

## **THE EDUCATIONAL MISSION OF THE CHURCH IN THE MIGRATION PERIOD OF THE 5TH AND THE 6TH CENTURY**

### Abstract

The author of this paper provides a brief overview of the Roman Empire at the time of great turmoil in the 5th and 6th centuries that led to the collapse of its western part. The fall of the Empire triggered the decline of the culture and consequently collapse of the educational system. In such difficult times, the Church sought to protect the values of the Roman society (*romanitas*) including the education in Latin which was considered one of its most important values. The author clarified the historical circumstances and presented two great Christian intellectuals who were aware of the values and benefits of the culture they wanted to protect from oblivion and preserve for future generations. They were Boethius and Cassiodorus who encouraged the project of the whole education and culture, and as believers, they could also count on the Church's support, in areas of its influence, though the process was long-lasting and slow. In that context, Cassiodorus even founded the monastery Vivarium, in Calabria where the main task of the monks was rewriting of works of the holy Fathers and Greek and Roman classics. The author concluded that Christianity i.e. the Church did not neglect the culture of the Old World and time, but participated in the process of its preservation, and used it in order to reach the people who lived in the territories of the Western Empire, offering them the proclamation of the Gospel and literacy.

Key words: *Christianity, education, Boethius, Cassiodorus, education.*

### **Introduction**

Education was important in the Greco-Roman culture and the school was one of the most influential institutions of the society at the time. Ancient Greek education had already developed a whole person education aimed to the well-being of the individual, society and to homeland defence. The Hellenistic education programme therefore included gymnastics, physical training, harsh discipline as well as the development of intellectual abilities. The lessons were taken within family, elementary

school, high school, but also in private gardens where philosophers used to gather with their students.<sup>1</sup> From the beginning of the 3rd century BC, Roman culture was greatly influenced by Greek culture; however, the Romans were more interested in effective school instruction for practical purposes, i.e. military and political ones.

Education and upbringing of the time is a complex issue, but this paper focuses on the trends and processes that occurred in the period from the 5th century onward, and cultural legacy that has been preserved especially in the western part of the Empire. The process of separation of the East and West began in the 5th century and affected many areas of human life including culture and education. This process was caused by migration of people, i.e. new peoples invaded the borders of the Empire. It accelerated the collapse of the Western Empire and the formation of the Gothic kingdom. The new social circumstances compelled the Church to seek new forms of evangelization but also to preserve all other heritage of civilization. Despite many difficulties and the disintegration of the Empire, which negatively affected social development, cultural values were preserved due to the many remarkable individuals who had a vision inspired by faith.

## **1. Education at the time of the decadence of the Roman Empire**

In order to support the above claims, it is necessary to explain the role of education system in the Late Antiquity. The emergence of Christianity brought not radical changes concerning education but also in the life of Hellenistic society. Despite of the tensions that frequently undermine the sustainability of society, Christianity accepted the Greco-Roman educational models and strategies evaluating the inherited education system as well as research and scientific work. However, the Church rejected those elements which in any way promoted polytheism or mythology, so changes mostly referred to upbringing and the basic human values. At the beginning of Christianity, there were efforts to accept it as an entirely new religion opposed to all forms of culture of that world, but as anticipated, a sensible and moderate fraction prevailed and entered into dialogue with bearers of the culture of the time, which resulted in a fruitful encounter between Christianity and philosophy.<sup>2</sup> Although the holy fathers primarily focused on theology and theological issues of their time, which not directly affected the sphere of education, they significantly contributed to the axiological and teleological aspects of upbringing.

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<sup>1</sup> Today's system of education is shaped according to the Greek model in which encompass family upbringing, elementary and high school education and finally higher education.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. I. Bodrožić, *Klement Aleksandrijski i prihvaćanje grčke filozofije u Aleksandrijskoj Crkvi koncem 2. stoljeća*, *Vrhbosnensia*, 16 (2012) 2, p. 291-306.

The Roman Empire started to face a great crisis at the beginning of the 5th century, which intensified through years. The Empire was no longer threatened by or exposed to constant barbarian invasions on its borders or bordering provinces, but the very centre of the Empire was under attack. Thus, Alaric's invasion led to the destruction of Rome, the centre of the Roman Empire, in 410, and less than fifty years later, in 455, Genseric invaded it again. The peak of the crisis was also the formal decline of the Western Roman Empire in 476, when Odoacer defeated Romulus Augustus and thus gained control over the western part of the Empire forming the Gothic kingdom.

