Catholic home-education (part 2)

In the last issue I suggested that, for Catholics, home-education offers an opportunity to avoid some of the limitations of the school system and to provide a more 'traditional' and authentically Catholic education. Here I would like to look more closely at two particular issues raised by these assertions: firstly, if 'traditional' education doesn't look like modern schooling, what does it look like, and secondly, can home-education provide young people with the qualifications they would normally gain in school, and which are deemed necessary for progression into employment or higher education?

What is 'traditional education'?

Very broadly speaking, a traditional education differs from a modern education in three main ways: the former holds that teaching involves transmitting an existing corpus of knowledge, that acquisition of 'facts' is the necessary basis for gaining mastery of a subject, and that, ultimately, the purpose of education is to raise the student's mind to 'higher' considerations; the latter maintains that the subjective experiences of a child are of primary importance, and that mastery of factual knowledge is necessary primarily in order to pass the required examinations since education is essentially utilitarian in purpose. Consequently, in a traditional education, most of a child's education would be devoted to acquiring knowledge of, and making logical connections between, the 'necessary truths' which will allow him to make sense of the world and his place in it. This knowledge, and the skills to use it effectively, constitute in large part the 'thinking for oneself' which appears so often to be missing in the modern schooled child. As Melanie Phillips observed in her controversial book on education, *'All Must Have Prizes'*:

> *"In essence, a liberal education valued knowledge as good in itself rather than primarily as a passport to skills, a highly paid job and a successful economy. By acquainting children with 'the best that has been known or said in the world, and thus with the history of the human spirit', in the words of the Victorian thinker Matthew Arnold, it taught an understanding about human life and the human condition. The study of literature in particular, so often derided by utilitarian philistines, engaged young people's capacities for moral understanding and fostered insight, imagination and emotional sensitivity to help understand other people... promoting an understanding of the national culture and a respect for past civilisations.*
> *(This education) taught young people to think for themselves, to base their conclusions upon evidence and to acquire that critical sense which forms the basis of judgement."*

In this sense, as Phillips explains in detail in the rest of her book, traditional education now represents quite a counter-cultural, and therefore unfashionable and unpopular, way of teaching children. In a secular society such as ours which celebrates and promotes cultural and moral relativity and individualism, an education based on the transmission of one particular culture and one set of moral codes simply has no 'officially approved' place. In such a society, education must inevitably avoid the teaching of objective moral or spiritual truths and even, it might be argued, the teaching of objective intellectual truths since the scepticism inherent in secularism renders all truth questionable. This is why, as I argued earlier, there is a real sense in which, as Catholic home-educators, we are not trying to imitate school but are doing something quite different: we are educating in a distinctly identifiable Catholic cultural context because we have a particular set of objective values to transmit to our children and because we believe that the knowledge, skills and values we pass on to them will enable them to think, judge and express themselves 'rightly'.

Where do we find this kind of education?

When it comes to the question of what to teach, there is good news and bad news. The bad news (for the busy home-educating mother) is that when we are talking about 'traditional' education there is no single, comprehensive or correct definition of what this kind of education actually looks like. We cannot pinpoint any particular point in educational history and hope that by simply reproducing the materials and methods of that 'golden age', we will be giving our children the best possible education: there is no definitive corpus (the fact that those claiming to possess it disagree with one another seems proof enough of that), and there is no 'off the peg', one size fits all 'traditional' curriculum. The good news is that there are, unsurprisingly, myriad books, websites and organisations devoted to the restoration of traditional education which can assist parents in working out the approach which suits them best – these range from those which simply offer arguments, advice and ideas, to those offering the whole package complete with graded books, tutor marked assignments and a recognised qualification at the end of it all.

