

THE CATHOLIC SCHOOL AS A PLACE FOR A LIFE OF HOLINESS

Seen from the perspective
of the spirituality of
Hugh of St Victor (1130-1141)
and St John Baptist de la Salle (1651-1719)

Preamble

The Christian tradition is full of richness of different spiritualities. Yet, they appear in a spiral as there are nearly always certain elements in one form of Christian life which reappear in another separated in time by several centuries.

It is in the light of the above that I, as a Brother of the Christian Schools today identify with certain elements in the spirituality of the Canons of St Victor (Victorine School). Hugh of St Victor interests me for two reasons:

- a. His spirituality and theological teaching are strongly that of an educator, whose rule of life has an Augustinian flair such as ours has.
- b. His teaching directly and explicitly provides for the full restoration of the fallen man to the dignity of the child of God through education. It also provides for a strong possibility of contemplative friendship with God.

So, by developing an aspect of the theological teaching of Hugh, I strive to:

- a. Corroborate the vision of St John Baptist de La Salle with an earlier vision in the Church, for the purpose of
- b. providing an impetus for the ministry of an educator today.

Hugh acclaimed by Bihlmayer as the most outstanding theologian of the 12th century, is a canon regular. He belongs to the Canons of St Victor begun about the year 1112 A. D. by William of Champeaux. The Canons adopted the rule of St Augustine and their monastery soon became an outstanding School of theology. It followed the practico-speculative method of St Augustine. Hugh's deep and lengthened study of the works of Augustine enabled him to present an Augustinian synthesis that had never before been accomplished, hence his appellation: alter Augustinus. Hugh's major work is on the Sacrament of the Christian faith which is an introduction to the understanding of the Scripture. His other works include treatises on meditations, on methods of prayer, in praise of charity, on the formation of novices. Still others include commentary on the Celestial Hierarchy of the pseudo-Dionysius and homilies on Ecclesiastes and "De Contemplatione et ejus speciebus". The latter is attributed to him but not with certainty.

It is thus evident from the above that Hugh of St Victor is a scholarly and contemplative person. This makes him attractive to me. His spirituality and the development of his theology with regard to studying as a means of contemplating God is worth examining with the hope of encouraging all involved in the establishment of Christian education, especially in our Catholic Schools today.

Hugh's Theological teaching

This will be fleshed out in what follows and used as I progress, to illustrate its relevance as applied to today's Catholic school.

Briefly stated, Hugh notes that original sin has left a disastrous effect on man, but not without traces of the memory of God. The memory of God that remains is a point of departure. This enabled him to enter into a knowledge of God in a sequential manner. The first stage is the Symbolic Knowledge. This is followed by Rational Knowledge and finally by Mystical Knowledge.

Chaos and Restlessness.

Some of the disastrous effects of original sin are chaos and restlessness. St John Baptist de La Salle, a pioneer of modern education and Founder of the Brothers of the Christian Schools observes this phenomenon in children when he writes: «God so loved the souls he created that when He saw them involved in sin and unable to free themselves, His zeal and desire for their salvation led Him to send His own Son to rescue them from their wretched condition.» (1). Poverty is another effect of sin of society and De La Salle observes that this is an indirect cause of restlessness in children as their parents who could not afford to send them to school allow them to wander around aimlessly like vagabonds. (2) However, Michel Sauvage and Miguel Campos in their study of the Lasallian spirituality indicate that the childrens, hopeless lives would have been transformed by the concrete presence of their teachers who are for them sacrament of God's saving love. (3) The ten Black Bishops of the United States of America also recognise the chaotic condition of this world and see a hope of remedying this in the existence of the Catholic School. They write: «It (Catholic School) also represents – and this is no less important – a sign of stability in an environment of chaos and flux. It should be a source of legitimate pride that our schools are sought after by many who are not Catholics as well as Catholics because of the religious and moral values considered as part of quality education.» (4).

What then makes Catholic education capable of arresting the restlessness of youth and the chaos of the environment? What elements in the Catholic School respond to the needs of world youth? Does the Catholic School have the potential of restoring the damaged man to the full image of Christ? These are areas I intend to examine in what follows.

