

## Praise for *Know Thyself*

“When Andrew arrived in Erbil, his presence in the classroom was palpable. Sitting amongst the children, he uplifted the entire environment with the spirit of only a true educator. Now, he has incarnated that spirit in the word and, with careful attention to man’s design in the image of God (*imago Dei*), has defended the principles of classical Catholic education to parents, teachers, and truth-seekers alike.”

—**Archbishop Bashar Matti Warda**, CSsR., Chaldean Archbishop of Erbil (Iraq)

“Scripture warns us that ‘of making many books there is no end’ (Eccles. 12:12), but Andrew Youngblood’s *Know Thyself* is not just any book. He not only articulates a strong case for the classical renewal movement, but does so in a Christ-centered manner I’ve rarely seen even in Christian discussions of education, which are often distracted by, and settle for, merely political or cultural goals. Youngblood respects the giftedness and autonomy of students and prioritizes their needs, especially their spiritual needs. I recommend *Know Thyself* to anyone who wants to conduct classical education in a way that honors Christ.”

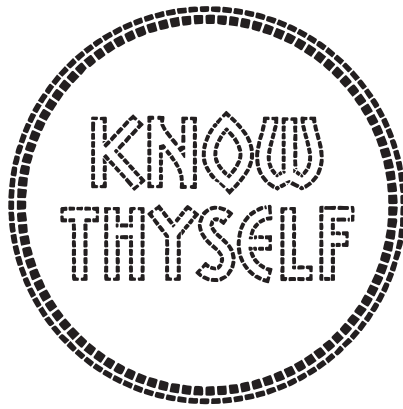
—**Jeremy Tate**, President and Co-Founder, Classic Learning Test (CLT)

“Amidst a wide panoply of the wisdom of the ages, which may be reason enough to imbibe the teachings of this convincing tome, Youngblood really hits the mark with *Know Thyself* when he echoes the wisdom of the Holy See over the last 150 years. He calls us all, parents and educators, to a deeper understanding of and commitment to the true end of education: a personal encounter with Christ. Nothing less, in every subject, every day, should be our goal for our young people. I myself am deeply moved by his teacher’s heart, summed up by his confession that ‘I will not let my students define themselves by a college acceptance letter, a job, an illness, monetary success, or anything other than the love of their Father.’ *Know Thyself* does a beautiful job at calling us all back to the Church’s true vision for education, and showing how the wisdom of the ages makes this high calling not only possible but a fascinating adventure.”

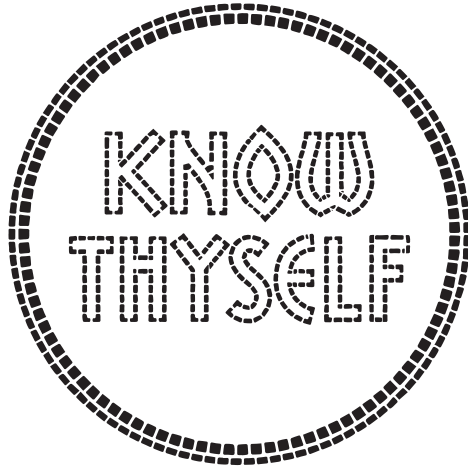
—**Michael Van Hecke**, President and Founder, Institute for Catholic Liberal Education

“*Know Thyself* is a pilgrimage of self-discovery through the world of education, and helps us think about our own education and consider our children’s education. What is the purpose of education? Andrew Youngblood answers with his experience, expertise, and beautiful prose, explaining what we should know but have forgotten. Whether you are a parent, student, or teacher, this will clarify what Catholic classical education is and why it matters.”

—**Nancy Carpentier Brown**, author of *The Woman Who Was Chesterton*







CLASSICAL CATHOLIC EDUCATION  
AND  
THE DISCOVERY OF SELF

ANDREW YOUNGBLOOD

FOREWORD BY DALE AHLQUIST

WORD *on* FIRE.

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To God the Father  
for the Gift of his Love





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# Foreword

*Dale Ahlquist*

G.K. Chesterton says that the reason we study the *Odyssey* is that all of life is a journey. Hold on to that metaphor.

