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TEACH, WITNESS AND  
ADVOCATE:  
Catholic Education's Response to Secularism

by Patrick J. Reilly

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THE CARDINAL  
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Promoting and Defending  
Faithful Catholic Education

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# Teach, Witness and Advocate:

## Catholic Education's Response to Secularism

by Patrick J. Reilly

### Introduction

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The Catholic Church in the United States today faces serious challenges arising from secularism and an increasingly secular society, including growing threats to religious freedom. But while Catholic education is a victim of these threats and can even—when done poorly—make matters worse, **faithful Catholic education must be embraced as a key solution to the challenges that secularism poses to Christianity and as a primary means of the New Evangelization.**

While the entire Church should renew its appreciation for the essential role of faithful Catholic education, it is most urgently the Catholic educator's role to proclaim, defend, and witness to the value of Catholic education. The Catholic educator's response to secularism should be characterized by *resistance* to violations of religious freedom and *public witness* to the Faith and to the integrity of Catholic education—and not by compliance and silence.

Catholic educators cannot rely simply on legal and public policy efforts to preserve their institutions. Even if the Church and her allies successfully fend off current threats to religious organizations in the courts or legislatures, the underlying crises of truth and faith are likely to persist, laying the groundwork for new violations of natural and constitutional freedoms.

Moreover, Catholic educators must not be tempted into silent compliance, even if they are able to identify moral and legal options for operating under government coercion. Any action or commitment of the Catholic educator must avoid the risk of scandal and—even more—should have the intention and effect of teaching truth by explanation and example. Catholic educators should vigorously assert their rights in a free society and use every available means within their competency and mission to defend the integrity of Catholic education.

Above all, **Catholic educators can most effectively respond to secularism by better fulfilling their authentic, divinely inspired mission to evangelize by forming the human person.** They do so in their teaching to students and others, research and writing about key moral and social concerns, public witness to the Faith, advocacy for Catholic education, defense of the rightful autonomy of Catholic education from the state, and solidarity with others in each of these tasks.

It may seem an odd position that Catholic education is proposed as a *solution* to actual and threatened violations of religious freedom, when it is most certainly a *victim* of those same violations. In an increasingly secular society, actors in all levels of government are attempting or threatening to abuse their powers and violate religious freedom in a manner that could damage, cripple, and ultimately bar Catholic education—including Catholic homeschools, schools, colleges, and universities. Especially with regard to sexuality and gender, marriage, the

sacredness of human life, and human dignity, a growing divide between Catholic teaching and social mores has motivated public policymakers and courts to show increasing insensitivity and even hostility to the demands of the Catholic faith upon believers and the fidelity that is necessary to Catholic apostolates and ministries.

Not only do these violations conflict with a school or college's institutional commitment to a Catholic identity, but they also interfere with the ability of Catholic educators to teach and witness to the Faith. In this sense, the impact of religious freedom violations is especially damaging to Catholic education.

Moreover, not only is Catholic education a victim of the growing threats to religious freedom, but where our Catholic institutions are marked by infidelity and indifference to their mission, Catholic education is also a *contributing cause* of this crisis. The abuses of religious freedom—and secularism generally—are rooted in ignorance, misunderstanding, and often hostility to the truth about man and God. This secular confusion both feeds and is fed by the scandal of Christian infidelity and poor catechesis and theology; many Catholics, together with many other Americans, are experiencing what Pope Benedict described as a “contemporary ‘crisis of truth’ [that] is rooted in a ‘crisis of faith’”.<sup>1</sup>

Weakened Catholic identity and dissent within our very own Catholic institutions—particularly many colleges and universities—sow greater confusion within the Church and society. They also invite further encroachment upon the freedoms of religious institutions, because non-Catholics are understandably suspicious of the Church's sincerity when she seeks legal exemption from government policies and regulations in order to uphold certain Catholic teachings and practices, but Catholic institutions and educators openly dissent from those same teachings and practices.

Nevertheless—or perhaps precisely because of the confusion that has crept into many Catholic educational institutions—faithful Catholic education is a necessary and primary solution for the Church in facing the challenges of secularism. **Catholic education, when done rightly, is that apostolate of the Church that seeks and communicates truth in the light of faith, forming the human person to know, love, and serve God.** That mission is urgently needed today.

