

What is Education?

The ancient Greek poet Pindar writes that our most important duty in life is to *become who we are*. This imperative is not exclusively a pagan one; it is also at the center of the Christian educational tradition. As the Irish poet Thomas Moore wrote: “Education... [is] making visible what lies hidden as a seed.” Those of us who are parents and educators are entrusted with this hidden seed—and a great responsibility it is, for this is the seed that, when cultivated, grows into wisdom and virtue.

Making visible the beauty that lies hidden places certain demands on us. First and foremost, we must truly want to *know* and *love* our students for who they *are*. This lets us help them find their unique calling in life *in freedom*, guiding—not coercing—they. We must thus resist the enduring temptation to project our own expectations and regrets onto those we educate. In his book *Education at the Crossroads*, French philosopher Jacques Maritain tells us that “the education of man is a human awakening,” which aims at developing “internal and spiritual freedom,” so that each individual grows into a truly free person, able to live and flourish in right relationship with God, nature, and society.

This all sounds very lofty and noble, but what does it all mean practically? What I have discovered over the years—working with students of all ages and backgrounds, from school pupils to political leaders—is that the *culture* of the learning environment is the key to unlocking each person’s ability to learn. A good learning culture is an atmosphere that encourages and makes true learning possible. It comes about only through a community of peers and teachers who are committed to enabling each student to make

full use of his talents and gifts through a proper application of faith and reason, in friendship and mutual trust.

When founding or reviving an educational institution, the first task is to select the *right people* and the *right setting*. These two aims are as practical as it gets. And yet, they must be informed by the transcendent values of *truth* and *beauty*.

Let us consider first how founding or rejuvenating this kind of institution necessitates truthfulness. The men and women we engage for our educational efforts must be people who are *personally* dedicated to lifelong learning and growing. It is the *attitude of life* that counts. Teachers must be able to *model* an authentic life that shows a unity of word and deed. Perfection is not required; only the effort and willingness to grow.

There are few things more destructive in education than teachers who do not live in accordance with their own teachings. In the words of Michael D. O’Brien: “A messenger is in his words if the messenger is truly himself. His life is his primary word, and his spoken words bear his life. He learns to be this when he has discovered that a man can give to others only what he truly is.”

Second, educators must cultivate a beautiful setting—one that uplifts the soul. This principle informs our decisions about architecture, furniture, decorations, and the natural environment. School buildings, the university campus, or the conference venue should always be ordered and pleasing to the eye and other senses.

Prioritizing beauty is by no means a luxury; it is a *real* need that is to be met with simplicity. I have seen beautiful yet very simple school buildings in Africa that were far better suited for

their purpose than most of the bland modern European or American educational buildings and conference venues. Ugliness and noisiness, so omnipresent in our functionality-driven societies, distract us and cause anxiety. These uninspiring and ugly spaces can never be a suitable environment for true learning and growing. Beauty invites the human spirit to quietly observe and contemplate and, as a result, to ascend to higher planes of knowing and understanding.

Once we have established truth and beauty as the foundation of our educational endeavors, we can start with undertaking the first and most difficult task in education: making visible the hidden seed. This starts with *character formation* and it is a prerequisite to truly enable intellectual formation. As James V. Schall explains when he speaks about liberal education:

There is an intimate connection between our moral life and our intellectual life. Sometimes I think the history of our times can be described as an argument whether or not this connection is true. Self-discipline is the beginning of wisdom, not its end.

The moral life—which is what character formation addresses—is fundamentally *relational*. We learn through our relationships, as we were painfully reminded during the very unfortunate extended school and university closures in response to COVID-19. Technological advances have opened the way to distance learning—but such advances cannot ever replace human interaction and personal relationships.

Character formation happens where people meet and grow together in wisdom and experience. Students learn not only from what their teacher says but from who their teacher is and how he or she lives. We also learn from our fellow learners, including through disagreement and debate. Character formation encourages growth in virtue, as it teaches us—through the harsh realities of life—to become ever more consistent in discerning between good and evil, truth and falsehood, sense and nonsense.

