

THE SAINT XAVIER PLAN

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THE RIGHT PROBLEM, at the right time, with the right solution, and civilization takes another step forward. Understanding the difficulty existing in any situation is a major step towards its ultimate resolution. This is true in the field of education as in all others. It is not sufficient in itself, of course, to merely formulate the problem, the right solution is equally necessary. Education, for example, in this country has progressed marvelously in the field of teaching methods, while at the same time it has not provided the country with well-educated children. Why? Fundamentally, educationists have failed to ask, much less to answer, certain ultimate questions. But upon the answers to these questions depends a proper understanding of the entire purpose, and therefore, nature of education.

St. Xavier College in Chicago, Illinois, since 1846 a leading institution in the education of Catholic women, has been plumbing the ultimate since its foundation. The result is "a vertical view of education," The Saint Xavier Plan for the Liberal Education of the Christian Person. The Plan received its first precise formulation in a Progress Report of the college's Self-Study issued in 1953. This was the climax to twenty years of asking the right questions. It summarized the conclusions of many soul-searching sessions in which curriculum, aims, procedures and effectiveness of St. Xavier were subjected to close faculty scrutiny.

The Sisters of Mercy, who have staffed St. Xavier from its beginnings, called in the Dominican Fathers from the Albertus Magnus Lyceum in River Forest, Illinois to aid them. These experts in the field of Thomistic philosophy and Catholic theology were able to render valuable advice in giving direction to the educational aspirations of the College. Furthermore, the Sisters, because they conduct elementary and secondary schools within

the Chicago vicinity, as well as the College itself, were in an ideal position to investigate educational content and procedures on all levels of instruction. For as the work progressed, it became increasingly evident to the Self-Study group that "education is a continuum, not only in school, but throughout life, and that many of our academic problems are the result of an artificial categorization by school levels."¹ Hence, the group examined the educational process as an organic whole and not merely as a series of carefully graded, separate and distinct specialties.

The Progress Report issued in 1953 was by no means the last word. At that time the conclusions were somewhere between "abstract generalizations and detailed proposals." Since that time, further refinements have been made and actual implementation of the conclusions has been carried out in several elementary and secondary schools staffed by the Sisters of Mercy. The entire program is being used at the College itself. Workshops and conferences in other Catholic schools are presently discussing its attributes and in some places have actually adopted certain of its features.

The Plan also owes a debt of gratitude to the Commission of American Citizenship of the Catholic University of America. This organization labored to establish a curriculum which would educate the Catholic laity of the United States according to the principles of St. Thomas Aquinas and the directives of the Popes. Fathers Walter Farrell, O.P., and Robert Slavin, O.P., took part in drawing up the philosophical principles of the Commission, while Sisters Mary Joan, O.P., and Mary Nona, O.P., made significant contributions in the field of elementary education.

The Self-Study proposed three basic questions which we will examine here. The right answers to these right questions constitute the St. Xavier Plan.

"WHAT IS THE END OF MAN?"

This first and most basic question in education has been sadly neglected by modern educators. Yet, the end of man determines all his activities. And if the view of the Plan is correct, that education is a cooperative art whose sole aim is the making of a product—the educated person—then it is of absolute necessity to know the nature of the product and the purpose for which it is intended. To answer this question, the Plan employs the teaching of St. Thomas Aquinas concerning man's goal. The Angelic Doctor teaches that man is an intrinsic, organic, intelligent and

free unity which operates through diverse powers of both body and soul. Furthermore, the perfection of this unity consists in the perfect operation of all its powers. Each of these diverse powers, such as nutrition, reproduction, sensation, appetite, intelligence and free will, have their own proper objects, the attainment of which constitutes the perfection of man. Now it is the function of education to assist all these powers, in the attainment of their proper objects. But whereas the lower powers are restricted to particular things, the intellect and will seek to encompass all reality. Thus, the intellect and will are most properly the concern of the educator. In the case of the intellect, education develops man's power to know the truth; in the case of the will, man's power to love the good. When these natural powers have been modified by such good habits that man easily and pleasantly achieves both the true and the good, he is said to possess the intellectual and moral virtues. It is precisely because the intellect and will do reach out to all reality and not to just a part of it that the possession of their objects will render man happy. The operation by which man attains to this happiness is contemplation. Contemplation, then, is not a condition of rest or passivity which quickly results in ennui; on the contrary, it is a dynamic process of knowledge, intimately conjoined to love, by which man accomplishes the perfection of his nature and, consequently is rendered happy. Therefore, the Plan affirms that "if education is to prepare man for life and for happiness, it must be ultimately a preparation for contemplation. Its task must above all be the development of those virtues by which contemplation is possible, the virtues of wisdom, and the charity which wisdom presupposes and in which it flowers."²

"WHAT PART DOES LIBERAL EDUCATION PLAY IN THE LIFE OF THE CHRISTIAN PERSON?"

