

On The Education of Young Men and Women

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There are people who think that it is wonderful to have a mind that is quick, clever, ready to see pros and cons, eager to discuss, and to discuss anything, and who believe that such a mind is that to which university education must give scope—regardless of *what* is thought about, *what* is discussed, and *how important* the matter is.

Jacques Maritain, *Education at the Crossroads*¹

As an atheist, I preferred metaphysics because it is the supreme science, the ultimate crowning of reason. As a Catholic, I love it still more because it allows us to have access to theology, to realise the harmonious and fertile union of reason and faith. It was not enough for me to live, I wanted a reason for living and moral principles which were based on an absolutely certain knowledge. . . . Among all the sciences, it is metaphysics which, after all, seems to me best suited for a feminine mind with a gift for abstraction.

Raïssa Maritain, *Raïssa's Journals*²

I.

Jacques Maritain wrote one book (*Education at the Crossroads*) and several essays (collected in *The Education of Man*³) on education. He consid-

¹ Jacques Maritain, *Education at the Crossroads* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1943), p. 53.

² *Raïssa's Journals*, presented by Jacques Maritain (Albany, New York: Magi Books, 1974), pp. 110–111.

ered education to be an art, perhaps in its own way the finest of arts because its object, when perfected, was the most beautiful of all the earthly realities. The closest analogy to teaching, according to Maritain, is medicine.⁴ Neither medicine nor education creates its respective subject matter or what it is to be healthy or complete once it exists. Each seeks to lead or guide a body or soul to what it ought to be when it functions normally. Once in its normal status, the healthy body or the healthy soul should be let alone to do those myriads of things that healthy minds and bodies do. Given that the body is healthy, it, that is the human incarnate person informing it, simply lives, does the things that healthy human beings do. When man, body and soul, is educated, he again simply lives, does the wondrous things free and healthy human beings can do or, more darkly, freely does the things they ought not to do. Knowledge as such, as Aristotle tells us, does not automatically mean that we will be virtuous.⁵

Education prepares our given faculties and capacities to do what they are made or created to do. Man does not cause or have control over what he is. What he is, is given to him by nature. Man does not make man to be man, Aristotle says, but taking him from nature makes him to be good man. We are astonished that such a being as ourselves exists in the first place. The drama of human existence, however, has to do with what this same human being, among his fellows, does with this given existence, because he can both know and rule himself in a curious freedom that enables him also to reject, revolt against what he is. The human good includes the choice of the human good. The human being can choose not to be what it is designed, purposed to be. The risk of human existence is its capacity to reject human existence.

Maritain holds that the teacher is indeed a cause in the education of youth, but an instrumental cause, necessary for the most part, to be sure, but not the principal cause of education. The student is the principal cause of his own education. Interestingly, Maritain shows a certain persistent, optimistic sympathy for students, not untypical, I suppose, of those who have no children of their own. He thinks everyone can be educated in the important things—not only can be but should be. He is, no doubt, willing to

³ Jacques Maritain, *The Education of Man*, eds. Donald and Idella Gallagher (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1962). Most of Maritain's lectures and essays on education are also published in a French edition, *Pour une philosophie de l'éducation* (Paris: Fayard, 1959).

⁴ Maritain, *Education at the Crossroads*, pp. 30–31.

⁵ *Nicomachean Ethics* II.5 1105b2.

admit a small place for strict scholastic discipline. We have all heard the expression "spare the rod and spoil the child." Maritain evidently referred to this saying in his own attitude to physical discipline. "Education by the rod," he affirms, "is positively bad education." He then adds, amusingly,

if from a love of paradox I were to say something on its behalf, I should only observe that it (the rod) has been able, actually, to produce some strong personalities, because it is difficult to kill the principle of spontaneity in living beings, and because this principle occasionally develops more powerfully when it reacts and sometimes revolts against constraint, fear and punishment than when everything is made easy, lenient and psychotechnically compliant to it.⁶

Maritain even wonders whether, from the opposite side, making things too easy for the student does not produce indifference and passivity in them. But he is much more concerned about inspiration, play, and the delight of seeing things for one's self. Neither "birch and taws (floggings)" nor the teacher himself ought to be the principal agents in education.