First, let's mention the fact that Homer's epic poem is not only still being studied after three thousand years; it is undergoing a surge of popularity in a growing number of new schools being opened across the country. In addition to studying Homer, students are reading more recent writers such as Sophocles and Euripides and Plato and Aristotle.

They are part of the revival of classical learning in intermediate and secondary education. While many parents, quite fed up with the state of public schools (and the private schools that do nothing but imitate them), are rushing to embrace this genuine alternative offered by a return to the classics, other parents are reluctant to send their children to these new "old" schools. They fear they will be too difficult and perhaps too elitist. But G.K. Chesterton offers this assurance: "The perfectly classical can be understood by anybody." And he lends further solidarity: "The tastes of the man in the street are classical."

But that might not be enough to put them at ease. For those parents who are still intimidated by the term 'classical education,' who are mystified if not afraid of such unfamiliar territory, Andrew Youngblood has written this book to help take the mystery out of

it. He clearly and calmly explains what classical education is but also why it is vital.

However, at the same time, he paradoxically puts mystery into it. There are, after all, two kinds of mystery. There is the puzzle to be solved, as in a detective story; and there is eternal truth to be contemplated over and over, as in the mysteries of the Holy Rosary. Andrew fathoms the first and plunges deeper into the second.

Each student is a mystery. So, for that matter, is each parent. Chesterton says, “The self is more distant than any star.” Studying the stars—as every student should do, just as the ancients did—only makes existence more wonderful but also more strange.

We first realize this strange thing called existence inside our own skin, our own mind, and our own soul. Thus the classical dictum “Know thyself.” Who are we, and what are we doing here? If students are not looking for the answers to these questions in whatever subject they are assigned to study, then they are not being taught to think. The cautionary corollary to “Know thyself” is the profound reflection of Socrates on being sentenced to death for the crime of teaching philosophy: “The unexamined life is not worth living.”

One of the main differences between the presently prevailing model of education and the classical one is that the present model keeps changing and is easily swayed by current fads and fashions, while the classical model is built on the real definition of education, which is to pass truth from one generation to the next. Our present schools are a hodgepodge of different subjects, some of which are deemed necessary and some optional, but none of which are connected to each other. But the classical model is based on an integrated curriculum. Everything has to come together. Chesterton says, “Thinking means connecting things.” Modern education—and consequently, modern culture—has suffered by separating the arts from the sciences, the humanities from mathematics, language from its roots, philosophy from reality, and theology from—well, from the classroom altogether.

The three pillars of classical education are the transcendentals: truth, goodness, and beauty. If we pursue these three things, they will lead us to ultimate truth, ultimate good, and the beatific vision. As Andrew shows, the fullest and most complete classical education is one that is grounded in the Catholic Church, the house where the ultimates meet.

While Andrew Youngblood explains some of the reasons for the resurgence in classical education, he neglects to mention one: Andrew Youngblood. He is one of the reasons. He is the Director of Curriculum and Instruction for the Chesterton Schools Network, a growing collection of classical Catholic high schools in five different countries. Directors direct. He has helped deliver a carefully crafted, integrated classical curriculum to the many Chesterton Academies, especially in their nascent stages. He has not only had a front row seat; he has had a driver's seat.

That last metaphor was a good one. In fact, it gets back to the same metaphor that I asked you to hold on to. We study the *Odyssey* because all of life is a journey. Andrew describes learning as a journey. "To be on a journey," he says, "is the essential human condition." The goal of the classical, integrated curriculum is to arrive at a great family reunion at the end of that journey.

## St. Charles de Foucauld's Prayer to God the Father

Father,  
I abandon myself into your hands;  
do with me what you will.  
Whatever you may do, I thank you:  
I am ready for all, I accept all.  
Let only your will be done in me,  
and in all your creatures.  
I wish no more than this, O Lord.  
Into your hands I commend my soul;  
I offer it to you  
with all the love of my heart,  
for I love you, Lord,  
and so need to give myself,  
to surrender myself into your hands,  
without reserve,  
and with boundless confidence,  
for you are my Father.  
Amen.

