THE BIBLICAL BASIS OF MERCIFUL LOVE

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Abstract

In this study, I wish to examine and present God's extraordinary love. This love can be divided into two parts. Humanity — Adam and Eve — first encounters unconditional love. At this point, they do not yet have to strive for the reward — that is, eternal life and complete harmony. In Paradise, they have everything they need. As a result of sin, they will eventually lose these blessings. God's merciful love, however, gives them another chance to return and regain complete happiness. This, however, comes at a price. They can attain this gift only through effort, work, faithfulness, and respect for the laws. Compared to the state before the Fall, the reward is no longer granted in advance. This publication seeks to present God's highly complex, forgiving, and instructive love. The primary basis for this examination is the Bible, specifically the Book of Genesis. The masterpieces of medieval sacred art also help in understanding this. The study refers to Michelangelo's works as examples but does not engage in a detailed analysis of them within the scope of this paper. It focuses primarily on presenting God's intention to teach.

Keywords: Grace, creation, teaching, reward

Introduction, Objectives

This study seeks to explain and enrich the Bible's instructional and educational teachings, and to develop them into a theoretical method, primarily in relation to the field of pedagogy. The analysis of art and visual representations also provides significant help in this investigation. Literacy has been a part of human culture for millennia, but the ability to read and write has become widespread among the vast majority of people barely more than a hundred years ago. Alongside speech, images, sculptures, forms, and architectural monuments served as the primary means of conveying information for thousands of years, acting as vehicles for messages.

People of the Middle Ages, the Renaissance, and the Baroque era, from childhood onward — as participants in church services, listening to sermons, and gazing at the murals, stained-glass windows, sculptures, and capital columns, almost imperceptibly acquired the body of knowledge that enabled them to interpret what they saw (Seibert, 1986).

The depiction of God, the Holy One, and Man has sparked theological debates for centuries. A strict interpretation of Scripture approached the subject as idolatry; however, the complexity of Catholic and Orthodox teaching moves beyond this simplistic generalization, nuances it, and supports it as a tool that fosters moral and theological growth. Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, later Pope Benedict XVI, in his work "Explanation and Study of the Development of the Liturgy," points out the solution to

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the problem with extraordinary thoroughness and clarity. He refers to this line of reasoning as the "question of images," which articulates unequivocal support for the beneficial promotion of artistic activity. He writes that Christian images, such as those found in the catacombs, draw extensively on the canon of images established by the synagogue, yet they imbue it with a new meaning (Ratzinger, 2002, p. 105.).

During the period of Christianity's full flowering, — the flourishing Middle Ages and then the Renaissance — sacred art left behind exceptionally elaborate works for posterity. These works taught millions of people about the faith and the Scriptures; their theological significance is extraordinary and can certainly be compared to that of written sources. For this reason, the author of these lines dares to use these artistic masterpieces to introduce the truths of the faith and to unfold their pedagogical message.

Both the patrons who commissioned medieval works and the artists themselves possessed a very thorough knowledge of theology. The Renaissance period was already more socially open, allowing for certain, more cautious forms of artistic freedom. One of the most brilliant representatives of this era was Michelangelo Buonarroti, who left one of the greatest and richest creative legacies to posterity. This article focuses on his most monumental work: the ceiling frescoes of the Sistine Chapel.

The objective of this study is to explore the pedagogical message of the Creation and the characteristics of God's educational work. It aims to identify the lessons of humanity's pre-fall state and to draw parallels with everyday life and the field of pedagogical work.

In this introduction, it is essential to clarify the concept of education itself, highlighting the formulation that underpins the entire study and its objectives. In this regard, among the many definitions, the loving, developmental function can be emphasized. Just as the scientific approach to pedagogy is called the science of pedagogy, its practice is called education. The concept of education is broader than that of teaching. While teaching — to put it simply for now — essentially refers to the transfer and development of knowledge, education encompasses all developmental activities directed from the educator toward the learner. If we were to define it: education is a conscious interpersonal action aimed at the development of the learner (Gloviczki, 2015, p. 21.).

