

Medieval and Reformation: Theological Education within a Supportive Context

(2 of 3)

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At the point at which we left our story yesterday, the conversion of Constantine had led to a decline in the catechumenate, and the Germanic invasions had wrought havoc in the former Western Roman Empire and its educational institutions. As a result, the ignorance of the clergy was abysmal. If they appeared to be educated, this was due to the contrast between them and the warlike and illiterate masses.

Even so, since it was the only institution that could do so, the church became the main means for the preservation of classical knowledge and letters. Yesterday we saw that, while the church frowned on pagan schooling, many of its more influential leaders did have such schooling. Now the situation changed, and the church became practically the only preserver of classical pagan letters. The transition is remarkable: In the fourth century Jerome still felt guilty about being such a Ciceronian, and by the sixth one of the main tasks of people such as Cassiodorus, Isidore of Seville, and Gregory the Great was to preserve what little was left of Cicero's culture.

In order to respond to the challenges of the times, some studious Christians wrote books whose purpose was to instruct the clergy. Such was the case of Ambrose's *On the Duties of the Clergy* and Augustine's *On Christian Doctrine*. Much later, in his *Etymologies*, Isidore of Seville sought to summarize all the knowledge of his time and thus to bequeath it to later generations. But probably the two most important books for ministerial studies during the Early Middle Ages

were the *Institutes of Divine and Secular Letters*, by Magnus Aurelius Cassiodorus, and the *Pastoral Rule* of Gregory the Great.

Cassiodorus was born slightly over half a century after the death of Augustine and lived approximately from 485 to 580. He came from a family from southern Italy that for seven generations had important public offices, and he followed in their footsteps, at the service first of the Byzantine Empire in the city of Ravenna, and then of King Theodoric of the Ostrogoths. While busy in his administrative and diplomatic tasks, Cassiodorus was also concerned about the poor state of letters in his time and was convinced of the need to educate the clergy. To that end he proposed to Pope Agapitus that a school be founded in Rome, but various military and political upheavals made this impossible. Eventually, Cassiodorus founded a monastery in Vivarium, the land of his ancestors, and withdrew to it.

In his *Institutes*, Cassiodorus reaffirmed the traditional curriculum of classical letters, in which, after the very first studies when one learned to read, write, and sing psalms, studies were divided into two sections: the trivium—that is, the three main roads (which, by the way, is the origin of our word "trivial"): grammar, rhetoric, and logic.¹ The trivium was followed by the *quadrivium* (that is, the "four ways"), which included arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, and music. And then, on the basis of this knowledge, one would turn to the field of "Scripture"—which actually included all theological studies—as well as to some practical aspects of pastoral tasks.

This curriculum became the norm throughout the Middle Ages, and its echoes may still be heard in the present-day expectation that one goes to college and studies the liberal arts before delving into theology. (And, by the way, our very understanding of the "liberal arts" comes from Cassiodorus. Before him, "liberal" was understood in contrast to "servile"—the latter corresponding to the slaves or *servi*, and the former to the free and leisurely. Cassiodorus changed the etymology of the term "liberal" arts, claiming it referred to those things that are contained in books—*libri*.)

However, most clergy in the early centuries of the Middle Ages had never followed such a curriculum. Their learning consisted mostly in reading the *Pastoral Rule* of Gregory the Great, who was bishop of Rome from 590 to 604. In contrast to the writings of Cassiodorus and Isidore, and much more like the work of Ambrose, Gregory's *Pastoral Rule* is sharply focused on the responsibilities of the clergy and how to fulfill them. At the very beginning of his work, Gregory complains that while in occupations such as medicine, in which those who have not studied the matter carefully do not dare engage, there are among the clergy many who dare to teach without having studied. Thus, in words that would find an echo today, he declares at the very beginning of his work that:

No one presumes to teach an art till he has first, with intent meditation, learnt it.
. . yet how often do men who have no knowledge whatever of spiritual precepts
fearlessly profess themselves physicians of the heart, though those who are
ignorant of the effect of drugs blush to appear as physicians of the flesh!
(*Pastoral Rule*, 1.1)

But Gregory also declares that knowledge is not enough, for it must be accompanied by the practice of faith. Therefore, once again in words that would find echo today, he says that: "There are some also who teach the things which they do not practice but by study they have learnt" (*Ibid.* 1.4).

