

Rhetorical Training at Trinitas Christian School

by Joshua Butcher, Trinitas Christian School

The good man is skilled in speaking. The simplicity of Quintilian's expression of the end of rhetorical education contrasts with the magnitude of his undertaking to develop its scope and sequence in twelve volumes. Beginning with the child in infancy, he progresses through the various stages of development as well as the contents and methods necessary for the cultivation of the orator. At Trinitas Christian School in Pensacola, Florida, we attempt to wed Quintilian's ideal with the Christian and classical method and content that make up the academic culture of our school. What follows is an outline of our way of exercising qualities we desire, and exorcising errors we don't, in students from our earliest ages to our eldest.

Grammar Stage and Beyond

Training orators at Trinitas begins in the K4, where the main points of emphasis are the beginnings of delivery and the retention of a broad variety of facts. Each month, every student in the school memorizes a substantial passage of Scripture, which they recite before their class at the end of the month. We practice during our morning meetings as well as throughout the day, and teachers attend to students' posture, pronunciation, poise, volume, tone, eye contact, and other delivery elements. The same approach is taken with our Evening of Theatre & Recitation in the second quarter, where all students perform before their parents, friends, and larger community memorized selections

of narrative, poetry, speech, or song. As the children mature, the expectations grow as well, as we seek to attend to nuances of inflection, pauses, gesture, and other more advanced delivery

stage begin to mature into more logic-oriented abilities, we begin using the progymnasmata exercises in the fifth through eighth grades in order to give them exposure to and practice

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elements. Opportunities for dramatic performance are given to fourth and fifth grade students, developing the invention skill of characterization, requiring some rudimentary audience analysis, and affording another chance to work on delivery.

In the second grade, individual students study facts about a particular country, memorizing data through chants, fact cards, and other forms of repetition, in order to present before their class in an oral report. Similarly, third grade students select a Greek god to report upon, making use of the same preparation and development. Fifth graders likewise report on a Founding Father, with higher expectations of their more fully developed skill set. More generally, the memorization of facts in the grammar stage is an integral part of early *invention*, for as Antonius remarks in Cicero's *On the Ideal Orator*, no orator is complete without a broad exposure to and retention of the essential facts from as many subjects as possible.

As students in the grammar

with the tools of oratory that will eventually become part of a naturalized process of invention and arrangement. Indeed, the progymnasmata, or preliminary exercises, are the building blocks or tool kit of the fully developed orator. Moreover, the exercises begin simply and grow more complex with each step. While the manipulation of language and the genres of expression afforded by the progymnasmata are vital, no less vital is keeping the end of the complete orator in mind. The complete orator must have a firm sense of what is true and a firm understanding of who is his particular audience in a given situation. So progymnasmata exercises are made richer to the extent that students are made attentive to actual or hypothetical audiences and given some purpose in presenting their exercise to that audience. Students in the middling grades are naturally oriented to black and white categorization (an aspect of truth) and more easily respond to concrete tasks, which is more effectively accomplished by setting them in a particular context with a particular audience in mind.

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Logic Stage

In the logic stage of development, which runs roughly through our seventh to ninth grades, there is a continued emphasis upon the rudiments of proper style. We continue to use the progymnasmata exercises in writing (especially the more advanced skills of characterization, description, and thesis) and we begin to develop more advanced speaking through in-class presentations. Additionally, we begin preparation for the ACCS Chrysostom Oratory Competition¹ by having our seventh through tenth grades compete for top-of-the-class honors and House points on a topic derived from their Magna Traditio courses for our own “Chrysostom Oratory Competition.” Students will spend several weeks drafting, revising, and practicing their speeches before competing. The top orators from each class deliver their speeches before a larger audience of the logic and rhetoric school as well as any parents and friends whom they invite. The major emphases in the logic stage include the coherent arrangement of material (we use the classical six-part arrangement) and the beginnings of argumentation—in particular the support of claims with reasons and evidence. Students in the logic stage continue to have opportunities to participate in dramatic plays, perform Scripture recitations, and deliver their recitations at the Evening of Theatre & Recitation.

Rhetoric Stage

Our formal rhetoric training begins in the rhetoric stage, where students in the tenth grade are introduced to the origins of classical rhetoric. By

studying the sophists (*Dissoi Logoi*, *Encomium of Helen*), Plato (*Gorgias*, *Phaedrus*), Aristotle (*On Rhetoric*), Cicero (*On the Ideal Orator*), and Augustine (*On Christian Doctrine*) the students begin to differentiate the various philosophical conceptions of right speaking, the inescapable ethical dimension of oratory, as well as the basic and advanced conceptions of the five canons in their historical setting and development of the ideal orator.

In addition to historical and theoretical knowledge, students are given informal and formal opportunities to write and speak. Impromptu “table topics” allow students to rely upon their memory and intuition to craft and perform persuasive speeches based upon prompts that involve two-sided arguments. The teacher and peers offer analysis with the expectation of the students incorporating criticism into their future performances. By the end of the first year, students have good exposure to the foundations of rhetoric and some groundwork in performing on the basis of their own, as yet underdeveloped, storehouses of knowledge.