In *Education at the Crossroads*, moreover, Maritain cites some remarks of Professor F. Clarke of the University of London to the effect that a certain "stringency and tension" are needed in education. Clarke adds that "original sin may be more than an outworn theological dogma after all," that "of all the needs of democracy, some abiding sense of the reality of original sin may yet prove to be the greatest."⁷ To this sober remark of Clarke about the existential condition of the subject of education, Maritain immediately adds that, as a Catholic, he agrees with him. Maritain has, nonetheless, one caution, namely, "that an abiding sense of the reality of the internal power of regenerating grace and faith, hope, and charity, may prove to be even more necessary."⁸

⁶ Maritain, *Education at the Crossroads*, p. 32.

⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 93-94. Clarke's book is *A Review of Educational Thought* (London, 1942).

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 94. "Christian faith knows that human nature is good in itself but has been put out of order by original sin; hence it sees that Christian education will recognize the necessity of a stern discipline, and even of a certain fear, on the condition that this discipline, instead of being merely external—and futile—should appeal to the understanding and the will of the child and become self-discipline, and that the fear should be respect and reverence, not blind animal dread. And Christian faith knows that supernatural grace matters more than original sin, and the weakness of human nature, for grace heals and superelevates nature and makes man participator in divine life itself; hence it is that Christian education will never lose sight of the God-given equipment of virtues and gifts through which eternal life begins here below," *Ibid.*, p. 131.

Maritain, in other words, is willing to talk about Christianity as if it were a legitimate topic of conversation and as if it has something both positive and necessary to contribute to education and to the understanding of what its subject matter is like. He does not, to be sure, want anyone to be forced to study theology in non-denominational schools, but he thinks anyone without a knowledge of theology simply would not understand the actual human record and probably not himself. "Modern philosophy itself . . . has burdened itself all through modern times with problems and anxieties taken over from theology, so that the cultural event of philosophy purely philosophical is still to be waited for."⁹ That is, all actual philosophy not only bears the mark of some theological consideration, but, to use Maritain's perceptive phrase, "philosophy purely philosophical" always reveals itself to be somehow incomplete even for its own purposes.

II.

I have entitled this essay, "On the Education of Young Men and Women." Maritain of course speaks rather of the "education of man," using that word to mean, in context, any person, male or female, of a rational human nature. He does not make too much of the differing ways of approach to the highest things that we might find in say a Gertrude von le Fort's *Eternal Woman* or even in some of his own wife, Raïssa's writings. However, we find one striking exception to this general approach. In 1941, George Schuster was inaugurated President of the then all-women Hunter College in New York. On this occasion, Maritain was invited to give an address which he entitled, "The Education of Women."¹⁰ This essay develops a thought that, as we cited in the beginning, he had already learned from his wife about the place of metaphysics in the education of young women. I think it worthwhile to recall the principal points that Maritain makes about the education of young women because it shows both its importance and, in an indirect way, what he thinks about the education of young men.

To introduce this topic, however, let me begin with a classic text about the education of young men and young women. Charlie Brown is worried about his slow reading and is seeking an excuse that would not redound to his own unwillingness to work at it. Linus, it seems, has been to the ophthalmologist who has explained to him the dubious relation between glasses and slow learning. Charlie was hopeful his problem was caused by

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 74.

¹⁰ Maritain, *Education of Man*, pp. 154-158.