The Starting Points and Foundations of the study

This study seeks to present God's educational purpose from two fundamental perspectives. One is creation itself, whose logic is built upon the conceptual realms of perfection, sinlessness, and complete harmony. The other perspective is the portrayal of humanity within this immaculate system. Humanity, divided into man and woman, introduces the possibilities of choice, free will, sin, punishment, learning, and repentance into the history of the world. The two gender roles play an absolutely interrelated yet distinct role, without which the pedagogical message of Genesis cannot be understood.

The First Approach

God first creates and gives a perfect world for free, but He also sets a condition and gives a law for life. The Lord God gave a command to man: "You may eat from any tree

in the garden. But you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for on the day you eat from it, you will die" (Gen 2:16–17).

God very precisely foretells what will happen if man breaks the law. He does not ask for anything in advance, He simply gives a perfect world without any compensation, without any active effort or contribution on man's part. This is a pedagogical concept that seems foreign to our modern age and human logic. Typically, a person — whether an adult, a child, or a student — receives a reward in life only after first learning or accomplishing something. God, however, does not require any prior achievement at the time of creation; He merely imposes one restriction, one prohibition, on His creatures. They may not eat the fruit of the tree of knowledge. Thus, He does not set an active prerequisite for a happy, harmonious life, but rather issues a prohibition, commanding obedience to a rule. Compliance with this becomes the very measure of morality. Man fails, but receives a new commandment, which is likewise morality — the search for and following of God — but here a prior achievement is required, after which the gift arrives: that is, once again, complete and blissful harmony with the Creator.

Drawing on the experiences gained throughout his career to date, the author of these lines has concluded that "traditional" teaching methods based on rewards and incentives can often be made even more effective. They need to be supplemented with the adaptation of some kind of prior gift, trust, and moral challenges (Garai, 2009).

According to research in the field of teaching and learning, the most commonly used reward and pedagogical methods can be divided into three main groups. The first group includes methods in which a reward is initially provided free of charge, without any compensation or conditions, or with only minimal conditions. In this case, the reward loses its value and is utilized only to a limited extent. An attitude of passive acceptance and consumption also emerges. The motivational effect is either absent or manifests only in a very indirect way, without expectations or sanctions (Garai, 2010, p. 35). From a pedagogical point of view, the educational effect, which also encourages one's own efforts, is very small.

The second — and perhaps the most common — modern teaching method is when we first ask for a specific product and then reward it. This method is not always effective either, because it is based on coercion and therefore provides only limited motivation. Modern school systems today serve as examples of this (Juhász–Garai, 2007). From elementary school through higher education, this method is the norm. The completed product is recognized and graded. Until then, there is essentially no reward within the system. The structure is entirely emotionless and is based on interests. Determining interests is very difficult, especially in the case of the younger generation, where the urge for emotional attachment and harmony is still strong. In many cases, it is not good grades, praise, or the desire to gain prestige that motivates students, but rather emotions and feelings related to love. This pedagogical system is only partially suitable for this.

The third educational principle is based on discipline, which was dominant in earlier historical periods. It is undoubtedly simple, quick, and very easy to apply in any culture or social order. Its essence is that results are first demanded, followed by punishment if they are not achieved. Its effectiveness is particularly poor because it is driven by fear, which provides very little inspiration for achievement. The acquired knowledge fades extremely quickly as soon as the coercive circumstances cease. Numerous examples can be cited of this educational method, though its use is

becoming increasingly rare in the present day — especially in modern, democratic countries.

All three of the above methods can achieve results, but they also have serious shortcomings. They are based on indifference, self-interest, and fear, neglecting the guiding principle of loving and emotionally oriented rewards. In order for this principle to take effect, it may be necessary to apply the method of advance reward — which also appears in Genesis — either as a standalone pedagogical principle or integrated with other techniques.

The Second Approach

The Bible speaks with natural simplicity about creation. "God created humankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them." (Gen 1,27).