According to *Ex corde Ecclesiae*, the 1990 apostolic constitution on Catholic universities, Catholic educators serve both the Church and society and fulfill their mission to teach “the whole truth about nature, man and God”.<sup>2</sup> Especially in higher education, they engage in writing and research “so that the united endeavor of intelligence and faith will enable people to come to the full measure of their humanity, created in the image and likeness of God, renewed even more marvelously, after sin, in Christ, and called to shine forth in the light of the Spirit.”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Pope Benedict XVI, “Address to Catholic Educators at The Catholic University of America” (April 17, 2008). “Only through faith can we freely give our assent to God's testimony and acknowledge Him as the transcendent guarantor of the truth He reveals.”

<sup>2</sup> Saint Pope John Paul II, *Ex corde Ecclesiae* (1990), 4.

<sup>3</sup> *Ex corde Ecclesiae*, 5.

The Vatican Congregation for Catholic Education has taught that Catholic education is “a privileged means of promoting the formation of the whole man” and an instrument of evangelization, which is the Church’s mission in this world.<sup>4</sup> Pope Francis has said that education is “key, key, key” to evangelization.<sup>5</sup> Pope Benedict XVI said that Catholic education is “an essential resource for the new evangelization,” while cautioning that Catholic colleges especially “need to reaffirm their distinctive identity in fidelity to their founding ideals and the Church’s mission in service of the Gospel.” He added, “It is no exaggeration to say that providing young people with a sound education in the faith represents the most urgent internal challenge facing the Catholic community in your country.”<sup>6</sup> Saint Pope John Paul II said, “In the overall work of the new evangelization, the educational sector occupies a place of honor.”<sup>7</sup>

At a time when the New Evangelization has a limited focus on casting its nets wide but shallow, the Church should place increased priority on the deep, integral formation that Catholic education provides. **Catholic education, more than any other means of evangelization, helps ensure a lifelong commitment to the Faith and preparation of our young people for sainthood in an increasingly difficult and often hostile culture.**

Catholic education, then, is itself an appropriate and necessary response to the contemporary crises of truth and faith that are the bases for a secularized culture and violations of religious freedom. Nothing short of a substantially increased effort to educate Catholics in the Faith may be sufficient to protect against the dangers of a culture that is rapidly becoming what Blessed John Henry Newman called “simply irreligious.”<sup>8</sup>

## **First Response: Teach**

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**T**he principal duty of the Catholic educator is to teach, and the Church in American society is in great need of this service. Too much of education is no longer grounded in truth and “the fount of truth,”<sup>9</sup> and young people are lacking in the most human faculties of reasoning and communication.

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<sup>4</sup> Vatican Congregation for Catholic Education, *The Catholic School* (1977), 8-9.

<sup>5</sup> Antonio Spadaro, S.J., “Wake Up the World! Conversation with Pope Francis about the Religious Life,” *La Civiltà Cattolica*, 2014 | 3-17.

<sup>6</sup> Pope Benedict XVI, “Address to the Bishops of the United States of America (Regions X-XIII) on Their *Ad Limina* Visit” (May 5, 2012).

<sup>7</sup> Saint Pope John Paul II, *Ecclesia in America* (1999), 71.

<sup>8</sup> Blessed John Henry Newman, *The Catholic Sermons of Cardinal Newman*, ed. C.S. Dessain (London: Burns and Oates, 1957), 121-123. “I think that the trials which lie before us are such as would appall and make dizzy even such courageous hearts as St. Athanasius, St. Gregory I, or St. Gregory VII. And they would confess that, dark as the prospect of their own day was to them severally, ours has a darkness different in kind from any that has been before it.”

<sup>9</sup> *Ex corde Ecclesiae*, 1.

Catholic education forms students intellectually and in the Faith, and prepares them for service to society and for lifelong witness to the Faith. In each respect, Catholic educators can fulfill their mission in ways that respond to secularism and its root causes.

