



Educating for Eternity

In his telecast on the *Training of Children*, Bishop Fulton Sheen spoke about three instincts which can be observed in children. In the first place, he says, we see in a child an instinct for eternity. For the child, time is a reality still only very remote in his consciousness. Each passing moment for the child is like an eternity. This, says Bishop Sheen, is why a child cries when his parents leave him alone—as far as he is concerned, his parents are gone “forever.” The second instinct is an instinct for the truth. A child will believe anything he is told; he has no reason not to. He takes the truth for granted. When the father tells his little son that he is loved, the son believes him and is content. The third instinct is the instinct for love. The child is loved, we hope, by his parents from the first moments of his waking life. He is coddled and kissed, and as he grows he develops in himself a fondness for those closest to him. He does not have to be told to love his parents. He simply does, and to him it seems the most natural thing in the world to do.

Now what does any of this have to do with education, and in particular classical education? When Bishop Sheen spoke of the instincts of the child he was really speaking of the instincts of man himself. Every man comes into the world with an instinct for eternity, an instinct for truth, and an instinct for love. As the human child grows to manhood, these instincts can either be nurtured or destroyed. Thus the importance of training a child properly, which was Bishop Sheen’s whole point in the first place. Through the training of a child we can make either a man or a monster.

The purpose of education (rightly and classically, that is, traditionally, understood) is to shape the young human being into the best possible version of himself. But what is that best possible version supposed to look like? In the Church, of course, the saints provide an outstanding example of men and women who have achieved everything that a human being is supposed to achieve, and it does not have much to do with I.Q.

But more generally, what is man? Why are we here? What is our purpose on earth? Do we even have a purpose? These are philosophical questions which must be answered before any education is going to be really successful. For they are necessarily the foundation upon which education is based. If we don’t know who we are, or why we are here, what need is there for education? Even the modern world has its answers, utilitarian and materialistic though they be.

In the Baltimore Catechism, which is wonderfully concise, we find the answers to our questions. What is man? The Catechism responds, “Man is a creature composed of body and soul, and made in the image and likeness of God.” Why did God make us? The Catechism responds, “God made [us] to know Him, to love Him, and to serve Him in this world, and to be happy with Him for ever in heaven.” Here we have to do some unpacking. In the first place, a human being is not just a material thing, he is both matter and spirit, body and soul. Secondly, we are body and soul made in the image and likeness of God, which means, in part, that we have an intellect and a free-will. Thirdly, we have a purpose that is beyond mere utility. Our purpose is to know, love, and serve God. Why? Because to do so will make us happy.



I believe Aristotle was the first to argue that human desire for happiness is the one motive common to all men. All men want to be happy. As Aristotle says in the first chapter of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, happiness “is the end of all that man does.” The most hardened criminal will brave any peril to achieve his goal. Why? Because, mistaken though he may be, he thinks that committing the crime will make him happy.

Man is a creature with an eternal destiny. The happiness that we all so desperately want cannot be found here on earth, not fully. Our happiness is only to be found in God. “You have formed us for Yourself, and our hearts are restless till they find rest in You,” prays Saint Augustine of Hippo at the beginning of *The Confessions*. We shall be truly happy, and therefore, truly human, only at the sight of God. We are destined for nothing less than that *Beatific Vision*, the “vision that makes us happy” (cf. Latin *beatus* = happy, and *facere* = to make). This is our goal, our purpose, as human beings. The Greek word for such a purpose, the purpose for which a thing exists, is *telos*. The *telos* of man is to know, love, and serve God in this world and to be with Him—to *see* Him—in the world to come.

Education is education only in so far as it helps us to achieve this Divinely ordained purpose—a purpose, which as Bishop Sheen points out, is, to a certain extent, instinctive as seen in the behaviors of a child. If the purpose of man is forgotten, we can no longer educate, but only corrupt. If God is not to be our end, than something else must fill the void, be it money or power or whatever else. Then, instead of unending joy, we shall have unending sorrow.

A truly classical education assumes man’s eternal destiny in God. Thus it seeks to train, or more literally “draw out” of us all those things—shadow remnants of the Fall—which cloud our vision, so that we can more clearly see, as we were made to see, the True, the Good, and the Beautiful. For God is Truth, Goodness, and Beauty, and all that is true, good and beautiful, comes from Him.

One could say that this clarification of the intellect is the primary benefit of classical education. However, this seems to cheapen the claim. Rather this clarity is the great *gift* that a classical education bestows on the student.

Classical education puts the mind of the student in contact with Truth. Modern secular education has abandoned truth for ideology, which is relativistic, subjective, and intensely political. Either, “there is no truth,” or “truth is what you make it,” or “truth is what the government says it is.” Really these are all just ways of avoiding the Truth. Truth is too much for modern man. It is too demanding, too uncomfortable.

