

# The Nature and Purpose of Classical Liberal Education

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Classical Catholic Liberal Education can be defined by identifying its 23 constituent elements. Since the faculty, parents, and students of the Pharr Oratory Academy, Newman Institute, and Athenaeum should be ever aware of what their education is all about, this bulletin presents a series of articles explaining each of those 23 essential elements, specifying throughout what makes that education Catholic. Beginning with this issue, this bulletin presents explanations of each of the essential factors that together define Classical Catholic Liberal Education. It should be noted at the beginning that, because liberal education includes everything, a corresponding all-inclusive curriculum is academically required. This is no mean task.

## **Descriptive Definition:**

*Truth or knowledge is the end of liberal education.* The ancient philosophers argued that the nature or definition of a thing is determined by its aim, end or finality. The aim of liberal education is truth or knowledge. Liberal education sets out to achieve three aims: To find truth, to impart truth, and to acquire a skill for earning a personal livelihood.

*Practical preparation as a human necessity and end for liberal education.* Even though theoretical knowledge in searching for and finding truth occupies the highest place in a liberal education curriculum, practical preparation for professional and job skills must also be included in the classical liberal education curriculum, being given a significantly lesser place of importance. Learning a skill or profession should not, therefore, be excluded from the liberal education curriculum.

*Curriculum and freedom of choice.* The freedom suggested by liberal education does not give learners the liberty to choose their own curricular subjects. The liberal education curriculum is all-embracing and determined beforehand. In liberal education, everything is a subject. How the curriculum of everything should be divided and approached is a practical concern.

*Truth and the formation of a right conscience.* Liberal education's primary aim is the search for truth. There is no other work more important than that of the discovering the way of goodness and truth. The liberal educators's task is to help learners form a right conscience which, logically, includes the very moral obligation of searching for truth, the constant awareness of the need to exercise responsibly personal freedom and personal choice in the quest for truth, and the importance of the inclusion of leisure and contemplation during which conclusions are determined intellectually coherent or not. These three operations (freedom, truth concerning what is veritably good, and leisure-contemplation for sorting things out) are necessary for the formation of a right conscience which will, ultimately, determine the objective quality of human acts.

*Liberal education as progressive pre-libation of sought-after knowledge.* Liberal education is preparation for confronting life scientifically and teleologically and for pursuing freedom, democracy, and truth. The purpose of liberal education is to provide the highest education in all the arts. Liberal education is also the learners themselves en route toward education's ultimate ends; that is, liberal education is the learner in a state of progressive satisfaction, enjoying a certain foretaste or pre-libation of the sought-after knowledge, wisdom, and morality of all values that are included in the ultimate ends of education.

*Liberal education in the ends of the arts and the freedom of the learner.* Liberal education becomes complete in the ends of all the arts and in the freedom of the learner. The communist application of Darwinian evolution to sociology is possible only by depriving learners of their freedom.

*Conversation with the great minds of Western civilization and the world.* The purpose and nature of liberal education is to teach students using as a starting point specially *selected texts* taken from key authors from the canon of literature of Western civilization. The careful reading, analysis, interpretation, synthesis, and discussion among other students and mentors of the core content of those specially chosen texts serves to occasion manifold and diverse possibilities for plumbing more deeply the minds of those authors, for understanding them from different

points of view, and for grasping what and how those authors have contributed to Western civilization and to humanity.

*Reading and studying the great minds as a pedagogy.* The reading and study of the great authors of Western culture is an efficacious pedagogical method that contributes to the integrated development of the mind and body of both student and teacher.

*Integrated development: critical thinking, growth, and higher level of thinking.* The ends of liberal education are the integral development of the person, the endowment of the person with the tools for critical thinking, and the capacity for making appropriate life decisions. Liberal education revolves around four goals: The betterment of human beings, in general; the affirmation of education in the humanities; the elevation of thinking to a higher form and level; and the acquisition of knowledge concerning the nature of a human being, on the one hand, and helping students to conform or to resign themselves to that nature, on the other.

