

From Coercion to Fascination: Grades, Vulnerability, and Responsibility

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Abstract: *Gaudium et Spes* encourages theologians to think of the classroom as a place where both students and teachers grow in their ability “to wonder, to understand, to contemplate, to make personal judgments, and to develop a religious, moral, and social sense” (no. 59). Yet, substantive research shows that traditional modes of grading are a mechanism whereby both teachers and students become invulnerable to the fascination essential for a good theological education. Our essay reflects on our experiments using ungrading strategies in our theology and philosophy courses. First, we show how the Catholic vision of education, Pope Francis’s emphasis on the role of freedom, and Luigi Giussani’s theology of education are at the root of our pedagogical experiments. Second, in dialogue with education theorists, such as Alfie Kohn and Susan Blum, we describe how ungrading methods increase the vulnerability to wonder, help teachers and students alike become greater protagonists in the journey of learning, and thus foster everyone’s flourishing. Third, we draw on our classroom experience to illustrate the challenges and opportunities of this form of education. Our goal is to introduce fellow theologians to the research informing our experiments and to spark conversation about how such experiments can enhance the art of teaching theology to twenty-first century college students.

MORAL THEOLOGIANs ARE INTERESTED IN REFLECTING ON how practices form persons because of the commitments they embody and foster. Teaching is a practice in which most moral theologians are involved nowadays, which is why the vocation of being educators has been the object of extensive ethical analysis.¹ We want to insert ourselves in such ongoing reflection by considering the implicit commitments of current pedagogical practices, testing whether such commitments fit with the Catholic vision of education, and offering our own suggestions to better align *how* we teach with the ideals suggested by the Church.

¹ For example, the *Journal of Moral Theology* has published an entire issue devoted to the topic of university ethics. See *Journal of Moral Theology* 9, Special Issue 2 (2020).

Gaudium et Spes encourages theologians to think of classrooms as places where students and teachers grow in their ability “to wonder, to understand, to contemplate, to make personal judgments, and to develop a religious, moral, and social sense” (no. 59). Yet, substantive research shows that traditional modes of grading are a mechanism whereby both teachers and students become invulnerable to the fascination essential for a good theological education.² Our essay reflects on our experiments using ungrading strategies in our theology and philosophy courses.³ First, we show the theological commitments at the root of our pedagogical experiments. Second, we describe how ungrading methods increase the vulnerability to wonder, help teachers and students alike become greater protagonists in the journey of learning, and thus foster everyone’s flourishing. Third, we draw on our classroom experience to illustrate the challenges and opportunities of this form of education. Our goal is to introduce fellow theology professors to the research informing our experiments and to spark conversation about how such experiments can enhance the art of teaching theology to twenty-first century college students.

By “ungrading,” we refer to practices variously related to the effort to reduce the presence and impact of grades and grading on students and teachers. These practices can be more or less radical, can be used in a variety of disciplines, and can be adjusted to different types of institutions. When we use the term “ungrading,” we are not only referring to the total elimination of grades. We are referring to the increasingly visible movement to turn our attention away from grades and toward learning. To use the words of one of the most important scholars in this field: “There’s a growing movement at this end of the second decade of the twenty-first century. I call it *ungrading*. Others called it *de-grading* or *going gradeless*. Though the destination tends to be generally the same, there is variation in the routes, the reasons,

² Other scholars have focused on the negative impact of grades in other disciplines and suggested practices to move away from them. For example, see Sarah M. Zerwin, *Point-Less: An English Teacher’s Guide to More Meaningful Grading* (Heinemann, 2020) and Jo Boaler, *Mathematical Mindsets: Unleashing Students’ Potential Through Creative Math, Inspiring Messages and Innovative Teaching* (Jossey-Bass, 2015).

³ We use the strategies detailed in the article in undergraduate classes that meet in person and in the academic formation of future permanent deacons one of our colleges provides through online, synchronous instruction. The classes we teach span from general education requirements in theology and philosophy to non-credit-bearing classes and upper-level courses for students majoring in our departments. We focus on the theological underpinnings of our practices and leave an analysis of them using social science research methods to future endeavors.

the contexts, and the specific ways various individuals at different levels of education enact our changes.”⁴

Our pedagogy is rooted in two interconnected theological commitments. First, we follow Pope Francis’s frequent affirmation that, in a time like ours, when faith is no longer an evident presupposition of social life, the Church must make room for the adventure of freedom. People need to be empowered to truly explore their lives and faith to move past a mere formal certainty about their calling into a true conviction born out of careful discernment. Second, we learn from the theology of Luigi Giussani, who conceived of education as taking a risk: the risk that teachers and students accept of verifying whether the Christian proposal stands up to the full depth of the person’s needs and questions.

Such theological commitments have sparked a pedagogical experiment whereby we invite students to a different form of education. Informed by the work of many contemporary educational theorists, we do not coerce participation via grades. Instead, we ask students to name the course grade they want to work for, and then we commit to helping them do that work. We see this as an opportunity to move away from coercion to the vulnerability of fascination and freedom. This vulnerability is twofold: 1) the students become vulnerable by becoming more responsible for their own education, and 2) the professor becomes more vulnerable by partnering with students. The result is a way of teaching theology more appropriate to the current cultural moment, better for our students’ needs, and more conducive to our flourishing as teachers.

THE CHURCH’S PEDAGOGICAL COMMITMENTS

The Catholic Church, “Mother and Teacher of all nations” (*Mater et Magistra*, no. 1), is an educational institution by nature and has always had plenty to say about pedagogy. Such an emphasis on formation dates back to Jesus and the apostolic community, informed the discussions of the Fathers of the Church, and continued throughout the Middle Ages up to the modern and contemporary magisterium.⁵

⁴ Susan D. Blum, “Introduction: Why Ungrade? Why Grade?” in *Ungrading: Why Rating Students Undermines Learning (And What to Do Instead)*, ed. Susan D. Blum (West Virginia University Press, 2020), 2.

⁵ Such an emphasis on the importance of education is common, not just in magisterial teachings, but also in the theological reflection and apostolates of numerous religious orders and lay associations. For example, we work at Benedictine colleges that are inspired by a long tradition of reflection on the connections between the Church’s tradition, monastic commitments, and education. See Association of Benedictine Colleges and Universities, “The Ten Hallmarks of Benedictine Education,” *Journal of Catholic Higher Education* 29, no. 1 (2010); Placid Solari, OSB, “Response to the

For example, the Second Vatican Council addresses the issue of education head-on by publishing the declaration *Gravissimum Educationis*. There, the council describes the Church as having “the responsibility of announcing the way of salvation to all [people], of communicating the life of Christ to those who believe, and, in her unfailing solicitude, of assisting . . . [people] to be able to come to the fullness of this life. The Church is bound as a mother to give to these children of hers an education by which their whole life can be imbued with the spirit of Christ” (no. 7). Furthermore, the declaration asks Christian educators to be “endowed with an apostolic spirit,” create “a special atmosphere animated by the Gospel spirit of freedom and charity,” and “do all they can to stimulate their students to act for themselves” (no. 8). Such principles hold true at all levels of education, but especially in Catholic colleges and universities, “since the destiny of society and of the Church itself is intimately linked with the progress of young people pursuing higher studies” (no. 10).

