

Special issue 2: The Study of Historical Pedagogues and its Importance for Christian Education

Title: “Take heed that ye offend not—despise not—hinder not—one of these little ones”. Charlotte Mason and her Educational Proposal

Abstract

Charlotte Mason (1842-1923) was a well-known English educator from the XIX century whose work and legacy is certainly worthy of consideration today. One of the most interesting aspects of her philosophy of education is the fact that she adopts an anthropological approach: the consideration of the child as a person whose natural desire to know can only be satisfied with an education centered in the great books, the narrative method and the importance of relations. Her wide experience as a teacher, parental advisor, and teacher trainer, as well as the application of her method with surprisingly good results, constitute an endorsement of her proposal.

Key Words: Mason, Anthropology, Narrative Education, Integral formation.

Introduction

“Our business is to find out how great a mystery a person is *qua person*” (1954: 80), asserts Mason in her essay *Towards A Philosophy of Education*, the work where she condensed her knowledge on education. Mason summarizes in this statement what her life’s task had been: the design and implementation of an educational project based on an adequate view of the person. An educator from a young age and a thinker who became nationally renowned in her time -and internationally after her demise-, Mason saw the need to start from the person, from his nature, when trying to develop an education that “should regenerate the world” (1954:11). Thus, before answering the question of what should be taught and how, she formulates with the question: what is man? And she does so at a time when the utilitarian and materialistic philosophy was extending its dominion over the educational field.

Mason’s is a proposal to accompany the child in the process of getting acquainted with reality, of encountering it, and thus in the process of his or her integral development. The British educator starts from a look of reverence toward the child, a look that is deepened and nourished by the experience of having accompanied thousands of children as a teacher and mentor during thirty years, as she herself remarks in her final essay (Mason, 1954: 7).

One of her pivotal ideas is that knowledge nourishes the mind as food nourishes the body, therefore children need knowledge as much as they need food. In line with this, she proposes “a liberal education for all” (1954: 79), of which she affirms: “some of it is new, much of it is old” (1954: 28); what establishes her as a “bridge between the classic and the modern world” (quotations in Glass, 2014: 3). This education must, above all, be in agreement with what leads the person to its fulfilment, an idea which always guided the work of the English educator. Mason had the opportunity to see the abundant fruits of

delight and learning borne by an education centred on the best books, on living ideas, on good habits, and on the development of relationships. She firmly believed that the child's deep yearning for knowledge must be nurtured by literary means, stressing the centrality of the word, of letters, as we will comment below.

To make this educational method possible, Mason provides ample advice derived from her experience as a teacher trainer and parental advisor. She also stresses the need to accompany the children in the pursuit of the knowledge of God, the Sciences, and the Humanities, the first of which she deems the most fundamental.

Mason's ideas and her educational method are still followed today and, as it happened in her lifetime, the application of her proposal is currently giving rise to the creation of various communities. Moreover, because of the rediscovery of Mason's philosophy in recent decades, there is a growing series of studies, doctoral theses, publications, etc., that also highlight the validity of the method. As an example, Elaine Cooper's book *When children love to learn: a practical application of Charlotte Mason's philosophy for today* (2004); Benjamin E. Bernier-Rodriguez' PhD: "Education for the Kingdom: An Exploration of the Religious Foundation of Charlotte Mason's Educational Philosophy", Lancaster University, Religious Studies Department (2009); Karen Glass' work *Consider This: Charlotte Mason and the Classical Tradition* (2012); or a biography on Mason published by Margaret Coombs entitled *Charlotte Mason: Hidden Heritage and Educational Influence* (2015), etc. More studies can be found in: <http://libguides.redeemer.ca/CMDC>. Likewise, several digital sources have been created, such as the Charlotte Mason Digital Collection (Redeemer University College, 2009) or Ambleside Online.

The aim of this paper is to introduce Charlotte Mason to the reader and to approach the question of her contribution to the educational field. Starting from some notes about her life and work, her anthropological view will be explained before moving on to the main ideas of the method she propounded in the most mature of her essays: *Towards A Philosophy of Education* (1923).

An approach to Charlotte Mason. Teaching as a vocation.

