

Personalist pedagogy and Catholic higher education

By Jon Sozek, October 2020

Over the past year, education has emerged as a central theme in Francis's pontificate. This began in September of 2019, when Francis spoke at the launch of a process, at the Vatican, to create a new "Global Compact on Education." This compact, he said, will promote "an education that integrates and respects all aspects of the person." It will "place the human person at the centre" of education and be "based on a sound anthropology." It will contribute, moreover, to the "long-term vision" of creating "a new humanism," to challenge the "throwaway culture" criticized in *Laudato Si'* (Francis 2019). The event scheduled for May 2020 to begin this process was delayed due to Covid-19. Yet recently, on October 15, a "relaunch" was held. Speaking there, Francis again laid emphasis on the human person in the first of seven "commitments" that he, Francis, makes: a commitment, namely, "to make human persons in their value and dignity the centre of every educational programme" (Francis 2020).

For those of us who move in Catholic circles, talk about "the human person" might be so familiar as to seem rather anodyne; just a habitual Catholic way of speaking. But I think we do well here to pause: what does it mean, really, to make human persons "the center" of an educational program? If Francis is doing more here than just "speaking Catholic," what is he actually calling for?

In my remarks this morning, I'd like to make a start at answering these questions. To do so, I'll survey some themes from the personalist philosophy of education developed by Jacques Maritain in two works: in his Terry lectures of 1943, *Education at the Crossroads*, and his 1962 book *The Education of Man*. These are certainly, as I'd say to my students, "old books." Yet revisiting Maritain's work, I hope to show, is a good way to start sketching out the meaning of Francis's vision.

We'll consider two themes, drawing from both books: (1) Maritain's understanding of the aims of education and (2) some features of a "personalist pedagogy."

The Aims of Education

We begin with the aims of education, and from a phrase often taken as the watchword of Maritain's approach: "Integral education for an integral humanism." The idea of integration is important for Maritain, and his treatment of it has had a significant influence on subsequent Catholic thought. Pope Paul VI, for example, citing Maritain, called for the "integral development" of pre-industrial societies; Francis, perhaps with Paul and Maritain in mind, has called for an "integral ecology" and has insisted, prominently for years, that "everything is connected."

But we might ask: why do we need an "integral" education? What is it? And what problem is it meant to solve? To understand this, we need take a little historical detour.

We can say this: Integration is felt to be needed by these authors because they see modern societies as "fragmented," in Maritain's phrase — or, if we prefer, "differentiated," in the more neutral sense proposed by Max Weber. As our societies have grown in complexity, *Gemeinschaft* (community) has given way to *Gesellschaft* (mass society). The organic unity of familiar human relations has yielded to more impersonal, alienating modes of interaction. This has had countless good effects, indeed — as Maritain, Paul, and Francis would all agree. But also, it's come at a cost.

"Personalism" — that slippery term — can be read as an effort to reckon with the costs of modernity. From the French Revolution through the First Vatican Council, we might say the typical Catholic response to modernity was nostalgia: a desire to recover pre-modern, even medieval forms of social life. By the 1930s, however, a shift had occurred — and Maritain was at its forefront. Rather than "undo" modernity, at the unacceptable cost of undoing its many gains, we

might start, he surmised, from where we are: from a felt condition of fragmentation. From there, we might try, almost surgically, to reassemble the fragments of our societies in such a way as to preserve the gains while reducing the costs. Social differentiation, therefore, would not be rolled back, but the various spheres of society would be “integrated,” yielding new, call them “integral” approaches in various disciplines. We would see that “everything is connected,” to recall Francis’s phrase.

Similarly, modern affirmations of the self and of individual rights would not be rejected, as they had been by Pius IX. Rather, they would be recast; now, as an affirmation of the integrated “whole human person.” Unlike the “atomized individual” of modernity, the “person” would have both rights and responsibilities, as well as a commitment to the common good. In this way, we can begin to explain the curious fact that the Catholic Church, the strongest opponent of human rights in the nineteenth century, became their strongest advocate in the twentieth.

Let’s return to our main thread. For Maritain, we can say — keeping in mind the terms we’ve been developing — education has two “essential” aims. The first pertains to the student’s integration as a person; the second, to her preparation for a career and responsible citizenship. Both are “essential,” in Maritain’s studied, Thomistic phrasing. But also, they are ordered.

