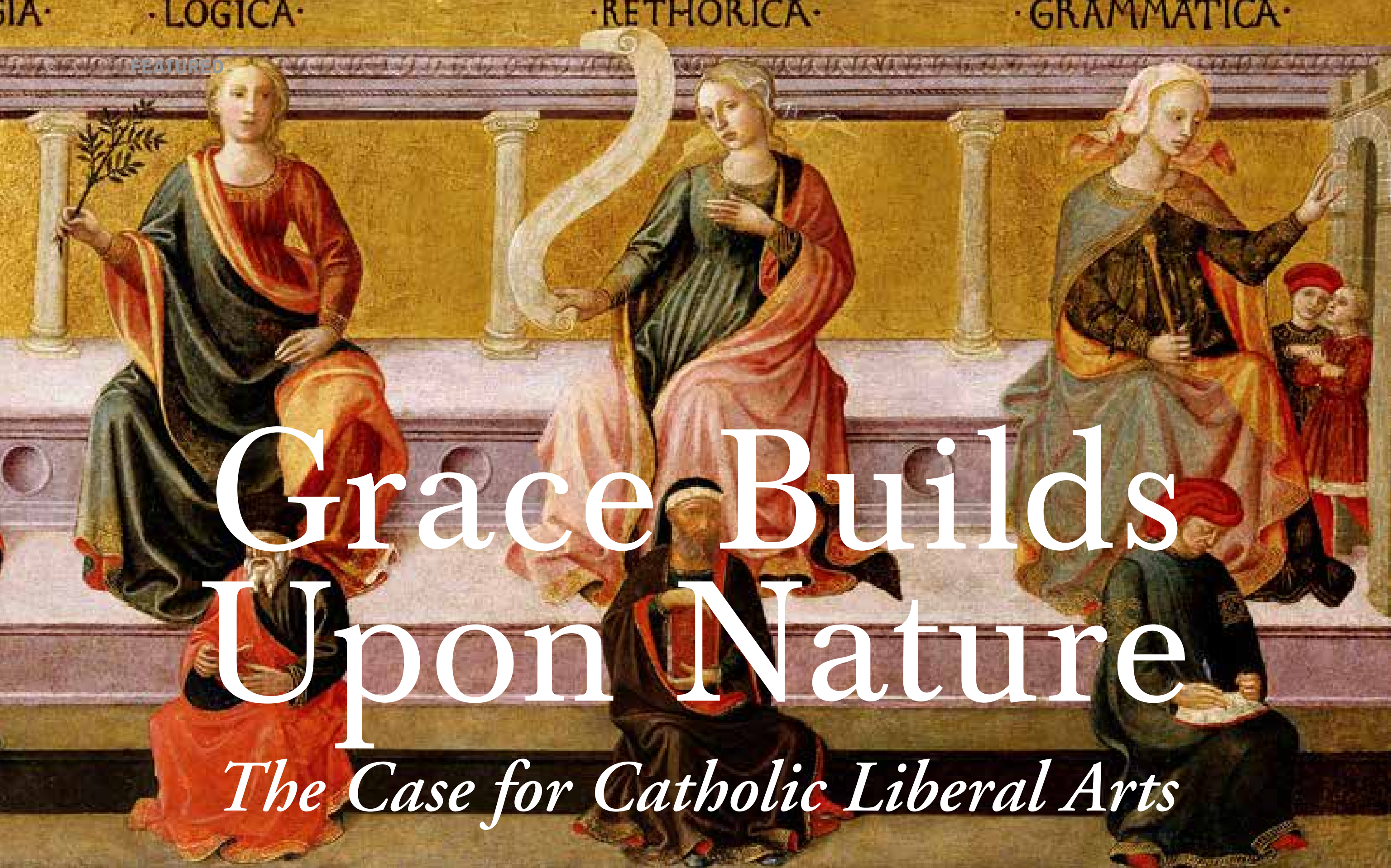


Grace Builds Upon Nature

The Case for Catholic Liberal Arts

Dr. Matthew Childs

> The sower went out to sow his seed. And as he sowed, some fell by the way side, and it was trodden down, and the fowls of the air devoured it. And other some fell upon a rock: and as soon as it was sprung up, it withered away, because it had no moisture. And other some fell among thorns, and the thorns growing up with it, choked it. And other some fell upon good ground; and being sprung up, yielded fruit a hundredfold. Saying these things, he cried out: He that hath ears to hear, let him hear. (Luke 8:5-8)