# Introduction

## THE INSCRIPTION

It seems a fitting metaphor that the path up the mountain was gradual, uneven, yet beautiful. The marble stones of the Sacred Way, elegant and refined, reinforced the sense of a pilgrimage. As he walked up this path, the man's gaze fell continually upon the peaceful valley below, covered by thousands of olive trees gently swaying in the wind and creating the illusion of a green ocean with soft waves. Somehow, this too must have reinforced the metaphor of his journey, for he was on a quest for answers, intellectual if not spiritual. As he turned his gaze away from the Valley of Phocis below, the majestic temple sanctuary came into view. He continued his pilgrimage up Mount Parnassus.

The details of his physical appearance are scant in ancient literature. It is possible that he was thin and lanky, resulting in an unhealthy appearance. But given that these details are recorded by a comic playwright who did not much care for him or his famous friend, it is entirely possible that this description bears the exaggeration of artistic license. Although well-known and a man of importance in Athenian society, his friendship with Socrates would become the trait for which history would remember him. In literature, he appears as a faithful companion to the controversial Athenian sage. And this journey, made with an impetuosity that was perhaps characteristic, was the most famous moment of Chaerephon's life.

The events that caused this pilgrimage are unknown. Perhaps his friend's tendency to be a polarizing figure in Athens was already becoming an issue that required some intervention. Perhaps he was overwhelmed, like so many others, by his friend's sagacity, or confused by the latter's constant insistence, contrary to his fame and reputation, that he was the most ignorant of all men. Whatever the reason, Chaerephon was determined to resolve the issue by consulting the Oracle of Delphi.

As he entered the sacred ground of the sanctuary, he continued his procession with the other pilgrims to the temple of Apollo. Believed by the Greeks to be the center of the world, the temple was famous for the cryptic, prophetic utterances that the elderly priestess, the Pythia, delivered in a trancelike state. It was her insight that Chaerephon sought in order to resolve the question that stirred him as so many others: "Was any man wiser than Socrates?"<sup>1</sup> Her eventual response that no one was wiser only accelerated the chain of events that led to the trial and death of Socrates, which would transform the life of the great philosopher's student, Plato. In turn, the life and teaching of Plato, and his equally famous student, Aristotle, would amplify the philosophical and scientific revolution that had been brewing in Greek society for over two hundred years and would officially birth Western civilization.

But all of this was in the unknown future. At the moment, under the warm sun, surrounded by the beautiful buildings of the sacred sanctuary, with the temple entrance in front of him, Chaerephon journeyed on his quest for confirmation of what he already knew to be true. Socrates and his relentless pursuit of truth

1. The reference to Chaerephon visiting the Oracle of Delphi is given in Plato's dialogue the *Apology*, which presents itself as a transcription of Socrates' defense during his trial. Xenophon also provides a version of Socrates' defense and mentions the visit. Chaerephon is described by the playwright Aristophanes in his work *The Clouds*. The phrase "Know thyself" was inscribed in the forecourt (*prónaos*) of the temple of Apollo in Delphi. Many associate the saying with Socrates, and both Xenophon and Plato mention that it was a topic of conversation that he broached on several occasions.



and wisdom had brought about this journey. But Chaerephon's pilgrimage for answers, if the first to be caused by Socrates, was by no means the last. Plato and, to a greater or lesser degree, nearly every student since would be impacted by the argumentative sage of Athens. And as he entered the shrine of Apollo, approaching the famous oracle, Chaerephon looked up and saw the famous yet enigmatic inscription carved in stone above the temple entrance: *know thyself*.

#### KNOW THYSELF

Education, both classical and non-classical, finds a stimulus and origin in the person of Socrates. He was a complex character, both inspirational and enigmatic, whose life and teachings marked a revolutionary new beginning in the Western intellectual tradition and in education. Since he did not write anything himself, we know of his life and teachings through the writings of his students, primarily Plato, and some of his detractors. When his friend Chaerephon returned from the Oracle of Delphi with confirmation that Socrates was indeed the wisest of all men, he responded not by boasting or celebrating but by trying to prove the oracle wrong. He set out to discover if anyone knew the secret of a meaningful life because such a person would surely be wiser than him. He began questioning everyone he could find, asking deeper and deeper questions about the important aspects of beauty, friendship, knowledge, etc., but no one could give him satisfactory answers. Instead, they pretended to know more than they actually did. Socrates began to understand that true wisdom came from embracing our ignorance. Only after accepting that we do not know can we begin the journey of education. Eventually, Socrates realized that the oracle had been right all along. He was wise, not because of what he knew, but because he was able to admit that he was ignorant. His methods of investigation, however, resulted in some noble and important men of Athens looking foolish. This caused him to be admired by some and despised by others.

