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## *What is Catholic Education?* by Jonathan Beeson

**W**e live in an era of history which is marked by great technological advances. Our world is, as a result, far more connected and far less static than it was for our forbearers. These epochal shifts have certainly affected modern educational theory. In a desire to meet the new challenges of modernity, educators have felt the need to insist on educational reform, and in some cases, educational revolution. It is easy to feel adrift in this sea of educational change, thankfully the Council Fathers of Vatican II had the foresight to guide the Church by addressing the issue of education in *Gravissimum Educationis*. In *Gravissimum Educationis* the Fathers laid out the basic principals of modern Catholic education but they anticipated that their guidelines should be further developed within the Church by ongoing discussion. In response to this call for further reflection, the Vatican and the Bishops of the Church have issued many statements which provide further fullness to the Council's seminal guidelines.

But how does one condense a myriad of lengthy documents into one short essay on the nature of Catholic education? I would hardly know how to do just that except for the wonderful example provided by Archbishop Miller in his little book entitled, *The Holy See's Teaching on Catholic Schools*. My article borrows heavily from the Archbishop's work and I wholeheartedly recommend it to you. Archbishop Miller makes the case that, as the Church has its essential marks (one, holy, catholic, and apostolic), there are essential marks that make a Catholic school distinctively Catholic. In this essay, I propose that there are five marks that distinguish Catholics schools from their non Catholic counterparts, and, as Headmaster, I write this essay as a reminder to myself of how the school should be directed to accomplish its God ordained mission. I hope the essay will be useful to you as you think through the benefits of offering your child a Catholic education.



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## A Catholic School has Christ as its Teacher

The Catholic school is guided by the light of Christ which “gives light to everyone who comes into the world.” (Jn 1:9). Christ himself is, as Archbishop Miller suggests, “the Teacher of the Catholic School.” This wonderful declaration is no mere sentiment for Christ is fully present—body, soul and divinity—to our students every hour of every day in the Most Holy Eucharist. With Christ in our midst, a Catholic School offers something that other schools simply can not offer. Through the Mass and Eucharistic Adoration, Christ is present to our young people and speaks to their hearts and minds, calling them to the higher life. Our teachers also know Christ’s influence and are inspired to co labor with our Lord in the moral and spiritual formation of the students. But all—as mere creatures—are helped by Christ’s ever present grace to live the life which their baptism entails, becoming the saints that they are destined to become.

Inspired by Christ’s sacramental presence, Catholic Schools are apostolic. “Apostolic” comes from a Greek word which means “sent”. Catholic schools have been sent, by our Lord, to work within the Church. A Catholic school is a unique organism within the Church in that it is the ecclesial locus for demonstrating the harmony of faith and reason. But this internal apostolic mission has an outward focus, however, as Christ sends Catholic students out to play their part in evangelizing the world with the Gospel of Christ.

## A Catholic School is Founded on a Christian Anthropology

All educational institutions are governed by assumptions, whether explicit or implicit, about human nature and what constitutes a good life. Educators want to teach children how to live a fully actualized life. People tend to assume that a person will be most happy if he or she lives in a way that is consonant with their nature. The pressing issues of education, then, concern the definitions supplied to “human nature” and “personhood.” Of course, not all educators are working with the same definitions. Different



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educational goals, then, emerge between them. Informed by faith and reason, Catholic educators intend to offer an education that “fits” with the way God has created each and every student.

Among the created order, human beings are unique as personal beings. To be a person is to be something more than a mere collection of matter; it is also to be something more than a mere animal. Human beings, unlike the rest of the terrestrial order, are made in the image of God. This dignity is demonstrated through the unique powers human beings possess. Persons are able to think about transcendental things and are, in a limited but significant manner, able to grasp the truth. Persons are also moral beings, created with a conscience to guide them. Finally, persons qua persons are able to make choices which are truly free. But in addition to being persons, human beings share a common human nature. Individuals do, of course, possess distinct personal backgrounds and temperaments, however, every human being, through the creative work of God, is oriented to the same end, and through an innate evolutionary process, move in a perennial pattern from childhood to adulthood.

Aware of these anthropological structures, Catholic educators insist that good education cultivates human freedom. It is not freedom, however, to be beguiled by error. Truth is essential to genuine human freedom. Every human being, in virtue of God’s design, is naturally oriented towards the Good, the True, and the Beautiful. Authentic teachers recognize this natural orientation and attempt to be an occasion for the student’s discovery of the truth. Authentic teaching is not, then, a heteronomic imposition of authority; it is rather, the intellectual, aesthetic, and spiritual guidance of an experienced and trusted friend. Genuine Education does not strive for conformity; it hopes, rather, to give students “eyes to see and ears to hear” the world around them.