The principle that grace builds upon nature has perhaps become an axiom so familiar that we have lost the sense of its urgent implications for education. When we speak to new teachers about our profession, we often make reference to the parable of the sower and the seed because our essential job as teachers is to do what we can to prepare the soil of our students' intellects so they can fully receive the seed of truth and bear intellectual and spiritual fruit. This parable and Christ's own explanation of it vividly depict how grace builds upon nature. The seed, "the word of God," comes from the same source and has the same capacity for life no matter where it falls; the difference is in the ground, the receiver. The truth is always the truth, available for all, but only those who are properly nurtured and disposed to do so will fully receive and profit from it. The supernatural virtues are perfect, as the very life of God, but they cannot act without being received and they cannot flourish, as a soul matures, unless they are grounded in the natural virtues. In establishing the Church, *the* Word of God, *the* good Seed, instructed her leaders to teach and to sanctify; to educate or to lay the foundation of natural virtue and "give the increase" by administering the sacraments. This two-fold mandate, "the great commission," is confirmed by Pius XI in his 1929 encyclical on education *Divini Illius Magistri*: "education belongs pre-

eminently to the Church" (para. 15), and "not merely in regard to the religious instruction… but in regard to every other branch of learning and every regulation in so far as religion and morality are concerned" (para. 23)—which is *every* branch of learning, as even progressive educators prove by their own efforts to undermine the Church's prerogative and pervert every part of the educational process.

While formulating a plan for the expansion of St. Mary's College to a four-year program, I read the book *Catholic Higher Education in Protestant America: The Jesuits and Harvard in the Age of the University*, by Kathleen A. Mahoney, published in 2003. The "reformers" of higher education at the beginning of the twentieth century proceeded along the very same lines and presented many of the same arguments as the proponents for *aggiornamento*—to get with the times—within the Church several decades later. The revolutionaries were attempting to subvert the Church and academia—and thereby culture at large—early in the twentieth century. St. Pius X held them back in the Church, but they won the battle for the soul of education, paving the way for their eventual ascendancy in the Church and in the world in the latter part of the century. When Catholics chose modern education over traditional education, naturally the errors of modernism began to permeate the "soil" of their children's intellects. There are two major points emphasized in Mahoney's book: Protestantism is the motivating force behind the shift from traditional liberal arts colleges to elective and specializing universities, and the initial battle for education was lost not on principle, but because Catholics were drawn away from traditional colleges to the new, progressive universities. A closer look at the "Law School controversy" featured in the book can be read as a cautionary tale about abandoning the centuries-old tradition of Catholic liberal arts as well as a motivation to re-assess our attitudes toward the purpose and value of higher education.

The controversy, which began as a protest by Jesuit college administrators against discrimination in the admissions process of Harvard Law School, revealed the agenda of progressives there. Mahoney summarizes the importance of the battle between the university and the college approaches early in her book: "[c] ulminating in 1900, the Law School controversy proved a defining moment in American Catholic higher education… Americans had come to understand the era in which they lived as an age of modern progress, a powerful temporal construct making formidable claims on both Christianity and higher education. Being timely, modern, and up-to-date became cultural imperatives in many quarters and a driving force in the university movement" (13). The desire to get with the times is a normal human social inclination. What is more important for our understanding of the qualitative nature of the educational reform is the deeper motivation, the ideological driver, so it is critical to know that "during the academic revolution, religion helped reshape higher education, with liberal Protestantism playing patron to the modern, nonsectarian university" (8). In our times, educators shy away from religion—in its theological form, while pushing the new "religions" of the day, such as critical race theory and gender ideology—but those promoting the university of elective-specialist approach at the dawn of the twentieth century were very clear about the motivating ideology behind their "reforms." Mahoney notes that the educational reformers "understood their work as furthering… Christian goals by freeing higher education

Memorial Hall at Harvard University.

from the tyranny of tradition and the vestiges of its medieval (read Catholic and European) past that bedeviled the colleges and limited their effectiveness" (62). The essential conflict brought into relief by the "Law School controversy" is that between modernism and traditionalism, liberalism and conservatism, Protestantism and Catholicism. On the university side of the argument are all the characteristics that always accompany the revolution and about which the late nineteenth and early twentieth century popes repeatedly warned: the call for unbridled freedom, novelty, progressivism, subjectivism, autonomy, and the absolute need to get with the times, the *aggiornamento* of Vatican II and following. In his typically clear and concise way, Archbishop Lefebvre summarizes the entire thought process in a single word: liberalism, which, in its ultimate manifestation seeks the "adulterous union between the Church and the principles of the Revolution" (xvi-xvii), the confusion of and finally indifference to truth and error.