His approach, today known as the Socratic Method, caused great polarization in Athens. He was accused of impiety against the gods and corrupting the minds of the youth, for which he was brought before the Athenian Senate. Plato's dialogue the *Apology* recounts Socrates' defense during the trial, where he stated that he had done nothing but attempt to prove the oracle wrong. The jury was not swayed by his argument, however, and convicted Socrates by a vote of 280 to 221. The law allowed a convicted citizen to propose an alternative punishment, but, instead of suggesting exile, Socrates suggested he be honored by the city for his services and be compensated for his work. The jury was not amused by his defiance and sentenced him to death by drinking a mixture of poison hemlock. Before his execution, his friends and disciples, including Plato, offered to bribe the guards and help him escape. He declined, stating he was not afraid of death. Socrates drank the lethal mixture without hesitation.

The life and work of Socrates did not happen in isolation. He was the product of a rich philosophical and scientific tradition that had been developing for almost two hundred years. But his brash and unapologetic methodology resulted in a rigorous search for the essence of things in a way that had not hitherto been utilized. His quest for wisdom inspired Plato and led to the creation of his school, the Academy, the prototype for Western education.<sup>2</sup> But even more than an inspiration for schools, Socrates provided a pedagogy and a purpose to education. He forces us to leave our comfortable lives and the safe places where we exist unchallenged and enter on a quest for self-improvement through knowledge. We are compelled to enter the dark space of accepting our ignorance and embracing the struggle to change. This can be a difficult journey, and one where we are constantly confronted with our own limitations, but Socrates has left us no choice. We must seek

2. Above the entrance to Plato's Academy was the inscription, "Let no one ignorant of Geometry enter here." The saying might be surprising to some, but it highlights the connection of Plato's school to the liberal arts and the integrated view of education.

to understand the world around us and, in so doing, discover the truth of who we are. We must learn to know ourselves.

**THE RESURGENCE OF  
CLASSICAL CATHOLIC EDUCATION**

For most of the next 2300 years, classical education, built on the principles of ancient Greece, was the accepted form of pedagogy and instruction. This changed dramatically in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when the principles of Socratic education were largely discarded. Within a generation, however, a revival of classical pedagogy began to take place. During a course on education given at Oxford in 1947, the English author Dorothy Sayers gave a lecture in which she applied the three traditional liberal arts related to language acquisition—grammar, logic, and rhetoric, collectively referred to as the ‘trivium’—to stages of growth in students. Using this framework, Sayers set forth a pedagogy of education that transferred the structure of classical education to educational pedagogy and child development. No longer were the liberal arts only the *what* of education, but also the *how*. This lecture is seen as the starting point for the modern revival of classical education, a movement that continues to experience significant popularity and exponential growth in certain circles.<sup>3</sup>

When encountering classical education for the first time, parents invariably and understandably want to know the difference between it and the more prevalent pedagogy in public, parochial, and private schools. I had this same experience, but in reverse. Having experienced classical education in college and then working in classical school environments, I wanted to understand what non-classical education was and how it was different from the

3. The article in question is “The Lost Tools of Learning” by Dorothy Sayers. I agree with Shawn Barnett’s article criticizing Sayers’s approach, but the catalyst effect that the speech had is widely acknowledged. See his “Dorothy Sayers was Wrong: The Trivium and Child Development,” Circe Institute, August 9, 2019, <https://circeinstitute.org/blog/blog-dorothy-sayers-was-wrong-trivium-and-child-development/>.

classical model when I was hired to run a classical program in a diocesan school that used common core educational standards for its classes. In order to appreciate the benefit of classical pedagogy, it is important to understand the difference.

One of my first observations, and one that I continually experience as a point of confusion when talking with parents, is that many people do not realize how much education has changed in the past twenty years. I had always experienced my exposure to classical education as somewhat consistent with my experience in parochial high school in the 1980s. This was one of the reasons that I was somewhat skeptical of all the chatter about the current state of education that surrounded the lightning-fast adoption of Common Core standards in 2010. Modern pedagogy, however, by its own admission, has a strong emphasis on job preparation and earning potential. This is markedly different from classical education in which the goal is to help students thrive not just at work but in the very art of living by cultivating a life of flourishing through personal excellence.