In eleventh grade, students begin formal instruction in argumentation and debate. We begin with classical doctrines of *commonplaces* and *stasis*, along with the accompanying composition exercises of *suasoriae* and *controversiae*. More formal debate structures follow as well as the tools of argument analysis, including a review of basic formal logic, Toulmin analysis, and the evaluation of evidence. Impromptu exercises include crafting and developing definitions and the “gauntlet” of point-counterpoint debating. Students learn the

differences between fact, value, and policy claims and prepare stock issues briefs for values and policies, which they debate using a modified form of Lincoln-Douglas style debates. Eleventh graders also use Magna Traditio themes to develop speeches for the school’s Chrysostom Oratory Competition in which the top five juniors and seniors compete for House points and the chance to compete in the ACCS Chrysostom Oratory Competition.

Seniors complete their rhetorical training at Trinitas with an advanced course in oratory, which is completed in conjunction with their senior thesis project. We cover material from *Ad Herennium* as well as review material from Aristotle’s *Rhetoric*. Students write and perform informative and persuasive essays and speeches, usually on topics derived from their thesis research. There is also an increased emphasis upon imitation and style, and we do exercises using the four categories of change: addition, subtraction, transposition, and substitution. For the theory and practice of style we make use of Erasmus’ *On Copia of Words and Ideas*, Ward Farnsworth’s *Farnsworth’s Classical English Rhetoric*, and Augustine’s fourth book from *On Christian Doctrine*. Seniors also take up a larger role in speaking engagements in the life of the school, including serving as the emcees at our Evening of Theatre & Recitation and performing brief introductions to school events such as our Evening of Truth, Beauty, and Goodness.

Although Trinitas has a significant amount of training that is quite obviously rhetorical in nature and design, I would be remiss to ignore the importance of three other factors that play a

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vital role in the formation of an ideal orator. First, our students read, read, and read some more—and they read “good books.” Our Boni Libri program² requires a minimum of six hundred minutes per month, or about thirty minutes per day, of reading from a list of required and recommended books. Many students exceed the minimum, and a majority of the students complete the Boni Libri program each year without fail. Reading is essential to gaining the storehouse of knowledge an orator needs, and it is also important for the recognition and development of versatility in style. Second, our students are pressed to think deeply and diversely—that is, to think so as to remember, so as to infer connections and implications, so as to imagine possibilities. A well-trained mind smooths the road of the well-trained orator. Third, our teachers keep the standards high and smother their children with the love and grace necessary to keep children and families willing to seek after the standards. Orators honed in such a culture will have, Lord willing, not only the skills to speak clearly, pleasingly, and persuasively, but the vision to transform the culture of their churches and their communities.

Notes:

1. For information on this competition go to <http://accsedu.org> > School Resources > Chrysostom Oratory Competition.
2. For more on the Boni Libri program listen to Kenwyn Trotter’s conference workshop, “Everybody’s Reading Boni Libri” at <http://accsedu.org> > School Resources > Journal and Newsletter.

Why Another Crusade?

by Saint Bernard of Clairvaux

You cannot but know that we live in a period of chastisement and ruin; the enemy of mankind has caused the breath of corruption to fly over all regions; we behold nothing but unpunished wickedness. The laws of men or the laws of religion have no longer sufficient power to check depravity of manners and the triumph of the wicked. The demon of heresy has taken possession of the chair of truth, and God has sent forth His malediction upon His sanctuary.

Oh, ye who listen to me, hasten then to appease the anger of Heaven, but no longer implore His goodness by vain complaints; clothe not yourselves in sackcloth, but cover yourselves with your impenetrable bucklers; the din of arms, the dangers, the labors, the fatigues of war are the penances that God now imposes upon you. Hasten then to expiate your sins by victories over the infidels, and let the deliverance of holy places be the reward of your repentance.

If it were announced to you that the enemy had invaded your cities, your castles, your lands; had ravished your wives and your daughters, and profaned your temples—which among you would not fly to arms? Well, then, all these calamities, and calamities still greater, have fallen upon your brethren, upon the family of Jesus Christ, which is yours. Why do you hesitate to repair so many evils—to revenge so many outrages? Will you allow the infidels to contemplate in peace the ravages they have committed on Christian people? Remember that their triumph will be a subject for grief to all ages and an eternal opprobrium upon the generation that has endured it. Yes, the living God has charged

me to announce to you that He will punish them who shall not have defended Him against His enemies.

Fly then to arms; let a holy rage animate you in the fight, and let the Christian world resound with these words of the prophet, “Cursed be he who does not stain his sword with blood!” If the Lord calls you to the defense of His heritage think not that His hand has lost its power. Could He not send twelve legions of angels or breathe one word and all His enemies would crumble away into dust? But God has considered the sons of men, to open for them the road to His mercy. His goodness has caused to dawn for you a day of safety by calling on you to avenge His glory and His name.

Christian warriors, He who gave His life for you, to-day demands yours in return. These are combats worthy of you, combats in which it is glorious to conquer and advantageous to die. Illustrious knights, generous defenders of the Cross, remember the example of your fathers who conquered Jerusalem, and whose names are inscribed in Heaven; abandon then the things that perish, to gather unfading palms, and conquer a Kingdom which has no end.

Source:

The World’s Famous Orations, ed. William Jennings Bryan (New York: Funk and Wagnalls, 1906); online edition published 2003 by Bartleby.com, <http://www.bartleby.com/268/7/4.html>. This is from a sermon given in part in the English edition of Joseph Francois Michaud’s *History of the Crusades*.