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Mothering a gift of God: How Edith Stein's theology of education opposes the technocratic paradigm

*La maternidad, un don de Dios:
Cómo la teología de la educación de Edith Stein
se opone al paradigma tecnocrático*

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ABSTRACT: As the field of education is increasingly influenced by AI technologies, it becomes difficult to ascertain whether teaching methods are adequately cultivating human capacities fully. The technocratic paradigm can permit a utilitarian vision of education that overlooks personal vocation and perpetuates a distorted vision of

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divinely created human nature. Interestingly, in Edith Stein's *Essays on Woman*, where we encounter her vision for education, the essential nature of woman is characterized as having qualities that present a direct contrast to the features of the technocratic paradigm. Though Stein does not herself use the term technocratic paradigm, her description of the vices and structures that challenge the formation of women parallel the problems caused by the technocratic paradigm, such as a failure to recognize the truth of creation, reductionism, and a lack of care for creation integrally understood. The gifts and virtues of women's souls can be seen as a counter to the dangers of a technocratic era – and perhaps by extension, a key to redeeming technology to a proper relationship with humanity, the created world, and the divine. This paper will first demonstrate the connections between Pope Francis's portrayal of the technocratic paradigm from his encyclical *Laudato Si'* and the threats and challenges to true education as described by Stein. Then, features of feminine nature that contrast with the technocratic paradigm will be described. Finally, suggestions are offered for a pedagogical approach that forms both men and women toward relationship with God rather than according to technocratic aims. Ultimately, Stein's educational insights challenge a technocratic educational system and help students to unfold their authentic selves as gifts from God.

KEYWORDS: Edith Stein, education, pedagogy, technocratic paradigm, technology ethics.

RESUMEN: A medida que el ámbito educativo se ve cada vez más influenciado por las tecnologías de IA, resulta difícil determinar si los métodos de enseñanza están cultivando adecuadamente las capacidades humanas en su totalidad. El paradigma tecnocrático puede fomentar una visión utilitaria de la educación que pasa por alto la vocación personal y perpetúa una visión distorsionada de la naturaleza humana creada por Dios. A este respecto, Edith Stein, en sus conferencias sobre la mujer, con su visión de la educación, concibe la naturaleza esencial de la mujer caracterizada por tener cualidades que contrastan directamente con las características del paradigma tecnocrático. Aunque Stein no utiliza el término “paradigma tecnocrático”, su descripción de los vicios y de las estructuras que dificultan la formación de las mujeres es paralela a los problemas causados por el paradigma tecnocrático, como el fracaso en reconocer la verdad de la Creación, el reduccionismo y la falta de cuidado por la Creación entendida de manera integral. Los dones y virtudes del alma de la mujer pueden considerarse una contrapartida a los peligros de la era tecnocrática y, por extensión, una clave para redimir la tecnología y llevarla a una relación adecuada con la humanidad, el mundo creado y lo divino. Por ello, en este artículo se demostrarán en primer lugar las conexiones entre la descripción del paradigma tecnocrático según el papa Francisco en su encíclica *Laudato Si'* y las amenazas y retos para la educación auténtica descritos por Stein. A continuación, se

describirán las características de la naturaleza femenina que contrastan con el paradigma tecnocrático. Por último, se ofrecerán sugerencias para un enfoque pedagógico que forme tanto a hombres como a mujeres desde el punto de vista de su relación con Dios, en lugar de según los objetivos tecnocráticos. En última instancia, las ideas de Stein sobre la educación desafían al sistema educativo tecnocrático y ayudan a los estudiantes a desarrollar su auténtico yo como un don de Dios.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Edith Stein, educación, ética de la tecnología, paradigma tecnocrático, pedagogía.

1. INTRODUCTION

In our contemporary setting, academia faces significant challenges in light of advances in technologies to forming students as whole persons who trust their own capacities over those of an algorithm. The encroachment of artificial intelligence (AI) in the field of education exhibits one prime example of such a technological challenge. Students are tempted to new forms of plagiarism by the deceptive and time-saving qualities of AI technology. Evident problems arise in that these technologies offer an easy pathway for students to avoid character-forming aspects of assignments. On the other side of the student-teacher relationship, various tasks involved in grading and class preparation could be outsourced more frequently to AI and other technologies. Online educational programs may sacrifice important in-person interaction between student and instructor, depriving students of an opportunity for relational growth alongside intellectual growth.

Using AI as a resource over questioning an instructor can also jeopardize the possibility of discovering an inspiring human mentor. If the goals of education are reduced to solely job attainment, then this system misses an interrelated and crucial aspect of education to discover and to nurture the unique talents and skills of individual students, to help them to discover how they contribute to society, family, and friendships in a way only that student can. Further, in consideration of the theological dimension, education should make the student aware of her or his highest calling to relationship with God and the prioritization of seeking grace within an ethical life as foundational and

preeminent to all other aspects of life. Deferring to AI technologies for educational purposes too readily, whether by students or educators, can further the influence of the technocratic paradigm in the area of education. The character of education that can predominate on account of an over-dependency on AI for materials, content, and delivery is one that views a student as a product with capacities to be tapped by society, but this lacks emphasis on cultivating personal self-understanding and encouraging the freedom of the student to listen for a divine calling to lovingly serve the community.