A Catholic educator's objective is to educate the student—to form the student intellectually and in relationship to God. According to the 1977 Vatican document, *The Catholic School*, Catholic education's "task is fundamentally a synthesis of culture and faith, and also of faith and life: the first is reached by integrating all the different aspects of human knowledge through the subjects taught, in the light of the Gospel; the second in the growth of the virtues characteristic of the Christian."<sup>10</sup>

Saint Pope John Paul II said the vision of Catholic education has "its origin in the person of Christ and its roots in the teachings of the Gospel. Catholic schools must seek not only to impart a quality education from the technical and professional standpoint, but also and above all provide for the integral formation of the human person."<sup>11</sup>

The endeavor to interweave reason and faith, which has become the heart of individual subjects, makes for unity, articulation, and coordination, bringing forth within what is learnt in school a Christian vision of the world, of life, of culture, and of history. In the Catholic school's educational project there is no separation between time for learning and time for formation, between acquiring notions and growing in wisdom. The various school subjects do not present only knowledge to be attained, but also values to be acquired and truths to be discovered.<sup>12</sup>

The Catholic college or university continues this formation. *Ex corde Ecclesiae* says that students participate in "a continuing reflection in the light of the Catholic faith upon the growing treasury of human knowledge".<sup>13</sup> Their education combines "academic and professional development with formation in moral and religious principles and the social teachings of the Church".<sup>14</sup>

Catholic education has not only an inward concern for the student's own development, but also an outward concern for society and its evangelization. According to the Vatican II declaration *Gravissimum Educationis*, Catholic education aspires that students "learn not only how to bear witness to the hope that is in them (cf. Peter 3:15) but also how to help in the Christian formation of the world that takes place when natural powers viewed in the full consideration of man redeemed by Christ contribute to the good of the whole society".<sup>15</sup> And *Ex corde Ecclesiae*

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<sup>10</sup> *The Catholic School*, 37.

<sup>11</sup> *Ecclesia in America*, 71.

<sup>12</sup> Vatican Congregation for Catholic Education, *The Catholic School on the Threshold of the Third Millennium* (1997), 14.

<sup>13</sup> *Ex corde Ecclesiae*, 13.

<sup>14</sup> *Ex corde Ecclesiae*, General Norms, Art. 4, §5.

<sup>15</sup> Pope Paul VI, *Gravissimum Educationis* (1965), 2.

demands that graduates should be prepared to “devote themselves to the service of society and of the Church, but at the same time prepared to give the witness of their faith to the world.”<sup>16</sup>

**Catholic education responds to secularism by better ensuring that future generations of Americans know God, know the Catholic faith, and are capable of defending the Faith and religious freedom.** This simply fulfills the teaching mission of Catholic education, already embraced by faithfully Catholic schools, colleges, and universities.

But where is the evidence that students in Catholic schools, colleges, and universities today are graduating with adequate knowledge of the Faith and are living in fidelity to the Church’s moral and social teachings? If Christian formation is the heart of Catholic education, it should also be the central focus of student outcomes measurements and periodic assessments to better ensure the results that we promise, followed by intensified efforts to improve those results. This is a challenge even to the most faithful Catholic institutions, which need better instruments to document their degree of success in the formation to which they are publicly committed.

Do all of our Catholic schools, colleges, and universities put at least as much emphasis on Christian formation as on academic achievement and career preparation? Is this reflected in our standards, curricula, course plans, choice of textbooks, extracurricular programs, and policies? In our teachers and our hiring priorities? In our celebration of the Sacraments, prayer, sacramental preparation, and other activities? Are opportunities for formation simply made available to students, or are they integral to the student experience, with due respect for freedom of conscience? Especially on college campuses, is there an implicit relativism that suggests a false equality between Christian formation and the practice of other religions?

With particular relevance to contemporary culture, a Catholic education—in partnership with parents—forms young people in sexual purity and provides understanding of the Church’s teaching with regard to sexuality, marriage, human dignity, and the sanctity of human life. Today these truths are distorted and often attacked in American society, encouraging sympathy for laws that offend morality and violate the rights of Catholic institutions to uphold Catholic teachings. Do the graduates of Catholic education embrace sexual morality and the true nature of marriage, counter to contemporary American culture? Do they embrace the Church’s teaching on the sanctity of human life and the dignity of the human person? Note that these are more than questions of institutional commitment to the faith; they require commitment to achieving outcomes and the promise of a sure formation of students.

How, then, does Catholic education make the further claim to prepare students for evangelization, to “give witness of their faith to the world”? This objective requires inspiration and skills preparation that are largely absent from most Catholic school, college, and university programs of study. This requires our attention, especially at a time when the Church is calling the laity to a New Evangelization.