In the end, Catholic education “promotes friendly relations and fosters a spirit of mutual understanding” between pupils of different talents and backgrounds (no. 5). Saint Paul VI famously insisted on the fact that persons today listen “more willingly to witnesses than to teachers, and if . . . [they do] listen to teachers, it is because they are witnesses.”⁶ Saint John Paul II encouraged Catholic universities to create an environment where students “freely associate with their teachers in a common love of knowledge” that steers them towards “searching for, discovering, and communicating truth” (*Ex Corde Ecclesiae*, no. 1). Echoing similar insights, Pope Francis endorsed Rosmini’s maxim that Christian education requires “communion in learning, holy intercourse, habit of life, [and] interchange of affection” (*Veritatis Gaudium*, no. 4c). Overall, the Church is committed to an education rooted in Christ, a love for all truth, a sense that “pupils are active participants in the educational process,”⁷ and that formation requires a community of learners in which teachers and students make themselves vulnerable to the encounter with one another.⁸

Address ‘American Benedictines and Higher Education’ by Father Hilary Thimmesch, O.S.B., April 22, 1992,” *American Benedictine Review* 46, no. 2 (1995).

⁶ Paul VI, “Address to the Members of the Consilium de Laicis,” October 2, 1974.

⁷ Congregation for Catholic Education, *The Identity of the Catholic School for a Culture of Dialogue*, January 25, 2022, no. 41.

⁸ “The school must stimulate the pupil to exercise his intelligence through the dynamics of understanding to attain clarity and inventiveness. It must help him spell out the meaning of his experiences and their truths. Any school which neglects this duty and which offers merely pre-cast conclusions hinders the personal development of its pupils” (Congregation for Catholic Education, *The Catholic School*, March 19, 1977, no. 27).

Yet, there is reason to doubt that common pedagogical practices actually promote such an education.

AGAINST BEHAVIORISM

This Catholic vision of education is not isolated from the hopes and fears of those outside the Church. We hear echoes of the Church's commitments in the work of contemporary social scientists, educational theorists, and teachers who question the commitments underpinning contemporary education. Their critical approach resonates with a Catholic view of the human person.⁹

A leading critic for the last forty years has been Alfie Kohn, whose work has inspired a bevy of educators to reexamine the status quo. Kohn's intervention in education springs from a sharp critique of both clinical and pop versions of B.F. Skinner's behaviorism. Kohn's most influential work, *Punished by Rewards*,¹⁰ challenges our unconscious acceptance of the behaviorist maxim, which claims that people behave and learn best when they are coerced to do so by external rewards and punishments. Kohn questions whether coercion is a suitable method of securing the behaviors we want from others. He concludes that external rewards and punishments are counterproductive.

There is no question that external rewards are effective in coercing behavior. The problem is that while such rewards *coerce* effectively, they simultaneously undermine the student's internal motivation and the student's learning. In other words, external rewards reduce both desire for and contact with truth. As such, they compromise the fascination essential for the adventure of education. Kohn offers five causal explanations for why external rewards are counterproductive. First, rewards punish because they are methods of controlling rather than dialoguing with people. Second, rewards increase competition, which may increase the agency of those who "win" but can also diminish the agency of those who do not. Neither does competition contribute to cooperation. Third, rewards enable us to bypass the difficult work of discovering why a behavior or outcome is or is not occurring. Fourth, rewards discourage recipients from taking risks.¹¹

⁹ In what follows, we are interested in highlighting the convergences between Catholic commitments and the work of scholars who are part of the ungrading movement. The tension between these approaches could be dealt with in a future project.

¹⁰ Alfie Kohn, *Punished by Rewards: The Trouble with Gold Stars, Incentive Plans, A's, Praise, and Other Bribes* (HarperOne, 2018).

¹¹ Kohn, *Punished by Rewards*, 49–67.

And finally, rewards diminish internal, native interest in the behavior or outcome being rewarded.¹²

Kohn's findings here have inspired many to develop alternative pedagogies. Their desire for alternatives is understandable, and no one has articulated that desire better than Susan D. Blum. Her 2016 anthropological study of US college students—*I Love Learning; I Hate School*¹³—and her 2024 book on the US schooling system, *Schoolishness: Alienated Education and the Quest for Authentic, Joyful Learning*,¹⁴ bring Kohn's project into the twenty-first century. Both works articulate the desire of students and teachers for some alternative to behaviorist education and its worrisome connection to neoliberal visions out of sync with the Catholic commitments we espoused above.

Blum's definition of "schoolishness" illuminates the ongoing dependence on a behaviorist model. She says that "schoolishness" is "the characteristic of being made for, by, and about school." She then clarifies: when something is schoolish, it is not real but is instead created "for the self-contained world of closed-off institutions, with their own logic, grammar, rules." This closed-off world is not unlike Skinner's laboratory. Blum even suggests that "schoolishness" is a "form of being that emphasizes packaged 'learning,' teaching, orderly progressions, uniformity, evaluation by others, arbitrary forms, predetermined time, artificial boundaries, postponing rewards and use."¹⁵

Educators inspired by, or sympathetic to, Kohn and Blum's work have developed alternative approaches to teaching that resonate with the Catholic vision sketched above. Throughout the ungrading literature, we encounter witnesses who identify grading as one of the most objectionable parts of the teacher's vocation.¹⁶ Most people do not become teachers so that they can design, proctor, and grade exams. Most people become teachers out of an affection for their discipline and a desire to share that affection with others. Grades, however, get in the way of sharing that affection.¹⁷

¹² Kohn, *Punished by Rewards*, 68–95. Kohn devotes an entire chapter to the fifth reason that rewards fail: the destruction of a person's fascination. He calls this the "most tragic single consequence of applied behaviorism" (68).

¹³ Susan D. Blum, *I Love Learning; I Hate School*: *An Anthropology of College* (Cornell University Press, 2016).

¹⁴ Susan D. Blum, *Schoolishness: Alienated Education and the Quest for Authentic, Joyful Learning* (Cornell University Press, 2024).

¹⁵ Blum, *Schoolishness*, xi.

¹⁶ Cf. Sarah M. Zerwin, *Pointless: An English Teacher's Guide to More Meaningful Grading* (Heinemann, 2020), xiv.