The technocratic paradigm not only permits a utilitarian vision of education that overlooks the orientation of education to personal vocation but also perpetuates in students a distorted vision of the world as mere material put into service for one's own gain. Interestingly, in Edith Stein's *Essays on Woman*, where we encounter her vision for education, the nature of woman is characterized as having qualities that present a direct contrast to the features of the technocratic paradigm.² Though Stein does not use the term 'technocratic paradigm,' her description of the vices and structures that challenge the formation of women are clearly evidence of this phenomenon. The gifts and virtues of women's souls are arguably presented as resources for remediating the dangers of a technocratic era—and perhaps by extension, are a key to redeeming technology to a proper relationship with humanity, the rest of the created world, and the divine. I will draw a contrast between a technocratic version of education and the one offered by Edith Stein, who lifts up the need to value a frequently observed quality of women: the attentiveness to the particular. This attention to the individual is further ordered toward a desire to bring individuals together, a desire for communion. In a world where technology fails to foster intimate social relationships, maternal love exhibits the courage to venture forth “to carry [God] into souls,” to use the phrasing of Stein, rather than to carry the individual into the digital ether of anonymity. The key to responding to the advent of AI in

² By acknowledging an essential nature of woman for purposes of education, this does not involve for Stein an imposing of a particular way acting. Stein does interpret nature as a “guide,” (Stein, 1996, 70) but not one that is destructive of the individual. Rather, education is to help to cultivate the gifts and virtues particular to female students, including their individual talents and personalities, so that they are not overlooked or devalued by a society that has a reductive perspective of the goals of education.

education, is to invite an attention to the student as an individual gift and to allow our educational systems to promote, teach, and cultivate such love.

This paper will first demonstrate the connections between Pope Francis's portrayal of the technocratic paradigm from his encyclical *Laudato Si'* and the threats and challenges to the nature of women as described by Stein. Then, the features that Stein describes of feminine nature that contrast with the technocratic paradigm will be described. Finally, suggestions will be offered for a pedagogical approach that teaches both men and women to build a vision of the world based in relationship with God rather than one based in objectification. Ultimately, Stein's educational insights aim to counter the harms of a technocratic educational system and help students to unfold their authentic selves. Further, from Stein and *Laudato Si'*, we discover lessons of looking to one another, our families, our communities, and the intrinsic value instilled in the world as significant and powerful educators for the human person. One may point to the modern educational system as one example of a sphere of life in which we find the forces of the technocratic paradigm slowly carving a new and potentially harmful landscape.

2. THE IMPACT OF THE TECHNOCRATIC PARADIGM ON EDUCATION

As Pope Francis describes in *Laudato Si'*, the technocratic paradigm involves interacting with nature merely as matter that can be harmed according to one's desires and will, rather than celebrating nature as a created gift to be cherished. The paradigm "exalts the concept of a subject who, using logical and rational procedures, progressively approaches and gains control over an external object" (Pope Francis, 2015, section 106). According to the technocratic paradigm, all problems can be solved by technology, but this leads to a drastic misunderstanding of human life. By rendering technology the mediator of moral decisions and steward of goods, human creativity comes to serve technology rather than the inverse. Optimizing and showcasing technological capability thus becomes a central overarching goal for human society.³ In

³ Paul Scherz explains that the technocratic paradigm is "multifaceted" and highlights two important aspects as "the phenomenology of technology," which involves the way in which

Laudato Si', Pope Francis warns how the technocratic paradigm interferes with human relationships in society and with nature. Technologies have attained power over creation in such a way that distorts our perception of the lives we are given and the world that surrounds us (Pope Francis, 2015, section 104). Pope Francis objects to the assertion, implied by economic pursuits and development ineptives, that all technological innovation is a benefit to society and is without qualification morally neutral (Pope Francis, 2015, section 105). Rather, technologies can pose dangers to not only the structure of society but also to the well-being of the individual soul. Even in subtle or unanticipated ways, with the perpetually increasing reliance on technology as a key to a happy life, humanity risks further and ever more dangerous exploitation.

The technocratic paradigm can obscure that reliance on grace is needed for drawing toward the fullness of human happiness (Pope Francis, 2015, section 86). Rather than seeking to know the world through wonder, appreciation, and awe, data analytics and the scientific method are heralded as the most reliable and valuable means of human interaction with the environment (Pope Francis, 2015, section 107). Pope Francis highlights how our engagement with technology shapes our characters and thus our societal structures: The technocratic paradigm can exacerbate a utilitarian ethos and disincentivize a loving curiosity to know the truth of creatures and the rest of creation according to the providential design of the universe and their destiny in relation to God (Pope Francis, 2015, sections 110–112). Thus, the technocratic paradigm has a two-part danger: to seek to solve problems solely through technological means at the expense of attending to other resources such as relationship or grace, and to engrain communities in habits

technology causes us to experience the world as something that is primarily objectified, and “the role of sociotechnical systems,” which involves increasing control over society with diffused accountability and limitations to individual agency. The two features that I mention here, habits of relying on technology as a primary means of solving problems and of treating others solely according to one’s own desires are related to the two that Scherz highlights (Scherz, 2021). This process of engaging in a structure of technological optimization over other human goods is described and cautioned against in Scherz, 2021 and Scherz, 2024.

of objectifying nature and one another as tools for one's own use, devoid of inherent dignity.⁴

Now, new technologies that serve as educational resources invite complicated moral questions. Through overdependence on these technologies, we may unintentionally habituate ourselves to learning methods that implicitly question the value of human relationship. An infiltration of the technocratic paradigm into an educational system thus puts at risk the relational skills so valuable to caring for the family as well as the wider human community.

In *Laudato Si'*, Pope Francis points to the technocratic paradigm as motivating values of power and progress empty of some further goal (Pope Francis, 2015, sections 104–105). Technologization tends to deflate, objectify, and reduce human relationships merely to a calculable value (Pope Francis, 2015, sections 16, 20). Francis cautions against viewing the environment and society as expendable—as if each are separable from one another and as if both are devoid of and independent from love (Pope Francis, 2015, 155, 221, 231). Rather, a good society depends on love, on healthy human relationships, and individuals must be prepared for their responsibilities toward such an engagement. Love can assist another in seeing the wholeness of a person rather than merely tolerating the other to the extent that they serve one's needs. A human person finds fulfilment in answering a call to relationship: the human, “who is the only creature on earth which God willed for itself, cannot fully find himself except through a sincere gift of himself” (Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, 1966, section 24). The description of the technocratic paradigm offered by Pope Francis exhibits striking parallels with a diagnosis Stein provides of threats to women's holistic development, human interrelational potential, and an education ordered to theological ends.

