

St. Teresa Adult Enrichment Series

Session One: St. Thomas More on the Goals of Education

The purpose of the Adult Enrichment Series at St. Teresa's is to give adults opportunities to be transformed through the renewing of their minds (Romans 12:2) through guided discussions on topics they may not have resources to learn about in their day-to-day lives. It is important that participants prepare for the evening by reading and considering the material as suggested before each session.

The readings for our first session are two letters by St. Thomas More: one addressed to his young children's paid teacher, William Gonell, and the other to his "dearest children" themselves. Both were sent from King Henry VIII's court, where More worked; and both were written entirely in Latin. Drawing from these texts, please consider the following question:

***According to Thomas More, what are the goals of education,
and how do they relate to one another?***

To William Gonell—at court, May 22, 1518

I have received, my dear Gonell, your letter (*litteris*), elegant and full of affection¹ as always. Your devotion (*adfectum*)² to my children I perceive from your letter, your diligence from theirs. Everyone's letter pleased me greatly, but above all I notice that Elizabeth shows a modesty of character (*morum modestiam*) in the absence of her mother, which not every girl would show in her mother's presence. Let her understand that such conduct delights me more than all the learning (*litteras*)³ in the world. Though I prefer learning (*doctrinam*) joined with virtue (*virtute*) to all the treasures of kings, yet renown (*fama*) for learning, if you take away moral probity (*morum probitatem*),⁴ brings nothing else but notorious and noteworthy infamy, especially in a woman. Since erudition in women is a new thing and a reproach to the sloth of men, many will gladly assail it, and impute to learning what is really the fault of nature, thinking from the vices of the learned to get their own ignorance esteemed as virtue. On the other hand, if a woman (and this I desire and hope with you as their teacher (*praeceptore*) for all my daughters) to eminent virtue of mind (*animi*) should add even moderate skill in learning, I think she will gain more real good (*veri boni*) than if she obtain the riches (*diuitias*) of Croesus and the beauty (*forma*) of Helen. Not because that learning will be a glory (*gloriae*) to her, though learning will accompany virtue as a shadow does a body, but because the reward of wisdom (*sapientiae*) is too solid to be lost with riches or to perish with beauty, since it depends on the inner knowledge of what is right (*recti conscientia*), not on the talk of men, than which nothing is more foolish or mischievous.⁵

¹ *elegantissimas, amorisque plenissimas*—most elegant, and most full of love.

² Ambiguous in Latin (like English "affection"): it could mean any warm-heartedness (so "affection for," "fondness of," even "goodwill toward") or any emotion in general ("feelings regarding").

³ Here and elsewhere, unless noted.

⁴ Probably better translated as "goodness (or uprightness) of character (or morals, habits)."

⁵ *stultius neque pestilentius*—colloquially, "stupid and unhealthy," or even "silly and contagious."

For as it becomes a good man to avoid infamy, so to lay oneself out for renown is the sign of a man who is not only arrogant (*superbi*), but ridiculous and miserable. A mind must be uneasy which ever wavers between joy (*laetitia*) and sadness because of other men's opinions. Among all the benefits that learning (*doctrina*) bestows on men, I think there is none more excellent than that by study (*literis*) we are taught to seek in that very study not praise (*laudum*), but the study itself. Such has been the teaching of the most learned (*doctissimi*) men, especially of philosophers, who are the guides of human life, although some may have abused learning, like other good things, simply to court empty glory and popular renown.

I have written at length on not pursuing glory, my dear Gonell, because of what you say in your letter (*epistola*), that Margaret's lofty and exalted character (*indoles*) of mind should not be debased. In this judgment I quite agree with you; but to me, and, no doubt, to you also, that man would seem to debase a generous character of mind who would accustom it to admire what is vain and low. He, on the contrary, raises it who rises to virtue and true goods, and who looks down with contempt from the contemplation of the sublime, on those shadows of good things which almost all mortals, through ignorance of truth, greedily snatch at as if they were true goods.