¹⁷ Cf. Morna McDermott, "The Corporate Model of Schooling: How High-Stakes Testing Dehumanizes Education," in *De-Testing and De-Grading Schools: Authentic*

When grades are used to coerce student behavior, the teacher is no longer a free partner with the free student on the free journey toward deeper knowledge and understanding. Instead, the teacher is a gatekeeper who surveils the student's work in order to make decisions about how to rate and rank that work in relation to impersonal standards set by distant administrators and politicians. The link to behaviorism is disturbing. According to Kohn, behaviorism insists that human persons possess no self and no freedom. From this perspective, "self" and "freedom" are words for aspects of life that behaviorism has not explained yet. Once behaviorism succeeds in providing a complete account we will be relieved of the illusions and superstitions that come with such terms.¹⁸ The "adventure of freedom" will be exposed for what it always was: a mythical quest. Ungrading removes one of the central mechanisms by which we convince our teachers and students that they are not free selves called to learn.

Freedom and responsibility are correlative. In an environment where grades are used to coerce, behavior is not motivated internally but elicited externally. In other words, under the regime of grades, student action is not as free as it could be. It is little wonder, then, that we encounter students who do not take responsibility and act for themselves.¹⁹ However, in an environment where teachers and students associate freely on the journey of education, responsibility is essential. Several ungrading practices, described below, demand student responsibility and invite students to see themselves as protagonists in their education. From Vatican II to Francis, the magisterium has called for a pedagogy that lifts students and teachers up to their full stature as knowers and lovers destined for communion with each other and their Creator. The resonance with the Church's pedagogical commitments is clear, though such commitments often remain at the level of theory even in Catholic institutions.²⁰

Alternatives to Accountability and Standardization, eds. Joe Bower and P.L. Thomas (Peter Lang, 2013), 78–95. McDermott pulls no punches and likens contemporary schooling to a CAFO (concentrated animal feeding operation), the opposite of an environment that fosters free association.

¹⁸ Kohn, *Punished by Rewards*, 6–11.

¹⁹ Cf. Joshua R. Eyler, *Failing Our Future: How Grades Harm Students and What We Can Do About It* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2024), 15–20.

²⁰ While we find the *vision* of Catholic education inspiring and sound, history shows that the *practice* of Catholic education has suffered from the same problems as its secular counterparts. Behaviorism is inadvertently ubiquitous in Catholic institutions, and history is replete with examples of Catholic schools and colleges that did not live up to the vision we are espousing. For example, see Maka Black Elk, "Truth, Healing, and Reconciliation: The Challenge for Future Relationship Between Indigenous Peoples and the Catholic Church," in *Journal of Moral Theology* 12 (2): 88–95. doi.org/10.55476/001c.84393.

FROM COERCION TO FASCINATION: EDUCATION AS RISK

Pope Francis

Moving away from coercion to rediscover the connection between education and fascination is especially necessary today. Pope Francis says we live in an “epochal change,”²¹ that is, a moment in which “what is in crisis is a whole way of understanding reality and of understanding ourselves.”²² This crisis causes many to feel like people who have endured a shipwreck that has left us “in difficult times of disenchantment, postmodernity, and changes.”²³ Many of the certainties that once sustained our common life are gone, and even those that remain are radically questioned.²⁴ The result is that many feel like orphans, abandoned to themselves, and unsure about how to go on. Addressing educators during his time as the archbishop of Buenos Aires, Francis reflected on the testimony of a student. This young person’s words should haunt all teachers: “We are children of failure We were born in the desert, among ashes, and in the desert, nothing is sown nor grows.”²⁵

“Something is broken, fragmented,” says Francis. “We live [with] a deficit of memory and tradition.”²⁶ Rather than discovering and relying on the wisdom of our forefathers, we live as if we have to restart from scratch. What a daunting task! Each person needs to rebuild from the beginning, and life appears to be a continuous struggle of self-creation. Such a situation has a profound impact on the health of individuals and societies. “Civilizations grow in the shadow of some basic beliefs about the world, human beings, coexistence, the why and wherefore of founding human events, and so forth,” explains Francis, and these beliefs “constitute a sort of certainty on which the construction of a historical figure rests, and which gives meaning to the existence of communities and people.”²⁷ Since the certainties that formerly animated our society have been worn out, a culture of relativism has taken hold of our imaginations. Francis quotes John Paul II who says that according to some, “the time of certainties is irrevocably past, and the human being must now learn to live in a

²¹ Francis, “Meeting with the Participants in the Fifth Convention of the Italian Church,” November 10, 2015, vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/november/documents/papa-francesco_20151110_firenze-convegno-chiesa-italiana.html.

²² Francis, *In Your Eyes I See My Words: Homilies and Speeches from Buenos Aires, Volume I: 1999–2004* (Fordham University Press, 2019), 46.

²³ Francis, *In Your Eyes I See My Words*, 52.

²⁴ Francis, *In Your Eyes I See My Words*, 47–48.

²⁵ Francis, *In Your Eyes I See My Words*, 79.

²⁶ Francis, *In Your Eyes I See My Words*, 80.

²⁷ Francis, *In Your Eyes I See My Words*, 84.

horizon of total absence of meaning, where everything is provisional and ephemeral” (*Fides et Ratio*, no. 91).²⁸ The rationalistic optimism that viewed history as a triumphant progress has collapsed. The threat we face is precisely the opposite because human beings today experience “rootlessness and helplessness.”²⁹ Relativism has brought us to a dead end: a movement born under the banner of freedom now paralyzes us with fear.

Another more subtle feature marks relativism. According to Francis, relativism deceives us into thinking that there are no absolute values when, in fact, there is an absolute that is affirmed, namely, that the individual is the unique and absolute source of values. “When human beings place themselves at the center, they give absolute priority to immediate convenience and all else becomes relative,” says Francis. The result is that they start seeing “everything as irrelevant unless it serves one’s own immediate interests” (*Laudato Si’*, no. 122). If I am the unique source of all meaning, everything that is not perceived as useful to me is meaningless. This is the origin of what Francis calls the “throwaway culture” (*Evangelii Gaudium*, no. 53). Everything is used as an instrument to satisfy needs and desires. People use things and each other, and when they are done, they discard them. While relativism was born from the desire to be freed from the supposed tyranny of tradition, it now subjects us to other unspoken, and thus more dangerous, tyrannies: the tyranny of our whims, instincts, and the dominant culture that continuously tries to manipulate us. In these circumstances, Christianity cannot rely on cultural assumptions and practices to be handed on to future generations, nor expect that students can somehow be forced into appreciating the truth of the Christian proposal.³⁰

Confronted by these difficult times, Francis encourages Christian educators not to give in to pessimism. Rather, the crisis opens up new possibilities and is an opportunity for conversion. “Our task as educators,” he says, “can no longer be confined to ‘keep doing the same as always’ or even ‘resisting’ an extremely hostile reality.”³¹ Instead of being discouraged and trapped, wasting our energies in laments, the current challenges are a “summons to revive our hope and to make it the source of prophetic visions, transformative actions, and creative forms of charity” (*Amoris Laetitia*, no. 57). Today in particular, the Church must ground her witness in a renewed

²⁸ Francis, *In Your Eyes I See My Words*, 85.

²⁹ Francis, *In Your Eyes I See My Words*, 19.