My basic experience of student formation as head of a classical primary school included aspects of mimetic instruction,<sup>4</sup> classroom discussions, repetition of core ideas for mastery, and integration of learning for enhanced student involvement and efficacy. An easy and straightforward example of these pedagogical principles included the use of songs in the elementary years for acquisition of grammatical knowledge in English or a foreign language (in the case of schools where I worked, Latin). They were fun and had a tremendous impact on recall. This allowed the students to have easy access to core information as their understanding of a particular subject increased. They could apply basic knowledge

4. Mimetic instruction is a form of pedagogy that engages the student through the journey of knowledge acquisition. It is a core practice in classical schools and comes from the Latin word meaning “to imitate.” It is rooted in the understanding that learning is a journey that begins with an invitation and gradually grows into a mastery of new knowledge.

to material that was gradually increasing in difficulty, leading to greater and greater mastery. This did not seem very controversial or revolutionary. It actually seemed like common sense.

Other basic principles, such as the use of cumulative practice for ingrained knowledge of essential and basic information like math facts or consistent training through easy, age-appropriate writing exercises, seemed also undeniably beneficial. Assessing student engagement through kinetic learning, narration, or thoughtful conversation seemed equally obvious. Using constant monitoring of individual learning through some variation of seminar discussion with older students, which allowed the teacher continual feedback about where each and every student was with the internalization and mastery of new concepts, seemed to me to be the very essence of what it meant to be a teacher. It was confusing when I heard these techniques being actively discouraged and even labeled as harmful for students in non-classical settings. That is when I began to realize how classical pedagogy has a wealth of knowledge and experience to bring to the current discussion about education.

And this leads to a first observation about the discussion surrounding classical education. The discrepancy between classical education and non-classical education might arise from our unfamiliarity with the former but also with the basic principles of the latter. It is possible that people speaking about education today assume that there is little or no difference between classical education and current educational trends. If you went to Catholic school in the twentieth century, your experience might be more similar to the standards of classical education than most modern standards. In this case, it is not just classical education that you need to understand. It is how much education has changed in the early years of the twenty-first century.

## MY JOURNEY OF EDUCATION

I graduated high school in 1989. Even though it was not classical, there were aspects of reading classical literature that were incorporated and expected within the curriculum. *The Federalist Papers* were part of my summer reading list for senior year. We read *Beowulf*, *Macbeth*, and *Crime and Punishment*. In religion class (I attended a Catholic high school), I was blessed to have excellent teachers who authentically and enthusiastically explained the Church's teaching. They succeeded in engaging the class—I was the exception—in seminar discussions. I remember the amount of effort, wasted on me, that my calculus teacher brought to his teaching of the material. Many of my teachers employed most, if not all, of the principles of classical pedagogy, called mimetic instruction, even if they were doing so unknowingly. After high school, I attended a large state university for one year. That was probably the closest I came to contemporary education: large auditorium lectures with small breakouts led by teaching assistants that were completely untrained at teaching, seemingly interesting classes that we could not sign up for, and core requirements that were arbitrary and disjointed.

The next year, I transferred to a small, Catholic college with a strong liberal arts curriculum and classical pedagogy. I never looked back. Everything about classical education worked better for me. It was engaging and interesting. It answered questions that were important that I had never thought to ask. And as I was exposed to Catholic culture on campus and intellectual rigor in the classroom, I felt myself being healed and made whole from all the lies of secular society that I had so readily bought into.

For the past twenty years, I have been involved with education, always classical, at all grades, from pre-K to college, and in various forms of leadership, including teaching, administration, training, consulting, and curriculum development. I have helped start more than thirty classical high schools, mostly in the United States but also internationally. One of my great joys was to bring classical

education to a Catholic pre-K–12 school in Kurdistan, Iraq.<sup>5</sup> I have seen the impact of classical education on hundreds of high school students and witnessed the same healing that I experienced take place in them. Even more inspiring for me, as someone who works with schools that are both Catholic and classical, I have seen countless students be transformed by an encounter with Christ during these important and formative years. I see students encountering God’s love, not just by the liturgical life or character formation of the school, but in the classroom itself, by the books that are used and the way they are taught. This is why I believe so passionately in classical Catholic education, and why I want to help you understand more deeply the riches that this education has for all students.