⁴ Anselm Ramelow, O.P. describes how this habit of objectification inculcated through the technocratic paradigm can even overflow into one's relationship with God (Ramelow, 2024). Michael Hanby also provides an insightful analysis of the technocratic paradigm (Hanby, 2015).

3. CHALLENGES TO A PROPER PERSPECTIVE OF THE HUMAN PERSON AS DESCRIBED BY STEIN

While it is possible to utilize technology in positive ways to benefit humanity and to respond to the needs of a community, it is also important to remain attentive to the ways that technology unfettered by guiding values can shape a society toward restricted freedoms, ingrain habits inhospitable to community, and distance human engagement with the world. To create and to innovate is certainly a gift of human nature. Like other natural gifts, it can be used to help us to better know the love of God by striving to participate in it, to love with our gifts as God loves. Just as God's creation reveals his love, it is possible for our technological innovations to reveal our love, what we value. Technoscience has the potential to be a particularly human way to love the world and to glorify God. Pope Francis acknowledges this positive potential of technology:

Technoscience, when well directed, can produce important means of improving the quality of human life, from useful domestic appliances to great transportation systems, bridges, buildings and public spaces. [...] So, in the beauty intended by the one who uses new technical instruments and in the contemplation of such beauty, a quantum leap occurs, resulting in a fulfillment which is uniquely human (Pope Francis, 2015, section 103).

Yet, it is also possible for technology to become an end in itself rather than for it to be utilized for the further end of seeking and participating in divine love. Reflecting on the *telos* of human life toward divine love can help to specify limits to technological use that does not facilitate this end.⁵ Without recognition of this further telos, technoscience may replace a vacuum of desire for fulfillment. The aim for human perfection can become lost in a maze of the accumulation of technological capacity. In this inversion of values, the human person serves – and to make the point more ominously, falls victim to – the endless pursuit of technological advancement. Pope Francis illustrates this point:

⁵ This is essentially the argument of the technology ethic put forth by Gerald McKenny in his work *Biotechnology, Human Nature, and Christian Ethics* (McKenny, 2018).

There is a tendency to believe that every increase in power means “an increase of ‘progress’ itself,” an advance in “security, usefulness, welfare and vigor [...] an assimilation of new values into the stream of culture,” as if reality, goodness and truth automatically flow from technological and economic power as such. The fact is that “contemporary man has not been trained to use power well,” because our immense technological development has not been accompanied by a development in human responsibility, values, and conscience (Pope Francis, 2015, section 71).

This power dynamic exposes a vicious cycle: the human person is not prepared to adequately engage with technology in such a way that remains committed to specifically human values, but the human – though exploited by her own creation – is incentivized to only further improve on the technology, which in turn further disrupts and distorts human development. Focus that is limited to further technological advancement distracts from personal well-being and growth (*cf.* Berdyaev, 1934; Borgman, 1987). We mis-educate the next generation by projecting that human activity only has value in light of its association with and control by technology.

Though, again, Stein never uses the phrase ‘technocratic paradigm,’ a phrase coined by Pope Francis, it is evident that she is aware of the risk of the degradation of human society on account of this phenomenon or similar. It seems the indications of the technocratic paradigm are evident to Stein in the trajectory of Nazi Germany eugenics (her immediate setting) as well as apparent more broadly as one of the struggles that arise from fallen human nature. In her *Essays on Woman*, Stein outlines some of the challenges to properly understanding the nature of woman and to achieving a proper educational formation of women in turn. To provide a few examples, first, Stein describes the impact of public opinion on the value and place of woman during the Nazi regime: On the one hand, there is a failure to recognize the truth and reality of who woman are. This parallels the characterization of the technocratic paradigm as involving a failure to recognize the truth of a given creation: its intrinsic value, the role it plays among the wider community, and its existence as an expression of God’s love and brilliance. Stein criticizes false understandings of the nature of woman:

There is still a multitude of thoughtless people satisfied with hackneyed expressions concerning the *weaker sex* or even the *fair sex*. They are incapable of speaking about this weaker sex without a sympathetic or often a cynical smile as well. They do this without ever reflecting more profoundly on the nature of the working woman or trying to become familiar with already existing feminine achievements (Stein, 1996, 157).

Stein is concerned about a tendency to demean the capabilities of women, which can serve to distrust or overlook accomplishments of women in various spheres, from the family to the workplace.

Second, Stein also outlines the ways in which society tends to only value woman to the extent that they satisfy biological-reproductive needs, which parallels the reductive aspect of the technocratic paradigm. This brings to the fore the objectifying mindset that can only view another human person as a utility, as a means to secure one's own aims or desires. Stein discusses how this biological reductionist perspective leads to a restricted understanding of the role and potential contribution of woman to society:

[T]his romantic view is connected to that brutal attitude which considers woman merely from the biological point of view; [...] The woman is being confined to housework and to family. [...] Not only is violence being done to the spirit by a biological misinterpretation and by today's economic trends, but also by the materialistic and fundamental point of view of opposing groups. [...] [it is a] callous disregard of woman's nature and destiny (Stein, 1996, 157).

While acknowledging the great gifts that women offer to family life and to caring for loved ones, Stein also notes that withholding the gifts women can bear to other spheres can interfere in the individual calls of women to serve their communities in broad ways.