³⁰ See Alessandro Rovati, “Benedict XVI, Pope Francis, and Living Christianity in a Secular Age,” *Church Life Journal*, August 3, 2023: churchlifejournal.nd.edu/articles/benedict-xvi-pope-francis-and-living-christianity-in-a-secular-age/.

³¹ Francis, *In Your Eyes I See My Words*, 174.

commitment to people's authentic freedom. People must be accompanied in a process of discernment,³² and Christian educators must "equip them with tools to do so well" (*Christus Vivit*, no. 46). Mentors should nurture the seeds of faith "without expecting to immediately see the fruits of the work of the Holy Spirit" (*Christus Vivit*, no. 46). In fact, when a person accompanies another in the journey of faith, she "does not substitute the Lord [and] does not do the work in the place of the person accompanied."³³ Instead, education is a form of accompaniment, whereby a mentor walks alongside others while "encouraging them to interpret what is stirring in their heart, the quintessential place where the Lord speaks."³⁴

Unfortunately, such interior freedom on the part of both teachers and students does not come naturally. Francis reflects on the history of the people of Israel to expand on this point:

They suffered under the tyranny of the Pharaoh, they were slaves and then the Lord set them free. Yet to experience true freedom, not simply freedom from their enemies, they had to cross the desert, to undertake an exhausting journey. Then they began to think: "Weren't we better off before? At least we had a few onions to eat . . ." This is the great temptation: better a few onions than the effort and the risk involved in freedom. This is one of our temptations. Yesterday, speaking to ecumenical representatives, I mentioned Dostoyevsky and his "Grand Inquisitor." Jesus secretly comes back to the earth and the inquisitor reproaches him for having given freedom to men and women.³⁵

Such suspicion of freedom can become part of the Church's life and educational institutions as well. How can Christian teachers avoid such enmity against the adventure of freedom while also providing a formation equal to the epochal challenges we face today?

Luigi Giussani

To answer, we turn to the theology of education of Luigi Giussani, a prolific Italian theologian and educator.³⁶ According to Giussani, an authentic Christian education must propose the Church's tradition—

³² See the cycle of catechesis on discernment Francis preached during his Wednesday General Audiences between August 31, 2022, and January 4, 2023.

³³ Francis, "Spiritual Accompaniment," General Audience, January 4, 2023, [vatican.va/content/francesco/en/audiences/2023/documents/20230104-udienza-generale.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/audiences/2023/documents/20230104-udienza-generale.html).

³⁴ Francis, "Spiritual Accompaniment."

³⁵ Francis, "Address to the Slovakian Bishops, Priests, Religious, and Seminarians," September 13, 2021.

³⁶ For a thorough and extensive intellectual biography of Giussani, see Alberto Savorana, *The Life of Giussani* (McGill-Queen's University Press, 2017).

the truths that the Church has received and professes—in an effective and adequate way.³⁷ To teach people about the Christian tradition is to offer them a working hypothesis, a way to look at and understand reality and everything in it. It is to provide them with an orientation about the ultimate meaning of things, the fulfillment and destiny towards which humans strive.³⁸ In fact, whether they realize it or not, humans always act under the inspiration of a sense of what the goal or meaning of life is, and if the Church does not propose one, people will look for one on their own.³⁹ To say that personal autonomy entails that each individual should be free to craft his or her own path forward without any influence does not lead to authentic freedom. Instead, it obscures how individual instincts, the dominant culture, and the loudest voices shape us. The alternative is not between accepting a working hypothesis and being free. It is between being aware and explicit about which authority a person follows and being at the mercy of hidden authorities.

Every person needs an authority: someone who proposes a hypothesis regarding life's meaning.⁴⁰ At the beginning of life, parents are such an authority.⁴¹ Later, people begin to recognize as authorities those who can help them understand reality and inspire them, fill them with awe, command respect, and make them want to follow them. Adults recognize an authority because they compare themselves with it and discover the help the authority provides for their lives.⁴² When individuals do not recognize the role authorities play in their lives, it

³⁷ The following paragraphs follow arguments Giussani developed in *Il Rischio Educativo* (Rizzoli, 2014). We used the original Italian and translated it. For an English translation, see *The Risk of Education* (McGill-Queen's University Press, 2019). In our footnotes, we list the Italian pagination first and the English pagination in parentheses. Similar reflections are present throughout Giussani's extensive body of work, which comprises more than sixty volumes and numerous essays and reflections. See the official archive of Giussani's work at scritti.luigigiussani.org/.

³⁸ Giussani does not think that all realms of knowledge can be absorbed or reduced to the Christian tradition and what theology teaches and reflects on. As the recent magisterium has taught, there is a genuine autonomy in the different disciplines. Yet, everything ultimately depends upon God, which means that faith plays a special role in any human endeavor by giving a horizon of meaning and purpose to everything human beings do. (See *Gaudium et Spes*, nos. 36, 59; John Paul II, *Ex Corde Ecclesiae*, no. 29; John Paul II, *Fides et Ratio*, nos. 13, 15–16, 45, 48; Benedict XVI, "The Reasonableness of Faith in God," General Audience, November 21, 2012, vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/audiences/2012/documents/hf_ben-xvi_aud_20121121.html; Francis, *Veritatis Gaudium*, Apostolic Constitution, Foreword, vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_constitutions/documents/papa-francesco_costituzione-ap_20171208_veritatis-gaudium.html.)

³⁹ Giussani, *Il Rischio Educativo*, 16 (xxviii).

⁴⁰ Giussani, *Il Rischio Educativo*, 83 (42).

⁴¹ Giussani, *Il Rischio Educativo*, 85 (43–44).

⁴² Giussani, *Il Rischio Educativo*, 83 (42).

is not because individuals are completely autonomous. Rather, they are blind to the forces that shape them.

This blindness, Giussani claims, is a recipe for alienation, ideology, or skepticism.⁴³ When Christians do not propose Christ as the keystone of reality, they do not foster authentic autonomy in those they educate.⁴⁴ Instead, they leave people—especially youth—at the mercy of a million contradictory voices, which often cause uncertainty and fear.⁴⁵ In this situation, those who hold on to their religious and moral ideas are tempted to shield themselves and become completely closed off to the environment in which they live, while others turn their back on the religious teachings they received without ever thinking about them or taking them seriously. We seem to be trapped in a situation where anti-religious bias, one-sided ways of affirming religion, or complete indifference appear as the only viable choices.⁴⁶

In contrast to the dominant view and its purported neutrality, to educate, Giussani argues, is to introduce the person to all reality and its meaning.⁴⁷ Such insistence on the need for a clear proposal of meaning does not entail being closed to other perspectives; quite the opposite. For Giussani, no one can be open to other cultures and proposals without starting from a certainty.⁴⁸ Without such certainty, the ability to discover and create new things and relationships dries up.⁴⁹ Instead, starting from the certainty of faith, Christianity looks at what is true in everything it meets and exalts it. Thus, Christians find many companions on the journey towards truth. Faith opens up the horizon of the person and embraces reality.⁵⁰

It is not enough, however, to introduce people to such a hypothesis regarding life's ultimate meaning. Instead, an authentic education must empower them to become certain about the truths it proposes,⁵¹ which means that it cannot consist of blind imposition, but must encourage a journey toward personal certainty.⁵² Accordingly, to present the truths affirmed by the Church in an authentic way is to show how they are alive in the present. Christianity can speak to the

⁴³ Giussani, *Il Rischio Educativo*, 71–72 (31–32).

