

SATISFYING THE URGE TO KNOW

MATTHEW DONAHUE, O.P.



ALL MY LIFE I have experienced a desire for knowledge. As a child I wanted to be like my father, because to a boy 'daddy knows everything.' By the time I was a high school senior I had actually learned a little, although I thought I knew everything. I was quite satisfied with myself. Today, I realize that there are many more things in the world than I ever dreamed of, and I desire more than ever to learn about them."

This is a typical expression of one's desire to know. It illustrates a universal principle: "everybody wants to know." This individual's longing serves to introduce the age-old problem of planning a curriculum for the modern classroom. How can a school curriculum satisfy the natural human appetite for knowledge, and at the same time prepare youths to take their places in our ever-changing world?

In order to decide how to quench this natural thirst for truth we should understand, in general, something of the human capacity for knowledge. Like the human impulse for self-preservation, and other movements of this nature, the reasons 'why we have it' will determine 'what it is'. The underlying principle involved, of course, is that no natural desire is in vain.

Three convincing reasons for this natural yearning to acquire knowledge can be adduced from St. Thomas' commentary on Aristotle's principle: "all men by nature desire to know." It is not mere curiosity on the part of men. In the first place, we conclude that knowledge perfects man according to his nature. Secondly, reasoning is man's proper activity; and thirdly, speculation develops man's highest and most noble faculty. Without a doubt, these reasons are much too formidable to explain in one paragraph. If we attack them individually, we shall find them to be key principles in laying down a curriculum of studies.

1. "KNOWLEDGE MAKETH THE TRUE MAN"

Our body requires a certain amount of food each day to maintain its health. To insure bodily health nature has provided each of us with the desire for food. Now this appetite for nourishment is part of a more universal inclination in nature for its own perfection. The natural desire of everything, animate or inanimate, for its own per-

fection, St. Thomas asserts, is the reason—the urge—behind man's lifelong search for science or truth.

If we remember that man's desire for perfection must be according to his nature, we will see why man has a love for scientific knowledge. Over and above the common desire of all things for self-preservation and preservation of the species, man has a special desire for the development of his intellectual powers. The rational intellect distinguishes man from every other creature, therefore the desire for perfection of this faculty will be proper to man alone.

The same basic desire to know causes remains throughout life. But just as our appetite for food and drink grows, so too our appetite and capacity for knowledge develops and becomes more refined. The child begins the process of intellectual perfection by asking his mother "Why is this? Why?" As a man, he will still be seeking answers although his quest may have become more scientific. For science is nothing else than the knowledge of the causes of things. When a man knows the Cause of all things, then his science is truly perfect.

2. "REASONING IS MAN'S PROPER ACTIVITY"

The orderly way in which plants and animals and all natural things fulfill their proper functions attests to the principle of St. Thomas that all things have a natural inclination to perform their proper operation. Man, too, was made with an inclination to his proper activity. His proper work is to reason.

We act in a reasonable manner whenever we use our intellects to direct our actions. A designer is always pleased to see his handiwork doing what it was made to do. Handled by a crafty skipper, a sleek sailboat, skimming across the lake, its sails unfurled in the full wind, is a proud sight to the craftsman who planned and built it. But both the workman and the skipper are dismayed to see their boat standing becalmed with its sails drooping limply. A man who follows his reason glides smoothly through life and is a joy to his Creator. When he does not act according to reason, he annoys both himself and his Maker.

3. "SPECULATION PERFECTS MAN'S HIGHEST FACULTY"

An electric toaster, if it could speak, would tell us of its constant "desire" for the electric socket on the kitchen wall. It would explain that it is never really an electric toaster until it is plugged into its source of electricity. The toaster is inclined by its nature towards its principle, because in this way it attains its perfection.

If a man will reflect, he will discover that his intellect has an inclination to be united to its principle. The intellect is given the

power to know "first principles" by nature. But it develops the habit of first principles and acquires new ones only from a study of things. As a man gains a clearer understanding of these universal truths, his intellect develops. Scientific knowledge gives him an orderly and more perfect knowledge.

There are two kinds of science corresponding to the two ways in which the intellect knows. The intellect, like the eye, serves two purposes. When I read St. Thomas' commentary on Aristotle, my eyes are stimulated by the black and white page, but the knowledge they gain is further ordered to the development of my intellect. On the other hand, my eyes delight in the beauty of a sunset for their own sake. I look at the sunset just to see the brilliant colors.