If you examine the websites of most well-known curriculum providers offering a more 'traditional' style Catholic education you will gain a good idea of what is on offer (these are largely based in America: Mother of Divine Grace School, Seton Home Study school, Kolbe Academy, Our Lady of Victory, St Thomas Aquinas Academy spring immediately to mind). If you read around you can work out which approach appeals to you the most, and identify which programmes are best suited to that approach, then see what books they recommend. Even if you don't want to sign up for an American programme, it is still very helpful to scour the schedule lists of these various websites, gain ideas and 'borrow' whatever you find best suited to your own situation. This 'borrowing' is exactly what Laura Berquist did (and recommended others to do) in her hugely influential book 'Designing Your Own Classical Curriculum', written before she founded MODG School. She advises that parents discover "*...what other people have used successfully... (then) reduce it from a potential to an actual curriculum.*"

Having done plenty of curriculum browsing and borrowing in my time (the cover of my copy of Berquist's DYOCC fell off some time ago through over-use), I have noticed that there are more similarities than differences between the curricula on offer, both in content and methodology, which simplifies things somewhat. You'll see Saxon Maths, Math-U-See, Voyages in English, Baltimore Catechism, Faith and Life, Prima Latina and other standard American textbooks cropping up on various lists. (Seton are an exception as they write their own texts). You don't need to buy into a particular programme to use these books, including Seton's (some of which are, by the way, recommended in Berquist's own lists). If you are not too concerned about having prepared schedules and tutor support, you can simply buy the books and work through them at your own pace, or substitute them for other texts if you find something you prefer. (I've made a hobby of trying to find English alternatives to the recommended texts and many of my own key books are second-hand editions of old, English, out of print books.) If a particular book works for you, don't be concerned that it isn't on anyone's list, and indeed, to borrow Berquist's light-hearted quip, *'If you find something better that will achieve these goals, use it and tell me about it!'*.

The same holds true not only for particular resources but for subject matter and methodology too. It is easy to gain the impression that unless you teach your child certain subjects in a certain way you will never succeed in educating him 'properly' and this can create a great deal of pressure. Curriculum providers are quite good at selling their products and giving the impression that theirs is the best education on the market. I think we have to be careful and recognise that there are many ways to educate a child well, and there are legitimate debates about what needs to be taught (even those involved in 'Classical Education' disagree on several fundamentals in both content and methodology, dividing into 'pure Classicists' and 'Neo-Classicists' in their treatment of such essentials as Classical languages and the Trivium).

How do we know what to teach, and when?

The Primary years

Back to basics

Almost all educationalists engaged in restoring effective education agree that what is essential in the early school age years is to cover the foundational subjects as well as possible – i.e. the 3Rs of reading, 'riting, 'rithmetic, or, for Catholic parent-teachers, the 4Rs, since we also count Religion as foundational. Not so long ago primary school was a more relaxed business – there was little if any regular testing, and the teachers' job was to ensure that children turned up at secondary school able to read, write and manage basic mathematical operations. Schools seem such busy places these days: the National Curriculum is jam-packed with all manner of subjects which *must* be covered, but, as a glance at the education pages of any newspaper will tell you, there is a price: the basic skills are being crowded out. Thinking back to Dewey, this is no co-incidence: he advised that 'grammar' (the basis for all 'language art skills') and maths, were to be treated as being of secondary importance, whereas mastery of both had been considered central to a 'traditional' education. In Dewey's philosophy, children can only respond subjectively to the world around them via their own personal experiences. The trouble with this is that children do not normally 'discover' the rules of grammar and mathematics for themselves (none of mine has yet!) – they need to be *taught* them, and they need to *learn* them. Grammar and maths are foundational 'subjects' because they contain essential skills based on non-optional rules which need to be mastered if those skills are to be applied effectively to other subjects. (The early years' 'grammar' of Religious Instruction is study of the catechism, which is similarly foundational as a solid basis for later, more in-depth study of our Faith.)

Talk of 'back to basics' and rote learning often conjures images of miserable five year olds bowed over desks repeating meaningless phrases to please an intimidating teacher. Just to be clear, I am not here advocating sitting very young children down at a desk for long periods every day practicing their Latin declensions. There is a great deal of research suggesting that for boys at least, delaying formal study until the age of seven or even later can be more effective than starting at age four or five: several countries work on this basis and do seem to avoid some of the problems we face in our own system which starts very early. I've certainly found that nothing is lost (and much frustration and time-wasting is avoided) by delaying; even then, the dreaded 'rote learning', so maligned these days yet found by past generations to be so necessary, needs only to form a small part of a child's 'teaching day' to be effective.