lack of glasses, in which case, of course, he was not responsible. However, there may be more serious reasons at work here. Charlie, with some concern, asks Linus. "You say my being a slow reader is not caused by needing glasses?" Linus replies, "Probably not." Linus continues authoritatively to a puzzled Charlie, "Slow reading in children is often the result of 'mixed brain dominance'. . . . A person is right-handed because the left side of his brain is dominant. . . ." In the third scene, Lucy appears from nowhere intently listening as Linus proceeds, while Charlie hesitantly puts his hand on his chin, "Now if you are ambidextrous or if you have been forced to write with the wrong hand, this may produce 'mixed brain dominance'. . . ." Linus concludes triumphantly to a bewildered Charlie, "If this is true, we can rule out poor vision as the cause of your slow reading." The last word, however, as we might expect, goes to the ever logical Lucy who asks Linus the really worrisome unspoken question bothering Charlie Brown about the slow learner, "Have you ruled out stupidity?"¹¹ If I might put it this way, Maritain in his various discussions about the education of young men and women does largely downplay both original sin and stupidity as the major problems, or at least as insurmountable ones. He affirms, for instance, that "in a social order fitted to the common dignity of man, college education should be given to all, so as to complete the preparation of the youth before he enters the state of manhood."¹² I am not sure whether Maritain ever goes into the problem of the private or public financing of such a system, assuming that he is in fact right that everyone should go to college. He does, however, have some reservation about his own thesis: "Exactng from all pupils the same degree of rigorous study and progress in all items of the curriculum is most unwise."¹³ A natural "apathy" toward many studies will probably be normal.

What about the lazy student, someone we have all met at one time or another, perhaps in ourselves?

Laziness must be fought, of course, but encouraging and urging a youth on the way which he likes and in which he succeeds is much more important, providing, however, that he be also trained in the things for which he feels less inclination, and that he traverse the entire field of those human possibilities and achievements which compose liberal education.¹⁴

¹¹ Charles Schulz, *Nobody's Perfect, Charlie Brown* (New York: Fawcett, 1963).

¹² Maritain, *Education at the Crossroads*, p. 64.

¹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 64-65.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

Maritain's educational project, then, though formidable, is weighted on the side of learning because it is itself a delightful and worthy thing to do.

III.

Maritain begins his lecture at Hunter College, delivered in the midst of World War II, by remarking that "culture today stands in need of defense."¹⁵ As the subject of culture has both progressed and degenerated since Maritain's time, we need to see that for Maritain the word culture includes wealth, technology, industry and scientific equipment. But primarily it means knowing "how and why to use these things for the good of the human being and the securing of his liberty."¹⁶ Culture is primarily inner formation. To develop inner strength is another way of talking about what the classics called the virtues, both of mind and heart. The soul cannot be destroyed by force. "The soul yields only when it so wills. Culture implies the pursuit of human happiness, but requires also that we know in what this happiness consists."¹⁷ These are words directly from Aristotle and Aquinas. Culture includes the habits of our tradition. "Culture consists in knowing, but it does not consist only in knowing; it consisted even more in *having known*, and in the forgetting of a great many things because we know them too well and because they have passed down from memory into the very marrow of our bones."¹⁸ Included in culture is the liberty that the founders of the American Republic knew. If we do not know the reasons for living and for dying we will not keep our culture.

Maritain next acknowledges that not everything can be learned in books, but he insists that books and lectures "are an indispensable and basic vehicle of what man should know, and that without schools worthy of the name, there is no culture."¹⁹ Maritain recalls Goethe to emphasize the priority of being over having, something John Paul II often emphasizes. Action follows being. Maritain suggests, carrying out the implications of this position, that the mission of the school respecting culture is greater in women's colleges than in men's, a statement of much interest when men are not allowed to have colleges.²⁰ What is the reason for this? It is because, Mari-

¹⁵ Maritain, *Education of Man*, p. 154.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 154-155.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 155.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

tain thinks, women have more leisure for "being" than men do. He calls it their great "privilege and duty."²¹ Somewhat in the tradition of Tocqueville, he remarks as a foreigner that America is known for being a land favorable to youth and a land favorable to women. Since women are so important for culture, Maritain thinks, the teaching of young women is "doubly important and significant."²²

Maritain, moreover, sees no truth in the idea that at the level of intelligence women cannot attain the highest levels of excellence. He avers, however, that there is a welcome and necessary differentiation or complementarity that is itself good for culture. "My already long experience as a professor has shown me," he continues,

that often young women enter into the realm of knowledge with an intellectual passion more ardent and a love of truth more disinterested than young men do. If they are usually less gifted than men for the constructive synthesis and the inventive work of reason, they possess over them the advantage of a more vital and organic feeling for knowledge. When they love truth, it is in order to bring it down into life itself. When they love philosophy, it is because it helps them to discover themselves and the meaning of existence; and they well understand the saying of Plato, that we must philosophize with our whole soul.²³

