from the tradition, in a prayerful receptivity, the lived gratitude of liturgy, drawing on whatever is true, good, and beautiful in the world around us but with the courage and patience to make the necessary critiques, even if doing so takes us in directions that run counter to conventional expectations.