It might be argued that by insisting on such non-optional basics we condemn our children to an exceptionally boring and restricted curriculum, and risk destroying their 'love of learning'. I think that's what we've been led to believe (along with the idea that learning should always be fun and the child must never be made to learn anything which doesn't excite his personal interest – Dewey again) but I think that if, as I suggested above, 'all' we *have* to achieve, academically speaking, by age 10 or 11, is competence in the basics, we will have time to follow a more 'interest led' style of education in the other subjects. At primary level, we can cover history, geography, science, music, art, modern languages and even classical studies in an informal way, following a child's interests without feeling under pressure to 'cover everything' on a prescribed syllabus.

Interest-led learning: the logical order of things

'Informal' or 'interest-led' learning is not usually associated with more 'traditional' education, and often has educationalists of the Classical hue recoiling in horror, but while it is true that some things just need to be learned rather than 'discovered', and that a certain amount of rote learning and memorisation is unavoidable in acquiring foundational knowledge and skills, it doesn't necessarily follow that we are obliged to reject all modern methods and insights into how children learn most

effectively. Traditionalists in education (particularly the Catholic ones) are understandably suspicious of progressive ideas, many of which are rooted, if only distantly, in the idea of Rousseau that the child is naturally good and should be left to develop his innate goodness naturally without the interference of teachers. Rousseau's theory contrasts markedly with the Catholic understanding of the child as fallen with a capacity for goodness if taught wisely; clearly, this distinction in understanding the nature of the child has enormous implications for approaches to teaching! Rousseau's influence can be seen, at least indirectly, in the work of educationalists known for adopting a more child-centred approach, such as Pestalozzi, Froebel, and possibly (though remotely) even Catholic thinkers such as Maria Montessori.

However, whilst such suspicion is probably quite healthy on a philosophical level, there is a danger of throwing out the baby with the bathwater – or, in this case, discarding useful insights along with the wrong-headed philosophy from which they came. The very way in which educationalists of various schools are stereotypically portrayed can be misleading and can lead us to reject an approach which may in fact have useful and valid elements. For example, 'traditionalists' are often portrayed as favouring an inflexible approach to learning which 'indoctrinates' passive children into the teacher's way of thinking (i.e. bad, anti-child, outdated and ineffective), whilst 'progressives' are credited with encouraging the child to take a more active participation in his own learning, with a focus on personal response and self-knowledge (i.e good, pro-child, modern, and effective). But this is a false distinction, and omits to take into account that many progressive ideas were formulated in response to the very type of schooling which the 'traditionalist' also aims to avoid (including meaningless rote learning of decontextualised facts for utilitarian ends). As I argued earlier, one of the key differences between earlier forms of education and modern schooling is precisely this desire that the child *should* actively engage his intellectual powers with the material, making connections and seeking real understanding. Perhaps the essential difference is that in a traditional context, this intellectual application proceeded from, rather than preceded, the acquisition of basic knowledge – there was no idea of asking a child of eight to produce poetry before he had learned to compose a sentence, any more than we would expect a child to run before he could walk. What is misleading in the typical categorisation is the implication that 'engaging a child in his own learning' is only possible within the progressive framework of subjective curriculum choice, self-determining rules, 'freedom' and constant change. The usual polarisation in educational thinking between progressive or traditional, informal or formal, a broad curriculum or the "three Rs" was recently criticised by Professor Robin Alexander (head of the Cambridge Primary Review) as '*pernicious*': he argued that there need be no contradiction between a focus on the basics and a broad curriculum, pointing out that *"schools that do best in the basics are those that put them in the context of a broad and balanced curriculum."*

What all this suggests is that in terms of traditional education for primary years we can aim to cover the basics well without feeling restricted either to studying only the essential subjects or to employing only 'old-fashioned' methods. The use of small, directed segments of rote learning does not exclude the possibility of adopting different ways of reinforcing our teaching – one obvious example might be the use of CDs, DVDs or online programmes to assist a child in learning Times Tables. Similarly, we can make room for more interest-based study, using a variety of contemporary methods (an example here might be allowing the child to choose, from pre-selected options, a history topic to cover in the form of a notebook, timeline or lapbook). If the parent has a good idea of what sort of areas would be most profitably covered in a given year in the broader subjects, it is easier to be flexible about the order in which topics are covered, thus allowing the child a certain degree of choice. In my own experience, subjects such as history, geography and literature benefit greatly from a more informal approach in the early years, keeping up interest and giving the child opportunities to make those all important connections between the subjects they are studying, whilst laying a good foundation for more detailed study later.