Education as the Plan conceives of it is not the responsibility of the school alone. Instead, the school is only one of the agencies which are responsible for the education of the child. The Family, Church and State all play an essential role in assisting man in his search for happiness. Actually, the school is only that part of education:

by which the human person develops the intellectual virtues, making use of the natural and supernatural lights given him by God, and with the cooperation of teachers who because of special competence in the

liberal arts, and in particular in the arts and sciences, have been delegated to this task by Family, Church or State.³

The development of these habits, culminating in the acquiring of wisdom, is effected by the careful selection of principles and their orderly exposition according to the plan of St. Thomas and the educational experience of Western civilization. Such a procedure results in an integrated and continuous educational program extending from elementary school to college. Nor does such a program terminate in mere intellectualism. For sacred theology, the queen of the sciences, sees that although Christian education is ultimately for contemplation, it is contemplation of the supernatural order, which, being a free gift of God, must be merited by the wayfarer on earth through charity. Consequently, the Christian must grow in the virtues of Christ to be truly educated. Nevertheless, it remains the peculiar role of the school to teach those intellectual virtues whereby the truth is known, understood and communicated.

The Plan proposes, then, as the goal of liberal education the development of the intellectual powers with respect to all orders of human knowledge. Following St. Thomas, it distinguishes four of these orders. First, there is an order in reality which man's mind does not make, but merely knows or contemplates. The study of this order pertains to natural science and philosophy. Secondly, there is an order which the mind of man produces by its own activity. This pertains to logic, mathematics, grammar and the other arts, all generally known as the liberal arts. The third order, which has to do with human actions, is studied in the social sciences: ethics, politics, and economics. Finally, there is that order which is found in things made by human reason and pertains to the fine and useful arts. Since this division of human cognition is complete and exhaustive, it will constitute the subject matter to be taught, no matter what the level of learning.

On the other hand, these orders can be known in diverse ways, which will vary according to the ability, training, and maturity of the learner. So, for example, when the mind apprehends all four orders in an integrated manner, grasping all things in the light of their first principles and ultimate causes, it is said to possess the virtue of wisdom. It is this acquired wisdom which is the goal of the St. Xavier Plan. Furthermore, because it is the term of the learning process, all other studies are subordinated to it, resulting in an integrated program of education. For wisdom is not so much concerned with the discovery of new things, as

with reflection upon things already known. It contemplates those conclusions of the sciences which deal with things through their more proximate principles. It concerns itself with the arts, by which man judges correctly concerning things made by man. Wisdom presupposes, too, the habit of practical wisdom, by which the results of human actions are correctly and scientifically judged according to right reason and the moral law. Nor does it obscure the work of these subordinate virtues, but, retaining their clarity, wisdom unifies all the knowledge gained by them into one, integrated whole. And it is in this view of reality, on both the natural and supernatural levels, that man achieves his ultimate goal—happiness.

“The goal of schooling, therefore, must be to bring the student as far as possible along the road toward wisdom.”⁴

The St. Xavier Plan does not pretend to teach the infused Wisdom of the Holy Ghost, but it does have as its aim the instruction of the learner in the highest wisdoms which man can acquire by his own efforts: philosophy and sacred theology.

Only these wisdoms help the student to see himself and his destiny, to find the significance in all details of life and the world, to open up to him his true and lasting life of contemplation. A schooling which fails to give the student these wisdoms may have equipped him to serve society, but it has not equipped him for personal happiness.⁵

“HOW CAN THE SCHOOL SYSTEM EDUCATE LIBERALLY AND RELIGIOUSLY?”

