

COMMENTARY

The Brotherhood of the Common Life And the Education of Orphans

On January 29, 1996, Helga Zepp LaRouche, founder of the Schiller Institute, issued a “Call To Save the Children in Bosnia-Herzegovina.” In that call, Mrs. LaRouche wrote that “the most destitute losers in this bestial war are the children. In 1992-95, 10.7 percent of all children and young people from one to nineteen years of age were killed or are missing, i.e., every tenth (!) child has lost its life; every fifth child (!), namely, 19.8 percent, has been wounded; and every sixth child (!), namely, 15.3 percent, has been made an invalid. Further, there are thousands of children who have suffered severe psycho-physical injuries.

“But what is to become of the children who have survived the war ‘unhurt,’ who perhaps have lost one parent, or both? Who have become witnesses to the most horrible human degradation, who have experienced in real life all the bestiality which is otherwise imagined only by the sick minds of Hollywood writers? Today many of these children are not only bodily crippled, but they are traumatized. The experience of atrocities has obliterated their childhood.”

In organizing support for this initiative, the pressing question of how to educate orphans and other poor children, who have been brutalized by such atrocities, has arisen. Dr. Jozef Mikloško, who serves as chairman of the initiating committee of the Call, reported that his son is responsible for seventeen orphanages in Slovakia. Father Watson of Georgetown University’s Center for Peace Studies has



A Renaissance schoolmaster instructs his pupils.

indicated that he is working with the Franciscans, who run an orphanage in Medjugorje. Father Hupp, Director Emeritus of Boys Town in Nebraska, another initiator of the effort, has also had to deal with this question extensively.

The Brotherhood Method

In response to Dr. Mikloško’s question about how to approach this difficult problem, Lyndon LaRouche has stressed the model of the teaching method of the Brotherhood of the Common Life of Gerhard Groote and Thomas à Kempis. The purpose of this article is to examine that method, as a means of helping those immediately confronted with the task of educating such children, such that they overcome their traumatization and develop fully as creative human beings, capable themselves of contributing to lasting peace in war-torn, hate-filled areas of the world, such as Bosnia.

As this author has developed more fully in “The Brotherhood of the Common Life” [*Fidelio*, Vol. III, No. 2, Summer 1994], the Brotherhood was a teaching order started in the 1390’s and early

1400’s in The Netherlands and Germany. The importance of the Brotherhood’s work was, that in focussing on the education of poor children, it began a process that led to a Renaissance throughout Europe in the Fifteenth century, through the creation of a national intelligentsia which was drawn from the poor and oppressed, and not merely from the ruling elite. In so doing, the Brotherhood laid the basis for the development of the modern nation-state in France under Louis XI, during the years 1461-1483.

There are two interrelated issues raised by the Brotherhood’s contribution: First, that it was only through mass, or relatively universal education, that a population could ever be educated sufficiently to practice self-government. And second, that only in this way could modern economy, based upon advances in science and technology, be fostered—since such an economy requires an educated labor force.

As Lyndon LaRouche has pointed out, “The idea of a Christian Classical humanist education, such as that of

Groote's Brothers of the Common Life, or the Schiller-Humboldt reforms, the reliving of moments of great, axiomatic-revolutionary discovery, as if to replicate that moment from within the mind of the original discoverer in one's own mind, is a typification of the relevant way in which the child and youth must be developed morally and formally at the same time." LaRouche emphasizes, that the relevant feature of such education "is emphasis upon use of primary sources' representation of processes of great discovery, prompting the student, in this way, to replicate that mental experience of the discoverer in the student's own mental processes."

In order to demonstrate the approach taken by the Brotherhood, this article will utilize as its source the first part of a book written by Thomas à Kempis entitled *Rules to Live Above the World While We Are in It*. This first part is the "Children's Manual," which contains, according to à Kempis, "Holy Instructions and Meditations for Forming the Minds of Children According to the True Christian Pattern." Included in this manual is the "Alphabet of a Scholar in the School of Christ."

Ecumenical Approach

One might argue that a Christian Classical humanist approach were not practical, especially in an area of the world such as Bosnia, where the majority of the population is Muslim. However, such an approach is absolutely necessary among Christians in this war-torn area of the world, and an intelligible representation of the method employed by the Brotherhood of the Common Life should be of great value to Muslims, Jews, or any other persons of good will.