In other words, character formation is about learning the virtues, both classical and Christian. These virtues—which Josef Pieper calls “the tools of life”—can be instilled and strengthened in different ways: not just through

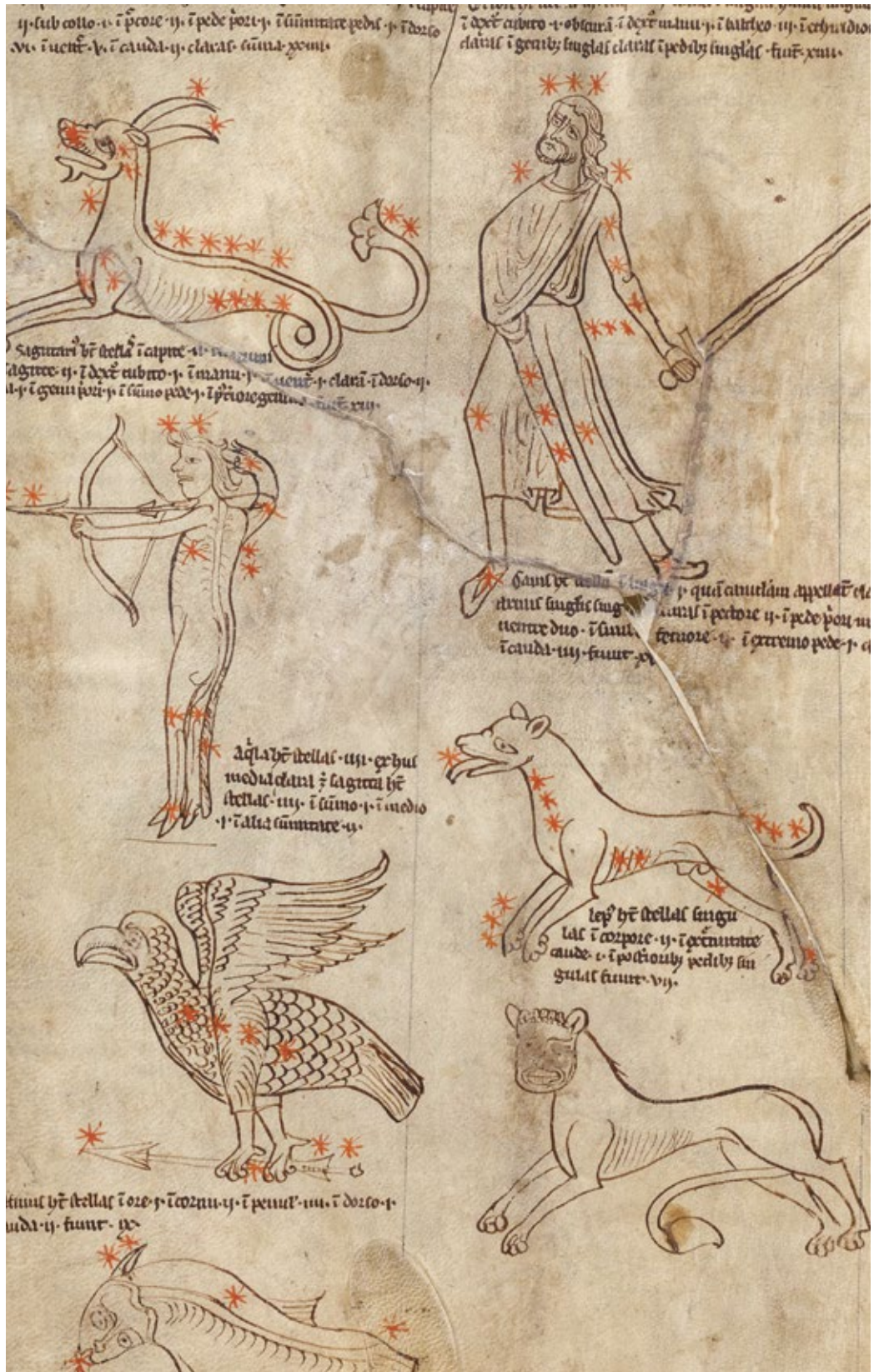


reading, writing, discussion, theater, sports, and social and community service but also simply by living, working, and spending time with others—especially those whom we do not readily like or understand. When designing curricula with character formation in mind, the most important thing to remember is that the virtuous life requires ongoing, humble work to form persons who live purposefully and act justly, and who never give up.