**Beyond teaching students, the extraordinary challenges facing Catholic education today should inspire educators to teach others in the Church and community, thereby confronting the ignorance that feeds violations of religious freedom.** The Church proclaims

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<sup>16</sup> *Ex corde Ecclesiae*, 20.

the benefits of Catholic education for both the student's formation and "the common good of societies." According to *Ex corde Ecclesiae*, the Catholic college or university is committed to dialogue with culture and to be an "effective instrument of cultural progress for individuals as well as for society."<sup>17</sup> Catholic educators should consider ways of making their teaching available to ever-widening audiences, including non-Catholics, in ways that simultaneously benefit their institutions.

The Church's efforts to make use of new technologies and methods of communication suggest ways that Catholic educators can share their teaching with society without significant distraction from the priority of teaching students. Professors and teachers can be held out to news media as experts, providing a Catholic perspective when possible. They can be publicly visible as bloggers and columnists, television and radio guests, and speakers at public events. They can share classroom materials and even videos in all subjects to help adult Catholics and others learn what is presented to students, especially with regard to the integration of the Faith. All of this enhances the reputation of Catholic institutions while increasing appreciation for the formation provided in Catholic education.

The secularization of American society invites Catholic educators to more vigorously seek ways of using their expertise for catechesis and evangelization in the community. New apostolates or associations of educators joined together for this purpose would be an effective and valuable service to the Church and society.

## **Second Response: Research and Writing on Key Moral and Social Concerns?**

**I**n addition to teaching, Catholic college educators often make important contributions by their research and writing. Focusing this work on the falsehoods that lie at the root of secularism and on the tragic consequences of secularism is a much-needed service of Catholic education today.

In elementary and secondary education, this begins with the "critical, systematic transmission of culture in the light of faith" in Catholic schools.<sup>18</sup> Educators and students are called to examine culture and to consider how it should be transformed in the light of the Gospels. This can be carried outside the classroom through social activities, events, lectures, debates, the arts, and other means of interacting with the surrounding culture.

But it is especially in Catholic higher education that educators are called to writing and research that serves the needs of the Church. Despite observations that the West has already entered a "post-Christian" age, we are reminded of the hope expressed by Saint John Paul II in *Ex corde Ecclesiae*, that Catholic universities around the world:

...are for me a lively and promising sign of the fecundity of the Christian mind in the heart of every culture. They give me a well-founded hope for a new flowering of Christian culture in the rich and varied context of our changing times, which certainly

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<sup>17</sup> *Ex corde Ecclesiae*, 32.

<sup>18</sup> *The Catholic School*, 49.

face serious challenges but which also bear so much promise under the action of the Spirit of truth and love.<sup>19</sup>

*Ex corde Ecclesiae* places special emphasis on the role of research in the Catholic university to help “discern and evaluate both the aspirations and the contradictions of modern culture, in order to make it more suited to the total development of individuals and peoples.”<sup>20</sup>

University research will seek to discover the roots and causes of the serious problems of our time, paying special attention to their ethical and religious dimensions. If need be, a Catholic University must have the courage to speak uncomfortable truths which do not please public opinion, but which are necessary to safeguard the authentic good of society.

A specific priority is the need to examine the predominant values and norms of modern society and culture in a Christian perspective, and the responsibility to try to communicate to society those ethical and religious principles which give full meaning to human life.<sup>21</sup>

**Catholic educators, especially in higher education, could support the Church’s response to secularism and its root causes by engaging in a variety of research and writing projects.**

Already some of the best arguments for religious freedom and its legal defense have come out of universities, including some Catholic institutions. Much more can be done to marshal college and university resources—the most precious of which is the expertise of faculty members—to provide intellectual support, gather valuable information, and analyze the strategies and activities of the Church’s many apostolates.

In particular, the violations of religious freedom impel Catholic educators to place priority on research that directly supports efforts to defend the Church’s institutions or addresses the needs of apostolates and ministries that are focused on the issues central to most violations: sexuality and gender, marriage, the sacredness of human life, and human dignity. While much valuable research has already been provided by professors in Catholic colleges and universities, it cannot be said that their faculties are, as a whole, as committed to this work as the times require.

In his *First Things* article a few months ago, proposing various preparations for the 2015 Synod on the Family, George Weigel provided an example of the myriad ways scholars could provide valuable support for the Church’s mission. He wrote:

More data should be brought forward—and [it is] abundantly available—to demonstrate that the Church’s idea of permanent and fruitful marriage, like the Church’s teaching on the appropriate means of regulating fertility, makes for happier marriages, happier families, happier children, and more-benevolent societies than does the deconstruction of marriage and the family that is inundating the West like a tsunami. In teaching the truth about marriage, about love, and about the complementarity of the sexes, the Catholic

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<sup>19</sup> *The Catholic School*, 2.