Gregory then turns to the more practical and extensive part of his work, in which he gives advice as to how to deal with various sorts of people, which he presented in marked contrast, so that the pastor will understand that the first task is to determine with what sort of person, vices, or virtues one is dealing. This can be seen in the very titles of various chapters, such as: "That the poor have to be admonished in one way, and the rich in another"; "That the fainthearted are to be admonished in one way, and the forward in another"; etc.

But, helpful as these books were, what was most important was the development of institutions that could serve as centers of learning. Early medieval schools generally fall under two categories: the monastic schools and the diocesan and parochial schools. As Cassiodorus described the monastery he founded in his ancestral lands of Vivarium, he intended it to become like a city whose inhabitants would not have to worry about the occupations of daily life but rather devote themselves to the worship of God and to studying and copying books. Thus, as letters declined among the rest of the population, monastic life became a refuge where that ancient knowledge was studied and preserved.

At first, as is clear in the Benedictine *Rule*, monasteries were not intended to be centers of preparation of ordained ministry, since monks had vows tying them permanently to their monastic house. But even so, soon monasteries became centers producing pastors and prelates. This may be seen in the case of Gregory the Great, who was forced by the pope to leave the monastery in order to engage in active ministry and eventually became pope himself. Later, Gregory took Augustine of Canterbury and his companions from the monastery in order to send them as missionaries to England. Four centuries later, the Abbey of Bee, in Normandy, provided Lanfranc and Anselm to serve as archbishops of Canterbury, and one of its monks became first a bishop and then Pope Alexander II.

At an earlier time, the catechetical system through which candidates prepared for baptism had been the most basic form of theological education. Now its place was taken by the novitiate through which monks prepared for their final vows. Both the novitiate and the earlier catechetical system sought to provide people with the necessary theological instruction and character formation to join a community in which a particular and often difficult lifestyle would be expected from them: in the case of catechumens, the church; and, in the case of novices, the monastery. This was part of a radical change in which what was earlier expected of most Christians and offered to them was now reserved for a smaller group of particularly devout Christians, the monastics. (Likewise, the earlier practice of sharing goods among all believers, now abandoned by the church at large, became a fundamental dimension of monastic life.)

The most outstanding monastic schools from the seventh century until the eleventh were those in Ireland. Irish monasteries became centers of study and learning where ancient manuscripts were preserved and copied, where Greek was still studied long after it practically disappeared in the rest of Western Europe, and where people from both Great Britain and the Continent went to study. Although most of those monasteries had around fifty students, there were several that had more than a thousand, and at least a few of them reached the figure of three thousand students. As a result of the fame of the Irish schools and of the widespread disorder elsewhere, the number of students from other regions was such that they were said to arrive in "small fleets."² Among the nobility that went to Ireland to study were three kings, two of Northumbria and one of France. But the most famous product of these schools was the Englishman Alcuin of York, who was one of the main promoters of the intellectual renaissance of the Carolingian period. Also, while women were not allowed into the clergy, many nuns not only devoted themselves to study but also contributed to the education of monks, many of whom then joined the clergy. A notable example is St. Hilda (614-80) who founded in Whitby a monastic house for both women and men and who took the lead in defending the traditional practices of the Celtic church against what she saw as intrusions from Rome.

Cathedral schools arose in different areas, apparently without any coordinated effort. We know that there were already such schools in Spain early in the sixth century.³ Soon the idea itself of cathedral schools expanded beyond the cities and their cathedrals to some rural parishes, where parochial schools emerged.⁴ Although it is impossible to know exactly what was taught in

these rural schools, apparently it was limited to the most basic education and the central doctrines of the faith, and their students were not only those preparing for clerical functions but also children of the nobility. There are also indications that some students would move from these rural schools to those in monasteries and cathedrals.

The growth of cities in the twelfth century led to further growth among cathedral schools, some of which gave rise to universities, to which monastic schools often contributed.⁵

The most common exercise in medieval universities was a series of lectures in which the professor commented on a text. But just as important were the disputations, whose method soon determined the structure of lectures. There were two sorts of *disputatio*: the *disputatio ordinaria* and the *disputatio de quodlibet*. The *disputatio ordinaria* took place with relative frequency—often weekly—and was less demanding than the *de quodlibet*.