Third, Stein highlights how older forms of education restricted women's vocational choices, which relates to the problems of the technocratic paradigm of a lack of care for a gift of creation as integrally understood. Stein defends the proposition that "there is no profession which cannot be practised by a woman" (Stein, 1996, 49). While the Industrial Revolution, she explains, made it possible for women to have access to greater domains in society, one

of the challenges to entering into these fields was that "Vocations other than domestic had been exercised for centuries almost exclusively by men. It was natural, therefore, that these vocations assumed a masculine stamp and that training for them was adapted to masculine nature" (Stein, 1996, 105). According to Stein, both feminine and masculine natures have areas of weaknesses and strengths. One of the disadvantages of an educational system based on and overly attuned to masculine nature such that it forgets feminine nature is that it emphasizes a hyper-focus on the singular and misses a vision of the whole and of the needs of the vulnerable. In contrast to this, Stein lifts the example of "those women in whom one takes refuge in order to find peace, and who have ears for the softest and most imperceptible little voices" (Stein, 1996, 134). This description stands in stark contrast to the technocratic paradigm that prioritizes power over the cultivation of creation apart from the self.

Stein posits that our fallen nature has made it more difficult to appreciate the value of both man and woman. As Stein describes in her own exegesis of the Creation narratives, fallen nature distorted human relationships, including "the consequence that man and woman saw each other with different eyes than they had previously" (Stein, 1996, 64). This is especially evident, Stein argues, in the ways in which the relationship between man and woman is marred by competition, struggle, domination, and brokenness. "The Lord clearly declared that the new kingdom of God would bring a new order of relationship between the sexes, i.e., it would put an end to the relationships caused by the Fall and would restore the original order" (Stein, 1996, 65). The desire for increased control over the world and over one's own capacities, characteristic of a fallen nature, gives rise to a changed view of human goals that is dissociated from reality:

given man's fallen nature, this one-sided endeavor to achieve perfection easily becomes a decadent aspiration in itself; our desire for knowledge does not respect limits placed on it but rather seeks by force to go beyond these limits; human understanding may even fail to grasp that which is not essentially hidden from it because it refuses to submit itself to the law of things; rather, it seeks to master them in arbitrary fashion or permits the clarity of its spiritual vision to be clouded by desires and lusts. In the same way, the decay of man's dominion is seen when we consider his relationship to the natural

riches of the earth: instead of reverential joy in the created world, instead of a desire to preserve and develop it, man seeks to exploit it greedily to the point of destruction or to senseless acquisition without understanding how to profit from it or how to enjoy it (Stein, 1996, 71).

Human understanding should not be misunderstood as culminating in a possession of data, skills, or resources for no further purpose related to the good of the individual and, by extension, detached from the common good.⁶ Rather, human understanding is a gift that allows for the person to discover her or his vocation and to assist the rest of creation toward their own vocations as well. The human person is meant to delight in, acknowledge, and rationally employ the gifts of the world not for mere exploitation but for the flourishing of all aspects of creation within the divine plan.

In demonstrating the postlapsarian brokenness that is evident in relationships between men and women, Stein notes the vices she perceives as both particular to man and particular to woman. Interestingly, the vices that Stein attributes as typically observed in masculine or feminine natures, respectively, are ones that resonate with the depiction of the technocratic paradigm as Pope Francis characterizes it. These vices to dominate and to view the world solely as an end to serve utilitarian needs contribute to an inhospitable environment for invoking and cultivating the virtues of attentive care for the other and the wider world. The gifts of woman particularly may be overlooked and undervalued by what one may call a technocratic society evidenced by an inclination to power and control. Yet, this feminine nature can also help to draw humanity back from its inclination to “brutal authority”: for Stein, the woman “runs less danger of losing herself in one-sidedness. Thus, she will be able to serve man in their mutual duties; she protects man from his natural one-sidedness by her own harmonious development” (Stein, 1996, 72). Receiving such a ‘harmonious development’ in the first place, however, is of utmost importance. According to Stein, feminine personalities are likewise at risk of demonstrating a possessiveness characteristic of the technocratic paradigm, such as “The woman who hovers anxiously over her children as if they were her own

⁶ In *The Human Condition*, Hannah Arendt (2018) criticizes technologies and scientific pursuits that seek to gain information and further control without a beneficial end.

possessions” (Stein, 1996, 75), or other examples Stein provides of types of women who are overly possessive of the gifts of love they receive.

The effective education of men and women are crucial for “man and woman are made to complement each other,” and therefore to help one another seek holiness, through God’s grace, out of the shadows of a fallen nature (Stein, 1996, 72). The human community is to be inspired by one another’s virtues, to uphold one another as collaborators toward holiness, to be shaped by one another’s strengths—as men and women but also as unrepeatable, inimitable individuals. Persons are called to assist one another, reflect on their respective tendencies and listen for God’s consolation and aid—especially through the Holy Eucharist (Stein, 1996, 125). These sources of help and correction make possible that “one sees the problems of one’s own life with God’s eyes” (Stein, 1996, 125). Acknowledging the significance of this benefit for personal formation from social interaction helps toward seeking strong educational resources to the community and leaning into the transformative power of grace to avoid disruptive vices. What Stein personally observes as the feminine tendency to seek the gift of the other is held as a model for all of humanity.⁷ Thus, these positive tendencies observed in one or the other sex are not presented as limited to or confining of that sex but as goals of formation for both sexes. Stein explains the importance to render oneself “*empty of self*” and “*self-contained*” (italics in original), “But no one can render himself so by nature alone, neither man nor woman. [...] We can do nothing ourselves; God must do it” (Stein, 1996, 134). In speaking of the duties of humanity as a whole in the following quote, we see a clear resonance between Stein’s and *Laudato Si*’s visions:

Man can fulfill his most noble vocation which is to be the image of God only if he seeks to develop his powers by subordinating himself humbly to God’s guidance. To be a finite image of divine wisdom, goodness, and power would

⁷ This is emphasized especially in how Stein states that “The imitation of Mary includes the imitation of Christ because Mary is the first Christian to follow Christ, and she is the first and most perfect model of Christ. Indeed, that is why the imitation of Mary is not only relevant to women but to all Christians. But she has a special significance for women, one in accord with their nature, for she leads them to the feminine form of the Christian image” (Stein, 1996, 201).

mean that man would seek *to know* within the form and the limits ordained by God, *to enjoy* gratefully the glory of God as manifested in God's creatures, *to help perfect creation* in a free human act as God intended. Man's *non serviam* before God brings about in its turn his perverted relationship to all creatures (Stein, 1996, 73, italics in original).