#### ***APOLOGIA (A DEFENSE)***

I experience classical Catholic education every day in my high school classroom. It is inspiring, engaging, and diverse. It focuses on the whole child and unabashedly states that it is more focused on a student’s success at life and their relationship with Christ than simply job training. It asks questions about the nature of love and friendship, law and civic duty, purpose and discernment. For those who are interested in learning about my program, I let them talk to the students. They are always my best ambassadors. And I am in a unique situation in that the students who participate in my classical program also take non-classical classes in our archdiocesan high school. So they are especially qualified to explain what they love about classical education and how they experience it in contrast

5. I have been fortunate to be the director of a classical Catholic program within a high school of the Philadelphia archdiocese for the past seven years. The program is part of a network of over fifty classical Catholic schools, and I serve as the Director of Curriculum and Instruction for this network. In March of 2022, I was blessed to lead a delegation that traveled to Iraq for its first ever papal visit and to help launch the Chesterton Academy of St. Thomas the Apostle at Mar Qardakh International School. For more information about this thriving Catholic school in Iraqi Kurdistan, visit [marqardakh.com](http://marqardakh.com). Information about the Chaldean Catholic community in Erbil is available at [www.stmiraq.org](http://www.stmiraq.org).

to non-classical classes. Some of them have provided personal testimony for this book.

Classical education also has its detractors.<sup>6</sup> They complain that it is impractical, outdated, or, worse, judgmental. These objections stem from a lack of understanding or misunderstanding of classical Catholic education. Others, like the criticisms that it is not in line with modern philosophical trends or that it is religious, are not only true but speak to the core of the mission of a classical Catholic school. Rather than answer these objections and criticisms, my goal is to lay out the beauty that I see in classical Catholic education as someone who has experienced it both as a student and as a teacher. I have witnessed the benefit of this environment on the intellectual, spiritual, and character development of hundreds of my students.

#### THE STRUCTURE OF THIS BOOK

This book is divided into two parts. Honoring the example of Socrates, the first part attempts to discover the essence of classical Catholic high school education by engaging in a discussion about the journey of education in general and examining the difference that faith makes in the educational process, before exploring some essential elements of classical Catholic education.

The second part will provide an overview of the integrated, narrative approach to education common in classical settings, using different periods of history as the starting point. The ancient world presents a time of longing for the redeemer of humanity, while the reality of God becoming man ushered in a new era and changed history forever, creating a Catholic society. A third period can be seen in the High Middle Ages, when faith and

6. A sample of objections to classical education can be found in a foreword written by Peter Kreeft to the book *Liberal Arts Tradition: A Philosophy of Christian Classical Education* by Kevin Clark and Ravi Scott Jain (Camp Hill, PA: Classical Academic Press, 2021), xv–xvii. The foreword, with a list of the objections, can be found at Christopher Perrin, “Dr. Peter Kreeft on the Benefits of Classical Education,” *Inside Classical Education*, February 4, 2015, <https://insideclassicaled.com/dr-peter-kreeft-on-the-benefits-of-classical-education/>.



reason lived in a beautiful harmony in a Catholic culture known as Christendom until eventually, in the modern era, people abandoned an understanding of the human person informed by Christ's revelation to humanity. This rejection has led to an ever-increasing misunderstanding of who we are and what we are called to be. As these different periods are explored, aspects of classical Catholic education will be seen from across disciplines.

One final remark about the structure of this book: The fact that the arrangement of the seven chapters mirrors the seven liberal arts and that the first three deal with essential aspects (like the trivium) while the last four focus more concretely on the various subjects (like the quadrivium) is not accidental. But it also has no bearing on the understanding of the book. There are no hidden meanings or double entendres. It was just something I could not resist.

