

The Church as Teacher

To wrap one's mind around the history of education is impossible, but certain elements of teaching are pertinent to our thoughts on women. Obviously there are informal arenas of learning and more formal settings, ranging from instructing a toddler how to tie his shoes to granting Ph.D.s in prestigious academies. To consider the ways that women teach is to look at all of these places, building on the premises that motherhood is both physical and spiritual and that teaching is inherent to motherhood in all its manifestations.

Consider the affectionate term given to a beloved school from which one graduates, *alma mater*, which means "sweet mother." This phrase ties the two vocations neatly into one.

The teaching vocation belongs to more than those who train for it professionally; it encompasses all who are entrusted with guiding others toward the truth. That said, it would benefit us to look first at some recent scientific discoveries that have backed up some grassroots theories on the particular affinity women have for this vocation.

SOME SCIENTIFIC EVIDENCE

In the realm of biology, great advances have been made in the study of the human brain. Interestingly, while men's brains are slightly larger than women's, women have more dendritic connections between both the brain cells and the two hemispheres

of the brain. Women have a strong capacity to transfer data from one side of the brain to the other, leading them to use both sides in an integrated way, while men operate more often from the left side.

The left side of the brain hosts myriad pieces of essential information, including language, complex voluntary movements, verbal memory, speech, reading, writing and arithmetic. Female brains, in general, are more adept than male brains at adding to these thought processes the information stored in the right half of the brain.¹

It is the increased ability to access this right lobe that makes women distinct from men in the way they think. The right side of the brain holds the key to many areas where women seem to have an edge: for example, recognizing faces, reading facial expressions, picking up social cues, discerning objects by touch, nonverbal memory, spatial relationships, a sense of direction, the sense of smell and the overall integration of information.

Women's brains also have been shown to have a larger limbic area, the seat of emotion. Women tend to have a greater ability to feel emotion, and their enhanced language skills allow them to express it. They have a greater ability to bond with other persons, especially through their capacity to interpret nonverbal signs and signals. Throughout history women have been the primary caregivers for children.

Whatever the individual deviations are from these norms, medical studies have proven that the brains of men and women are different and cause them to have different overall strengths and weaknesses. Despite radical feminism's attempts to repattern the way that men and women act—insisting that their behavior is socially or culturally conditioned—we have to conclude that men and women are “wired” differently and that God planned it that way for His purposes.

What this has to do with education is subtle but essential.

While men may be content to look at data or impersonal facts to see their way to a solution, women more often use personal experience and intangibles as well as quantifiable evidence to create a more integrated, multidimensional picture. They may or may not be able to explain themselves to the men around them, but I'd like to think that this, too, is a part of what Pope John Paul II affirmed as "the feminine genius."² It is important not to deduce from this that women are better than men, or smarter or "superiorly wired"; they are simply different. Because of this difference the Church has promoted the understanding of "complementarity" between the sexes, which we are to receive as a good, for it is what God intended.

TAKING A HISTORICAL LOOK

Male-female differences have had important effects on the history of educational institutions in the life of the Church. After the fall of the Roman Empire, monasticism was the quiet force that restored order to Europe. One element that grew from this was a system of education built on monastic and, later, cathedral schools, which evolved slowly into a very structured way of passing along a sophisticated body of knowledge.

Families sent their young boys who showed academic promise to the monks to be educated. Families with money and the inclination sent their young girls to convents to be taught. The Church was guardian and dispenser of education, which integrated a variety of disciplines—rudimentary science, rhetoric, logic and elementary math—with a Christian worldview. In a simple and straightforward way, contemplative reflection was combined with intellectual inquiry, giving students a well-rounded education.

As the Middle Ages progressed, academic disciplines became more sophisticated. Teachers formed guilds, just as other workers of the age did. There was great pride in one's profession, and

teachers were as inclined as other workers to show marks of distinction and to look out for one another in a Christian and brotherly way.

Cathedral schools competed for honors and fought for the better students. These schools evolved into the universities that we recognize even to the present day. There should be a great sense of satisfaction in the part that the Church played in seeking out knowledge of the world and making education available to a widespread portion of the population.