The most important role of the educator, then, is to point the human person toward God's desire for him or her – and thus to the workings of grace as the greatest teacher. The educator helps to perfect creation by helping others to seek their perfection alongside the grace of God.

4. GIFTS OF FEMININE NATURE ACCORDING TO EDITH STEIN

I will now turn to the ways in which Stein describes feminine nature that can serve to help face the challenges of the technocratic paradigm. First, it is important to note that, though Stein upholds an essential difference between men and women, this does not negate the possibility in her view that, "Many woman have masculine characteristics just as many men share feminine ones" (Stein, 1996, 81).⁸ Further, men and women are meant to collaborate with one another, to learn from one another's virtues and to aid in rooting out one another's vices to both model Christ to the fullest. I argue that any differences described by Stein as frequently apparent between men and women are not meant to be a source of competition or division. I do not believe Stein intends for us to think that it is the case that a virtue that is more often encountered in woman versus men or vice versa is an incidence of nature or society depriving one sex from the gifts divinely bestowed to another or even of reductive, limiting stereotype. Rather, the virtues that are evident in either sex are meant to benefit humanity as a whole, and they are meant to be held up as a model, a lesson in being human for the other to celebrate and appropriate in a personal way.

⁸ To offer another example that Stein understands that it is possible for men and women to exhibit habits or characteristics frequently found in the other sex and that no opportunities should be withheld from an individual simply on account of sex, she writes, "Individualities are not simply variations of feminine nature but are often approximations of masculine nature and qualify, thereby, for an occupation not regarded as specifically feminine" (Stein, 1996, 110).

Sexual difference is real and metaphysically significant for Stein, and this difference accounts for the opportunity of one sex to serve in the role as icon to another: illuminating another angle of the Creator's infinite love and the creature's fulfillment of the call to a being of love.⁹ Men and women hold up the virtues of Christ for one another toward which both seek together. Edith writes that, "[I]t is suitable that the same gifts occur in both, but in different proportions and relation" (Stein, 1996, 100). Further, the even more fundamental difference at the level of the individual accounts for the most creative and personalized gift in return to the creator, and each instance of human individuality reveals not only the capacities of one's given sex, but even more precisely, the charism gifted by a God to a particular person called to a relationship with Him that no one else is capable of mimicking:

Each human soul is created by God [...]. There is a correspondence between the uniqueness of the individuality and the suitable activity to which she is called; the development of such uniqueness must be established as one of the goals of girls' education. [...] A flexible variety of educational methods is needed to bring about a combination of an authentic humanity and womanhood with an unspoiled individuality (Stein, 1996, 201–202).

To follow Stein in her observations of traits frequently encountered among women does no harm to maintaining a fundamental notion of equal dignity between the sexes and surely does not detract from the individual responsibility to reveal one's personal uniqueness and purpose. In her criticizing the objectification of woman, Stein turns to the preciousness of difference in the providential plan:

It does not seem to me that this means that woman was created only for the sake of man; for every creature has its own meaning, and that is its particular way of being an image of the divine being (Stein, 1996, 196).

⁹ Pope John Paul II described persons with disabilities as icons of Christ in Pope John Paul II, 2004. Here, I am offering the interpretation that this is a similar method by which Stein understands the different sexes to be illuminating different aspects of the perfected human person in Christ to one another to model and appropriate in one's own way.

Attention to the differences in an individual that are not mimicked in any other person are important for completing the education of any person – man or woman. This attention to individual uniqueness is not something that can be discovered *simply* on the plane of sexual difference.

It has been emphasized well enough that women just as men are *individuals* whose individuality must be taken into consideration in educational work. However, in order to avoid a misunderstanding, it is perhaps not superfluous to emphasize that women and men are given a common goal of education as *human beings*: ‘You are to be perfect as your Father in heaven is perfect’ (Stein, 1996, 142, italics original).

Each person’s individuality is necessary to the development of all of humanity to a common goal and common good of holiness. To limit uniqueness simply to sexual difference alone is to miss an important gift that God renders the world in each human created to dwell within it. Though our cooperation in society, endurance in friendship and family life, and collegial partnership with one another, we help one another become who we each were called to be individually and we become the community we are called to be together (*cf.* Stein, 1996, 196).

Feminine spirituality, according to Stein, is characteristically able to notice and delight in the particularities of an individual person. In a society that often only cares to view the woman according to a sexual, reproductive, or commercial value, its inhabitants are dangerously situated to overlook the necessary contributions and gifts of woman that are needed to heal human relationships. Collaboration is needed between man and woman, but it seems that the feminine nature, as described by Stein, is characterized by a partiality to particular virtues that can serve as an antidote to the tendencies and harms of the technocratic paradigm. It is devastating to witness in popular culture how many of Stein’s observations of distorted views of woman still ring true today. To showcase the “feminine” in pop culture is often reduced in contemporary society to a caricatured interpretation of feminine sexuality based on what gratifies the masculine utilitarian imagination. In the entertainment industry, which certainly utilizes technological innovation to improve user experience and mass-produce access to desired goods, the feminine type that is

put on display is often projected as sexually liberated yet simultaneously and conflictingly an immediately accessible spectacle as a sexual object for another.¹⁰ This simply serves prerational desire and relinquishes the opportunity to be challenged and formed by the individual personality embodied in the other. It is evident that the often-celebrated reductive relationship to the feminine in entertainment is one of objectification.