This brings me to a point that is especially relevant today. Eighty years ago, in his prophetic *The Abolition of Man*, C.S. Lewis already wrote that modern educators

“Three Studies of the Head of a Youth” (c.1737), 42 x 28 cm black chalk on paper drawing by Francesco Salvator Fontebasso (1707-1769), located in the Getty Museum.

"Miscellany of Texts on the Quadrivium," a leaf from an English manuscript of the early 12th century, in black, green, and red inks, located in the Getty Museum.



... make men without chests and expect of them virtue and enterprise. We laugh at honor and are shocked to find traitors in our midst. We castrate and bid the geldings be fruitful.

Education in the 21st century West—even more than in Lewis's time—is largely marked by a culture of weakness, 'wokeness,' and entitlement, too often leading to spineless people who cannot cope with new or unfashionable opinions and who abandon their commitments the moment obstacles arise. These people have been taught to blame all their problems on society or on others, rather than looking inward to learn personal responsibility and inner strength to overcome such obstacles.

Educators must rediscover the virtue of *heroism*—so central to many great works of literature, yet so foreign to our own time. Why is this important? Because this virtue directs us to apply the virtues of courage, perseverance, self-mastery, and self-giving as *a way of life*. Herein we find an urgently needed alternative to the widespread obsession with invented rights and perceived victimhood, for heroism calls us to embrace our duty to ourselves and others as a source of joy and fulfillment.

Alongside character formation, education must cultivate a vibrant intellectual life. If there is something our modern world seems to have completely forgotten, it is the ability to think for oneself and to do so with *clarity*. We live in a society of permanent distraction and much confusion. Fleeting feelings, opinion polls, and the latest social media hype constantly draw us away from the search for truth until, at last, we find ourselves so distracted, so scattered in our thoughts and our discourse, that we cannot even discuss such basic realities as the fundamental nature of human life, or what it means to be male and female.

Superficiality of thought seems to be the norm in public discourse today. The scientific method, logical argumentation, and healthy debate are routinely rejected in favor of whatever new orthodoxy our 'thought leaders' and 'experts' mandate. Those who disagree, no matter how valid their reasons, are threatened with 'de-platforming,' 'cancelling,' and other forms of public shaming and censorship.

In such a state of affairs, we need education that seeks to make visible what lies hidden as a seed

in the individual person: the capacity for reason and discussion, for contemplation, for heroism, for selfless love. We need an education that is patiently willing to attempt to cultivate students who are unafraid of the great and controversial questions of life, and who are always open to better understanding the truth of what it means to be human—even if it contradicts the mainstream narrative.

So, what is the *key* to education? It is the task of cultivating the seed that lies hidden *within* every human being. It is an education that promises true freedom of thought and speech—for here there are no taboos or thought crimes, no blanket rejection of the reality of the created order, of tradition, and of religion. But this requires an atmosphere of *truthfulness* and *beauty* in which, through the acquisition of knowledge and the fostering of virtue, each individual can shape his character in relation to the good—and eventually contribute richly.

Such an endeavor also entails the formation of profound friendships—and a community in which charity reigns supreme. Here, the student—with the help of the great minds of history—will learn *how* to think. And, in the process, the student will learn to listen with humility—and to heroically pursue the true, the good, and the beautiful. ■

Christiaan Alting von Geusau is the president and rector of ITI Catholic University, the founder and chairman of the board of the high school 'Schola Thomas Morus.' He is a professor of law and education, and is the founder and president of the International Catholic Legislators Network. He previously served as a director of the Phoenix Institute, an educational organization seeking to bring the treasures of the Western intellectual tradition to young people around the world.