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By Julia Houck

It's 2024, one might say the importance of girls receiving an education is clear enough in today's age, but that was not always the case. Women were not given the opportunity to pursue a proper education until the nineteenth century in America. This history of education for girls differs all over the world, yet this article will focus on American and European educational practices. The education of girls began in the early nineteenth century at dame schools, focusing on basic literacy. "The Common School Movement of the 1840s and 1850s proposed girls' education to be taken further, and they were then permitted to attend town schools, though usually at a time when boys were not in attendance." Most women at this point could read, but could not write efficiently.

To begin, defining the essence of a true education is necessary. Yet even before that, what is our purpose in this life? Man is created to know, love, and serve God. That is our fundamental purpose, so everything around us should be aimed to this end; Union with God, by means of loving God and our neighbor so we may, in hope, be saints in Heaven.

This truth is clearly set forth by Pius X of saintly memory:

Whatever a Christian does even in the order of things of earth, he may not overlook the supernatural; indeed he must, according to the teaching of Christian wisdom, direct all things towards the supreme good as to his last end; all his actions, besides, in so far as good or evil in the order of morality, that is, in keeping or not with natural and divine law, fall under the judgment and jurisdiction of the Church.[1]

If Union with God and Sanctity is what each individual is called to pursue and fulfill by God's grace, the Catholic faith must be at the center of our lives and education, placing God first.

Pope Pius XI said in his famous encyclical on education (Divini Illius Magistri):

"It is necessary that all the teaching and the whole organization of the school, and its teachers, syllabus and text-books in every branch, be regulated by the Christian spirit, under the direction and maternal supervision of the Church; so that Religion may be in very truth the foundation and crown of the youth's entire training; and this in every grade of school, not only the elementary, but the intermediate and the higher institutions of learning

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as well."

Unfortunately, not everyone can afford Catholic education or be blessed with a Catholic upbringing, yet education primarily begins in the home, with the family. Pope Pius XI writes, "In the first place the Church's mission of education is in wonderful agreement with that of the family, for both proceed from God, and in a remarkably similar manner.[i]

If education ultimately begins in the home with parents fulfilling their duty to guide their children, it generally begins from the mother to the child, therefore mothers should be educated to keep good character and virtue. We see it does not rely solely on teachers in schools to provide education, it takes a community of good examples to bestow on children to learn how to live a life of virtue.

Character

In "The Education of Catholic Girls" by Sr. Janet Stuart (1857-1914), "a person's character must be formed well in upbringing, as it becomes more difficult to break habits as one is older and vices are instilled…"

"If habits are not acquired by training, and instead of them temperament alone has been allowed to have its way in the years of growth, the seal bears no arms engraved on it, and the result is want of character, or a weak character, without distinctive mark, showing itself in the various situations of life inconsistent, variable, unequal to strain, acting on the impulse, good or bad, of the moment; its fitful strength in moods of obstinacy or self-will showing that it lacks the higher qualities of rational discernment and self-control" [ii]

One major fault of most educational systems today is the "neglect of the training of the will and character.[iii] Government funds and grants are given to schools to improve educational subjects taught in classrooms, but there is a lack of discipline in forming the human person; which is "education" in the true sense of the term.

Stuart provides several examples as a means to training character; training girls to become virtuous women:

One, "contact with those who have themselves attained to higher levels [of character], either parent, or teacher, or friend."[iv] Being surrounded by a faithful family, mature friends, disciplined school and teachers in a well-rounded Catholic community is beneficial in learning after others. As "Iron sharpeneth iron, so a man sharpeneth the countenance of his friend," Proverbs 27:17.

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Two, "vigilance which, open and confident itself, gives confidence, nurtures fearlessness, and brings a steady pressure to be at one's best." By being watchful of our surroundings and acting with prudence, students learn to take strides to live a life according to Christ and His Church.

Three, Criticism and correction. "To be used with infinite care, but never to be neglected without grave injustice." Learning how to take criticism is necessary in a world that is overly sensitive in almost all areas of life, and is largely associated with not instilling good habits early on. For example, in American culture, speaking about "hot topics" such as racism or transgenderism can cause people to get "canceled" in the liberal sphere. Even disagreeing upon smaller topics, while against a bigger party may cause isolation and exclusivity. Traits of being disagreeable and forming one's own opinion and ideas can go a long way to shape one's character and increase the chances of not being taken advantage of. It is a good habit to instill early on, as well as knowing when and how to graciously correct others under our care or friends-alike.

Four, Discipline and obedience. "If these are to be means of training they must be living and not dead powers, and they must lead up to gradual self-government, not to sudden emancipation."[v] To see if an individual had a successful upbringing and education, we can look at their character to see if they strive to keep discipline after schooling; whether that means working, becoming a mother, or entering religious life, a habit of discipline is necessary to be instilled to fulfill duties in life. Some, if not most, luke-warm modern Catholics have a horrible idea about the sacrament of Confirmation. Whether it is conscious or not, it seems people think it is a type of "graduation" from Catechism classes, when in reality, the fight for keeping vigilance more deeply has just begun in the newly named soldier of Christ. The lack of discipline against vice and strife for virtue is missing, and therefore I'd argue was missing to establish a true faith in that individual.

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[i] https://www.vatican.va/content/pius-xi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-xi_enc_31121929_divini-illius-magistri.html

[ii] P27 “The Education of Catholic Girls” by Janet Stuart

[iii] P1

[iv] P47

[v] P48