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A Case for Classical Education

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In a bid to save Catholic education, major Catholic archdioceses are closing many schools and turning others over to the control of regional boards. This sad necessity has become an occasion for soul-searching within the Catholic educational bureaucracy. As Catholic leaders combat the causes of plummeting enrollment, they might look beyond the obvious financial barriers to examine the curricula and culture offered in their schools. Fewer Catholic parents are willing or able to make costly tuition payments when the differences between free government education and the local parochial option are negligible. However, an emerging movement in Catholic education offers an alternative both faithful and marketable. At the cutting edge of the effort to restore Catholic education are a number of schools, private and even diocesan, that are finding growth and enthusiasm in the rediscovery of a rigorous, classical liberal arts curriculum.

This movement first emerged among Catholic homeschoolers in the 1970's and 1980's, then spread to small independent schools in the early 1990's. Today, around 100,000 Catholic students are homeschooled, and thousands more are enrolled in independent Catholic schools outside of the diocesan system. The enormity of this loss to the diocesan schools cannot be measured simply by empty seats. These parents, who have chosen "the road less traveled", are among those most willing to sacrifice time, talent, and treasure for an authentically Catholic education. With parental devotion and American spirit, they have not settled for merely passing on catechesis.

Like many of their Protestant and secular counterparts, these parents have found inspiration and direction from an unusual source—a semi-whimsical, 1947 speech

given by mystery author Dorothy Sayers, in which she laments the inability of her contemporaries to recognize shoddy reasoning and emotional manipulation and re-imagines a Medieval curriculum in a modern setting:

They do not know what the words mean; they do not know how to ward them off or blunt their edge or fling them back; they are a prey to words in their emotions instead of being the masters of them in their intellects.

The heart of Sayers' reform lies in connecting the classically known trivium of grammar, logic, and rhetoric with her own insight into the developmental stages of learning. Learning the basic terms and facts of any discipline (grammar) is appropriate to the Parroting age (elementary), in which learning by heart is a natural and pleasurable activity. Making connections, drawing conclusions, recognizing fallacious reasoning are natural activities for the Pert stage (junior high). In the Poetic stage (high school), the student infuses forms with meaning. Overall, the goal is to develop those abilities that will make life-long learning a reality. Teaching to standardized tests in subject areas is antithetical to the classical movement. Those who practice Sayers' methods add a commitment to classical history rather than social studies, a preference—drawn from the Great and Good Books movements—for original writings rather than textbooks, and a serious attention to integrating the curriculum within a Christian understanding of the world.

The last 15 years have seen an explosion of classical schools and homeschooling organizations among non-Catholic Christians. The Association of Classical and Christian Schools has 229 members, Classical Conversations claims to help 37,000 homeschoolers and the Circe Institute offers an impressive array of training services and products.

Although not yet so well organized, many independent Catholic schools also have embraced the classical approach. At first schools like the Lyceum Academy in Cleveland, Ohio and St. Augustine Academy in Ventura, California, were considered outsiders and even threats to the Catholic educational establishment. But the evident successes of these schools in forming strong Catholic academic communities with students knowledgeable about their faith, their Church, and Christian civilization have led pastors, bishops, and superintendents to open their arms toward these schools. In the Diocese of Madison, Wisconsin, the Most Reverend Robert C. Morlino has lent his support to the independent St. Ambrose Academy to such an extent that he teaches there on a regular basis.

In 2009, St. Jerome's parish school in the Archdiocese of Washington, D.C., faced dropping enrollment and major debt that forced a diocesan review process. A group of parishioners approached Pastor James M. Stack with the idea of a classical curriculum, a bold move for an urban, socioeconomically and ethnically diverse school. Fr. Stack and Principal Mary Pat Donoghue embraced the idea, and a

volunteer curriculum team of educators, theologians, and philosophers hammered out the 120-page educational plan for the pre-K-8 school. The superintendent supported the initiative, and St. Jerome's today has gained national attention for its early successes. Some classes now have waiting lists. After the first year with the new approach, math and reading scores jumped. Disproving the notion that a classical curriculum is elitist, many students who previously struggled found motivation and success through the rich content and lively discussions that required them to think deeply.

"We have seen what it looks like for a child to be truly educated, and it is a very different thing than just the acquisition of skills," said Donoghue. "This is about opening the treasure trove of the Catholic Church, and re-imagining ourselves in its heritage and thought."

As public education moves toward nationally accepted common core standards, Donoghue insists that the Church has an opportunity to move in a different direction and resist the pressure to conform to decidedly secular content and pedagogy. Classical Catholic schools have made a conscious choice, not to turn back to the past, but to draw upon the riches of tradition to help children understand who they are in the modern world. The response of students, parents, and teachers reveals the fruit of these efforts.




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RESOURCES

Dorothy Sayers' 1947 speech, "**The Lost Tools of Learning**"

Association of Classical & Christian Schools

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