*Totally committed to human arts and the pursuit of truth.* The aim of liberal education is reduced to two goals: To educate people by means of liberal arts and to exceed the standard objectives of regular education. The nature and purpose of liberal education is based on classical Greco-Roman cultural values developed and enhanced, later, by a Judeo-Christian culture and mentality. All four cultures can be represented by four distinct cultural streams that eventually came together to form Greco-Roman-Judeo-Christian Western civilization. Work should be started to rescue Greco-Roman-Judeo-Christian values.

*“Liberal” is not taken in the political sense, but in the classical liberal sense.* Today, many are confused about the meaning of the word *liberal* in the phrase *liberal education*. The word *liberal* in the phrase *liberal education* should not be taken in the popular political sense of libertine, libertinism, or free spirit, but, rather, within the context of the classical Greco-Roman-Judeo-Christian liberal education in which learners are left unencumbered by want or need, so that they are enabled totally to be committed to the pursuit of truth.

*Liberal education: Multidisciplinary, purposeful, commonsensical, and ethical.* Besides its multidisciplinary character, liberal education is founded on a theoretical framework of Aristotelian realism that emphasizes the objectivity of reality, viewing the world as based on common sense and as observed by the natural sciences; morality, although having a subjective element, is established axiologically with objective criteria. Liberal Education is purposeful and separated from all other forms of education because of the emphasis on ethics and human interaction and because students are encouraged to formulate their own theories about the world even to the point of challenging conventional thinking. Students must always support their thinking with arguments and theories that are logical, coherent and respectful of the sound reasoning: Liberal learners use the great thinkers as their models; from the classical academically recognized common-sense scholars of Greco-Roman-Judeo-Christian antiquity consistently up to those commonsense realist thinkers of today.

### **Structural Description:**

Liberal education provides learners with the means for “centralizing” or refining the focus on the goal, finality or purpose of life and for identifying creation as the intellectual, material, spiritual, and educational theater for achieving those ends. Intellectually, learners search for truth, knowledge, goodness, beauty, and happiness; materially, learners enlist all material creation into the attainment of that truth, knowledge, goodness, beauty, and happiness; and educationally, learners make use of curriculum, teacher, mentor, and learner, for identifying, organizing, and scheduling the matter, methodology, and method-learner relationship for the attainment of truth and knowledge.

There is no dichotomy between liberal education as philosophy and liberal education as rhetoric or practice; both are important and necessary: Liberally educated learners must never cease to be obsessed with the truth; they must also be conscientiously aware of their moral obligation to contribute practically to the good of society. The student of liberal education should never allow their schooling to interfere with their education which should never be reduced to busy information. They must always see the total picture, the relationships, and the ultimate end. To assure this proper focus and perspective, time, leisure, and silence must be set apart for meditation, contemplation and prayer.

In defining the purpose of liberal education, liberal education's aims are, on occasion, cast into a socially competitive and, therefore, pragmatic arena. Describing the purpose of education in terms of forming the person or student in all *competitive* areas, evokes notions of economic and business rivalry—having, seemingly, in mind economic rather than educational ends and benefits.

Some say that the purpose of education is the pursuit of truth; others say that the end or objective of education is to learn an art, a skill, a profession, or a specialization. In one instance, two extreme, yet valid, positions are considered. One has to find a middle point between finding the truth from within what you are carrying out and having a skill, an art, or specific knowledge in an area to be able to develop for yourself a job or a work. Theoretically, the pursuit of truth has priority. But if an individual is going to be an engineer, what matters is that one's numbers and calculations be correct. Yet, the good of society and ethics have to be attended. The pursuit of truth always has priority.

Liberal education is much more than a school with a special kind of educational philosophy or with a particular pedagogy or, simply, as a unique place of learning. Liberal education, rather, is a way of thinking, a way of looking at life, a special attitude, a way of acquiring more knowledge, a different way of looking at the universe, a better way of looking at self and other people, and way for making one's self a better human being. Liberal education that is Catholic brings classical liberal education to an even higher level, enlisting supernatural powers, divine grace, that allows learners to go beyond what human beings alone can naturally attain.

Each liberal learner approaches liberal education with a unique background and bias and, therefore, with special preferences. For example, *human nature* can be chosen as a theoretical construct, emphasizing the moral obligation of learners to make personal goals and behavior conform to the constituent elements of human nature. Metaphysically and practically, conformity to or coherence with what is considered essentially *human nature*, in the living of a virtuous life, is the essence and function of liberal education.