There are two main goals in authoring this work: to make the discussion about the benefits of classical Catholic education accessible for all parents and to give parents and educators a sense of what occurs in the classical classroom every day. Visitors are regularly shocked by what they see when they participate in our discussions. A professor from a local Catholic university sent two education majors to observe a Socratic seminar in our program. Afterward, they said they have never been part of such a dynamic discussion. This reaction happens frequently. When parents hear from their children about the classroom dynamic, I hear over and over again, "I wish I could join your class!" For those who are thinking about classical Catholic education for their family or institution, this book will provide you with context, background, and explanation of what this approach to education offers.

#### **NO BOW TIES REQUIRED**

I was having dinner with friends one evening. They were on the cusp of a big decision: where to send their oldest son to high school. They had narrowed it to three choices: an archdiocesan

high school, a Catholic private high school, and a highly ranked public school. I was excited to hear about their discernment process and asked them how they felt the curricula of the three schools varied. They did not seem to understand my question and started talking about the quality of the sports fields and the cleanliness of the buildings. I persisted and tried to make my question more concrete: “What books do they read freshman year at the various schools?” I felt like I could gain a sense of how the curriculum was woven together by the answer to that question. Again they seemed not to understand and responded that they had finally made their selection based on the antique staircase in the main building. I don’t think it ever occurred to them to look at what was being studied.

This situation is not altogether unique. As someone who is passionate about curriculum and who is repeatedly trying to explain what a classical Catholic education has to offer, I often encounter parents who are not that interested in the details of what is being studied in their child’s classes. On the other hand, there are many families who are very intrigued by the specifics and are excited to discuss the curriculum. For those interested, they often quickly see the benefit of classical education.

There are many excellent responses to the question “What is classical Catholic education?” Unfortunately, they are sometimes complicated and often heavily academic. In videos, the men are often sitting in leather armchairs with thick bookcases behind them. Bowties are almost mandatory. A pipe is not unheard of. At conferences, a fedora or two might make an appearance. Women giving keynote lectures on the subject often appear elegant in ankle-length dresses. These are people whose work and ministry I greatly admire and respect. Although I eschew the bowtie, I am the king of the sweater vest, another staple of classical educational attire. To my great pride, my beard was once described as “academic.” But an answer is needed for everyone, the men who wear bow ties and the squad of dads in their t-shirts and polos, the

women in long skirts and the moms in leggings. The families in my program are down-to-earth, hardworking, and from a wide and very diverse set of backgrounds. They are very real and very busy. They care deeply about their children but have a million things going on. This book is for them and those like them.

Classical Catholic education is an amazing form of pedagogy and can be of great benefit. Through brief vignettes, personal anecdotes from students and teachers in classical Catholic programs, and examples from the classroom, my goal is to provide an explanation that is accessible, clear, detailed, and hopefully inspiring to all parents interested in helping their children find the approach to high school education that is right for their family. The book is designed so that you can read it in five-to-ten-minute increments if necessary. For all educators who read this book, perhaps the examples and pedagogical discussions can inspire you to incorporate elements of classical education in your classroom. It is a rich and rewarding approach to teaching, although at first it can seem somewhat daunting. If this book finds its way to students, then please know that, even though I addressed this book to adults, you are always in the forefront of my mind. Some students do not appreciate what an enormous opportunity high school can be, especially the learning experience in the classroom. But this is one of the most important times in your life. I hope and pray that your time in school is exhilarating, challenging, and formative. Don't be afraid to embark on the journey of education. You are worthy of all the best. You are sons and daughters of God the Most High. But it all starts with understanding who you are and who you are called to be. Know thyself. Your high school should teach you to see yourself through God's eyes. When you do, you will be amazed at what you see.



PART I

Understanding  
Classical Catholic Education



# What Is Classical Catholic Education?

The first part of this book comprises three chapters, dealing first with education in general, then Catholic education, and finally classical Catholic education. The first chapter discusses education as a journey of change. The learning process is fascinating and mysterious while simultaneously being natural and commonplace. It is communal by nature but must take place within the individual. No one can learn for another. As we will see in chapter 1, the story of *Brideshead Revisited* emphasizes how no one is able to journey for another. We hope to have the support and companionship of many on this path, but ultimately we are responsible for our own journey.