The socio-political situation negatively affected the process of education and upbringing. The social and political instability caused the breakdown of education system as there were no institutions that could guarantee its overall functionality. However, some authors who deal with this subject matter and period have not always well understood the facts, and deduced from them the correct conclusions that would reflect cause-effect relationships.

It is the case with A. Kaiser who, in *Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*, described and interpreted those changes as follows: "The monasteries, that were built as early as in the 4th century in the West, were the only centres of knowledge which was to be preserved and transmitted through the interpretation of Christ's word in the 6th century. The Ascetic model of upbringing was based on God's fear and morality that was the most relevant aspect of education. Christian behaviour was based on the study of faith, but the individual's free will was recognized. Therefore, young people had to be raised by the deeds and values taught by Jesus Christ, rejecting the Greco-Roman tradition as an expression of pagan idolatry. The only teacher was Christ, whose image on the icon depicts teaching the crowd, and which constituted a privileged educational tool for every individual, especially those illiterate. The schools, that had to be public, were abolished, thus only monasteries could organize catechetical lessons; the Mythologies and other works of classic writers were forgotten; there were no plays in amphitheatres, stadiums and circuses and gymnastics and music lost their values. Music education maintained and the mute perception of sight in preaching (*mute praedicatio*) was widespread, while the alphabetic letters were the privilege of few teachers of grammar and philology who taught about Latin, Greek, Hebrew, and Arabic authors, but in a Christian sense. The Barbarian people who penetrated into the ancient Roman Empire brought with them warlike games, horse games and hunting. Only the Carolingian Empire, though for a short time, was open to the cultural renewal and public education which had already been forgotten, albeit under the clergy's leadership. Instead of the classic texts, the texts of the Evangelists and the Church Fathers were rewritten and enriched with precious miniatures; all forms of literature,

art and education that were created through so many centuries fell into inexorable oblivion.”<sup>3</sup>

The quoted text gives the impression that Christianity deliberately rejected all values of Hellenistic culture and introduced new criteria of its evaluation. It also suggests that Christianity is responsible for the decline of culture and the disintegration of education system, since the monasteries and monks were to dedicate themselves primarily to the texts of Scripture and writings of the Fathers of the Church. It follows that the Roman culture was universal since it anticipated public education contrary to Christianity that was seemingly to reduce it for the few not the many. Quite the contrary, the Church has always made the effort to reach the littlest, even at times when education was reserved for a social elite and wealthy people. Moreover, the quoted text implies understanding that the crisis of education in the Late Antiquity arose from the desire of the Church to replace schools with monasteries. However, reality was different as well as conditions that caused changes in the education and upbringing processes. Western Christianity tried to safeguard the threatened values and culture in monasteries. As far as education models were concerned, the Church did not interfere significantly, but it was deeply involved in the process of upbringing.

The Church was mostly concerned with the moral dimension of educational programme and not that much with the model of education. Briefly, from the very beginning, the Church promoted moral values, respecting the scientific and cultural forms that did not undermine morality and promote pagan values. Furthermore, Kaiser makes the rather provocative claim that the texts of the Evangelists and the Church Fathers were copied and enriched with precious miniatures, instead of the classic texts. The fact that the classic texts were less rewritten than that of the Church fathers was not at all a matter of ideology, or a choice of one thing and rejection of another, or bias, but the choice was such because of bad material conditions and the inability to overwrite all texts. But even then, as we know, the classic works were also rewritten in many monasteries, which assert that there was no conscious rejection of classic culture, but rather adjustment to the social and historical circumstances.

