

Catholic Home Education and qualifications: one family's experience

A difficult decision

Ten years ago, our eldest son was rapidly approaching his fourteenth birthday. We had been putting off the question of what to do about qualifications, but we had to make a decision. At that time, there was a division amongst the Catholic home-educators we knew: quite a few were following American programmes such as Seton and Mother of Divine Grace; others had opted for GCSEs. Feelings about these two options ran high but the general consensus was that the American courses were the better choice - firstly, because they were overtly Catholic, whereas GCSEs were secular; secondly, because they offered a higher level of educational attainment when compared with GCSEs. GCSEs, it was said, wouldn't stretch a bright child; they were simply a box ticking exercise; worse than that, the content would not nourish (and might even endanger) a child's faith.

It seemed likely that we, too, would follow the US route. We had set out on our home-educating adventure using American books, because this was what we had been advised to do by older, more experienced mothers (I went home from my first ever Catholic home-ed group - almost twenty years ago - clutching three catalogues: Seton, Emmanuel Books and Catholic Heritage Curricula. This was in the days before we had the internet and everything had to be mail ordered!). Over the next few years I dutifully purchased a whole shelf of books: various Baltimore Catechism texts, Saxon Maths, Voyages in English, Writing Road to Reading, Prima Latina and Primary Language Lessons spring to mind but I'm sure there were more.

At the same time, I read widely about approaches to education, from Montessori to Charlotte Mason to unschooling. Of all the books I read at this point, the one that made the deepest impression on me was Laura Berquist's book, *'Designing Your Own Classical Curriculum'*. For the first time I really began to comprehend the gulf between the sort of learning that was going on in our schools and the sort of learning which had taken place in previous eras. I began to grasp that we had jettisoned a great deal which was good and that, as Catholic parent-educators, it was very much in our interests to try to restore it. I researched more and more into what education - as opposed to modern 'schooling' - was really all about.

In the light of all this reading and reflection, the decision about which system to follow appeared to be a 'no brainer', as they say. The US programmes were overtly Catholic and used Catholic textbooks to teach the faith; they spoke of wisdom as the end of education (not just getting a good job); their book lists were filled with classic texts of history and literature; they were refreshingly lacking in trendy, politically correct ideologies. GCSEs on the other hand offered no 'Catholic' syllabus to study; classic literature and history (the riches of our culture) seemed to be sidelined; there was no talk of wisdom - the whole approach seemed entirely utilitarian. What on earth would possess us to opt for GCSEs?

As it was Pentecost, we offered our family novena partly for this intention, for wisdom and guidance to know what to do. The following week we began researching GCSEs in earnest.

Working out what we wanted for our family

Why did we take what seemed at the time this rather risky, if not irrational, decision? Looking back now, I think there were three main factors (apart from the overwhelming sense that, despite all we'd read, this was where the Holy Ghost was leading us)

- Up until this point, whilst covering the essentials, we had tried to give our children the space to follow their interests and to take their time over things (even with the essentials, getting something useful out of a textbook was more important to us than simply getting to the end of the book). Valuing the freedom to tailor our curriculum and move at our own speed through subjects, we felt that signing up to a programme in which we had to cover a certain amount of set work in a week (with little choice as to the books we used or the pace at which we worked) would not be a good fit for us. Although we realised that whichever route we took, education post 14 was going to have to be more structured in content, we sensed that GCSEs, not being a whole 'programme', would give us more freedom to choose what we studied and when.
- Although we had been using American books for several years, it struck me fairly early on that several of the books I was ordering were quite standard, secular textbooks - Saxon maths, Writing Road to Reading, Concepts and Challenges in Science etc. They were not Catholic (or 'classical') in any way I could see; moreover, they were expensive to ship over and often did not live up to our (rather high) expectations when they arrived. Thus, as time went by, I found myself replacing them with fairly standard UK books which I often found cheaply secondhand (or picked up in the library). I had from the start used British books for history and geography; soon I replaced the US grammar books with a lovely set of English textbooks from the 1950s, and the Latin book with a series my husband had used at school. For science we simply used a good set of encyclopedias and supplemented with library books following our children's interests. As maths was my weakest subject, we stayed with the American course the longest at secondary level, before switching to a GCSE textbook. The only subject in which I struggled to find suitable replacements was catechesis: I still use the American resources and recommendations at secondary level.
- Finally, and this was the most significant factor - there was the vexed question of qualifications. While the US courses might appeal in offering a more 'classical' approach, the result would be a High School Diploma, and this wasn't something we wanted for our children. My husband felt strongly that if our children were going to get any qualifications at all, it made sense that they should be ones which were readily recognised in our own country, and ones with which we were familiar so that we could help them effectively (we were not keen to get our heads around the assessment method in the US system which is totally different from ours, relying as it does on the recording of points gained over the course of four years). At this point, we expected that our children would want to go on to 6th Form for A levels, then on to University (as we had) and GCSEs seemed a more obvious preparation for that (though as it turned out this was not the route most of our children chose).