In the ancient world, Socrates highlighted the beauty and delicacy of learning by comparing the process of acquiring new knowledge to the process of delivering a baby. In this paradigm, the teacher is a midwife, guiding the student. This new life is always part of a student's potential. The teacher helps them make that potential a reality. But as beautiful and appealing as this imagery is, the reality of day-to-day instruction involves a host of variables that must all converge on and within the student for learning to take place. And this learning process that the student undergoes is a journey of change.

Literature is replete with examples and metaphors for the journey of life and education. Perhaps none is more beautiful than that of Homer's *Odyssey*, which illustrates the true nature and arduousness of a journey, the beauty of coming home, and the reunification that results. Plato's famous Allegory of the Cave is also a tale about the journey of new knowledge and one of the most influential parables in history. It is about a man who, through the enlightenment of education, discovers a new and more fundamental reality in the world. This basic message can also be found in many modern superhero and animated films, from *Iron Man* to *Moana*.

The second chapter explores how the Catholic faith changes the journey of education. How is the quest for personal growth through the transformation of knowledge acquisition impacted by the encounter with Jesus Christ? Quite a bit, actually. The fact that education is a search for, and an encounter with, truth takes on a much greater dimension when Truth itself takes on human flesh. This is why one of our most important tasks as Catholic educators is to create environments that facilitate this encounter. This is crucial at any time in life, and high school is no exception. If encountering Christ and building a strong relationship with him is our fundamental goal in life, then it must be an essential part of our educational journey as well. And since it is so essential, it is important to be direct and intentional with students about growing this connection.

Since the central reality of our life is our relationship with Jesus Christ, there are only two different paths we can choose: the one where we turn to Christ and allow ourselves to be loved by him, the other where we reject his grace and turn our backs on him. One relationship, two paths. This spirituality of the two ways can be found throughout Scripture and the writings of the early Church. Two paths, called the state of grace or sin in this life, result in heaven or hell in the next. There is no third path or destination. This relationship with Jesus transforms the journey



of education into a pilgrimage, with one main difference: the goal is present to us as we travel. We need not wait till the end of our journey, of school or life, to achieve our goal. Christ is present to us in the here and now. In fact, we can only encounter God, who lives forever in the now, in the present moment of our life. The past and future melt away as we open ourselves to encounter our Lord in the present. This is why living in the current moment is vital. This reality must impact our decision about where we decide to go for high school. If encountering Christ is the goal, a good Catholic high school can provide the optimal environment for creating the space for this encounter.

I have read many articles and seen countless videos of people answering the question “What is classical Catholic education?” The definitions are not always clear and sometimes very academic. It is important that we are able to provide a concise and precise explanation of what a classical Catholic education entails. So the following definition is provided in the third chapter: *Classical Catholic education immerses students in the unity of truth, transforms them through a metaphysical worldview, and, through engaging discussion, encourages them to embrace a life of flourishing fulfilled in God’s call to divine intimacy with Christ in his Church.*

This definition has several elements: (1) A classical Catholic education will present the various subjects in an integrated fashion. Truth is one, and learning, which focuses on truth, must be one integrated reality looked at from the various standpoints of math, literature, science, philosophy, the arts, history, and theology. A perfect model of this integrated aspect of education can be found in the first philosopher of the Western tradition, Thales of Miletus. (2) Since all truth is one and finds its origin in the work of the Creator, all reality shares certain essential characteristics of truth, beauty, and goodness. Known as the transcendentals, these essential aspects of all being help provide the student with a metaphysical worldview that is profoundly transformative. (3) The example of Socrates, who bequeathed to the world his

famous pedagogical methodology, the Socratic seminar, is an essential part of a classical Catholic educational pedagogy—not because it is old and classic but because it is engaging, energizing, and healing for the students. Along with Plato and Aristotle, this great philosopher focused on what it means to excel in the art and craft of living. (4) Lastly, a classical Catholic education will have the Incarnation of Christ as the central reality that informs our worldview and teach students to think with the mind of the Church. If Socrates and Aristotle encourage a life of excellence, Jesus Christ transforms our understanding of the human person by promising that we are to be “participants of the divine nature” (2 Pet. 1:4). This promise serves as the starting point and ultimate goal of every journey, including the journey of education. Although these elements might be employed partially or arbitrarily in modern pedagogy, when taken together, these components provide the essential characteristics of a classical Catholic high school education.