Furthermore, in contrast to radical pluralism, Catholic education insists that all is not equal in areas of intellectual expression. All educators, whether they acknowledge it or not, function *de facto* as cultural and literary critics. Teachers must sift through centuries of literature, history, art and



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philosophy to find that which is most useful for teaching students. But it needs to be said that all educators, *de jure*, have the responsibility to present to students that which is noble and good—i.e. that which leads to their full self actualization. Catholic educators are not, then, primarily interested to present students with an unorganized, plurality of voices; rather, the Catholic teacher points students to that which is perennial. While Catholic educators do recognize and share some of the noble aspirations that inspire pluralist educators (e.g. globalism and ending racism), we firmly believe that education should look to transmit the universal, timeless expressions of human greatness found throughout history and the world as those expression express what is essentially human.

Moral formation is also a hallmark of Catholic education. It hardly “fits” the human condition to offer an education that is supposedly neutral to moral matters. Without moral instruction how then shall we live? Some may think that formal education can ignore instruction in moral issues and focus exclusively on the “three Rs” but such a perspective ignores what is being said to students when moral matters are no longer essential to academic learning. In essence, a subtle—or not so subtle—gesture is made towards relativism as students are encouraged to believe that moral matters are mere opinion and are not made of the hard stuff that comprises the noble disciplines of academic discourse. Furthermore, can such a formal education allow students to see the great significance of the moral issues that confront them, when so little of the students day is left, after their formal education is done, for moral reflection? If education is to train young people for life, how can they afford to spend so much time learning of distant galaxies and planets but so little time intellectually reflecting on those great moral decisions which will affect the quality of their lives. An education which ignores the great moral issues of life simply does not “fit” the human condition.

Finally, Catholics are concerned to educate the “whole man”. Human beings are, unlike the angels, physical creatures; therefore, authentic education is concerned to educate the body as well as the spirit. A physical education that develops habits of wellness is paramount for orienting



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children toward the happiness that God intends for His creatures. As human beings we are also called to play our part in the greater organism of society. Therefore Catholic schools must help the children to become well adjusted young men and women. Education should, then, have the humanizing focus of teaching children basic manners and civility.

### A Catholic School is Animated by a Familial Community

It is from the face a mother that a child first experiences love. This primordial gift continues through the larger community that helps raise the child. Nothing can be more important to human development than love and the trust that emerges from love. Try imagining helpless children raised in a community without love. Without love; there is no trust, and without being able to trust someone, dependant creatures like ourselves wither on the vine and die, scorched by life's oppressive heat.

This dependant facet of the human condition is no accident. The very structure of our being points us to our ultimate dependence upon God. Theologians have noted this aspect of human existence and insisted that the parental relationship is often a child's first introduction to religious faith. Children are prepared to believe in a loving God and the free gift of grace when they have experienced the unmerited love of a parent. Children find it plausible to trust in something they cannot prove or initially understand if they have been reared in an environment were they have had the comfort to implicitly trust in the care of their parents.

According to the Church, Catholic Schools are to be reduplications of the family. Those who are in charge of the school must reduplicate a family ethos of love and trust because such a relational atmosphere is essential to transmittal of knowledge. Children are not computers ready for the downloading information; they are, like you and I, relational beings. Children learn best from teachers they love and respect.



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It is obvious, then, that Catholic school teachers must be of the highest caliber. First and foremost, we are concerned to assist the parents in pass down the Faith to our young students. It is impossible to pass on what one does not have; therefore, Catholic teachers must be men and women devoted to the Faith. It is also important that they feel a call to be educators. Teachers are on a heavenly mission and it is important for them to see their work in that manner. Such a perspective motivates them to sacrificially give of themselves; such love, in turn, calls and inspires students to greatness. A spark is ignited in the soul of a young person by the love and devotion of a teacher when education moves beyond a cold professionalism to *cor ad cor loquitur*, “heart speaking to heart.”

### A Catholic School Curriculum is Shaped by a Catholic World View

The Catholic Faith rejects the modern attempt to relegate theology to the arena of feelings and sentiment. Theology is a science, and, therefore, an academic subject within our institutions. But theology is unique in the prominent role it plays in uncovering the unity of human knowledge. For Catholic educators religion is not a class—although we do have theology classes—religion, is, rather, like the sun as it centers our intellectual perspective and sheds light on all that we know and hope to pass on to our children. Given this fact, Catholic education is most authentic when it presents the unified intellectual vision of a Catholic world-view.

First, Catholic educators attempt to explicate the unity of human intellectual and cultural endeavors through a certain attitude towards the past. Catholic teachers have a healthy respect for the past. Such a perspective is, of course, not uniquely Catholic, but it would be fair to say that this Catholic intellectual orientation stands against the main current of contemporary society. Ever since the reformation and modernity, there has been a pervasive tendency among intellectuals to assume that tradition is something antithetical to the advancement of human knowledge, a Catholic world-view, however, sees tradition as something essential to knowledge. Every thinker is embodied in a particular time and space



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within history and as a result works with the intellectual tools bequeathed to him or her by previous generations. A failure to recognize the embodiment of human thinking allows for extravagant claims regarding intellectual novelty which results in lopsided, fragmented, intellectual paradigms. Such lopsidedness allows revolutionaries to disregard tradition as they are often blind to the goodness of the tradition and their own intellectual shortcomings. Much of the anti-religious sentiments of modernity can be attributed to this blindness. Students need some standards of criticism by which they can evaluate the past. Through the wings of faith and reason, Catholic students are lifted above the limited perspective of personal opinion to see how all intellectual “revolutions”, in so far as they discover genuine insight, are not as breaks with the past but are part of a single trajectory of human achievement.