The early secondary years

A new set of challenges

If, in the primary years, we have managed to give our children a good grounding in language arts, mathematics and catechism study, coupled with a broad introduction to a variety of other subjects, by eleven or twelve they will be well prepared to move onto the next stage in their intellectual life. At this stage, as well as dealing with more complex study, and a greater quantity of work, children begin to think more analytically about the material – making links, asking more complex questions and so on. Most parents of a twelve or thirteen year old will tell you that at this age children are interested in why things are the way they are, why they are not otherwise, what could be different and what could not. I know that a lot of five year olds ask questions like this, but the difference is that the five year old tends to accept the answer you give him at face value, whereas the young teen wants to use the subjects he's studying to help him make sense of those questions for himself.

This is more challenging (obviously!), but I would say that even (perhaps especially) at this stage, home still has advantages over school. At this age, most children move up to a secondary school in which two changes occur: firstly, the 'fun' element in learning is replaced by a renewed emphasis on 'serious' studying for tests – some children respond positively to this, some rebel against it; secondly, the classes are much larger and the teacher has even less chance than before to actually engage on any meaningful level with each individual child – just at the point when this engagement with the material, this discussion, is becoming vital. Why is this conversation so important? It is because at this point in their lives, as they think about matters more deeply, we need our children to understand the world in terms of their Faith, and we need them to understand it well enough in order to be able to explain it (to themselves and others), and to live it. This means that we need to equip them to think these things through for themselves rather than accept passively what society (and in particular the media and their own peer group) suggests to them and which is often in direct contrast to the teaching we are giving. I referred earlier to the importance of encouraging children to 'think for themselves' but we need to be a little wary of the phrase as it means very different things to different people. For many educationalists, 'thinking for oneself' often means rejecting the existing truth and cultural norms which are offered and creating, or 'discovering', one's 'own truth' – intellectual and moral subjectivity strikes again. Obviously this is not what Catholic educationalists mean by the phrase! What they refer to is the function of education which allows, in Newman's phrase, *"...the training of the intellect to reason well in all matters, to reach out towards truth and to grasp it."*

The secondary years are the time to develop this critical faculty, by explaining in appropriate detail the reasons for, and uses of, those 'facts' learned in the primary years. The child now begins to see, for example, that grammar forms a sound basis for successful compositions, that learned mathematical facts provide the basis for more complex concepts and operations, and that the 'bare bones' of the catechism form a framework on which to build an ever more complex understanding of his Faith. Contrast this with the contemporary system in which young adolescents often find themselves asked to create original literary works whilst lacking the basic grammatical knowledge with which to construct paragraphs, to perform complex mathematical functions in maths and the sciences whilst still struggling to work out basic operations, and to make serious moral decisions based on a faith about which they have little concrete knowledge (and which many will reject as irrational and 'irrelevant' because no-one has ever explained to them how reasonable, relevant and indeed necessary that Faith is).

This is, ironically, the point at which many home-educating parents come under most pressure to put their children in school as the spectre of 'serious' exams looms. However, it might be argued that the greatest challenge parents face is not so much to get their children through exams, but to keep alive the conversation about all the questions which are going around in those adolescent heads.

The later secondary years

GCSE or HSD?

Given the fact that most if not all of the books, courses, programmes etc. dedicated to restoring Catholic education are American, it is entirely logical that some UK parents decide to follow the American system throughout the secondary years and aim for a High School Diploma rather than opting for UK qualifications. The US system has the obvious advantage of allowing you to follow a completely Catholic curriculum (such as those already mentioned – MODG, Kolbe, etc.), and it is possible to use a HSD, with some additional qualifications such as Standardised Assessment Tests (SATS) and Advanced Placements (APs), to apply to University in the UK, thus bypassing the GCSE system altogether. Not many students have done this to date, but it is theoretically possible. It's worth noting that some parents choose US courses partly because they intend to send their children to American universities – the UK of course has, at present, no Catholic institution for 'liberal' tertiary education, though there are plans to establish one in 2014 or thereabouts (see http://www.benedictus.org.uk/ for information).