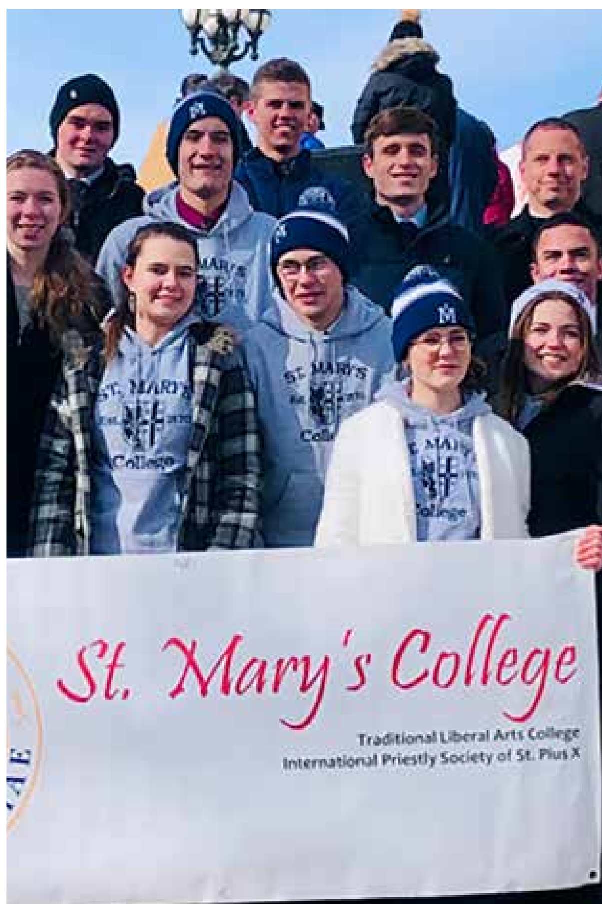
Mahoney describes the enthusiasm with which Americans welcomed the brave new world of progressive education:

> Reform and innovation swept through the academy; traditional forms of education associated with the collegiate tradition suddenly seemed out of date. Students flocked to the new universities with their professional schools, graduate programs, elective courses, looser discipline, and vital student life. At the 1893 International Congress of Education at the Chicago World's Fair, congress organizer Charles G. Bonney announced unequivocally that the "educational systems of the past have been outgrown" (12).

This should sound very familiar to anyone aware of the calls for updating the Church during Vatican II. Once the appetite for novelty had been whetted and all the old ways rejected as outmoded, it wasn't that hard to criticize Catholic liberal arts colleges since they were committing the ultimate sin of the time: "Modernity… created a new divide in an academic system already cleaved by the Reformation: the traditional and the modern… a potent critique of Jesuit education developed: that it was not modern. Jesuit education… was rooted in the past and thus irrelevant to the wants of the day in modern, Protestant America" (59). The underpinning of the movement was, unsurprisingly, "freedom," and liberation *from* a very specific source—the Catholic Church:

> Like their fellow Protestants, the leaders of the university movement defined Protestantism as the religion of liberty; this was nothing less than a bedrock conviction… Insofar as the Reformation had freed Christians from the tyranny of Rome, the university men argued that the new universities, as Protestant institutions, were to be infused with and shaped by a full measure of liberty not wholly realized in American colleges. "Above all," Eliot proclaimed in his inaugural [address as president of Harvard], a university "must be free. The winnowing breeze of freedom must blow through all its chambers." With nineteenth-century Americans increasingly convinced that they were living in modern times and headed toward a progressively better future, the winnowing breeze of freedom assumed a more pronounced temporal hue. Freedom in education meant emancipation from the deleterious constraints of an outmoded, irrelevant, past. (82-83)