Ms. Mason was gifted in many ways, but in none I think more than in her power of inspiring others with ideas, and ideas fundamentally so sound, that those who were able to work them out, felt that they must originate in truth -so often ideas are inspiring for a time, but having little actuality, little relation with facts- they do not live to bear fruit (Frances Chesterton, 1923: 83).

These words were written by Frances Chesterton, G.K. Chesterton's wife, who before getting married had worked in close cooperation with Charlotte Mason. Mrs. Chesterton's words summarize some of the main features of Mason's character. She also emphasizes Mason's keen appreciation of "the immense value of each human soul", which she developed from her experience as a companion of many children and adults, and which she ardently advocated through her lecturing and writing. Mrs. Chesterton's view of Charlotte Mason reveals the ultimate conviction that was latent in Mason's heart and deeply rooted in her educational theory and practice: that the human soul was created by God and finds its rest only in Him.

In writing her brief contribution, the wife of the author of *Orthodoxy* (1908) recalls the day she met Mason and all that she heard and saw on that Sunday afternoon. Different from the city of London and far from it, the working environment of Mason was located in a rural setting, in Ambleside (Lake District, northwest England). The young Frances was able to hear from a lady -whose smile and gentle voice stood out- a message that struck her as she was readying herself for her educational task, and which came from a word of Scripture: “Out of the mouth of babes in arms you establish your glory, O Lord” (Psalm 8).

This “prominent and highly respected figure of the English educational scene of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries”, so depicted by her biographer Margaret A. Coombs (2015: xxi) was born in Wales in 1842, during the Victorian era. She was an Anglican Christian of the High Church branch, but not many details of her life are known as she did not want to reveal them. When asked about her biography, she used to say: “My dear, my life does not matter. I have no desire to have it written down. It is the work that matters” (Coombs, 2015: 6). She was an only child, educated mainly at home by her parents, a common practice in her time. Her mother, who suffered from chronic health problems, died when she was sixteen years old; soon afterwards, her father passed away too. These events had a deep impact on her life and entailed -among other things- her need to earn a living from a very young age. An avid reader since her childhood, her schooling ended at the age of eighteen and she attended one of the few institutions of her time where she could obtain a teaching certificate. From that moment on, Mason began her teaching career -to which she devoted herself entirely, as she never got married- and she would carry out this mission in response to her vocation until the end of her life, at the age of 81.

Although Mason was afflicted with a severe heart disease, this fact did nothing to slow down her intense and astoundingly fruitful activities. She taught in different schools across England and soon developed her vision of “a liberal education for all”, one of the main purposes of which was -as she herself put it- “to form links between high and low, rich and poor, the classes and the masses, in the strong sympathy of common knowledge” (Mason, 1954: 79). In relation to this point, professor and researcher Stratford Caldecott has emphasized Charlotte Mason’s down-to-earth approach (2014: 125), idea which stands in sharp contrast with the educational practice of her time.

In her last work, Mason expounded some of the most important landmarks in the development of her educational philosophy and method. The very first of them was her getting acquainted -when still a young woman- with the children of an Anglo-Indian family, who were living with their grandparents and were being brought up by an aunt who was Mason’s intimate friend. Mason herself was working by that time at an Elementary School and a pioneer Church High School; however, the closeness to these Anglo-Indian children in the atmosphere of their home filled her with astonishment when she discovered their potentialities: generous impulses, sound judgment, great intellectual aptitude, imagination, and moral insight (Mason, 1954: 10). Devoted as she was to the teaching of children in large groups, she had never been able to study them thoroughly; it was, therefore, “under the guidance of these children”, that she began “to take the measure of a person and soon to suspect that children are more than we, their elders, except that their ignorance is illimitable” (1954: 11). She also concluded from this experience that

children's minds reject abstract conceptions and discovered that the mind of a child takes or rejects according to its needs, as we will comment later.