Second, Catholic educators are committed to demonstrating how the knowledge of reason fits with the knowledge of revelation. The educational motto of “faith and reason” is not one that simply intends to show that faith and reason are not contradictory. While it is important to point out that perceived contradictions are merely apparent contradictions, the primary task of Catholic education is to show that the intellectual quest invariably leads to the answers of revelation. Take mathematics, for example. Mathematical thought itself points to a larger reality than what crass materialism will allow when it thinks of numbers, equations and geometric problems. The self-conscious mathematician must wonder, then, about a transcendental order. It has also been quite fascinating to many that mathematics seems to correspond to the real world. And is it not curious that humanity is able to mediate between the mathematical world and the material world? To the intellect, informed by the contents of the Catholic Faith, these curiosities are hardly mysterious for, through Revelation, we are told that humanity was fashioned in the image of God and as such serves as a mediator between the eternal and temporal order. But physicists also invariably raise theological questions. Theories of origin, such as the Big Bang Theory, elicit the question: why is there something instead of nothing? Furthermore, the necessary conditions of sustainable life in the universe are so complex and minute that, as the



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“Anthropic Principle” suggests, it appears that design and intelligent execution under gird the entire universe. One could, if time permitted, draw similar connections between revelation and reason in other academic subjects (e.g. in the social sciences) but what is important for us to note is that Catholic educators intentionally attempt to make these connections as Catholic education insists on the harmony of faith and reason.

Finally, a Catholic educator prepares young students for receiving the unified conceptual framework of the Catholic world-view through the careful cultivation of the religious imagination. Much of what we see in life as adults is determined by what we expect, or do not expect, to see. The intellectual plausibility structures of mature adults are but the evolved and sophisticated contours of a child’s imagination. Many modern men and women have trouble believing in God or the Catholic faith precisely because their imaginations were truncated and deformed by a pedagogy calculated to make religious conviction appear absurd. History seems to bear witness to the fact that the impulse to believe in God is irradicable but certain types of early childhood education can work against this natural impulse, and, as a result, generate a conflicted adult psyche. It is important then for Catholic educators to choose literature and materials that promote a moral and spiritual imagination consonant with the created order. Of course, children will be exposed to the ambiguity and plurality of the world as they mature in their use of reason, but they will find it hard in their adult lives to conceptually embrace the Christian world view unless we first present that world view to their young minds in a non conceptual, imaginative format.

In summary, students are to be presented a holistic picture of life. “Specialization” is a distinctive characteristic of and nagging problem for the modern intellectual. In contrast to an education that offers students the truncated perspectives of a fragmented intellectual outlook; Catholic educators insist on the unity of knowledge and strive to explicate that unity—in some measure—to their students.



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## A Catholic School is a Work of Charity

The cost of Catholic Education has drastically changed during the second half of the twentieth century. The loss of the Religious in our schools and the overhead that ensued from that loss are partly to blame for these rising costs. The shortage of Religious men and women is a global problem, however, the situation for education is particularly difficult in our country, as anti-religious sentiment prohibits parents from affordably educating their children as they deem necessary. In many states, the Blaine Amendment, and other such legislation, prohibits tax dollars to be allocated in a manner consonant with the religious and parental wishes of America's Catholic and religious citizens.

Especially hurt are the religious working and middle class who are unable to afford the rising costs of private education. The economic situation is, according to Vatican, "of great concern to those responsible for Catholic education" for if we are not careful we "run the risk of giving a counter-witness (to the Gospel) by admitting a majority of children from wealthier families." The Bishops of North America have, furthermore, made it clear that special consideration is to be given to Catholic immigrants who come into our country seeking a better life. A student of American Catholicism must agree with Christopher Dawson: "American Catholicism owes everything—even its existence—to the immigrants." The Catholic dioceses in America will certainly receive much more than they give, when they intentionally try to serve Catholic immigrants. Currently in America, we are witnessing an enormous wave of Catholic immigration from Latin America. Has our Lady of Guadalupe sent to us, missionaries to train in our schools for the re-evangelization of our secular society?

The Church is lobbying to correct the anti-religious biases in our culture that stifle Catholic education. However, it is incumbent upon the laity to support their Archdiocesan schools. As we give to this important mission of the Church, we fulfill Christ's call to make "disciples of all mankind."



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## Conclusion

These five marks, which comprise an authentic Catholic education, will always guide the day to day operations of St Theresa Academy. In *Gravissimum Educationis*, loosely translated, “the paramount importance of education,” the Fathers of Vatican II insist that we embark on something quite significant when we educate a child. If education was simply preparing a child for a career, if it was simply the transferal of data, then, one might chide the Fathers for such lofty language; but children are eternal souls, and education is nothing other than preparing them for their life with God. With these sacred souls in our care, we look to the constant intercession of our dear patroness, Saint Theresa of Liseaux. May God bless us in this great work.

