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Catholic Renewal of the Classical Liberal Arts

Renovación católica del modelo clásico de artes liberales

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Abstract

The classical liberal arts are an educational model that had a tremendous influence on education for centuries. The early Christians superimposed their religious formation on this traditional academic course, and, eventually, the Catholic understanding of the human person and the world transformed the approach to classical education, elevating the aspirations of the model. This paper aims at researching this transformation, going deeper into how two important principles of Catholic education renew the classical liberal arts: Catholic anthropology and the unity of knowledge within the Catholic worldview.

Keywords: Catholicism, Catholic schools, liberal studies

Resumen

Las artes liberales clásicas son un modelo educativo que tuvo una gran influencia en la educación por siglos. Los primeros cristianos sobrepusieron su formación religiosa a este curso académico tradicional, y, eventualmente, la comprensión católica de la persona humana y del mundo transformó la educación clásica, elevando las aspiraciones de este modelo. El presente artículo busca investigar esta transformación, profundizando en cómo dos principios fundamentales de la educación católica renuevan el modelo clásico de artes liberales: la antropología católica y la unidad del saber desde una cosmovisión católica.

Palabras clave: catolicismo, escuelas católicas, estudios liberales

The classical liberal arts are an educational model which has its root in Ancient Greece. Marrou (1964), a French historian, said that «when we say “classical education” we really mean “Hellenistic education”» (p. 138) because it was during Hellenistic times that the liberal arts attained perfection. This model had a tremendous influence on the education of children for centuries, being in use throughout the Roman era in the West and the whole of Byzantine history in the East (Marrou, 1964), and during the medieval world and the age of humanism with the different renaissances (Dawson, 2010). According to some authors, there were still some rudiments of this classical training during the Enlightenment (Perrin, 2004), and even today, Dorothy Sayers reintroduced the trivium to the modern audience, where educators can find some current applications in the US and throughout the world that conceive classical education as an authoritative and excellent education, following the principles established by the Greeks and the Romans (McCoy, 2021; Perrin, 2004).

Within this historical context, at the very beginning, the early Christians superimposed their religious formation on this traditional model, which was the education they had received (Marrou, 1964). Afterward, the Christian engagement with the liberal arts caused a transformation of this academic course, because the Catholic perspective required a fundamental altering of the model, a fact that this paper explores further. Precisely, the purpose of this paper is to research and state how the liberal arts are renewed by two significant principles of Catholic education, as far as Christ makes all things new,¹ including any method and curricula (Topping, 2015). After explaining the classical liberal arts, this paper analyzes how these two principles transform the approach to classical education: Catholic anthropology, which changes the aims of education and makes the nature of sin, the Reconciliation in Christ, and the Trinitarian conception of the person deeply elevate the model; and the unity of knowledge within the Catholic worldview, which changes the conception of reality and enables the complementarity of faith and reason to attain truth necessary in education.

1 The Lord said: «Behold, I am making all things new» (Rev 21:5). And also: «Behold, I am doing a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?» (Is 43:19).

Classical Liberal Arts Model

It is difficult to explain the classical liberal arts model, as far as there were diverse ways of conceiving it, emphasizing one or another of its main characteristics. For instance, Plato emphasized music, gymnastics, and the quadrivium (arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, and music) as preparation for dialectic and philosophy; Isocrates prioritized grammar, preparing for rhetoric and politics; Philo mentioned five subjects (grammar, music, geometry, rhetoric, and dialectic), whereas Vitruvius, seven as the preparation to educate the architect (Topping, 2014). The medieval university taught the liberal arts and had the aim of seeking «the metaphysical ideal of a super-science which provided a rational basis for theology» (Dawson, 2010, p. 15), whereas the Renaissance humanists proposed the «five *studia humanitatis*: grammar, rhetoric, poetry, history, and moral philosophy» (Buckley, 2007, p. 92). Despite these differences, across the centuries, there are some commonalities, rooted in the tradition of Greece and Rome, which are explained as follows.

First, as Hugh of St. Victor (1961) said, the liberal arts «constitute the best instruments, the best rudiments, by which the way is prepared for the mind's complete knowledge of philosophic truth» (p. 87). That is the reason for their name, trivium and quadrivium: the ways, the *viae*, to enter the secrets of wisdom. By preparing the students for that, they were also *liberal*, making students free and no longer needing the help of the teacher, so, students were capable of learning by themselves and attaining truth in every subject matter (Buckley, 2007; Sayers, 1948). John of Salisbury (2013) even said that the arts liberated man from any ambition and anything incompatible with wisdom. So, the liberal arts trained students, giving them a set of intellectual skills or tools; and, they had a certain aim, truth, providing the freedom to investigate it (Perrin, 2004).

