Contemplation, Attention, and the Distinctive Nature of Catholic Education

Rik Van Nieuwenhove

Abstract

Catholic education should be primarily understood in terms of the contemplative disposition it fosters among students, i.e., a theocentric focus of knowing and loving God, rather than in terms of values. This argument will be developed by drawing on the Thomist understanding of contemplation (as knowing and loving God), and Simone Weil's notion of attention. The second part will show that the attentive regard for God in all things undergirds some of the central features we have come to associate with Catholicism and its educational vision, such as its sacramental understanding of the world and the way it envisages the relation between faith and reason.

In an increasingly secularist society, Catholic colleges and schools at all levels — elementary schools, high schools, and universities — may find it challenging to legitimize their own specific identity, especially if they are in receipt of state funding (as in the United States and some countries in Europe).[1] The temptation is to articulate Catholic identity in terms of values that are widely shared throughout society (such as social justice, inclusiveness, tolerance, etc.). Undoubtedly, the concern for "faith seeking justice," for instance, coheres well with progressive secularist agendas, as well as with a traditional emphasis upon the common good, which is at the heart of Catholic moral teaching. The Catholic tradition has indeed important intellectual resources to address pressing global issues, such as profound socio-economic injustice, as well as the ecological crisis.

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[1] My purpose in this paper is primarily to distinguish Catholic education from secular education, rather than from other Christian denominations.

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Catholic education, however, should not be primarily defined in terms of values. The reason why it should not be defined in those terms is, quite simply, that religion itself should not be reduced to morality, no matter how significant the implications of a life centered on loving God and neighbor are for our moral outlook on the world. To conceive of Catholic education merely in terms of values may result in a further dissolving of its specific identity, thereby — ironically — actually contributing to a less diverse (and more monochrome, implicitly secularist) educational landscape. Catholic education should, on the contrary, be primarily understood in terms of the contemplative disposition it fosters among its students, i.e., a theocentric focus of knowing and loving God. It is the attentive regard for God in all things that undergirds some of the central features we have come to associate with Catholicism and its educational vision, such as, *inter alia*, its sacramental understanding of the world, or the way it envisages the relation between faith and reason, as will be shown in the second part of this paper.

In the first part, some key aspects of this contemplative disposition, or attentive regard for God, will be discussed. First we will discuss how charity re-anchors our desire and will in God; then we will discuss the intellective dimension of contemplation. The argument will be developed broadly in conversation with the ideas of St. Thomas Aquinas and, to a lesser extent, Simone Weil.[2] In the second part of this paper, some of the features characteristic of Catholic education will be discussed in light of this general vision.

Contemplation and the Christian Understanding of the Human Person: Knowing and Loving God

Contemplation can be defined in broad terms as a disposition of attentive regard for, or orientation toward, God in all things. Thomas Aquinas characterizes contemplation as "the simple act of gazing on the truth"[3] or "the consideration of truth," in particular divine truth.

[2] Simone Weil may strike some as an odd choice as a spokesperson for the Catholic tradition. While she remained officially outside the Catholic Church, and despite the occasional extremism of some of her views, she eloquently expresses some central insights on contemplation from the Catholic tradition, and exerted, for instance, a deep influence on Pope Paul VI, as Peter Hebblethwaite records in his book *The Year of Three Popes* (London: 1978), 2.

[3] *Summa Theologiæ* (henceforth: *ST*) II-II.180.3 *ad* 1. I use the translation *Summa Theologica* by the Fathers of the Dominican Province, 5 vols., (Westminster, MD: Christian Classics, 1981).

However, contemplation is not merely intellectual for St. Thomas, for it also involves love of God: "And this is the ultimate perfection of the contemplative life, namely that the divine truth be not only seen but also loved."[4] It is the thrust of this paper that these two aspects, namely knowing and loving God, should inform every aspect of our educational endeavors.[5]

The claim that contemplation is a disposition of knowing and loving God implies that it should not be equated with a religious experience or a meditative technique. As a disposition (Lat. *habitus* or *intentio*) it shapes all our other experiences and engagements with the world. Aquinas's fellow Dominican, Meister Eckhart (one of the key influences on Simone Weil) calls this disposition *Abegescheidenheit* or *Gelassenheit*, usually translated as detachment; Ignatius of Loyola calls it *indifferencia* — which is not indifference but rather a kind of detachment that implies a deep involvement with the world. By being focused on, or centered in, God we ideally become radically selfless or devoid of self-possessiveness, and it is this selflessness that allows us to be really present to the world, others, and God himself. Through being radically focused on God, our self is no longer our primary concern, and it is this self-forgetfulness that allows us to be really present to reality. By being detached from our self-centered concerns and in becoming self-forgetful, we can be truly involved and become profoundly receptive or open to reality.[6]

This paper will argue that Catholic education, if it is to remain true to itself, should assist students in developing this contemplative, receptive disposition. The liberal arts in particular can contribute to nurturing this disposition of detached *ascesis* and involvement.[7] Before

[4] *ST* II-II.180.7 ad 1.

