

Theology of Education in the Second Vatican Council's *Gravissimum Educationis*

Stuart Nicolson

Abstract

Theology of education regards the growth in the journey with God and being with God and others. *Gravissimum Educationis* (GE) calls for moral learning in education, and specifically Christian education so Christians grow in God, become more Christ-like (theosis) and an active participant in society, thus bringing Christianity to the world. The document also encourages different theological means of communicating the faith to educate Christians and reach out to others. This paper identifies both of these themes in GE, focusing on the early sections of the document.

Keywords

theology of education; Gravissimum Educationis; education; theosis; Christian education; communicating the faith

Introduction

This paper will consider theology of education as the relationship between God and man, where they come together in leading man to become more like God, as a means of readying him for eternity and being in full communion with his Creator. One source for developing the understanding of this relationship and how it forms education is the Second Vatican Council, particularly the first few sections of the document *Gravissimum Educationis* (GE). While this is clearly of its time (1965) with some themes, it looks forward in ways that continue to be apt and even increasingly urgent today. This paper in particular identifies two important themes in the early sections of the document yet have been somewhat overlooked in the decades following the Council, namely theosis (cf. Mt 5:48) and the communication of the faith, which are perceptible as following Christ's two-fold commandment (Mt 22:37-38).

Theology and Education

If philosophy of education considers the 'why' of education (see Hábl 2021, 60) then the theology of education is the 'who', not in an anthropocentric sense but in the relationship between God and his creation, specifically man. Considering that God is love and thus seeks the best for the other then the growth and development of the person regarding goodness,

beauty, truth, and unity, through education (*educare, educere*¹) is the means of teaching and drawing man out of the darkness he is born into – not really a blank slate but with plenty of potential for growth in so many ways – and to orient his life towards the transcendentals, becoming more like God (theosis, divinisation) who is the ultimate goodness, beauty, truth, and unity.

Thus, theology of education regards how God and man cooperate in different ways to ready man to be with God in eternity. This teleological purpose in education has, of course, the long-term view. Within that range of what is between ‘now and at the hour of our death’, there is a deeply complex and very multi-faceted process taking place, one which we are only somewhat aware of, whether we consider anyone’s own personal awareness or as a theoretician, or a practitioner, or all three. For beyond our human understanding is not only God’s ways of nurturing us, with or without particular grace (his ability to bring good out of bad and to draw the greatest sinner to him), but also his purpose both regarding each person and the ‘bigger picture’.

There is nothing for God to learn in our education, only for us persons, but there is everything for him to go through with us, as he walks with us on our journeys of development – to him or away from him. What is that journey, why should we take it with him, should it be taken with others also, and why should education be grounded in God, thus placing theology of education as the cornerstone in spite of the majority of directions of travel in education for centuries now? By looking through the lens of theology of education, we can find some answers in the first few sections of GE, which are considered briefly in this paper.

Defining Education Theologically

The Introduction of GE was especially important because of its time and context: it was an acknowledgement of the progress (good or bad) in society in certain areas and the need for the Church to have a voice. The maturation of modernism was in full flow, where rights and opportunities were increasing, at the cost of crumbling traditions including families and communities in order to enable industrialised societies. GE’s Introduction opens by referring to ‘the social progress of this age’ and how the Council ‘has considered with care how extremely important education is in the life of man’, while pointing out that education’s ‘influence ever grows’ regarding the ‘social progress’. Thus, education is important in not only the development of individuals but also society as a whole: if you control education, you control the direction of society to at least a significant extent. In this sense, education is the means of supplying future workers/participants for the progress and purpose of society.

However, subsequently, after recognising the growth and spread of education ‘everywhere’, GE recognises that despite ‘Mighty attempts [...] to obtain education for all’, a great many remain without ‘even rudimentary training’ (GE Introduction). Then follows the first element of theology of education: ‘so many others lack a suitable education in which truth and love are

¹ Both roots of ‘education’ are intended generally here. For more, see, for example, in the *Online Etymology Dictionary* under ‘educate’.

developed together' (GE Introduction). This emphasises that the education of persons needs to be much more than simple training of basic skills, whether functioning as a simple tool or machine or calculating complex accountancy. Thus, the Council document calls early on for truth and love to be embedded in education.