As earlier stated, according to Hugh the disastrous effects of original sin leave traces of memory of God. This prompts him to explore further the concept of God through the knowledge of Arts, Scripture, philosophy and other sacred sciences. All these are to promote the mind's enlightenment about God as well as to increase the practice of virtues. Augustine had said that the whole world is a book that must be read rather than be admired. I believe, through its graded and systematic instructions, the Catholic school strives to meet this requirement of providing knowledge. In this regard, the Fathers of the Vatican Council II have this to say: «All men of whatever race, condition or age, in virtue of their dignity as human persons have an inalienable right to education. This education should be suitable to the particular destiny of the individuals, adapted to their ability, sex and national cultural conditions, and should be conducive to fraternal relations with other nations in order to promote true unity and peace in the world. True education is therefore directed towards the formation of the human person in view of his final end and the good of that society to which he belongs.» (5) This final end that education or knowledge aims at bringing about is the restoration of man to the image of Christ talked about by Hugh of St Victor.

Still talking of symbolic knowledge, I think about this also in the realm of all types of knowledge which serves man in many positive and meaningful ways. These include the physical, intellectual, moral and social as well as spiritual dimensions of man's needs. The Church Fathers write: «Due weight being given to the advances in psychological, pedagogical and intellectual sciences, children and young people should be helped to develop harmoniously their physical, moral and intellectual qualities.» (6) Corroborating this, the Black Bishops say in their pastoral letter: «The education of a people being the greatest and fundamental means of elevating it to the higher planes to which all Christian civilization tends, we pledge ourselves to aid schools in establishing wherever we are to be found, Catholic, schools embracing the primary and higher branches of knowledge.» (7)

Rational knowledge.

Man can ascend and attain the Invisible through the tangible, the visible. Hugh, in the tradition of the Fathers, believes that there must be a rational and reflective study of the Scripture and scriptural matters such that knowledge already acquired can lead to a greater understanding of God in the light of faith. The appreciation of symbolic things earlier described must be through rational knowledge. It is the stimulation of the minds of the children through appropriate teaching techniques available to the modern man that this can be achieved. Vatican II affirms that: «Children and young people have the right to be stimulated to make sound judgements based on a well found conscience and to put them into practice with a sense of personal commitment.» (8) I submit that through the practice of making consistent sound moral judgements, rational knowledge is attained. In addition, the elements of education mentioned above, namely arts and sciences, need be unified rationally such that what is learnt in one area can be meaningfully integrated within the person with what is learnt in other areas. Thus the task of making integrated human beings belong properly to the Catholic school with its dedicated staff. I believe this is very much in the mind of Pius XII when he said of the Catholic school: "Life is a synthesis".

Mystical knowledge.

Reflection on the knowledge acquired as explained above is necessary for meditation. This is especially true when the subject of reflection is the Sacred Scripture done in the light of faith. Although the Scripture is a privileged starting place to reflect about God, one does not stop there. «The reflective Catholic should be able to distinguish his religious community with its distinctive faith and cult from the outrageous failures of many of its members.» (9) This is to say he will avoid rhetorical questions such as "Has the Church a future?" and "Can one continue to accept the Church?" (10) The education of the person becomes truly reflective when it is directed towards ensuring an entry into knowledge of the mystery of salvation leading to a more deeply appreciation of the gift of faith which he has received. Thus he learns to adore God the Father in spirit and in truth.

However, according to Hugh, reflection on knowledge must not be merely speculative: it must be an understanding (*intus legere*) that stimulates effective love and eventually leads to contemplation, which is mystical knowledge. Mysticism, however, is an intense experience of God which is not earned, deserved or merited. I believe it is a gratuitous gift of God given by the Spirit as it wills. Still, needless to say that the person who seeks a greater understanding of knowledge can possibly, more readily appreciate the gift of contemplation than the unenlightened mind. In the words of Dermot A. Lane «God is co-experienced and co-known through the different experiences and knowledge of the human subject.» (11)

God is present to us from the outset in all our experiences. With Thomas Aquinas, we would want to hold that God is known implicitly in everything that is known. Also, Lane quotes Schillebeeks as saying: «God is the transcendent third in all our human experiences and above all in our interpersonal relationships.» (12) Still, it is important to stress the fact that God takes the initiative in all experiences involving Him and the created world. The point I am making is the need for man to do the ground work by nourishing his mind with appropriate knowledge which may better prepare him for the possibility of a mystical experience.