Basically, social development throughout history has been related to this. The concept of the family as a cornerstone is the foundation of community life. This study seeks to examine the pedagogical aspects and lessons of creation, the Fall, and human community in a more complex manner. It focuses on presenting the pedagogical intent found in Genesis, God's educational will, the relationship between man and woman, and the message conveyed therein. At this point, God is teaching not an individual, but the human community, and He teaches within that community. Most pedagogical activities in the world are similarly adressed to communities. At the time of creation, only the two creatures exist as a social entity.

Sin and expulsion, then punishment, give rise to a life of struggle for humanity and to intertwined destinies; yet, despite this, there is still individual freedom, because there is free will. Amid all these events, God's teachings and pedagogical messages emerge with tremendous power. A just, merciful, and rewarding God is revealed in the story of creation — a God who at first bestows only infinite gifts and then establishes order and rules of operation. Disobedience will lead to punishment and the promise of mercy. Clear and unambiguous pedagogical principles emerge from this process, which can be adapted for use in today's education. This paper aims to present these findings — firstly through an examination of the biblical descriptions, and secondly through a superficial analysis of the paintings.

It is essential to note that the individual can also live a full life, in its physical, intellectual and spiritual sense. The story of creation, however, does not present to us the individual level, but rather the strength and unity of the community, as well as peculiarities of the community, along with the lessons to be learned from it.

The educational activity of God, and the examination of that work, is inseparably intertwined with humanity's fundamental questions. Whether we view the world as individuals or as a community, humanity has always been occupied with the dilemmas of the meaning of life. The exploration of the path leading to God and to truth; the reason for suffering; the miracle of life; and the moral imperative — all of which are present in every human being, in every culture, and in their religious dimensions as well. These eternal questions manifest most intensely within religion itself and in the ways they interrelate. Faith and the meaning of life can be approached as the result of God's work of teaching (Székely, 2017)

The approach taken in this dissertation is predominantly pedagogical rather than theological, supplemented by art history. Painting — especially during the Middle Ages — sought to convey the teachings of the Bible in their entirety and to depict its stories. It continues to do so with captivating power to this day.

Michelangelo Buonarroti the Educator

Michelangelo di Lodovico Buonarroti Simoni, one of the most outstanding religious painters of 15th- and 16th-century Europe, is the best-known representative of the Italian Renaissance. In his monumental masterpiece, the ceiling fresco of the Sistine Chapel, the Bible unfolds like a living film. It presents moral teachings, human characters, and God's merciful love and educational intent in an exceptionally vivid manner. Through his style of depiction, he helps us understand the full message of the Bible. The extraordinary size and richness of the fresco do not allow for a detailed artistic analysis in the form of a short publication. Nor is that the purpose of this essay; rather, it aims to draw attention to God's complex educational intent — an intent that encompasses both the reward given in advance and the praise earned through effort.

The educational significance of the Sistine Chapel is also evident in the fact that the election procedure for the popes of the modern era takes place here. It serves as the setting for an extremely intimate and secluded world during those days and weeks when the College of Cardinals attempts to decide on the Church's supreme leader. There is only one dominant visual experience and source of information surrounding those present: the paintings on the chapel's walls. These are what they see, what they admire, and what they contemplate when they look up. They exert an extraordinary and exclusive aesthetic pressure and influence on those present. God's message and teaching come from here — from the walls — and, of course, directly through the souls of the cardinals and their communication with one another.

Pope Julius II commissioned Michelangelo to paint the entire chapel. The work took place between 1508 and 1512. The artist worked almost entirely alone, with minimal assistance, and was nearly broken by the time he finished. His eyesight and spine suffered as a result of this heroic endeavor. The work was created on a vast area of nearly 500 square meters, with unprecedented precision and in accordance with biblical stories. He broke with the sacred motifs of the time and opted for the principles of Renaissance artistic freedom. Despite causing outrage among many, it has remained one of the masterpieces of art history (King, 2015).

