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HUMAN EMBODIMENT AND TRINITARIAN ANTHROPOLOGY - SIX IMPLICATIONS FOR RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

In recent years, I have often found myself in rural communities speaking about strategies for meeting the contemporary challenges of religious education. After one of these sessions earlier this year, I was approached by an elderly lady, long retired from her position as a highly respected Catholic teacher, who told me of a struggle she had faced for the whole of her life. "I was always made to feel," she said, "as if all that mattered was my soul, and that my body was little more than some kind of prison that I had to punish and subdue so that I could leave it behind and become something like an angel. It never really made sense to me. Why did God make us this way if what he really wanted was angels?" She articulated the problem very well. This was certainly the kind of training that many Catholics of her generation had received. It was as if God had made some kind of mistake in putting human beings together with both material and spiritual components, and we would all be better off if we rejected our corporeal dimension altogether. This approach certainly placed a high value on our spiritual nature – but in the end, it actually made the doctrine of the resurrection of the body almost incomprehensible. Among many other reasons, it was to address misunderstandings such as this that Pope John Paul II set out to develop and explain a theology of the body – to try to lay to rest this Platonic denigration of human physical existence and to affirm the goodness of the material creation. Rather, the human person is a unique kind of reality – an *embodied* being with a Trinitarian structure, having been created in the image of the Triune God. The human constitution is not a mistake; it is willed by its creator to exist in the way it does. Hence, we must account for human nature as it *is* and educate the human person accordingly. Applying these essential ideas to the

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field of Religious Education really requires lengthy volumes of its own. Regrettably, I will only be able to touch briefly on some of the main ideas. I will do so by proposing six key areas which need further exploration for the renewal of religious education along the lines implied by the ongoing project of Pope John Paul II and his successors.

Religious Education and the Human Person

The General Directory of Catechesis, a 1997 document from the Congregation for the Clergy, makes a valiant effort to bring together in one place many of the insights from Pope John Paul II's massive corpus of authoritative teaching as it applies to education. One of the terms used in this text is "Trinitarian Christo-centrism." This is an example of what teachers might call "excessive lexical density" – too much meaning packed into too few words! Yet it really does sum up something very important about religious education. Namely, that it is about bringing human beings into relationship with the Blessed Trinity, through Christ. This idea is perhaps more familiar in the Liturgy, where all prayers are addressed to the Father, through the Son in the communion of the Holy Spirit.

If we take time to examine this Trinitarian process, it can demonstrate what happens when religious education is working effectively. Sofia Cavalletti, whose insights into catechesis are perhaps unmatched in recent history, made this simple comment when asked to sum up the process of bringing children to God: "Remember the order: first the body, then the heart, then the mind." In other words, if you want children to learn anything new, begin by presenting them with an interesting concrete object – something that stimulates the senses to "wonder." This wonder sets up a desire to explore further because they have found delight and joy in what has been perceived by the senses. Through this vehicle of joy, the senses succeed in touching and activating the heart to love what has been discovered. Finally, when the needs of the body and the heart have been met, the experience is encoded into its most abstract form: intellectually in the mind. I speak here of the child, but long experience has revealed something else. It is not just children who work this way – adults do this too. It seems that all human beings, when left free to follow their inclinations, prefer to begin with what is most concrete, then move on to delighting in and loving what they have found and then put it into intellectual form.

Note the simple Trinitarian structure. We can perhaps look at it differently. Children (and human beings generally) are first attracted by beauty (the Son), then drawn into goodness and love (the Holy Spirit), and finally to the truth (the Father). Just like the Holy Trinity, these classic transcendental properties of being (beauty, goodness and truth) always work together – they can be distinguished but not isolated from one another. (Goodness, for example, is not

authentically good unless it is also true and beautiful etc.) In terms of the educational process, it would seem that for human persons the *abstract* and *spiritual* are accessed by what is concrete and material. The body has an essential role to play in coming to know God – a role that cannot be dispensed with; a role taken on through the Incarnation by the Son of God Himself. We might say, educationally, that this is the key insight of the Theology of the Body, the beauty of the concrete reality evokes “eros” – the desire which draws us into a search for what lies beyond in two further stages before we arrive at the goal of communion in the Trinitarian life of God.

