The Divine Pedagogy as a Model for Online Education

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Abstract. In addition to the pragmatic concerns that often drive the use of technology in theological education, there is a need to develop theological justification and direction for online education. Several Roman Catholic Church documents propose the “divine pedagogy,” the manner in which God teaches the human race, as a model for catechesis or religious education. This can provide a rich resource for developing a theological pedagogy for online education. This is especially relevant to the justification for online education, because critics sometimes refer to the incarnational character of the divine pedagogy to argue against the disembodied nature of virtual education. This article addresses such criticisms and more constructively, relates several aspects of the divine pedagogy such as adaptation, community, and participation to teaching and learning in the online environment. (This paper was presented at Theology and Pedagogy in Cyberspace II conference in Evanston, Ill. on April 17, 2004.)

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This essay offers a theological pedagogy for online education based upon the concept of “divine pedagogy.” The phrase “divine pedagogy” describes the manner in which God teaches the human race. Several Roman Catholic catechetical documents propose this divine exemplar as a model for catechesis or religious education. The term “online education” is used as a broad label covering various uses of computer-mediated education encompassing both distance education in which all or the majority of teaching may take place online and the use of online learning to enhance classroom-based teaching. The theological perspective of this pedagogy is based on an explicitly Christian vision as expounded in Roman Catholic ecclesial documents, but should prove relevant to the wider Christian community and perhaps illuminative to religious educators from other traditions.

This theological pedagogy also responds to certain theological criticisms of online education. One often encounters the criticism that theological education has been driven by pragmatic concerns to embrace educational technologies without due consideration of theological issues. Noted exponent for the theological grounding of theological education, David Kelsey raises these issues in regard to online education (Kelsey 2002). After making the case that the pedagogy of theological education must be theologically based, Kelsey questions whether such a theological basis is possible for online education. Without explicitly rejecting online education, he seriously questions whether this approach is consistent with a Christian theological anthropology. Kelsey wonders whether online education fosters a spiritualized and dualistic view of human beings as “spiritual machines” that undermines the Christian understanding of human beings as personal bodies whose material bodiliness is affirmed by divine creation and incarnation. Kelsey raises a frequently voiced question, “is the disembodied nature of online education somehow inconsistent with a pedagogy based on Christian anthropology?” This essay answers Kelsey’s call for a theological pedagogy and also responds to his objections to online education.

This theological pedagogy draws upon the General Directory for Catechesis (1998, hereafter cited as GDC) published by the Vatican Congregation for the Clergy as a guide for catechetical ministry within the Roman Catholic Church. Some may question the usefulness of GDC in light of the distinction between catechesis in parishes and schools (which is admittedly the primary focus of this document) and the more critical study of theology in seminaries and other institutions of higher education. Such a question ignores the necessary cate-
theological component of theological education today. It has been widely noted that contemporary students come to college, seminary, or graduate theological study lacking fundamental knowledge or formation in the faith. Hence, at least part of the function of theological education, even in higher education is catechetical in scope.

More importantly, this document provides a rich concept for any theologically grounded pedagogy: the pedagogy of God as the model for the pedagogy of the church. Thomas Groome refers to this theme as the most “amazing” and “memorable” proposal within the document (Groome 2003, 26). According to the GDC, God’s own pedagogical strategy for teaching humanity provides the example theological teachers are to imitate in their own teaching. Divine revelation provides both the content and methodology for theology. Pope John Paul II stated the point succinctly in his apostolic exhortation on catechesis: “God himself used a pedagogy that must continue to be a model for the pedagogy of faith” (John Paul II 1979, 58). Using the divine pedagogy as the basic reference point also enables one to address the question raised by Kelsey and others regarding the disembodied character of online education, for at the heart of the divine pedagogy is the personal embodiment of divine revelation in the incarnation.

While using the GDC as a primary resource, the concept of divine pedagogy has broad relevance beyond the Roman Catholic audience of that directory. Groome in his own commentary on the directory invites Protestant readers to “listen in as neighbors in the body of Christ” for “resonant notes for their own ecclesial contexts” (Groome 2003, 2). The concept of “divine pedagogy” should resonate widely. For example, Protestant theologian and biblical scholar William Campbell has also proposed the divine pedagogy as a model for theological education (Campbell, 2.1). What is more significant is that Campbell develops his model in response to a Jewish reflection on God as the model teacher (Alexander 2001). This suggests that the concept of the divine pedagogy as a model for theological pedagogy is not unique to the Roman Catholic tradition but has roots in a broader Christian and Jewish biblical tradition.