The fresco is built around two central themes. One is a three-part composition depicting the Creation and the Fall, located at the center of the ceiling. The creation of Adam, followed by that of Eve, and finally the commission of sin and the expulsion from Paradise are depicted on the ceiling at the center of the chapel. This section provides a cinematic aid to this paper, helping to present God's merciful love and His instructive message in a more understandable way. Without words, it recounts the teachings of the Bible — the pedagogical message of God's love and mercy — with precision and compelling power. The other central section of the fresco depicts the Last Judgment, which, in accordance with Christ's judgment, groups people according to whether they lived out the teachings correctly or not.

The First Man

The first chapter of human history is the creation of Adam. "On the day that the Lord God created the earth and the heavens, there was no wild brush on the earth, and no plants of the field had yet sprung up, for the Lord God had not yet sent rain upon the earth, and there was no man to till the ground. Then a mist rose from the earth and watered the entire surface of the ground. Then the Lord God formed man from the

dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life. Thus, man became a living being" (Gen 2:4–7).

The story of Adam's creation can be examined in numerous Bible translations, but it is clear from all of them that this is not the end of humanity's creation. The Catholic Scriptures, which are referenced throughout this article, use the term "living being." This wording may seem degrading or belittling, but it actually indicates that the creation of humankind is not yet complete or finished. God's will be not to create a self-contained and self-sufficient individual, but rather a human being who exists in community and thus resembles his Creator. The mystery of the Holy Trinity reveals God's wholeness, perfection, and communion. Human beings, too, can be understood as a whole only in their communal state, in which gender does not appear as a limitation but rather as part of that wholeness. The God of revelation stands above gender. There is no and cannot be any question of gender with the God of the Bible. In connection with this line of thought, it should be noted that the depiction of the human body in the fresco is quite explicit. Depicting the Lord in physical form was virtually taboo until the Renaissance. Michelangelo effectively shattered these millennia-old rules that had permeated European Christian visual art. It is a fundamental biblical principle that no one can see God with physical eyes. Numerous theological arguments support this, and dogmatics treats it as a declared truth. God's chosen people, the Jews, encountered the Lord only through the experience of His power, goodness, or other attributes; physically, no creature has ever seen, heard, or touched Him (Előd, 1983, p. 32). In a groundbreaking depiction on the ceiling fresco of the Sistine Chapel, Adam is shown with a naked body of flawless beauty, alongside God the Father, who, though elderly, radiates strength and wisdom.

The Second Man

The creation of the wholeness of the human body and soul does not end with Adam. It is through the creation of Eve that this wholeness becomes a perfection that encompasses all of life. "The Lord God commanded the man, 'You may eat from any tree in the garden. But you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for on the day you eat from it, you will surely die." Then the Lord God said, "It is not good for man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him." So the Lord God formed out of the ground every beast of the field and every bird of the air. He brought them to the man to see what names the man would give them. Whatever the man called them, that was their name. But the man did not find a helper suitable for himself. So the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and while he slept, He took one of his ribs and closed up the place with flesh. Then the Lord God formed the woman from the rib He had taken from the man and brought her to the man. The man said, "This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called 'woman,' for she was taken out of man." Both the man and the woman were naked, yet they were not ashamed of one another" (Gen 2:16–25).

The creation of man ends with Eve. At this point, the Bible uses the terms man and woman emphatically. When Adam is alone, there is no gender definition or distinction established, nor can there be. From an educational perspective, it must be emphasized that God still grants this miracle embodied in community — the creation of Eve and the experience of community — without expecting anything in return.

Original Sin

In the beginning, there was only one rule, which was the very measure of morality. "The serpent was more cunning than any of the animals of the field that the Lord God had created. He said to the woman, 'Did God really say, "You must not eat from any tree in the garden"?' The woman replied to the serpent, 'We may eat the fruit of the trees in the garden. God only said about the fruit of the tree in the middle of the garden: "You must not eat it or even touch it, or you will die."' Then the serpent said to the woman, 'You will certainly not die. God knows full well that on the day you eat from it, your eyes will be opened, and you will be like gods, knowing good and evil." The woman saw that the tree was desirable for food, a delight to the eyes, and enticing to gain wisdom. So she took some of its fruit and ate it; she also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it too. Then their eyes were opened, and they realized they were naked. They sewed fig leaves together and made coverings for themselves" (Gen 3:1–7).