In 1453, Nicolaus of Cusa, who was himself educated by the Brotherhood of the Common Life, wrote a dialogue entitled "On the Peace of Faith." While attempting to render Christianity intelligible to those of other faiths, he stressed in the dialogue, that the basis of peace among peoples of different religions is the fact that all human beings are created in the image of God, and thus have the natural law of love imprinted upon their minds through participation in

God's Eternal Law.

Cusa writes: "The divine commandments are very brief and are all well known and common in every nation, for the light that reveals them to us is created along with the rational soul. For within us God says to love Him, from whom we received being, and to do nothing to another, except that which we wish done to us. Love is therefore the fulfillment of the law of God and all laws are reduced to this."

Profound Questions

A child traumatized by war is confronted with profound questions of life and death at an early age, questions which many adults have difficulty resolving for themselves, if they have not already resolved them at an early age.

Deprived of familial love, confronted with injustice and evil, the child must be given a sense of his own value in the eyes of a merciful God. And he must come to understand internally, rather than merely outwardly, the importance—and the very possibility—of overcoming suffering and tribulation.

The approach taken to these problems by the Brotherhood of the Common Life was based upon the healing power of imitating Christ, and imitating those who imitate Christ. For Christians, the imitation of Christ is the replication of the creative method of composition of the world, since Christ is the Creator of the World. The child must replicate in his own mind the lessons of Christ, and they must become engraved on his heart. Thus, the child comes to know, and not merely learn externally, the agapic, creative love of Christ, and of those who imitate Christ in such works of creative love.

A child traumatized by the loss of parents in war or under other conditions, must have his understanding awakened to the possibility of overcoming suffering through love. He must come to see his own tribulation as a cross that he must bear, as Christ bore his, and that if he bears this cross willingly, he will have much to offer other human beings.

The child must see that creation is good, despite the presence of evil in the world. He needs to know that the universe is well-ordered, not disordered, and that the ordering principle of the

universe is agapic creativity. He needs to experience this directly in his own mind.

Musical Memory

By teaching the children of the poor and orphans, the Brotherhood discovered an educational principle which Lyndon LaRouche has described as "musical memory." The child must learn to subsume the multiplicity of his life experiences, though especially shattering in the case of an orphan, under the One, Who is Love.

The Brotherhood school lessons stressed memorization and reflection upon an alphabetical poem entitled "Christ's Cross-Row." This poem is presented in the "Children's Manual," which, it is believed, Thomas à Kempis wrote shortly after he joined the Brotherhood

In the introduction to this manual, à Kempis writes that he intends to teach the fundamental lessons in the School of Christ, beginning with humility and love. The method he will employ is the method of "examples" rather than "precepts," that is, the pedagogy employed is exemplary rather than didactic. The examples he employs are those of Christ and his Apostles, particularly St. John and St. Paul.

Through the mnemonic device of engraving the alphabetical poem of Christ's example of the Cross on his heart, the child's mind and heart are lifted above the insecurity and fear associated with his sense of loss and forsakenness, to a mental state based upon loving creative reason.

As Lyndon LaRouche has explained, even before the first line of a poem or the first notes of a musical composition, the composer must have recollected in his own mind the relatively absolute One or unifying concept of the composition as a whole. He must know in advance the end or purpose of the whole composition. In a sense, the composition is enfolded, as Nicolaus of Cusa would say, by its end or terminus. The unfolding or development of the multiplicity in the realm of the Becoming of the poem or musical work from its very beginning, must proceed lawfully from the concept of the work as a whole. All variation, every discontinuity, each dissonance

from the very beginning of the piece, must be subsumed by and lead to the end of the work. For the creation or performance of the work to reflect the principles of the creation of the universe, its unity must be ever-present in the mind or memory of the composer or performer. In this sense, its eternity must be the terminus of its temporal unfolding.

The model à Kempis used for this alphabetical method is that of Psalm 119, in which each of the eight verses of the first strophe begins with the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet; each verse of the second strophe with the second letter; and so on, for all the twenty-two letters.

