

# Issue Bulletin

Examining Critical Issues in Faithful Catholic Education

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## All Employees Matter in the Mission of Catholic Education

By Dan Guernsey, Ed.D.

In Catholic education<sup>1</sup> it is not just religion teachers but all faculty and staff members who are responsible for the success of the school's religious mission: the complete and integrated formation of students' physical, moral, and intellectual abilities so that they might attain salvation and assist in the well-being of others.<sup>2</sup>

It is evident to most that teachers of religion must be authentic witnesses in both word and deed to the fullness of the Catholic faith. What may be less obvious is how all faculty and staff members contribute to the religious mission. While the impact of different types of employees may vary, an impact nevertheless remains. This is because a Catholic school is a faith-based community where all relationships matter, and all are involved in modeling a Christian worldview in order to fulfill an important part of the school's responsibilities for evangelization and moral formation.

### Community Matters

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“Because its aim is to make man more man, education can be carried out authentically only in a relational and community context,” explains the Congregation for Catholic Education in

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<sup>1</sup> This document focuses on elementary and secondary education. Employees in higher education have similar expectations, but colleges educate and form young adults in a broader, more complex, and less intimate environment. St. John Paul II's *Ex corde Ecclesiae* emphasizes that the responsibility for maintaining and strengthening Catholic identity “is shared in varying degrees by all members of the university community, and therefore calls for the recruitment of adequate university personnel, especially teachers and administrators, who are both willing and able to promote that identity. The identity of a Catholic University is essentially linked to the quality of its teachers and to respect for Catholic doctrine” (Part 2, Art. 4, 1).

<sup>2</sup> Saint Pope Paul VI,; Pope Pius XI, *Divini Illius Magistri* (1929) 7; Congregation for Catholic Education, *The Catholic School* (1977) 26.

*Educating Together in Catholic Schools.*<sup>3</sup> A Catholic educational institution, “because of its identity and its ecclesial roots, ...must aspire to becoming a Christian community, that is, a community of faith, able to create increasingly more profound relations of communion which are themselves educational.”<sup>4</sup>

Not only does it cultivate in the students the cultural values that derive from the Christian vision of reality, but it also involves each one of them in the life of the community, where values are mediated by authentic interpersonal relationships among the various members that form it, and by the individual and community acceptance of them. In this way, the life of communion of the educational community assumes the value of an educational principle, of a paradigm that directs its formational action as a service for the achievement of a culture of communion.<sup>5</sup>

The unique communal nature of a Catholic school is critically important to emphasize because,

Everything that the Catholic educator does in a school takes place within the structure of an educational community, made up of the contacts and the collaboration among all of the various groups — students, parents, teachers, directors, non-teaching staff — that together are responsible for making the school an instrument for integral formation.<sup>6</sup>

This principle of integral formation entails deep appreciation that a student is a complex but unified person made in the image and likeness of God. Integral formation seeks to develop harmoniously the student’s mind, body, and spirit in a Catholic context. Because the environment surrounding a student plays such a critical role in integral formation, Catholic leaders must pay close attention to that environment and the values and beliefs of those hired to create and maintain it.

When Catholic values animate the environment, vision and moral purpose flourish. Some of the conditions necessary to foster and sustain this culture of communion are:

that everyone agree with the educational goals and cooperate in achieving them; that interpersonal relationships be based on love and Christian freedom; that each individual, in daily life, be a witness to Gospel values; that every student be challenged to strive for the highest possible level of formation, both human and Christian.<sup>7</sup>

Relationships, programs, and conditions in conflict with Catholic moral teaching undermine the Christian community and environment necessary to ensure the effective formation of students.

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<sup>3</sup> Congregation for Catholic Education, *Educating Together in Catholic Schools: A Shared Mission Between Consecrated Persons and The Lay Faithful* (2007) 14.

<sup>4</sup> Congregation for Catholic Education (2007) 12.

<sup>5</sup> Congregation for Catholic Education (2007) 39.

<sup>6</sup> Congregation for Catholic Education, *Lay Catholics in Schools: Witnesses to Faith* (1982) 22.

<sup>7</sup> Congregation for Catholic Education, *The Religious Dimension of Education in a Catholic School* (1988) 103.

## All Teachers Matter

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All teachers share in the religious mission of the Catholic school: first, because they are in relationship with the students who are in a unified and integrated program of formation; second, because all academic disciplines participate in the One Truth, who is God.

Catholic schools focus on the complete person, made in God's image and likeness, not just on the mind or on a subject matter. Learning and formation happen concurrently. They are entwined. A teacher cannot separate academic formation from complex integrated human formation. Teachers are not mere functionaries imparting technical information. The Church emphasizes that,

the teacher does not write on inanimate material, but on the very spirits of human beings. The personal relations between the teacher and the students, therefore, assume an enormous importance and are not limited simply to giving and taking. Moreover, we must remember that teachers and educators fulfill a specific Christian vocation and share an equally specific participation in the mission of the Church, to the extent that "it depends chiefly on them whether the Catholic school achieves its purpose."<sup>8</sup>

Everything is connected. Every person and every relationship matters on the path to holiness. These relationships are deeply human and spiritual. They must be respected and used to achieve the wholistic mission entrusted to the teacher by the Church.

While academic disciplines differ in specifics, they all find their source in God. St. John Henry Newman understood that Catholic schools must show students how the truths of different academic disciplines relate to each other so that they illuminate each other and reality, leading to an appreciation for the unity of all truth and to Christ himself. Nothing should be taught in isolation.