The practical sciences are learned so that we may put them to work for us. But the speculative sciences are sought for their own sake. Our intellect is developed and perfected by the speculative sciences much in the same way that the eyes are perfected by the colors of the rainbow. The object of the intellect is universal; the intellect has a desire for universal truths. Man himself will find his true happiness, says St. Thomas, in contemplating the beauty of Eternal Truth, which is to be his joy forever.

4. WHAT CURRICULUM WILL SATISFY?

All that is involved in the development of mind and body is contained under the general heading of education. The school, next to the home and the Church, is the most important channel of education. "Education," said Pope Pius XI, "consists in preparing man for what he must be and what he must do in this life so that he might attain the perfect happiness of the next life."¹

A philosophy based on the nature of man alone cannot determine the curriculum for schools. Philosophy alone is not equipped to establish a system of education for fallen human nature. Original sin has weakened our wills and darkened our intellects. Sacred Theology, "a certain impression of the Divine Science which is one and simple yet extends to everything,"² must be the criterion. Theology, the queen of the sciences, is the true integrating element of all intellectual life. Ultimately, then, we must look to the Church, which is the supreme teacher in matters pertaining to eternal life.

A Christian education must be a well-rounded training. Pius XI stresses the fact that we must educate the "whole man." Under this term, the Pope includes all the human faculties of mind and body,

¹ Pius XI, *On the Christian Education of Youth* (Washington, 1936), p. 39.

² *Summa Theologiae*, Ia pars, Q. 1, art. 3, ad 2.

particularly the spiritual faculties of intellect and will. "Christian education," he maintains, "takes in the whole aggregate of human life, spiritual, intellectual and moral, individual, domestic and social, not with a view of reducing it in any way, but in order to elevate, regulate and perfect it, in accordance with the example and teaching of Christ."³

5. TRADITIONALISM VS. PROGRESSIVISM

These two philosophies are predominant in our schools today. The modern progressive or experimentalist philosophy aims at the constant reconstruction of experience. Following John Dewey, it teaches that there are no objective truths. As a consequence it holds that schools should not base their curricula on absolute values. The school should develop the child to use things according to the dictates of his own will rather than retard him with outmoded standards. The traditional philosophy of education maintains the existence of absolute values. It is the duty of the school to instill these truths. Training for the present must include a study of objective norms which transcend the utilitarian. Man is thus prepared to use the absolute values he learns to adapt himself to conditions here and now.

The two major types of educational philosophy are characterized by Professor John Brubacher as follows: "One stresses the dynamic nature bounded by time and rich in novelty and in varied individualities. It does not overlook the need for stability, but the recurrent and the universal it treats as items of the social culture which are constantly subject to revision, in the light of future events. The other educational philosophy gives full recognition to this dynamic world of nature but thinks that the stable factors in it are not just instruments of the culture but are primordial traits of reality, themselves stemming in the last analysis from a supernatural source."⁴

Modern education has challenged the traditional evaluation of speculation. "There is a difference of opinion, however, as to how fruitful speculation is in educational matters. Some think that speculative inquiry leads nowhere at all, that conclusions not based on practical experience are inconclusive, that they bring the whole philosophical enterprise into positive disrepute. Others sanction speculation because on occasion it has pointed to conclusions with which science has later on had to catch up."⁵ This second group, which approves of

³ Pius XI, *loc. cit.*, p. 65.

⁴ Brubacher, John S., *Modern Philosophies of Education*, p. 40; Macmillan and Co., New York. 1950.

⁵ Brubacher, *op. cit.*, p. 12.

speculation for its practical value, and not for its own sake, includes even some members of the traditionalist school.

6. PROGRESSIVISM DOES NOT MAKE THE WHOLE MAN

Progressivists are like gourmet chefs, ever in search of novelties to please their admirers. In knowledge as in food, we recognize that change and variety are necessary to stimulate the appetite and to meet different types of living. On the other hand, every diet needs definite amounts of the staple foods. The progressivists deny that there can be any intellectual "staff of life." Standards are always changing. Is there any wonder, then, that the modern curriculum changes like a restaurant menu?

