

# THE THEORY OF CLASSICAL EDUCATION

## NEW OLR MISSION STATEMENT

*Under the patronage of the Blessed Virgin Mary, the mission of Our Lady of the Rosary Catholic School is to support parents in their role as the primary educators of their children. Our rigorous classical training draws out of students their natural desire for wisdom and virtue. By fostering a love for truth, beauty, and goodness, we seek to form disciples of Jesus Christ, set free to realize their full potential by living joyfully in accordance with the truth revealed by God through nature and the Catholic Church.*

The above mission statement makes official Our Lady of the Rosary's adoption of a classical model of Catholic education. There is much natural overlap between practices that are theoretically classical and those that are simply what Catholic schools have always done. That's because it was the Catholic Church herself who built the monasteries that became the great schools and universities of the world. These institutions educated in the classical tradition. As a result it is not always easy to say, "We're doing X because we're Catholic and Y because we're classical." The two are inherently blended.

In the course of the last century, and especially the last fifty years, many Catholic schools have abandoned the tradition of education that made them the gold standard for a millennium. So now it is not sufficient simply to speak of Catholic education in isolation. We must be clear about what sort of Catholic education we are proposing. The answer to that question is a classical one.

Classical education is neither a trendy innovation nor a relic of the ancient past. It simply seeks to recover a coherent, effective educational philosophy that has only recently been lost. It is a return to the original purpose of education. Not content with the modern pragmatic approach of merely training students for "college and career readiness" – an expressly materialistic goal – the classical school sees the purpose of education as forming human beings for excellent, virtuous living. For this reason, a classical educational model is the natural and best framework for implementing a Catholic school's spiritual mission.

So what is classical education and why do we need it? Before answering this question, we should acknowledge a few unfortunate truths about the modern school landscape.

## THREE UNFORTUNATE TRUTHS

First, modern secular educators don't actually agree about either the purpose of education or how to accomplish it. They can't even articulate who the human person is. Do we have a soul? Where do we go when we die? They don't know. Yet Catholic schools tend to defer to their influence, which is illogical.

Second, despite this lack of agreement secular educators repeatedly demand that Catholic schools continually retrain their teachers and change their curriculum lest they fall out of step with the culture. Why is this?

Third, there is a lot of money to be made by people who push educational innovations and reforms. Change is not cheap. But there is very little money to be made by acknowledging that what worked for hundreds of years can still work today. The undertow in education will always be to try new things, even when the old things are working just fine.

The result of these factors is that Catholic schools are bombarded by influences that cause us to doubt our vision and discard time-tested traditions. Now we must muster the fortitude to reclaim the heart of education for the sake of our students.

### AN INTEGRATED EDUCATION

The word *integrated* comes from the Latin word meaning *to be made whole*. It gives the sense of all the pieces fitting together without disagreement, as in a person of integrity. Regrettably, modern education is usually any thing but integrated. It does not fit together, but rather is dis-integrated. The modern school is frequently like an outfit comprised of separately attractive articles of clothing purchased from expensive stores. But the net result is an ensemble that still doesn't match or make any sense once you put the clothes on.

Students in large schools, particularly state schools, drift from classroom to classroom receiving instruction from teachers who cannot be expected to share any religious or philosophical foundation in common. Frequently, they barely know each other. As a result the textbooks and readings are chosen without regard for the big questions of life. Each classroom is like an educational island, with its own teacher, group of students, syllabus, and priorities. These classes do not have anything to do with one another, nor do they try. The students are left with the impression that education is not about the pursuit of shared truth but is rather a protracted exercise in earning grades to progress to the next level of schooling.

Classical education corrects this problem through intentional integration of subject matter across disciplines, and by hiring teachers who themselves model interest in diverse subjects. Students in English class discuss what their Catholic faith has to teach them about the choices presented in a novel. Students in history class consider the decisive impact of scientific discoveries on world events. Each class actively pursues examples of truth, goodness, and beauty in the subject matter. They are trying not just to learn facts but to learn lessons. They seek wisdom. In the process, each student learns to recognize the person of Jesus Christ as the perfect model of integrated Truth, Goodness, and Beauty.

This focus on integration improves both the students' acquisition of knowledge (by presenting more overlapping content) and their interest (by demonstrating that the truth reinforces itself across disciplines). More importantly, it convinces students that more likely than not, all knowledge has an application in their lives, if they can just discover the connection.

## THE CLASSICAL TRIVIUM

An Internet search of the phrase *classical education* will in due course introduce one to the idea of the Trivium. What is the Trivium? It refers to the three proven roads down which a fully successful student of any discipline must travel: grammar, logic, and rhetoric. We have all heard the words grammar, logic, and rhetoric, and likely have at least a notion of what they mean. But sometimes the little bit we do know only obscures the larger reality of how these subjects inform instruction in the classical classroom.

What then are grammar, logic, and rhetoric in the context of a whole classical education? Most subjects in school – language study, science, history, or math – can be considered from different angles and at different levels of depth. Let's take science as an example. A topic such as *ecosystems* might be covered in 2nd grade, 6th grade, and 10th grade. But it should not be covered in the same way at each of these levels. The instruction must be age appropriate and progress toward mastery. (And of course it should integrate with other disciplines when possible.)

