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Aristotle was asked how much educated men were superior to the uneducated: "As much," said he, "as the living are to the dead."



A CHRISTIAN EDUCATOR

Mortimer J. Adler

Current usage accustoms us to the distinction between an educator and a teacher. An educator is one who, quite apart from teaching, formulates the policies of an educational program, constructs the curriculum, or administers the system under which other men teach. In most cases, the educator is himself far removed from the primary functions of teaching. The teacher, on the other hand, is customarily supposed not to be an educator. He occupies a place in a vast machine. He does his little bit toward altering the students who pass before him on the moving beltline of the course of study. But, like any other factory hand, he is not supposed to understand the principles of the whole operation designed to produce the ultimate product, nor is he to question the whole process in its relation to the society which is being served, or disserved, as the case may be. Were we not so inured to this conventional distinction we should, I think, be immediately shocked by its viciousness. The comparison with the assembly plant, if just, should at once condemn the specialization and mechanization which has made our educational system a mockery. That specialization has reached its extreme when educators are not teachers, and teachers are not regarded as educators. Always and everywhere opposed to the mechanization of vital processes, and to the specialization which robs a living whole of its unity and hence its vitality, Father Virgil Michel was both a teacher and an educator, a teacher who never failed to ask the ultimate questions about the means and ends of his teaching, an educator whose vision of program and policy was always focused by his understanding of the place of learning in human life.

We have not only accepted the separation of educator and teacher, but we have even grown accustomed to the notion that the teacher need not be a student in the same sense in which those whom he instructs are. In fact, the second error is a consequence of the first. Since the teacher is a specialist who does not have any concern with the educational program as a whole—except, of course, the concern to maintain the sacred property rights in his vested interest—he may regard himself as an advanced student in some special field of research, but he seldom considers himself obligated to submit to the education which the curriculum as a whole imposes upon his own students. Such teachers may have a place in universities or research institutes, but they do not belong on that basic level where the aim is general or liberal education. The good teacher there must be one who is genuinely devoted to his own continuing education. Father Virgil's soundness as an educator was due not only to his being a teacher, but more than that, to his being a teacher who was, first of all, a student, a man in whom the love of learning has not been killed by the degrees which confer officially the right to teach others.

Though I write here primarily of Father Virgil as an educator, it is necessary, for the reasons given, to emphasize his qualities as a teacher and a learner. They determined his educational vision. He was himself always at work to further his grasp of the intellectual tradition which constitutes the substance of basic education. He never passed on to others—either in his writing, which was for him



always an instrument of teaching, or in his lecturing—what he had not first made alive as part of his own life of learning. As a teacher of philosophy, he did not dwell in or take his students into that museum of fossilized doctrines or stuffed ideas which is built by textbooks and manuals. He was steadfastly a good teacher because he was a Christian teacher, realizing in his own practice the truth of St. Augustine that teaching is the greatest act of charity which man performs for his fellow men. One can quicken others only by one's own vitality. And he was a sound educator because he was a Christian educator, recognizing how the fullest cultivation of human nature was indispensable to the foundations of Christian culture in any society. His study of the liturgy had taught him how intimately fused in operation were the principles of grace and nature. But the elevation of nature by grace does not dispense with the need to perfect nature according to its own principles. There was for him, therefore, no antinomy between a good education and a Christian education, though the latter had dimensions which necessarily exceeded the order of nature.

In the last year Father Virgil had devoted much time to planning a new curriculum for the college at St. John's University, of which he was dean. Because his plans in this connection have momentous significance for the renaissance of Catholic education in this country, and because this undertaking was characteristic of all his educational efforts, I deem it appropriate to make this matter pivotal in the present discussion. Father Virgil was himself persuaded of the basic rightness of the program of general education which President Hutchins has outlined and which is now actually in operation in one secular college in this country, a namesake, St. John's College at Annapolis, Maryland. Two things must be recorded here: first, that this curriculum for a liberal education is generally rejected, even violently opposed, by the powers which dominate our secular institutions, both public and private, and this is, of course, not surprising when one appreciates how contrary are all the efforts of the prevailing regime; second, that this curriculum has not been readily accepted by Catholic educators, and has even been opposed as inconsistent with the aims of Christian education. The second

fact is surprising, almost shocking, since this reform which Mr. Hutchins proposes appears to be the precise corrective of all the educational abuses which leading Catholic educators have pointed to in the prevailing system, abuses which they are willing to admit have been allowed to contaminate Catholic education for the sake of obtaining the official sanction of the various accrediting boards.

It is not necessary here to discuss the intrinsic merits of the proposed curriculum, or the obvious defects of the thoroughly degraded curriculum which has made our colleges, both Catholic and secular, a travesty on liberal education. But it is necessary to state briefly the insights which motivated Father Virgil and his associates at Collegeville to contemplate a reform which no other Catholic college in the country is yet prepared to adopt. I shall not mention the virtue of courage which made them properly fearless of the immediate, though obviously only temporary, practical consequences, which might result from ignoring the established code of the accrediting system. What great reform could ever be accomplished without such fortitude? I shall confine myself to Father Virgil's insight that this educational reform must be sound for Catholic schools, seeking to perform the task of Christian education, if and because the proposed curriculum was intrinsically sound, according to natural principles, as a way of perfecting the specific nature of man. Father Virgil went further, holding quite properly that this curriculum could achieve its aims even more fully under Christian than under secular auspices.