Models of dedication to the Ministry of Education.

None of the developments outlined above can take place in a Catholic school without the guidance of outstanding, knowledgeable and dedicated teachers, teachers who are proud of their profession and are willing to give their best.

The Victorine school to which Hugh belongs, to my mind, exemplifies the attribute of exceptional dedication of staff and faculty to the cause of education. First, its founder, William de Champeaux is a professor of repute at Notre Dame in Paris (†1122). Secondly, the School produced luminaries such as Adam of St Victor (†1192) who was the poet of the school; Archard (†1171) a spiritual writer who wrote treatises on the Trinity as well as on Christology to mention a few, not to mention the illustrious and famous sons in the person of our hero, Hugh and Richard of St Victor, the latter of whom is a student of the former.

It is my contention that the role of teachers cannot be overestimated in bringing the students to a greater knowledge of God. And this is especially true of the Catholic school. For «Catholicism knows that man is so essentially social that his capacity for a human life can only be actualised through living with others and that the more rational a truly human society is, the better it will be for the individual development of any and all of his potentials including the religious.» (13)

In addition, the Fathers of the Vatican Council realise the importance of having similar calibre of men and women as teachers in the Catholic school when then say: «Priests, religious and laymen carefully chosen and prepared for their task should provide permanent centres of guidance, spiritual and intellectual for the students. Special interest should be taken in young men of outstanding abilities whether they be students of Catholic or other universities who seem to be suited to teaching or research and they should be encouraged to adopt academic careers.» (14). Other important persons in history have exalted the ministry of teachers notably amongst them is the Founder of the Brothers of the Christian Schools, John Baptist de La Salle. By his life he showed how important it is to spend one's life generously in the task of education of youth. (15) Not only that, he vigorously exhorts school masters, his disciples, later called "Brothers" to give all their lives to the ministry which is God's calling for them. He writes in his meditations: «God diffuses the fragrance of His knowledge throughout the world of human ministers. Just as he commanded light to shine out of darkness, so He also kindles the light to shine in the hearts of those whom He has called to announce his word to children, to enlighten them by making the glory of God known to them. Since God in His mercy has given you such a ministry, gain glory before Him by proclaiming His truth to those whom you are called to teach.» (16)

Conclusion:

The acquisition of knowledge, symbolically or otherwise, to be rationalized and internalised need the assistance of capable and generous teachers. It is then that the knowledge acquired can be used as a path towards God. This makes the Christian school relevant in the context of evangelisation today.

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* Life of Hugh of St Victor and references to the School of St Victor taken primarily from Jordan Aumann: Christian Spirituality in the Catholic Church.

(1) De La Salle: Meditations for the Time of Retreat. (Med. 9/3) English translation, printed by St Mary's College Press. Winona, Minnesota, 1975.

(2) Ibid, of Med 2/1.

(3) M. Sauvage and M. Campos: De La Salle: Annoncer l'Evangile aux pauvres. p. 301.

(4) A pastoral letter of the Black American Bishops: "What we have seen and heard". 9th September 1984; p. 28.

(5) Austine Flannery: Vatican document II: On Christian Education, p. 726-27.

(6) Ibid; p. 727.

(7) "What we have seen and heard" p. 28.

(8) Vatican II: document on Education, p. 726.

(9) John Donohue, sj: Catholicism and Education; p. 80.

(10) Ibid p. 9.

(11) Dermot A. Lane: The Experience of God. p. 15.

(12) Ibid.

(13) John Donohue - Catholic Education, p. 80.

(14) Vatican II, p. 736.

(15) De La Salle relinquished his canonry of the cathedral of Rheims in 1682, in order to be fully available to the ministry of the school. Cf Sauvage and Campos; p. 32.

(16) De La Salle: Meditations for the Time of Retreat, p. 47.