The first essential aim is to create conditions for the student to integrate the various aspects of herself as a person. This includes her body and spirit, but also an overcoming of contradictory ways of thinking and unhealthy patterns of willing. From a condition of fragmented manyness, over time — and in different ways at different times — the student is guided to develop an integrated sense of personal identity. The student herself, not the teacher, is thus the primary agent of education, for only the student can effect this integration, in freedom, for herself. The teacher, the curriculum, and any educational program can only serve as a guide. As Maritain puts it, education is meant “to guide man in the evolving dynamism through which he shapes himself

as a human person” (1943, p. 10). Education is in this respect “a human awakening” (1943, p. 9); an awakening to one’s interior life and to truth, goodness, and beauty. It helps the student “attain ... full formation or ... completeness” (1962, p. 83). The student is “made more human” by the disciplines and objects of their study, insofar as these “convey ... the spiritual fruit and achievements of the labor of generations, and deal with things which are worth being known for their own sake, for the sake of truth or the sake of beauty” (EM). The humanities are called the humanities, then, we can say, not because in them *we study humanity*, but because through them *we ourselves are made human*.

The second essential aim of education — to prepare for a career and citizenship — is not subordinate to the first in terms of importance. It too is, again, “essential.” But Maritain seems to say, if you like: “seek ye first” personal integration, and the rest will be added unto you. Put otherwise: lead a student to be awakened to a sense of her own freedom, intellect, responsibility, and rootedness in culture, and she will, by natural extension, seek to contribute to society. (Parenthetically, it’s worth noting that this doesn’t work the other way round; vocational training does not, of itself, integrate the personality.) Here Maritain acknowledges the advances brought about by modern theories of education, such as John Dewey’s, in focusing education on practical life and the needs of society. Dewey and others did away with the bookish and elitist approaches of the past, and for Maritain, this was to the good, even if he takes exception to such theories in most other respects. It is notable also that Maritain insists, throughout both of the works we are considering, that the kind of education for freedom we are describing — liberal education — must be made “available to all.” This is, he thinks, an indispensable pre-condition of democratic self-government, of which he was a vigorous advocate.

We have considered these aims of education, clearly, with a focus on the student, but remember: for Maritain, integral education is “*for an integral humanism*.” His aim is the transfor-

mation and renewal of culture. As he said in 1943, in the belly of the war: “the individualism of the bourgeois era” should be replaced “not by totalitarianism or the sheer collectivism of the beehive but by a personalistic and communal civilization, grounded on human rights and satisfying the social aspirations and needs of man” (1943, p. 89).

Personalist pedagogy

We may turn now to what I am calling “personalist pedagogy” — a term Maritain does not use, but could. We can start from a simple question: if the student is and has to be the primary agent of her own education, what then is the role of the teacher?

For Maritain, “Teaching is an art; the teacher is an artist” (1943, p. 30). But the teacher is not like the sculptor, who works with passive clay. Her art is more akin to medicine. He writes:

Medicine deals with a living being that possesses inner vitality and the internal principle of health. The doctor exerts real causality in healing a sick man, yes, but in a very particular manner: by imitating the ways of nature herself in her operations, and by helping nature, by providing [an] appropriate diet and remedies that nature herself uses... In other words, medicine is an *ars cooperativa naturae*, an art of ministering, an art subservient to nature. And so is education.

Skilled in this cooperation with nature, the teacher establishes conditions under which the student can achieve her own awakening and integration. The teacher pays “a sort of sacred and loving attention to the [student’s] mysterious identity, which is a hidden thing that no technique can reach” (EM, p. 61). She encourages; she never humiliates. She is ready “at hand with the lessons of logic and reasoning that invite to action the [student’s] unexercised reason” (1943, p. 43). Everything she teaches, she ensures, is, in the student, “actively transformed by understanding into the very life of the mind ... thus strengthen[ing] the latter, as wood thrown into fire ... makes the fire stronger” (1943, p. 50).