It is easy to overlook how a culture that overemphasizes entertainment in this form derives distorted expectations for the education of its citizens. In the context of leisure, we gain insight into the effectiveness of an educational program. In the moments in which a human mind is not evoked by obligation and is not expected to fulfill a task, we have a glimpse into that which it seeks comfort, into what it inclines for its happiness. We can also receive insight into how the person orders their education, in what relationships and fulfilling experiences the educated person takes delight. The dynamic between formation and fruitfulness, between education and recreation, reveals where the heart of the human lies. An entertainment culture which encourages females to see themselves as objects overlooks many more challenging yet rewarding gifts that a feminine perspective brings, including the possibility of “her singular sensitivity to moral values” (Stein, 1996, 78). A technocratic culture renders it easier to become lost in one’s own anxieties, to fail to delight in surrounding goods as a gift from God. It can render it easier to become trapped in the instinct to meet others’ desires at the expense of one’s own sense of happiness and conviction for moral right. It can also render it easier to miss the gift of leisure altogether, to view life as an endless toil toward economic and technological advancement or empty entertainment without true connection to the other and his or her deepest values.¹¹ In a society that rewards specialization and mechanistic efficiency, it is easy to lose sight of the scope of one’s path from the present to future hopes, and of the individual amidst the

¹⁰ There has been a growing body of research exploring how depictions of women on social media have impacted the mental health of children and adolescents, especially girls (see, for example, Choukas-Bradley, et al., 2022; Papageorgiou, 2022; Haidt, 2024).

¹¹ Pope John Paul II describes work as that which is ordered to the “total vocation” of the human person. See, for example, *Laborem Exercens* on the subjective dimension of work and Sabbath rest (Pope John Paul II, 1981).

technocratic collective. Stein argues that the feminine perspective can help toward this end: “Part of her natural feminine concern for the right development of the beings surrounding her involves the creation of an ambiance, of order and beauty conducive to their development” (Stein, 1996, 78).

The tendency of the technocratic paradigm to generalize and to objectify life must be countered by the opposite tendency: the gaze toward the particular and the investment in caring and cultivating the fullness of one’s gifts, especially through grace. The technocratic culture that at once seems to de-emphasize and obfuscate the value of feminine gifts de-sensitizes us to its needed counterweight. The inclination to blind oneself to the inherent value of nature and instead hunger for control and possession, can only be off-set by the opposing movement: rather than to blind one’s sight, to bind oneself in association with surrounding being. To overcome the drive to possess, we must practice the responsibility to embrace and then to let go, to relish in the gift of another being. Along these lines, to avoid viewing another person as a utility to serve the ends of a technocratic system, we must offer an education that infuses hopes for the student to chase a destiny all her own. The model of educator found in the virtuous mother described by Stein exemplifies this task to help the other to find his purpose, not to possess him:

In order to develop to the highest level the humanity specific to husband and children, woman requires the attitude of selfless service. She cannot consider others as her property nor as means for her own purposes; on the contrary, she must consider others as gifts entrusted to her, and she can only do so when she also sees them as God’s creatures towards whom she has a holy duty to fulfill. Surely, the development of their God-given nature is a holy task. Of even higher degree is their spiritual development, and we have seen that it is woman’s supernatural vocation to enkindle, in the hearts of husbands and children, the sparks of love for God or, once enkindled, to fan them into greater brightness. This will come about only if she considers and prepares herself as God’s instrument (Stein, 1996, 110).

The educator offers the student back to herself, to seek her own end instilled by her Creator. Stein describes the tenderness that supports an educational formation that prepares the human person to care for the rest of creation

and to account for one's vocation in relationship with God: "Because of the close bodily tie between child and mother, because of woman's specific tendency to sympathize and to serve another life, as well as her more acute sense of how to develop the child's faculties, the principal share of the child's education is assigned to woman" (Stein, 1996, 72). An educational system that emphasizes production over character can lose emphasis on the unique gifts needed to nurture the future. What Stein describes of the mother parallels the type of love and care that Pope Francis points to as required to heal humanity's interconnected responsibility to society and to nature, as well as to restore trust in the economy of salvation.

We find a profound inverse of the technocratic paradigm in Stein's description of the vocation of woman to love and to teach in light of an individual's value to the created universe. Stein articulates what she sees as woman's mission to encourage each being's fulfillment of its divinely bestowed purpose. In contrast to objectification, we find "the specifically feminine manner of empathy;" and in contrast to reductionism and materialism, we are inspired by how "the specifically feminine attitude is oriented towards the concrete and whole person" (Stein, 1996, 111). These features of the feminine should be promoted, not hidden away, as the destiny of creation according to providential design depends on this type of love.

Thus, if our educational system loses itself to the aims of the technocratic paradigm, this will further entrench us away from the contributions of feminine nature to the education of all. Education must awaken us to the world around us. Only then will students realize the great moral formators who exist past the ChatGPT window or cell phone screen and who instead are alongside us in the day-to-day. "An especially strong natural desire for such spiritually nourishing values lives within the soul of woman. She is predisposed to love the beautiful, inspired by the morally exalted; but, above all, she is open to the highest earthly values" (Stein, 1996, 136). To let the soul of the woman shine out, for Stein, can help to bring other hearts toward the most precious of divine gifts. Stein was concerned about an educational system that did not value the particular gifts of its female students properly, and she knew that a better educational approach would cultivate these gifts rather than combat or hide them. It seems from her perspective that to overshadow the graces of women is to

leave humanity in a precarious position without this strong guiding influence toward falling in love with the good.

Against tendencies to idealize or to objectify women and render them less able to discern their vocations (e.g., Stein, 1996, 157), Stein encourages educational systems to look deeper within the souls of women to celebrate their irreplaceable role in the human vocational journey. While the technocratic paradigm can make us blind to the needs of others, the needs of the most marginalized in our society, the feminine ability to notice the call of the other can help to meet the goals of an integral ecology that not only seeks the flourishing of all of creation's participants but also joyfully thrives in harmony.¹²

Woman's attitude is personal; and this has several meanings: in one instance she is happily involved with her total being in what she does; then, she has particular interest for the living, concrete person, and, indeed, as much for her own personal life and personal affairs as for those of other persons (Stein, 1996, 255, italics in original).