[5] In passing it should be remarked that cultivating a contemplative disposition of knowing and loving God opens up a Trinitarian perspective, for in knowing and loving God we participate in the generation of the Word and the procession of the Holy Spirit as Love, thereby fully actualising our image-character (cf. *ST* I.93.7). Christian education, then, is the process whereby we learn to know and love God in all things. In secular education this reference to God is, of course, absent, and remains implicit: Secular education, at its best, is the process whereby we come to know and love truth, beauty, and goodness as they are embedded and reflected in our world.

[6] Simone Weil describes this "self-effacement" in *Gravity and Grace* (London: Routledge, 1987), 35-37, while on p. 46 we find: "Thus, perfect detachment alone enables us to see things in their naked reality, outside the fog of deceptive values."

[7] This dialectic of self-forgetfulness and being present to reality can be clarified by developing a simple analogy. Imagine that you are listening to a complex piece of music — a fine string quartet, for instance. You are simply listening with your fullest attention,

we develop this point, we will first examine in some more detail the two central aspects of contemplation, namely, love and knowledge of God.

Loving God: Contemplation and Desire: A Non-possessive Way of Relating to God, World, and Self

St. Thomas Aquinas's understanding of the nature of charity, or love of God, can assist us in explaining how the will of the Christian should become firmly rooted in God. If human desire is not first anchored in God, and invests its infinite dynamic on one particular created being, it may end up idolizing it. There are many possible objects of excessive attachment, such as the nation (in extreme patriotism), money, prestige, sex, food, social recognition, etc. In these instances, our desire latches on to something that cannot sustain this intensity, and we end up worshiping something finite, and idolizing it. And as the Psalms remind us, an idol is a false God, impotent and lifeless (Ps. 135:17-18). In erotic terms, we can compare an excessive attachment to a created good to infatuation.

Alternatively, the infinite dynamic of human desire can maintain itself by investing itself in a multitude of things, thus ultimately inducing tedium and boredom. Here what matters is not the object of desire but desire itself. In erotic terms, one can compare this to the philanderer who drifts from one woman to another but does not linger with any of them —because none of them matter. In our consumerist society this cultivation of non-attached desire is actively promoted. Here, desire desires to desire — but desires nothing in particular.

In the *Summa Theologica* I-II, 2 (henceforth, *ST*), Thomas deals with a whole range of created goods that fail to provide us with ultimate fulfillment or happiness (wealth, honors, fame, power, bodily goods, pleasure, goods of the soul) but he desists from identifying any of them with the ultimate good. Thomas is aware that human desire has an almost infinite, inexhaustible dynamic — and it is for this very reason that only God can fulfill human desire: Nothing in this created world can satisfy the human will; only God suffices to fill our hearts *(solus*

and the music really captivates you. You lose yourself in the music, it captures you. These metaphors are revealing: We are being "lost," "captivated," "captured," and we forget about ourselves and our concerns for a while. And yet, in this very loss of self we are genuinely present to the music and what it reveals about our world and ourselves. So, the important point is that it is only by being detached and by losing ourselves that we can be really involved or present.

Deus voluntatem hominis implore potest).[8] When our most profound desire relates to God first, we can relate to created things properly, without possessiveness, without trying to subjugate them to our own concerns, or without idolizing them.

Thomas makes clear how charity redeems human desire in *ST* II-II, 27.4, which deals with the question of whether God can be loved immediately in this life. Thomas contrasts knowledge and love of God. Because our knowledge is derived from the senses, those things are knowable first, which are nearer to our senses. But while our knowledge of God is mediated through creation, our love of God is immediate, and we love creation through God:

> Accordingly, we must assert that to love which is an act of the appetitive power, even in this state of life, tends to God first *(tendit in Deum primo),* and flows on from him to other things *(et ex ipso derivatur ad alia)* and in this sense charity loves God immediately, and other things through God *(charitas Deum immediate diligit, alia vero Deo mediante).* On the other hand, with regard to knowledge, it is the reverse, since we know God through other things….