In addition to that, as Marrou (1964) said, despite the changes in emphasis across time, traditionally, there were seven liberal arts, «which were finally and definitely formulated in about the middle of the first century B.C.» (p. 244). «The trivium treated discourse, what was given in language; the quadrivium treated things, what was given in nature» (Buckley, 2007, p. 91), so, they provide students with universal skills and introduce them to the content of reality.

On the one hand, the trivium comprised, in order, grammar, dialectic, and rhetoric (Sayers, 1948). And «in its most basic sense, grammar has to do with understanding language, dialectic with dialogic reasoning, and rhetoric with the artful composition of texts, written and spoken» (Clark & Jain, 2021, p. 44). It is not the purpose of this paper to delve into every liberal art, but, as Clark and Jain (2021) said, the trivium was not intended to learn the language, but to learn how to use it wisely as a preparation for attaining truth and wisdom. And as said before, this also implied content, which could be illustrated in the literature. Literature could be a vehicle of good style, but also good living, and it provided a cultural soil, preparing for truth (Buckley, 2007). In that sense, the «fables, fairy tales, stories, rhymes, romances, adventures» (Senior, 2008, p. 25), and in general, literature, can cultivate virtue and provide an imaginative ground, where the fundamental truths can grow (Senior, 2008). In that regard, the trivium could be a very good instrument to prepare for the understanding of the metaphysics of reality, as well.

On the other hand, the other arts were the quadrivium, which studied number and its relationship to physical space or time, following the traditional Pythagorean division of arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, and music (Marrou, 1964). «Arithmetic being pure number, geometry number in space, music number in time, and astronomy number in both space and time» (Caldecott, 2009, p. 24) were preparatory to the study of philosophy. This is the case because, apart from developing mental speed, the power of memorization, and human perceptiveness, mathematics helps the human soul to rise from real objects and sensory knowledge to the apprehension of objective realities and truth, ascending from the cave, as Plato would describe it (Marrou, 1964; Lehman, 2022). Besides, the quadrivium and mathematics could also help to describe the physical world, helping to understand not only the objectivity of reality but also its physical part, attaining a more holistic vision of it (Clark & Jain, 2021).

These arts were just the beginning of this educational model, for, as Dawson (2010) said, «they were but the preparation for the real business of higher education, which was to guide the mind by science and philosophy towards its final spiritual goal» (p. 6). This spiritual goal was wisdom, the comprehension of reality, and its deepest truths (Clark & Jain, 2021). For example,

Plato (1968) thought this ultimate truth was the idea of the good, which gives light to the truth of all things, also helping man to act prudently.² For the medievals, this ultimate truth would be studied by metaphysics, which analyzed being itself and prepared for the study of theology, the study of God (Dawson, 2010). Wisdom required this understanding of the principles of reality, and, in addition to it, it also required the understanding of what proceeds from these principles: reality itself (Aristotle, 2011).³ The medievals, for instance, considered this reality as threefold: God, man, and creation; so, wisdom also included the comprehension of morality (the study of man) and what is called today *the natural sciences*, the study of the natural world and the creation (Clark & Jain, 2021). The arts were the best preparation for these endeavors, as they make students master language and the basics of natural things, being the trivium and the quadrivium the tools for higher learning (Sayers, 1948).

Finally, this model aimed ultimately at the development of the whole man, «body and soul, sense and reason, character and mind» (Marrou, 1964, p. 298). For the Greeks, *paideia* was the term that meant perfection of the human being, a man who becomes truly man (Marrou, 1964). The Romans, according to the second-century grammarian Aulus Gellius (1968), translated *paideia* to the term *humanitas*, pursuing the *maxime humanissimi* by the arts (Buckley, 2007). This aspiration was also called virtue, *areté*, which could mean the harmony of the various powers of the soul, true happiness, the resemblance of God, or the excellence of the human person, body, and soul (Jaeger, 1943). This pursuit included what has been aforementioned, the arts, philosophy, science, and theology; additionally, several classical authors included other elements which are explained as follows.