In a *disputatio ordinaria*, the professor posed a thesis or question to be discussed. An advanced student or a group of them, the "opponents," proposed a series of arguments that would seem to contradict each other. Then another advanced student—the "respondent"—offered a solution and explained why the apparently opposing arguments did not contradict the answer that the student gave. Finally, in another session, the teacher would offer a more careful and detailed response—the *determinatio*.

The *disputatio de quodlibet*—meaning "disputation on whatever"—was much less formal in its structure but much more difficult and therefore of greater importance in university life. It was celebrated only once or twice a year and always under the direction of a doctor. In contrast to the *disputatio ordinaria*, which took place in the classroom and only in the presence of students, the *disputatio de quodlibet* was open to the public. In this event, students as well as professors and even the public in general could pose questions and offer arguments and objections. As there were frequent rivalries among professors, it was not rare for a teacher to take this opportunity to ridicule his rivals. And, since the subject was much more flexible, the professor could not have prepared his answers beforehand.

The university curriculum began with three or four years devoted to the study of the seven liberal arts—the *trivium* and the *quadrivium*. Then came a rigorous series of public and oral examinations on these various disciplines. After passing these exams, the student was a "bachelor." Those who would then continue studying theology were now called "biblical bachelors," and for two years would comment on Scripture. Once this requirement was completed to the satisfaction of the faculty, the biblical bachelor became a "sententiary bachelor," whose main academic exercise consisted in commenting in detail on the four books of *Sentences* of Peter Lombard. After at least two years of commenting on the *Sentences*, the student became a "formed bachelor." As such, he could teach and preach at the university, always under the supervision of a licensed teacher. This period would normally take five years. Finally, after an examination of his moral life and his dedication to study, the former became a

"master" or "doctor" and was now allowed to preside over *quaestiones disputatae*—ordinary as well as *de quodlibet*—and to preach at the university. Given this process, those who became doctors often attained this degree well beyond forty years of age.

Normally all professors and most of their students were clergy, since the common way to cover the cost of studies was to receive the benefits of an ecclesiastical position whose pastoral duties were performed by another person. But still, the number of actual pastors who had university studies was minimal. As university studies became more complicated and prolonged, greater was the number of clergymen who did not have such studies. With the passing centuries, university studies became increasingly specialized but at the same time more distant from parochial life and from those who performed pastoral ministries.

It was only after the Reformation that for the first time specific studies began to be required before ordination. It was then that seminaries finally appeared. Apparently, the word "seminary" was first employed to refer to an institution for the training of clergy by Cardinal Reginald Pole in his plan for the restoration of Roman Catholicism under the rule of Mary Tudor. At that point, a "seminary" was a seedbed, and what Pole proposed was the creation of institutions that would serve as seedbeds for the clergy. As in a seedbed, these young plants would be protected from the evils of the surrounding world until they could be transplanted into their actual fields of ministry.

Since Pole was an influential figure at the Council of Trent, it is not surprising that this council endorsed his proposal. According to its decrees, all bishops should organize seminaries for the training of young priests. Small dioceses could have joint seminaries, and large ones could have more than one. All students had to be at least twelve years old, had to have completed their first letters, and should have shown aptitude for ministry. These seminaries were similar to monastic houses in their emphasis on communal life and discipline. They were similar to university faculties in the content of their teaching. But they were different from the monastic novitiate as well as from the university faculties of theology in that their main purpose would be to train candidates for diocesan priesthood. Following the decrees of the Council, Pope Pius IV founded the seminary of Rome in 1565.⁶

It was the Jesuits who worked most diligently on establishing a common curriculum and who, in 1599, after long deliberation, produced a *Ratio studiorum* or order of studies to be followed by all their candidates. This was organized in three cycles. The first consisted of five years of studies in grammar, liberal arts, and rhetoric. The second, in three years devoted to logic, mathematics, physics, ethics, and metaphysics. And finally, there was a four-year cycle of theological studies based on the writings of Thomas Aquinas. The influence of this *Ratio studiorum* was such that soon all Catholic pastoral education was shaped by it.