After years of teaching experience and having already developed her idea of education as an atmosphere, she also realized that parents could be greatly assisted if they understood some basic principles about the education of their children. It was then that she began to give the lectures that would later be published under the title of *Home Education*. The lectures enjoyed a wide audience and gave birth to the Parents' Educational Union (PEU), an association which, according to Essex Cholmondeley's biography (1960), was organized in such a way that each local branch was responsible for accomplishing three main objectives, namely: that there was "a religious basis for the work, that the number of classes was distributed among the four parts of education (physical, mental, moral and religious), and that the same work was carried out with parents of all social classes" (Neven Van Pelt, 2011: 6). These ideas already highlight some of the defining features of the project.

In addition to all this, a publication was launched in 1890 to keep the PEU members in touch with one another: *Parents Review: A Monthly Magazine of Home-Training and Culture*, edited by Mason herself with scholarly contributions on education. In this way, a community was established around Mason's project and method, thus embodying one of the crucial characteristics of the project, since, as the author herself expressed, hers was not a project of one person, but of a community.

Later, in 1892, at a time in her life when she had already achieved much and had known and befriended many people, she founded the *House of Education* in Ambleside, the only training school for governesses at the time. Her contribution was admired, and Mason became a reference, as Margaret Coombs narrates in her biography: "for many years, aristocrats and educators met metaphorically at Miss Mason's feet at Ambleside" (Coombs, 2015: 2). The school later evolved into Charlotte Mason College and became a branch of the Faculty of Education at Lancaster University; after that, it joined the University of Cumbria, where it remains today.

A great thinker and scholar, as the aforementioned biographical book relates –"she read every day for several hours and was always assimilating new ideas that stimulated her thinking"– Mason referred and discussed the ideas of authors like Jean-Jacques Rousseau, John Locke, Herbert Spencer, Johann Friedrich Herbart, Johann H. Pestalozzi, Maria Montessori, as well as those of John Dewey, Friedrich Nietzsche, Charles Darwin, etc. As J. Carroll Smith defends, she was insistent that her students, who were training to be teachers, must have a broad understanding of educational philosophy and psychology (Carroll Smith, 2000: 13).

Her thinking was not, however, a mere appropriation of other authors' ideas, since she took issue with many of their anthropological premises and pedagogical suggestions, most especially when those premises and suggestions were in clear disagreement with what she had learned during decades of teaching and mentoring experience. With regard to pedagogical issues, she was particularly critical of Herbart and –perhaps surprisingly– Montessori. She was, indeed, critical of all educational philosophies and practices that did not take into proper account the dignity and the potentialities of children. And this she did, as we will see below, in a clear and conscious evangelical spirit.

Moreover, Charlotte Mason published a considerable number of essays in which she developed her vision. Geography, religion, and education were the subjects into which she delved most frequently, being the six volumes she devoted to this last subject the ones that were republished due to their success. Besides the aforementioned *Home Education*, we find the titles *Parents and Children* (set of essays), *School Education* (1904), *Ourselves* (1904), *Formation of Character* (1905), and *Towards A Philosophy of Education* (1923). This last –also mentioned above– was her most mature work and the one in which she developed her thought in greater depth. Also helpful in understanding her educational proposal is her six volume poetry project called “The Saviour of the World” (published between 1908 and 1914), which is, after her series on education, the next most important publication project to which Mason devoted her efforts. The Ambleside educator thought that the life and teachings of Christ laid down in verse could communicate the sublime better than in prose. In this regard, it can also be underlined - as Bernier-Rodriguez explains- that the poetry volumes represent “Mason’s final and more thorough attempt to answer the apologetic need lying at the heart of the beginnings of her educational efforts”, as she could perceive in her time “an overriding need to save from the danger of unbelief and criticism the foundations of a living faith as an inheritance for future generations” (2009: 252).

From 1914 on, more and more schools adopted Mason’s philosophy and method; her educational programs spread throughout the British Isles and the colonies, and were introduced in state schools, obtaining widespread approval. Ambleside became a training ground for teachers, and Ms. Mason spent her later years overseeing this network of schools. Afterwards, Charlotte Mason’s educational philosophy crossed the British borders and spread onto America, Australia, and continental Europe, where it began to be assimilated, practiced, and reinterpreted for the new century.

“Take heed that ye offend not—despise not—hinder not—one of these little ones”

Our crying need today is less for a better method of education than for an adequate conception of children, —children, merely as human beings, whether brilliant or dull, precocious or backward. Exceptional qualities take care of themselves and so does the ‘wanting’ intelligence (Mason, 1954: 80).