<sup>20</sup> *The Catholic School*, 45.

<sup>21</sup> *The Catholic School*, 32-33.

Church is proposing the path to happiness and human flourishing, not the road to repression and misery. It should make a bold, data-driven case in defense of that teaching, which is a defense of the dignity of the human person.<sup>22</sup>

It is this sort of “bold, data-driven” research and argument that is needed from Catholic scholars to address not only issues concerning marriage, but all the issues that feed a cultural disdain for the Catholic Church and are consequences of secularism.

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### Third Response: Public Witness to the Faith

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Catholic educators are called to be witnesses to the Faith. That witness is greatly needed today, both inside and outside the classroom.

Catholic education, by definition, assumes fidelity to the magisterium of the Church. According to Canon Law, “The instruction and education in a Catholic school must be grounded in the principles of Catholic doctrine. . . .”<sup>23</sup> *Ex corde Ecclesiae* requires that a Catholic college or university “informs and carries out its research, teaching, and all other activities with Catholic ideals, principles, and attitudes. . . . Catholic teaching and discipline are to influence all university activities, while the freedom of conscience of each person is to be fully respected. Any official action of commitment of the university is to be in accord with its Catholic identity.”<sup>24</sup>

Such fidelity depends most heavily on the witness of the educators themselves. In schools, says Canon Law, “teachers are to be outstanding in correct doctrine and integrity of life.”<sup>25</sup> In colleges and universities, requires *Ex corde Ecclesiae*, “all Catholic teachers are to be faithful to, and all other teachers are to respect, Catholic doctrine and morals in their research and teaching.”<sup>26</sup>

**There is great value to the Church and society in the very example of Catholic educators who remain steadfastly committed to Christian formation in complete fidelity to the magisterium of the Church**—especially when such formation is contrary to the norms of secular culture and defies government threats and laws violating religious freedom. Such educators provide an important public witness to the authentic purpose and value of Catholic schools, colleges, and universities. Such witness creates opportunities to explain and demonstrate to policymakers and the American public why many Catholic institutions are unwilling to compromise their fidelity to Catholic teaching when faced with government coercion.

This witness is all the more important amid the current crisis of Catholic identity within Catholic education. Many institutions today fail in significant and public ways to uphold their mission,

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<sup>22</sup> George Weigel, “Between Two Synods – An Analysis of the Challenge of this Particular Catholic Movement,” *First Things* (January 2015).

<sup>23</sup> Code of Canon Law, 803 §2.

<sup>24</sup> *Ex corde Ecclesiae*, General Norms, Art. 2, §2, §4.

<sup>25</sup> Code of Canon Law, 803 §2.

<sup>26</sup> *Ex corde Ecclesiae*, General Norms, Art. 4, §3.

thereby promoting confusion and doubt regarding the necessity of freedoms that protect religious education. By contrast, faithfully Catholic schools, colleges, and universities can be effective and much-needed models of Catholic education within the Church and society, demonstrating why religious freedom remains valuable and necessary to preserving their integrity.

There have been substantial efforts in recent decades to strengthen the Catholic identity of schools, colleges, and universities—and also to establish new, lay-directed schools and colleges that are often extraordinary in the formation provided to students—but the present threats increase the urgency for such efforts. The Church is in great need of their witness and their courage to stand against violations of religious freedom and protect the integrity of Catholic education. Those institutions that do so may be weakened financially and in their ability to compete for students and employees; the Church should not abandon them to that fate, but should **substantially increase support for such institutions in recognition of their great importance and with gratitude for their example.**

#### **Fourth Response: Defense of the Rightful Autonomy of Catholic Education from the State**

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**I**nherently connected to the mission of the Catholic educator is the obligation to explain and, when necessary, to defend that mission. This is greatly needed today, amid increasing government threats to religious freedom.

Catholic educators provide a vital service not only to the Church, but as Pope Benedict said to American educators in 2008, they “truly serve society”.<sup>27</sup> The benefits to both Church and society need to be proclaimed loudly in defense against the threats to educators’ ability to provide authentic Catholic teaching and formation. Catholic educators should appeal to the Church for her public witness to the value of Catholic education, but primary responsibility rests upon Catholic educators themselves to more convincingly argue their place in the Church and society and to celebrate their contributions.