In contrast, classical education teaches the student to face the Truth unabashed. The classically-trained student wrestles with Truth, as Jacob wrestled with God. He learns to respect the Truth, through it cost him his ego. He learns to love the Truth and to defend the Truth, though it cost him his very life.

Classical education teaches the student Goodness. Of course, no form of education will make a person good, automatically. No, there is much more to morality than knowing right and wrong. But it is important to know right from wrong nonetheless. It is important that each of us form his conscience, which is our link to God’s Divine Law, and which Blessed John Henry Newman called the primordial Vicar of Christ. We must help our children to form their consciences. As someone once said (I can’t now remember



who), “man, made in the image and likeness of God, has been given an intellect, and he will use that intellect for good if it is well-trained, or ill if it is corrupted.”

There is a battle being waged in the soul of every man, woman and child. At the end of time, each and every soul will be either saved or damned for all eternity. Much is at stake in the education of our children. As Dr. Don Briel says in his Forward to Ryan Topping’s book, *Renewing the Mind*, “to teach is to shape a human being, and this necessarily involves a certain violence.” To educate is to take a side in the fight against “the rulers of the darkness of the world.” Education is, as Ryan Topping says, “a battle between the gods.”

Indoctrination in modern secular circles is a taboo word. Modern secular centers of “education” claim to teach values and tolerance. What they are really teaching is a subjective view of reality. For them goodness is nothing more than what is good for the individual in the moment. It might very well change the next moment. But, “good and ill have not changed since yesteryear,” as Aragorn says in Tolkien’s, *The Lord of the Rings*. Values come and go, but Goodness remains yesterday, today, and tomorrow the same. We must bring our children up in the light of Truth and Goodness, lest (God-forbid) they come to be counted among the sons of the kingdom, who will be “thrown into the outer darkness.”

And is it not better in the light of Truth and Goodness? For it is in that light that we recognize true Beauty. Of all the concepts, Beauty is perhaps the most misunderstood by modern secular culture. Never has the world been so full of ugliness masquerading as beauty.

But it is no wonder. If Truth and Goodness are set aside, as they often are, Beauty cannot long endure. Beauty is informed by Truth and Goodness. Without them, what beauty is perceived is false. John Keats’ famous lines, “Beauty is truth, truth beauty . . . ,” are misleading. For while all Truth is Beautiful (for those who can see it), not all beauty is true. The eye of the beholder is often a fickle judge of character. The Enemy is clever, and he is not above (or below) taking a fair and pleasing form. But what is fair to the outer eye, the inner eye may see as foul. Thus the inner eye must be trained to see the wolf in sheep’s clothing.

In conclusion, education is about putting the student into contact with God and His creation. We do not educate simply to train for a career or a skill. If that is all that education is, then the modern educational model is worthy one. But no, we, as human beings, are made to be in a relationship with a Being who loves us and who wishes us to be with Him for all eternity. We must educate with this historical fact ever in our minds: God sent His only-begotten Son into the world, Jesus Christ, the God-man, so that our human nature could be ennobled and He could call us His sons and daughters. From the beginning, He calls us to Himself. And if we will it, if we learn to see with minds and hearts unclouded, we may see Him as He is, face-to-face for all eternity.



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Summer Checklist

- ✓ Spend time outside together as a family. Nature is made by God and is a gift that He has given us to enjoy. Enjoy it, and give thanks to God.
- ✓ Read. Encourage your children to read good books. Build a library of good books in your home. It doesn't have to be large, but a good home library will give you and your children the opportunity to simply take a book off the shelf and begin reading. Also, make time to read aloud to your children. Show them that you value reading good literature so much, that you even take the time to read it to them yourself. If reading aloud isn't your thing, let the older kids try, or purchase an Audible subscription.
- ✓ Be silent. Remember God did not come to Elijah in the whirlwind, but in the still small voice. Education requires time to simply sit and meditate. But to meditate effectively, you must have silence. There is too much noise in the world today. For the first time in human history, we can talk about a sensory overload. Unburden yourself and your family. Find time each and every week (it needn't be long at first) to turn off or shut out *all* the noise. Don't expect it to be comfortable at first. We are so accustomed to noise that when we turn it off we become anxious, because we feel that something is missing. Fight the temptation to turn the noise back on, and soon enough, you will yearn for these moments of silence.
- ✓ Pray. Go to mass as often as you can. Pray the rosary. Spend time in the adoration chapel. Talk to God in your own words, and teach your children to do the same. God is Truth. To know the Truth, we must cultivate a relationship with He Who is Truth.