As we have underlined in the introduction, Mason’s approach to education stems from an anthropological stand, as she considers that in her time there is no clear notion as to what education is, and this because there is no clear notion of what a child is. In this section, we will briefly expound what we will call –for lack of a better term– the “paidological” foundations of Mason’s proposal, showing both their evangelical inspiration and their ultimate agreement with the classical tradition.

The first article of her creed -and the basis of her whole proposal- is “Children are born *persons*”, an idea “of a revolutionary character”, as it implies a complete reversal of attitude towards children (1954: xxx). In fact, it is in sharp contrast with other educational ideas of her time –such as the Herbartian and, in a different way, the Froebelian doctrines–, which tended to belittle children intellectually (1954: 27), to consider the mind of the child as a mere receptacle, therefore laying the burden of education upon the teacher - with the consequent danger of giving much teaching with little knowledge. Furthermore,

her proposal ran counter one of the dominant theories of psychological development of her time, which was an inevitable corollary of Ernest Haeckel's Recapitulation theory. Haeckel condensed his theory in the famous formula, "Ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny." According to this, a human being on the first stages of its development—that is, a child—can only enjoy a level of intellectual prowess similar to that of primitive humans, which was (erroneously, as it is well established today) deemed to be very far from that of their modern counterparts.

By comparison, Mason—who had witnessed first-hand the astonishing potentialities of children—defended that they have a natural thirst for knowledge, as well as "an unlimited power of attention to which the power of retention (memory) seems to be attached" (1954: 14). Therefore, she asserted, there is no need to employ any means of extrinsic motivation or reinforcement, be it positive or negative, nor coercion of any kind. On the contrary, according to Mason, such means (as marks, prizes, praise, blame, etc.; that is, rewards or punishments of any sort) serve only to hamper the child's capabilities and whither its inborn desire for knowledge. It is not difficult to hear here the echoes of Plato and Aristotle, surely two of the most important thinkers of the classical tradition, and arguably their founding fathers. The former asserts in *The Republic* that "nothing that is learned by coercion stays with the mind" (VII, 536e), and the latter famously affirms in the first sentence of his *Metaphysics* that "all men by nature desire to know" (I, 1, 980a21).

Yet Mason goes one big step further. In fact, in order to understand Mason's approach, it is crucial to explain that her first principle—"Children are born *persons*"—, as she herself expressed, is not to be found in the classical tradition; rather, it has its original source in the Holy Gospels, where Mason discovered the most important of her foundational concepts. Mason summarizes this code of education, "expressly laid down by Christ" (Mason, 1886: 12), in the first volume of her series on education, entitled *Home Education*, with a powerful warning taken from Matthew: "Take heed that ye offend not—despise not—hinder not—one of these little ones" (Matthew 18:10). We can see, then, that by drawing her inspiration from the Gospels Mason pushes the classical tradition beyond its original (one could say pagan) limits. Thus, what Plato, Aristotle, and others applied only to grown-up, male, free, Greek humans (that is, to the *πολίτες*), Mason extends to every human being, from the very moment of its birth. This and no other constitutes the basis for her proposal of "a liberal education for all", and is the reason why her approach can be rightly considered to be simultaneously revolutionary and traditional.

It is difficult to overstate the impact that this evangelical core has had upon the educational philosophy of Charlotte Mason. All of her proposal, in theory and in practice, hinges on it. It was the ultimate yardstick with which she judged—assisted by the verdict of experience—the truth and suitability of the educational philosophies and methods of her time, including her own. And it provided the impetus that permanently encouraged her in her educational endeavours.

"A child requires knowledge as much as he requires food"

Building on this Gospel-inspired basis of deep respect for the dignity and the capabilities of the child, Mason addresses the so-called problem of the mind, taking issue both with the recapitulationist and the materialist tendencies of her time. Against the former, she defends that the child is born "with a mind as complete and as beautiful as his beautiful

little body” (1954: 36), “with a mind of amazing potentialities” (1954: 38). Against the latter, she repeatedly stresses the difference between the mind and the brain, which she illustrates with a beautiful analogy, asserting that the brain is “the organ and instrument of [the] mind, as a piano is not music but the instrument of music” (1954, 38). She considers the child’s mind as a spiritual organism, with an appetite for all knowledge, and she stresses that the mind needs sufficient food, as much as the body does; knowledge ‘nourishes’ the mind and awakes to delightful living (Mason, 1954: xxxi).