Reflections

Over the past decade we have entered our five oldest sons for UK exams and have amassed thus far a collective total of 30 I/GCSEs, a few A and AS Levels and an FSMQ in Further Maths. We've been relieved to find that our original fears about GCSEs did not come to fruition:

- Whilst GCSEs are by no means the perfect means of assessment, the exams were of a higher standard than we had expected, teaching knowledge and skills we found useful and age-appropriate. To take a few examples: the maths and science International GCSEs had extensive and demanding syllabuses; Latin and Greek we felt were just challenging enough for our 14/15 year olds; the English Literature courses offered good text options (with a liberal sprinkling of Shakespeare, Austen and Dickens), and demanded mastery of the essay form; the history exam required not just a passing acquaintance with the era studied, but detailed knowledge, analysis of sources, an understanding of provenance, the ability to present both sides of an argument and make judgements based on the evidence presented: all perfectly good skills to acquire at that age. Perhaps the least interesting exam for us was (and remains) English language; it does tests basic skills such as inferring subtle meaning from a text, summarising evidence, analysing language and writing descriptive passages, but it feels more like a box to tick rather than a standard to aim for. Luckily, as with all these exams, there was nothing to prevent us from aiming higher. We do not enter our children for RE GCSE; instead, we simply teach the faith, first through catechesis then later through apologetics.
- While it is of course true that GCSEs are a secular qualification and that there is no GCSE course in Catholic theology, we found nothing which was directly opposed to our faith, and we remained completely free to use our own books/courses to teach our faith alongside the other courses of study. We did not feel that we needed to use overtly Catholic materials for subjects such as maths, sciences, Latin, grammar and so on. There is truth and beauty in mathematics and the natural sciences, an order which reflects the mind of God, and any good textbook will embody this. This leaves us free to use any materials which embody these qualities, whether they are overtly Catholic or not. If this were not the case, MODG would not have Saxon maths on its syllabus; it would have to promote some form of 'Catholic maths'. It is true that the humanities (history, literature, philosophy etc.) present a more subjective expression of truth and that we need to take more care in guiding our children through them, but this is no bad thing: ultimately, we want our children to know how to look for truth when we are no longer there to guide them, even (especially) when the books they are reading are not overtly Catholic. It is a sobering thought that this is a category which includes almost every great work of English literature.
- We had been worried that a focus on exams would mean that we had to settle for the kind of secular/utilitarian education that epitomises modern schooling; that we would, in other words, have to give up on all those other elements we wanted for our children such as aiming to inculcate wisdom and virtue (and clear thinking) rather

than just passing tests to get onto the next stage; integrating learning across the curriculum (reflecting the God-given order in our universe); offering a rich curriculum steeped in our Catholic faith and culture as expressed over the last 2,000 years of history; working with our children's individual interests and intellectual development; working at a sensible pace which suited our own family and allowed us to go deeply into areas of personal interest rather than racing to complete a programme. What we eventually realised is that in order to achieve these aims (not perfectly but to the best of our ability) we needed somehow to take our Catholic educational philosophy and work GCSEs into this, rather than let GCSEs dictate the whole programme of study for two crucial years of our children's education. This involved taking a very different approach to GCSE level study from the one taken by schools. Entering only for as many exams as are needed to move onto the next stage (never more than eight), and spreading the exam sitting over two or even three years, proved two of the most effective ways to free up time for teaching beyond and around the GCSE syllabus, and teaching non examined subjects such as philosophy and apologetics.

Summing it all up

Following the UK route at 13/14+ need not limit the quality or Catholicity of your child's education but like everything else, it has advantages and disadvantages.

The main disadvantage is that you will not find the kind of ready made curriculum with ongoing support which America offers; you will need to spend more time choosing books/courses to suit your own programme of education. On the other hand, you will have the freedom to teach at your own pace, and to study UK history, geography, literature etc. whilst supplementing this with materials from the US programmes to teach the faith.

The main advantage of following the UK route is that the qualifications your children gain will give them access to local schools and colleges to study courses post-16, whether A levels or more vocational qualifications (most A levels can be taken from home but vocational courses do need to be pursued at a college). It is worth noting that all these courses are free to young people from ages 16 - 19 as long as the course of study is *begun* before the 19th birthday. Most colleges and schools require between 5 and 8 GCSEs to pursue such courses and all require maths and English GCSE in order to secure funding. It is worth considering taking these two GCSEs even if you follow an American programme, in case your child, on completion of a High School Diploma at 18, decides to pursue vocational training or an apprenticeship in the UK. Not all young people choose to go to University, and degree apprenticeships are an increasingly popular and respected option (even for young people with excellent grades) as they offer a means of gaining a degree without the usual debt.

Since lack of support is the main problem faced by Catholic home-educators following the UK system of education, I hope that as more parents choose this option, we will be able to create a supportive community - not commercially, but in a spirit of mutual help, sharing resources and experiences as we work through the process with our own families.