For example, Aristotle (2011) considered virtue as twofold: intellectual and moral, aiming at the excellence of character. The Renaissance humanists considered that humane development was achieved by «the reflective contact worked between the student and the great achievements of human beings, in language and in history, which the student would imitate, incorporate, and assimilate» (Buckley, 2007, p. 94). Plato (1968), apart from the study

2 In the *Republic*, 517 b-c, by the end of the explanation of the allegory of the cave, Plato explains what he means by the idea of the good.

3 See Book 6, Chapter 7 of the *Nicomachean Ethics*.

of the quadrivium and philosophy, also encouraged gymnastics for the body and musical education for the soul, contributing to the formation of the character and the personality (Marrou, 1964). This prepared for good judgments (loving and hating aright) because music, rhythm, and melody had this influence, as Aristotle (1988) also said. Thereby, the education of the whole man and his perfection were the higher goals of the classical liberal arts model; and by this training, people ought to be prepared to «be good citizens; to take their full share in the life and government of the city» (Dawson, 2010, p. 6). In fact, even though classical education had higher purposes, in the end, the classical approach could leave education to this practical end in the life of the city.

Catholic Renewal

«And the Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us» (Jn 1:14). Christ, God himself, came to this very world and restored all things (Rev 21:5), renewing the whole of man's life, which includes education (Paul VI, 1965b). Thus, education and every educational model, if brought into contact with Revelation, changes and is elevated into something new, the Gospel being the abiding point of reference and inspiration, whether in K-12 or higher education (Congregation for Catholic Education, 1977; John Paul II, 1990). Across the centuries, many authors and the Holy See have contributed to this understanding of Catholic education and its principles, providing fundamental guidelines which illuminate and transform the curricula and every educational model (Miller, 2006).

Therefore, as was aforementioned, Christian engagement with the classical liberal arts is a real transformation and renewal. So, the following section addresses the main arguments of this paper, applying two important principles of Catholic education to this traditional model: Catholic anthropology and the unity of knowledge within the Catholic worldview.

Renewal of the Liberal Arts Model: Catholic Anthropology

As Edith Stein (2007) said, every educational method is always rooted in a conception of man. Not only pedagogy and educational practice but the very ends of education depend on the ends of the human being (Ruiz Sánchez, 2003). For that reason, the Revelation of the human person in Christ changes

the traditional Hellenistic conception of man and education in its essence (Paul VI, 1965a).

Dawson (2010) said the ancient *paideia* offered an education that «would train the citizen in the liberal arts that would fit him for public life» (p. 23). This model could aim in the end at the betterment of the city; however, Catholic ideas about education transcend this purpose, aiming not only at forming good citizens of this world but, above all, citizens of the world to come (Miller, 2006). So, the city is not the final goal, but in the Trinity «the human person is called to discover the origin and goal of his existence» (Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, 2004, section 34). Plato (1968) understood this end as the idea of the good, but for Catholics, the ultimate end is to encounter the living Trinitarian God in Christ (Benedict XVI, 2008b). This elevates any worldly aim into a transcendent one based on a relationship with God himself in this world and in Heaven: «For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known» (1 Cor 13:12). Education helps to foster this encounter with God, which changes the priorities at any Catholic educational institution.

The classical model aimed at virtue and at becoming fully man. Nevertheless, Christ, the Perfect Man, «fully reveals humanity to itself and brings to light its very high calling» (Paul VI, 1965a, section 22), which is conforming to his very image. Man's destiny is, then, not only human perfection but divine, which elevates the whole purpose of the liberal arts model: Man is not only capable of contemplating God but he can be in communion with Him; the harmony of the various powers of the soul is unified beyond human possibilities by the sacraments and God's help (Rowland, 2019); human virtues, the fulfillment of what a person can be, whether moral or intellectual, «are purified and elevated by divine grace» (Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1992, section 1810; Pieper, 2011); and God infuses theological virtues (faith, hope, and charity) into every faithful person, which «adapt man's faculties for participation in the divine nature» (Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1992, section 1812). So, the perfection of man reaches an unimaginable fulfillment, because it is not only natural but supernatural (Pieper, 2011).