Unfortunately, two rifts grew that would prove to have serious negative consequences on the integrated knowledge that had served the Church and the world so well. There was eventually a split in academia between theology and philosophy, which ultimately mandated that students choose one or the other as a primary discipline. This breach was so pronounced that by the end of the thirteenth century, the University of Paris mandated that theological topics not even be discussed by those who taught philosophy.³ Clearly the integration that had served education so well was being overcome by compartmentalization, as the universities drifted from their contemplative roots.

The second rift happened at roughly the same time, when women were refused access to the universities. This was not so much an objective indictment of women as students but a shift in the way that men saw the academy. True to the spirit of the age, the guilds had evolved into chivalric outposts, and the ecclesial ranks reflected the orders of the knights that fought for truth and order in the secular world. Eventually the universities barred all students and masters who were not part of the clergy.

Concretely, then, by the end of the thirteenth century, the feminine presence was gone from academia, and the spiritual motherhood of the Church was severely constrained. The effect was twofold and wholly negative in the long run.

Primarily, women, who had built many of their abbeys into

powerful learning establishments, no longer had access to the best formation. At that time Hildegard of Bingen, a Benedictine abbess, was the most renowned female academic, and her fields of expertise were many. There were other women as well—a long and impressive list—who had worked side by side with men in the scriptoria reproducing religious texts, had studied in the universities and had written treatises on a wealth of subjects. This collaboration now—school by school—came to a crashing halt.

The second effect was more subtle but every bit as harmful to the field of learning. Not only did women no longer have the benefit of the best of education, but the schools no longer benefited by the presence of women and their integrated way of thinking. What women brought to academia then—and still do—is “the living experience of the truths of faith.”⁴ What followed, sadly, was a disintegration over the years on many levels.

The potential whole was divided into compartments, running the risk that the individual disciplines would die without the others. With the elimination of the direct contribution of women to the theological process, their monastic experience was excluded. Further, a tendency to divorce the public and the private realms of life and to restrict men and women to each respected realm was enforced more and more.

Father Francis Martin, professor of biblical theology at the John Paul II Institute for Studies on Marriage and Family, has written, “In terms of theology, this meant that women were not allowed to participate in the elaboration of the theological syntheses to which they could have brought important contributions. Their own faith experience suffered in turn because their lack of training inhibited them in expressing adequately what they were learning from the Holy Spirit.”⁵

It must be remembered that, while women have the gifts of feminine discernment, integration of ideas and grounding in real life experience, they also need the discipline and contrast of

masculinity to round out their experience. “It is not good that the man should be alone” (Genesis 2:18) cuts both ways. Education suffered in ways that are still visible today.

FEMININE GIFTS IN EDUCATION: MARIA MONTESSORI

Two women in the last century have offered groundbreaking work in the realm of education and have given us excellent tools to work with while imaging the Church as teacher.

Maria Montessori was born in 1870, and at the age of thirteen she entered a technical school in her native Italy. After several years of engineering studies, she concentrated on modern languages and natural science, then decided to pursue a medical degree. While she enjoyed the total support of her mother, her father was strongly opposed (though he stopped short of forbidding her pursuit). She was further deterred by the fact that many medical schools didn’t admit women.

Maria persisted with a virtual end run, entering the University of Rome to study physics, math and natural science. With this degree in hand, she was accepted grudgingly into medical school, where she excelled despite the shock to the community. She was awarded her diploma in 1897 with remarkable scores, and she joined the staff of the same university a year later.

One of her responsibilities opened a whole new world for her and led to her work in teaching. She regularly visited asylums for the insane, which housed children who had been labeled “feebleminded.” She gradually discerned that these children for the most part were thirsting for experience in the most basic sense. She returned to school to study neurology for clues in how to help them. Later, working with many families with young children, she developed her teaching methodology, which has been hailed as a pedagogical breakthrough on many levels.

One dimension of her approach is the integration of body and soul to transmit truth. Reflecting the scholastic principle that

“nothing is in the intellect which was not first in the senses,”⁶ Maria’s use of materials, especially her sensory-rich, play-based way of learning through manipulatives, reinforced the link. “From the hands to the mind” is an expression repeated often in Montessori training,⁷ and the resulting classrooms are delightful places for children.