The UK system has no such advantages: it is not Catholic in content, is not 'traditional' in its aims and seems to represent exactly the kind of schooling (and learning to the test) which perennialists in education are fighting against, *and yet* most Catholic home-educators I've spoken to still want their children to acquire at least a minimum of UK qualifications. Why? They would say it is simply because this is the system in which their children have to function – because GCSEs are, in effect, our 'state requirements'. It is true that they are not strictly required, but they perform a particular function insofar as they are recognised by employers and institutes of higher education as an easy means of assessing basic competence, and as such many parents feel that their children would benefit from having at least a few, particularly English and maths, under their belts.

I think the essential question here is, 'Is it possible to pursue a more traditional style of Catholic education and obtain GCSEs at the end of it, or does the pursuit of these qualifications necessarily entail a wholesale jump over into a 'school' approach?' In answering this question, I would suggest that we need to take a fresh look at the usual polarisation between the two approaches – the 'either or' of US or UK, of real education versus useful qualifications. In reality, one is not mutually exclusive of the other and if we wanted to, we could take full advantage of the materials or at least the ideas offered by US curriculum providers whilst still aiming to take in some UK qualifications from 14-16.

The key to this approach could be to view GCSEs not as the *primary* source of education at 14+ but precisely as functional qualifications for employment/higher education purposes which can be acquired in the context of a broader Catholic curriculum. In other words, we might categorise GCSEs as part of the 'practical' sort of education which is required to make a living, rather than the intellectual, spiritual and cultural sort of education which I've been talking about here. Fr James Schall, in his wonderful little book, '*Another Sort of Learning'*, observes that there are two types of education which must be pursued at the same time. In the first, we have to look to make a living, in the second we have to make space and time for questions that have little directly to do with business or keeping alive, but which are important in and of themselves. As he wryly notes, *"Nothing is wrong with the former of course, but this is not what life is finally about."* What I'm suggesting here is that what the world calls education, by which it usually means 'schooling', is actually more concerned with the former, with making a living (or, in some cases, gaining a university place, since this has unfortunately also come to be connected more with economics than with purely academic endeavour). Viewed in this way, working for GCSEs need not constitute the whole of a child's education, nor provide a limit for it; rather it could be simply one part of a larger whole.

One final point to be made here is that whilst the general UK qualification – the GCSE – is generally of a lower standard than the qualification which it was designed to replace, most home-

educators do not in fact take GCSES. Instead, they take IGCSEs (International GCSEs) which are not only better suited to private candidates since they are exam-only with no coursework component, but are also generally recognised as being of a higher standard than the usual GCSE. IGCSEs have long been favoured by independent schools and are recognised as a much better preparation for A level study. There are a few notable exceptions: maths, Latin, Greek and economics can all be taken as exam-only GCSEs. Bear in mind that the whole system is set to change and that with a return to an emphasis on examinations, more GCSEs may become available to home-educators. (Why would this be of interest? It might be argued that if a parent views these exams as practical qualifications rather than the crux of a child's education, then the 'easier' they are to pass – and therefore the less time and effort they take – the better!).

If we look briefly at individual subjects we can see how a more 'traditional' approach might lead into (or, even incorporate but then go farther than) a GCSE or equivalent.

English Language: the subject which, along with maths, parents are most likely to want their children to get in terms of 'real life use', fits in quite smoothly to this pattern. A child with a solid foundation in composition up to the age of 14, taught in whatever way the parents choose, and using whatever materials they prefer, should be able to pass a GCSE exam with little more than some practice in writing the sorts of answers particular to whichever exam they are to be entered for. Much of the work in gaining these qualifications is not so much in studying the subject matter itself but in getting to know the different examination boards and working out what exactly is needed for each individual exam specification. A good proportion of a 'high grade' is the result of exam technique – that is, of knowing exactly what an examiner is looking for – and this knowledge can be gained by sitting plenty of past papers and looking at examiners' reports when marking them. So, for instance, a child could follow a 'traditional' approach such as that in Andrew Campbell's *'The Latin Centered Curriculum'*, pursuing a rigorous language arts course culminating in the study of Aristotle's Rhetoric at around age 15: in this context, a GCSE in English would not present much of a challenge!

Maths: The transition to maths GCSE is very straightforward, and most children with a solid grasp of the foundations could, by following a standard textbook, be ready to sit a GCSE at 15 or 16 (a gifted child, or one hoping to study maths at a higher level, might prefer the more challenging IGCSE, or Additional Maths, or even an AS level – all can be done from home).

