

Christopher Dawson's Vision of Culture and Catechesis

By R. Jared Staudt

What is the goal of catechesis? To make the faith the center of our lives. St. John Paul II made this clear: "Catechesis aims therefore at developing understanding of the mystery of Christ in the light of God's word, so that the whole of a person's humanity is impregnated by that word."¹ We come to know Christ so that he can shape the way that we live concretely and as a whole. Pope Benedict XVI said the same about Catholic education more broadly, claiming that it should "seek to foster that unity between faith, culture and life which is the fundamental goal of Christian education."²

An important reason why catechists have to work for this goal is that education is the way in which we pass on an identity and way of life. Education forms culture, understood broadly as our way of life. Our children will either use their faith to navigate the challenges of the world or will subordinate their faith to a secular worldview. Catechists impart not just the content of the faith but seek to form a life that embodies that faith. If our children conform

to the secular culture more than to the faith, this entails a breakdown of our catechetical and educational efforts.

Christopher Dawson, more than any other Catholic thinker, has recognized the centrality of religion in culture and education's role in forming culture. Dawson (1889-1970) was an English-Welsh convert to Catholicism and an historian who produced a vast synthesis of history, the human sciences, and theology stretching from prehistoric times to the crisis of the mid-twentieth century. The thread that united all of his works was the thesis that religion is the heart of culture. Tracing the role of religion throughout history, he noted that modern culture has a void in place of this heart, which it attempts to fill with other secular ideologies. Without a religious renewal, Dawson thought the material advances of technology would prove self-destructive for our culture, a prediction which partially came true in the World Wars.

I first encountered Dawson when I was a precocious college student. I was interested in just about everything and wasn't sure how my interests fit together. Fr. Arthur



Kennedy (now an Auxiliary Bishop in Boston) pointed me to Dawson's works and I spent the next three years focusing on him. In my roles as a theologian and a catechist, Dawson has proved an invaluable companion. He has helped me to understand that religion is not private (as we have been told), but essentially culture forming. He pinpointed the underlying crisis of our time, which is the focus on the material above the spiritual, which he claims creates an imbalance in the person and society. He proposed an agenda for reversing this problem by rediscovering the vital power of Christianity to reinvigorate Western society by immersing ourselves in both its spiritual power and the more material, cultural fruits of her living tradition.

Dawson helped me to discover my own mission of working to reform Christian culture through catechesis and education. When asked upon graduation, which one of Dawson's books made the greatest impression on me, I answered *The Crisis of Western Education*. In this work, he reacts against the practical and utilitarian nature of modern education. He attempts to resituate the work of Catholic education within the realm of building culture. This matters for catechesis, because it provides a broader context for why learning the faith matters. It impacts life at its deepest core and transforms how we live in the world. Dawson wrote:

The essential function of education is "enculturation," or the transmission of the tradition of culture, and therefore it seems clear that the Christian college must be the cornerstone of any attempt to rebuild the order of Western civilization. In order to free the mind from its dependence on the conformist patterns of modern secular society, it is necessary to view the cultural situation as a whole and to see the Christian way of life not as a number of isolated precepts imposed by ecclesiastic authority but as a cosmos of spiritual relations embracing heaven and earth and uniting the order of social and moral life with the order of divine grace. Christian culture is the Christian way of life. As the Church is the extension of the Incarnation, so Christian culture is the embodiment of Christianity in social situations and patterns of life and behavior. It is the nature of Christianity to act as a leaven in the world and to transform human nature by a new principle of divine life.³

Dawson provides here a bold objective for religious education: to change the entire life of our students.

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If the Church does not educate practically on how to live in the secular world, navigating the challenges of technology, consumerism, and a relativistic worldview, then we have failed to reach our ultimate goal. Catechists have to set their sights on rebuilding Christian culture—not in a global way, which would be perhaps unrealistic—but beginning simply in the lives of Christians and their families, in our parishes and schools.

After the World Wars, Dawson evaluated the state of Europe in his *Understanding Europe* and examined what needed to happen to overcome the crisis produced by the wars—devastating violence produced by atheistic ideologies. He believed this crisis to be a threat to Europe's very existence. His solution is education, and particularly religious education.