Mason’s educational proposal underlines the idea of “atmosphere”. With this she refers to the natural conditions in which the child’s life should take place. As she points out, it is not a set of carefully constructed artificial relationships, but a healthy environment, where common sense and the importance of the family are key facts. As to discipline, she underlines the habits of mind and body, stressing among them the importance of attention, expression, obedience, good will, as well as the habit of thinking and judging well, referring at this point to the tradition of virtue. Moreover, she expresses that education is “a life”, a life that feeds on ideas.

Another important aspect of education according to Charlotte is that it is “the science of relations”. The child, Mason explains, is always eager to establish multiple and varied relationships:

Relations with places far and near, with the wide universe, with the past of history, with the social economics of the present, with the earth they live on and all its delightful progeny of beast and bird, plant and tree; with the sweet human affinities they entered into at birth; with their own country and other countries, and, above all, with that most sublime of human relationships—their relation to God (Mason, 1954: 73-74).

Therefore, it is convenient to work with and accompany the child in the study of Theology, the Humanities, and the Sciences, to introduce the child to reality, highlighting the contact with nature and always keeping in mind that all branches of knowledge are connected in the knowledge of God, which “ranks first in importance, is indispensable, and most happy-making” (Mason, 1954, 159). For all these kinds of relationships to be fruitfully established, Mason affirmed that the child requires that in most cases knowledge be communicated to him in literary form, an idea that leads us to Mason’s literary method.

The Literary Method in Education

Mason discovered through her thirty years of teaching experience that children decline to know that which does not reach them in a literary form. On the contrary, “what they receive under this condition they absorb immediately and show that they know by that test of knowledge which applies to us all, that is, they can tell it with power, clearness, vivacity and charm” (Mason, 1954: 64). She repeatedly states that every point that she exposes in her final essay has been proved in thousands of instances and that the method “may be seen at work in many schools, large and small, Elementary and Secondary” (1954: xxviii). She could test that children have a kind of natural appetency for those letters that nurture their desire of knowledge and their imagination, and this fact can be tested in a direct way through their interest in tales and stories since a very early stage of life, an idea which has also been defended by authors like Chesterton and Tolkien, who affirmed that the relationship between the fairy tale and the child is a “natural relationship,

as children are human beings and stories are something inherent to human sensibility” (Segura, 1997).

How did Mason implement a method centred in the reading of great books? Rawnsley, a disciple who had the chance to witness it in a school setting, will describe the experience for us. We will reproduce his words so that the reader can glimpse a vivid image of the situation:

The teacher takes a subject which interests the children and reads part of a page in a clear and interesting manner. All listen, for they know that the next step will be that one of them will be called on to stand up and narrate to the others what all have just heard read. Everyone follows the narration, keen to correct if the narrator goes wrong, and with their help but with none from the teacher, the class gets through the piece and begins on another. But herein is the secret, all know that the teacher will only read the bit once, so if they don't give their close attention, they will have no chance to join in the game (Rawnsley, 1923).

In the following sessions, the reading period was longer, and children could remember and accurately repeat a whole page almost verbatim. Even more surprising, however, was the fact that they could retain that knowledge for weeks and months, indicating that it had been truly assimilated. Thus, the method provides a complete education deriving from the habit of attention, which in turn paves the way for the capacities of expression, vocabulary acquisition, knowledge, imagination, and creation of living ideas, as the educator repeats in her final essay after thirty years of practicing. This kind of education is based in the reading of good books –“the best that we can find” (Mason, 1954: 52)-, both in prose and in verse, which were always personally chosen by Mason. By the end of the term, children had read two or three thousand pages of very good literature, and, as Mason writes, they perceive so vividly what they have heard that they narrate with originality *Gulliver's Travels*, Shakespeare's plays, etc. A look of brightness on the faces of all the students and their increased intelligence are marked consequences of their reading, as Rawnsley, among others, could test. Mason herself was astonished by the results of this method, so much so that she concluded by experience that “to introduce children to literature is to install them in a very rich and glorious kingdom, to bring a continual holiday to their doors, to lay before them a feast exquisitely served” (Mason, 1954: 52). As she herself explained, this method contrasts with “the interest roused by marks, pleasing oral lessons and other school devices” (Mason, 1954: xxvii), examples of a materialistic tendency present in Mason's times due to the Darwinian influence; an approach which did not consider the spiritual nature of man.