It is also the fact that the monasteries were the only places of culture in the 6th century and that the Church has always been eager to teach people morality and values, which have been proclaimed and left to the human race by Jesus Christ. Even if the classical tradition was neglected, to a certain extent, it was not a conscious neglect but rather conforming to the social and cultural constraints. Moreover, eventual Christian attitude of neglect towards the Hellenistic culture could have been manifested much earlier, from the 1st to the 3rd century, when the Church was

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<sup>3</sup> A. Kaiser, *Educazione (storia di)*, in: *Enciclopedia Filosofica 4*, Milano, 2006, p. 3231.

under severe persecution. But even under persecution and by rejecting the polytheism and idolatry of the pagan society, the Church had a positive attitude towards the scientific and cultural accomplishments of the time, and all Christian writers and the Church fathers were educated in the same cultural setting. Furtherly, if Christianity had ever tried to reject the social values, then it would have done it at the time when it enjoyed the social reputation and support of the Empire and not at the time of its fall. Therefore, we can rightly say that the Church has never rejected formal sciences and philosophy as the defining characteristics of Hellenistic tradition, but it certainly made efforts to *enhance* the development and *practice of moral values*.<sup>4</sup>

Obviously, the cause-and-effect relationship was different and more precise explanation is required to clarify why the decline of Roman culture happened at all. Also, it is important to emphasize the efforts of Christians to protect the inherited Hellenistic values that were under the influence of the barbaric peoples who ignored them and consequently caused their decline and oblivion. The fact that the Church cared for those values and accepted them can be supported by the data that some radical groups and individuals like Titian left the Church, since they did not approve the Church's attitude towards the Hellenistic values. Also, there were negative attitudes towards philosophy and a great theologian Tertullian was one of those who supported the idea that it caused all heresies. However, from its very beginning, Christian theology has continued to fly on the wings of Hellenistic thought by the prudent use of the spiritual heritage of the Old world.<sup>5</sup>

Furtherly, at the time of freedom of Christianity, Pope Damasus in Rome proved himself as a true successor of the city's sacredness, which he intended to shape according to the Christian principles, not rejecting the inherited tradition but rather using it for his own needs, i.e. to reach architectural style and aesthetic standards of Augustine. It is the reason why he adopted the form of Greek temple and civilian architecture for the early Christian basilica.<sup>6</sup>

## 2. Boethius' role in preserving Hellenistic culture

The claim that Christianity, i.e. the Church did not reject the Hellenistic values, i.e. works of classical Greek culture and philosophy, can be supported through an example of Boethius<sup>7</sup> who deliberately wanted to

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<sup>4</sup> Cf. M. Pellegrino – S. Heid, *Cristianesimo e cultura classica*, in: *Nuovo Dizionario Patristico e di Antichità Cristiane*, Bologna-Milano, 2006, p. 1268-1276.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. C. Andersen – G. Denzler, *Ellenizzazione*, in: *Dizionario storico del Cristianesimo*, Milano, 1992, p. 271-272.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. F. Cardini, *Cassiodoro il Grande*, Milano, 2009, p. 33.

<sup>7</sup> Boethius was born between 475 and 480 in Rome and raised in reputable family, so he could receive a very caring religious education. He was greatly appreciated by The-

preserve ancient classic knowledge, especially philosophy, and to transmit it to generations in the Middle Ages. He translated into Latin Aristotle's most famous logical works, the *Organon*. He also made a great effort to express Christian teaching in terms drawn not simply from the Neoplatonist and other philosophers such as Aristotle and Porphyry, but also from his original philosophical thought that was to become a predominant influence in the greatest philosophical synthesis of the Middle Ages.<sup>8</sup> Thus, not only that he emphasized a complementary relationship between philosophy and theology, consistent with the inherited tradition, but he also referred to philosophical knowledge in order to ground his theology on a solid foundation and to promote it lately. All his accomplishments were based on his Christian and theological convictions, though he was also supported by the highest ecclesiastical circles in Rome.

In that context, Boethius was aware that the great treasures of the Old World were to fade away if there would be no one to accept and practice it, i.e. to pass that legacy on to future generations. He also showed interest in *artes liberales* contrary to the Romans who were reluctant to that tradition.<sup>9</sup> But his idea and endeavour concerning education of the Christian intellectual was immense, but it would not have been feasible unless he had had support in the ecclesiastical circles who shared his opinion and his concerns about the social circumstances of the time. Thus, Boethius can be rightly regarded as the father of medieval Christian thought, who especially contributed to the development of scholasticism, since he translated into Latin many important works of Greek philosophers and scientists but also some textbooks on matters of *Trivium* and *Quadrivium*. He was known for introducing Aristotelian logic into discussions, and for defining basic concepts such as a person, happiness, eternity, etc.<sup>10</sup> He earnestly promoted the project of preserving Greek culture in order to introduce it into the medieval world that was underdeveloped and deprived of many dimensions of its own culture, particularly philosophical and scientific ones.<sup>11</sup>