English Literature: A child following a more 'traditional' course of study would inevitably have encountered a good deal of excellent literature by the age of 14, and the IGCSE (which is not very different from the old 'O' level) can provide a good opportunity for some more focussed study on particular texts. Your child will be familiar with writing about literature and only needs to study the particular texts. There is still a reasonable choice of texts, and to date there have been plenty of options which most Catholic parents are quite happy with – Shakespeare and Austen still make obligatory appearances. In a course like Campbell's, a child is studying Shakespeare at age 13, and Beowulf and Sir Gawain (Tolkien's) by 15. Studying for an IGCSE would, again, not present much of a challenge for a child used to handling this level of literature.

Latin: If you have introduced Latin in early secondary school (we tend to start it formally at about ten or eleven), and you carry on with a rigorous text like Henle (or CLAA, as some of us are trying out at the moment) as many home-educators do, your child will be ready for, or even ahead of, GCSE level Latin by the age of 15. Then it is, again, really a question of memorising the set vocabulary, studying the prescribed literature texts and working through past papers to see what is required. The level of grammar required is not particularly high (I can say this because my own son, whose grasp of grammar was not remarkable, managed a B in Latin GCSE aged 14, largely because we concentrated on the literature component.) If your child is studying ***Greek,*** there is also a GCSE

available for this, and a coursebook – 'Greek to GCSE' . The author, John Taylor, is very helpful with home-educating families and gives the textbook answers away without a charge.

History: GCSE history is much maligned for its 'subjective response to social history' approach and because it focuses almost entirely on the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Whilst the latter is also true of IGCSE (there are currently no options without coursework for other periods in history, Ancient or Modern), the standard is, again, higher, and even the modern focus need not present a serious problem since most 'classical/traditional courses would cover plenty of other history throughout the child's education. One approach would be to start with Ancient History quite early on (when children are fascinated by Greeks and Romans), moving on through Saxons, Vikings, Normans and the Middle Ages quite informally. By age 10 or 11, a child could follow a course in British History which, over the course of five years would lead naturally up to the 19th and 20th Centuries, and therefore fit in with the IGCSE material quite nicely. This is the approach we have tended to take with our own children.

Classics: Classical studies would be an integral part of any 'traditional' curriculum, but there is currently no exam-only option for Classics or Classical Civilisation at this level. A child who is keen on this subject and wants to pursue it further, could opt for an AS level from home which at the moment is, I believe, coursework free.

Science: several more 'traditional' courses tend to spend the primary years focussing on nature study (keeping a nature journal, developing the observation skills and wonder in God's creation natural to young children) then in later primary introducing areas such as earth science and astronomy through project work. If more detailed study in the individual sciences is introduced from about 10 onwards (there are some good, thorough books aimed at this level which focus on project work in botany, zoology and anatomy), then by age 12 or 13 a child would be ready to engage in more detailed subject study. At this stage parents could continue to use any texts they choose, US or UK; from age 14 onwards (if not earlier) it would be easy enough to make the transition to IGCSE textbooks for ***physics, chemistry*** and ***biology*** (IGCSE science is much more rigorous than GCSE science, the latter being more oriented towards 'social science' questions than actual scientific study, with a very poor academic reputation as a result.)

R.E. Is a subject which is of such importance in itself for any Catholic home-educator that the gaining or otherwise of a qualification in it seems almost irrelevant. However, even here a qualification can be gained if that is something parents want. The IGCSEs are all based on the comparative study of religions, but there are a few exam boards which offer Bible knowledge papers: these are quite do-able and do not involve any study of other religions – only, as the name suggests, scripture study. (The most popular amongst Christian home-educators is the 'O' Level offered by CIE but I believe there are others.)

This is obviously a very superficial investigation of the possibilities and challenges involved in secondary education, but I hope it gives an idea of how the question of broad education versus gaining qualifications might begin to be resolved.

Having offered here some theoretical outlines, I hope in the next issue to begin looking at individual subjects in terms of resources and approaches, with a brief overview of the process by which private candidates apply for examinations in the UK.

For information about Catholic home-education and the UK education system, please take a look at Amanda Lewin's new blog dedicated to this purpose:

http://catholichomeeducationuk.blogspot.co.uk/