

Editorial: Catholic Education and the Liberal Arts

Leonardo Franchi ^{1,2} ¹ School of Education, University of Glasgow, Glasgow G3 6NH, UK; leonardo.franchi@glasgow.ac.uk² School of Philosophy and Theology, University of Notre Dame Australia, 10 Grafton Street, Chippendale NSW 2008, Australia; leonardo.franchi@nd.edu.au

1. Introduction

This Special Issue of *Religions* offers a welcome opportunity to explore the argument that the Liberal Arts lie at the heart of the Catholic vision of education. Given the significant footprint of Catholic educational institutions worldwide today, it is vital to explore in a suitably critical manner (a) the nature of the Catholic education–Liberal Arts nexus and (b) how this partnership can positively influence wider and necessary debates on the nature, scope and aims of education.

Some questions will inevitably drive our discussion: to what extent can we offer a persuasive rationale for the place of the Liberal Arts in Catholic Education? Is it the case that Catholic educational systems will naturally gravitate towards a Liberal Arts approach? Does the use of ‘and’ in the title suggest that the Liberal Arts are only *one* component of Catholic education? Indeed, are there other methods besides “Liberal Arts” in which to frame the concept of Catholic education? Furthermore, a narrow view of Catholic education which overstates specifically catechetical issues cannot fully, if at all, capture the implications of the doctrine of the Incarnation. For the Christian, God became human: what is human, therefore, is from God. Catholic educational thought thus values preparation for active service in the world but roots this service in a properly critical, truth-seeking engagement with inherited knowledge.

Although Catholic education does not, of course, “own” the Liberal Arts, their marriage, so to speak, is built on firm foundations. Much of the literature on the Liberal Arts uses the famed trivium–quadrivium partnership as a starting point. This can be a helpful way to start thinking seriously about methods for a curriculum centred on the Liberal Arts: the *trivium* of grammar, rhetoric and dialectic, while valuable in themselves, are also the preparatory stages for the *quadrivium* of arithmetic, astronomy, geometry and music. The *quadrivium* in turn paves the way for the study of philosophy and, finally, of theology, the “queen of the sciences”. In this line of thinking, we note the progression from the study of the Liberal Arts to the contemplation of the divine in theology. It is not unreasonable to suggest, therefore, that institutions of Catholic education are a natural home for the Liberal Arts.

The impact of Catholic education on wider culture is an iterative process, involving many layers of action by educators and the institutions in which they work. It is much more, thankfully, than the passing on of theological doctrines and associated religious and social practices. It is hence important to be clear about terminology from the outset while at the same time avoiding the presentation of definitions that are too tight and, hence, potentially restrictive vis-a-vis the debates we wish to engender.

Catholic education refers to the wide range of educational opportunities offered by institutions related to the Catholic Church. What makes the institution *Catholic* is not so much the particular religious affiliation of the student body and teaching staff but the educational vision which animates its life: curriculum design, pupil involvement in the life of the school, the style of leadership / management and the wider social mission of the school are all essential markers of Catholic identity.¹ Catholic education is a meaningful



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amalgam of vocational and classical liberal approaches to education. A framing of curricular principles around the Liberal Arts does present some practical difficulties, not least the seeming preponderance today of explicitly utilitarian views of schooling. Educators, especially those in Anglophone countries, are familiar with the language of outcomes, skills, and employability. It is not the intention of this Special Issue to offer a platform for views that seek to marginalise such stances—education must have clear connections to life and society—but to offer a deeper and arguably richer vision: Liberal Arts as the academic foundation for a suite of professional qualifications and skills. This is a standpoint that is wholly in line with the Catholic understanding of the human person. The aspiration to human flourishing which animates the link between Catholic education and the Liberal Arts offers opportunities for dialogue on the wider aims of education.

Liberal Arts is a wide field, consisting of humanities, social sciences, maths and natural sciences. A Liberal Arts education aims to bring the student to a life-enhancing encounter with wisdom through the intentional study of the story of humanity. A Liberal Arts education is not tied to overly specific educational outcomes, in particular, those primarily grounded in concepts such as employability, but offers a broader engagement with knowledge so as to help students become more complete human beings. A Liberal Arts education, to be clear, is not just a route towards individual flourishing but a profound preparation for the “good life”. This is manifested, for example, in the building of personal and professional relationships and an appreciation of the dignity of the human person. It is a means to an appreciation of a fraternal intergenerational vision which seeks to avoid sharp divisions between past and present, young and old, family and outsider. Although the curricular *content* of a Liberal Arts programme is, of course, important, of equal value is the wider approach to teaching and learning which the Liberal Arts programme should exemplify. It is the teacher as an instructor, facilitator, guide and advisor who, with professional skill, aptitude and foresight, makes the curriculum come alive for students. To do this with nuance, knowledge and humility, teachers themselves must cherish and be immersed *in* the Liberal Arts and not just be aware of their value for others.

2. Aim of the Special Issue

The Special Issue is inspired in part by the German philosopher Josep Pieper’s groundbreaking volume, *Leisure the Basis of Culture*, first published in 1952 (Pieper [1952] 2009). This short volume offers a clear philosophical rationale for an appreciation of “otium” (leisure) as the basis of a good education. Although Pieper did not refer directly to the role of the Liberal Arts in education, his argument against so-called “industrial” models of education resonates with the thrust of the wider humanism inherent in the Catholic educational tradition.