In her essay *Towards a Philosophy of Education*, the author dwells on the three fields of knowledge previously highlighted, and frequently stresses the need to consider them in conjunction, feeding the desire to know in a broad way, and taking good care to avoid the limits that specialization imposes in this regard. The Humanities, she asserts, are suitable for all and the object of the natural desire for knowledge. “Science, for we all live in the world”, and Art, “for we all require beauty, and are eager to know how to discriminate; social science, ethics, for we are aware of the need to learn about the conduct of life; and Religion, for, like those men we heard of at the Front, we all ‘want God’” (1954: 15). To teach these disciplines, she proposes different ideas. For instance, reading the Bible, beginning at the age of six with the Old Testament, is a fundamental practice. For the

study of history, whose significance she repeatedly emphasizes, she encourages the study of biographies of illustrious people of the past -resorting to narration again- and recommends that the approach to ancient history be done through a chronologically ordered book issued by the British Museum, thus awakening the children's minds to know these treasures. Fairy tales by the Brothers Grimm, Andersen, Aesop's fables, etc. are also part of the program. Mason likewise comments upon the surprising results achieved in the learning of foreign languages, music or art: "children learn not only to see but to look at a painting, taking into account every detail". She recalls that when a group of children who had been educated through this method were asked where in London they would like to go, one of them answered: "Oh, Mummy, to the National Gallery to see the Rembrandts" (Mason, 1954: 215).

In addressing the issue of science -which was a deep concern of her time- she stresses the need to re-unite it with the humanities, as she considers that "they have become divorced". As to moral education, she considers it a delicate issue which should be addressed with the "best that we have in art and literature and above all to that storehouse of example and precept, the Bible" (Mason, 1954: 60). Mason's idea of educating the character by means of the great books of the tradition, rather than with abstract concepts and speeches, is a proposal that has been defended by different authors like G. K. Chesterton, Martin Buber, or, more recently, Alasdair MacIntyre, who defends that it is "through hearing stories about wicked stepmothers, lost children, good but misguided kings, wolves that suckle twin boys (...)" that children "learn or mislearn both what a child and what a parent is, what the cast of characters may be in the drama into which they have been born and what the ways of the world are. Deprive children of stories and you leave them unscripted, anxious stutterers in their actions as in their words" (MacIntyre, 2007: 216).

Moreover, also in relation with the ideas previously commented, the concept of experience is outstanding in Mason's educational philosophy and method. As she explains, the word denotes the process by which children come to know: they can experience everything they hear and read, as it penetrates them and becomes part of their life. The art of narrating is an extremely useful practice in this regard. As Karen Glass points out, in it every faculty of the child's mind is brought into play, facts and relationships that he had not observed come to light, everything is visualized and highlighted in an extraordinary way (Glass, 2014).

In relation to the role of the teacher in Charlotte Mason's approach to education, she considers his or her mission as a guide, philosopher, and friend. If it is assumed that every child has an overwhelming desire for the best knowledge and harbours an astounding intellectual potential, how can the teacher satisfy that desire and unleash that potential? Mason thinks that the teacher has a prophetic power of appeal and inspiration, his or her duty being "not the task of spoon-feeding with pap-meat, but the delightful commerce of equal minds where his is the part of guide" (Mason, 1954: 261). The teacher, thus, is the link between two great minds: those of the author and of the child. Mason addressed some words to graduated teachers of her school, underlining this new way of considering their vocation:

You, dear ones, are torchbearers, you hold the light. It is not because we are intelligent, nor because we know more, but because it has been our good fortune that a philosophy

of education has crossed our path, our vocation has led us. We have received a calling and we are working on principles that have not been worked on before (Mason, 1954).

