



Who can teach?

Rev. Father Peter Scott

We all know who ought to teach - all those who have responsibility for education, namely teachers, parents, guardians and priests. However, we are also very much aware of the fact that there are many who ought to teach who cannot, not a few of them being professionally trained teachers. The other side of the coin is that there are many others, who do not consider themselves teachers, and who were not formally trained as such, but who ought to teach, for they are forced by circumstances to do so. Can they really teach? Are they fooling themselves? What does it really take? Can parents really be considered to be teachers? Can home-schooling ever be a viable alternative? Can a Catholic priest or scoutmaster, without a teaching degree, really teach?

This series of brief articles attempts to answer these questions, by identifying one by one the various elements that make a person capable of teaching. Education is here to be understood in the fullest sense of the term, in the light of which the answers will become clearer. As Pope Pius XI points out in his 1929 encyclical *On Christian Education*, education is the means by which men seek to acquire a perfection higher than themselves, but yet the impulse towards it is implanted in their rational nature by the Creator Himself. Education is consequently that striving for perfection that is most in accordance with human nature, which the natural law makes us yearn for and impels us to obtain, but which can only achieve its true completeness in the supernatural order, by grace, for its very purpose is the obtaining of a perfection greater than ourselves. Education is consequently not a right so much as a special favor or privilege to which nature inclines us. This truly broad vision of education ought to encourage the large number of us who have the

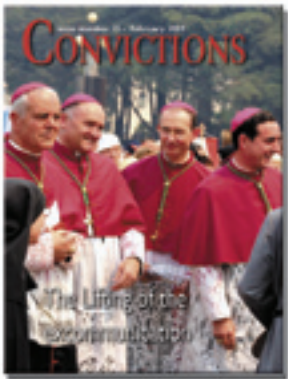
responsibility for some kind of education to prepare ourselves to draw the most out of the souls entrusted to us.

Goal of education

A first principle of solution to these questions lies in the end, the goal to be achieved by education. A man cannot teach unless he understands what he is trying to do. The goal of education is nothing other than the last goal of human life, "with which the whole work of education is intimately and necessarily connected" (Pius XI, *Ib.*) Aristotle understood this particularly well when he gave this rather enigmatic description of the goal of education: "The true aim of education is the attainment of happiness, through perfect virtue". It could hardly be otherwise, since happiness is the goal of every human life. The striving for happiness is the foundation of all good, of all morality. A true educator is, then, one who knows what true happiness is, and who is able to share it with others. A first condition for being able to educate is to be happy in oneself with true happiness. Our Divine Savior expresses this perfectly when he begins the moral education of his disciples with the Beatitudes: "Blessed (i.e. truly happy) are the poor in spirit...the meek...those who mourn...those who hunger and thirst after justice...the merciful...the pure of heart...the peacemakers...those who suffer persecution for justice sake" (Mt. 5:3-10).

But in what does this happiness consist, that is the goal of education? Manifestly not in the passing physical, sensual, material happiness that so many seek, showing thereby their lack of true education. Father Edward Leen, C.S.Sp., in his commentary on this text of Aristotle, has this to say: "Happiness is the good life, and education works towards this by creating those intellectual, moral and emotional dispositions that are most favorable to the development of divine grace and its attendant virtues. Aristotle is right in judging the virtues to be the stepping-stone to a satisfactory life. Of course, he could not know of any virtues but the acquired ones. Christian education disposes the soul for the operation of the infused virtues." (What is True Education?, Tradibooks, 2008; pp. 23 & 24).

Happiness is the fruit of the possession of goodness, and goodness is attained by growth in grace and the practice of virtue. Education creates



CONVICTIONS
nr 15

true happiness in the soul by enabling it on this earth to grow in goodness in its acts by the practice of virtue, and in its being by the increase of sanctifying grace. It is because education enables a man to practice virtue that Pope Pius XI teaches that "education consists essentially in preparing man for what he must be and for what he must do below, in order to attain the sublime goal for which he was created" (Divini illius magistri). Clearly this happiness in the practice of virtue is supernatural, and both transcends and is compatible with all our human sufferings, pains and disappointments, in exactly the same way as Our Divine Savior retained his perfect happiness, that of accomplishing his Father's will, at the moment of his bitter agony in the garden of Gethsemane.

Happiness versus enthusiasm

The first requisite of an educator is, consequently, that he be happy - happy in himself, in his vocation, in his duty of state. He must be happy because he seeks after true virtue, the imitation of Our Lord Jesus Christ; happy consequently in the midst of suffering, hardship, insults; happy, come what may, despite his failings and weaknesses, because he is striving for goodness, that is, perfection, as commanded by Our Lord: "Be you therefore perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Mt 5:48). Without this happiness, the educator cannot possibly draw another man's will. He might be able to instruct another man's mind, but he will never be able to induce him to seek for goodness, for the practice of virtue in his own turn, if he cannot give him the example of true happiness. This is a fundamental observation for every wanna-be educator. If we are sad, bitter, disillusioned, envious, jealous, angry, impatient, troubled we are not fit to be a teacher, and our words will make little or no impression. To the contrary, if our interior happiness overflows, as it ought to, in exterior joy, and in the tranquility of order that makes for peace of soul, we can already begin the work of educating.

How often our lack of self-control, our moodiness, our emotional instability, our pettiness undermines the education we are pretending to give to others! How destructive is the inconstancy that comes from the fact that we are really not happy in ourselves, with our crosses, with Divine Providence and with our lot in life.