⁴⁴ Giussani, *Il Rischio Educativo*, 78 (37).

⁴⁵ Giussani, *Il Rischio Educativo*, 75 (34–35). Giussani thinks that facing alternative visions and objections is necessary for education. Such an encounter needs to be gradual and well timed, though, because “the result of a premature encounter with contrasting voices regarding the interpretation of life’s fundamental issues leaves young people disoriented” (78 [37]).

⁴⁶ Giussani, *Il Rischio Educativo*, 80 (39).

⁴⁷ Giussani, *Il Rischio Educativo*, 65 (25).

⁴⁸ Giussani, *Il Rischio Educativo*, 80 (39).

⁴⁹ Giussani, *Il Rischio Educativo*, 83 (42).

⁵⁰ Giussani, *Il Rischio Educativo*, 37 (xlvii).

⁵¹ Giussani, *Il Rischio Educativo*, 67 (27).

⁵² Giussani, *Il Rischio Educativo*, 70 (30).

human desire for happiness because it corresponds to the heart's longing. Giussani, following the language of the Bible, often refers to the heart as the core of the person (see *Catechism*, nos. 27–30). Despite all the different ways in which it expresses itself across time and cultures, and all the different ways in which each individual embodies it and lives it out, “the human heart is one” and is always the same.⁵³ Accordingly, one of the fundamental tasks of a Christian education is to help people become “aware of the needs that make up the heart and the person.”⁵⁴ Education must help us recover and live the original attitude that God created in us: the openness to and desire for the eternal that can serve as a compass to discover how the encounter with Christ is the fulfillment of our desire for complete happiness.⁵⁵ To this end, Giussani would tell his students that his role was to “teach you a true method to judge the things I will tell you. And what I will tell you is an experience born out of a long history: two thousand years.”⁵⁶

If no one lives Christian truths in a way that makes them reasonable and desirable—if no one is a credible witness—it is impossible to propose them and to become certain of them. Ultimately, becoming convinced of the Christian truths means investigating them and making them one's own. It is not enough to say, “They are true because my teacher, my priest, or my mom told me so.” People must discover the truths of Christianity for themselves. It is not a matter of doubting them but of discovering them.⁵⁷ And how do people discover the truth of what the Christian tradition proposes? By comparing it to the heart, that is, with their authentic human nature—the desire for truth, goodness, and beauty that God has placed at the core of who we are. We become certain of the truths the Christian tradition offers us as a working hypothesis by discovering whether they correspond to our authentic yearning for fulfillment.⁵⁸

No one can engage in such discernment and discovery alone. We must be accompanied by people who help us be true to our authentic humanity and rescue us from all possible misunderstandings. In fact, it is possible to engage in this process of discernment in inauthentic ways. Some people may stop at their immediate reactions, others may start from a skeptical position that is not open to discovering the truth, and others might be entirely determined by the dominant culture and

⁵³ Giussani, *Il Rischio Educativo*, 15 (xxvii).

⁵⁴ Giussani, *Il Rischio Educativo*, 29 (xl).

⁵⁵ Giussani, *Il Rischio Educativo*, 15–16 (xxvii–xxviii).

⁵⁶ Giussani, *Il Rischio Educativo*, 20 (xxxi).

⁵⁷ Giussani, *Il Rischio Educativo*, 17 (xxix).

⁵⁸ Giussani, *Il Rischio Educativo*, 18 (xxix–xxx).

blinded by it.⁵⁹ Still, the time comes when each one of us must look straight at the truths proposed by the Church to compare them with the heart.⁶⁰

Giussani argues that, at times, the Church has not taken seriously enough the need for people to investigate and discover the truth of the Christian tradition. The Church has feared it, which is reflected in the pedagogical practices that often characterize our institutions. Proposing the Christian tradition, living its truths in the present, and discovering their authenticity by comparing them with our humanity are all necessary for a genuine Christian education because its goal is to show faith's pertinence, relevance, and fittingness to life's needs.⁶¹ Giussani reflects on his experience as an educator thus: "I was profoundly convinced that if faith could not be found, discovered in, and confirmed by present experience—if faith could not answer to the demands of the present—then faith could not resist in a world where everything, everything, went and still goes against it."⁶²

To show faith's connection with life's needs is to show the rationality of faith, that is, to show that "faith answers to the fundamental and original needs of the heart of each human being."⁶³ So, "Faith answers the original needs of the human heart, which are the same in everyone: the need for truth, for beauty, for justice, for love, for the complete realization of the self," that is, the need for happiness and eternity.⁶⁴ According to this perspective, to say that something is rational is to say that it answers the fundamental needs of the human heart. And these are the criteria that all people, whether they are aware of it or not, whether they use them well or not, use to judge everything and decide how to act. Thus, to give reasons for our faith means to show and describe "the effects of Christ's presence," that is, the conversion and newness of life that faith proposes and makes possible.⁶⁵ "It is a crime," Giussani writes, "to understand, propose, and live faith . . . as a premise that has nothing to do with life" because what has no impact on the present does not exist.⁶⁶ We have separated faith from the present, the heavens from the earth, in such a way that our aspiration for the eternal has become abstract and

⁵⁹ Giussani, *Il Rischio Educativo*, 20 (xxx).

⁶⁰ Giussani, *Il Rischio Educativo*, 18 (xxx).

⁶¹ Giussani, *Il Rischio Educativo*, 19 (xxxi).

⁶² Giussani, *Il Rischio Educativo*, 20 (xxxii).

⁶³ Giussani, *Il Rischio Educativo*, 21 (xxxii). The Bible does not use the word "rationality" to identify the core of who we are as human beings but prefers the word "heart."

⁶⁴ Giussani, *Il Rischio Educativo*, 21 (xxxii).

⁶⁵ Giussani, *Il Rischio Educativo*, 21 (xxxiii).