Young women have more need of unity, Maritain thinks, the result of which means that an overly departmentalized education is more damaging to women than to men. He cites his old teacher Henri Bergson who did not think that women were in fact "more gentle and compassionate than men" and supposes Bergson was right in this, but Maritain does think women are "less naive and more courageous in the face of public opinion" than young men.²⁴

The complementarity of male and female is not seen as an opposition but as a necessity. Men have perhaps better judgment, women more intuition. The prodding and perception of women often disconcert but without it human culture would lack its richness. To teach the same discipline to young men and to young women reveals often that "the same discipline is received in different ways," a result that is a source of richness for the culture.²⁵ Raïssa Maritain's notion that metaphysics is to be a preferred study

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 156.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Ibid.*, pp. 156–57.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 157.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

for women suggests the truth of Jacques Maritain's remarks about how differently and more ardently young women receive the same subject matter. "It was not enough for me to live," Raïssa Maritain wrote in 1919; "I wanted a reason for living and moral principles which were based on an absolutely certain knowledge."²⁶ On reading this, one cannot help recalling John Paul II's wonderful reflection in *Veritatis Splendor* on the rich young man who asks what he must do to be saved.

Very often, Maritain observes, young women may not realize the long historical and intellectual effort it takes to bring "the human person, in woman as in man, to a consciousness of its dignity."²⁷ Christianity played an original role in woman's emancipation when the Gospel was preached to Greek and barbarian, to male and female alike. Maritain can be blunt at times: "The sense of human dignity is the mark of every civilization of Christian origin and foundation, even when our fickleness of mind causes us to forget it."²⁸ Maritain sees that the political notion of human dignity follows from the Christian notion of each person's supernatural destiny, not vice versa. Even in the natural order, following Aristotle, there is something in each person that transcends the state.

The human person, even though it be part of the political community, has within itself values and a calling which transcend the political community, for they are things that rise above time. Truth, beauty, wisdom are sovereignly useful for the State, they are not at the command of the State. The State must serve them, just as the State must respect in each one the fundamental rights of the person.²⁹

Since there are things in the natural order that already transcend the state, the state is limited. All of these natural things in turn are put into proper place, however, only when the supernatural destiny of actual men is understood in the light of man's "philosophy purely philosophical."

Maritain ends his little essay on "The Education of Women," then, not with an exhortation to women in particular but again to all those who would be educated, men and women. He calls what he stands for "a democratic education." This is "an education which helps human persons to shape themselves, judge by themselves, discipline themselves, to love and prize the high truths which are the very root and safeguard of their dignity, to respect in themselves and in others human nature and conscience, and to con-

²⁶ *Raïssa's Journals*, presented by Jacques Maritain (Albany, New York: Magi Books, 1974), pp. 110-111.

²⁷ Maritain, *The Education of Man*, p. 157.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 158.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

quer themselves in order to win their liberty."³⁰ If we reflect on this vision of education, does it not seem, in retrospect, that Maritain's project has largely failed, at least as an institutional project?

The famous first two sentences of Allan Bloom's *The Closing of the American Mind*, written some forty-five years after Maritain's lecture at Hunter College, are worth recalling here: "There is one thing a professor can be absolutely certain of: almost every student entering the university believes, or says he believes, that truth is relative. If this belief is put to the test, one can count on the students' reaction: they will be uncomprehending."³¹ Maritain's proposals remain pertinent precisely because they put the relativist belief "to the test."

IV.