The feminine inclination to love and to care reveals itself an important, irreplaceable ingredient for a peaceful, just, and hopeful society. This feminine attitude toward care for the other that Stein describes is one that can help to heal and to counter the degradation or loss of true relationships amidst the pressures of the technocratic paradigm to engage excessively in a virtual world.

5. SUGGESTIONS FOR EDUCATION

To now turn to suggestions for a vision of education based on the contributions of Stein and *Laudato Si'*, I wish to focus both on the particular role of the family as first educators and evaluators of all other forms of education and, in the setting of institutional education, the role of educator as mentor.¹³ To heal

¹² This is the call for an integral ecology Francis offers in *Laudato Si'*.

¹³ Stein elaborates on the relationships among various communities of educators—including the family, state and Church in her essay “Problems of Women’s Education.” See especially (1996), 207–221.

all levels of human relationship, Pope Francis calls for an education that values the empathy that Stein sees as modelled in feminine attention: Pope Francis describes the ideal education of uplifting “solidarity, responsibility, and compassionate care” (Pope Francis, 2015, section 210). Pope Francis emphasizes the crucial “importance of the family, which is ‘the place in which life –the gift of God– can be properly welcomed and protected against the many attacks to which it is exposed, and can develop in accordance with what constitutes authentic human growth” (Pope Francis, 2015, section 213).

For Stein, the woman is the main protector of and advocate for the family: when Stein recognizes the privileged position that “woman’s primary vocation is maternal” she demonstrates her vital place in this area without at all negating the importance of women in all other areas of society as well and, in fact, highlights how maternal gifts can benefit settings outside the family, too (Stein, 1996, 74). Nonetheless, “the Fall affected man and woman differently” (Stein, 1996, 74), and both men and women need one another to protect against the associated vices of a risk of “one-sidedness” in their respective inclinations. The collaboration of men and women is meant to assist one another in cultivating their gifts and overcoming impacts of fallen nature to a broken relationship (*cf.* Stein, 1996, 68). Men and women need one another to overcome their faults as well as to hone their strengths.

Men and women offer educational resources for one another relevant to self-understanding, and so, too, do other relationships involving both similarity and difference – starting within the family. Stein highlights that a proper educational system supports the family as primary educators. “Nothing can replace the educational competence of the home. [...] [T]he home will naturally transmit what we have come to regard as the formation of the person through other persons. [...] [T]he mother will build the bridge into this new world” (Stein, 1996, 221–222). It is in the family that we first learn to appreciate the world around us, and hopefully, acknowledge its beauty. Further, it is in the family that we first become aware of our uniqueness and our potential for individualized contributions of ourselves to a larger goal. “The ministry of the Christian family fits into this *telos* [of eternal relationship with God] by providing a context where the love of God is first nurtured and encouraged in the human heart, and where people first learn to care for their surrounding

community members” (A.I. Research Group, 2024, 162). Though families may not uphold this important responsibility to one another, the brokenness and suffering family all the more highlights a hope for healing and safety that families are called to cultivate. Further, families are not meant to be insular, but to turn toward the world, to take part in the opportunities for giving and receiving charity that surround them in their communities (*cf.* A.I. Research Group, 2024, 165). In the family, we first learn to hone a different gaze than the one imparted by the technocratic paradigm.

In this regard, ‘the relationship between a good aesthetic education and the maintenance of a healthy environment cannot be overlooked.’ By learning to see and appreciate beauty, we learn to reject self-interested pragmatism. If someone has not learned to stop and admire something beautiful, we should not be surprised if he or she treats everything as an object to be used and abused without scruple (Stein, 1996, 215).

Families are called to serve one another, the communities around them, and the wider Church, to demonstrate the resilience, sacrifices, and faithfulness of God’s love, which weathers the every-day challenges in the home and in the world beyond.

The Internet in general, especially through social media platforms and AI-assisted search engines or chat bots, has become a pivotal resource for sharing knowledge.¹⁴ It is right to question whether the tendency to turn to algorithms and online resources is preferable to the resources of a face-to-face classroom, which involves strenuous embodied engagement rather than a virtual interface. While the value and future of in-person classrooms is continually investigated, a few concerning trends in an educational system that leans increasingly to a virtual setting should be highlighted. First, online and electronic learning modes, while they have the benefit of easily circulating content to a wide audience, can also limit the number of voices involved in the teaching role. Rather than several instructors across a hall of classrooms, only one teacher—or at least image or impression of a teacher—is needed for the screen

¹⁴ For more on the interrelational disruptions involved in AI serving as an informational resource, see Courtois, 2025.

that will reach a great number of students. Second, this can contribute to a distancing between student and teacher, which can render it less likely that the student and teacher truly come to know one another, discover long-term mentorship opportunities, or simply become friends. Stein was a model of caring for students beyond the classroom, as exhibited in her letters to former students encouraging them in their continual pursuits.¹⁵ Further, Stein notes that the depersonalization of an educational style that seeks “encyclopedic” knowledge fails to be beneficial to educating all human capacities: “Such impersonality was little adapted to the educational goal and to feminine nature” (Stein, 1996, 113).¹⁶ Third, the online learning environment could be less adaptable to the individual needs of the student, and thus less responsive to the students’ educational and personal goals.¹⁷ While online learning can be a great resource for enhancing and expanding access to education, the student could still have an unideal relationship with the instructor and classmates. The student may be virtually visible yet still undiscovered behind the computer screen. The virtual educational system may miss important features to cultivate in the individual entrusted to its care.

Here, we acknowledge the foremost contrast between AI as paradigm educator and mother as paradigm educator. While the mother draws out the uniqueness of the individual, relying on AI can stifle uniqueness. Further, the ability of AI to offer immediate answers can distract from the inter-relational resources around us that share wisdom and beckon us to find ourselves within the midst of other personalities.¹⁸ Ultimately, the most important relational

¹⁵ See, for example, Edith Stein, Letter 102 to Anneliese Lichtenberger, in, Stein, 1993, 101.