There is a widening difference between what the Greeks and the Christians considered the highest virtue. Whereas the Greeks considered the highest

virtue to be wisdom, for Christians, it is love and charity (Topping, 2014). About that, Clement of Alexandria posited the virtue of *gnosis* as the highest one, which is related to wisdom but transcends it. Gnosis required a transformation of whole life through the contemplation and love of God through Christ, and that has as a consequence the living of the virtues, especially charity, which integrates the life of man (Sanguineti, 2003). So, «love is the beginning and end of education» (Caldecott, 2012, p. 14), because every person is loved by Christ unto the end (Jn 13:1), and, when they accept the call to live the same, charity changes the very depths of man, integrating the intellect, the will, the memory, the imagination, and all human capacities into the highest possible purpose (Rowland, 2019): the love for God and the fellow man in Him (Mt 22:36-40). Besides, charity animates the practice of every human virtue (Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1992), and it orders them and unites them, replacing wisdom as the unifying principle (Topping, 2014). And as John of Salisbury (2007) said, everything should aim at charity, even reading and studying (for example, the creation, knowing God by his deeds), acting or avoiding actions, everything is done «to the end that charity may be advanced» (p. 161).

What is more, there is a fundamental anthropological truth that classical education did not consider, and which was revealed by God: sin. The original sin committed by the first man is transmitted in a fallen state to all mankind, endangering the purpose of the liberal arts model (Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, 2004). «Sin is an offense against reason, truth, and right conscience» (Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1992, section 1849), it leads to vice, and weakens the powers of the soul, because sin darkens the mind and the will to know and to do good (Stein, 2007). The classical *areté*, the attainment of wisdom, the unity of the human person, the commitment to the hard work of studying, the capacity to contemplate the good and God: everything is endangered by this inclination toward evil (Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1992). This is a very illuminating truth for any classical educator who is willing to offer a good education, because it helps to understand many of the issues that students have in their formation. However, it is an enlightening truth to know that sin «must not be separated from the consciousness of the universality of salvation in Jesus Christ» (Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, 2004, section 120). So, despite these wounds to man's inmost self, the whole purpose of liberal education can be attained

because of the Resurrection of Christ. Every person, by participating in this Reconciliation, can put on the new man, and achieve his calling to divine perfection (Briel, 2020).

Finally, an education based on Catholic anthropology also considers the encounter and the relationship between the members of the educational institution as fundamental, a fact that is rooted in the Trinity itself (Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, 2004). As a matter of fact, across the centuries, forming communities and fostering a relationship between students and teachers were part of classical education. The Sophists, the Academy, and the Lyceum were some examples of how a liberal education gathered students and teachers (Marrou, 1964). However, Revelation elevates this aspiration for communion. For instance, Schall (2007) said that the unity in diversity of the Trinity, the Creator, implies that «the very notion of “person” cannot be what it is unless it is open toward, [...] its complete reality is to be related to another» (p. 54). A profound relationship between students and teachers⁴ is essential in Catholic education because man has been created as a social being in his essence, being capable of communion (Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, 2004). Newman (1905) said that a genuine education can only be offered through this encounter between the members of the educational community; so, the liberal arts model, renewed by Catholicism, not only considers this aspect as an accessory or optional but as fundamental to achieving its aims.

Renewal of the Liberal Arts Model: Unity of Knowledge and Catholic Worldview

The liberal arts model aimed at wisdom and the comprehension of reality attaining truth, and the trivium and the quadrivium were the tools to achieve this (Hugh of St. Victor, 1961; Clark & Jain, 2021). However, Revelation, taking into consideration these purposes, perfects and renews the model.

Classical education understood that truth is one, but for Catholic education, this unity is rooted in the Trinitarian God himself (Schall, 2007). Reality has a created order, which originated in a creational and personal act. God, giving existence to all that exists, gives a «metaphysical basis for the

4 Also, between teachers and between students themselves.

relations among all existing things» (Flores, 2020, para. 12), because the whole «world was made through Him» (Jn 1:10). There is a «comprehensive relatedness that undergirds creation» (Flores, 2020, para. 19), which correlates to the integration of every science and the whole truth attained personally by man. For that reason, man encounters truth, and this leads to the perfection of the intellect, which is «the power of viewing many things at once as one whole, of referring them severally to their true place in the universal system, of understanding their respective values, and determining their mutual dependence» (Newman, 1905, pp. 136-137). Every science contributes to this aim with the study of a certain aspect of reality, which is carried out by man (Newman, 1905). Thus, a liberal arts model renewed by the Gospel not only considers the aim of knowing reality and its principles, but understands that the whole reality is created, transcendent, and united in the Word, involving an encounter with the Truth (Jn 14:6).