Therefore, my dearest (*charissime*) Gonell, since I thought we must walk by this road, I have often begged not you only, who, out of your exceptional affection (*adfectu*) for all my family, would do it of your own accord, nor only my wife, who is sufficiently urged by her truly maternal love (*materna pietas*) for them, which has been proved to me in many ways, but absolutely all my friends, continually to warn my children to avoid as it were the precipices of pride and haughtiness, and to walk in the pleasant meadows of modesty: not to be dazzled at the sight of gold; not to lament the lack of what they erroneously admire in others; not to think more of themselves for gaudy trappings, nor less for the want of them; not to deform the beauty that nature has given them by neglect, nor to try to heighten it by artifice; to put virtue in the first place among goods, learning in the second; and in their studies to esteem most whatever may teach them piety towards God, charity to all, and modesty and Christian humility in themselves. By such means they will receive from God the reward of an innocent life, and in the assured expectation of it will view death without dread, and meanwhile possessing solid joy (*solido gaudio*) will neither be puffed up by the empty praise (*laudibus*) of men, nor dejected by evil tongues. These I consider the real and genuine fruits of learning (*veros ac genuinos doctrinae fructus*), and though I admit that all literary (or "learned"—*literatis*) men do not possess them, I would maintain that those who give themselves to study (*literas*) with such intent will readily attain their end (*consummatos*) and become accomplished.

Nor do I think that the harvest is much affected whether it is a man or a woman who does the sowing. They both have the name of human being whose nature reason (*ratio*) differentiates from that of beasts; both, I say, are equally suited for the knowledge of learning by which reason is cultivated, and, like plowed land, germinates a crop when the seeds of good precepts (*bonorum praeceptorum*) have been sown. But if the soil of a woman be naturally bad, and apter to bear fern than grain, by which saying many keep women from study (*literis*), I think, on the contrary, that a woman's wit (*ingenium*) is the more diligently

65 to be cultivated, so that nature's defect may be redressed by industry. This was the opinion
of the ancients, both the wisest (*prudētissimi*) and the most saintly. Not to speak of the rest,
Jerome and Augustine not only exhorted excellent matrons and honorable virgins to study
(*līteras*), but also, in order to assist them, diligently explained the abstruse meanings of the
Scriptures, and wrote for tender girls letters (*epistola*) replete with so much erudition that
70 nowadays old men who call themselves doctors of sacred literature (*līterarum*) can scarcely
read them correctly, much less understand (*intelligant*) them. Do you, my learned Gonell,
have the kindness to see that my daughters thoroughly learn (*congnoſcent*) these works
(*doctrinae*) of saintly men. From them they will learn in particular what goal (*ſcopum*)⁶ they
should set for their studies, and the whole fruit of their endeavors should consist in the
testimony of God and a good conscience (*conſcientia recti*). Thus they will be inwardly calm
75 and at peace and neither stirred by praise of flatterers nor stung by the follies of unlearned
mockers of learning (*līteras illīteratorum*).