The final epigraph of *Towards a Philosophy of Education* is devoted to the Word that gives meaning to all the others. Although, as we have seen, Mason points at the theological horizon throughout the entire essay, she establishes at this moment a most complete relationship between the centrality of the word, of the letters, the narration, and the Logos (John 1:1), identified as Christ: “In Him an extraordinary literary aptitude excels”. She emphasizes that Christ exposed the deepest thoughts to the multitude in ways that everyone could understand, and “every utterance which fell from Him is marked by exquisite literary fitness” (Mason, 1954: 331). Mason also affirms that the supreme desire and glory of man is to know God (Mason, 1954: 157), the true *telos* of our yearning for knowledge, as we have “an urgent, incessant, irrepressible need of the infinite” (Mason, 1954:65). This is the most precious treasure any child can know, as “knowledge, the knowledge of God, is the ineffable reward set before us” (Mason, 1904: 12). Thus, Mason’s anthropological conception finds its source in the person’s participation in the essence of God, as she quoted from Carlyle: “The mystery of a Person, indeed, is ever divine, to him that has a sense of the God-like” (Cfr. Mason, 1904: 13). And from this foundation, she adds a verse by Wordsworth which shows a way to keep the mystery of the person inviolate, which is also her desire for the education of children: “We live by Admiration, Hope and Love!” (Wordsworth, 1814). Thus, considering that she defined faith as “an interchangeable term for admiration” (1904: 10), Mason presents the theological virtues as a proposal of life.

Discussion and conclusion

Having introduced Charlotte Mason and outlined her philosophy, the question as to the originality and validity of her proposal now arises. Does it have anything unique and valuable to offer to the educators of today — and most especially to Christian educators? The following lines aim to provide an answer to this pressing question.

The originality of Mason’s proposal clearly stems from its radically Christian character, yet it is in no way beneficial only for Christians. The originality of the Gospel, and thus of Christianity, with regard to children was eloquently expressed by Hans Urs von Balthasar in a bold quote: “Everywhere outside of Christianity, the child is automatically sacrificed” (Von Balthasar, 1968: 257). For Mason, such a sacrifice did not need to involve any bloodshed, since the sacrifice that she had many times witnessed and always denounced was of an intellectual and spiritual nature, namely: the annihilation of the inborn dispositions, and astounding imaginative and intellectual potentialities of the child (their gift for honest prayer, their large faith, their keen sense of wonder, the delight they take in learning, their enormous powers of attention and retention, etc.).

Within Christianity, on the contrary, the child is presented by Christ himself as a model for the adult, for it is in the baptised child -cleansed from original sin and still untarnished by factual sin- where the image of God shines more brightly and clearly. That is the reason why Mason, having experienced the truth of the evangelical view of children through her

many years of teaching, embarked on a quest for an educational method that could do justice to the child. Instead of attempting to shape the children in the various images propounded by the ideological fads of her time, she devoted her efforts to educate children in such a way that the image of God that was engraved in them could be allowed to shine and shed light for the adults.

We have just set Mason's proposal in opposition to the ideological fads of her time. Do we have a rationale to do this? If so, could her proposal be a remedy for the fads that hold sway over much of current educational practice? Or is her proposal one more ideology among many? After all, being so radically Christian-inspired, her ideas may well be deemed ideological too. What exempts them from being charged with such an accusation, we believe, is the fact that they have repeatedly stood the test of experience. They have an empirical anchorage, so to speak. In multiple schools and homes, with children belonging to all strata of society and coming from different cultural backgrounds, the Charlotte Mason's principles have been fruitfully applied. Fruitfully, that is, if a vivid imagination, a love of learning and reading, a keen sense of wonder, a vast knowledge of History, Science and Literature, and a sharp judgement, among other things, are considered to be desirable fruits for the education of a child. We firmly believe that they are.

Finally, and from a Christian standpoint, we consider Mason's proposal to be valid for the children of today because, in bearing all of the aforementioned fruits, it paves the way toward the knowledge -in the thickest, deepest sense of this term- of God, which "is the ineffable reward set before us" (Mason, 1904: 12).

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