Recognising the Church's task of proclaiming salvation and restoring all things in Christ, the Council states that 'the Church must be concerned with the whole of man's life, even the secular part of it insofar as it has a bearing on his heavenly calling' (GE Introduction) and references here Pope John XXIII and other Council documents. While this regards the need for the Church to be more 'in the world', regarding education it encourages the recognition that education should not merely be a means to a worldly end but that there is the sacred and the secular need to develop each person in an integrated way, ideally effectively being 'in the world but not of the world'. The following sentence states a theological-educational foundation for Catholics: 'Therefore [the Church] has a role in the progress and development of education' (GE Introduction). As the document is speaking both to Catholics on behalf of the Church, declaring its fundamental importance in the development of the faithful, as well as a declaration to society as a whole, this is also the Council stating its role as a significant authority and contributor to wider society through education, amongst other things. Thus, GE establishes the Church's role in education, at least theologically.

GE 1 then defines the right to education for all persons as 'inalienable' through having the 'dignity of a human being', thus education is defined as integral to the human being: every person has the right to be led out of a lack of development, low understanding, and from ignorance to a better place by others. Developing GE's Introduction, the context of this is 'in harmony with their fraternal association with other peoples in the fostering of true unity and peace on earth' (GE 1). Then it is clarified that the Church values both visions for education: true education aims at the formation of the human person in the pursuit of his ultimate end and of the good of the societies of which, as man, he is a member, and in whose obligations, as an adult, he will share. Thus, man is not merely his own growth/education/theosis project but one who participates appropriately in society.

The first section then expands on the societal role of the well-educated person. Educated through the inclusion of modern developments in teaching, the aim is for the young to 'develop harmoniously their physical, moral and intellectual endowments so that they may gradually acquire a mature sense of responsibility in striving endlessly to form their own lives properly and in pursuing true freedom as they surmount the vicissitudes of life with courage and constancy' (GE 1). For theology of education, this means particularly moral and intellectual development leading to living responsibly, with freedom, and approaching life's challenges appropriately. GE explains that this includes relationships with others, from appropriate sexual education to learning how to participate in the community, in groups and organisations, and in dialogue with others while being 'willing to do their best to promote the common good' (GE 1). This meeting of moral theology and practical theology has since been expanded on significantly by the Church in, for example, the *Compendium of Social Catholic Doctrine*, being an area of particular importance for the laity (*Apostolicam Actuositatem* (AA) 31).

GE 1 also recognises that the young have ‘a right to be motivated to appraise moral values with a right conscience, to embrace them with a personal adherence, together with a deeper knowledge and love of God’ (GE 1). The Church therefore considers it imperative that the young are led to an understanding of the importance and goodness of having good moral understanding and the desire to apply it. Development of this is connected to the development of a relationship with God through growing in knowledge and love. Responsibility for this development – a ‘sacred right’ – in the young is first given to all in authority in society and in particular in charge of education and then also to ‘the sons of the Church’ (GE 1).

Therefore, education is not only for utilitarian means or the selfish pursuit of one’s growth but the development of the person participating in society, as a member of society, growing in God’s ways of morality.

‘Christian Education’

The above is the section title of GE 2. This brief section is the most theological, immediately defining the right of a Christian – through baptism – to a Christian education. A specifically Christian education is then described, being more than the general education the Church calls for all to receive.

It is the most serious obligation of the ‘pastors of souls’ that all receive a Christian education, which is:

that the baptized, while they are gradually introduced the knowledge of the mystery of salvation, become ever more aware of the gift of Faith they have received, and that they learn in addition how to worship God the Father in spirit and truth (cf. John 4:23) especially in liturgical action, and be conformed in their personal lives according to the new man created in justice and holiness of truth (Eph. 4:22-24); also that they develop into perfect manhood, to the mature measure of the fullness of Christ (cf. Eph. 4:13) and strive for the growth of the Mystical Body; moreover, that aware of their calling, they learn not only how to bear witness to the hope that is in them (cf. Peter 3:15²) but also how to help in the Christian formation of the world that takes place when natural powers viewed in the full consideration of man redeemed by Christ contribute to the good of the whole society.
(GE 2)

Each statement here is rich in theological depth and deserves extensive exploration beyond the scope of this paper, which merely offers a brief overview while identifying the themes of theosis and communication of the faith. Each quote below is from GE 2 unless stated.