¹⁶ To capture her full assessment: “The tendency to make teaching material into an encyclopedic panorama of all contemporary knowledge resulted in an informational overload; the efforts of both teachers and students were concentrated on the acquisition and transmission of factual knowledge. The personal element in teaching declined in importance. Teachers became specialists and paid less attention to a broad human and personal contact. Such impersonality was little adapted to the educational goal and to feminine nature” (Stein, 1996, 113).

¹⁷ For more on the disadvantages of virtual learning over an interrelational context, see Courtois, 2025.

¹⁸ For more on how Stein’s studies of empathy and anthropology illuminate the need for virtue to be developed in a relational context, see Courtois, 2025.

source for educational development is prayerful relationship with God, and in fact, hopefully the teacher him- or herself sees education as a vocational collaboration with God:

[A] wholesome effect is endangered if either one loses sight of intellectual and spiritual freedom or of the educational goal in itself, i.e., humanity developed most perfectly in the natural and supernatural sense. This can be found again only when the teaching vocation is understood as entrusted by God, and the student's personality is taken up in light of the educational mission (Stein, 1996, 114).

Educational expectations that utilize AI output may emphasize efficiency and ready availability, while the educational formation described by Stein involves those that require an unraveling, a sustained long-term witness, a patient love, a careful watchfulness, a continual discovery of the gifts of another, and an eventual bittersweet release of the student who enters into his or her own vocation, well-formed and ready.

6. CONCLUSION

Educational systems play an important role in preparing students for their responsibilities as contributors to societies, as friends within a caring community, and as members of a supportive family. Thus, there are important normative, cultural, and traditional expectations about which an educator instructs the student. Nonetheless, this should not mean that the individual good for each student as an irreplaceable creation is overlooked. As Stein describes, the educator must be encouraged and trained to remain attentive to the student before him or her. To simply hold another to imposed expectations without seeking to discover the journey to which that student is called fails to encourage a truly human formation. At some point, the student must realize a divine calling that no other person, even an educator, can discover for her or him. The educator, however, helps the student to take seriously the responsibility to seek and to respond to such a calling.

To expect uniformity among the products of an educational system is an instance of the technocratic paradigm at work. To extract the sweat of human effort without feeling, impose uninspiring tasks without a clear connection to vocational goals, or expect productivity without an eye to personal needs are the symptoms of a technocratic culture. An educational system that leads students to anticipate a similarly functioning working life fails to unlock all the potential of human nature as ordered to rational love. Such an educational system fails to deliberate on and seek the goods and purposes of the human being that underlie and shape one's chosen service to society, while also helping the individual to determine how to conduct such service ethically. Furthermore, the technocratic paradigm can help to perpetuate an educational system that tolerates inattentiveness to individual student effort and talents. This presumption of an inattentive educational system is admitted when a student thinks her work can be replaced by the output of AI, as when a student attempts to plagiarize with an essay generated by ChatGPT.

The alternative vision for education that Stein explores is one that acknowledges a student as inherently beloved by God and destined to exhibit this love in the world. This educational theology can only be accomplished by encouraging an independent motivation to pursue one's calling to shine forth a dimension of God's love in the way only that student can. Education is incomplete without an acknowledgement and incorporation of its theological purpose: "Thus, everything points to this conclusion: woman can become what she should be in conformity with her primary vocation only when formation through grace accompanies the natural inner formation. Because of this, religious education must be the core of all women's education" (Stein, 1996, 135). The educator is to make the student aware of God's love for him or her, and education thus becomes a task to encourage the individual to discover how to best love God with her or his own heart.¹⁹ This parallels Stein's sentiment that "the primary and most essential Educator is not the human being but God Himself" (Stein, 1996, 107). Both the educator and student—as two necessary participants in the educational experience—find a piece of their callings

¹⁹ For more on individual being as a gift of God called to love God in return in light of familial responsibility, see Courtois, 2022, Chapter 5.

to holiness in one another as they point each other toward the most important relationship: that with God. “Guidance to the condition of being a child of God,” Stein writes, “should be carried out in the first years of childhood, although later it must be constantly renewed and deepened” (Stein, 1996, 246). One can more fully enter into the vocation of a child of God, which paradoxically and mysteriously is a calling in which one is to mature. To be a child of God is to simply be one’s own self without reservation. Education helps one to become most fully one’s self. An education that celebrates the gift of the person in his or her singular giftedness is less inclined to miss out on the poetry of God’s love such a life can reflect – in a way no other life can.

Education can find its fullness in the gifts of both male and female educators and male and female students. The attention to the individual that Stein describes as distinctive to a feminine spirituality and personality helps educational programs to align with the highest goals and truths:

Thus we can specify as the goal of individual educational work the formation of a person who is what *she* is supposed to be personally, who goes *her* way, and performs *her* work. Her way is not chosen in an arbitrary fashion; it is the way in which God leads her. Whoever wishes to guide others towards the pure development of their individuality must guide them towards a trust in God’s providence and towards the readiness to regard the signs of this providence and to follow them (Stein, 1996, 202–203).

The model of woman as maternal educator is able to draw our uniqueness from us, to encourage us to impart our personal stamp of love in all we do and to chase our calling. This Steinian view of education celebrates the uniqueness of each student as it corresponds ultimately to finding one’s identity and work in a personal calling within the body of Christ, as each of our destinies resides in Christ and His mission (Stein, 1996, 238). This approach to education cherishes the interests and talents of men and women alike and seeks for neither to be neglected in student formation. Stein describes an example of feminine love for the divine masterpiece of each individual person that can challenge a homogenizing tendency of a technocratic education: this love can work to replace empty progress with promotion of authentic self-gift if we teach it to unfurl to its fullness.

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