Much of this was a response to two new circumstances. The first of these was the printing press, which now made books much more available and increased the rate of literacy. The

second was the Protestant Reformation, which had actually begun in a university context. Less than a year after the posting of the 95 theses, Philip Melanchthon arrived at the University of Wittenberg.⁷ At that point, the total enrollment in the University was one hundred and twenty students. Two years later, attendance to his lectures reached six hundred—and, according to some witnesses, even two thousand.

The work of Melanchthon in the field of education, both general and theological, was such that he was given the title that had been given to Rabanus Maurus seven centuries earlier:

Preceptor Germaniae—the Teacher of Germany. In his initial speech at the University, Melanchthon had proposed a reformation of the educational system. This was soon embodied in Wittenberg and quickly expanded to other Lutheran university centers. What he proposed was a theological curriculum in which teaching would not be grounded in the philosophical scholasticism of earlier generations, but in a biblical study based on solid exegesis in the original languages.⁸

Melanchthon's work on university reformation was not limited to Wittenberg. Since at that time many universities were being founded, he was able to participate actively in the formation of several of them—those in Greifswald, Königsberg, Jena, and Marburg—besides contributing to the revision of curricula in various others—among them, Köln, Tübingen, Leipzig, and Heidelberg. (Regarding the latter, Melanchthon commented that there he had studied two things: first, much trivia; and then, more trivia!)

The result of all of this was a growing insistence on the need to widen the scope of theological education.⁹ Up to that point, it was ordination that turned one into a pastor or priest, and studies were not particularly necessary. But by the middle of the sixteenth century, it became normal for candidates to the Lutheran ministry to study at universities at which they pursued theological studies and trained for the task of teaching the people. Such studies became more necessary since now pastors and other church leaders not only had to teach the people much that they had not known before but also had to know how to face Catholic opponents who called them heretics and were armed with a series of elaborate arguments.

Approximately at the same time as Melancthon, Heinrich Bullinger (Zwingli's successor in Zurich) was proposing similar reforms. However, it was the Academy of Geneva that soon came to occupy among the Reformed a place similar to that the University of Wittenberg had in the formation of the first Lutheran leaders. Following Calvin's plan, the Genevan Academy would include a *schola privata* and a *schola publica*. In the former, reading and writing would be taught, at first in Latin and French and then in Greek. The curriculum for this school would also include the liberal arts. The *schola publica* would be a more advanced school in which courses would be offered in theology and exegesis—normally by lectures on those subjects. In 1564, five years after the founding of the Academy, Beza would tell Bullinger that there were twelve hundred students in the *schola publica* and three hundred in the *privata*. Among those three hundred were several who soon took Calvinism to the Netherlands, Scotland, and

England—countries where schools and programs would soon be established following the Genevan model.

A leading figure in the development of Protestant theological curricula was Andreas Hyperius, who in 1556 proposed a curriculum divided into three main areas: the study and interpretation of Scripture, doctrinal or "positive" theology—which included history—, and more practical studies such as church administration and government, preaching, and worship. Quite clearly, the influence of this division of subjects may be seen in theological curricula to this day. In passing, it is also interesting to note that it was Hyperius who wrote the first treatise on homiletics.

Following the lead of Hyperius, the most influential figure in the development of theological curriculum was Johann Heinrich Alsted, a staunch Calvinist who was present at the Synod of Dort. Alsted dealt with pastoral education in his *Logica theologica*. His curriculum was divided into two major headings: theory and practice. Among the theoretical disciplines are theology itself, exegesis, polemics, and the history of theology. Under the heading of practical studies, Alsted emphasized homiletics and what were then called "cases of conscience," in which the prospective pastor learned how to guide the flock in decision-making, which, therefore, included some of what today we understand by "ethics" and some of what today would be called "pastoral care." For each subject, twelve major books were assigned. During the course of the year, the student was to read and analyze each of them and prepare for the final

examinations in July. After such examinations, a new annual cycle would begin, with no vacations in between!

In spite of what has often been said about Protestant scholasticism, Alsted as well as all the main theologians of the time were convinced that good theology—while making use of philosophy and other such disciplines—was to be grounded in Scripture and had to be relevant to the actual life of the church.¹⁰

Having said this, it is important to point out that British Puritan leaders shared these views and this understanding of theological education, which were then carried to the British colonies in the Western world, and were instrumental in the founding of the oldest schools of theology in English-speaking America—Harvard, Yale, and many others that followed. Needless to say, to this day one can find echoes of Hyperius, Alsted, and their colleagues in much of the typical theological curriculum in the United States.