Unlike knowledge, charity (so to speak) redirects human love and desire: It immediately targets God and other things through God *(alia vero Deo mediante)*[9] in a kind of triangular movement.

The claim that, in charity, we love God first does not imply that we fail to attribute intrinsic meaning to created things, including other human beings. Nor does it imply that we do not really love created things or persons in their own right. On the contrary, it is exactly when our desire becomes focused on God that we can begin to relate to other things with the respect and reverence that is due to them. Consider the analogy of friendship, in which we find a similar triangular dynamic. Friendship is usually accompanied by a set of advantages, such as mutual comfort and support. If, however, we were to directly target these advantages, we would no longer be acting as a friend. Indeed, we would end up instrumentalizing the friendship. If we directly aim for the

[8] *ST* I-II.2.8 and *Commentary on the Gospel of St John*, no. 586 (Albany, NY: Magi Books, 1998).

[9] See also Simone Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, 55: "God's love for us is the reason for us to love ourselves.… It is impossible for man to love himself except in this roundabout way." This theocentric focus applies to both love of self and love of neighbour: "Supernatural love touches only on creatures and goes only to God.… To love a stranger as oneself implies the reverse: to love oneself as a stranger."

benefits of friendship, we betray it, and use the friendship for extraneous purposes. In the words of Roger Scruton:

> We gain the advantages of friendship only when we do not pursue them: these advantages are the necessary by-products of a practice that does not and *cannot* intend them. One of persistent fallacies of modern … thinking is the belief that if something benefits us, then it is a means to the benefit that it confers. On the contrary, the things that benefit us most — duty, love, friendship, beauty, knowledge, and the worship of God — are ends in themselves, and vanish just as soon as we treat them otherwise.[10]

Similarly, charity, our love for God, allows us to enjoy created things without either idolizing them (infatuation) or turning away from them in indifference and tedium (philandering). To pursue our erotic analogy, we could compare this to marriage, in which we invoke God as a third party. Christian marriage is fundamentally different from a secular contract between two parties. It is a vow before God as a third party, whereby the spouses inscribe their lives into the eternity of God. Thus, centering our desire in God does not lead to a flight from the world but allows us to engage with it in a proper manner, without idolizing it or abusing it, and treat it with the reverence it is due.[11] Charity re-anchors our desire in God, which allows a disposition of receptivity, gratuity, and openness toward the world to flourish. As Meister Eckhart suggested, as Christians we learn to live and love without a *why*; if God is your ultimate concern you cannot give ultimate reasons why you love God.[12]

In summary, our will, by being focused on God through charity, becomes detached and non-possessive. This is the first way in which the disposition of Christian contemplation refocuses us on God. Now we turn to our second faculty, namely intellect. Through the intellect we

[10] Roger Scruton, "On Humane Education" from *The Aesthetic Understanding. Essays in the Philosophy of Art and Culture* (South Bend, IN: St. Augustine's Press: 1998), 245.

[11] In passing it deserves to be mentioned that education itself can be described as friendship extended among the generations. So what applies to friendship (namely, that you should not directly target the benefits friendship involves) also applies to education: If you are only interested in the benefits education confers, and not in education itself, you will never acquire real knowledge. For instance, if your primary concern in either teaching or learning mathematics is its usefulness, you will never become a proper mathematician. See Roger Scruton, "On Humane Education," 244.

[12] Meister Eckhart, *Commentary on John*, para. 50, and *Sermons* 5b, 26, 39, and 41. This, too, proved a central insight for Simone Weil. Loving God is its own reason — indeed any profound love is its own reason. There is, in other words, something deeply anti-utilitarian about being religious, which, incidentally, coheres well with the gratuitousness of leisurely education.

are present to reality. Indeed, Thomas Aquinas claims that the word *intellectus* is actually derived from *intus legere*, reading the inner being of things. It involves openness, receptivity, presence, and insight.[13]