We can read about it and see it depicted in the fresco: the tempter appears in the form of an animal, the serpent. This animal is the wisest of all creatures. It is wiser and more cunning than man; it uncovers man's darkest desire — to be like the gods. The Church teaches as a dogma that God tested humankind in obedience, but they failed and received the promised punishment (Előd, 1983, p. 158).

The Punishment

The greatest lesson and most important message of the Creation Story is the punishment itself, which embodies God's infinite mercy and love. God does not let go of humanity's hand; He draws us back to Himself, and He even shows us the way. "The Lord God said to the serpent: 'Because you have done this, you are cursed above all animals and all the wild creatures of the field. You will crawl on your belly and eat the dust of the ground all the days of your life. I will put enmity between you and the woman, between your offspring and her offspring. He will crush your head, and you will strike his heel.' And to the woman he said, 'I will greatly increase your pain in childbirth; in pain you will give birth to children. You will long for your husband, but he will rule over you.' To the man he said, "Because you listened to the woman and ate from the tree, even though I forbade you to eat from it, the ground is cursed because of you. By the sweat of your brow, you will earn your food all the days of your life. Thorns and thistles it will bring forth for you. You will eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your brow, you will eat your bread until you return to the ground, from which you were taken; for you are dust, and to dust you will return." The man named his wife Eve, because she would become the mother of all the living. And the Lord God made garments of skin for the man and his wife and clothed them" (Gen 3:14–21).

As God had previously warned man, if he ate the fruit of the forbidden tree, he would die. There was only one law, and it encompassed everything God expected of His creatures. Man knew what he would lose and also what he would gain. God had previously stated exactly what would happen if the law were broken. Death is the primary punishment; alongside it, the knowledge of good and evil is the gain — a kind of "reward" that the two sinners desired. In His justice, God does not take this away from them, but places them in a world where, through the proper use of this knowledge, they can return to eternal life. In this way, the consequences of original sin are complex and already point toward the redemption in Christ. From then on,

God no longer grants the reward in advance; rather, humans must first earn it through their own deeds. The pedagogical method in effect during the time of Genesis is completely transformed, marking the beginning of an entirely new era. God establishes a new system for humanity, in which the role and example of Christ will be dominant; the path to salvation culminates in Him (Ratzinger, 2014).

It is absolutely necessary to emphasize once again that, following life in paradise, the principle of rewards tied to conditions and achievements emerges as a commandment. From then on, God grants recognition and gifts to humans only when they earn them through hard work. This is also the approach of traditional pedagogy, which evaluates the outcome itself and rewards or punishes it accordingly.

Even nakedness is connected to this idea, as a very important consequence of sin. The Bible puts it precisely. After the couple ate from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, they realized they were naked (Gen 3:7). It is in this nakedness that the difference between man and woman first becomes apparent. This new feeling, previously unknown to them, is none other than shame, which did not yet exist in the sinless state at the time of creation, even though they were unclothed then as well (Gen. 2:25).

It is essential to emphasize here that shame is also part of the educational process. Those who perform poorly in the school of life not only receive fewer rewards but must also cope with the shame stemming from their relationships with others and their own weaknesses. Shame itself and its presence in the teaching process constitute a specific form of pressure that is ultimately linked to fear. Following this logic, it can be concluded that rewards tied to performance and productivity are the law of the world after the Fall, which also manifests as a method of education. There are no longer any rewards given in advance.

Pedagogical Conclusion

God's love goes far beyond human logic. The Bible reveals a merciful God who calls humanity to salvation, who creates the path to happiness again and again, both after the Fall and after humanity's repeated failures. Moreover, the Almighty God not only gives gifts to his creatures when prior conditions are met but also grants rewards in advance. The believer must see this as well, not just the judging, weighing Father. This is how we can gain a fuller understanding of the overflowing nature of divine love. Both methods of reward are part of human history and must be viewed as a combined example. It must be emphasized that God has always taught and spoken to humanity. If God has instilled in humanity the quest for infinite truth and infinite love, then it is reasonable to expect that He will also respond (Bognár–Kerényi–Rédly, 2020, p. 36).

