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Education for Success or Happiness

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Education for Success or Happiness?

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Twenty-Eighth Sunday in Ordinary Time
Sunday Readings for October 11, 2009 for Cycle B:
Wis 7:7-11; Ps 90:12-16; Heb 4:12-13; Mk 10:17-30

EDUCATION FOR SUCCESS OR HAPPINESS?

Lawrence E. Frizzell

The words of the young man some years ago still resonate in my ears. "My old man hasn't done badly, considering his education, but I'm going to be a millionaire by the time I'm twenty-five!" He was talking with someone else, outside my range of vision, so there was no opportunity to ask if he considered whether this would bring happiness. I can only pray that he learned the easy way that accumulation of wealth is no great sign of success in life, nor in itself the way to personal fulfillment.

Of course this is a perennial problem for parents and other educators. Let me quote a writer in Alexandria, Egypt from the second century BCE to the query, "what is the highest good in life?" The Jewish sage replied:

"To know that God is Lord over all, and that we do not ourselves direct our plans in the finest of actions, but God brings to completion the affairs of all people and guides them with his sovereign power." The next question was how to transmit this insight to one's children. "By continual prayer to God to receive good impulses for future actions, and by exhorting one's children not to be dazzled by fame or riches -- the bestower of these gifts is God himself, and people do not have an excess of anything through their own merits." (*Letter of Aristeas to Philocrates* 195-196).

Note that prayer is required for the parental task of teaching!

In Alexandria about a century later, another Greek-speaking Jew presented his teaching on the divine gift of wisdom as the prayer of young king Solomon. Recall that God had invited Solomon to ask for anything he wanted (1 Kgs 3:5). His prayer showed a maturity beyond his years. "Give your servant an understanding mind to govern your people, that I may discern between good and evil..." (3:9).

The first reading is part of a meditation on wisdom (personified as a bride) as the most precious of God's many gifts to his children. Wisdom is more important than power, riches, good looks or even health in leading a person to the true purpose of life (Wis 7:8-9). Of course, the individual could hope to have wisdom and abundance of other good things as well! But what would we do if we had to choose one or the other?

The Gospel presents us with the poignant picture of a good young man who was eager to share in life eternal. Jesus tells him to keep the commandments, to which he replied: "Teacher, I have kept all these since my childhood" (Mk 10:20). Jesus read his purity of intention and called him to give his possessions to the poor -- then he would be truly free to follow Jesus and collaborate in building

the Kingdom of God. Both Jesus and the young man were sad because the latter wanted both perfection of life and the goods which his family had accumulated. In the early Church many, like Anthony of Egypt, heard this Gospel text proclaimed in the liturgy and answered Christ's call in a dramatic way.

Are the young people today less idealistic than those of past ages? Undoubtedly God's grace is as active as in earlier times. Are the temptations more persuasive? Probably not, just more pervasive! Do parents today acknowledge the mystery of divine providence in their family's life and choices? Or do your children see only a relentless pursuit of wealth and status on the part of their elders? Do your goals and ambitions obscure the Gospel from your children?

Peter seemed to be enthusiastic in his response to Jesus, but perhaps he also wanted reassurance. Jesus guaranteed his followers three realities. First, a profound experience of the deepest benefits of human life in the community he was founding. Secondly, persecution on the part of those unable to tolerate the "folly" of faith. Third, the gift of eternal life, since communion with Jesus in his Passion enriches his followers beyond measure.

Does this make sense? Not to the person who considers that the world is his to conquer. Only through faith can we know that "with God all things are possible" (10:26, see Gn 18:14). The corollary is also true: Without God in one's life, all achievements are ephemeral.