The openness of Gothic King Theodoric and his official visit to Rome in 500 were favourable for Boethius. The King was welcomed by the pope, clergy, the Senate as well as whole population. He promised on that occasion that he would preserve the current social order, and hence provided

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odoric, the king of the Ostrogoths who entrusted him the most important offices until Boethius was accused of betrayal, then he was sentenced and murdered in Pale around 525. (cf. U. Pizzani, Boezio, in: *Nuovo Dizionario Patristico e di Antichità Cristiane I*, Genova-Milano, 2006, p. 796-802).

<sup>8</sup> F. Koplston, *Istorija filozofije, Srednjovjekovna filozofija*, Beograd, 1989, p. 103-106.

<sup>9</sup> H. Chadwick, *The Consolations of Music, Logic, Theology and Philosophy*, Oxford, 1981, p. 69-71.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. B. Mondin, Severino Boezio, in: *Storia della Teologia I*, Bologna, 1996, p. 481.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. C. Moreschini, *Storia della filosofia patristica*, Brescia, 2004, p. 464-467.

enough room for Boethius' project of preserving ancient values, primarily the Greek scientific and philosophical heritage, until his fall from power because of the alleged conspiracy.

### 3. Cassiodorus and his project

Another writer worthy of mention was Cassiodorus who continued Boethius's project of preservation of classical literature. His goal was the same: to translate into Latin the entire Greek literature, both pagan and Christian in order to transmit it to the Latin west and future generations. Thus, he had become a significant link in the chain of the Late Antiquity culture and that of the Middle Ages, which developed several centuries later. Later he withdrew from political and public life, and founded the Vivarium monastery in Calabria where the major activity of his monks was the rewriting of manuscripts. In his *Institutiones divinarum et saecularium litterarum*, he provided a comprehensive educational programme, initially including the general humanistic education divided into two parts (trivium and quadrivium), followed by theological formation. By adopting the fundamental principles of Christian philosophy, i.e. the principle of harmony of faith and reason; the principle of harmony of the Gospel and culture, Cassiodorus considered, as Origen and Augustine, that the acquisition of profane forms of knowledge should become an integral part of monastic theology and of monastic culture, bearing in mind that pagan knowledge had to be purified of sinful misapprehensions and delusions. Thus, human wisdom (*litterae humanae*) and divine wisdom (*litterae divinae*) were complementary to each other, since the understanding of the Scriptures required the acquisition of basic knowledge and skills.<sup>12</sup>

Indeed, the rewriting activity in Vivarium varied. Cassiodorus produced several editions of the Bible and collected various Bible commentaries, especially that of Origen, Augustine, Ambrose, and Jerome. He did not neglect the secular writings according to his possibilities. And above all, it is to point out that Cassiodorus brought Greek codes from Constantinople and arranged their translation.<sup>13</sup>

Boethius's and Cassiodorus's roles were irreplaceable because not only that they transmitted the knowledge of the world to the Middle Ages, but they also connected Roman society with the Gothic kingdom, that would gradually open up to the same culture that those outstanding intellectuals nourished and promoted. Thus, their significance is twofold, since they reflected the tendencies of the contemporary Christian intellectuals concerning their attitudes toward a nation of newcomers whom they could offer their cultural heritage and thus preserving it from oblivion and destruction.

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<sup>12</sup> Cf. B. Mondin, *Storia della Teologia*, Bologna, 1996, p. 481-483.

<sup>13</sup> F. Cardini, *Cassiodoro il Grande*, Milano, 2009, p. 139-149.