Religious Education for the Body

If we accept the view that human development has a Trinitarian structure that gives a place to the body, heart and mind, then this must have its implication for religious education. Those who understand human development have no doubt that the youngest children always begin the process of constructing their own understanding of the world through the senses. One has only to follow an infant around to notice what is going on. These children are fascinated by the real objects in their environment – they want to touch, to smell, to hear, to see and (often to the horror of their mothers) taste whatever they encounter. It is also obvious that they are gripped with wonder in the presence of every new reality they encounter. Cavalletti points out that this fascination with the concrete, even in the youngest children, begins to take us out of ourselves through the vehicle of wonder, which is evoked by “an attentive gaze at reality.” Few would dispute that this is the way young children operate – but we can often forget that older children and even adults never really lose this capacity to be “awed” in the presence of beauty and drawn into a transcendent reality. For human beings, the careful contemplation of concrete objects appears to direct us to a spiritual reality beyond ourselves.

This characteristic surely points us to the genuinely human starting point of religious education – attending to the needs of the body through the senses. If we circumvent this step, we are simply not attending to human nature as it is constituted. There is a well-known axiom of good teaching practice, expressed simply as “concrete to abstract.” This has also been the understanding of the Church in relation to the sacramental system. In every sacrament, by means of the senses, the human person is drawn into a spiritual reality beyond oneself. If religious education is to be successful, it cannot neglect or omit this essential starting point at any stage of development. The bodily senses have a crucial role to play. For example, in presenting the sacraments, it is usually best to begin with a careful, tactile study of the material elements found in the sacramental rites. Each of these, in its own way, draws the participant into a particular real-

ity made present in the sacrament.¹ Any number of instances can be cited in support of using this process as the starting point, but there is a particularly poignant story told by Cavalletti in *The Religious Potential of the Child* concerning the use of a simple set of materials – cruets for pouring water and wine into a chalice.

“We will never forget seven-year-old Massimo, who continued to repeat this exercise for so long a period of time. The catechist, thinking that he was doing it out of laziness, came up to him several times to introduce him to some other work; but Massimo’s facial expression was intent and rapt and he was trying to explain the meaning of what he was doing as he repeated the various actions... Finally – it was almost at the end of the year – he managed to say: ‘A few drops of water and a lot of wine, because we must lose ourselves in Jesus’... In the end Massimo had known how to express it with words worthy of a mystic.”²

Religious Education for the Heart

It is almost a truism in religious education that the whole project will be futile if we fail to reach the heart – but how? Any teacher knows that it is impossible to force anyone to make a “heart response” – this is an intensely personal decision. Some may try, using coercive, manipulative techniques to get an *apparent* response, but this will ultimately fail. In any case, it betrays the respect for genuine freedom that must lie at the heart of human existence. Yet, this does not mean that we should simply abandon the field altogether. Rather, we need to be aware that we are *leading* the child to a place of encounter with Christ, who will choose the right moment and circumstances for this meeting. This is quite different from teaching them the multiplication table.

Sofia Cavalletti has some extraordinary insights into this matter. She was herself a professional Scripture scholar at La Sapienza University in Rome. When asked to prepare a child for First Communion, she had hitherto no experience with children, so she did the only thing she knew – she began to share the Scriptures with him. The reaction of the child was something she was not prepared for. Even after two hours, the child remained deeply moved and wanted to go deeper. Cavalletti had uncovered one of the key ways in which the heart is won over to God – the Scriptures themselves.

A caution must be issued here. This cannot be used as some kind of technique – Cavalletti is not suggesting that if the children are forced to listen to the Bible, their hearts will be won over. Quite the contrary; any force of this kind is more likely to turn the child in the opposite direction. Nevertheless, if the Scriptures are offered as the place to go in order to build on and explain the experi-

¹ The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* gives quite explicit descriptions of the particular realities that the elements of the sacramental rite stand for in the case of the sacrament of Baptism.

