

When I Discovered Your Words

The Lost Art of Discipline

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Two books I have been reading during this Lenten season have touched on the theme of discipline. They have been the cause of my reflection on the role of discipline in education, especially in light of my experiences as a teacher and administrator.

Holy Scripture and our Catholic heritage have a great deal to say about discipline and its necessity in, and benefit to, Christian life and holiness. The sources of discipline can be divided into three; namely, the discipline that authority imposes on others (parents on children, teachers on students, priests on penitents, drill sergeants on recruits, etc.), the self-discipline that one imposes on oneself, and the discipline that God imposes on each of us. It is the second of these, self-discipline, which will be the focus of my thoughts in this post.

In his book *Rediscover Catholicism: A Spiritual Guide to Living with Passion & Purpose*, author Mathew Kelly writes about the need for discipline in one's life. He notes that modern culture abhors and rejects discipline. Discipline is viewed as something opposed to freedom. In a culture of instant gratification, this so-called freedom is seen as the right to do whatever one pleases. However, true freedom is not the right to do whatever one pleases; rather, it is acting in accordance with truth, goodness, and beauty for the glory of God. "Therefore," he writes,

freedom without discipline is impossible. Strength of character is not stumbled upon in life's moments of need and temptation. Character is built little by little, over days, weeks, months, and years with thousands of small and seemingly insignificant acts of discipline. Self-possession is not an unearned right; it is the privilege of the few who build it, defend it, and celebrate it by disciplining themselves. ... [I]n order to love you must be free. For to love is to give your *self* freely and without reservation. Yet, to give your self – to another person, to an endeavor, or to God – you must first possess your self. This possession of self is freedom. It is a prerequisite for love, and is attained only through discipline.

Far from opposing freedom, discipline is necessary for true freedom – and for holiness.

Even in the culture of the Church there has been, in some ways, decreased attention to certain disciplines. For example, after Vatican II, there was a loosening of restrictions regarding the discipline of Friday fasts and fasts before Mass. And in our Catholic schools, while there may still be a focus on virtue, there is often a neglect for the same focus on self-discipline which creates good habits and human virtue.

In the book *Spirit of Penance, Path to God*, Dom Hubert Van Zeller writes about the need to discipline our will, intellect, affections, emotions, and body in order to unite our self to God. "A man must choose," he writes, the less-easy course so often that when the way is open to sin, he goes on choosing in the way that has become second nature to him." This deliberate choosing, over days, weeks, months, and years, are the actions of discipline that bring order to our lives and put our lives at the service of God's will. This is the discipline of the

will. Learning to discipline the will, the affections, the emotions – and even the body – is necessary for children to avoid misbehavior at school, to put order into their day and their relations, and to strive to become holy. It is, however, especially the discipline of the mind – the intellect – that requires careful attention when considering Catholic principles of education. Van Zeller writes, “[A] man should be able to train his thought and his outlook, as he should be able to train his horse or as he should be able to train his will. By applying the right kind of discipline to the mind, a man may change his whole character and his whole life.”

The training, or discipline, of the intellect has many facets: being diligent, having enthusiasm for learning, being curious, being imaginative, being perceptive, asking good questions, integrating new information with old, being clear, accurate, precise, and logical. Many other attributes of a disciplined mind might be produced. These habits of mind must be trained and inculcated into the thoughts and actions of our students if we truly desire for them a first rate education – an education which can refute the intellectual errors of our time, lead them into Truth, and help them to grow in holiness.

Like the story of the beggar that St. Alphonsus de Liguori relates in his *Uniformity with God’s Will*, we hope that our students will be able to say “I am a king ... [i]n my soul, where everything is in good order; where the passions obey reason, and reason obeys God.”

Teaching the virtue of discipline – the reason for it, the means of obtaining it, and the benefits it promises – must become again a central theme in Catholic education. Further, our policies and our actions as teachers and administrators must reflect this need to inculcate a desire for self-discipline among our students. If our ultimate goal in education is to lead children on the path to holiness, then its penultimate goal might be assisting in the habituation of virtue and the discipline needed to do so. This principle of discipline is a crucial element in recovering an authentically Catholic philosophy of education. It is one element that must be recovered and renewed in our Catholic schools in order to be faithful to a Catholic understanding of the development and formation of the human person in Christ.

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