But I fancy that I now hear you object that these precepts, though true, are beyond
the tender years of my daughters, since you will scarcely find a man, however old and
advanced in study, whose mind is so fixed and firm as not to be tickled sometimes with
80 desire of glory. But, dear Gonell, the more do I see the difficulty of getting rid of this pest of
pride, the more do I see the necessity of getting to work at it from childhood. For I find no
other reason why this inescapable evil so clings to our hearts, than that almost as soon as we
are born, it is sown in the tender minds of children by their nurses, it is cultivated by their
teachers (*magiſtirs*), it is nourished and brought to maturity by their parents; while no one
85 teaches (*docet*) anything, even the good, without bidding them always to expect praise
(*laudem*) as the recompense and prize of virtue. Thus long accustomed to magnify praise,
they strive to please the greater number (that is, the worse) and end by being ashamed to be
good. That this plague of vainglory may be banished far from my children, may you, my dear
Gonell, and their mother and all their friends, sing this song to them, and repeat it, and beat it
90 into their heads, that vainglory (*gloriolam*) is despicable, and to be spit upon, and that there
is nothing more sublime than that humble modesty so often praised by Christ; and this your
prudent charity (*prudens charitas*) will so enforce as to teach virtue rather than reprove vice,
and make them love good advice instead of hating it. To this purpose nothing will more
conduce than to read to them the lessons (*praecepta*) of the ancient Fathers, who, they know,
95 cannot be angry with them; and, as they honor (*venerentur*) them for their sanctity, they
must needs be much moved by their authority. If you will read something of this sort, besides
their reading of Sallust—to Margaret and Elizabeth, who are more mature than John and
Cecily—you will bind me and them, already in your debt, still more to you. And besides you
will make my children who are dear (*charos*) to me first by the law of nature, and then
100 dearer (*chariores*) by learning and virtue, most dear (*charissimos*) by such advancement in
knowledge (*doctrinae*) and good character (*bonorum morum*). Farewell.

⁶ This is a Latin transliteration of a Greek word, *scopos*.

To his Dearest (charissimae) Children—at court, September 3, 1522

105 The Bristol merchant brought me your letters (*litteras*) the day after he left you, with
 which I was extremely delighted. Nothing can come from your workshop, however rude and
 unfinished (*illaboratum*), that will not give me more pleasure than the most meticulous
 (*accuratissimum*) writing of anyone else. So much does my affection (*adfectus*) for you
 commend whatever you write to me. Indeed, without any recommendation, your letters are
 110 capable of pleasing by their own merits, the charm and pure Latinity of their style. There has
 not been one of your letters that did not please me extremely. But to confess candidly what I
 feel, the letter from my son John pleased me the best, both because it was longer than the
 others and because he seems to have given it a bit more labor and study. For he not only put
 out his matter prettily and composed in fairly polished language, but he plays with me both
 115 pleasantly and cleverly, and turns my jokes on myself wittily enough. And this he does not
 only merrily, but with due moderation, showing that he does not forget that he is joking with
 his father, whom he is eager to delight and yet is cautious not to give offense.

 Now I expect from each of you a letter almost every day. I will not admit excuses (for
 John makes none) such as want of time, sudden departure of the letter carrier, or want of
 120 something to write about. No one hinders you from writing, but, on the contrary, all are
 urging you to it. And that you may not keep the letter carrier waiting, why not anticipate his
 coming, and have your letter written and sealed, ready two days before a carrier is available?
 How can a subject be wanting when you write to me, who am glad to hear of your studies or
 of your games, and whom you will please most if, when there is nothing to write about, you
 125 write just that at great length. Nothing can be easier for you, especially for girls, loquacious
 by nature and always doing it.

 One thing, however, I admonish you, whether you write serious matters or the merest
 trifles, it is my wish that you write everything diligently and thoughtfully (*diligenter et*
meditate). It will do no harm if you first write the whole in English, for then you will have
 130 much less trouble and labor in turning it into Latin; not having to look for the matter, your
 mind will be intent only on the language. That, however, I leave to your own choice, whereas
 I strictly enjoin you that whatever you have composed you carefully examine (*diligenter*
examinetis) before writing it out clean; and in this examination first scrutinize (*considerate*)
 the whole sentence and then every part of it. Thus, if any solecisms have escaped you, you
 135 will easily detect them. Correct these, write out the whole letter again, and even then do not
 grudge to examine (*examinare*) it once more, for sometimes, in rewriting, faults slip in again
 that one had expunged. By this diligence (*diligentia*) you will soon make your little trifles
 seem serious matters; for while there is nothing so neat and witty that will not be made
 insipid by silly (*futilis*) and careless loquacity, so also there is nothing in itself so insipid that
 140 you cannot season it with grace and charm if you give a little thought (*meditando*) to it.
 Farewell, my sweetest (*dulcissimi*) children.