² Sofia Cavalletti, *The Religious Potential of the Child* (Chicago: Catechesis of the Good Shepherd Publications, 1992), p. 92.

ences of wonder that have been brought about through the senses, they are invested with an mysterious attractive power. The child encounters there a *person* rather than a sequence of words. The Holy Spirit is enabled to complete the task of revealing Jesus. Time and again, this approach has shown its worth. Cavalletti and her collaborators have already spent more than sixty years determining exactly which Scriptural passages seem to touch the hearts of children – and indeed, adults. In order to enhance the natural processes, the initial presentations can be given using wooden models set within simple dioramas to engage the senses and create the scene.

Ultimately, however, it is the actual words of the Scriptures themselves that seem to have the effect on children's hearts. Like most well-meaning adults, Cavalletti began telling Biblical stories using her own words or those in a children's Bible in order to simplify the message and "get it across." She quickly discovered that this approach did not seem to have the same effect. Eventually, she decided that it was not up to her to simplify the Scriptures to instruct their minds – something (or in her words, *someone*) else was at work here. Just as the children had been enchanted by their contemplation of real objects, so too were they enchanted by the "real" words. It was after these experiences that Cavalletti articulated the principle of how the Scriptures must be presented to those lacking in experience – "rich food, but not too much of it!" Children were to be allowed to read the Scriptures for themselves, but given the time to slowly reflect on passages that captured their imaginations. This could mean a single verse or a more extended passage, depending on their interest.

The use of the Scriptures at this level does not usually involve complex intellectual study of the Bible and its principles of interpretation. At this point, we are not trying to create scholars – this is a task for a more advanced stage of development, and too great an emphasis on such a complex intellectual task can actually get in the way of the encounter of the heart. It is a relatively easy matter to correct false impressions that may be picked up when reading in this way and only minimal guidance is necessary at this point. My own teaching of children has verified this approach. When children are allowed to follow the natural processes of human development – starting with the senses, and are then offered the Scriptures, they usually seize the opportunity to move in freedom to a deeper relationship with God. Many teachers will confirm that the Bibles are among the most popular items available when children are left free to choose. Children go to them again and again and spend more and more time reading passages that interest them. They use the Scriptures for their intended purpose: to know and love Christ. Indeed, to echo the words of St Jerome: "Ignorance of Scripture is ignorance of Christ."

Religious Education for the Mind

The current consensus of educational theory shares a significant insight with the views of St Thomas Aquinas, namely, that human beings construct their understanding by moving from concrete realities to abstract concepts, words and propositions. St Thomas, of course, goes further. In this view, the whole material universe has a purpose – to reflect some vestige of its creator. By engaging with it, we are able to build up a basic picture of who God is. Once we have engaged with reality, we form words and propositions that describe the experience. This indicates the proper place for the mind in religious education – as the synthesis point for describing what the senses and the heart have already discovered. The words then lead us back to the original encounter and to any subsequent reflections we have had about it. The words used to describe objects, events and reflections are a means of allowing us to participate mentally in those things; they connect us with our own memories and with a cultural tradition that we may not have personally experienced.

Perhaps a common example will illustrate this best. Consider the initial teaching of reading in one of our first grade classrooms. Children arrive at school with a wealth of existing experience in their oral language – drawn from the data of their senses and from things that they have already loved. *Playground* for example, is a word that is likely to conjure up for them a whole world of happy associations and experiences. *Mum* is much more than a word of three letters! So even at the age of five, all three components of human learning have begun to operate effectively and are bringing about an integration of body, heart and mind. Yet it must be clear that there is also a normal sequence that brings this about – the body-heart-mind sequence.

Often in religious education in the past, we have made the mistake of confusing the final stage (clarifying mental propositions) as the principal task, or even as the necessary starting point, rather than seeing how it should take its proper place within the overall scheme of things. At other times, we have reacted against the sterility of an overly intellectual approach by rejecting it altogether – a outcome that can actually prevent participants from arriving at the truth. Undoubtedly, it is essential to connect children with the authentic tradition of their Church and to provide them with clear teaching regarding what the Church holds to be true. But the reality of God is far greater than the propositions written about Him – even though these be true and necessary for us to know. A comment from Pope Benedict XVI (writing as Cardinal Ratzinger) endorses this view:

“Human words, at any rate, the great fundamental words, always carry within them a whole history of human experiences, of human questioning, understanding and suffering of reality. The great theme words of the Bible bring with them into the process of revelation also, in acceptance and contradiction, the fundamental

experiences of mankind. So in order to understand the Bible aright, one must always also turn to question the history preserved in its words.”³

By the same token, it is beyond dispute that appropriate texts must eventually be committed to memory, as noted forcefully by Pope John Paul II in *Catechesis Tradendae*.