Besides, this unity of knowledge considers the major topics «on which human reason employs itself: God, Nature, and Man» (Newman, 1905, p. 219), and this could reorganize the subjects of the liberal arts model. For instance, astronomy and music, part of the quadrivium, instead of being tools, could be part of this comprehensive view of reality. Astronomy places the mathematical observations of the universe into a system, and music studies the proportionalities that exist in the world (Clark & Jain, 2021), thereby, understanding nature, and the creation of God.⁵ Also, literature, as a way to deepen the complexity and mystery of man, his moral questionings and reasoning, enriches the comprehension of man. For that reason, while grammar, logic, rhetoric, and mathematics are still a preparation to approach reality, astronomy, music, and literature could be part of this universal system described by Newman. Even more, philosophy is not the only subject that lays the foundation and arranges the places of every other discipline (Newman, 1905), but also theology, which is even more perfect. Theology is «a reflective and scientific elaboration of the understanding of God's word in the light of faith» (John Paul II, 1998, section 64); so, the truths it studies, extend the range of knowledge possible for the human reason by itself, completing what every other science says (John Paul II, 1998; Newman, 1905). Philosophy and theology are deeply interrelated and are

5 Astronomy and the natural sciences are also a way of knowing God. See Rom 1:19-20.

both important to achieve this integration of knowledge, serving the other disciplines in their search for meaning (John Paul II, 1990), a fact that also reorganizes the classical liberal arts.

This introduces another new aspect that renews the classical model through Revelation: the complementarity of faith and reason. Faith, a supernatural gift, makes man «aware of the reality of the Divine Trinity» (Pieper, 2011, p. 38), thus, believing in God and believing all that He has revealed (Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1992). By faith we have a relationship with the truth, who is God himself (Jn 14:6), fostering the capacity to commit to Him and know Him. That perfects natural reason because the «truths arrived at through reason and (the) truths understood through Revelation are each rooted in a common source, the God who is Truth, and are therefore ultimately complementary to one another» (Briel, 2021, p. 19). Thereby, each discipline retains its integrity and its proper methods, and as far as it honestly searches for truth and the good, it cannot conflict with faith (John Paul II, 1990). Instead, faith enriches the vision of reality, because it is «granted the vision of the Logos» (Benedict XVI, 2008a, section 7), achieving not only a human worldview and a human understanding of reality but one enriched by the mind of Christ.

Hence, this unity of knowledge synthesizing faith and reason conforms to a Catholic worldview, which ultimately elevates the classical model. A worldview, a *Weltanschauung* is not a mere integration of every part of reality or every science, but it is a view of the total, even while it approaches the part (Guardini, 1994). Even though a classical education fosters the formation of a worldview, the Catholic *Weltanschauung* gives a specific meaning to this reality, which comes from faith (Giussani, 1995), grasping the fullness of its meaning in Christ. More precisely, it is the view of Christ, the way He knows the world, the criteria from which he judges every situation, and, in the end, the understanding of the whole life through Him (Guardini, 1994). This Catholic worldview is dynamic, even purifying and elevating any authentic cultural value and perspective, which reaffirms its transcendence in time and space (International Theological Commission, 1988). From this standpoint, the classical liberal arts worldview has a renewed foundation, which is based on faith and Christ himself.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper has researched how the classical liberal arts model is renewed by Catholicism. To achieve this aim, it applied two specific principles to it: Catholic anthropology and the unity of knowledge within the Catholic worldview. Accordingly, this transformation occurs, because the ultimate purpose of the model is new, specifically Heaven and the encounter with God. Even more, to be truly man means to be another Christ, which transcends any classical aspiration. Charity, not wisdom, is the highest virtue, and the Revelation of sin and the reconciliation in Christ illuminates the understanding of every student. This is a shift in anthropology, all the more because the community and the relationships among the members of the educational institution are not accessories but fundamental, a fact that is rooted in the Trinity.

Also, this renewal occurs, because the unity of knowledge is based on the creative and personal act of God in the Word. This comprehensive view reorganizes the subjects of the liberal arts model, having philosophy and theology as unifying components. The search for truth requires both reason and faith to achieve wisdom, and this conforms to a Catholic worldview, which is seeing the world as Christ would see it.

There are several practical applications of these assertions, as long as the identity and the vision of a Catholic liberal arts institution are renewed in its foundations. The priorities, the curriculum, the educational climate, the faculty formation, the hiring process, and the marketing strategy, all are deeply influenced by the principles of Catholic education. And even though it is not the purpose of this paper to address this practical aspect, the reflections and arguments of this research are guidelines for a posterior implementation, whether in the K-12 or the higher education sector.

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