The pedagogical principles outlined in the Bible, together with the messages conveyed by artistic depictions, form the basis for applying a unique method of education and motivation that combines the characteristics of both reward systems. The teacher's approach of offering gifts in advance can be applied in many situations in educational work. This is particularly true in the teaching of moral, artistic, and theological studies. Of course, in the case of rational, science-based fields of expertise, this approach — which is predominantly emotionally motivated — may have fewer applications. However, this love-based approach must remain a prominent feature of educational methodology. The life stories of many saints prove its right to exist. Their examples, which serve as models to be followed, convey truths of eternal validity for future generations as well.

As a pedagogical conclusion of this study, it can be stated that, by following the divine example, teaching with love can be not only just but also rewarding in everyday teaching work and in human relationships in general.

Summary

The result-oriented mindset of the modern world is increasingly diverging from the biblical principles of love. It expects products and rewards based on that. This approach is growing stronger and manifests itself in a mechanical and absolutely dominant way in educational work. God's work as a teacher, however, is far more complex and full of love.

At the time of creation, a blissful world begins to function, filled with countless gifts and beauty. Within this world, humanity finds its place — as one who, without having done anything to deserve it beforehand, earns and receives all of this. There is one rule that he breaks, and for this he loses everything, yet he receives a new promise. In this new life, God sets forth conditions that must be fulfilled beforehand; the reward comes after these conditions are met. From a pedagogical perspective, the Fall was a turning point. It must be noted, however, that the Father's love encompasses both principles of reward. The path to salvation can also be facilitated by many rewards — even undeserved ones — that stem from loving care.

The Bible's pedagogical message also encompasses the distinct yet unified characters of the first human couple. Teaching is articulated through this: Adam and Eve together form the very foundation of early society. Together, they receive a shared punishment and a shared destiny, along with a new commandment and a new mechanism of instruction. The family is created, then the larger community — humanity itself — to which God's community is connected and finds its fulfillment in faith and in the Church.

Art can be of great help in enabling us to better understand human nature, God's love, and the pedagogy of Genesis. The Bible truly comes to life in works of art. Neither the ability to read and write nor textual interpretation is necessary; a carefully crafted work of art contains every message that conveys God's will

As a final thought, it can be concluded that the Father's love is complex and imbued with a special mercy. It also includes the concept of reward in advance, which it may be desirable to view as an example and to follow with humility when applying Christian-oriented education.

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A KÖNYÖRÜLETES SZERETET BIBLIAI ALAPJA

GARAI PÉTER

Az értekezés Isten rendkívüli szeretetét kívánja vizsgálni és bemutatni. Ez a szeretet két részre különíthető el. Az ember, Ádám és Éva elsőként a feltétlen szeretettel találkozik. Ekkor még nem kell küzdeniük a jutalomért, azaz az örök életért, a teljes harmóniáért. A paradicsomban mindenük megvan. A bűn következtében majd elveszítik ezeket a javakat. Isten könyörületes szeretete azonban újra lehetőséget ad nekik arra, hogy visszatérjenek és újra elnyerjék a teljes boldogságot. Ennek azonban már ára van. Erőfeszítéssel, munkával, hűséggel és a törvények tiszteletével érhetik el ezt az ajándékot. A bűnbeesés előtti állapothoz képest már nem megelőlegezett módon jár a jutalom. Jelen publikáció Isten igen összetett, megbocsátó, tanító szeretetének a bemutatására törekszik. A vizsgálódás elsődleges alapját a Biblia, azon belül a Teremtés könyve adja. Ennek megértésében segítenek a középkori szakrális művészet remekművei is. A tanulmány példaként utal Michelangelo munkáira, de részletesebb műelemzésbe jelen keretek között nem bocsátkozik. Elsődlegesen Isten tanító szándékának bemutatására koncentrál.

Kulcsszavak: Kegyelem, teremtés, tanítás, jutalom