

CAN STUDY BE PAINLESS?

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TIME AND ENERGY are often dissipated by students in their search for some practical plan that will insure the best results in study. A variety of detailed methods have been proposed by modern educators, but the solutions so far offered have failed to achieve the desired effect. Undoubtedly a few students, after several years of labor, arrive at some sort of a haphazard method which is suited to their particular needs. But what about the majority of those who are still lost in the maze of confusion? A practical solution to their difficulties and one that will overcome many of the obstacles encountered by every student can be found in the following letter written by St. Thomas in response to a request made by a young man, seeking advice on how he might advance in study.

Dear John:—

Because you are so dear to me in the Lord, I shall try to answer your request about the best way of making progress with your studies. Let me counsel you, at the outset, not to plunge at once into the sea of knowledge but go in by the little streams. We get to the bottom of difficult truths by first mastering the easy ones. Here, then, is what I suggest:

(1) Be slow to speak; and don't frequent those places where people do a lot of talking. Rather, stay in your own room and try to make it a place of covenant with your Lord. Remember that by devoting yourself to regular prayer, you will be able to preserve that precious thing we call purity of conscience.

(2) Be a gentleman at all times. Don't be too inquisitive about the affairs of others; and don't be too familiar, because over-familiarity breeds contempt, and certainly interferes with the spirit of genuine study.

(3) Be careful not to mix in with the speech or actions of worldly-minded people. Above all, shun useless arguments. Take the saints and the good people around you as your models.

(4) It's not the teacher so much as the truth he expounds that counts. Don't be prejudiced by the sources of your information, but whenever something good is said, commit it fast to memory.

(5) Be sure you clear up all doubts about the subjects you are studying. Like a man who wants to fill a vessel, be eager to store your mind with every possible item of useful knowledge. But here, once more, I caution you against seeking the type of knowledge that is beyond the power of your understanding. . . .

If you follow these simple rules, my dear John, I assure you that the thing you want most—to be a good student—will be your reward.

Fraternally yours,
Thomas of Aquin*

Here is a simple yet profound procedure which anyone can follow. From this letter, six outstanding points can be evolved which will make study both vital and fruitful. We must first of all develop *the habit of study*; this cannot be accomplished over night, but requires a great deal of labor and constant effort on our part. But once the disposition has been acquired there will be greater facility in grasping the matter and less time consumed in fruitless labor.

Secondly, there must be *interest* which is stimulated when the order, dignity, utility, and difficulties of the subject to be undertaken are foreseen. Likewise restraint must be exercised in regard to those subjects for which we have a natural inclination or liking.

An invaluable asset in the pursuit and acquisition of knowledge is *concentration*. This power essentially consists in applying the mind to the subject at hand and the avoiding of all external and internal distractions. Where there is constant strife there is little room for learning.

There is always present the great danger of forgetting *reality* and this is especially true in the study of philosophy and theology. The best way to avoid this difficulty is to make an attempt to apply the notions learned to our own lives and in this way we will never become insensible to the things of the universe.

A student's course of study embraces a wide variety of subjects and obviously he could never remember all the fine points in each field.

* Free translation of Opusculum 61 taken from a pamphlet distributed by the Deserving Poor Boys Priesthood Association.

But he can *learn* and *retain the fundamental principles* or notions which are the structural foundation of each subject; for, after the newness wears off these should remain.

The last and most important element in study is *the supernaturalizing of all our actions*. To do otherwise would make our every effort a sterile labor and we would become the victims of an all permeating pride. Prayer and study are inseparable. Modern educators have failed to recognize this truth and as a result their theories on study are man-centered rather than God-centered.

The student who adopts St. Thomas' suggestions will still have to work hard, but he will no longer suffer the mental anguish and frustration previously experienced. In other words the "pain" involved in study is not completely removed but it is alleviated.

Prayer To Saint Thomas Before Class Or Study

O Blessed Thomas, Patron of Schools, obtain for us from God an invincible faith, burning charity, a chaste life, and true knowledge, through Christ Our Lord. Amen. (100 days for each recitation)