First, the educational process is shown in theological understanding: more ‘knowledge of the mystery of salvation’ is connected with increasingly being ‘aware of the gift of Faith’ given to the faithful. Thus, a relationship with God and our readiness for eternal life with him is developing in the person, leading to the growing desire to be with him and like him.

² The online document on the Vatican website erroneously records this reference; it should be 1 Peter 3:15.

Second, connected to this, the Christian learns an important part of this relationship: how to worship God ‘in spirit and truth’, which is Christ’s prophecy to the Samaritan woman regarding post-Temple worship. The Church emphasises that the worship learned is to be ‘especially in liturgical action’, which is written of in the Council’s *Sacrosanctum Concilium* (see, for example, 48, 115).

Third, Christian education is a conversion process (see Eph 4:22-24), where the person discards the old and takes on the new; the participation of the faithful with knowledge by realising it in their lives is the journey to God, to be more like him. Two theological elements are emphasised – justice and holiness of truth – which are not characteristic ideas in the then modern (nearly postmodern) world. The process of becoming more like God ‘in but not of the world’ is clear.

Fourth, the aim that the faithful ‘develop into perfect manhood, to the mature measure of the fullness of Christ’ clearly describes theosis, with a teleological lens that points Christian development in the direction of becoming as Christ-like as possible. The Eph 4 reference speaks to both the individual as well as the Christian community.

Fifth, this community – ‘the Mystical Body’ – is what the Christian must learn to ‘strive for’. For God is love, which is the opposite of aloneness, and the teleological task given to the faithful is of participating in the building of the Kingdom of God, being the purpose and meaning of the focus and hard work of the Christian life.

Sixth, the Christian needs to develop awareness and learning in order to represent God to others. On the surface, the reference to Peter’s Epistle, which calls us to be prepared to explain our hope in Christ in a Christian manner, is unclear: to ‘bear witness’ here is from *apologia* – to explain, defend. However, while the term ‘apologetics’ is not used explicitly in the Council documents, its use is called for also in *Lumen Gentium* 10, *Dei Verbum* 8, *Christus Dominus* 13, and especially *Dignitatis Humanae* 14 (cf. Siniscalchi 2016, 18–19; Nicolson 2018, 415). The Council’s focus is significantly pastoral and it calls the faithful – ‘the apostolate of the laity’ (AA 1) – to ‘bear witness’ to Christ when dealing with those in the Church, other Christians, and non-Christians of good will (AA 27). The formation, that is, education, to participate in this role is described in AA 28-31, reflecting the first part of the Peter’s call: ‘be prepared’. This return to a purer meaning of apologetics, thus moving away from a more formal and authoritative style, is described in AA 31:

Since in our times, different forms of materialism are spread far and wide even among Catholic [sic], the laity should not only learn doctrine more diligently, especially those main points which are the subjects of controversy, but should also exhibit the witness of an evangelical life in contrast to all forms of materialism.

Thus, GE 2 amongst other council documents calls for what may be regarded as a *ressourcement* of apologetics: be prepared through education in the faith and communicate this to others in a Christian manner (1Pt 3:15-16), which is to bear witness to one’s faith.

Seventh, the Christian is called also to assist in ‘the Christian formation of the world’ which occurs when in our humanity we understand ourselves and our relationship with God, cooperating with God’s grace which benefits all of society. Thus, man with God builds, creates, the world in the best possible way, imbuing it with all that God wills, which recalls that God created this world for man (cf. Gen 1:28) and it is our task to cooperate with God in it.

Therefore, GE calls on the person to develop through education to become an active Christian who grows in his relationship with God while reaching out to others in this world, and whose teleological direction of personal growth sees him as a medium of God’s action in this world while becoming more ready for the eternal Kingdom. And as the commandment to love God is being fulfilled, the second, to love one’s neighbour is being accomplished in reaching out to others. For through Christian education – preparation – one bears witness to one’s faith and God’s presence grows in the affairs of mankind and mankind becomes more formed in Christian ways. What is clear, though, is that man is called through and by his education to participate in this world, bringing Godliness to the world. For as the apostles were sent out, so too is the Christian usually called to be a Christian presence in this world’s activity and dealings, as the light and salt of the world (Mt 5:13-16).

It is with regard to this that Christian education in any form should be assessed: the growth of the person, becoming more Christ-like to participate in this world and be ready for the next.

