

From the desk of...

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Dear Trinity Family,

“HUMANITIES AT TRINITY”

Well – we’re nearing the end of the fall season at TCA, the very first Fall for our Rhetoric School students! It’s been a great few months for all of us and I’d love to share a little of what we’ve been doing.

Ninth grade Humanities at Trinity is comprised of three courses: Literature, History, and Bible. These three are tightly integrated and deeply interwoven. Students will often be asked a question in History that could just as well be asked in Literature or Bible – and it works this way for all three classes. The historical period we’re studying matches with the Biblical texts we’re reading as well as the literary texts we’re working through. The goal is to give the students a sense of the flow of human experience in history, both in human culture and God’s workings. This is precisely the classical model that was followed in the Christian Humanist schools and universities during the Renaissance and Reformation of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Except I don’t wear my black velvet academic robes or speak Latin the whole time. (Just part of the time!)

In Bible we’ve been reading through the book of Luke, which will be followed by Acts in the Spring. The students are making a careful study of the life of Christ, considering theological questions of all kinds, studying the geography and history of Israel, and working through personal application of scripture. We’re paying close attention to both the literary and historical nature of Luke/Acts, and are viewing these texts in a theological framework. I’m giving them a “virtual tour” of Israel using Google Earth and a special High-Res CD program combined with my collection of 800 photos I took during my visit there in 2003.

The Literature course has been great fun for me! The first three weeks were spent reading through Mary Shelley’s novel “Frankenstein.” We dealt with a lot of really tough philosophical issues, mostly regarding bioethics. This is a very challenging novel, and it really stretched our students, I think. I am deliberately sprinkling several NON-Graeco-Roman literary works throughout the year in order to both provide variety and also show that human concerns remain largely the same across wide gaps of time and varied cultures.

After “Frankenstein,” we started working through Virgil’s massive classical epic, the “Aeneid” – we are presently in Book 8, about three-quarters of the way through. We are reading through the entire epic aloud, in class together. This vastly increases students’ comprehension compared to reading it alone as homework. And the students don’t mind having less homework, either! So we sit in a big square in the Humanities classroom and take turns reading and talking about the characters, the plot events, and the philosophical and theological issues running through the tale. We’ve considered questions such as “Is love a thought, a feeling, or an action?” and “If Fate can change – is it Fate?” and “What does it mean that pagans often really do understand ‘truths’ apart from knowing the Bible?” and so on and so forth. The kids have been really engaging with this very long, very tough text. Sometimes we take a little break from Virgil, while staying “Roman”; we’ve read selections from Ovid’s “Metamorphoses” and from Seneca’s “De Ira” (‘On Anger’). One day we slowly worked through -- skipping History class and taking two whole periods -- Seneca’s Stoic philosophical explanation of the origin and nature of anger, and compared it with scripture, and considered issues like self-control, human nature, violence, suicide, and hope.

In History we started with a close study of Mediterranean geography, and an even more detailed examination of the Italian peninsula and how geography strongly controls historical processes. We then began looking at various Roman myths about the founding of Rome, and moved into the actually verifiable historical facts

themselves. We have now nearly completed the history of the Roman Republic and are right at the point of the collapse of the system and its replacement with the Roman Empire. We've gone into great detail about Roman customs, religious beliefs, ethics, the family, mythology, and theories of government. We've looked at a number of primary sources, including the Twelve Tables of Roman Law, records of family life, and speeches by Cicero. We also took several days and watched the great film "Ben Hur" and the students wrote excellent response essays! They were able to recognize the various elements of biblical Christianity, Roman Stoic philosophy, and historical verities such as the Roman conception of adoption, the awesome nature of naval battles (and chariot races!), the power of "the Divine Augustus," and even what "SPQR" means on soldiers' banners!

One new thing we are working on in 9th grade Humanities courses are our "Commonplace Books," originally known in classical times as a "locus communis." This is a large, blank journal, divided into topic sections (such as literature, Bible & theology, history, art, politics, proverbs, etc.), where favorite quotations are entered during reading. This will take place both during class time and while reading homework – as well as pleasure-reading and Bible study. Over time this collection will grow to be a valuable resource for writing and for public speaking, and will be an anchor and a major tool for use in the Rhetoric courses I will be teaching starting with next year's tenth graders. Students are choosing their own volumes and personalizing them by designing their own insignias, and you will soon see them filling up with the gleanings from their studies. By the time these students graduate, they will have a very personal collection of favorite passages, quotes, proverbs, wise sayings, and examples of literary culture. If they write down just one quote per school day they will have collected *over a thousand* by the time they graduate! Imagine having such a personalized treasure trove of wisdom at your fingertips!

In addition to chairing Humanities at TCA, I am of course teaching several courses at Master's – including one on hermeneutics and another on Shakespeare. As usual, I have also been very busy with a number of speaking engagements. Recent events have included speaking on the Occult at Calvary Chapel Chino Valley, and a film screening of "Amadeus" followed by a lecture on "God, Genius, and Mediocrity" on campus at The Master's College. I was asked to speak on Renaissance Christian Humanism and Classical Schooling at the Association of Christian Schools International annual convention this month but was far too busy.

My current research program is focusing on Reformation theology, particularly regarding John Calvin in the sixteenth century and John Milton in the seventeenth. I have been spending many, many hours doing archival work in rare book and manuscript collections, reading through original works in French and Latin as well as English, studying the development of Calvinist theology in Europe and especially England between the 1530s and the 1660s. It is indescribably fascinating to hold history, literally, in your hands, in the form of ancient books.

Two more exciting and recent developments include receiving a contract from Crossway to publish my book on Film, Philosophy and Theology (it will be out late next Fall), and a request to speak at the first ever academic conference on the superstar pop band U2, to be held in NYC next May. Talk about Mysterious Ways!

If you're considering Trinity for your student, or already have one or more students in the Grammar or Logic schools, and would like to talk with me about any aspect of the Rhetoric School Humanities program, please feel free to contact me through the TCA office. I look forward to hearing from you!

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