The teacher, as he is understood by the Plan, once again following St. Thomas, is much like a doctor. Just as a doctor by his skillful use of the medical arts aids nature to heal itself, so too the teacher only acts in concert with the natural powers of the learner to advance him in knowledge. The person himself must learn. However, he is aided by the teacher who orders the subject matter in such a way that the learner more easily and quickly assimilates it. The teacher accomplishes this task by laying before the student the procedures which must be employed, the objects which are to be considered, the problems to be solved, the principles to be applied. Although the teacher is only a dispositive cause of knowledge, he is nevertheless a necessary one. For the road to wisdom is long, arduous, corduroyed with error and easily lost.

Without the teacher, the student will either give up, or fall into absurdity.⁶

In addition, the school must provide a cardinal fundament of information which comes not only from the personal experience of reality, but also from the common experience of mankind. This matter must be taught in such a manner that the learner may grasp, retain and appreciate the facts presented to him.

It is in the light of the above considerations that the Plan proposes its order of learning, its second major contribution in the realm of modern education.

On the elementary level, the learner has two responsibilities: first, he must build up his basic fund of information; secondly, he must master the liberal arts by which this information can be understood and communicated. The second stage of his educational maturity occurs when the child begins to explain phenomena in terms of their proximate principles and causes. At the same time, he will see his own place in the universe and consider the means he must employ in order to gain his end. In such a consideration, he rises above the merely scientific and approaches the level of practical wisdom. Finally, he goes on to the consideration of the Divine in the light of faith by the study of sacred theology, the highest of the acquired wisdoms.

Such a student will know that even this equipment with the intellectual virtues which the school has assisted him in acquiring is only a means to live the Christian life of Charity, placing at the service of Charity, a sound and enlightened wisdom, so that strong in love the Christian may merit in Christ the wisdom that is without shadow and is everlasting.⁷

THE ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

Since the Sisters of Mercy do conduct elementary and secondary schools as well as St. Xavier College, they can implement this educational plan on all levels of study. As a result, the "continuum" aspect of education is respected from the earliest years of formal schooling until its completion and culmination at the college level. Under this scheme, the elementary school's curriculum is geared to provide the child with an ordered body of knowledge, acquired within a Christian atmosphere. This body of knowledge is complete not only as regards religious truths, but also as regards secular information. Moreover, the material is conveyed in a manner especially adapted to the mind of the young learner. Thus, for example, the child's innate capacity for wonder and delight at the beautiful is exploited to the fullest possible extent. In these first years, esthetic values found in the world will be punctuated. The secular elements are organized around some

truth known from religion, for example, the story of creation and Adam and Eve. In actual practice, this means an emphasis on the beautiful and good as seen coming from the hands of an All-loving Father.

This first step towards wisdom will consist of two main subjects. The first of these is the study of the pre-liberal arts—the three “R’s.” The second is “Our Heritage,” the basic truths of our Western civilization which are required by every citizen. The latter requirement constitutes the pre-scientific study of the elementary school child and taken together with the former prepares the child for more advanced education in the high school.

The pre-liberal arts are divided into two main skills: that of the linguistic arts and that of the mathematical. The linguistic arts include those subjects now taught in most elementary schools: grammar, reading, writing, spelling. But in the St. Xavier Plan the emphasis is upon the manner of learning. Accordingly, these basic skills are taught through the utilization of logical principles. Furthermore, the pre-liberal arts are seen as necessary for logical thinking, clear communication of ideas, correct and valid judgments concerning reality. Consequently, these skills are the basic tools without which science and eventually wisdom are impossible. Proficiency in the linguistic arts is attained not only in English, but in another foreign language as well, preferably either French or Latin. This is a rather radical innovation in a milieu where foreign languages are left to the later years when their acquisition is less perfect and more arduous. Paralleling the linguistic skills at this level is arithmetic.

Under “Our Heritage,” or the pre-scientific studies, are included nature study, Christian doctrine and social study. These, like the pre-liberal arts, are viewed under the light of the “continuum.” In the elementary school, therefore, the concern is to build up a store of knowledge which will be the foundation for further study in later years. The study of nature and society grows out of the study of Christian doctrine, resulting in a world-view, ordered and integrated by Christian faith. This ordered view must be presented in a way particularly adapted to the young—vividly, imaginatively and highly unified. The truths of faith, seen against this fuller background of reality, can then be memorized catechetically. As the learner matures and advances in the educational curriculum, these different aspects of the world-view separate into the four major divisions of knowledge which are scientifically treated on the college level: the liberal

arts, nature study, social study, and Christian doctrine.