As Mahoney notes, this "winnowing breeze of freedom blew through the curriculum, leaving the traditional, classical course in disarray and the elective system in place" (85). That elective system demonstrates most clearly the immanential, modernist bent of the university curricular model. Not only were schools freed from tradition, students themselves became their own guides. "While the scientific revolution helped create the curricular problem, Protestant-inspired liberty and the 'doctrine of individualism,' as Harper [president of the University of Chicago] put it, helped produce one solution: having students select their own courses" (85). Eliot was very explicit about the motivating principle behind the approach, confirming "[t]he elective system was . . . 'in the first place, an outcome of the Protestant reformation'" (86). The revolution always begins with the cry for freedom, the *non serviam* or refusal to submit to the constraints established by God and maintained by His Church and her educational dictates and institutions. In the end, the result is also predictable, since the revolution always devours its own. The modern university didn't stop at implementing the freedom of Protestantism, it ended up replacing religion altogether: "[w]hile Christians had historically argued for the importance of the schoolhouse and the



church, for the university men the schoolhouse became the church. The 'university has succeeded to the place once held by the cathedral as the best embodiment of the uplifting forces of the modern time,' claimed Columbia University President Nicholas Murray Butler" (62).

On the other side of the controversy were the Jesuits fighting for the rights and value of their colleges as institutions serving within the Church and passing down the wisdom, discerned and revealed, of the ages. As Mahoney puts it, "as the Law School controversy evolved into a public controversy the Jesuits found themselves on the defensive, forced to demonstrate that traditional forms of education were indeed relevant in modern America" (59). That defense is invaluable for us because those early twentieth-century Catholic educators left us arguments for the significance of a liberal arts education as the necessary basis for any further specialized study. Their arguments remain valid to this day, and we would do well to listen this time as we make decisions about where to send our children to school in an ever more fragmented and morally corrupt culture. The strongest, clearest sustained discussion of educational principles from the traditional or Catholic side of the argument came from Fr. Timothy Brosnahan in a response he wrote to the president of Harvard University, *President Eliot and the Jesuit Colleges*, which Mahoney includes in its entirety as an appendix to her book. Brosnahan very adeptly demonstrates the injustice of Harvard Law School's admissions policies, but more importantly explains why a liberal arts education is far preferable to the elective or "majors" system. Brosnahan argued that "abandon[ing] the doctrine of unity in education… might produce experts… but could not develop a man," (269) lowering the standard of education and the intrinsic value of a college degree by providing "one-sided formation [and] unfit men for University work" (267). This misguided approach to education is only exacerbated by the idea that the ones deciding what to specialize in are the students themselves. Fr. Brosnahan criticizes President Eliot's elective system strongly, saying that the Harvard president "banishes unity from college education and bows down before individuality" (265). He goes on to point out the absurdity of demanding a teenager who, as he says, "will work, like electricity, along the line of least resistance" (267) to "look out on the wide realm of learning, to him unknown and untrodden, and to elect his path" (265). One is led to ask "can the blind lead the blind" (Lk. 6:39) or "how shall they hear [or properly select or learn], without a preacher" (Rom. 10:14)? The university men's approach to education that leaves out the foundations of truth, ethics, *humanization* can't help but produce what Richard Weaver, echoing Brosnahan a half-century into the educational reform experiment, called "deformed" because it only "partially developed" (Weaver, 56) men and women. Weaver's sustained discussion of faulty approaches to meaning in *Ideas Have Consequences* explains perfectly why the Jesuits and all traditionalists in education insist upon a liberal arts grounding before any kind of specialization: without a moral context of good and bad, right and wrong, without the "ought" of the *Tao* as C.S. Lewis speaks of the natural law in *The Abolition of Man*, we lose our capacity to think and, therefore, to act rightly:

> There is ground for declaring that modern man has become a moral idiot… [m]ultiplying instances show complacency in the presence

> of contradiction which denies the heritage of Greece… [w]e are approaching a condition in which we shall be amoral without the capacity to perceive it and degraded without means to measure our descent (Weaver, 10).