The concept of the divine pedagogy originates from the church fathers especially as a way to describe the progressive preparation for the coming of Christ. As implied by the root meaning of the term “pedagogue,” the servant who leads children to the place of instruction, the church fathers use the term especially to describe the historical process by which God gradually and progressively taught and prepared the human race for the fullness of revelation in the coming of Christ. Both the preparation for the gospel in the Old Covenant as well as the development of Greek philosophy represent an educational process by which God providentially prepared the human race for Christ (Saldanha 1984; 101, 138, 187). Clement of Alexandria provides an example of applying such a divine model to catechetical formation. The divine pedagogy provides a model for the teacher to follow and imitate in teaching the faith (Kovacs 2001). In modern times, the Vatican II Constitution on Divine Revelation borrows this patristic term in its treatment of the history of revelation (Dei Verbum 1965; 13, 15). As already noted, the concept is frequently found in contemporary Catholic catechetical documents such as Catechesi Tradendae, General Directory for Catechesis, and the Catechism of the Catholic Church. In what follows, several key aspects of the divine pedagogy as described in these catechetical documents will be highlighted and related to online education.

Perhaps the central element of the divine pedagogy is the idea of adaptation. “God willing to speak to men as friends manifests in a special way his pedagogy by adapting what he has to say by solicitous providence for our earthly condition” (GDC 1998, 146). Scripture provides the prime example in which, God, “adapting His language with thoughtful concern for our weak human nature” expresses the divine words in human language (Dei Verbum 1965, 15). Clement of Alexandria directs the teacher in imitation of the divine pedagogy to adapt his message to the needs and capabilities of each student (Kovacs 2001; 7, 10). The Church is called to adapt her message to the circumstances of her audience according to their age, culture, and social environment (GDC 1998; 146, 170).

In many ways, online education can represent such adaptation. For students who cannot come to a theological institution, computer technologies provide the adaptive tools by which that institution can bring its educational resources to them. This represents a very concrete adaptation to the real world circumstances of students. Online technology makes it possible for students to learn without leaving their geographic location, home and work responsibilities, church communities, and ministry obligations. Just as the divine adaptation involved accommodation on God’s part, requiring the translation of transcendent divine truths into the humble language of the human audience, so online adaptation calls upon theological educators to accommodate traditional practices to a new virtual environment. The Catechism of the Catholic Church provides an interesting note in this regard, citing Irenaeus’s assertion that the divine pedagogy involves both God and man becoming accustomed to each other through this accommodation (Catechism of the Catholic Church 1997, 53). Most instructors who have made the transition to teaching online can attest to the mutual process of accommodation in which both teacher and students have to become accustomed to a new form of learning and interaction.
This adaptation can include the individualization of instruction. As the divine pedagogy was adapted differently to the needs of Jews and Greeks in their educational preparation for the gospel, and as Jesus, the incarnate teacher adapted himself to the various conditions of his hearers, so Clement calls the Christian teacher to imitate the Logos in adapting the message to the capabilities and stage of growth of each student (Kovacs 2001, 7–8). While such adaptation to individual students is difficult in the classroom, the modular nature of digital tools provides resources for modifying content to accommodate diverse learning styles and needs.

In addition to viewing online education as a tool for the concrete adaptation to the needs of students, one can also consider the online environment as part of that contemporary cultural context to which theological learning must adapt. The Internet has been characterized as the new Areopagus or public forum. Mass media culture, the digital culture of computer-mediated information, and the virtual culture of the Internet are all increasingly part of the cultural context in which contemporary theological students live and therefore, the cultural context for contemporary theological education (GDC 1998, 160–162; John Paul II 2002, 2). Tom Beaudoin describes the role of secular mass-mediated culture in the religious formation of the post-Vatican II generations as “virtual” catechesis and contrasts it to the “real” catechesis offered through formal educational programs (Beaudoin 2003, 66–70). He calls for a synthesis of the two by enculturating “real” catechesis in the world of “virtual” catechesis. Online education can facilitate such a synthesis by using the tools of media culture as both the means and environment for theological learning.

