

THE SAINT PATRICK CURRICULUM

Salvation History: Teaching from the Heart of the Catholic Intellectual Tradition

I want a laity, not arrogant, not rash in speech, not disputatious — but men who know their religion, who enter into it, who know just where they stand, who know what they hold and what they do not, who know their creed so well that they can give an account of it, who know so much of history that they can defend it.

~ Saint John Henry Cardinal Newman on the goal of Catholic university professors, as quoted by Pope Benedict on the occasion of his trip to England to beatify Newman.¹¹

Life is like a voyage on the sea of history, often dark and stormy, a voyage in which we watch for the stars that indicate the route. The true stars of our life are the people who have lived good lives. They are lights of hope. Certainly, Jesus Christ is the true light, the sun that has risen above all the shadows of history. But to reach Him we also need lights close by – people who shine with His light and so guide us along our way.

~ Pope Benedict, *Spe Salvi*, 49.

Our God is the Lord of History. He created Time and gave it a clear beginning, a key middle point, and a sure end. Moreover, He continually acts within His own history. Thus it is that the history curriculum proper to a Catholic classical school is not principally one of “classical” Greece and Rome, nor of Western Civilization though it will appear, nor yet of Church history though that too plays its part, and certainly not of a values-neutral multi-culturalism though all times and places may be considered.

The history curriculum proper to a Catholic classical school is the History of Salvation. From the Fall in the Garden of Eden, when we were lost and separated from our God, to the end of time foretold by John the Evangelist, Salvation History traces the arc of God’s faithfulness in getting us back. God in His goodness and care devised a Divine Plan, a complicated, multi-character, multi-nation, exciting, at times harrowing, drama, which works itself out through the generations over many millennia. It involves kings and battles, heroic deeds and selfless sacrifices, desert wanderings and ocean voyages. It involves travel and travail, wit and wiliness, courage and suffering, close shaves and near escapes, powerful men and unlikely heroes, unexpected twists and turns, and again and again eucatastrophic reversals, when seemingly hopeless defeats turn, at the very last moment, into triumphant and joyful victories of good over evil. And because the Incarnation is the fulcrum of history, and because Christ has already been victorious, we are assured that this greatest of adventures has a happy ending. Christ is “the fulfillment of all things, he is the Alpha and Omega, the last end of the world as he is the spring of its eternal youth

¹ Fr. C. J. McCloskey, “Benedict XVI and Education,” *National Catholic Register*, May 20, 2013.

For Christians, the structure of history is complete, and its decisive event, instead of coming last, occupies the central position. Nothing can ultimately go wrong.”²

Thus, properly taught, history is not a series of names and dates, but a compelling story of God slowly revealing Himself to man. The Original Sin of Adam and Eve, about which the child will hear in the first weeks of Kindergarten, sets the stage for the grand romance wherein God draws us back to Himself. As we lead the child through Salvation History, we follow along first with the Israelites as they embrace their identity as God’s chosen people. The strand of their story interweaves with those of great civilizations – Mesopotamia, Egypt, Greece, and others. Each of these foreign peoples who lived before the time of Christ still lived in the light of Christ, and in each of their cultures we can trace some aspects of revealed truth as they interpreted the world around them. But while some of their ideas and artifacts were ingenious and would be considered great contributions by later peoples, not all they did or thought was wholesome and true. God called upon the Israelites to safeguard their Wisdom and their hearts from the influences and sway of all those neighboring tribes with whom they interacted. For a child to watch as the Israelites flounder and fail, are forgiven, and then grow in fidelity is the beginning of learning to embrace one’s own faith, to cherish it, preserve it, pass it on, resist alternative weaker worldviews, stand up for it, and, if called upon, to die for it.

With the coming of Christ, [Imagine that! Christ came!], the world is made new: Mary, the new Eve, says Yes to God; Jesus, the new Adam, dies for our sins; and Saint Peter and the apostles, the new Tribes of Israel, trade in their task of preserving the faith from encroaching neighbors for the mission of spreading the Good News to all the lands. Hereafter, the life of the Church becomes the strand we will follow through Salvation History, as she navigates internal mutinies and external storms, in her efforts to preserve, defend, and spread the Faith. Heresies and the response of the Church Fathers, persecutions and the Edict of Milan, the fall of Roman civilization and the rise of France, the daughter of the Church, the invasion of the Moors and the call for Crusaders, the sad division of the Reformation and the challenge to papal authority is the context in which we see the lives of the saints, the growth of religious orders, the formation of monasteries, hospitals, universities, and cathedrals, the courage of missionaries, and the creation of masterpieces of art, literature, and music, all in the ongoing effort to “go out and teach all nations.”

The way is not smooth, yet what becomes apparent as the child journeys along is that God is involved in the details. Nor is the way uniformly heroic, yet, having witnessed the obedience of the patriarchs and prophets of old, and the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus at the center of history, and the impact of the saints on the spreading of the Church thereafter, the child comes to understand that *our actions and our ideas matter*:

This idea that history is directed and ordered by God toward a great “Eucatastrophe” – a complete reversal of the seeming victory of evil into the perfect and joyful triumph of good – is central to our understanding of literature, history, and our faith. Students who are given the opportunity to experience vivid narratives of historical events begin to see this big picture with greater clarity. The

² Jean Daniélou, S.J., *The Lord of History*, trans. Nigel Abercrombie (Cleveland: Meridian Books, 1958), 82-83.

result is that they take their faith, their personal responsibilities, and their intellectual lives much more seriously.³

The student becomes aware that what is being taught is important and meaningful. In fact, it matters desperately. To learn Salvation History is to awake to the fact that we are part of God's Plan, not only because God desires to save us, but because we each have a unique and individual mission to fulfill in order to cooperate in saving others. In other words, *history* and *virtue* are closely intertwined. The lives of men of old, woven together, have created the historical fabric in which we now live. And our actions will have lasting significance, in the eternal as well as temporal spheres. Recognizing this, Saint Patrick, in his hour of greatest need, prayed, "I bind unto myself this day . . . *all good deeds of men.*" Saint Patrick knew his Salvation History, and he understood that his own life and ability to do good were undergirded by all the good deeds, large and small, known and forgotten, of those who had come before him. Such is the mystery of the Body of Christ.

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