“We must be realists. The blossoms, if we may call them that, of faith and piety do not grow in the desert places of a memory – less catechesis. What is essential is that the texts that are memorized must at the same time be taken in and gradually understood in depth, in order to become a source of Christian life on the personal level and the community level.”⁴

What must be kept always in view, however, is the fact that these texts cannot stand in isolation from the body or the heart of those whom they are meant to serve. Religious Education for the mind will always work better if it is preceded first by suitable sensate experience and then a reflective engagement of the heart.

Religious Education and Moral Formation

Moral formation carries very clear implications when looked at in light of the Theology of the Body and Trinitarian anthropology. Too often, this area can be seen as an extension of the philosophical study of ethics. It is far more than this and just as in other areas of religious development, it involves the sequential interplay of body, heart and mind.

The youngest children are not capable of living their lives in accordance with self-chosen moral principles. It can be quite amusing to watch young parents in a shopping centre trying to reason with a two year old in terms of the moral principles they should observe! It may sound surprising, but, once again, the starting point for moral formation is the body. From the time children can walk, wise parents will be ensuring that they acquire good habits – that their actions will be limited by moderation in every area of their existence. Their parents will ensure that they eat properly, speak courteously, move safely, tell the truth, treat others fairly and so on. In none of these areas are they yet capable of acting out of intellectually derived moral principles – they are simply trained to respond in the appropriate way. Parents may even “walk them through” the steps that they are meant to follow.

The great Italian educator, Maria Montessori, developed a wide variety of teaching tools to assist in this basic moral formation of the body. She referred to it as “practical life” activities, and “training in grace and courtesy”. These activities consisted principally in learning how to care for their immediate environment by themselves – tidying their table, cleaning up after themselves and so

³ Joseph Ratzinger, *Pilgrim Fellowship of Faith* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2005), p. 71.

⁴ John Paul II, *Catechesi Tradendae* (Rome 1979), no. 55.

on. She observed that these basic tasks involving the body were found to be the basis of future moral action. It is extraordinarily difficult for the mind to direct a body which has not been "habituated" in this way to carry out virtuous acts. Those who have missed this training in childhood must travel a difficult road of ascetical effort later in their lives if they are to learn the same lesson – that the body must eventually do what the mind and the heart identify as good and true. What comes easily to a child can only be acquired by serious and sustained effort in adolescence or adulthood.

Once this task of the body has laid the appropriate foundation, it will be time to move on to the Christian motive for moral activity – love. This, obviously, takes us into the realm of the heart. Only those who love deeply are genuinely capable of sustained moral effort. At around about the age of six years, children become capable of understanding that there can be necessary rules that underpin the way they should act. At this point, they will become focused on rules and regulations about how to behave, about what is fair. This is a natural development, and should be allowed to run its course in a way that allows them to work through to a more mature approach that allows them to resolve the tension between justice and compassion in appropriate ways.

Parallel with this development, however, is another deep need. Those who would acquire moral virtue need to be given the opportunity to fall in love with God – without coercion or manipulation. The moment when this mysterious personal development takes place is not in the hands of the teacher, or even the parent. It can be said from the experience of many who work with children, however, that there will be a myriad of opportunities that seem to present themselves for the purpose at this time. Often these opportunities are associated with the child's preparation for First Communion. While this development cannot be forced, it appears that it can be aided by offering inspiring, beautiful stories about what human beings can achieve at their best when they act from a motive of love. Once again, the Scriptures offer many opportunities for this as do the lives of the saints or other literature. Most of all, however, it is clear that those who are most likely to be capable of the kind of love that manifests itself in moral action are those who have been loved themselves. This kind of love is the second (and perhaps the most important) foundation of genuine moral agency. "If you love me, you will keep my commandments" (John 14:15).

