

Speak, Write, Act

By Robert Spencer

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Home Schoolers today confront such a forest of programs, curricula, textbooks and materials that they may miss the tree: the Cross that is the goal and center of all our educational endeavors. Of course, as in all matters touching the spiritual life, frequent reminders of the ultimate goal, and examinations of the various aspects of life in its light, are salutary. The goal of education is no different from the goal of life itself, since education is preparation for living the good life.

Saint Ignatius of Loyola and the early Jesuits kept this firmly in mind as they established educational institutions throughout Europe in the sixteenth century. Although St. Ignatius did not write his *Spiritual Exercises* as an educational manual, his vision was unified: he didn't lay aside his goals for spiritual formation when he turned to education in general. Thus he articulates the goal of education when speaking of man's vocation:

Man is created to praise, reverence, and serve God our Lord,
and by this means to save his soul.
All other things on the face of the Earth are created
for man to help him fulfill the end for which he is created.

Education's place is to help the child discover and fulfill HIS God-given vocation. In a letter to one of his fellows, a Father Mercurian whom he asked to found a Jesuit school in Perugia, St. Ignatius explains that he wants the Jesuit college

. . . to give a proper literary formation to its own subjects so that
they may become useful laborers for Christ, and this will redound
to the benefit of the people. . .

The chief element of everyone's vocation, whatever the student's ultimate state in life, is to know, love and serve God. Saint Ignatius reveals the specific form this should take in education in his various instructions to Jesuits opening schools. In the letter to Father Mercurian, St. Ignatius hopes that Jesuit students will "set an example of good life and edifying conversation," and that the college "will resemble a seminary and be a perpetual storehouse of good deeds." He directs that the youth be instructed in "Latin, Greek and Hebrew," as well as in "composition, disputations and other literary exercises. The whole curriculum, of course, should be framed by "the sacraments, exhortations, Christian doctrine and similar offices."

Instructions for the school at Ingolstadt are consistent with these goals:

Let the masters show great diligence in class-exercises, repetitions,
disputations, written compositions; and let them use every means
to inculcate in their pupils, even in the youngest, the Catholic teaching,
remembering that they are instructors in virtuous habits no less than in letters.

St. Ignatius' directions crystallized into a triple focus upon training students to speak ("edifying conversation"), to write ("composition") and to act ("virtuous habits").

Home schooling parents can use St. Ignatius' triple focus and overall goal for education as a framework for their entire curriculum. Amid the expert-worship, hucksterism and profiteering so prevalent in modern education, St. Ignatius' model is simple, adaptable and proven. Over the centuries the Jesuit educational model became the most consistently successful the world has ever known. It re-energized Catholic Europe and laid the foundations for a Catholic culture in Central and South America, which began waning only with its choice of Marx over Ignatius. And it is not just for Jesuits any more.

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To speak

The ancient Trivium divided education into three branches: grammar, dialectic (logic) and rhetoric. While all three of these are generally neglected today, rhetoric is in the worst position for being maligned as well as underutilized. “Rhetoric,” in an inversion and vulgarization of Aristotle’s conception of a finely honed appeal to the will, has become a synonym for inflated verbiage designed to deceive.

Yet it is the will that makes choices, not the intellect. Appeals to the will are indispensable for evangelization: years ago, I was an earnest Protestant who engaged in street evangelism with a college group. We would approach people on the street at random and occasionally find one full of skepticism and questions. Our organizers advised us to approach these types with a question of our own: “If I answer all your questions sufficiently, will you give your life to Christ, or are you just indulging in intellectual games?” The real question behind this one was, “Is your will disposed to convert?” Without the will, there can be no conversion, whatever the preponderance of favorable intellectual evidence.

Hence the need for rhetoric. It not only trains one to appeal to the will effectively and honestly, but it helps one discern the spuriousness in many of the popular culture’s appeals to us. All too many people do not have intellects trained well enough, or wills disciplined enough, to resist what is spurious and harmful. The truth must be heard. It must be defended. The Holy Father has called for a reevangelization of Europe. (The United States could use it too!) Catholics who take this seriously must train students to speak. If the Church is really going to reconvert Europe and the Americas, the spectacle of the student overcome by shyness, as unwilling as he is unable to articulate and defend his beliefs in the public forum, must be banished from home schools and classrooms. The best test of learning is the ability to explain verbally what one has learned: “I understand it; I just can’t explain it” is sometimes an intermediate step, but often is an excuse in masquerade.

A student can and should be trained to speak at home. While explaining and defending his views to his father, mother and siblings may not be Bryan-meets-Darwin, it is a beginning step that will poise, confidence and experience beyond what most students are getting today anywhere.

Here the *Spiritual Exercises* are again a firm foundation. St. Ignatius’ curriculum for training in public speaking is encapsulated in the “Presupposition” to the *Exercises*.

In order that the one who gives these Exercises and he who makes them may be of more assistance and profit to each other, they should begin with the presupposition that every good Christian ought to be more willing to give a good interpretation to the statement of another than to condemn it as false. If he cannot give a good interpretation to this statement, he should ask the other how he understands it; and if he is in error, he should correct him with charity.