Another significant aspect of the divine pedagogy is the divine motivation behind this adaptation. Divine adaptation is described as a marvelous “divine condescension” (Dei Verbum 1965, 13; Catechism of the Catholic Church 1997, 684; GDC 1998, 146). God condescends, lovingly stoops down, to our human level, and graciously adapts the divine wisdom to our limited human capabilities. Perhaps, online education might be seen as reflective of a similar “academic condescension.” The theologian, from her or his lofty ivory tower with its time honored traditions of classroom lectures and seminars, rather than demanding that students leave home and hearth to climb that tower and join him or her there, condescends to stoop down, via the tools of computer mediated communication, to the student’s own humble home. Accommodating oneself to the new digital environment, one adapts one’s teaching style to communicate one’s wisdom into the student’s world.

It is in regard to divine adaptation, accommodation, and condescension, however, that online education comes face to face with the critique raised by Kelsey and others. For, the supreme manifestation of divine accommodation is God becoming human. The General Directory for Catechesis emphasizes that “the centrality of Jesus Christ, the Word of God made man . . . determines catechesis as “a pedagogy of the incarnation” (GDC 1998, 143). The directory, however, does not apply incarnational pedagogy in terms of the physical bodily presence of the teacher. Rather the pedagogy of the incarnation points to the realm of the student’s life experience as the locus of divine saving action. The incarnation teaches that God comes into our human world and catechesis involves assisting students to read their human experience in the light of faith, to recognize and respond to the presence of divine grace in that experience (GDC 1998, 152–153). Archbishop Raymond Burke explains in a commentary on the directory:

Experience helps to make the doctrine of the faith understood. We remember how Our Lord Jesus used a variety of experiences to teach the truth of the Gospel. With regard to personal experience, it is the place in which God manifests Himself to us, even as He most perfectly manifested Himself in the taking of our human nature by God the Son. The catechist has the solemn responsibility to help the catechized to view the experiences of daily life in the perspective of the Gospel and Church teaching. Only then will catechesis lead to a deepening Christian life. (Burke 2003, 46).

In regard to the catechist or instructor, it is not the bodily presence of the teacher that is emphasized but rather his or her personal relationship with God and with the catechized (GDC 1998, 156). Such is consistent with the emphasis of Clement of Alexandria, who explains that the teacher is to be a living image of Christ, not by similarity of physical form but by similarity in teaching and as a “living symbol of the Lord’s power” (Kovacs 2001, 6). This shifts the emphasis from the physical presence of the instructor to the incarnation of divine truth in the life of the instructor and the instructor’s ability to assist students in discovering and incarnating that truth in their own lives. From such a perspective, the physical presence of the instructor is not essential. What is important for an incarnational pedagogy, whether teaching in the classroom or online, is the instructor’s own participation in the truth and salvation of God and the ability to communicate and foster that personal faith and insight among students.

Online education may foster such communication. The key is the instructor’s personal communication rather than the educational environment. A face-to-face classroom is not somehow inherently incarnational if the instructor adopts a detached, impersonal teaching style. Nor is an online classroom incarnational if the instructor does not personally communicate with the students. The online environment does however provide
a number of communication resources, ranging from one-to-one email, group discussion, and personal feedback to video, audio, and interactive media, by which an instructor can personally express and witness how the truth is incarnate in his or her life. In addition, by moving learning from the classroom to the students’ own world, the instructor might find it easier to use the student’s own life experience as the context for theological reflection, facilitating the recognition of the divine presence enfleshed within the student’s own life and circumstances. Critics of online education are correct to emphasize the need for an incarnational pedagogy but they err in focusing such pedagogy on the physical presence of the instructor in the classroom. Rather, according to these catechetical documents, it is the sphere outside the classroom, in the daily life of instructor and students where one should look for the embodiment of divine truth. The instructional environment is less significant. It seems that virtual instruction can be incarnational if it points students toward response to the gospel in their daily lives and if the instructor communicates his or her own lived participation in the truth.