Maria’s thoughts on something as simple as a human hand are profound:

The hand is in direct connection with man’s soul, and not only with the individual’s soul, but also with the different ways of life that men have adopted on the earth in different places and at different times. The skill of man’s hand is bound up with the development of his mind, and in the light of history we see it connected with the development of civilization. The hands of man express his thought, and from the time of his first appearance upon the earth traces of his handiwork also appear in the records of history. Every great epoch of civilization has left its typical artifacts.⁸

Maria underscored the foundation linking children’s initial curiosity about their surroundings and their potential creative genius, which can unfold if they are well directed. This incorporation of the senses mirrors the way that the Church herself has always taught, both within the liturgy and beyond. Signs and symbols permeate Catholicism, from water to incense to bells—all of which stimulate the senses. And tangibles such as rosaries and processions, standing and kneeling, all bear sacramental meaning to the faithful. So in pondering this way of teaching, one sees a rich exchange, in which the Church offers the truths of God through the physical realities of His creation, to which the grateful soul responds with creations of its own, some of which become lasting cultural treasures.

From E. Mortimer Standing, a colleague of Maria’s, came the accolade, “Many others have loved children, worked for them,

and with them; but no one—since Our Lord spoke those startling words of appreciation of children to His generation—no one has so completely understood the soul of the child in its depth and greatness, in its immense potentialities, and in the mysterious laws of its development.”⁹

The maternal doctor laid remarkable groundwork that enabled educators to serve the individual in a profoundly Catholic way. In her own words we find the essence of the teaching vocation:

If we discover these laws governing the development of the child, then we discover the spirit and wisdom of God who is at work within the child. We must respect the objective needs of the child as something which God himself has instructed us to satisfy. This is the true spirit of education, for it means that divine wisdom itself is embodied through the actions of teachers and educators. If in the voice of nature we recognized the voice of God telling us to help the child, then we shall always be prepared to fulfill these needs. We shall then realize that in this way we are lending ourselves to God’s plans and that we have a part in God’s work in the child. We shall not then consider it a tiresome obligation selflessly to accommodate the demands of the child who is entrusted to our care, but shall see it as fulfilling the wishes of God, who reveals himself in the child. Only the recognition of God in his laws and in the expression of his will in children actually enables us to live for the child and to renounce ourselves.¹⁰

Thus, “as the eyes of servants look to the hand of their master” (Psalm 123:2), so the teacher sees herself in humble service to “the other,” motivated by love to perform the tasks by which both will discover God’s will. It is the concept of “unfolding” that describes what Maria saw in the natural development of a child, as he or she seeks to know the surrounding world and establish with it a give-and-take that will last a lifetime. In this approach the teacher simply provides an environment in which

a child can thrive and reveal—or unfold—his God-given personality and gifts.

AND EDITH STEIN

Another woman used this very concept of “unfolding” in her work in education. This was in a different setting but nourished by the same faith.

Edith Stein was born into a Jewish family in Breslau, Germany, in 1891, roughly a generation after Maria Montessori. She was a lively and fun-loving girl, embraced by a loving family and a wide circle of friends. She proved a brilliant student, finally settling on philosophy as her field of study.

Despite the strong faith of her mother, Edith slipped away from the observance of Judaism. Intrigued by the witness of Christian friends and then captivated by the biography of Saint Teresa of Avila, she entered the Catholic Church at the age of twenty-nine. This not only transformed her life but also added immeasurable richness to her philosophical studies, especially to her understanding of the human person.

Edith completed her doctorate in 1916. Continuing her writing and lecturing extensively in German philosophical circles, she took a teaching position at a Catholic girls’ high school. There she paid close attention to the nature of her students and the ways in which they learned. She was both disciplined and compassionate in her dealings with the girls.

Edith stayed at this post until 1931 and then took a position at the German Institute for Scientific Pedagogy. It was there that she established a system of education for women. She based her system on how women think, acknowledging the feminine gifts of integration of thought and service to the other, and on the nature of the person in light of God’s truth. Further, she geared her methodology toward preparing young women realistically for the lives they were called to lead.