In the *Global Compact on Education*, Pope Francis (2020) offered the contemporary Church’s educational community a fresh perspective on the aims of Catholic education. His words are an entry point for serious discussion of the link between Catholic education and the Liberal Arts and, by extension, the rediscovery of the intellectual and cultural heritage of the Catholic Church. Although the *Compact*’s stated aims are apparently secular in style, Pope Francis claims tantalizingly that it (i.e., the *Compact* and its aims) is grounded in the foundational principles of Christian Humanism. He does not provide a wider explanation of what he actually means by this statement, nor does he offer further thought on what is understood by Christian Humanism. This omission provides a welcome opportunity to tease out some of the implications of the links uniting Liberal Arts, Christian humanism and Catholic education.

Christian humanism places the study of the human person—as *imago dei*—at the centre of the educational project. Central to this project is the so-called Catholic Intellectual Tradition (Royal 2015), itself an important term for understanding and suitably framing the myriad ways in which Catholic thinkers themselves have contributed to the history of ideas, whether this be the Church’s early engagement with philosophy or the contemporary interest in pro-life matters and climate justice. The Catholic Intellectual Tradition emerged

and continues to emerge inter alia from (a) the encounter between faith and reason, (b) existential issues arising from reflection on the nature of the human person, (c) debates around what we mean by social justice and (d) consideration of the centrality of the sacramental principle in Catholic thought and what this could mean for education.

Furthermore, Catholic education, seen in the light of this intellectual heritage, cannot be restricted to or misrepresented as an affair of the mind only. Its pastoral nature offers a supportive framework for the application of the “knowledge” offered by the Liberal Arts to the practice of social life. Catholic education, through the eyes of the Catholic Intellectual Tradition, is, ultimately, a communal search for a God who is also, perhaps paradoxically, searching for us. Students are helped to make sense of this tradition in collegial dialogue with their peers and teachers about events of the past but with an eye on the present and future. It is this worthy humanistic tradition which offers another reasonable argument for the coupling of Catholic education and the Liberal Arts.

Catholic educational theory, a subset of the Catholic Intellectual Tradition, recognizes both the importance of preparing for active service in the world and the value of critical engagement with inherited knowledge. At its best, it is a meaningful amalgam of vocational and classical liberal approaches to education. It places in the public square a theory of education which is not reserved for members of the Catholic Church alone but serves as an intentional bridge towards all who seek the Good, the True and the Beautiful. Catholic institutions, if faithful to the Catholic Intellectual Tradition, do not just explore the Liberal Arts from a distance as one more historical phenomenon but strive to shape curricula so that the Liberal Arts are foundational to and integrated within the wider educational experiences on offer in the institution.

3. Liberal Arts and the Way of Beauty

This Special Issue shows how key curricular domains express the “Way of Beauty” for students and teaching staff. It opens up avenues for further dialogue between Catholic educators and all who seek an education for human flourishing. It places the Catholic educational vision firmly in the “educational village”, which the *Global Compact* proposes (Pope Francis 2021, p. 5). To focus on beauty is to remind ourselves and others that, as noted above, all creation is a way to God. Catholicism eschews a rigid division between spirit and matter, with the “world” seen as a place to be avoided as it is a cause of sin. Rather, Catholicism sees beauty in the harmony of the universe and takes delight in the potential of the human person to do good and to live well.

This openness has implications. Catholic schools, colleges and universities cannot be reserved for members of the Catholic Church alone but offer the hand of friendship to all who seek the Good, the True and the Beautiful. Indeed, the *via pulchritudinis* (“way of beauty”) is also the *via veritatis* (“way of truth”). The option for beauty, therefore, is not ancillary to the educational mission of the Church but central to how it sees the mystery of the human condition. The Liberal Arts are where this beauty can be found. Catholic education, therefore, is a place of wonder, awe and mystery, manifesting the longings of humanity for fulfilment. In engaging with the power of literature and the arts, along with the capacity of the sciences to enlarge our knowledge of creation, the Liberal Arts, in turn, offer students the opportunity to become wiser and more human. Ultimately, it is through ongoing formation in Beauty, Truth and Goodness that people can be accompanied to a meaningful encounter with God.

4. Concluding Thoughts

To conclude, we all have a stake in the quality of education. Social and community cohesion depends to a great extent on the availability of worthwhile educational opportunities. Catholic schools, colleges and universities foster human flourishing by proposing a broad educational programme which values inherited knowledge, a love of truth and active service in the world. To guard, cherish and promote a Liberal Arts education is central to this noble cause.

Beauty is the attractive force which opens the human mind to that which is beyond our human capacity to understand and is, for this reason, a necessary complement to the power of human reason to seek truth. ‘Real beauty draws us up and out of ourselves; it connects us to realities that cannot be commodified. It re-sacralizes the world, even if only for a moment’ (Maier 2022).

The essays in this Special Issue will help us focus on this noble ambition.

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Note

- ¹ This definition recognizes and values the impact of the family and the parish on young people’s religious formation. It is on these strong pillars that the work undertaken by the institutions of Catholic education rest. Our focus here, however, is on the school.

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