Within the Church, not only does Catholic education suffer from declining enrollment and financial hardship in elementary and secondary schools, but there appears to be declining appreciation for the unique benefits of Catholic education at all levels. This is greatly exacerbated by the crisis of Catholic identity in Catholic education, with many Catholics no longer aware of the significant impact that an authentic Catholic education can have for a young person. **A vigorous defense of traditional Catholic education and proposals for its renewal are urgently needed.** Catholic educators can also do much to help Catholics better understand and appreciate what they do and why it has such great importance for the Christian formation of young Catholics.

In addition, **the case must be made more convincingly for the rights of Catholic educators amid the pluralism of American society.** Again citing the Vatican document, *The Catholic School*:

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<sup>27</sup> Pope Benedict XVI, “Address to Catholic Educators at The Catholic University of America” (April 17, 2008).

The Church upholds the principle of a plurality of school systems in order to safeguard her objectives in the face of cultural pluralism. In other words, she encourages the co-existence and, if possible, the cooperation of diverse educational institutions which will allow young people to be formed by value judgments based on a specific view of the world and to be trained to take an active part in the construction of a community through which the building of society itself is promoted.

Thus, while policies and opportunities differ from place to place, the Catholic school has its place in any national school system. By offering such an alternative, the Church wishes to respond to the obvious need for cooperation in a society characterized by cultural pluralism. Moreover, in this way she helps to promote that freedom of teaching which champions and guarantees freedom of conscience and the parental right to choose the school best suited to parents' educational purpose.

...In fact, as the State increasingly takes control of education and establishes its own so-called neutral and monolithic system, the survival of those natural communities, based on a shared concept of life, is threatened. Faced with this situation, the Catholic school offers an alternative which is in conformity with the wishes of the members of the community of the Church.<sup>28</sup>

Included in this is a defense of the rights of parents in a free society to direct the education of their children and to choose authentic Catholic education that is not compromised by government mandate. Saint Pope John Paul II wrote in *Ecclesia in America*:

To carry out [her] tasks, the Church in America requires a degree of freedom in the field of education; this is not to be seen as a privilege but as a right, in virtue of the evangelizing mission entrusted to the Church by the Lord. Furthermore, parents have a fundamental and primary right to make decisions about the education of their children; consequently, Catholic parents must be able to choose an education in harmony with their religious convictions. The function of the State in this area is subsidiarity; the State has the duty "to ensure that education is available to all and to respect and defend freedom of instruction. A State monopoly in this area must be condemned as a form of totalitarianism which violates the fundamental rights which it ought to defend, especially the right of parents to provide religious education for their children. The family is the place where the education of the person primarily takes place."<sup>29</sup>

The place of Catholic colleges and universities in American society must also be vigorously promoted and defended. According to *Ex corde Ecclesiae*:

Catholic Universities join other private and public Institutions in serving the public interest through higher education and research; they are one among the variety of different types of institution that are necessary for the free expression of cultural diversity, and they are committed to the promotion of solidarity and its meaning in society and in the world. Therefore they have the full right to expect that civil society

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<sup>28</sup> *The Catholic School*, 13-14, 20.

<sup>29</sup> *Ecclesia in America*, 71.

and public authorities will recognize and defend their institutional autonomy and academic freedom...<sup>30</sup>

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### **Fifth Response: Solidarity with Others in Responding to Secularism**

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**M**y final suggestion is for increased collaboration both within and without the Catholic Church in pursuing these tasks. In all of this, the Catholic educator is united with the Church and others who seek the common good. Collaboration should be desired and invited to increase the effect of the educator's efforts and to promote Christian unity and charity.

The Code of Canon Law states that the Church's bishops have "the duty of arranging everything so that all the faithful have a Catholic education,"<sup>31</sup> "to establish and direct schools,"<sup>32</sup> to consent to use of the label Catholic,<sup>33</sup> and to "watch over" and regulate Catholic education.<sup>34</sup> In higher education, according to *Ex corde Ecclesiae*:

Bishops have a particular responsibility to promote Catholic Universities, and especially to promote and assist in the preservation and strengthening of their Catholic identity, including the protection of their Catholic identity in relation to civil authorities. This will be achieved more effectively if close personal and pastoral relationships exist between University and Church authorities, characterized by mutual trust, close and consistent cooperation, and continuing dialogue.<sup>35</sup>

**Collaboration to promote and defend Catholic education is an important expression of the close relationship between Catholic educators and their bishops.** Catholic educators should communicate frequently with their bishops to ensure the Church's guidance and to encourage support for their protection and mission. The Church should expect educators' vigorous defense of that mission, and educators who courageously engage in self-defense should expect the full support and assistance of their bishops.