The objections which some Catholic educators have brought against the curriculum in question are various. It has been wrongly supposed, for instance, that to emphasize the development of the intellectual virtues at the level of college education is to deny the primacy of the moral or cardinal virtues in education as a whole. Father Virgil avoided this error by discriminating the function of a college in the whole process. Character is indispensable not only to the good life; moral virtues are indispensable to the life of a good student. But while to say this is to recognize that a college cannot perform its specific task in a moral vacuum, it is not to mistake that specific task as comprising anything other than making men bachelors of the liberal arts, men with intellectual discipline, men able to read, write and speak, and cultivated by the knowledge and wisdom, the arts and sciences, of the European tradition.

I shall ignore, as Father Virgil would, the specious objection which arises from adherence to textbooks and manuals in teaching philosophy and science. As he himself always turned to and used Plato and Aristotle, St. Augustine and St. Thomas in his own teaching, because that was the way of his own learning, he could

not acknowledge the supposed pedagogic exigencies which have been thought to justify the use of second-hand materials, or worse, for imposing a “system” dogmatically on students. He never confused philosophy with apologetics and hence he never confused the mode of instruction which is proper in the sphere of religious dogma with the dialectical way of the mind in acquiring specifically human knowledge or natural wisdom. Philosophy and science are not reducible to a catechism.


But there is one objection which goes to the heart of the matter and which must be considered. To make a liberal education depend on the mastery of the liberal arts and on the reading of the great products of these intellectual arts, leads us to view the tradition of the West comprehensively. That tradition includes all the great works of religion, philosophy, science and belles-lettres and, since in the human order, imperfection is of the essence, even the greatest works will have errors and defects, and there will be many books of great importance intellectually *because* they are so largely and crucially wrong. At this point the objection has been made by some Catholic educators that the tradition of the West is divided into black and white, and that only the pure and true shall be admitted as the materials of Christian education. Not only is such a division impossible *per se*, because in all human work there are degrees of both truth and error; but more deeply the answer must be given that the truth shines forth most clearly in the widest context of errors it is able to rectify. It was this answer which Father Virgil, keenly appreciative of the catholicity of mediaeval learning, always gave to such an objection. Nothing can be alien to Christianity if it is catholic. Not only must it encompass the pagan tradition of the ancients, but it must similarly make modern culture its own—even the most deviating and antagonistic trends in modern thought—if Christendom is to be re-established in the modern world. But this cannot be done by putting up fences and staying within the tradition of books not on the Index. Father Virgil knew that the Index was not intended to restrict the field of education. He knew that the great flowering of Christian culture would not have happened in the thirteenth century if Christians had not read the books of infidels and pagans.

Let me cite one example of Father Virgil’s catholicity as a teacher, to make plain what I am here saying about his educational vision. He was of late years primarily concerned with social questions. He sought to deal with the most difficult and pressing of contemporary problems by bringing to their solution the light of abiding principles learned from Aristotle and St. Thomas. But he did not stop there. He also knew the *Das Kapital* of Karl Marx, the *Communist Manifesto*, the writings of Engels and Lenin. He did not condemn

these works as absolutely black, as utterly false, for he found much that was true in them, much that was relevant to understanding the iniquities of capitalist society and bourgeois culture. Aristotle and St. Thomas were clear in principle but necessarily silent on problems which have a unique historic emergence in modern times. That Father Virgil was one of the clearest voices to interpret the message of the great encyclicals was due to the breadth of his understanding, cultivated by reading Marx as well as St. Thomas. He could discern the basic truth in the Marxist attack on the intrinsic injustice of capitalism, as well as correct the errors which the communists made because they, unlike him, had not been educated in the wisdom of Aristotle and St. Thomas. But then, he would ask, what of those Catholics who did not see the ultimate social bearing of their own basic principles because they had not suffered their minds to be opened to the reality of contemporary problems by reading Karl Marx?

Recognizing the urgent need to revive true education in the modern world, Father Virgil saw, first of all, that the kind of reform which Mr. Hutchins has proposed belonged even more properly in Catholic colleges than in secular ones. This was essentially and *par excellence* Catholic education. He felt deeply that Catholic schools had not only failed to meet the challenge of modern ideas—both the true and the false ones—but that, worse, they had forsaken their own ancient heritage, or retained it only in some fossilized form. In the second place, he saw, with great wisdom, that whatever danger might attach to such a program under secular auspices—such dangers as sophistry or eclecticism when the truth was at stake—must necessarily be minimized or even totally eliminated when, in a Catholic college, the course of study was fortified by the principles of Catholic faith and the context of religious life. And finally, he saw that upon the right reform of education depended the reconstruction of the social order. Educational matters were for him never merely academic questions. He knew that the rottenness of existing education reflected the decadence of modern culture itself. “Our present education,” he wrote recently, “is distinctly the product of our bourgeois mind, of extreme self-complacency above all else. We are at a most important turning point in the history of mankind, truly the end of an era Yet our educational efforts today, and the predominant body of educators today, are still transmitting the cultural attitudes they learned in their own generation, the materialistic liberalism and individualism with which our curricula and textbooks are completely imbued.”

Father Virgil Michel lived and worked in the profound hope that a new era was at hand. Yet it would not happen, he knew, unless men joined hearts and heads and hands in making its accomplish-

ment their common cause. To that end he dedicated his educational efforts, as a writer, a teacher, a leader. It is not enough to review his efforts and praise them. The praise itself, though justly earned by him, will become for us so many hollow, empty words unless, sharing the same vision and hope, we also dedicate ourselves by deeds to the same end. 

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