⁶⁶ Giussani, *Il Rischio Educativo*, 22 (xxxiii).

muted, and our daily existence has become completely prey to pride, self-assertion, and violence.⁶⁷

All of this is to say that to propose with clarity the meaning of things and give witness to the truths of the Christian tradition in a convincing way is not enough to educate in an authentic way. Instead, true education insists on the personal responsibility that students have to commit themselves to such a journey of discernment and discovery.⁶⁸ Becoming convinced of the truth of Christianity demands an “existential commitment.”⁶⁹ What we announce needs to become the inspiration for a way of life. The truth of Christianity needs to become “flesh and blood.”⁷⁰ It is not enough to know it. We must come to love it. And to love it, we need to open ourselves to it with patience and spend time with it.⁷¹ “Conviction emerges from the discovery that the intellect proposes as a unitary hypothesis, but it is love that verifies it in a commitment to existence.”⁷² To help people become convinced of the Christian proposal’s truth, “education must, on the one hand, propose with clarity and commitment a unified meaning for things and, on the other hand, push young people to compare every encounter with that criterion [the heart], that is, to commit themselves to a personal experience and an existential verification.”⁷³

With Giussani, we recognize that the classroom cannot be the sole or even primary way in which people encounter and become convinced of the truth of the Christian faith. The event that faith announces needs to be lived. It cannot simply be studied. Faith has to do with God’s announcement that “I am with you always” (Matthew 28:20) and thus needs to be a lived experience of Christ’s presence. Accordingly, we need to “abandon ourselves to this presence and live our life within this presence, under the influence of this presence, being judged by this presence, being enlightened by this presence, being sustained by this presence.”⁷⁴ It is impossible to encounter Christ without spending time in the place where the truths of Christianity are lived, namely, the Church and her whole life—prayer,

⁶⁷ Giussani, *Il Rischio Educativo*, 22 (xxxiii). Such a separation runs against the logic of the Incarnation. The Christian announcement is that the Word became flesh. Accordingly, the goal of the entire life of a Christian is to manifest the glory of Christ. And Christ was true God and true man, which means that, while having to do with the eternal, his glory is also a glory that has to do with history. Christians must become servants of Christ’s earthly glory so that Christ may be revealed more and more on earth.

⁶⁸ Giussani, *Il Rischio Educativo*, 88 (46–47).

⁶⁹ Giussani, *Il Rischio Educativo*, 89 (47).

⁷⁰ Giussani, *Il Rischio Educativo*, 90 (48).

⁷¹ Giussani, *Il Rischio Educativo*, 90 (48).

⁷² Giussani, *Il Rischio Educativo*, 92 (50).

⁷³ Giussani, *Il Rischio Educativo*, 92 (50).

⁷⁴ Giussani, *Il Rischio Educativo*, 36 (xlv).

Scripture, liturgy, service, community, and more.⁷⁵ Still, our vocation as theologians means that the Lord is calling us to give witness to him in our work as teachers and that, accordingly, how we propose the faith must be informed by a correct understanding of how our students live and learn.

Thus, we are convinced that education needs to let the person take more and more responsibility for her choice responding to the ideals it proposes. The goal is to lead the person into a personal encounter with all reality, and such a personal encounter happens only when educators take a risk on the freedom, heart, and intellect of those they teach. Taking such a risk is the only way for people to mature. Only when the person experiences for herself the truth of the tradition she has received can she become truly free.⁷⁶

According to Giussani, the Christian experience consists of three interrelated elements. First, the encounter with a fact that is outside the person. Second, the grace of faith, that is, the grace of perceiving the full meaning of the human encounter the person has made—such a need for grace was true for the disciples who encountered the man Jesus, just as it is true for those who, today, encounter him through the human reality of his Body, the Church. Third, the awareness of the correspondence between the fact that the person has encountered—her encounter with the Lord—and the person's longing for happiness, her thirst for a total meaning for her existence, and the desire for her realization and destiny. Because of this threefold nature, the Christian event exalts our humanity—our reason and our freedom.⁷⁷ None of the above is possible, though, without humility and simplicity, the poverty in spirit and cleanness of heart Jesus teaches are necessary to embark on the journey of discipleship (cf. Matthew 5:3–12). Giussani identifies such a simplicity and purity of heart in the “acceptance of one's fundamental dependence, of the fact that, by nature, we are made,” that is, we are creatures.⁷⁸ Relatedly, the Christian experience requires a wide-open heart willing to be surprised by the encounter with the truth. Unfortunately, the common mentality teaches people to follow Christianity only inasmuch as it confirms and supports their pre-established interests and convictions without letting it change them profoundly. In fact, when the Christian event does not match their predetermined concerns, people usually begin to shield themselves with all their objections and doubts. Yet, these objections and doubts are often a way to hide a “lack of openness and genuine

⁷⁵ Giussani, *Il Rischio Educativo*, 90 (48).

⁷⁶ Giussani, *Il Rischio Educativo*, 104 (62).

⁷⁷ Giussani, *Il Rischio Educativo*, 130–131 (87–88).

⁷⁸ Giussani, *Il Rischio Educativo*, 131–132 (88).

love for what is true and good.”⁷⁹ Accordingly, acknowledging and recognizing the surprising correspondence between the Word made flesh and our human nature cannot happen without humility and openness. It is in accepting with sincerity the signs the Lord puts in front of us and our complete dependence upon God that the whole drama of human freedom unfolds.⁸⁰

For Giussani, “reality is a sign.”⁸¹ The Lord always uses what happens to us as a way to call us to himself, and faith—the recognition of the origin of what we are given—is the exaltation of the value of reality as a sign. In fact, reason is driven by the desire to understand the meaning of what we encounter, that is, to understand reality in all its depth, judging what happens, naming what it is and where it comes from, and becoming aware of the way it interacts with the heart’s fundamental needs. From this point of view, faith is the apex of reason because “faith is the path towards what reason aspires to more than anything else. And what does reason look for, ultimately, if not the meaning of life, the meaning of existence, and the meaning of everything?”⁸² Well, the fundamental Christian announcement is that “two thousand years ago, the meaning of everything that exists has come among us to say: ‘I am the way and the truth and the life’ (John 14:6).”⁸³

In light of all the above, Giussani argues that education must love freedom to the point of betting everything on it. Saint Paul invited all Christians to live “the truth in love” (Ephesians 4:15), that is, to come to embrace the Christian event with one’s whole self—with our whole heart, whole being, and whole strength (cf. Deuteronomy 6:5). The encounter with Christ touches the entirety of the person—intellect and will, reason and affection—so that the relationship born from it may become “the law of our daily activity.”⁸⁴ In time, the hearts of Christians should burn with the desire to let Christ become the totality of existence, to allow the love for him to become the person’s single desire. In fact, Giussani describes the life of a Christian by quoting from Romano Guardini: “In the experience of a great love everything becomes an event,”⁸⁵ that is, in light of Christ and the person’s love for him, everything becomes pregnant with meaning and filled with hope.⁸⁶ Giussani refers to Saint Paul’s testimony: “The life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave

⁷⁹ Giussani, *Il Rischio Educativo*, 90 (48–49).

⁸⁰ Giussani, *Il Rischio Educativo*, 131–132 (88).

⁸¹ Giussani, *Il Rischio Educativo*, 29 (xl).

⁸² Giussani, *Il Rischio Educativo*, 34 (xliv).

⁸³ Giussani, *Il Rischio Educativo*, 35 (xlv).

⁸⁴ Giussani, *Il Rischio Educativo*, 24 (xxxv).

⁸⁵ Romano Guardini, *L'Essenza del Cristianesimo* (Morcelliana, 1981), 12.