The logical structuring of the learning process by the Plan renders obsolete the system of carefully differentiated grades current in most educational institutions. At the schools conducted according to this plan, the student advances according to his own rate of development which is determined by the individual's capability. Although six years are seen as sufficient for the acquisition of the skills taught at the elementary level for the average and superior student, some may complete the requirements only after seven or even eight years. In like manner, the rate of advancement for each student varies from subject to subject. Under the non-graded system, a child may advance quickly in those areas in which he has no difficulties, but may be retarded in others which are more challenging to him. After the completion of the primary period, consisting of the first three years, a year of development is provided for the slower learner. This is repeated at the end of the second period, if it is required. The rate of advancement is determined by periodic achievement and diagnostic tests.

Continuity of effort is aided by the fact that teacher replacement is kept to a minimum. Contrary to popular educational usage under which the child is assigned to a new teacher each year, the same teacher remains with the group throughout each period. This ideal, however, may not be preserved if there should be evidence of teacher inefficiency, personality conflicts or similar contingencies.

It should be noted, also, that early and direct contact with Sacred Scripture itself and the great works of art and literature is fostered under the Plan. Therefore, with the completion of elementary school, the foundation has been laid for the more elaborate superstructure of the sciences and wisdoms. The basic tools for living the Christian life of charity will be in the learner's possession and he may turn his attention to the liberal arts as taught on the high school level.

THE HIGH SCHOOL

Like the elementary school, the high school has two chief aims: to teach certain skills and to propose for assimilation an organized body of information. The first consists in the teaching of the liberal arts. The second is composed of courses in Christian doctrine, social studies and natural science. These last named are further and more advanced treatments of that material consid-

ered in the elementary school under the title, "Our Heritage." At present, the high school is a poor compromise between the often opposed requirements of further education, vocational training and immediate job preparation. As a result, the modern high school is unable to train its students adequately for any of these situations. Under the Plan, now being introduced in three Chicago high schools taught by the Sisters of Mercy, the high school has thrown off its compromise character and attained a new dignity based on its fulfillment of the needs common to all three types of student. Whatever the occupation of the student after graduation, he will require a mastery of his rational powers in his ability to think, understand and communicate. It is the goal of the liberal arts high school to give him that mastery. The St. Xavier Plan contends that:

The liberal arts can be learned best when the person is young and still in a formative intellectual stage. High school years, therefore, are precious in the successful development of the person and should not be wasted learning things that can be acquired elsewhere or later. Therefore, in a free society the opportunity for a liberal arts education ought to be universal.⁸

Two basic skills comprise the liberal arts: logic (and the linguistic arts) and mathematics. In actual practice, each student takes a four-year English course which is taught according to logical principles. The entire learning process is centered upon "critical analysis," the art of analyzing and producing effective writing and speaking according to these principles. Included in the course is the theory and practice of poetics, rhetoric, dialectics and demonstrative logic. The conclusions arrived at here are applied to English composition, speech and the analysis of literary selections. Such training reaches its climax in the fourth year when all the modes of communication are reviewed and complete esthetic and scientific works are subjected to scrutiny following the norms established in the preceding three-year period. At the same time, the work started in the elementary school on a foreign language is continued along lines parallel to the English course. Moreover, a program in the fine arts applies the principles considered in the English course to the visual arts and music. Demonstrative logic is perfected and completed in algebra, geometry and the application of mathematics to scientific methods and procedures.

As has been noted, "Our Heritage" becomes three separate courses at this stage. The aim of these courses is to continue to unfold for the student the vast fund of information peculiar to

Western civilization and the result of Western experience. Although the method of instruction is more advanced than that of the previous years, the study of nature, the social sciences and Christian doctrine which comprise this phase of the high school program cannot be considered truly scientific. In the natural science course, for example, the concentration is on a descriptive treatment of man, his faculties and their objects, and his use of his environment. Hence, the course has more the character of a natural history course than that of a scientific discipline. In the last two years of this subject, however, elements of scientific procedure are introduced in "Methods and Techniques of Natural Science." It is here that mathematics and the scientific method are conjoined to natural history in order to permit the development of a full-fledged science. Such an approach to the study of nature well prepares the student for a complete scientific training on the college level.

