



The Catholic Tradition of Classical Education

with Dr. Andrew Seeley

Lesson 2: The Wisdom, Experience, and Teaching of the Church

Outline:

Catholic Schools and their Difficulties

The Church's experience with Classical Education began in Patristic period which was the common education in the Roman Empire, and it fostered their Catholic life. The Church appropriated the good in pagan learning and purged what was not useful to the Christian life.

If those who are called Philosophers, and especially the Platonists, have said aught that is true and in harmony with our faith, we are not only not to shrink from it, but to claim it for our own use from those who have unlawful possession of it. For, as the Egyptians had not only the idols and heavy burdens which the people of Israel hated and fled from, but also vessels and ornaments of gold and silver, and garments, which the same people when going out of Egypt appropriated to themselves, designing them for a better use, not doing this on their own authority, but by the command of God, the Egyptians themselves, in their ignorance, providing them with things which they themselves, were not making a good use of; in the same way all branches of heathen learning have not only false and superstitious fancies and heavy burdens of unnecessary toil, which every one of us, when going out under the leadership of Christ from the fellowship of the heathen, ought to abhor and avoid; but they contain also liberal instruction which is better adapted to the use of the truth, and some most excellent precepts of morality; and some truths in regard even to the worship of the One God are found among them. Now these are, so to speak, their gold and silver, which they did not create themselves, but dug out of the mines of God's providence which are everywhere scattered abroad, and are perversely and unlawfully prostituting to the worship of devils. –St Augustine (On Christian Doctrine)

- **Early Middle-Ages:** The Church through Benedictine monasteries preserved Classical pagan learning, educated themselves in it to read and understand the Scriptures and the patristic corpus more deeply.
- **Later Middle-Ages:** More aspects of ancient education recovered. Aristotle's approach fully developed and adapted in Universities. Jesuit order adapted Renaissance classical education and made it universal.
- Classical education gives the young confidence in the Church's wisdom, goodness, and stability. Even non-Catholics agree with the importance of classical education and the flowering of the middle-ages. Non-Catholic advocates of classical education frequently present the following writers and thinkers as models:
 - Augustine of Hippo
 - Thomas Aquinas



- Dante Alighier
- Geoffrey Chaucer
- Shakespeare
- Giovanni Pierluigi da Palestrina
- Raffaello Sanzio da Urbino
- Michelangelo di Lodovico Buonarroti Simoni
- J.R.R. Tolkien
- John Henry Newman
- G.K. Chesterton
- Jacques Maritain
- Fulton Sheen
- **Prior to 1960s** – over 13,000 US schools educating 5,500,000 students, and it was staffed with clergy and monastics. This not only provided cheap labor but a perspective that is salvation oriented, caring primarily about the souls of their students. The communal strength of the ecclesial context carried over into the academic context and created “community” between staff and student. Schools largely served immigrants (like the Italians, Polish and Germans) and communities where the parish was the center of their lives, with an emphasis on catechesis.
- **1970s Classical Education in Public School** – 3 years of Latin was required, they read classical authors and ancient mythology, and had strong history courses. It was only recently that secular education departed classical learning.
- **Post-Vatican II:** Religious people left their orders, focused on economic advancement and assimilation, schools lost the experience of parish life, increased cost to have lay teachers, and the laity was not prepared for spiritual leadership (and it lost the former pastoral environment). Secular standards and training became opposed to Catholic approaches. Catholic schools began merely to look like secular counterparts. A number of Catholic schools dropped less than 40% from what it was in the 1960s, and are now in a postmodern state.

Distinction between *Modern* and *Postmodern*:

- **Modern** – Intentionally departing the classical for the modern.
- **Postmodern** – Unaware of there being anything before modernity, and no vision of education.