⁸⁶ Giussani, *Il Rischio Educativo*, 24 (xxxv).

himself for me” (Galatians 2:20). Faith is ultimately inconceivable without the vibration of such an experience of love for Christ in the present.⁸⁷

The Christian educator cannot force such a life-transforming event to happen in the lives of the people she accompanies. Instead, all Christian educational proposals are rooted in charity, that is, a love for the other and her destiny rooted in one’s relationship with God.⁸⁸ Furthermore, Christian educators must be humble. Their attempts are sustained by the hope that people might experience a grace-filled encounter with something beyond the educator’s power and strength.⁸⁹ In summary, education requires respect, a sense of fear and trembling for the mystery that dwells in the other person. Such a sense of reverence is essential because another person’s life and destiny are sacred and beyond one’s capacity to possess or fulfill.⁹⁰ Educators accompany people to a reality that is greater than themselves. They must love the persons entrusted to them and their freedom, trusting that the “unpredictable ways that human freedom opens in the dialogue”⁹¹ with reality and the mystery of God might lead people to their fulfillment and destiny. As Giussani explains, “The educational method that is more capable of pursuing the good is not based upon fleeing reality to affirm an idea of the good that is separate from it. It is instead a method . . . that engages the world, that is, the entire reality. We could call it a risky encounter or, better, a challenging encounter—an encounter that requires our total commitment.”⁹²

To summarize Giussani’s pedagogical proposal, we can say that, first, “To propose with precision a hypothesis regarding reality’s total meaning (that is, to offer a tradition) is the only way for a young person to achieve certainty.”⁹³ Second, “The presence of a clear and real authority which embodies and gives space to the hypothesis for meaning is what makes education coherent.”⁹⁴ Third, “To encourage the young person to commit herself to a personal verification of the hypothesis in all her experience is what allows a real conviction.”⁹⁵

⁸⁷ Giussani, *Il Rischio Educativo*, 25 (xxxv).

⁸⁸ Giussani, *Il Rischio Educativo*, 124 (81).

⁸⁹ Giussani, *Il Rischio Educativo*, 105–106 (63).

⁹⁰ Luigi Giussani, *Il Rischio Educativo: Come Creazione di Personalità e di Storia* (Società Editrice Internazionale, 1995), 142. We are referring to this other, earlier edition of *Il Rischio Educativo* because this section was omitted in the later one we used throughout. This earlier edition was published in English as *The Risk of Education* (The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2001), 125.

⁹¹ Giussani, *Il Rischio Educativo*, 105 (63).

⁹² Giussani, *Il Rischio Educativo*, 106 (63–64).

⁹³ Giussani, *Il Rischio Educativo*, 108 (65).

⁹⁴ Giussani, *Il Rischio Educativo*, 108 (65).

⁹⁵ Giussani, *Il Rischio Educativo*, 108 (65).

Fourth, “To accept an increasing but well-balanced risk of the autonomous comparison between the hypothesis and reality in the adolescent’s conscience is what allows for her freedom to mature.”⁹⁶ In the end, Christianity proclaims that the supreme law of all human relationships is charity—gratuitous and complete love for the person and thus love for her freedom.⁹⁷

We contend that the behaviorist pedagogy that grips our imagination is unsuited to providing such a thick formation in which the freedom of the person is fully engaged and an authentic discovery of the truth of Christianity is made possible. What, then, is the way forward?

UNGRADING

So far, we have highlighted the tensions between the Church’s pedagogical commitments and the behaviorism that imbues so much of our current education system. To do so, we have followed the critique of contemporary pedagogists and social theorists who highlight the detrimental effects of current educational practices on the experiences of both students and teachers. Furthermore, we have offered a theological account of education that shifts the focus away from coercion and performance to the centrality of fascination and freedom, risk and responsibility. What pedagogical strategies can help us embody the theological commitments we espoused? How do we move away from the behaviorist practices currently gripping our imagination?

Creative pedagogical responses to the behaviorism problem abound. Often, the responses come from lonely educators who do their best within a stifling system. They work for and with students to increase the kind of student agency we think is necessary for education generally and Christian education specifically. Though Kohn’s critique of external rewards in education was originally published in 1993, contemporary educators continue to experiment in light of his work.

Consider, for example, the 2020 collection of practitioners’ essays edited by Blum, entitled *Ungrading: Why Rating Students Undermines Learning (And What to Do Instead)*.⁹⁸ The contributions span across disciplines and grade levels. In 2024, *The Chronicle of Higher Education* published a collection of materials devoted to grading and

⁹⁶ Giussani, *Il Rischio Educativo*, 108 (65).

⁹⁷ Giussani, *Il Rischio Educativo*, 124 (81).

⁹⁸ See note 4. The foreword to the book is written by Kohn.

assessment.⁹⁹ A substantial portion of the collection is dedicated to ungrading. All of these contemporary reflections on ungrading are concerned with our question: how to make students protagonists by moving from coercion toward fascination. As we have encountered various means of accomplishing this end, themes have emerged. First, critics note that there is no consistent meaning given to grades. Their historical and contemporary usage may not be completely arbitrary, but neither is it systematic and precise.¹⁰⁰ Second, given this imprecision, it is difficult to say what grades mean. Sometimes, an A means a student excelled beyond what was expected. Sometimes, it means that a student did what was expected. And sometimes, it means that a student excelled beyond what everyone else did. Third, critics of grading lament the lack of meaningful communication between teachers and students. While educators generally strive to invest in the relationship with their students by giving feedback, most students do not pay attention to such comments. Behaviorism has conditioned them to stop thinking about an assignment as soon as they see a grade, something that makes any genuine dialogue and path of improvement almost impossible. Working against this combination of often-ambiguous grades and a lack of meaningful dialogue and relation is essential to forming the sort of protagonists we are thinking about here.

This is especially essential to theological education. If we hope for our students to encounter the Christian proposal and engage with it closely, we cannot impose it via low grades. We must invite them on a journey of learning, where naming what they do not know via feedback and conversation is not a way to justify a low grade but an invitation to enter into the subject more deeply. Students need accompaniment, and theology teachers should do everything they can to eliminate the obstacles between them and their students. It is difficult to be a witness—to both the integrity of our discipline and to the rational, life-giving content of our faith—if we are incapable of extended, meaningful dialogue with students, precisely when it is time to talk about their questions, concerns, misunderstandings, and errors.

The critique of coercive methods like grades generates many constructive proposals. If it is true that the meaning of grades is imprecise and that the use of grades shuts down dialogue between

⁹⁹ Maura Mahoney, ed., *Grading and Assessment: New Practices, New Perspectives* (Chronicle of Higher Education, 2024).