Maritain's elaborate program for all levels of education endeavors to spell out the various stages of teaching according to the age and maturity of the student. He is also interested in graduate and post-graduate education. If we return to the question of the education of young men, as I mentioned, we will find very little specifically written on this subject. What we do find is rather a detailed description of the person who is to be educated, almost as if to say that we cannot educate man unless we know what he is. I want to say something about Maritain's understanding of education from the side of his presentation of what the man, male and female, is who is capable of being his own primary cause of his education. In conclusion, I want to turn to Maritain's description of the famous "Thomist Circles" which were held between 1919–1939 at Versailles and Meudon while Maritain was teaching at the *Institut Catholique* in Paris. I want to mention these Circles in particular because, I think, they represent something that is becoming more and more of a necessity in the context of the political correctness of modern university life, namely some sort of alternative to the university, alternative not as a counter-institution, but as a human initiative that transcends the intellectual disorders that everyone confronts.

In his essay, "The Christian Idea of Man and Its Influence on Education," as well as in some remarks he made on Plato and Descartes, Maritain takes pains to set down the sort of being who is to be educated. He earlier affirmed that "education is by nature a function of philosophy, of meta-

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987), p. 25.

physics."³² This is no doubt one of the reasons that the penchant for metaphysics in the education of young women is so pronounced in the Maritains. If we do not know what or who it is to be educated, the whole effort will easily go awry. This understanding also hints at the importance of there being no philosophy that it itself "purely philosophically philosophical," that is to say, that the philosophic life, the highest life of the philosophers, however valuable, cannot itself be identified with the happiness to which each human person is intrinsically ordained.

What I appreciate in Maritain here is his willingness to state the uniqueness of the Christian understanding of man. Not unlike John Paul II in *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*, or Augustine in *The Confessions*, Maritain states clearly his understanding of competing views of man. Christianity, thus, does not hold the "transmigration of souls." This view would eventually mean that each of us is eventually everyone else, even every other thing. The Christian alternative is a version of the Greek philosophic idea of the immortality of the soul. "After the death of the body the human soul lives forever, keeping his own individuality."³³ But this understanding of immortality is not all. Faith holds that "the body will rise up and be united with the soul again." Even in the state after death, the immortal soul is not in a state of completion, a completion that would necessitate both body and soul. Both against Hinduism and Platonism which find the soul to be the essence of man, the Christian idea includes at all times the body, or the whole person, as the completion that is really implied by man's initial dignity as a being made for nothing less than God. Descartes's notion that the individual is only mind is likewise to be rejected as incomplete. This excursus into philosophy is important. A lofty understanding of man's soul at the expense of his body is not a Christian alternative. Christian philosophy grounds the whole educational enterprise by placing both body and soul in right perspective with regard to the final end of the whole person.

"Christian education does not worship the human body, as the ancient Greeks did," Maritain writes,

but it is fully aware of the importance of physical training as aiming at a sound balance of the whole human being; Christian education is intent on making sense-perception, which is the very basis of man's intellectual life, more and more alert, accurate, and integrated; it appeals confidently to the deep, living power of imagination and feeling as well as to the spiritual power of reason; it realizes that in the develop-

³² Maritain, *The Education of Man*, p. 41.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 129.

ment of the child hand and mind must be at work together; it stresses the properly human dignity of manual activity.³⁴

Maritain is careful to pay tribute to Plato and still make clear why a proper understanding of education does not follow from the notion of innate ideas or man's being as only a soul. Human souls do not preexist, nor are they replete with ideas the understanding of which is obscured by the body, so that the highest understanding can only be had if the body is removed. In the Platonic understanding the pupil "does not acquire knowledge from the teacher, who has no real causal influence and who is at best only an occasional agent; the teacher only awakens the student to those things which he already knows, so that to know is nothing else than to remember."³⁵

Maritain thinks that this Platonic system treats the human being as if he were an "angel." He also notes that Plato in the *Laws*, far from stressing this angelic knowledge, seems to propose an extraordinarily detailed list of things to which the citizen has to conform, something that implies a lack of an active practical intellect responsible for the judging of particular cases in which normal human life usually happens. Maritain's alternative is that of Aristotle which proposes a more realistic understanding of the relationship of teacher and pupil. "The teacher does possess a knowledge which the student does not have. He actually communicates knowledge to the student whose soul has *not* previously contemplated the divine Ideas before being united to his body; and whose intellect before being fecundated by sense-perception and sense experience, is but a *tabula rasa*, as Aristotle said."³⁶ It is of some importance to spell out this background understanding of what man is because it alone can justify the combining of man's physical and spiritual sides in one whole, all of which are essentially related to one another because of an end that itself transcends not only the state but philosophy, without being hostile to either.