The 2nd grader should learn *what* an ecosystem is and be able to identify *what* its rules are. This is the grammar of ecosystems. A 6th grader needs to know the *what*, but also begins to learn *why* things are the way they are. The *why* is the logic of ecosystems. The 10th grader needs to know *what* and *why*, but also should learn *how* to explain their knowledge to someone else. This is rhetoric as applied to ecosystems.

The Trivium's application to ecosystems is simply one example. In a Catholic school context, education is fundamentally about seeking truth, incarnated in Jesus Christ. Whatever the subject, be it ecosystems, the American Revolution, or multiplication, classical education begins by teaching **what is true**. Then it progresses to teach **why it is true**. Finally, students learn **how to explain this truth**, and do so in the context of competing opinions.

Frequently, classical educators speak of the Trivium – grammar, logic, and rhetoric – as stages of learning. There is some basis to the observation that students tend to progress from one stage to the other as they grow. But there is also a lot of overlap within the Trivium. Still, if it is helpful one may think of our Lower School as focusing mostly on the grammar (what is true) of subjects, while the Middle School layers on the logic (why is it true), and the Upper School builds to the rhetoric (how to explain this truth).

Perhaps you have heard of the Common Core, which has lately received much attention. One of the major shortcomings of the Common Core approach to education is that it attempts to push logic and rhetoric into the youngest grades as a means of adding rigor.

Common Core proponents don't use these words of course, but that is the effect. According to the Common Core educator, it's not enough for a 1st grader to tell you **what** 12+12 equals. The students must also tell you **why** it is so. But **why** questions are much more abstract than **what** questions and are not developmentally appropriate to the average six year old. More to the point, they are not at all necessary. The fact that some students can answer **why** questions as well as **what** questions might be a sign of giftedness in those students, but is it certainly not a sign of disability in those who progress more slowly.

The bottom line is that students who learn their math facts well in the early grades will be more than ready for the progression to logic and rhetoric in later years. A classical school makes sure the math facts and basic arithmetic are automatic before troubling the student with abstractions. The same sensible approach is taken in all subjects.

This classical approach of mastering – often simply memorizing – the grammar (facts and rules) of each subject builds a bank of core knowledge that gives the student the necessary foundation for more sophisticated study as they mature.

## MEMORY WORK

Memory work plays a major role in classical education, particularly for younger students. It will be standard practice for students to memorize Bible verses, famous quotes, poetry, dates, times tables, definitions, lists, and locations on maps. What's going on here? In the Internet age is it really necessary to memorize what can easily be googled?

There are three reasons classical education prioritizes memory work.

REASON ONE: The first is simply to develop the faculty (skill) of memory in the student's intellect. Just as one may develop physical stamina by exercising, one may improve the memory by actively training it. There was a time in recent history when the idea of going to the gym to work out would have been laughed at. Why? - Because in our agrarian and early industrial society most people got regular exercise as matter of their daily routine. It was only when our culture grew more sedentary that working out became necessary.

The Internet is a tremendous innovation to be celebrated, but it has done to our memories what the cubicle did to our bodies. Because we are not forced to memorize things as a matter of daily routine, our memories become atrophied. Yet they hardly become unnecessary. So we must work harder to develop the same aptitude for memory that came naturally to previous generations.

REASON TWO: To master the grammar of any subject area, a student must know – have memorized – what its essential elements are. Imagine going to the doctor only to have her ask Siri for help every time you describe a symptom. Imagine a referee who needs to be reminded how many yards a football player is penalized for a personal foul. There are some things one must simply memorize to be effective in school and work.

Too often the memorizing that students in school do is narrowly tailored to a single goal: get a good grade on a test. That's all well and good. But what we see all too frequently is that students train their short-term memories to store information precisely until the test is completed, and then they dump it. As a result, when high school teachers receive students they find they have to re-teach all the same basic facts the students should have learned in elementary school. The time this redundant teaching takes deprives teachers and students of the opportunity to go deeper into the logic and rhetoric of the subject.

REASON THREE: One cannot live virtuously and wisely without a core bank of remembered truths. Each person, confronted with the challenges and ambiguities of daily life, must be able to draw upon some knowledge that can lead to correct judgments about what is right. We've all heard the maxim: *Those who are ignorant of history are condemned to repeat it.* Well, it's true. There is much more at stake than school grades. So we must train the memories of the students to hold onto the teachings of their faith and the lessons of great men and women.

### EDUCATION IN VIRTUE

Some people refer to classical education as *liberal* education. And liberal it is, in the original sense of the word. The root of the word *liberal* is the same as that of *liberty*. By liberal education, we mean an education that prepares the student to live as a free person in a free society. Such a person must have the intellect to distinguish good and evil and must possess the will power to do the right thing.

Classical education prepares students to use their freedom wisely and well, to choose Christ and live according to the Gospel, even amidst the confusions of modernity. This education in virtue is wholly alien to the modern public school, which aspires to be so neutral in its values that it ends up having no values at all. A classical school is not afraid to name virtues and vices, to declare things objectively true or false, and to hold its students accountable for attaining a nobler standard of conduct.

### NEXT: CLASSICAL EDUCATION IN PRACTICE

In the loving hands of Catholic teachers, classical education brings out the best in students, both intellectually and spiritually. The philosophy alone does not produce this result; it takes a dedicated teacher implementing classical practices faithfully and with expertise. My next letter will provide information about the specific ways a classical education will be delivered to students in the classrooms of Our Lady of the Rosary.