Classical education and the Catholic tradition: A brief introduction

By Marcel Brown, PhD, dean and tutor of the Alcuin Institute for Catholic Culture

Classical education's roots are in ancient Rome and Greece, yet its branches and blossoms span more than 2,500 years of history across Europe, Africa, the Middle East and, today, the entire globe. According to a story told by Socrates in the *Phaedrus*, the ancient Greeks received their inspiration for this type of learning from Egypt. Already at this early date, c. 370 BC, the rough outline of what is now systematized began to emerge: in the *Myth of Theuth*, Socrates enumerates the arts of language and of number. The arts of language came to be called the *trivium*, a Latin word meaning "three ways." Modern-day *language arts* are derived from these, yet their ancient articulation follows a sequence which begins with *grammar*, proceeds to *logic* and culminates in *rhetoric*. From the time of Socrates to the present day, the trivium has been complemented by the *quadrivium*, the sequential study of the "four ways" of the arts of number, namely *arithmetic, geometry, music* and *astronomy*. Today the quadrivium has become the "STEM" subjects (*science, technology, engineering, and mathematics*). In classical education, the person in whom the seven ways of the liberal arts converge is liberally educated, educated for freedom.

In ancient Rome, classical education begins to be called "liberal" because it was reserved at that time for those who were free – the *liberi* who were destined to serve the state through leadership. The word "liberal" was thereafter used to describe both the student and the arts studied; hence the phrase "liberal arts." Whereas a classically educated Roman was destined for statecraft, a classically educated early Christian (like St. Basil, St. Gregory Nazianzen, or St. Augustine) directed classical liberal learning to the good of building up the "city of God." St. Augustine, like St. Paul, was highly trained in the "Hellenic" or "Greek" language arts, and, like St. Paul, he used his education to spread the Gospel. For St. Augustine, this was a life-altering decision. After years of serving at a state-sponsored center of learning, St. Augustine was banned from his career after converting to Catholicism. As he explains in his *Confessions* (c. 399), he knew well the consequences because he had been privy to Victorinus's conversion in similar circumstances. Witnessing this, Augustine knew he too could amend his life.

Not every classical school, as St. Augustine observes, dedicates its study of the liberal arts to God. In his *Confessions* St. Augustine enumerates most of the liberal arts as we have them today, yet he notes that without God they are missing their principle of integration. To the liberal arts St. Augustine thus adds something essential: their origin and end in God, the ultimate Reality:

> *And what did it profit me, that all the books I could procure of the so-called liberal arts, I, the vile slave of vile affections, read by myself, and understood? … For I had my back to the light, and my face to the things enlightened; whence my face, with which I discerned the things enlightened, itself was not enlightened. Whatever was written, either on rhetoric, or logic, geometry, music, and arithmetic, by myself without much difficulty or any instructor, I understood, Thou knowest, O Lord my God … yet did I not thence sacrifice to Thee.*

St. Augustine teaches in his *Confessions* that, without a Christian inspiration, the liberal arts leave students chained to a wall, imprisoned. In painting this picture, Augustine alludes to the most famous analogy given by Socrates in the *Republic*. Socrates there likens the degrees of knowing that which is truly real to the process of being unshackled and freed from imprisonment in a cave. Socrates equates ignorance with vice and knowledge with virtue: being vicious means imprisonment, whereas attainment of virtue is freedom.

The Cave Analogy had vast implications for the kind of "freedom" provided by classical education for ancient Greeks and Romans, yet the term "classical liberal arts education" takes on an added significance after the popularization of St. Augustine's *Confessions*. The liberal arts are not fully liberating without our conscious confession that Christ Himself is the source and summit of truly freeing learning. To classicism's pursuit of virtue, St. Augustine thus adds the Christian pursuit of holiness. Many throughout history have described classical education as an education "for its own sake" because the ultimate end of the classical Christian liberal arts is the excellence of the person *per se*, in nature *and* in grace, especially in reference to our transcendent end, the Beatific Vision.

As though responding directly to St. Augustine, St. Benedict retreats from the world to live in a cave, as if to say that such a life is freer than a life lived shackled to sin. Benedict had found in the liberal arts institutions of his time utter moral decay. He fled from this, saying later that, had he not done so, he would have died (surely a reference to the loss of grace which "higher" education can bring when not ordered to Christ). Ironically, it was St. Benedict's act of embracing a life apart which led to centuries of the spread of classicism: once St. Benedict's *Rule* (c. 530) became the standard observance in Western monasticism, Benedictine monasteries served as the principal transmitters of the classical liberal arts.

By the time Charlemagne and Alcuin began revitalizing the cathedral schools of Europe in the early 800s, the Benedictine monastic tradition had preserved classical learning so closely that *The Rhetoric of Alcuin to Charlemagne* is essentially a paraphrase of Cicero. The Plan of the Monastery of St. Gall, drawn up in 819 following the flourishing of Alcuin and Charlemagne, soon became the blueprint for medieval European monasteries. Its design housed the scriptorium – the room where texts were copied – near the sanctuary of the main church. There, monks turned to making manuscripts, to "tradition" in the truest sense of the word, which in Latin means "to hand on." Benedictine monks handed on the classical liberal arts and more – St. Jerome's translation of the Bible (the Vulgate), the writings of Jewish historians, "pagan" literature, works of medieval Islamic philosophers, the earliest books on medicine, botany, music and more.