V.

Maritain thinks that there is an intimate relation between the pursuit of truth, of education, and the spiritual life. The higher the level of education the more deeply the things of the spirit—now taken in the Christian sense of the incarnational unity and destiny of each person—need attending to. Maritain, for all his praise of philosophy, does not think that by itself it can

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 130.

³⁵ Maritain, *Education at the Crossroads*, p. 29.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 30.

succeed in keeping human dignity among men. "Thus we may understand the paradox that natural law exists, as the very basis of morality, and that nevertheless no effort of reason to establish among men a firm system of morality based only on natural law has ever been able to succeed. . . ." ³⁷ Some evidently paradoxical relationship exists between the supernatural and man's natural inability in this life, at least, to be natural. This paradox, this dilemma, is certainly pertinent to Maritain's organization of the "Thomistic Circles." He notes that throughout history, in India, China, Europe, among Quakers and Catholics, that "wise men living in solitude and contemplation gather together disciples who come to listen to them either for a certain number of years or at certain times of the year." ³⁸ Within the Catholic tradition, Maritain thought that the times especially required the formation of spiritual centers wherein spiritual life and instruction could be developed. This sort of experience would also be advisable for university students and boys and girls during vacation time. ³⁹

In his *Notebooks*, Maritain describes his own experiment with this sort of program that combines study, prayer, conversation and a sort of family environment. These study groups met once a month at the home of the Maritains. They were designed for "those men and women for whom the spiritual life and studies in wisdom (philosophical and theological) had a major importance and who wished to devote themselves as much as they could to pursuing them." ⁴⁰ The formal structure for these groups, its written constitution, is printed in the Appendix of the *Notebooks*. ⁴¹ It included even a private vow of prayer and devotion, though there was no idea of a religious congregation. The people who attended are listed by Maritain as they appear in one or other meeting. They were a "varied ensemble." They included

young persons and old persons, male students and female students, and professors—laymen (in the majority), priests and religious—professional philosophers, doctors, poets, musicians, men engaged in practical life, those who were learned and those who were uneducated—Catholics (in the majority), but also unbelievers, Jews, Orthodox, Protestants. Some were already experts in St. Thomas, others were

³⁷ Maritain, *The Education of Man*, p. 116.

³⁸ Maritain, *Education at the Crossroads*, p. 84.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 85–86.

⁴⁰ Jacques Maritain, *Notebooks*, trans. Joseph W. Evans (Albany, New York: Magi Books, 1984), p. 133.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 290–297.

serving their apprenticeship with him, others knew nothing about him or almost nothing.⁴²

There was a climate of friendship and liberty.

The atmosphere was not that of class or convent or seminar, nor were they "guests of a more or less stiff intellectual trying to offer them seats and passing out drinks and cigarettes before the exchange of ideas." Rather, the success of these afternoons and evenings was largely due to the presence of Maritain's wife. "They were received in the hearth of a family, they were the guests of Raïssa Maritain. Such meetings and such a work in common are inconceivable without a feminine atmosphere," Maritain wrote. Not only Raïssa was present but her sister Vera and her mother. Raïssa is described as present, taking an active part in the discussion, "always discreetly, but with the mad, boundless love of truth which burned in her." This peculiar phrase "mad, boundless love" appears often in Maritain's notes almost by way of challenge to those pedestrian souls who are not ready or willing to engage in the real drama of human existence in the knowledge and love of God.