The presumption that physical proximity alone makes classroom instruction somehow inherently incarnational and the lack of such physical presence disqualifies online education for use in theological learning must be questioned. Mary Hess challenges the assumptions that online education is disembodied and typical classroom learning is embodied (Hess 2000). She emphasizes, on the one hand, how online education is embodied in the student’s home environment as well as a virtual environment shaped by computer hardware and software. She questions, on the other hand, whether traditional theological education is inherently relational and embodied when it removes learning from the student’s lived world to the somewhat artificial and abstract world of the classroom. Incarnational or embodied learning involves more than physical proximity. This does not imply that physical presence is unessential to other areas of Christian life. A distinction can be made between those areas such as worship where embodiment is essential to an incarnational faith and other areas such as education where that incarnationality can be expressed in other ways. John Paul II makes such a distinction in his World Communications Day message regarding the Church and the Internet. On the one hand, he emphasizes the necessary embodiment of Christian life in the sacramental community but, on the other hand, precisely in the areas of information, education, and catechesis extols the potential beneficial role of the Internet (John Paul II 2002, 3). Likewise, the Pontifical Council for Social Communications, recognizes that “the virtual reality of cyberspace cannot substitute for . . . the incarnational reality of the sacraments and the liturgy” but also argues that the Internet can complement these incarnational realities, especially in such areas as “catechesis and other kinds of education” (2002, 5). While physical presence is crucial to certain aspects of an incarnational faith, it does not seem to be an essential factor in an incarnational pedagogy.

A second aspect of the divine pedagogy is the ecclesial or communitarian dimension. The divine pedagogy addresses students as members of faith communities and calls them into community as the context for learning. Catechesis inspired by the divine pedagogy “values the community experience of faith . . . is rooted in interpersonal relations, and makes its own the process of dialogue” (GDC 1998, 143). Group learning stimulates a common search for understanding, encourages responsibility for learning, and fosters the experience of ecclesial community (GDC 1998, 159). Online education provides many communications tools that can facilitate group discussion and cooperative learning through interpersonal dialogue among students. Such dialogue can be quite difficult in a traditional face-to-face classroom. Within the physical classroom, social and environmental conditions conspire to limit the full involvement of all students in a class discussion. In an online environment such as an asynchronous discussion board, all students have opportunity to participate in discussion. After teaching online courses for four years now, I have repeatedly seen the pedagogical usefulness of online discussion groups. I typically require students to post an insight, a question, and an application for each reading assignment. Again and again this fosters a rich conversation among students as they share their insights, questions and applications. I was initially surprised, but have now come to expect such discussion to foster a sense of community among the students. Students routinely share words of personal support and appreciation for insights of others. The learning community often takes on aspects of a religious community as students spontaneously share personal religious struggles with the class. At the same time, it is clear that these discussions are facilitating mastery and comprehension of the content and material of the course. Based on both adult learning theory and management theories about learning organizations, Jane Regan emphasizes the importance of creating structures for conversation in order to transform parishes into learning communities (Regan 2003, 47). Online education provides tools to create structures that foster cooperative and collaborative learning.

A third aspect of the divine pedagogy is the active participation of the student. God “attracts” humanity toward the truth by “bonds of Love” (GDC 1998, 139); Jesus offers the truth as a “pressing invitation” (140); the Church in her catechesis “looks to the free response of persons” and “promotes active participation among those to be catechized” (145, cf. 157). The teacher does not coerce or force-feed the truth to the students but
proposes the truth of the gospel and assists the student to “open themselves to the religious dimension of life” (GDC 1998, 147). Thus, divine pedagogy emphasizes the active participation of the student in his or her own learning. Student responsibility for their own learning can be emphasized in any educational environment but the online environment has been noted for fostering an active role for the student. Rather than the passive absorption of information delivered through a lecture typical of classroom teaching, online learning almost by necessity requires a more active role for the student. In online discussion, the student must express what has been learned and use what has been learned to respond to others in the discussion. Instructors may devise interactive exercises as a means of delivering information. The networked environment encourages independent research by the ease with which one can link to additional resources. So, online education provides many resources for promoting the active participation of students in their own learning.

A final aspect of the divine pedagogy relevant to online education is rich use of signs and symbols to communicate. Jesus made “use of all the resources of interpersonal communication, such as word, silence, metaphor, image, example, and many diverse signs” (GDC 1998, 140). The Church “conducts a pedagogy of signs, where words and deeds, teaching and experience are interlinked” (GDC 1998, 143). Traditional classroom instruction has been very dependent upon the word, spoken and written. While much online education remains very text dependent, the multi-media capabilities of digital technologies can be used to enhance both classroom and online learning, restoring visual images to the learning process.

In conclusion, the divine pedagogy provides a model of adaptation to students, cooperation in a learning community, active student participation and use of multiple media for teaching that can provide a theological justification and guide to online education. The incarnation as a central aspect of the divine pedagogy does not privilege face-to-face instruction over virtual learning but rather calls all theological educators, whether teaching in the classroom or online, to enliven their teaching in their own lives and to assist their students to do likewise.

References