¹⁰⁰ Susan D. Blum, “Why Ungrade? Why Grade?” in Blum, *Ungrading*, 1–22; Linda B. Nilson, *Specifications Grading: Restoring Rigor, Motivating Students, and Saving Faculty Time* (Routledge, 2014), 1–9; Eyler, *Failing Our Future*, 1–9; Susan M. Brookhart and Thomas R. Guskey, “Reliability in Grading and Grading Scales,” in *What We Know About Grading: What Works, What Doesn't, What's Next*, ed. Thomas R. Guskey and Susan M. Brookhart (ASCD, 2019), 13–31.

teachers and students, then finding alternative modes of grading provides us with an opportunity to fill our interactions with our students with rich content. Rather than complaining about students' lack of engagement and interest, we can begin treating our students as the protagonists they are created to be, replete with a reason that seeks the meaning of things, a freedom that longs to be engaged, and a natural desire for transcendence that can be hidden but not quenched.

As a result of our encounter with ungrading practices, we have adopted a system wherein, at the beginning of each semester, the students sign an agreement expressing the grade they want to achieve in our courses. This is often referred to as "contract grading,"¹⁰¹ though we often describe it as a feedback-based assessment method with students, colleagues, and administrators. We still use our expertise to determine what counts as excellence in our classes and describe it through rubrics and study guides, but we let students decide the level of mastery they want to achieve and then commit to accompanying them to their desired learning outcome, trying to involve them as much as possible in their learning journey through ongoing self-assessment exercises.

As a result, we move past the adversarial relationship that traditional grades create and form a partnership with our students that involves them in deciding what they want to achieve in the course. During the semester, students demonstrate whether their learning matches their desired outcome by choosing and submitting different forms of work that we can assess. If the students' work does not reach their desired level of learning, we give them extensive feedback, help them improve their understanding, and allow them to submit new work to exhibit their knowledge again. We are not relinquishing our role as teachers who need to tell their students whether they have learned something or not, but we take a bespoke approach with each one of them that creates trust and ongoing cooperation.

Instead of assigning ambiguous grades and writing defensive comments, we lead students whose work needs improvement into a cycle of revisions in which meaningful feedback and close collaboration are essential to the students' achievement. Students can continue working and resubmitting their assignments until we establish that they demonstrate the kind of learning they want to achieve in the class. Alternatively, the students may decide that they are satisfied with the learning they have gained, even if it does not match the goal they set for themselves at the beginning. In some cases,

¹⁰¹ Cf. Blum, *Schoolishness*, 110–112, 160–161; Eyler, *Failing Our Future*, 115–118; Asao B. Inoue, *Labor-Based Grading Contracts: Building Equity and Inclusion in the Compassionate Writing Classroom* (The WAC Clearinghouse/University Press of Colorado, 2022), 125–164.

we realize that the learning outcome students selected in the agreement is, for whatever reason, out of reach and thus work with each individual to find a suitable path.

This feedback-based assessment method has several strengths but also poses some challenges. Let us start by highlighting the challenges. First, it is time-consuming. Grade agreements put pressure on professors to attend to students' individual progress and needs and do not allow them to treat the people in their courses indiscriminately through anonymized grading via rubrics or, heaven forbid, multiple-choice tests. This latter feature can make the method infeasible in large classes, while we work at institutions where courses are mostly capped at twenty-five students. As for students, this feedback-based approach means their assignments are not usually completed after the first submission. Instead, further revisions and research are frequently needed, thus requiring more work than with traditional modes of grading. A second possible challenge of our approach is that it can create uncomfortable complications for students who say they want to work at an A level but who—for whatever reason—do not seem capable of working at that level, no matter how many chances they get. Third, it places a special responsibility on students to work independently from hard-set deadlines enforced by penalizing mechanisms. We give recommended deadlines to help students space out their work, but some end up struggling with procrastination and time management. Fourth, our method can be challenging to use in fast-paced, online courses where it is more difficult to have the time and space to create a very personal rapport with each student. Finally, the method relies on a level of dialogue and personal initiative that might pose unique challenges to some neurodivergent students and students less prepared for college, though it also provides a high level of flexibility that allows the formation of personalized learning plans for students with academic accommodations.¹⁰²

However, most of these challenges are the shadow side of this method's strengths. In fact, we take some of the challenges as a sign of our approach's worth. For example, is it truly bad to spend more time and energy engaging in theological work together? Is it so negative for a student to be given a chance to actually learn the subject matter if she is not able to do so on her first try?¹⁰³ Not at all. The

¹⁰² On this topic, see Kelly A. Hogan and Viji Sathy, *Inclusive Teaching: Strategies for Promoting Equity in the College Classroom* (West Virginia University Press, 2022), and Alex Shevrin Venet, *Equity-Centered Trauma-Informed Education* (Routledge, 2023).

¹⁰³ Alessandro adopted this approach to grading while teaching students in formation to be ordained as permanent deacons. In that context, he decided that it was important to devise a method that would ensure that students become familiar with what the

feedback method we use encourages deeper learning, facilitates meaningful interaction between students and their professor, and puts agency back where it belongs, namely, into the student's hands. Instead of wondering whether they can measure up to their professor's mysterious expectations, the students begin the semester knowing their professor is committed to their success. As a result, the students are invited to approach their education as *their* education rather than as a contest or an ordeal imposed on them by an external, punitive force. They are not anonymous members of a group. They are protagonists in a journey of learning in which professors play the role of stewards and companions rather than enforcers and guards.

Furthermore, there is a refreshing honesty about this method. Professors can be forthcoming about students' work in a way that does not threaten or discourage them. It's one thing to say, "This is not an A." It is another thing to say, "Given your desired learning outcome, let us try again!" Similarly, students are invited to be honest about their work. If they are not working at an A level but have opportunities and resources to help them do so, they have to be candid about what is happening. In our experience, many of our students do not work at an A level because they are not used to the high-level work and metacognition necessary to achieve that level of mastery. It is not that they are unable to develop these capacities but that, in their education, they have seldom been asked to actualize them, being limited to endless test-taking exercises instead. Some of our students take a while to adjust to this new level of responsibility, but our approach allows them to grow into the learners they wish to become, thanks to the ongoing conversations and feedback that it entails. Finally, the method encourages students who are in our classes just because they are part of their general education requirements and lack motivation to take ownership of their education in ways that often energize them.

Overall, we find that the pedagogical and assessment method we are experimenting with is far more conducive to creating the community of learners who pursue the truth in love that the Church calls for than traditional modes of grading. Furthermore, in the context of theological education, we consider the invitation to students to become protagonists in their learning that ungrading makes possible to be better suited to the existential gravity of what we are studying together. By introducing them to the Christian event and the tradition it has generated, we are making our students encounter a proposal that implicates them from day one of the course. For this reason, we also want to equip them with a method for interrogating the Christian claims. We want our courses to become an occasion to partner with

Church teaches rather than simply penalize them by assigning them a 66/100 score if they only remember two out of the three persons of the Trinity.

our students and help them engage in the synthetic and evaluative work that each person is summoned to by the encounter with a hypothesis on the ultimate meaning of life. We do not want to proselytize or coerce them into learning about the Christian faith. We prefer to take a risk on the encounter between their freedom and the fascination of truth instead. **M**

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