On Knowing God: Contemplation and Intellect

Earlier we suggested that contemplation is the attentive regard for God in all things. According to St. Thomas, this regard for God is intellective as distinct from merely rational. To explain this, I need to recall the medieval distinction between *ratio* or reason, on the one hand, and *intellectus* or intellect, on the other. In *ST* II-II, 49.5 ad 3, Thomas distinguishes intellect and reason as follows: "Although intellect and reason are not different powers, yet they are named after different acts. For intellect takes its name from being an intimate penetration of the truth *(ab intima penetratione veritatis),* while reason is so called from being inquisitive and discursive" *(ab inquisitio et discursu).* The act of the intellect is "to apprehend intelligible truth; to reason is to advance from one thing understood to another (*procedere de uno intellecto ad aliud*), so as to know an intelligible truth.... Reasoning, therefore, is compared to understanding, as movement is to rest, or acquisition to possession."[14] Contemplation then consists in the simple gaze of the intellect upon a truth (*contemplatio pertinet ad ipsum simplicem intuitum veritatis*).[15] Thus, contemplation as intuition is "a type of knowing which does not merely move towards its object but rests in it."[16] When contemplating, discursive reasoning must be put aside and the gaze (*intuitus*) of the soul must be fixed on the contemplation of the one simple truth.[17]

In short, we use *ratio* when we engage in a discursive process of reasoning. Reason is active, moving from one element in our reasoning process to another. But our reasoning comes to rest in intellect, the moment of insight. This moment of insight is a dimension of intellect, not *ratio*. Again, reason can only begin to operate in light of certain truths which it simply accepts but cannot argue for in a discursive manner. For

[13] Pierre Rousselot was entirely justified in calling it the "faculty of being" in his book *Intelligence: Sense of Being, Faculty of God* (Milwaukee, WI: Marquette University Press, 1999).

[14] *ST* I, 79.8.

[15] *ST* II-II, 180.3 *ad* 1.

[16] *ST* I, 59.1 ad 1, and Josef Pieper, *Happiness and Contemplation* (South Bend, IN: St. Augustine Press, 1998), 74.

[17] *ST* II-II, 180.6 *ad* 2. Pieper, in *Happiness and Contemplation*, 74, writes: "The object is present — as a face or a landscape is present to the eye when the gaze 'rests upon it.'"

instance, the principle of non-contradiction, a key axiom in traditional logic, is a truth that we can perceive solely in an intellective manner, not in a rational manner. Human reason, or *ratio,* thus operates in an intellective context, and is quite literally unthinkable without it.

There exists a dynamic or even dialectical relation between *ratio* and *intellectus*: while *ratio* needs the insight of *intellectus* to generate a reasoning process, the reasoning process also results in a moment of intellectual insight.[18] Thomas makes this point eloquently in *Expos. De Trinitate,* q. 6. art. 1.3: "One sees that rational thinking *(consideratio rationalis)* ends in intellection *(ad intellectualem)*… And again, intellection *(intellectualis consideratio)* is the beginning of reasoning *(principium rationalis)*… in which the intellect comprehends a unity in multiplicity."[19] In other words, when we are engaged in profound intellectual activity, struggling to interpret a text, for instance, there will be a to-and-fro movement between intellectual insight and searching, discursive reason.

This dialectic of receptive intellect and searching, discursive reason is of immediate significance to education, and vice versa. While faith and love foster a radical theo-centric focus, making us non-possessive, receptive, and "self-forgetful," an engagement with art (literature, music, and so forth) both implies and furthers a similar kind of self-forgetfulness. Thus, studies can function as *praeparatio evangelica.* In order to develop this idea, we will now examine a short essay by Simone Weil, titled *Reflections on the Right Use of School Studies with a View to the Love of God*.

In this essay Weil attempts to clarify what she means by attention and the significance it has for learning. Attention is an effort, she writes, but it is a negative effort. It refers to losing oneself in a problem (such as the translation of a text or solving a geometrical problem) through a radical openness, by which truth will appear:

> Attention consists of suspending our thought, leaving it detached (*disponible*), empty and ready to be penetrated by the object; it means holding in our minds, within reach of this thought, but on a lower level and not in contact with it, the diverse knowledge we have acquired which we are forced to make use

[18] I am indebted to Colm McClemens, quoted by Kevin O'Reilly in *Aesthetic Perception. A Thomist Perspective* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2007), 46.

[19] St. Thomas Aquinas, *The Division and Methods of the Sciences.* Questions 5 and 6 of his commentary on the *De Trinitate of Boethius,* trans., with introduction and notes, Armand Maurer (Toronto, Canada: PIMS, 1997).