One may apply St. Ignatius’ words to the home school by beginning a program of student presentations, in which the student tells the family or home school group about something he has been studying. Of course, unless he copies his presentation out of an encyclopedia (which would defeat the purpose), he will make mistakes. Here the audience must remember St. Ignatius and give the best possible interpretation to the student’s words. After the presentation comes a question period, in which the student is called upon to explain how he understands his statements. Then-and only then-comes a period of critique, when charitable corrections can be made. (See the sidebar for an explanation of how oral presentations are conducted at Kolbe Academy’s day school, which like Kolbe Academy Home School, is based on Ignatian methods and principles.)

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To write

Keith J. Topping, a professor at the University of Dundee in Scotland, has made some observations about reading that hold no less true for public speaking and writing:

Reading is a skill. The more you do it, the better you become.
The better you become, the less effort it takes. The less effort it takes,
the more you can do-and the more you want to do...
You learn to swim by swimming, and to read by reading.

Reading and writing are in almost as bad an odor as speaking, as teachers throughout the land fret about overloading their charges. One teacher I know landed in a hornet's nest by requiring a high school class to write two one-page papers each week. Although this was a paltry output compared to what the grandparents of the complaining parents had done in school as a matter of course (and without benefit of word processors!), the complaints were swift and vehement. Most disheartening was the fact that among the complainers were people with influence in education: a man who is now the principal of a school, and a woman who acts as an academic adviser for scores of students. American education has fallen so far from real standards of excellence that few even know what they are any more.

The fact remains, however, that writing is an essential skill in almost any field. One learns to write by writing. A home student should write incessantly: poems and stories, business letters, research reports, book reviews and reports, and more. The content matters less than the act of writing itself. The sheer effort required for articulating a thought and placing it coherently on paper is instructive; and the instrument is sharpened by use. A contemporary religious writer once told me that he had made it a practice during his high school years to write every day. He filled notebook after notebook with trivia that it embarrassed him to reread, but he recognized that the act of writing regularly made all his writing easier, more focused and more interesting.

Then there is Mark Twain's famous address to a roomful of aspiring writers. The story goes that he asked them if they wanted to become writers. Faced with a healthy show of hands, he asked them, "Then what are you sitting her for? Go home and write!" And he dismissed the seminar. I can't vouch for the veracity of the story, corking good as it is, but its message is right on the mark.

Reading is inextricably bound to writing. You are what you eat, and you write what you read; hence the Ignatian emphasis on the classics. Jesuit students from the early days of the order were formed to speak, write and act according to the best models. Renaissance humanists of St. Ignatius' day were using study of the classical Greeks and Romans as a weapon against the Church; some orthodox scholars of good will reacted defensively by abandoning the classics. St. Ignatius' concern for forming articulate warriors for the Church led him to take a different tack:

For ourselves, theology would do well enough with less of Cicero and Deomosthenes. But as St. Paul became all things to all men in order to save them, so the Society desire to give spiritual assistance seizes upon the spoils of Egypt to turn their use to God's honor and glory.

If Cicero's rhetorical skills could train pagans, why should Christian apologists get less? Of course, some educators object that the classics are matter for college or, at most, the final years of home education. Certainly the content of many books is not appropriate for youngsters of a certain level of maturity; such decisions are the province of the parent. Other parents and teachers may fear that if the classics are essayed too early, the student will miss the mark too widely and misinterpret them. That indeed may happen, but it is not to be feared. In the first place, mistakes in interpretation are not confined to the immature; in the second place, the best corrective for an undisciplined and unformed intellect is constant contact with disciplined and formed intellects, which are best found in the classic works of literature and history. To say that a child should not attempt to read great books because he might not understand them fully is to say that on one should read them, for the great books are great precisely because they are inexhaustible. A child does not wait to try to ride a bicycle until he is sure he won't fall off. Nor should one who is interested and able to read *Hamlet*, *War and Peace*, or the *Iliad* wait until he's sure every nuance will be clear to him. The skill is developed by exercise.

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To act

“To act” is the most multifaceted of St. Ignatius’ threesome. Principally it refers to the “virtuous habits” the saint advocates in his curricular instructions. The young Catholic should be trained to be courteous as well as charitable so that he can bear witness to the Faith in all his actions. Even more, however, “to act” points to an emphasis on drama that can be a tremendous curricular and extra-curricular opportunity for home schooled students.

Literature is the center of a classical curriculum, for it is through stories that we receive instruction most effectively. The scriptures are the best illustration of this truth: God did not reveal a systematic theology, but a highly unsystematic collection of historical narratives and literary works. Drama brings vividly to life the story on the printed page, and offers (especially in the works of masters such as Shakespeare, Aeschylus and Sophocles) the varied perspective of many characters unified and directed by the hand of the playwright.

Occasionally home schooling parents ask what we at Kolbe Academy think of their children being involved in community theater productions. We applaud! Such a perspective may seem strange.