In one place, in *Crossroads*, Maritain neatly enumerates four “rules of education for the teacher.” The first and primary rule, he stresses, is that the teacher should support the student’s “liberation” by fostering in her certain “fundamental dispositions which enable the principal agent to grow in the life of the mind” (1943, p. 39). Among these he includes a love of truth, the good, and justice; a sense for the value of cooperation; and what he calls a “simplicity and openness to existence.” This latter is described beautifully as “the attitude of a being who exists gladly, is unashamed of existing, stands upright in existence, and for whom to be and to accept the natural limitations of existence are matters of equally simple assent” (1943, p. 37).

The second rule is that the teacher should respect the so-called “preconscious spiritual dynamism of human personality” and “lay stress on inwardness and the internalization” of what is being taught (1943, p. 39). The goal is never merely to convey conventions or information. Those are means, not ends. The goal is to liberate the student’s inner “dynamism.” Two examples may be taken to illustrate this. Of teaching writing, Maritain says: “Before giving a youth the rules of good style, let us tell him first never to write anything which does not seem to him ... beautiful, whatever the result may be” (1943, p. 44). And of reading: “In asking a youth to read a book, let us get him to undertake a real spiritual adventure and meet and struggle with the internal world of a given man, instead of glancing over a collection of bits of thought and dead opinions ... according to the horrible custom of ... what they call ‘being informed’” (1943, pp. 44-45).

With the third rule, we return to the theme of integration: “the whole work of education and teaching,” Maritain says, “must tend to unify, not to spread out; it must strive to foster internal unity in man” (1943, p. 45). By “internal unity,” it is important to note, he does not have in mind merely mental pursuits. Such would develop only one aspect of the student’s person, and thus fail to create the conditions for their integration. Here and elsewhere, Maritain stresses the

importance of manual labor and experiential learning at all stages of education: the better to overcome, he says, the “cleavage between *homo faber* and *homo sapiens*” (ibid.).

Fourth and finally, the teacher should, in effect, worry less about how *much* she teaches and more about *how* she teaches it. Maritain writes: “teaching must liberate intelligence instead of burdening it ... [it must free] the mind through the mastery of reason over the things learned” (1943, p. 49). The goal is to occasion this mastery, not to fill up the student’s mind. “Teaching” at the undergraduate level, he says elsewhere, “should be concentrated on awakening the minds [of students] to a few basic intuitions or intellectual perceptions in each ... discipline, [so that] what is ... illuminating as to the truth of things learned is definitely and unshakably possessed.” This would, he says, lead to “a rise in the quality of the teaching ... and an alleviation of the material burden imposed by the curriculum” (EM, p. 72).

In concluding this section on Maritain’s personalist pedagogy, I’d be remiss not to mention his remarks on the personal life of the teacher herself. Expressing his concern about “the lack of integration in the minds of teachers themselves,” he suggests the formation of “study clubs and seminars in which teachers belonging to various disciplines and departments would meet together, on a voluntary basis, and discuss basic problems ... relevant to the unity of knowledge.” In this way, he says, “fresh and quickening blood [would] circulate in the campuses.” And yet, “such an initiative could obviously ... succeed only if teachers had the necessary free time, that is to say, if they were not faced with ... a much too heavy number of teaching hours. ... [For] it is preposterous to ask people who lead an enslaved life to perform a task of liberation” (EM, p. 60)!

Conclusion

We have asked what it might mean, concretely, to make human persons “the center” of an educational program. I have suggested that revisiting Maritain’s personalist philosophy of education is a good way to start answering that question, and we’ve sketched some defining features of his view. The student herself, we have seen, for Maritain, is the primary agent of her own education. Her task is not primarily to acquire information or skills, but to allow for her faculties to be awakened, according to their nature, and for her inner life to acquire some shape. The teacher, as a “minister” of this process, merely creates the conditions for this awakening on the part of the student. She accompanies the student, seeking to model, in what measure she can, the life of the mind. As distinct from other, more modern philosophies of education, such as Dewey’s, Maritain regards the adventure of education as beholden always to something beyond and above both student and teacher: to goodness, to truth, and to beauty — and no less, in his own case, to God.

Maritain straddles the fault-line between the two quite different Catholic attitudes toward the modern world described above, and in his own life experienced, vividly, the tremors of that relationship. He was thoroughly a personalist — no less so than Pope Francis himself, I would argue. Yet also, thoroughly, he was a Thomist, and today is best known as such. As Pope Francis’s Global Compact for Education takes shape over the coming months, we might look to Maritain — and Catholic personalists — for guidance in making real its vision.