As we then look back at the entire period we have covered today, from the early Middle Ages to the eighteenth century, it is clear that, even in spite of the upheavals of the Reformation, there was a constant factor in theological education throughout this period: It took place within a supportive context. The leaders of monastic schools such as the Abbey of Corbie in the ninth century could count on a cultural context that affirmed the value of theology. So could university faculties in Paris, Oxford, and Salamanca in the thirteenth century, and the Reformers

in the sixteenth. But by the time of Protestant scholasticism in the eighteenth, other factors were coming into play. The context was not as universally supportive as it had been for thirteen centuries. Now, even as Alsted was making his curricular proposals and the new scholasticism sought to cross every tee and dot every i, other currents were emerging that would bring about radical an unforeseen shift in the context of both theology and the church at large. But that is a subject best left for tomorrow.

Until then, thank you!

Notes

1. In Cassiodorus's plan the study of these three arts was mostly directed to ministerial and pastoral tasks. Thus, grammar was understood in a wider sense than it is today, for it included also an introduction to classical and patristic writings, as well as principles for the interpretation of those writings and of Scripture.
2. The Venerable Bede, in his *Ecclesiastical History of the English Nation*, declares that in times when plague and chaotic rule in England "Many of the nobility, and of the lower ranks of the English nation, ... forsaking their native land, retired thither, either for the sake of Divine studies or for a more disciplined life." 3.27
3. Acts of the Second Council of Toledo, in 527.
4. We find instructions about such schools in the acts of the Third Council of Vaison, gathered in France in 529.
5. The complex history of these institutions is illustrated by the origins of the University of Paris. For some time, there had been bitter rivalry between the cathedral school at Notre Dame and the monastic school in the Abbey of St. Victor, across the river, on the western bank. In 1160, the teachers and students on the western bank organized themselves into a guild, mostly to counteract the prestige of the cathedral school. Since the word *universitas* meant what today we call a guild or a union, that consortium of teachers and students came to be known as the "university." Bitter conflicts ensued. But in 1211 Pope Innocent III granted a charter to the University of Paris, and eventually the university and the ancient cathedral school were joined.
6. While the curriculum was still quite flexible, "minor seminaries" prepared students for philosophical and theological studies, which were then pursued in "major seminaries."
7. He went there to be considered for a teaching position. But he was not the original candidate of choice for his prospective colleagues—including Martin Luther—who preferred a more experienced professor. But four days after his arrival at the city, Melanchthon gave his first public lecture, "On the Correction of Studies for Youth," and the reaction was one of surprised approval. Shortly thereafter, Luther wrote a common friend that Melanchthon, "on the fourth day after his arrival he delivered a most learned and chaste oration, and there was so much applause and admiration on every side that you need not now commend him to us." Prologue to the German translation of Melanchthon's *Commentary on Colossians*, 1529. Quoted Clyde Leonard Manschreck, *Melanchthon: The Quiet Reformer* New York and Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1958), p. 24.
8. It may be worth noting that Melanchthon was a nephew of Johannes Reuchlin, who had long been engaged in an acrimonious debate with the Dominicans, who accused him of being a "Judaizer" by reason of his insistence on the need for careful study of the Hebrew language.
9. Melanchthon's interest in ministerial education became particularly pressing after the "visitations" of 1527. After much pleading and suggestions on Luther's part, Elector John of Saxony, whose capital was Wittenberg, ordered that a series of visits to the churches and schools of the entire area be conducted in

order to make certain that they were fulfilling their mission. Melanchthon was part of a commission visiting Thuringia. He was overwhelmed by what he saw. The outcome of that experience, which was shared by other visitors, was an entire program of educational reform that the University and the Elector approved in 1528 and published under the title of *Instructions for the Visitors of Parish Pastors in Electoral Saxony*.

10. Thus, François Turretin rejected the claim of medieval scholastics, that theology is a science, for, as Turretin would say, science is grounded on reason, while theology is grounded on biblical revelation. And, on the practical dimension of theological studies, Gerhard declared that true theological education must enable a person who has been gifted and called by God to "teach the Word of God, administer the sacraments, and keep the discipline of the church, so that humans may be converted and thus be saved, and to the glory of God." *Loci theologici*, 6.10.