> of. … Above all our thought should be empty, waiting (*en attente*), not seeking anything, but ready to receive in its naked truth the object which is to penetrate it (*prête à recevoir dans sa vérité nue l'objet qui va y pénétrer*).[20]

It seems clear that the receptivity Weil is describing is intellective as distinct from exclusively rational-discursive (what she calls "the lower level"). As we have seen, this intellective dimension involves receptivity and insight, while ratio is discursive and active. It refers to self-forgetfulness which enables us to be really present. Attention is a concentrated effort to become open, receptive in all we do; it is therefore an effort that entails a form of passivity, receptivity.[21]

What is important for our purposes is that every instance of attention is useful in our search for God:

> Being a little fragment of particular truth, it [i.e., truth encountered in studies] is a pure image of the unique, eternal and living truth, the very Truth which once in a human voice declared 'I am the Truth.'
>
> Every school exercise, thought of in this way, is like a sacrament.
>
> In every school exercise there is a special way of waiting upon truth, setting our hearts upon it, yet not allowing ourselves to go out in search of it. There is a way of giving our attention to the data of a problem in geometry without trying to find the solution, or to the words of a Latin or Greek text without trying to arrive at the meaning, a way of waiting, when we are writing, for the right word to come of itself at the end of our pen, while we merely reject all inadequate words.[22]

The insight that every school exercise has a sacramental dimension is an extraordinarily rich one. Weil is suggesting that there is a connection between, for instance, translating an ancient text, listening to a complex piece of music, or trying to solve a geometrical problem, on the one hand, and prayer on the other. The connection is attention. Every instance of attention, when nurtured in the context of studies, is

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[20] Simone Weil, *Waiting on God. Letters and Essays,* trans. Emma Crawford (London: Harper Collins, 1977), 58. For the French text, see Simone Weil, *Attente de Dieu* (Paris: Fayard, 1966), 85-97.

[21] It should not be confused "with a kind of muscular effort." She gives the following telling example: "If one says to one's pupils: 'Now you must pay attention,' one sees them contracting their brows, holding their breath, stiffening their muscles. If after two minutes they are asked what they have been paying attention to, they cannot reply. They have been concentrating on nothing. They have not been paying attention. They have been contracting their muscles" (Weil, *Waiting on God*, 56).

[22] Weil, *Waiting on God*, 58-59.

religiously relevant because — ultimately — attention, taken to its highest degree, is prayer.[23] Stratford Caldecott comments:

> Simone Weil … goes as far as to say that … the real goal of study is the development of attention. Why? Because prayer consists of attention, and all worldly study is really a stretching of the soul towards prayer.… School studies have a higher purpose than the acquisition of information or worldly skills. These acquisitions will follow, but they are subordinate to the orienting of the soul to God, implicit in the act of attention. To my mind, in these remarks Simone Weil has put her finger on the essence of education, and practically on the essence of Christianity itself.[24]

A school exercise assists us in developing attention, a disposition of receptivity that allows us to become present to reality, to how things really are. And prayer is, of course, an attempt to be present to God. So, all school studies are a way of cultivating attention, which, in turn, is essential in our orientation toward God. For Weil, attention as a receptive sensitivity or disposition that can be developed and nourished throughout all kinds of learning can therefore function as a *praeparatio evangelica.* Education allows us to develop an attentive disposition, which finds its ultimate fulfillment in religion.

In part two, we will briefly examine how contemplation is relevant for the Catholic worldview and education in particular. While a number of features of Catholic education will be mentioned, the main focus will be on the role of classics — faith and reason — and the sacramental understanding of the world. The question can be legitimately raised whether or not Catholic universities are, at least in a European context, at times in danger of quietly abandoning these characteristics under neo-liberal and secularist pressures.

Central Features of Catholic Education and Contemplation

Education as Transformative and Integrative

The theocentric focus at the heart of contemplation bestows a unity on our lives and intellectual endeavors that coheres well with the notion that Catholic education is *integrative and transformative.* All our educational endeavors — from reading Jane Austen to solving an

[23] Simone Weil, *Gravity and Grace* (London: Routledge, 1987), 105.

[24] Stratford Caldecott, *Beauty in the Word. Rethinking the Foundations of Education* (Seattle, WA: Angelico Press, 2012), 30-31.

intricate mathematical problem — should aim at nurturing in our students a contemplative disposition of "attention" that invites them to come to know and love God. Encouraging them to become aware of this theocentric focus and orientation will involve a deep transformation of our students, a re-centering on God.