St. Augustine was not the only saint to disapprove of dramatic productions on the twin grounds that plays-were unnatural, in arousing one’s passions for fictional events and characters, and that actors were notoriously immoral. The saint was correct, but his emphases can be placed in a larger perspective. Acting from an Ignatian perspective is more than just a fun after-school activity: it can have a spiritual element as well. In his famous apologetic work *Mere Christianity*, the Anglican literary critic and apologist C.S. Lewis likens the spiritual life to the wearing of a mask. A Christian’s turning away from what tempts him is rather like wearing a mask: acting the part of one who is not interested in the attractions of the sin. As one wears the mask all the time, it gradually molds his own features. Learning to wear the mask of charity, especially when it goes against our sinful desires, is our spiritual work. The taking-on of roles in dramatic performance, therefore, is an exercise akin to that of the spiritual life. When properly directed, acting can bring one closer to the spiritual goal.

The immorality of actors is a stereotype, which, like all stereotypes, may not be true in any particular case. It recalls St. Paul’s words to the Corinthians that they would need to “go out of the world” if they wanted to avoid associating with the immoral (1 Corinthians 5:9). After all, the call to Christians to evangelize the world by bringing Christ’s message into secular areas was a principal message of the Vatican II documents. If Christians are to regain a voice in American culture, which has great influence over the souls of Americans, we must return to the cultural arena.

To speak, to write, and to act: with these foci for home schooling, Catholics will train an army of energetic youth ready to fight for Christ in the twenty-first century.

Kolbe Academy’s Oral Presentation Program

At Kolbe Academy’s day school, students give oral presentations every Friday beginning in fifth grade. They make a presentation of about five minutes on something they’re learning, and then take questions and receive critiques from their peers. The oral presentation program, which was originated by Francis Crotty, one of Kolbe Academy’s founders, has been enormously successful. Kolbe students routinely win local speaking contests, and display a courtesy, self-possession and ability to communicate that has been noted with pleasant surprise by many visitors. Schools around the country have adopted the Kolbe model. Of course, for oral presentations one needs a group, but it need be not larger than the family circle. Some groups of Kolbe home schoolers now get together for regular oral presentations.

Oral presentations as practiced at Kolbe Academy have four main parts: the presentation by the student; the questioning of the student by the audience; the critique by the audience; and an analysis of the speaker’s (and audience’s) performance by the teacher.

Usually presentations are prepared in advance, but impromptu presentations have a special place for giving a young speaker the opportunity to think on his feet.

The presentation topic may be selected by either the student or the home teacher. Both should bear in mind that public speaking is not public reading, but is a skill in itself. The student should be coached to speak clearly, keeping his voice

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steady and speaking at a reasonable speed. He should maintain consistent eye contact with the whole of his audience. Body movements must be controlled, posture maintained, and hand gestures made from the waist up or from the heart.

After the presentation comes a question period. All questions from the audience must be repeated by the presenter. In a living room this may seem an absurd exercise, but it is invaluable training for speaking in large halls. If a child learns to observe common speaking procedures in his youth, his ease with them and pose in later life will make any speaking he may do much easier.

In the same vein, floor discussion between members of the audience is prohibited: any question or remark must be directed to the presenter. Oral presentations provide audience members the opportunity to become effective spectators and participants. Anyone asking a question from the audience must speak at a voice level that can be heard from anywhere in the room. Both speaker and audience should bear in mind that fluidity in speaking is one of the main goals of the oral presentation. Any statement or question that begins the “hmm,” “well,” “uh,” “let’s see,” “okay,” “all right,” “you know,” “oh yeah,” “I think” or a similar empty phrase should be stopped (by the home teacher) and begun again by the student.

Audience questions may be as wide-ranging as presentations. Presenters should not just read papers from class, but try to anticipate and prepare for possible questions. If the presenter is stumped by a question he may ask the audience for assistance.

Then come the critique. It may be a difficult rule for siblings and classmates to keep at first, but all critiques must be given charitably. The presenter must accept the critique in kind, thanking the person for his critique. No critique should be preceded by “I think” or “I like.” Only objective comments on presentations should be accepted.

Home teachers can evaluate not only the presentation, but also the audience. All spectators should sit up and be attentive throughout each presentation. Slouching, bending over with head in hands and talking to other audience members should be strictly prohibited. The audience must be taught audience courtesy.

After a student has delivered a good number of prepared presentations, he may be ready for an impromptu! Assign a topic and give the student one minute to prepare a talk. Impromptu presentations may be three minute long for high school students, one minute for grammar school students. Of course, with impromptus more latitude can be given than would in prepared presentations for lapses in organization, syntax or imagination. Ideally, however, the student should become so accomplished at thinking on his feet that his presentation style would be the same with or without a prepared text.

Robert Spencer is a former high school classics teacher at Kolbe Academy and Director of the Home School program. This material was presented in an article for *Sursum Corda* magazine/ Spring 1998.