A moral idiot cannot choose the good because he or she doesn't know (or *chooses not* to know) its definition. He or she is precisely the "blind" person, one "who strain[s] out a gnat, and swallow[s] a camel" (Mt. 23:24). The traditional liberal arts education the Jesuits were fighting to retain provides the basis for choosing the good and avoiding the evil because it defines them in accordance with the wisdom of the ages. The danger of specialists without a clear sense of right and wrong should be obvious to anyone familiar with *Frankenstein* or, in our times, anyone willing to admit the disastrous consequences of putting a career bureaucrat "specialist," with obvious motives for power and financial gain, in charge of guiding the global strategic response to the recent pandemic. Surely, we would never be foolish enough to allow a "partially formed man" or a "moral idiot" to make such important decisions outside his area of expertise! The essential positions about education highlighted by the controversy between Harvard and the Jesuits are succinctly summed up in an observation made by C.S. Lewis: "Aristotle says that the aim of education is to make the pupil like and dislike what he ought. . . .the difference between the old and the new education… [is] in a word, the old was a kind of propagation—men transmitting manhood to men; the new is merely propaganda" (*Abolition,* 26, 33). We chose the new, and the disastrous fruits of rejecting the Jesuits' stance for the old surround us on all sides.

The Jesuit defense of traditional education was brilliant on the level of principles and adequate to the task, but their arguments fell on deaf ears. The bitter irony is that "Catholic collegians proved the Jesuits' undoing… It was at the very height of their troubles with Harvard that the Jesuits discovered that most Catholic students, seeking professional education, academic credentials, and social opportunities, had bypassed Catholic colleges in favor of non-Catholic higher education" (Mahoney, 13). Surrounded by a dizzying array of scientific advancements, enticed by material advantages, and concerned with social acceptance—we may forget how ostracized Catholics were in our country at one time—many college-bound Catholic students opted for secular universities. The purveyors of the university system won, and we now have over a century of fruits by which to know them. What do we see? It is not possible to chronicle all the effects of the educational revolution of the early twentieth century, but the most obvious fruits are before us every day. The moral idiocy that Richard Weaver decried in 1948 is alarmingly evident in every profession including science, medicine, education, government, and finance. We are told by specialists to mask ourselves and cower at home in mortal fear of a virus, while infants are legally murdered by medical professionals every day. We defer to "the science" but the scientists and doctors promoted by the government and media are unable (or unwilling) to confirm basic biological facts, such as the difference between a boy and a girl. We profess equal rights for women while allowing men to compete in women's sports. We promote people to high judicial positions from which they will make laws about human rights when they are incapable of defining the most basic terms about human beings. Is this not "complacency in the presence of contradiction"? These are the fruits of a century of education unhinged from truth.

On the more mundane level, there are plenty of other indicators of problems in higher education. A post titled "37 Mind-Boggling College Student Statistics" from July 2021 includes the following data: 34% of college students in the US have an anxiety disorder; 49.8% of college students use birth control; almost 150,000 college students develop some kind of alcohol-related health problem every year; approximately 696,000 college students each year are assaulted by another student who has been drinking ("37 Statistics"). Statistics such as these indicate that modern universities are not contributing in a positive way to the formation of the whole man or woman. Not even the material outcomes are all that impressive given the monetary outlay and the utilitarian aims of contemporary higher education. According to statistics cited in a 2018 *New York Times* article about the "value" of a college education, "25 percent of college graduates now earn no more than does the average high school graduate" (Shell). Other studies have found "45% of 2,300 students at 24 colleges showed no significant improvement in 'critical thinking, complex reasoning and writ-

ing by the end of their sophomore years,'" and "that over 75% of two-year college students and 50% of four-year college students were incapable of completing everyday tasks" (Williams). As for the elective system, it is not promoting efficiency in degree completion, given that 30% of all undergraduates change their majors once and 10% change them multiple times, which explains, at least in part, why only 33% graduate in four years ("37 Statistics"). Just as Fr. Brosnahan predicted, curricula have developed to suit the whims of students who naturally proceed "along the lines of least resistance." In his *Daily Wire* article, Walter Williams finishes with a list of courses students have elected in our brave new education world: "What If Harry Potter is Real?" "Lady Gaga and the Sociology of Fame," "Philosophy and Star Trek," "Learning from YouTube," "How to Watch Television," and "Oh, Look, a Chicken" (Williams). One final statistic that 62% of institutions of higher education have sanctioned LGBTQ student groups ("37 Statistics") highlights precisely what lies at the end of the road of radical self-determination and amoral specialized skill to which we have been blown by the "winnowing wind of freedom" of the kind St. Peter calls "a cloak for malice" (I Pet. 2:16). Parents with the help of medical professionals are literally making Frankensteinian monstrosities of their own children—those they "chose" to be born—based upon the child's choice of "gender." This is the elective system writ large and the specialist gone mad. One can only imagine—though I suspect most of us would prefer not to—the extraordinary skill it must require for a surgeon to fashion a boy from a girl and vice versa, but could anyone other than a moral idiot consent to do so? In this one phenomenon, allowed by God in a dramatic attempt to open our eyes to the fact we are on the wrong road, we see a singular manifestation, the *reductio ad absurdum* (or *ad monstrositatem*) of a profoundly faulty educational approach and the "diabolically disoriented" thinking and action it engenders—pun intended.