Catholic education has in common with the best instances of secular education that it is transformative and integrative, shaping the whole person. For when we learn without being transformed, we are not being educated; at best we may acquire a set of skills, i.e., we are subject to training, not education. The integrative dimension of Catholic education has acquired particular relevance in modern society, in which we witness a "splintering of spheres of life into autonomous subsystems."[25] So an overarching and integrative vision, based on knowing and loving God, gives cohesion to our educational pursuits across different disciplines. Because Catholic education sees in the encounter with truth, goodness, and beauty at least implicitly an encounter with God, it acquires a cohesion which may be lacking from non-religious curricula. The integrative dimension is particularly relevant in the modern university which aspires to inter-disciplinarity so as to tackle the pressing issues of our contemporary world.[26] It must be acknowledged, however, that this ideal is in danger of succumbing to external pressures that aim to make education "more useful" or "relevant" to the job market, thereby reducing education to mere training in transferrable skills.

Tradition & Classics

The classics can prove an excellent medium for fostering the contemplative disposition we have discussed throughout this paper.[27] The arts can assist us in awakening in students a disposition of openness and receptivity, which may enable them to become receptive to the Otherness of God. Struggling to learn an ancient language, for instance, requires sustained engagement of intellect and will, which assists us in the nurturing of a non-self-centered disposition and growth toward a theocentric focus of knowing and loving God.

[25] Mark Roche, *The Intellectual Appeal of Catholicism and the Idea of a Catholic University* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame. 2008), 34.

[26] Ibid., 36.

[27] See Josef Pieper, *Leisure: The Basis of Culture* (South Bend, IN: St. Augustine's Press, 1998) and *Happiness and Contemplation.*

Moreover, it comes natural to Catholics who value learning to engage with the best of our intellectual and artistic tradition because of its power to reveal the sacramental nature of our world. Great art (of which the classics are a central component) reveals something about our world and who we are. The power of disclosure of works of art constitutes their greatness and appeal. Any emotional or expressive effect they have is the result of this revelatory power. Listening to Bruckner's *Andante* from his Symphony no. IX ("Dem Lieben Gott Gewidmete" [Dedicated to the Beloved God]) teaches us about grief, joy, hope, and, above all, reconciliation in its most profound sense. Reading *War and Peace* reveals what human beings are like: their selfishness, altruism, greed, lust, charm, doubts and confusions, pusillanimity, hunger for power, pride, heroism, honor, integrity, duplicity, mediocrity, desire for God, and so on. By engaging with important works of literature, we can cultivate our empathy and imagination, which will make us more mature and adept to interact with others and face reality. Roger Scruton puts it well: "In all kinds of ways the emotions and motives of other people 'come before us' in works of art and culture, and we spontaneously sympathize, by recreating in imagination the life that they depict. … Through imagination we reach emotional knowledge, and maybe this is the best way, in advance of the crucial tests, of preparing ourselves for the joys and calamities that we will someday encounter."[28]

Great works of art are undoubtedly the products of their own historical context. Nonetheless, when we are confronted with them there is "a consciousness of something enduring, of significance that cannot be lost and that is independent of all the circumstances of time — a kind of timeless present that is contemporaneous with every other present."[29] In understanding a classic work of art, if we understand it at all, historical distance is overcome. This, incidentally, takes the sting out the objection that classics are too far removed from the world of our students. Indeed, insofar as an encounter with great art (literature, music, etc.) captivates us in both its very difference and familiarity, it can begin to challenge us and genuinely enrich our lives. The notion that we have to pander to the experience and life-world of students (meeting students "where they're at"), on the other hand, is bound to instill tedium and boredom. In the words of Frank Furedi:

[28] Roger Scruton, *Culture Counts: Faith and Feeling in a World Besieged* (New York: Encounter Books, 2007), 38.

[29] Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (London: Sheed & Ward, 1989), 288.

> Today, critics of formal education object to the fact that it is too formal and not directly relevant to the lives of young people. They miss the point. Education is not, and should not be, reducible to ideas that are directly relevant to a pupil — it is about imparting the knowledge and insights gained through the experience [of] others in far-away places and often in different historical circumstances. … Education involves providing answers to questions that the young have not yet asked. One reason why this kind of knowledge is important is that it can help students to rise above their particular experience and gain insights into the wider world into which they are initiated.[30]

Classics address us at the deepest existential or intellectual level — and that is precisely why they are classics — disclosing something of our world (positively or negatively), and challenging us at a most profound level. Classics allow us to discover universal meaning in particular texts or pieces of art. In that sense, too, they are truly incarnational.