While moral action appears to be primarily an activity of the will, it is undeniable that in the fully developed human being, moral reasoning – an activity of the mind has a significant role to play. The relationship of intellect and will in the field of moral action has been widely explored and is well summarised by St Thomas Aquinas in the *Summa Theologica*.⁵ The study of ethics in

⁵ St Thomas Aquinas, ST I-I, 82, 4.

secondary school is a valuable activity – if it is based on the proper foundation of authentic human moral development, starting with the body and moving to the heart before reaching the mind. If, however, it is detached from love or made impossible for individuals because of their inability to make their bodies do what their mind perceives to be right, then there is a problem to be worked through. The educational theorist, Jean Piaget and his disciple Lawrence Kohlberg located moral agency entirely within the intellect – *if you know the right thing, then you will do the right thing*. A vast body of evidence drawn from human experience disproves this baseless optimism. To build an intellectual superstructure on an inadequate foundation will never succeed. If, however, moral reasoning takes its proper place as the mental culmination of stages that necessarily precede it, then clearly it will be the crowning glory of moral agency and allow us to perceive more and more ways of entering into the life of the Trinity by the way we think and act.

The Nature of Faith. *Supernatural Gift and Free Assent*

Although it is not directly connected with the Theology of the Body and Trinitarian Anthropology, one of the greatest challenges currently facing religious education is the widespread failure to recognise the double dimension of faith itself. G.K. Chesterton has insightfully described a key paradox in Christian thought and practice:

“Paganism declared that virtue was in a balance; Christianity declared it was in a conflict: the collision of two passions apparently opposite. Of course they were not really inconsistent; but they were such that it was hard to hold simultaneously.”⁶

One manifestation of the conflict is the way in which faith must be held, since it necessarily involves two apparently contradictory dimensions held in dynamic tension. On the one hand, faith is an undeserved gift of God – a theological virtue conferred in the Sacrament of Baptism. On the other hand, it also involves a genuine human assent, freely given. The insights of Benedict XVI shed some light on this for us. Pope Benedict points out that the act of faith comes about in a different way from the act of knowing.

“[N]ot through the degree of evidence bringing the process of thought to its conclusion, but by an act of will, in connection with which the thought process remains open and still under way. Here, the degree of evidence does not turn the thought into assent; rather the will commands assent, even though the thought process is still under way.”⁷

He recognised the difficulties in this approach, and acknowledged the accusations of philosophers such as Karl Jaspers and Martin Heidegger that faith,

⁶ G. K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (London: John Lane, 1908), p. 99.

⁷ Joseph Ratzinger, *Pilgrim Fellowship of Faith*, p. 23.

by pre-supposing the answers, leaves no room for questions.⁸ In answer, Benedict cites Pascal's observation: "The heart has its reasons that reason does not know". He noted that we are able to give the assent of faith not because of the depth of our own inquiries or the quality of our evidence, but:

"because the will – the heart – has been touched by God, affected by him. Through being touched in this way, the will knows that even what is not clear to the reason is true. Assent is produced by the will, not by the understanding's own direct insight: the particular kind of freedom of choice involved in the decision of faith rests on this... The will (the heart), therefore, lights the way for the understanding and draws it with it into assent."⁹

In other words, a religious education class must deal with a very different intellectual process than that involved in a science class. Blessed John Henry Newman brought a great deal of clarity to this interface between faith as a gift and faith as an intellectual process of assent to mysteries beyond human understanding in his classic work *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent*. Here, Newman described three mental acts associated with the holding of propositions of any kind – doubt, inference and assent. All three, he insisted were appropriate human behaviour.