Let's explore some selections from one of Dawson's writings where he explicitly teaches on the important role of catechesis today. I hope these brief selections can serve as a short introduction to Dawson, as well as demonstrate how he can help us in achieving the goal of catechesis.⁴

Excerpts: Dawson's Teaching on Catechesis

The Problem

We have seen that the weakness of Western culture in face of the new forces that threaten its existence is due above all to its loss of faith in its own spiritual values and the growing detachment of its external way of life from its religious foundations and the sources of its spiritual vitality. If Europe is to survive—if we do not surrender to the inhuman ideal of a mass society which is a mere engine of the will to power—we must find some way to reverse this process and to recover our spiritual unity. This is a problem of re-education in the widest sense of the word.

Christian Education

Taken in its widest sense education is simply the process by which the new members of a community are initiated into its way of life and thought from the simplest elements of behavior up to the highest tradition of spiritual wisdom. Christian education is therefore an initiation into the Christian way of life and thought, and for one thousand two hundred years, more or less, the peoples of Europe have been submitted to this influence. The process has been intensive at some points, superficial at others, but taking it as a whole it may be said that nowhere else in the history of mankind can we see such a mighty stream of intellectual and moral effort directed through so many channels to a single end. However incomplete its success may have been, there is no doubt that it changed the world, and no one has any right to talk of the history of Western

civilization unless he has done his best to understand its aims and its methods.

Religious Education

From the beginning Christian education was conceived not so much as learning a lesson but as introduction into a new life, or still more as an initiation into a mystery.... Christian education was something that could not be conveyed by words alone, but which involved a discipline of the whole man....

Thus Christian education was not only an initiation into the Christian community, it was initiation into another world; the unveiling of spiritual realities of which the natural man was unaware and which changed the meaning of existence. And I think it is here that our modern education—including our religious education—has proved defective. There is in it no sense of revelation. It is accepted as instruction, sometimes as useful knowledge, often as tiresome task work in preparation for some examination, but nowhere do we find that joyful sense of the discovery of a new and wonderful reality which inspired true Christian culture. All true religious teaching leads up to the contemplation of divine mysteries, and where this is lacking, the whole culture becomes weakened and divided. It may be objected that this is the sphere of worship and not of education: but it is impossible to separate the two, since it was largely in the sphere of worship that the Christian tradition of education and culture arose and developed. The first Christian education was the initiation into the divine mysteries in the liturgical sense, and it brought with it a development of religious poetry and music and art which was the first-fruits of Christian culture.

The Task

Civilization can only be creative and life-giving in the proportion that it is spiritualized. Otherwise the increase of power inevitably increases its power for evil and its destructiveness.

Therefore it is only by the rediscovery of the spiritual world and the restoration of man's spiritual capacities that it is possible to save humanity from self-destruction. This is the immense task which Christian education has to undertake. It involves a great deal more than any Christian or educationalist has yet realized.... The greater is our knowledge of nature and man and history, the greater is the obligation to use these increased resources for God, not merely in the way of moral action, but intellectually also, by the re-interpretation of the tradition of Christian culture in terms of the new knowledge, and by relating the instruments of culture to their true spiritual end.

The recovery of a Christian culture is therefore the essential educational and religious task, and it is inseparable from the social ideal of Christendom—of the Christian people—plebs Christiana—populus Dei.... [I]n the modern world there is a similar tradition of sacred culture which it has been the mission of the Church to nourish and preserve. However secularized our modern civilization may become, this sacred tradition remains like a river in the desert, and a genuine religious education can

still use it to irrigate the thirsty lands and to change the face of the world with the promise of new life. The great obstacle is the failure of Christians themselves to understand the depth of that tradition and the inexhaustible possibilities of new life which they contain.

My hope in providing this short selection of Dawson's writing is to introduce his goal for Catholic education: rediscovering the living tradition of Christian culture and inspiring a new generation of catechists to take up the task of enculturating our students into a renewed Christian culture.

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Notes

- 1 John Paul II, *Catechesi Tradendae*, art. 20.
- 2 Pope Benedict XVI, "Address to the Participants in the Convention of the Diocese of Rome," June 11, 2007.
- 3 Christopher Dawson, *The Crisis of Western Education* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2003), 115.
- 4 Each of the following excerpts are available in Christopher Dawson, chapter 13 "The Problem of the Future: Total Secularization or a Return to Christian Culture" in *Understanding Europe* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2008). Page numbers will be noted after each selection. Please note that I have added the headings.



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