#### 4. Instead of a conclusion

The above mentioned overview reflects an obvious crisis experienced by the society in the western part of the Empire. The decline of Western society triggered the downfall of many aspects of the Greco-Roman culture that was the pride of the Empire, and which could no longer be protected or promoted as it had been at the time of the Empire's stability. Nevertheless, there was some progress in culture and literature in the period of Theodoric's reign, unlike the period of Lombard domination specific of cultural collapse. The efforts of Pope Gregory the Great (590–604) were fruitful and led to the opening to Christianity, i.e. to the Catholic Church, and at the same time to civilization and Latinization. Gregory was also known of his missionary efforts, the most significant one was the mission of forty monks that were sent to convert the pagan Anglo-Saxons, and his great friend, Leander of Seville, had a great role in the conversion of the Visigoths to Catholicism.<sup>14</sup>

In addition to the above, it is important to keep in mind outstanding individuals, the people of God, as defined by P. Siniscalco, who have significantly contributed to the Church growth determining its mission and values in the new circumstances since the 5th century. Therefore, the vision and activity of the Church should be observed through their efforts. Their efforts in providing the spiritual and pastoral care, in a period of great turbulence and coping with the Barbarians, were immense and greatly appreciated. Although the Western Roman Empire was conquered by heretics, the Church remained faithful to its mission and managed to convert the winners. At this time, the Church as the most influential social institution guaranteed the social adherence even to those in power. Thus, during the fall of the Empire, in the 5th and 6th centuries, Latin culture was renewed and strengthened in its originality.<sup>15</sup>

Since the Church had been given full freedom in the Empire, Christians expressed their adherence to the Roman tradition that they had become familiar with. However, the fate of the society did not affect individuality and autonomy of the Church which remained free and carried out its mission accepting even barbaric people who threatened the boundaries of the Empire.<sup>16</sup> Thus, after the collapse of the Roman Empire, the Church recognized the need for the transmission of traditional educa-

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<sup>14</sup> A. di Berardino (ur.), *Patrologia IV*, Genova, 1996, p. 121-122; p. 151-155.

<sup>15</sup> P. Siniscalco, *Il cammino di Cristo nell'Impero Romano*, Bari, 2009, p. 274-280. The author mentions many names from this period, some of whom are the following: Peter Krizolog, Maxim Torinski, Caesar of Arles, abbot Columban, St. Benedict, Saint Patrick, Lupo di Troyes, Faust of Riez and many others such as Pope Gregory the Great and Saint Isidore of Seville.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. P. Siniscalco, *Il cammino di Cristo nell'Impero Romano*, p. 264-265.



tion and its values and was guardian and bearer of Latin culture and the awareness of belonging to Roman civilization (*romanitas*).

In times of great turbulence, the Church made constant effort to preserve the Hellenistic culture and to transmit it to future generations. The Church was aware that the Hellenistic culture could also enrich those people who settled in the area of the former Western Empire. From the earliest times, due to its consistency and prudence, the Church could recognize the values and dimensions of Hellenistic culture unlike that of the Barbarians if it could be called culture at all. That is why, the Church, at an opportune time, promoted evangelical values among people who lacked a genuine understanding of culture and true faith.

In this context it is possible to explain the Carolingian Renaissance in the 8th and 9th centuries, and the cultural revival under Charlemagne who intended to reach the splendour of the ancient Roman Empire in the newly created empire, through the promotion of cultural and religious values. Since he was quite concerned with Christian upbringing of his subjects and with the education of the clergy, he mostly expected their support and he ordered the construction of school buildings near cathedrals and abbeys not only for clerics and monks, but for the lay people too. Charlemagne's tireless promotion of ecclesiastical and educational reform bore fruit in the most influential religious figures that transmitted Christian culture based on the principle of harmony between faith and reason, and the primacy of faith over reason. In order to interpret the Holy Scriptures and holy canons, a command of correct and a fluent knowledge of Latin was required. The Gospel teaching offered basic moral and religious values and rest of the teaching concentrated on the works of the Classic authors, while the values of the Barbarians were integrated into the existing traditions.<sup>17</sup>

Therefore, it can be concluded that Christianity was involved in the process of preserving the Greco-Roman culture from oblivion, since culture was considered more important than the values of the people who were to settle the Western Roman Empire. The faith was proclaimed to them and culture transmitted to the extent that the existing social circumstances allowed it. Pupils could receive suitable moral and religious education through an ambitious humanistic program that did not lack anything that was considered valuable and useful for the education of those who found themselves in the Empire as new masters. Precisely, the Church adequately cared about their well-being, their worldly and spiritual needs and invested much effort not only into the evangelization of those peoples but also into their integration and the acceptance of culture of the former Empire as its own.

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<sup>17</sup> Cf. B. Mondin, *Storia della teologia 2*, Bologna, 1996, p. 14-16.