A critical proposition is that all pedagogy is to be inspired by Gospel values, and all knowledge to be illuminated by the light of faith.<sup>9</sup> All teachers in all subjects by word and natural example must be able to impart a Christian vision of culture, history, and human experience that is ordered to the news of salvation.<sup>10</sup> There is also in this process of intellectual, spiritual, and cultural development a natural intimacy between the student and teacher, which is powerful and which the Catholic educational institution seeks to harness toward its mission of salvation and service. That intimacy must never result in a student being misled or scandalized in any way.

## All Staff Members Matter

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Students learn to trust and love not only their teachers but also other formators as well, including coaches, extra-curricular program staff, receptionists, librarians, counselors, and nurses. These are

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<sup>8</sup> Congregation for Catholic Education, *The Catholic School on The Threshold of The Third Millennium* (1997) 19.

<sup>9</sup> Saint Pope Paul VI (1965) 4.

<sup>10</sup> Congregation for Catholic Education (1977) 8.

people in authority and service who take care of students; seek their benefit; make them stronger, healthier, and happier; ease their day or ease their struggles; and have a privileged place in the students' lives. It may be in working through an athletic loss, a sickness, or a student activity that a life-changing opening occurs where the student grows in holiness thanks to the insight or encouragement of an adult with privileged access to a student's aspirations, goals, hopes, or dreams. When such privileged access is granted, it is crucial for all such adults to provide in word and deed a stable, coherent, and lived Christian worldview. By doing so, the adult helps the student encounter Christ and thereby grow in virtue and strength.

Even those who have limited formative contact with the students, such as office, maintenance, and cafeteria staff, among others, have a role in the educational institution effectively fulfilling its Catholic mission. This role is important for three reasons: even limited student contact is still contact for potential good or ill; organizations benefit from the basic mission support of all members and are stronger for it; and a Christian community involves everyone, and the behavior of adults impacts those students and other staff members who interact with them.

It is sometimes the case that a maintenance worker or cafeteria worker is the loving and loved heart of a community. Goodness, generosity, kindness, and sanctity are all effusive of themselves, and a gifted and holy adult in any environment will have an outsized, even if unintended, positive impact on others. Additionally, what students see going on around them matters, no matter who is involved. Students may not talk to a maintenance worker about the faith, but they will notice if a maintenance worker is kind, diligent, loyal, faithful, and worthy of imitation. Conversely, they will also notice if the maintenance worker exhibits behaviors that are unkind, rude, lazy, disloyal, or sinful. It is especially important that sinful behavior not be normalized in the community from any source, no matter how intimate the relationship might be with students. Actions and behaviors contrary to Catholic moral teaching harm the community and interfere with evangelization and moral formation.

The dignity of all workers is valued, and part of that dignity and community membership is accountability for advancing the mission to the degree natural for the position—and never detracting from it. Anything less would risk harming authentic community by excluding those who are apparently held in lower esteem or to no standard.

Part of a school's mission is to build its staff in holiness and camaraderie. This in turn positively impacts overall mission effectiveness. When adult co-workers model lives of integrity and encourage each other toward holiness by lived example, the community grows stronger. Such a commitment toward holiness and shared values is what builds community among the faculty and staff, who are the keepers and advancers of the mission to an ever-revolving student body.

## Protecting Children and the Mission

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The faith-based community that is the Catholic school strives to be a type of family where the most innocent children or young adults can be safely raised in the Catholic faith. It is a special training ground and type of spiritual and moral incubator where students can be free to play, pray, and grow in physical and spiritual safety, as they work out their individual salvation in Christ and learn the skills necessary to later go out and evangelize the world. All faculty and staff have a strict responsibility to “do no harm” and avoid scandal, both inside and outside the workplace. A negative or counter-witness to the faith erodes the duty an employee or volunteer has in assisting in the moral development of the children being protected and formed in this privileged environment—so critical to the future of the Church and the world.

It would be unacceptable for employees who disagree with Catholic moral teaching to use their relationships with students to advance that disagreement or bring Church teaching into question or disrepute. It would be the height of what Pope Francis has called “ideological colonization”<sup>11</sup> for an employee to allow their privileged and powerful influence over students to in any way lead those students away from the Catholic faith and closer to the employee’s competing vision or competing morality.

## Conclusion

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Because the mission of Catholic education is ordered to a difficult, sensitive, and comprehensive end—the complete and integrated formation of student’s minds, bodies and souls, so that they might attain salvation and assist in the well-being of others—the entire faculty and staff in an educational institution must be ordered toward this end. It is not accomplished simply by teaching discrete subject matter in isolated classes. It is not accomplished by remaining aloof from the students. It can only be effectively accomplished with the entire community, in communion with each other and God. The education is not only provided in the classroom, but also the hallways, the sports field, the locker room, and the cafeteria. This formative environment must be marked by a deep, permeating unity of purpose and conduct among the faculty and staff who are dedicated to the mission of Catholic education.

*Dan Guernsey, Ed.D., has 30 years of experience in Catholic education at the collegiate level as an associate professor, dean, and president and at the K-12 level as a teacher and principal. He is a Senior Fellow at The Cardinal Newman Society, which promotes and defends faithful Catholic education.*

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<sup>11</sup> Elise Harris, “Pope: Ideological Colonization Is ‘Blasphemy’ that Leads to Persecution,” Catholic News Agency (Nov. 22, 2017) at <https://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/pope-ideological-colonization-is-blasphemy-that-leads-to-persecution-33704>.