What was the subject matter of these circles? They always concerned some great theological or philosophical issue, usually based in a text of St. Thomas or John of St. Thomas. "The fundamental idea was to bring into play at one and the same time, in the concrete problems and needs of our minds, things we knew to be diverse in essence but which we wanted to unify within us; reason and faith, philosophy and theology, metaphysics, poetry, politics and the great rush of new knowledge and of new questions brought by modern culture."⁴³ Maritain himself prepared the night before or on Sunday morning a brief exposition of the matter to be discussed. His notes contain outlines and sketches of what he had to say. He gives a list of the subject matters for the first ten years of the circles ranging from angelic knowledge to human knowledge of singulars, the desire for the vision of God, speculative and practical knowledge, justice and friendship, the Trinity, person, the Incarnation, free will, and the analysis of the voluntary act.⁴⁴ There was a constant effort to clarify language, to appeal to direct experience, but a "fierce search for intellectual rigor."

What did Maritain conclude was the most important thing that he himself learned from this experience of the Thomist Circles?

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 134.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 135.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 136.

The experience of our study meetings taught me a very precious thing: namely, that discursive and demonstrative argumentation, doctrinal erudition and historical erudition are assuredly necessary, but of little efficacy on human intellects such as God made them, and which first ask to *see*. In actual fact, a few fundamental intuitions, if they have one day sprung up in a mind, mark it forever (they are intemporal in themselves), and they suffice . . . to make a man unshakably strengthened in the love of St. Thomas and in the understanding of his wisdom. I observed this in a good number of our friends, whose example I take to be decisive.⁴⁵

Maritain seems to imply that his academic experience, at its highest level, requires spiritual experience. We must first ask to “see” before we shall see.

VI.

Maritain’s experience in the Thomist Circles seems to confirm his experience in teaching young women as well, in anticipation of confirming Bloom’s remark that the unhappiest members of our society are the students in the twenty or thirty best universities. They are unhappy because with the presuppositions of their philosophy, there is nothing left to see. Raïssa Maritain as a young woman loved metaphysics because it was “the ultimate crowning of reason.” She loved it more because it gave her access to something more, something higher, not higher than reason, but to a reason that is higher than human reason. Jacques Maritain thought it made a difference what kind of education we had. Education is not merely something of the soul, yet it is of the soul. What is really important is not a quickness of wit or a specialization of knowledge. What really matters is what is thought about, what is discussed, and how important the matter is.

That St. Thomas could guide us in sorting out things of importance to discuss, Maritain had no doubt. We can say without too much exaggeration that today graduates of most universities—public, Catholic, private—simply have never had the things that really matter clearly and adequately exposed to them. Yet, each student has to desire to know and has to suspect, at least, that he is not really encountering the great questions and, what is more important, the great answers. Education is not just a series of questions. Rather it is mostly a series of answers. When the Platonist tells us that our knowledge is innate, or when the Hindu tells us that we are already incarnate, or the Cartesian that we are only mind, we must be ready to see something else. No doubt there is an intimate relation between moral life

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 136–137.

and intellectual life. When the habits of our human wholeness are not in order, we will not be likely to think straight. But our bodies can be perfectly healthy and we can will not to see.

An access to “a reason for living” is, among us, the most important of the things we can receive from education. We should not doubt that the original sin that Professor Clarke speaks of, or the stupidity that Lucy Van Pelt suspects, or the relativism that Allan Bloom observes the best students embrace uncomprehendingly, can deflect us. Still, even the most perceptive theoretical knowledge and education will little avail us as we actually are, as Maritain said in his *Notebooks*, unless, like Augustine, “we first ask to see.” What we have yet to see when we already see is what education is really about and this seeing itself requires our first knowing what we are and, yes, praying for what we want to be. If we do not know some purpose for ourselves, we will not be able to fulfill that great Socratic admonition to “know ourselves,” for we cannot know even ourselves by knowing only ourselves.

“The task of the teacher,” as Maritain says, in a final sentence that we can properly apply to Maritain himself, is not one of “birches and tawes,” but “above all one of liberation.”⁴⁶ What really matters are the right answers to the right questions. The endeavor of the twenty-first century may well be that of finding new Thomist Circles, new families, new universities, new monasteries, yes, new on-line systems wherein the right questions and the right answers can be asked. But what is important is not the technology of it all, but the seeing, the desire that we see, the discipline and grace of life that enables us even to want to see.

⁴⁶ Maritain, *Education at the Crossroads*, p. 39.