Sources of Education

Regarding who provides this education is mainly explored in GE 3; further GE sections focus more on implementation, which is beyond our scope here. Parents are especially called to grow in their faith and understanding and educate their children in this. The document states that they ‘must create a family atmosphere animated by love and respect for God and man, in which the well-rounded personal and social education of children is fostered’ (GE 3). The family is fundamental for Christian growth, being ‘the first school of the social virtues that every society needs’ (GE 3). Thus, the cycle continues, parents bringing up the next generation of Christians, many of whom will become parents, who in turn should ‘recognize the inestimable importance a truly Christian family has for the life and progress of God’s own people’ (GE 3).

Wider society is called to ensure these rights of parents and families, intervening appropriately if necessary, and where possible providing schooling in line with parents’ requirements. The Church ‘has the responsibility of announcing the way of salvation to all men, of communicating the life of Christ to those who believe, and, in her unflinching solicitude, of assisting men to be able to come to the fullness of this life’ (GE 3). Later sections of GE look into different types of schools and the role of academics, etc. Of particular interest here, Catholic schools should be open to non-Catholics, being a type of mission reaching out to others, even as evangelisation through action and example (GE 9).

The Council document considers catechesis – handing on the faith – as integral to educating the faithful: it ‘enlightens and strengthens the faith, nourishes life according to the spirit of Christ, leads to intelligent and active participation in the liturgical mystery and gives

motivation for apostolic activity' (GE 4). With a strong and knowledgeable foundation, the Christian develops in understanding the faith, becoming an effective participant in both Church and society. While older styles of teaching 'the Catechism' did not suit all learners, it still provided some grounding for the faithful. Educational developments since the 1960s can easily be integrated into catechesis without it losing its particular place within education.

Three particular educational elements of communicating Christian ideas – evangelisation, apologetics, and catechesis (Levada 2010; Nicolson 2018, 418–9) – are included in GE, albeit not always explicitly. Evangelisation, which begins with bearing witness (*Ad Gentes* (AG) 11) including educating (AG 12), is meant here in the sense of AG 13, where a person is called to learn of God's love, salvation, awareness of sin, etc., thus to conversion. Catechesis is the teaching of the faith to a Christian, which leads to further growth, including but not only in a school (AG 17). Apologetics can include elements of both of these – answering doubts or misunderstandings in possible converts and committed believers – and also respond to anything from questions to accusations from anyone (Stackhouse 2006, 118). All three of these play some role at times in one's Christian education and also in participating in the Christian life, such as explaining attendance at church rather than going shopping or supporting a friend weighed down with life. Indeed, with examples such as a Pew Research Center survey showing less than 30% of U.S. Catholics believe the Church's teaching on the Eucharist and around half don't know what the teaching is (Smith 2019), all three elements are important, including the re-evangelisation of those poorly catechised.

GE ends with appreciation shown to 'priests, Religious men and women, and the laity who by their evangelical self-dedication are devoted to the noble work of education' (GE Conclusion). All have different but important roles in education, 'imbuing their students with the spirit of Christ, to strive to excel in pedagogy and the pursuit of knowledge' (GE Conclusion). Christians should 'not merely advance the internal renewal of the Church but preserve and enhance its beneficent influence upon today's world, especially the intellectual world' (GE Conclusion). Therefore, GE calls for educators – parents, clergy, teachers – to provide education that continues the Church's role of bringing up Christians who will reach out to others, grow in their effective Christian participation in the world, and be a part of the 'Christian formation of the world' (GE 2).

Conclusion

Theology of education can be regarded as the relationship between God and man, where the latter grows in becoming more like the former, thus preparing for the eternal Kingdom. Therefore, the Church calls in GE for education for everyone that both develops the person as effective in society economically but also socially, including morals, thus also somewhat the transcendentals. However, Christian education must be more: developing the Christian both as a member of society who can help form the world and as one becoming more Christ-like and ready for heaven (theosis). To spread and develop the Christian message, GE encourages the use of three Christian educational ways of communicating the faith that have been underused since the Council – evangelisation, apologetics, catechesis – and each can

contribute significantly to Christian education, thus theology of education. In this way, through education, we can participate in Christ's two-fold commandment being fulfilled.

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Stuart Nicolson, M.A.

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8647-8176>

University of South Bohemia, Faculty of Theology

Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies

Kněžská 8, CZ-370 01 Č. Budějovice

snicolson@tf.jcu.cz