St. John Henry Cardinal Newman once wrote an essay on the three movements of Western education, titled *The Mission of St. Benedict*. In it he reflects on Benedictinism as the poetic, Dominicanism as the scientific and Ignatianism as the pragmatic. Like the Benedictines, the sons of Dominic were classical in every way. St. Thomas Aquinas, the key figure in the scholastic synthesis of Aristotle with Sacred Scripture and the Fathers of the Church, has been called the Church's Common Doctor for good reason. Despite Jesuit pragmatism, or because of it, the order's 1599 *Ratio Studiorum* mandates adherence to the philosophy of Aristotle and the theology of Aquinas. All these greats – Augustine, Benedict, Thomas, Ignatius, Newman – were proponents of classicism. Put another way, Jesuit pragmatism is best understood in light of the same classical education championed by the Dominicans, preserved by the Benedictines, baptized by the Fathers of the Church, elaborated by ancient Romans and initially received and written down by the ancient Greeks.

For us here and now, how are we to receive the tradition of the classical liberal arts, the tradition of St. Paul, St. Augustine, St. Benedict, St. Thomas Aquinas, St. Ignatius of Loyola and St. John Henry Cardinal Newman?

Newman was, among other things, a great defender of the study of Latin at a time when it was going out of style. In classicism there is a saying: *Ubi sunt qui ante nos fuerunt?* Like most classical maxims, this one is so ancient that it has had time to go in and out of fashion over the course of centuries. It has even inspired the trope (Greek "turn") by which an orator, preacher, poet, or essayist asks, *Where are those who came before us? Ubi sunt?*

More than a decade before John Dewey revolutionized education with his New School for Social Research in 1919, G.K. Chesterton, in his apologetic work *Orthodoxy*, famously quipped, "Tradition means giving votes to the most obscure of all classes, our ancestors. It is the democracy of the dead."

Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Cicero, Augustine – the spiritual sons of Benedict, Dominic, Aquinas, Ignatius of Loyola and Cardinal Newman – do *they* get a vote in how we educate today? If yes, then surely, they have already cast their ballots unanimously in favor of the classical liberal arts.

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So, before John Dewey began revolutionizing American education just 100 years ago, what was there, why was it set aside and to what effect? Has the experiment of Dewey's experimentalism turned out well or poorly? *Ubi sunt?*

The fact that Latin is ubiquitous (literally everywhere) in science as well as in statecraft and in all derivative disciplines owes much to the classical formation of history's scientists and statesmen. When we hear in the news about a *quid pro quo* we are reminded that everyday words like caveat are not the master but the servant of anyone who has command of Latin. Is it mere coincidence that Latin remains the language of law and politics, science and medicine, philosophy and theology? Whoever knows Latin is never put off by what intimidates most: the mathematician's *"QED"* (*quod erat demonstrandum*, what was needing to be demonstrated), the philosopher's *a priori* (from what came before), the lawyer's *a fortiori* (from the stronger), the scholar's *ibid.* (*ibidem*, in the same place), the choir's *"Venite adoremus!"* (O come, let us adore!), the doctor's *nil per os* (nothing by mouth), or the pharmacist's *"BID"* (*bis in die*, twice daily), or everyman's *mea culpa* (my fault). Had the disciplines and their disciples not forgotten *Mater et Magistra*, Mother and Teacher, there would not be today the same degree of misunderstanding between the arts and the sciences; for as deep thinkers know, art is a science, and science an art.

American independence itself was a progressive retrogression, a forward-thinking return to theistic natural law and a classical understanding of the person, government, society and, loosely speaking, God. Washington, Jefferson and Lincoln were all devotees of classicism. Washington's reluctance to accept the Office of the Presidency has often invited comparisons to the Roman leader Cincinnatus (c. 519-430 BC). Jefferson drafted *The Declaration of Independence* in 1776 using the five-part structure originating in Plato's *Phaedrus* and handed on by Cicero (largely neglected in schools today). Lincoln's *Gettysburg Address* (1863) is clearly indebted to Pericles' Funeral Oration (431 BC). Jane Austen, a neo-classical contemporary of The Founders, uses Ciceronian structure in a letter sent by the classically educated hero of *Pride and Prejudice* (1813). In his 2006 Regensburg Lecture, Pope Benedict XVI uses the same structure – Austen's, Jefferson's, Cicero's and Plato's! – to argue for a return to Greek and Roman thought as a providentially ordained preamble to the fullness of Revelation in Christ.

In our age of overwhelming secularism, a classical Catholic school seeking to recover this great, lost tradition is like high ground in rising floodwaters. Breaching all levies, secularism's pervasive fluidity has long since reached the point of saturation, exerting its influence even and especially on education, where dry land is harder and harder to find. Given the causes of the deluge and its extent, it is high time to stem the tide by returning to the classical grounds of Catholic education, maybe not for the whole world at once, but certainly for one classroom, one family at a time. ✝