The classics are the embodiment of ways in which previous generations expressed their encounter with truth, goodness, and beauty. As indicated, they are therefore essential for growing and fostering a contemplative disposition. This emphasis upon the riches of tradition is more important than ever. In an increasingly de-traditionalized society it has become more difficult for people to acquire a sense of identity — for without memory there cannot be identity. This holds both at psychological and sociological level: Both as individuals and societies, we lose our sense of identity and direction if we no longer know our past, our tradition. Hence, more than ever, an engagement with the riches of the tradition should be an essential part of Catholic education.

Solidarity, the Common Good and Faith Seeking Justice

This paper has argued that knowing and loving God is one of the most central concerns of Catholic education. Obviously, genuine love of God will translate itself in love for our fellowmen, and Catholic educators (especially in the Jesuit tradition) have rightly pointed out that love of God that does not translate itself in love of our fellowmen lacks credibility.[31]

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[30] Frank Furedi, *Wasted: Why Education Isn't Educating* (London: Continuum, 2011), 55-56.

[31] See the document "The Characteristics of Jesuit Education, 1986," reproduced in Vincent J. Duminuco (ed.), *The Jesuit Ratio Studiorum. 400th Anniversary Perspectives* (Bronx, NY: Fordham University Press, 2000), 161-230, especially section 5.2: "Education in the service of the faith that does justice," 190-95; and Peter-Hans Kolvenbach,

From within a European context, however, some reservations should be voiced. At least in some universities (and schools), an overemphasis on values as the main "identity marker" of Catholic education may at times contribute to the erosion or even loss of identity. If we define Catholic schools and colleges mainly in terms of social justice, inclusiveness, and tolerance, we will fail to do justice to what makes these institutions distinctly Catholic (or even Christian). It is therefore essential to remember that, in a Christian perspective, love for our fellowmen grows out of love for God. As our discussion in part one made clear, charity, as a Christian virtue, is in the first place love of God, which then finds expression in love for other human beings and the world. Charity can never be reduced to the latter, without reference to the former.

Simone Weil made clear that attention enables us to sympathize with the suffering of other people. Attention sees the other as he is, and not as a mere specimen in a category labelled "unfortunate" but as a man, exactly like us, who was one day stamped with a special mark by affliction. For this reason it is enough, but it is indispensable, to know how to look at him in a certain way. This way of looking is first of all attentive. The soul empties itself of all its own contents in order to receive into itself the being it is looking at, just as he is, in all his truth.[32]

Attention assists us in discerning the real needs of people, and inspires us to engage with issues of social justice. She suggests that struggling with an ancient language, for instance, may one day assist us in discerning the needs of another person behind their words or even their silences.[33] In her view, attention is therefore the source of genuine compassion and engagement with others. Our ethical concerns should never, however, become dislodged from their nourishing source (i.e., the love and knowledge of God). If this happens, Catholic institutions are in danger of deluding themselves (and others) into believing they are offering an education that remains faithful to its Christian inspiration.

Sacramentality and Receptivity

Another distinguishing element of Catholicism is its sacramentality, which finds its theological origins in the doctrines of creation and

"The Service of Faith and the Promotion of Justice in American Higher Education" in George W. Traub (ed.), *A Jesuit Education Reader* (Chicago: Loyola Press, 2008), 144-62.

[32] Weil, *Waiting on God,* 60.

[33] Ibid., 55.

incarnation. All created things are pregnant with the mystery of God, and point to it. This is a central intuition of many major Catholic thinkers (Augustine, Bonaventure, Thomas Aquinas, Karl Rahner) throughout the tradition,[34] and nurturing this sacramental sensibility should be at the heart of Catholic education. It is the contemplative disposition, outlined in part one, that facilitates the discernment of the *sacramentality* in the world, allowing us to discover a depth dimension which is hidden from a non-religious point of view. Thus, the sacramental reality, so central to a Catholic outlook, can only be perceived if one shares this contemplative dimension, informed by faith. Only the religious person perceives a depth dimension in the world, behinds its facticity.

This sacramental view is different from modern perspectives, in which the world is seen in purely mechanical terms, subject to laws we can describe and which allow us to interfere in the world.[35] Indeed, this is one of the distinguishing traits of modernity: the belief that both our natural and societal environment is "makeable" or "produce-able." Hans Urs von Balthasar (following Heidegger) sees "the inability to receive" as the hallmark of the modern age — an age that believes it can produce everything.[36] In this problematic understanding, only that which can be produced by humanity is ultimately real and has truth and value. As Mark Roche observes, while this mindset has greatly contributed to the development of mathematics, scientific experimentation, and technology during the modern capitalist era, it has "also led over time to diminishing respect for what is already given — God, nature, tradition, other selves, and an ideal sphere of meaning. Seeing all positions as human constructions, this perspective ultimately negates every objective order and, with it, any moment of higher meaning and transcendence."[37] As will have become clear, the contemplative dimension (and the receptivity at the heart of it) is deeply alien to this mindset of "produce-ability."