Proximate causes do change, but not the Universal, Eternal Cause. Man is ordained by nature to know absolute, immutable truths. The scientific study of the eternal truths does not change with new inventions. Even today, the principles of Aristotle, amplified by St. Thomas, remain the best expression of unchanging truths. A system of education that does not recognize the eternal and supernatural standards whereby man is raised to his true dignity can never help a child to reach maturity.

The perennial values, to quote progressive moderns, are too authoritarian. Education must not direct, but follow, the natural inclinations of the student. But is Theology, which tells us that we must abide by a moral law to be saved, any more authoritarian than the doctor who puts us on a diet to save our life? The appetite of the child and, indeed of the man, must be controlled and directed. The goal of education is to direct the desire for knowledge towards its true target, the knowledge of God. How can an education which does not recognize God in its curriculum ever reach Him?

7. THE TRADITIONALIST EDUCATOR MUST TEACH THE STUDENT TO THINK

A good teacher of the traditionalist school must direct his students as a skipper guides his sailboat. The skipper must know the principles of sailing and the destination of his boat. In like manner, the educator must be learned in the processes of thought and firmly convinced of his final goal. But the pedagogue's primary duty is to teach his students to think for themselves, to draw out all their hidden capabilities.

He will often have to buck heavy winds of opposition, the puffs of pride bursting forth from fallen human nature. He will experience aggravating periods of calm when wandering minds and lagging dis-

positions develop what is termed "spring fever." Without skill and patience the teacher's learning will be ineffective.

As a flame tries to ignite straw, the teacher attempts to strike the spark of understanding. A flame must contact the straw in order to burn it; the teacher must reach common ground with his pupils. He must bring them from what they already know to the new truths he wishes to impart. As the proper work of the flame is to ignite straw, so the teacher's duty is always to make his students use their own reasoning powers.

Often, traditionalist educators are tempted to compromise. They are satisfied to teach the so-called "essential truths." A curriculum which is not based on the immutable causes behind the essential truths lessens the strength of the principles it propounds. Today such a system is like a torn sail in a gale. It will not withstand the assaults of a world that denies everlasting values.

8. EDUCATION OF THE WHOLE MAN MUST INCLUDE SPECULATION

Christian education of the whole man must be intellectual, moral and physical. If a man is to be prepared in body and soul, he must be trained to use the spiritual faculties of intellect and will, the internal powers of memory, imagination and common sense, the external senses and the lower appetites of the body. Artistic and intellectual development is the distinctive contribution of the school in preparing youths for leading a good life. The development of this spiritual side of man is essential to the development of the whole man because of the dominant influence of the intellect on the other parts of the human organism. According to its nature, the intellect is best trained through the cultivation of the speculative sciences.

Metaphysics, the highest of the speculative sciences, is not dead weight to the intellect; it is truly "electrifying." Speculation activates the intellect as electricity does the toaster. An understanding of the universal truths of metaphysics joins the intellect to its principles and helps keep the whole man in touch with reality. When metaphysics was baptized by Christian Theology, it became an alternating current between the natural and the supernatural. Since man spans the natural and the supernatural, he needs the natural truths of metaphysics as well as the supernatural truths of Theology.

Metaphysics is the vast ocean which mirrors the beauty of the sunrise. Theology is the rising sun illuminating the dark ocean and revealing some of the brightness of heaven. The human mind is something more than the "power to make use of reality for one's own desires" [Dewey]. The intellect has a natural inclination to see the awe-

inspiring beauty of Eternal Truth. Only in heaven is the desire perfectly satisfied. Yet here on earth man can have a certain impression of Divine knowledge through Theology. Enlightened by natural and supernatural truths and filled with supernatural Charity, man becomes another sun, the image of the Divine Sun, burning with the desire to illumine others with the fruits of his contemplation. Such a man is prepared for what he must be and what he must do in this life in order to attain perfect happiness in the next.

9. CONCLUSION.

Planning a school curriculum to satisfy the innate curiosity of the human mind in a changing world will ever remain a difficult problem. Keeping in mind the eternal values guiding human conduct and learning, we must reject the philosophy of progressivism. Only by checking the trend away from speculation and restoring Theology to its rightful place can we salvage what is good in the traditional liberal arts course. Measuring all things in the curriculum by man's ultimate end, it will be possible to achieve the education of the whole man. This is the aim declared absolutely necessary by Pope Pius XI.