In the "Law School controversy" we find the undeniable historical fact that higher education as we know it is directly tied to Protestant liberalism: it is a rejection of traditionalism, not just in thought or philosophy but also explicitly in theology. The university men understood what too many contemporary Catholics still either don't understand or refuse to acknowledge or deem relevant enough to determine their educational choices: traditional liberal arts education is tied directly to traditional Catholicism and secular university education is an extension and expansion of the Protestant revolt. In *Pascendi* St. Pius X drew a direct line from Protestantism to Modernism to atheism (para. 39); the educational revolution that rejected the liberal arts college accelerated the cultural trend toward that trajectory's endpoint. The evidence is overwhelmingly and ubiquitously clear. Confronted with the horrific fruits of a century of bad education, we ought to learn the lesson and listen to the Jesuits this time. C.S. Lewis summarizes the solution as well as he does the problem:

> We all want progress. But progress means getting nearer to the place where you want to be. And if you have taken a wrong turning then to go forward does not get you any nearer. If you are on the wrong road progress means doing an about-turn and walking back to the right road; and in that case the man who turns back soonest is the most progressive man… There is nothing progressive about being pig-headed and refusing to admit a mistake. And I think if

> you look at the present state of the world it's pretty plain that humanity has been making some big mistake. We're on the wrong road. And if that is so we must go back. Going back is the quickest way on. (*Mere Christianity,* 28-29)

In the Church, "going back" means returning to the Faith as taught and practiced up until the "new springtime" of Vatican II. In education, "going back" means returning to liberal arts curricula which retain ties with our traditions, grounding students in truth as pursued up until the dawn of the university age. That is what we have done at St. Mary's College from the start and will continue to do, now more comprehensively, in our expanded four-year program. Many people who are well-informed regarding the dangers of modernism to faith fail to understand or to appreciate fully the fact that without sound education that all-important faith is at risk. As Catholics, we understand Pope Pius XI's confirmation that "there can be no true education which is not wholly directed to man's last end… since God has revealed Himself to us in the Person of His Only Begotten Son, who alone is 'the way, the truth and the life,' there can be no ideally perfect education which is not Christian education" (*Divini* para 7). Going back and finding the right path toward developing virtue in our children means rejecting the errors institutionalized in our educational system after the Law School controversy; rejecting, in particular, the materialist utilitarian approach toward higher education as merely the means to getting a job. Finding the right school means more than searching out a conservative liberal arts college or an engineering program somewhere; it means finding a school tied to *the* Truth, truth in its fullness and in its practice, which can form students who have the intellectual and moral habits to judge the "ought" of anything that follows. Archbishop Lefebvre saw the contemporary crisis and its intensity more clearly than anyone else and called precisely for a going back, a restoration in all spheres, telling us "[w]e have to hold on. We have to build, while the others are demolishing… our enterprises faithful to the social doctrine of the Church… a whole tissue of Christian social life…" (251). He saw the critical role of education within that effort, directing in his society's statutes back in 1970 that "Schools really free from any constraint so as to be able to give a thoroughly Christian education to the young will be fostered and even founded by members of the Society. From these schools will come vocations and Christian homes," for traditional Catholic education prepares the "good ground" in which grace can flourish such that "they who in a good and perfect heart, hearing the word, keep it, and bring forth fruit in patience."

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TITLE IMAGE: *Seven Liberal Arts,* Francesco Pesellino, c. 1450.