In pursuing the social sciences, as was true in the study of nature, the stress is on the historical rather than on the scientific. However, the procedure espoused by the Plan differs from the usual history course because of the utilization of the liberal arts in the examination of social problems. Under the Plan, historical sources are submitted to logical scrutiny, moral principles are induced from historical facts, and new situations are weighed under the light of these inductions. For example, subsequent to certain historical surveys in the first three years, the senior year concerns itself with the contemporary American scene. It shows how Catholic moral standards, elaborated from the previous historical considerations, can be applied to modern social problems.

The course in Christian doctrine, primarily catechetical on the elementary level, advances in high school to theological reasoning concerning the truths of faith. It is not yet, however, the scientific method followed in college because it remains in personal rather than abstract terms. The student is encouraged to see the truths of religion as they relate to his own life. One method is to compare Christianity with other ways of life that men have tried and have found wanting. While the first year of the course is evolved from the reading of the Old Testament, the last three years are based on the New. The virtues, for example, are seen as exemplified in the life of Christ. Also treated are the Church, the sacraments and the problem of a Christian vocation in the modern world.

Just as the Bible provided the material by which the courses

presented in the elementary school were integrated, Christian doctrine on this more advanced level fulfills the same function. The liberal arts are employed in reading the Bible, while the study of man in natural science is related to the treatise on man in the first year course of Christian doctrine. And finally, social studies are used to understand Biblical history and to exemplify moral problems.

So conceived, the high school has a vital role in preparing the student for contemplation. And even if he should not continue his education at the college level, new horizons will have been opened to him. He will see more clearly his part in the total world picture and adjust himself more perfectly to the role assigned to him by Divine Providence. In this way, the student can more perfectly attain personal happiness.

COLLEGE

The chief purpose of St. Xavier College is to aid the person in her quest for a liberal education, so that she may be enabled to live a Catholic life in a democratic society.⁹

This liberal education at the college level is a balance of general education and specialization. As a result, the Plan distinguishes two phases in a college education. The first, general education, presupposes a knowledge of the liberal arts and the basic fund of information. It then introduces the student to the scientific pursuit of knowledge in the major fields of learning and provides him with an adequate foundation for subsequent specialization in an area of penetration. Possessed of a general education, the learner should be able to examine, judge, and appreciate the arts and sciences and manage his life according to the practical conclusions flowing from these judgments. In this way, the program of general education completes and complements the matter considered in the lower schools and prepares the way for further study.

The specialization phase is:

A unified pattern of courses at a more mature level, centering on some specialized discipline or interest.¹⁰

In addition to the liberal arts, it presupposes the general education program, philosophy and theology. Because of his previous training, the student-specialist will be able to fit his subject into the universal plan of reality, without the unfortunate over-

specialization and rigid departmentalization which so often results from modern college education.

In college, the courses begun in the elementary and secondary schools are carried to their logical conclusion. The liberal arts having been mastered on the lower level, the college can devote itself, first, to a deeper penetration and appreciation of the arts themselves, and secondly, to the inculcation of the sciences properly so-called. For example, the college student studies the universe, not merely from an aesthetic viewpoint, but as a true science employing the scientific method and laboratory experimentation, and investigating special problems. Then, he uses philosophy to understand the conclusions of his science and to see the facts which he has observed as manifesting the existence of God in nature.

As a result, the four divisions of the college: Liberal Arts and the Humanities, Natural Science, Social Science, Philosophy and Theology are all united and crowned by the course in sacred theology. Here all that has gone before is utilized to study the *Summa Theologica* of St. Thomas Aquinas.

Unless the student's mind is matured by the science of faith, the maturity conferred by the other intellectual disciplines will be fragmentary. . . . Working with the profoundest truths given to man, the student begins to see; to see purpose and pattern, nature and necessity, reality and relation; to develop a habit of mind that scrutinizes the world and all things in it and above it, and finds meaningful answers.¹¹

FOOTNOTES

¹ Saint Xavier College, *The Saint Xavier College Self Study, The Liberal Education of the Christian Person, A Progress Report* (Chicago, 1953), preface, p. 1.

² *Ibid.*, p. 19.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 23.

⁴ Saint Xavier College, Report of Elementary Curriculum Committee, *Statement of Curriculum Elementary School* (Chicago, 1957), p. 5.

⁵ Self Study, *op. cit.*, p. 28.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 23.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 39.

⁸ Statement of Curriculum Elementary School, *op. cit.*, p. 6.

⁹ *Saint Xavier College, Announcements 1957-1959*, (Chicago, 1957), Vol. XLIII, No. 1, p. 11.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 17-18.