Yet liberal education is more than this: It is an art and science used as a pretext for achieving something much higher which is the development of the intellect and intellectual virtues. This metaphysical preference is reflected in the establishment of goals: namely, the betterment of human beings, in general; the affirmation of education in the humanities; the elevation of thinking to a higher form and level; and the acquisition of knowledge concerning the nature of a human being, on the one hand, and helping students to conform or resign themselves to that nature, on the other.

Liberal education teachers can consider themselves to have tripartite role: To promote critical and original thinking in students; to teach students—in the midst of diversity—to distinguish truth from falsehood; and to show and to assure learners in a formation that is integrated and interdisciplinary.

Theoretically, the liberal education teacher's role might be considered essentially different and uniquely tailored to the teaching of speculative truth which supposes a special preparation of a philosophical worldview accompanied by a corresponding methodology compatible with select liberal education mentors.

The philosophical or speculative ideal for liberal education is embodied in Socrates who claimed that the unexamined life is not worth living. To live worthwhile lives, individuals must carefully examine their opinions and values to determine whether or not what they hold is really good and true. Socrates's pedagogical method might be called the Socratic methodology of critical questioning; it demonstrates that the wise learner is very much aware that there is always much more knowledge to be discovered. Socrates was convinced that if he stopped pursuing truth, his life would no longer be worth living. (Taylor, 2002).

On the practical or pragmatic side, skills, arts, and professional expertise can simply be learned by rote, practice, and imitation. Such preparation depends on well-prepared teachers of a given skill rather than on speculatively prepared liberal education mentors or teachers. Historically and on rhetorical level, liberal education has been aimed at training citizens to be leaders of society. Such leadership training is primarily *practical*, requiring leisure. The availability of leisure means that only men of means who did not have to work had access to such study and training.

Insight was also necessary for good leadership requiring wisdom, moral virtue and eloquence. In the

development of these personal attributes the study of classical texts was necessary, demonstrating that in the rhetorical tradition liberal (philosophical) learning was also necessary—but only as much as was pragmatically necessary for becoming a good leader. The public dimension of a leader’s life was critical to the leader’s success; this meant that the leader had to be fashioned into a wise man of insight and an eloquent speaker to communicate that wisdom (Taylor, 2002).

A scholar of liberal education cannot remain oblivious to the fundamental tension that exists between leisure and utility. In his *Politics*, Aristotle stated, “To be always seeking after the useful does not become free and exalted souls” (VIII. iii. 12. 1338b). Jalbert (2009) noted that Aristotle

does not say that liberal learners should avoid utility altogether; rather, they should avoid striving for utility everywhere. Importantly, “the distinction between leisure and utilitarian concerns is not intended as a way of distinguishing between two classes of people, but as a means of distinguishing between two types of human needs and interests”. (Jalbert, 2009, note 3, p. 231)

Liberal education has been attacked on the grounds of its uselessness. To such assault, Daniel Cottom, in his *Why Education is Useless*, retorts that the uselessness of higher education “emerges from the despair that eats away at our satisfaction and that questions even our greatest and most pleasing certainties” (Cottom, 2003, p. 204). To this, Jalbert (2009) retorts that

liberal education is useless in the same manner that genuine thinking is useless: it disrupts, it challenges, it undermines, in a word, it questions. It serves as a foil against what Cottom calls the “tyranny of stupidity.” Thus, the uselessness of liberal learning is its “immeasurable value” and the reason why it should be acknowledged and embraced by the academy. (Jalbert, 2009, p. 223)

Some consider liberal education, simply, as a quality liberal arts education that surpasses education as it is known today. Such an attitude inveighs against Aristotelian-Thomist based education that is teleological on all levels. If liberal education is considered only as a higher quality education, there is no guarantee or reason for assuming that learners will be exposed to the elevated educational ends of a truly classical liberal education whose educational purposes are philosophically intrinsic to and determined metaphysically, pedagogically, and historically by the constancy of the administration/teacher/learner relationship. In such a case where “liberal education” in a specific institution has fame, simply, of prestigious superiority, the teleology would not, necessarily, reflect something substantive of a classical liberal education’s true nature, but, rather, the phrase “liberal education” could represent a factor incidental to its identity inasmuch as educational purpose will have, in each case, been arbitrarily decided upon, not by the policy of the school tradition, but, ephemerally, by the current school agents (headmaster, teacher, school board, etc.) themselves. Liberal education thus determined lends itself to both philosophical relativism and subjectivism.