Folks in the world have understood the psychological importance of exterior happiness, and

it is why they employ enthusiasm to teach technical skills, not to mention their false philosophies of life and religions. It is enthusiasm that attracts new adepts and draws others to learn their system, for this superficial and passing happiness mimicks the true happiness for which we all long. It is the key to the success of all kinds of groups, from evangelical sects to yoga meditation groups. Catholic education cannot possibly imitate this enthusiasm, for its goal is supernatural virtue and happiness, and any attempt to do so will but form an empty bubble, ready to burst, as do the charismatics. It simply will not last.

Education creates the intellectual, moral and emotional dispositions that are most favorable to the development of divine grace and its attendant virtues.

Such enthusiasm can only be a very small part of education that is properly called "Christian", that has little to do with enthusiasm but everything to do with the real goodness of our lives, for that goodness alone which is supernatural can make us truly happy. This goodness is primarily in the practice of infused virtue, perfected by charity, but is not limited to purely interior virtue. For this virtue, once acquired, directs and sanctifies everything in our lives, all our activities and all our works. It produces the happiness in the performance of our daily duties for God alone, of which happiness Our Lord said: "And your joy, no man shall take from you" (Jn. 16:22). The Church confirms this, for in this does "the unsurpassed excellence of the work of Christian education" become "manifest and clear, for after all it aims at securing the Supreme Good, that is, God, for the souls of those who are being educated, and the maximum of well-being possible here below for human society" (Pius XI. Ib.).

It is the interior peace, the joy in being a Catholic consecrated to the glory of the most Holy Trinity, preparing his eternity through the daily Crosses of every day, that radiates true interior happiness. For this the state of grace alone does not suffice. How many there are who do not draw

upon the treasure of sanctifying grace, who leave it untapped for they do not act under its inspiration, but forget that they are Catholics in the performance of their daily duties. It is the longing for perfection that makes the difference. This is the prerequisite of being a teacher that so many teachers lack. It can easily be understood why it is that the religious, who have chosen a state of perfection in life, have traditionally been known and seen to be the best teachers.

A language of the heart

St. John Bosco understood this very well when he developed his preventive system of education, drawing boys by his example, that is by the happy striving for all the perfection of which a man is capable, that he might be able to share it with others. It is summarized in his motto "religion, reason and kindness", which takes the place of forcing children by the threat of punishment, as in the repressive system of education. For he pointed out that it is the longing to please God, and to please his instructors as God's instruments, that is the key to the education of the child, and that this longing is the fruit of charity burning in the soul of his instructors. To bring forth this desire to please, the teacher must constantly show that he is seeking God's honor and glory alone, that he is acting in a reasonable and just way to achieve this goal, and that the charity that he has towards Almighty God is manifested by the constant practice of kindness and thoughtful consideration towards those for whom he is responsible, in fulfillment of this most supernatural and extraordinary of moral principles, given by our Divine Savior Himself: "Amen I say to you, as long as you did it to one of these my least brethren, you did it to me" (Mt. 25:40). St. John Bosco uses the expression "the language of the heart", meaning thereby the love of a cheerful giver that both God and men appreciate so much. Here is how it is explained by one of his Salesians:

"The Preventive System enables the pupil to take advice in such a manner that the educator can always speak to him in the language of the heart...The educator having once succeeded in gaining the heart of his subject, can afterwards exercise a great influence over him, can caution, advise and even correct him...The practice of this system is wholly based on the words of St. Paul, who says: 'charity is patient, is kind. It beareth

all things, hopeth all things, endureth all things' (I Cor 13:4-7)" (A Treatise on the Preventive System, in Fr. Avalone).

Teaching worthy of the name, that is able to touch the heart and move the will, is consequently necessarily a great source of satisfaction, of interior joy, despite the hardships and frustrations that accompany it. Pope Pius XII understood this well when he spoke to French Catholic professors and students of the joy of teaching: "No matter how soul-satisfying be the 'joy of knowing', it finds its complement in the joy of teaching. To teach! What a sublime task, by which man, in the humble measure of his created capacity, participates in the action of the Incarnate Word. St. Thomas sums up admirably this dignity of the teacher: 'As it is a greater thing to give light than to shine alone, so also it is a greater thing to pass on to others things we have contemplated, than to contemplate alone.'" (Allocution of April 24, 1946, in Education [Papal Teachings], Solesmes, § 452).

This joy in teaching is the immediate effect of its being motivated by the holy ideal of charity, as St. Paul practiced and recommended: "I have shewed you all things, how that so laboring you ought to support the weak, and to remember the word of the Lord Jesus, how he said: It is a more blessed thing to give, rather than to receive." (Act 20:35). Again, let me quote Pope Pius XII, who described the vocation of the Catholic educator in the following words: "These feel themselves irresistibly drawn to protect children from evil in order to give them to God, to undergo weariness and discomfort in order to form men who will serve Christ, the Church and human society in a worthy manner. And this is your ideal; this is the love that has conquered your hearts and to which you have pledged your lives! It is this splendid ideal, this love which participates of the love of God Himself, which inspires you and which sweetens the severity of your work" (Ib. §444).

Whether, therefore, we are called to teach manners and prayers to pre-schoolers, or Math and English to grade schoolers, or History and Science to high schoolers, or a trade to adults, or philosophy or technical knowledge in a university, it is always the love of learning, the desire for perfection, the supernatural yearning to share one's love with others and draw them also to perfection, and to true happiness, that is the first and most necessary pre-requisite for every teacher.