‘Christ’s Cross Row’

À Kempis begins with the following “Little Alphabet”:

- Apply thine Heart unto Instruction.
- Boast not thy self of the Morrow.
- Cease from thine own Wisdom.
- Despise not the Poor.
- Envy not the Rich.
- Follow Christ.
- Go not after a Multitude.
- He that walks uprightly, walks surely.
- Judge not, that thou be not judged.
- Knock, and it shall be opened.
- Labor not after that which perishes.
- Much given, much required.
- No Man can serve Two Masters.
- One thing necessary.
- Pray always.
- Quench not the Spirit.
- Rejoice always.
- Seek, and find.
- Take the whole Armor of God.
- Use this World, as not abusing it.
- Walk honestly as in the Day.
- Yield your self up to God.
- Zealously affect a good thing.

What follows, then, is the “Alphabet of a Scholar in the School of Christ,” in which the Master, Christ, proceeds to discuss the lessons to be drawn from each of the above alphabetically ordered lines. The first lesson, for example, is:

Lesson I. *Aim* not to be Great or Popular in the World; but rather to be unknown, and nothing *Accounted* of. This is more wholesome and profitable than to be *admired* and praised of Men. *Ambition* is the bane of the soul.



As can be seen, each of the alphabetically ordered lessons contains additional words which begin with the same letter of the alphabet. Here are a few of the more important lessons:

Lesson X. *Know* thy self; and learn to *know* Christ; whom truly to *know* is a *Kingdom*. Let the *knowledge* of his cross be thy constant exercise, that it may *keep* thee in all thy Ways, and *kill* in thee all manner of Impatience. This if thou rightly *knowest* and understand, thou shalt *kindly* bear injuries, and account them even as thy best Friends and Patrons, who do oppress and slander thee. Since if thou judgest and considerest hereof in Justice, as the Cross will teach thee, thou shalt be sure to gain thereby. For profitable are they to thee in the Good, who withstand thee in the Evil. *Keep* this as a little *key*; which will serve to unlock many an hard Lock.



Lesson XI. *Lock* up thy Heart from creaturely objects; *Lay* up there for thy self an incorruptible treasure; and *labor* after the riches that none can take from thee. . . .



Lesson XXII. †: *Xamin* thy self by *Xrist* Crucified. Let *Christ* be thy Life, thy lesson, thy meditation, thy discourse. Let *Christ* be thy desire, thy gain, all thy hope and thy reward; and be sure to look on him always, and in all things, both as thy *Exemplar* and thy End. If thou seekest for any thing else than purely *Christ*, thou shalt suffer loss; Thou shalt labor,



and shalt not find rest. But if thou take *Example* by his first followers, who *excluded* all things beside for the sake of *Christ*, living as *exiles* in this world, that they might obtain with him a better; and lively *express* his Image in thy self; then shalt thou be exceedingly *exalted*, and shalt enter with *Christ* into the *Excellent* glory, by Faith expected.

Lesson XXIII. . . . Childhood and Youth are Vanity: But see thou put away Evil from thine Heart, by remembering now thy Creator in the Days of thy Youth, before the years draw nigh, wherein thou canst have but little pleasure; and by taking betimes upon thee the *Yoke* of Christ, in which thou shalt find thy Soul’s true rest. Hymns and Psalms, and spiritual Songs, with the Melody of the heart, are a chief employment of those who bow themselves to this *Yoke*: Truly light is the burden, and easy the *Yoke* of these choice devoted Servants of Christ; with whom the Choirs of Angels and all the Company of Heaven do rejoice together, celebrating the name of God their Savior with triumphant Hymns. You must know that the music of the Soul, when in Harmony with God, is the best music: And that he sings the sweetest Hymns to God, who glorifies him in his Life, and in the midst of Tribulation is evermore singing *Lauds* to his Name. . . .



In the conclusion, à Kempis says: “Write, O Child, this Alphabet in thine Heart, as in the Book of Life. But keep withall a Memorial hereof upon Paper; and every Day look into it, and by it accustom thyself to form thy Mind and Manners. Consider one Letter at a time, and get it perfectly. Let not one day pass without consulting it, and examining thy self thereby; that the contents thereof may be thoroughly engraven upon thy Heart. . . .

“Blessed is that Scholar, who, being well instructed in these Lessons, followeth Christ by this Way; and who daily for Christ’s sake takes up his cross, that he may reign with Him in Glory Everlasting. Amen.”

—William F. Wertz, Jr.

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