

Archbishop Chaput: The Purpose of an Education



Exactly 77 years ago today (September 1, 1939), Germany invaded Poland. Thus began the Second World War. Many good scholars have written about that conflict. Repeating their work here isn't my purpose. With the summer ending and young people back in school or soon to return, my focus this week is on education. And a detail from the opening days of that long ago German invasion offers a useful lesson.

Leading up to the attack, Hitler's SS compiled a list of 30,000 Polish clergy, intellectuals, professionals and aristocrats. All were targeted for arrest. Within two months of the invasion, up to 20,000 Poles were summarily executed (the genocide waged against Jews and others followed later). Most of the victims came from names on the list. They were murdered by SS *Einsatzgruppen*

or "Special Task Forces." Of the top 25

Einsatzgruppen

leaders, 15 of them had doctorates from distinguished German universities, then among the finest in the world.

In other words, most of the men who led the murder squads were not illiterate thugs. On the contrary, they were very well schooled. As the historian Niall Ferguson notes, they came from Germany's academic elite. The Nazi racial theories we see today as deeply unhinged and evil were advanced at the time as good and necessary, scientifically based and in the service of human progress. And a great many otherwise intelligent men and women believed in them.

Of course, all that happened many decades ago and far away. What's it got to do with American kids here and now heading back to school?

Just this: Knowledge and technical skills are important, but they're not the same as wisdom and moral character. Barbarians come in all shapes and sizes, some in expensive suits with good diction and excellent academic and professional credentials. Some even run for office, and we can find them in all political parties. The word "education" comes from the Latin *educare*, meaning "to bring up or train," which in turn comes from the Latin

e-
(“out”) and
ducare
(“to lead or guide”). The point of a true education is to lead people out of ignorance, dishonesty and brutishness to the refinement of their humanity and intellect in the virtues.

"...The goal of a Catholic education....is to fill the soul with the presence of its Creator. Thus religion is not an “add on” subject in a Catholic school. It's the centre of the enterprise, the first priority, and it needs to suffuse and guide every other subject and element of the school day. . ."

This is what distinguishes a Catholic education, properly taught, from much of modern learning. Even the finest mind is incomplete, a blank potential, without a purpose and moral framework for the facts at its command. And, as the saying goes, nature abhors a vacuum. *Some* purpose, no matter how selfish or perverse, inevitably fills a person's inner void.

The lesson of the 20th century is that all purposes and all moral frameworks are *not* equal. Some lead to suffering and worse because their understanding of the human person is crippled from the start by the absence of God. The goal of a Catholic education, in contrast, is to fill the soul with the presence of its Creator. Thus religion is not an “add on” subject in a Catholic school. It's the center of the enterprise, the first priority, and it needs to suffuse and guide every other subject and element of the school day. Young persons are the children of a loving God with an eternal destiny. They're meant to radiate with growing maturity throughout their lives the

great words of St. Irenaeus:

"The glory of God is man fully alive." ☐ ☐

Thus the ultimate purpose of our Catholic schools is not to get students into Harvard or Notre Dame or Penn or Stanford or Georgetown or Villanova – all of them great universities, but no automatic guarantee of anyone's humanity – but rather to get them into *heaven*, which is not some imaginary fairyland, but the intensely real and beautiful embrace of the God who made us, sustains us and longs for us to become the men and women he intended us to be.

That's why we're in this world. It's something to remember as students and teachers head back to class.

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