"We do but fulfil our nature in doubting, inferring and assenting; and our duty is not to abstain from the exercise of any function of our nature, but to do what is in itself right rightly."¹⁰

Newman draws attention to the fact that, in the case of revealed religion, the holding of certain doctrinal propositions indicates the presence or absence of faith itself. To take up a position of doubt in relation to settled doctrine makes one a sceptic. To give such doctrines a merely conditional acceptance (inference) indicates the position of the philosopher. To offer assent (whether or not one understands it fully, as yet) is to be a believer. Baptised Catholics are believers, having received the gift of faith. To position them in such a way that they are encouraged to take some other stance (either doubt or inference) is to deliberately undermine their status.

Newman makes a further distinction between inquiry and investigation. He insists that inquiry is inconsistent with assent, since one who inquires is in doubt about where the truth lies. Hence, a believer cannot at the same time be an inquirer.

"Thus it is sometimes spoken of as a hardship that a Catholic is not allowed to inquire into the truth of his creed; – of course he cannot, if he would retain the name of believer. He cannot be both inside and outside of the Church at once. It is merely common sense to tell him that, if he is seeking, he has not found. If seek-

⁸ Id., p. 20.

⁹ Id.

¹⁰ John Henry Newman, *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 5.

ing includes doubting, and doubting excludes believing, then the Catholic who sets about inquiring thereby declares that he is not a Catholic. He has already lost faith.”¹¹

In closing the door to inquiry in matters of religious faith, Newman was certainly not advocating fideism or anti-intellectualism of any kind. He simply made the necessary distinction between the way in which believers and non-believers need to engage with the data of revelation and faith. He believed that educated Catholics have an obligation to try to understand what they believe and discern the reasons underpinning this belief. To use his own words:

“inquiry implies doubt and investigation does not imply it; and that those who assent to a doctrine or fact may without inconsistency investigate its credibility, though they cannot literally inquire about its truth... in the case of educated minds, investigations into the argumentative proof of the things to which they have given their assent is an obligation or rather a necessity.”¹²

On the other hand, Newman saw the dangers involved in encouraging those who had been poorly instructed, or ill-equipped to assess subtle arguments to place themselves in danger through deliberate exposure to such approaches without proper preparation. Perhaps we could include in this group those who have not been properly prepared in the body (through the senses) or the heart (by means of a personal relationship with Christ founded in the Scriptures and the life of prayer).

“[Some] who, though they be weak in faith... put themselves in the way of losing it by unnecessarily listening to objections. Moreover, there are minds, undoubtedly, with whom at all times to question a truth is to make it questionable, and to investigate is equivalent to inquiring; and again, there may be beliefs so sacred or so delicate that, if I may use the metaphor, they will not wash without shrinking and losing colour.”¹³

In the current circumstances obtaining in religious education classrooms – particularly in secondary schools – these truths constitute a challenge. Much of the school system encourages a method of inquiry that can best be described as systematic scepticism. If such an approach finds its way into a religious education class, it will effectively undermine and denigrate the dimension of faith as a gift, and attempt to evaluate it using inappropriate criteria. Perhaps it is time to subject this kind of critical thinking to a process of critical evaluation to determine whether it is effectively performing a useful role in religious education!

¹¹ Id., p. 184.

¹² Id., p. 185.

¹³ Id., pp. 184-185.

Conclusion

This article has sought to draw attention to some of the issues facing contemporary religious education in terms of the theological turn brought about by a renewed emphasis on Trinitarian anthropology. The needs of contemporary religious education, of course, are not exhausted by these six issues. For example, that any authentic religious education in the Catholic tradition must promote a disposition which looks not only inward at one's own spiritual and physical needs, but also outward – to the needs of others. It is now widely accepted that this outward focus must find expression in an orientation towards New Evangelisation and social justice, in authentic relationships, and it must give appropriate place to the role of the community and the family if the project is to be successful. Clearly, further developments in this field lie ahead of us.

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SUMMARY

The author starts his considerations with a remark on the human person as a unique kind of reality – an embodied being with a Trinitarian structure. He claims that we must account for human nature as it is and educate the human person accordingly. He focuses on six key areas which need further exploration for the renewal of religious education: (1) religious education and the human person, (2) religious education for the body, (3) religious education for the heart, (4) religious education for the mind, (5) religious education and moral formation, and (6) the nature of faith.

KEY WORDS: embodiment, Trinitarian anthropology, religious education.