In contrast to such a superficial and misleading kind of “liberal education,” authentic classical liberal education sets out to accomplish a seemingly insurmountable task: The rescue of Greco-Roman-Judeo Christian values. The *telos* or finality of liberal education can be described, straightforwardly, as an education in the identity of “man” based on perennial concepts, essences and values that are rooted in classical Hellenic antiquity and developed principally within the Greco-Roman-Judeo-Christian cultural currents of history. Classical liberal education has its canon, its writings, its mentors and its methodology. Liberal education is Hellenic, Roman, Jewish, Christian, Islamic, Occidental, Oriental, for anyone searching for truth and knowledge with a pure and humble heart. Liberal education, to repeat, is for the rescue of Greco-Roman-Judeo-Christian values. Liberal education, in a sense, is an on-going argument for defending its own existence against those for whom, in many instances, existence itself is a moot question.

Replete information-giving is not of the essence of classical liberal education. A notion of liberal education whose purpose *is to provide students with the necessary information to make intelligent, moral decisions*, approaches, but does not attain, the essence of classical liberal education. The essence of classical liberal education is not, again, simply information-giving; it is not only to prepare students *in a wide array of subject areas, to help learners to become socially responsible, and to be effective in promoting a good Christian environment*.

A veritable classical liberal education is characterized by an obsessive quest for the truth. Classical liberal education is not just the impartation of already acquired information for the purpose of being socially responsible and for the ultimate creation of a good Christian environment. Although noble according to the norms of today's pragmatic outcome education, such education pales when compared with Socrates' intense search for truth for which he actually died, rather than live in an Athens where the free pursuit of truth would be restricted.

According to R. M. Hutchins (1936), the liberal arts, the arts of language, and the arts of mathematics make a person competent in understanding of the concepts of all subject matters. Because *human nature*, as an essence, is a constant that is common to all human beings and because the reality called *human beings* is substantially the same for each human person—being only accidentally different—Hutchins could draw the following conclusion about human nature and its relationship to education:

One purpose of education is to draw out the elements of our common human nature. These elements are the same in any time or place. The notion of educating a man to live in any particular time or place, to adjust him to any particular environment, is therefore foreign to a true conception of education. Education implies teaching. Teaching implies knowledge. Knowledge is truth. The truth is everywhere the same. Hence education should be everywhere the same. I do not overlook the possibilities of differences in organization, in administration, in local habits and customs. These are details. I suggest that the heart of any course of study designed for the whole people will be, if education is rightly understood, the same at any time, in any place, under any political, social, or economic conditions. Even the administrative details are likely to be similar because all societies have generic similarity. (Hutchins, 1936, pp. 66-67)

All human beings possess the same intellectual powers. It is the task of liberal education to develop those intellectual powers. Education must be designed to develop the human mind, as such. In this development, Hutchins believed that learners must, first, master the fundamentals of education (learning to read, to write, and to have a command of mathematics) and the liberal arts; with such preparation, the learner will be competent to study and understand the greatest works of the human race. This conviction leads Hutchins to state:

Ideal education is the one that develops intellectual power. I arrive at this conclusion by a process of elimination. Educational institutions are the only institutions that can develop intellectual power. The ideal education is not an ad hoc education, not an education directed to immediate needs; it is not a specialized education, or a pre-professional education; it is not a utilitarian education. It is an education calculated to develop the mind. There may be many ways, all equally good, of developing the mind. I have old-fashioned prejudices in favor of the three R's and the liberal arts, in favor of trying to understand the greatest works that the human race has produced. I believe that these are the permanent necessities, the intellectual tools that are needed to understand the ideas and ideals of our world. This does not exclude later specialization or later professional education; but I insist that without the intellectual techniques needed to understand ideas, and without at least an acquaintance with the major ideas that have animated mankind since the dawn of history, no man may call himself educated. (Hutchins, 1963, p. 10).

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