Canon law also calls on "the Christian faithful" to "foster Catholic schools, assisting in their establishment and maintenance according to their means,"<sup>36</sup> and to "strive so that in civil society the laws which regulate the formation of youth also provide for their religious and moral education in the schools themselves, according to the conscience of the parents."<sup>37</sup> Also, "the entire ecclesial Community is invited to give its support to Catholic Institutions of higher

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<sup>30</sup> *Ex corde Ecclesiae*, 37.

<sup>31</sup> Code of Canon Law, 794 §1.

<sup>32</sup> Code of Canon Law, 800 §1.

<sup>33</sup> Code of Canon Law, 803 §3.

<sup>34</sup> Code of Canon Law, 806 §1.

<sup>35</sup> *Ex corde Ecclesiae*, 28.

<sup>36</sup> Code of Canon Law, 800 §2.

<sup>37</sup> Code of Canon Law, 799.

education and... in a special way to guard the rights and freedoms of these Institutions in civil society.”<sup>38</sup>

Partnerships with Catholic laity and Catholic apostolates, then, are to be encouraged when confronting violations of religious freedom. Those apostolates that are independently engaged in such efforts should be encouraged to recognize the high priority of preserving faithful Catholic education and supporting its mission as itself necessary to the protection of the rights of the Church.

In fulfilling their mission, **Catholic educators should look especially to other Catholic educators and schools, colleges, and universities for mutual support.** There is a great need for unity and a shared response to government aggression. *Ex corde Ecclesiae* prescribes collaboration among Catholic scholars as “imperative” in university research, emphasizing “various national and international associations.”<sup>39</sup> If existing structures for scholars and institutions do not sufficiently provide the mission-centered support and assistance that is needed for research and communication with the government, American bishops, and Vatican, then the times may call for new associations to meet urgent needs.

Finally, Catholic educators should look to the shared experience and collaboration of scholars and leaders from other religions. In particular, Catholic and other Christian educators share many common concerns, and the latter’s commitment to Christian formation is often very similar to that of the most faithful Catholic schools, colleges, and universities. The Cardinal Newman Society has had much fruitful collaboration especially with Evangelical Christian educators who share most of our concerns about threats to religious freedom. **Cooperation with associations of Christian scholars, schools, colleges, and universities would prove valuable, I am certain.**

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## Conclusion: Resistance and Witness

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**T**he value of Catholic education is reason enough for a vigorous defense and efforts to preserve it, when confronted by secularism and government violations of religious freedom. But to return to an earlier point, survival alone—if it means silent acquiescence to the law—is insufficient and even dangerous, for it would so compromise the mission of Catholic education that it surely would not survive in any authentic form.

That is because the very mission of Catholic education requires assent to the truth and to God, the fount of truth, in all its activities. That calls for so much more than quiet compliance with laws that conflict with Catholic morality. Any government coercion that would compromise Catholic education must be resisted according to the methods and competencies of Catholic educators, in collaboration with each other and with the Church and her allies.

Resistance, however, cannot depend solely or even primarily on legal and public policy responses. Catholic educators must confront secularism by the most effective means possible—that is, by better fulfilling their authentic, divinely inspired mission to evangelize by forming the

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<sup>38</sup> *Ex corde Ecclesiae*, 11.

<sup>39</sup> *Ex corde Ecclesiae*, 35.

human person. In the ways suggested above and more, Catholic educators should be committed to authentic teaching, research and writing about key moral and social concerns, public witness to the Faith, advocacy for Catholic education, defense of the rightful autonomy of Catholic education from the state, and solidarity with others in each of these tasks.

More than ever, the urgency of the times invites Catholic educators to courageously witness to the Faith and to the great value of Catholic education. This witness is demonstrated most clearly in their consistent and perhaps courageous presentation of faithful Catholic education despite growing difficulties. The steadfast support of the Catholic bishops, clergy, religious, and laity to this project will, by God's grace, bring many blessings to the Church and to American society.

**About the Author**

Patrick J. Reilly founded The Cardinal Newman Society in 1993 and serves as President and CEO.