[34] For the development of this theme in the medieval period, see Rik Van Nieuwenhove, *Introduction to Medieval Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

[35] See Rik Van Nieuwenhove, "Retrieving a Sacramental Worldview in a Mechanistic World" from Frederiek Depoortere & Jacque Haers (eds.), *To Discern Creation in a Scattering World,* Bibliotheca Ephemeridum Theologicarum Lovaniensium, 262 (Leuven: Peeters, 2013), 539-548.

[36] Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama. Theological Dramatic Theory. Vol. IV: The Action* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press), 159.

[37] Roche, *The Appeal*, 18.

Faith and Reason

Finally, Catholic education has a positive understanding of reason and sees the relation between faith and reason in harmonious terms. This vision has been eloquently defended in St. John Paul II's encyclical *Fides et Ratio* — a document that is deeply indebted to Thomas Aquinas's views. This harmonious view coheres with the sacramental understanding of the world: The world is not a construction of the human mind but has its inherent truth, beauty, and goodness; and reason, informed by faith, allows us to interpret it. Now, perceiving God in all things is an intellective act, not a purely rational one. Thus, it is intellect that allows us to perceive the sacramental nature of the world. As discussed earlier, contemplation fosters awareness that human understanding is more than reason; it also involves intellect, which is receptive and intuitive, and fully acknowledges that human rationality is impossible without accepting some truths or commitments as simply given. The Catholic understanding of the harmonious relation between faith and reason hinges on this acknowledgement. Without the contemplative dimension at the heart of intellect, we are in danger of becoming either positivistic or skeptical.

It is exactly the acknowledgement of the intellective nature of human understanding which opens up the possibility of a fruitful dialogue between faith and reason. As indicated, contemplation involves mainly the intuitive, non-discursive aspect of human understanding (i.e., *intellectus*). A stronger awareness of this intellective and intuitive character reminds us of the fiduciary nature of all human rationality, that is, all our rational processes are based on accepting key beliefs and tacit presuppositions. Human reason has a self-transcendent dynamic to it, and is surrounded by truths that we can perceive in an intuitive or intellective manner, without discursive reasoning or analysis.

This implies that the modern separation of faith and autonomous reason (on which the secular paradigm is based) does not hold. If all our rational processes are based upon ultimate insights that we simply accept but cannot argue for, then the only rational way of engaging with the world is actually one which sees reason and beliefs in terms of mutual harmony (which is the Catholic view), rather than in opposition with one another (purely rationalistic or purely fideist). In short, if we want to be rational it makes sense to acknowledge the role of implicit beliefs and commitments within our rational pursuits. Denys Turner summarizes: "We could not be rational if we were not also more

than rational; human beings are not rational unless they are also intellectual."[38]

Conclusion

By re-anchoring our lives in God, religion creates a theocentric focus in us, which involves a radical dispossession of self, and a non-possessive way of relating to the world and others. It is exactly this non-possessiveness which allows us to be truly present to the world — and relate to it as it is — i.e., not as the projection of our own feelings, concerns, or theoretical constructs, but as a pointer toward God, allowing us to discover the inner depth dimension in the world. The disposition of detachment and self-forgetful contemplation allows us to engage properly with the world around us. More specifically, knowing and loving God enables us to relate to the world in a proper manner, without idolizing or repudiating it. It was further suggested that education should foster this disposition of self-forgetful attention, which allows us to be truly present to things of goodness, truth, and beauty. In this manner education can genuinely function as a *praeparatio evangelica.* If, however, Catholic colleges and schools fail to foster this disposition, our students will find it harder to relate to key aspects of the Catholic tradition, such as the sacramental sensibility, the intellective dimension and its openness to faith, and the pursuit of learning as a transformative practice which points toward the truth, goodness, and beauty of God.[39]

[38] Denys Turner, *Faith, Reason, and the Existence of God* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 89.

[39] I would like to express my gratitude to Rev. Prof. Eamonn Conway, Mary Immaculate College, for his constructive criticism of an earlier draft of this paper.