

Issue Bulletin

Examining Critical Issues in Faithful Catholic Education

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Community Matters to a Catholic School's Mission

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It is through the Catholic Church and its mission of salvation and evangelization that the Catholic school receives its mandate to form students in the faith and life of the Gospel, bringing them into communion with the Church and the Holy Trinity. The Church holds the ultimate truth in faith and life and charges her Catholic schools with sharing that truth.

A well-researched¹ and essential² means of forming students in this truth is the establishment of a Christian community, rich and prominent in the transmission of a Catholic faith and culture in which values, beliefs, and attitudes are conveyed and aid in the integral formation of students.³ This faith-based community is critical in Catholic education, because the community is not

¹ See John Convey, "Perceptions of Catholic Identity: Views of Catholic School Administrators and Teachers," *Catholic Education: A Journal of Inquiry and Practice*, Vol. 16, No. 1 (2012) 187-214; also see James Coleman and Thomas Hoffa, *Public and Private High Schools: The Impact of Communities* (New York: Basic Books, 1987).

² See Congregation for Catholic Education, *Educating Together in Catholic Schools: A Shared Mission Between Consecrated Persons and the Lay Faithful* (2007): "Communion is, therefore, the 'essence' of the Church, the foundation and source of its mission of being in the world, the home and the school of communion, to lead all men and women to enter ever more profoundly into the mystery of Trinitarian communion and, at the same time, to extend and strengthen internal relations within the human community" (10). Also see Congregation for the Clergy, *General Directory for Catechesis* (1997): "Catechetical pedagogy will be effective to the extent that the Christian community becomes a point of concrete reference for the faith journey of individuals. This happens when the community is proposed as a source, locus and means of catechesis. Concretely, the community becomes a visible place of faith-witness. It provides for the formation of its members. It receives them as the family of God. It constitutes itself as the living and permanent environment for growth in the faith" (151).

³ Congregation for Catholic Education, *The Catholic School* (1977), "...the school as a place of integral formation by means of a systematic and critical assimilation of culture" (26).

simply a sociological grouping but also a formative and educative means for student development.⁴

Community Is Essential to Catholic Schools

The desire for community is part of human nature. Made in the image and likeness of God, who is Himself a communion of persons, man is made for communion with both God and with others. As explained in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, “The desire for God is written in the human heart, because man is created by God and for God; and God never ceases to draw man to himself” (#27). Imaging God, man is also made for love, which includes friendship with others. It is through these divinely ordered relationships that man comes to realize his identity and his calling. It is through “mutual service and dialogue with his brethren, [that] man develops his potential; he... responds to his vocation” (#1879).

Community is part of integral formation. The adage “A man is known by the company he keeps” highlights the influence a community environment can have. Catholic schools recognize this and seek to ensure, “From the first moment that a student sets foot in a Catholic school, he or she ought to have the impression of entering a new environment, one illumined by the light of faith, and having its own unique characteristics.”⁵

Community acts as a facilitator of integral formation, the development of a student’s intellectual, moral, emotional, physical, and spiritual faculties. As such, Catholic education must be composed of faith-based educators and believers who are intentionally focused on the development of a student’s heart, mind, and soul⁶ through constant reference to the Gospel message, the building of community, and service.⁷ According to the Congregation for Catholic Education:

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.⁸

Parents, by their own choice, agree to partner with the educational institution for the holistic development of their children. They too help form this unique community, “animated by the

⁴ United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *To Teach as Jesus Did* (1972) 23, 108. Also see *Educating Together in Catholic Schools: A Shared Mission* (2007): “Because its aim is to make man more man, education can be carried out authentically only in a relational and community context” (12).

⁵ Congregation for Catholic Education, *The Religious Dimension of Education in a Catholic School* (1988) 27.

⁶ Congregation for Catholic Education, *Lay Catholics in Schools: Witnesses to Faith* (1982) 15.

⁷ United States Conference of Catholic Bishops 13-32.

⁸ Congregation for Catholic Education (1982) 22.

Gospel spirit of freedom and charity, to help youth grow according to the new creatures they were made through baptism” as they develop all the integral facets of their personalities.⁹

Community transmits values. “Mindful of the fact that man has been redeemed by Christ, the Catholic school aims at forming in the Christian those particular virtues which will enable him to live a new life in Christ and help him to play faithfully his part in building up the Kingdom of God.”¹⁰ The duty and task of the Catholic school is to inculcate virtue through a synthesis of culture with faith and faith with life.¹¹ Students learn values by being exposed to a community where “values are communicated through the interpersonal and sincere relationships of its members and through both individual and corporative adherence to the outlook on life that permeates the school.”¹² In Catholic education, special emphasis is placed on virtuous living—morality in conformity with the Ten Commandments, the Beatitudes and the perennial moral teachings of the Church. Anything less than a holistic and lived approach may result in virtue and values education becoming empty or sterile. The Catholic school must be a “place of ecclesial experience” where its “binding force and potential for relationships derive from a set of values and a *communio in vita* that is rooted in [a] common belonging to Christ.”¹³

Community is itself educative. Not only does community aid in reflecting on values and virtue, but also, by living in community, students learn to form community and are set on a path rightly ordered to communion with man and God. “Forming persons-in-community” is important not only to a student’s “solitary destiny but also to the destinies of the many communities in which he lives.”¹⁴ Living and interacting within a faith-based community cultivates within students the ability to create similar communities and, thus, act as leaven in the world.¹⁵

Community transmits faith and is required by faith. An important aspect in Catholic schools is that the Catholic faith, by its nature, requires community and communion. The community aspect of the Catholic school is necessary because of the nature of the faith, and not simply because of the nature of man and the nature of the educational role on its own. It must continually be fed and stimulated by its Source of life, the Saving Word of Christ as it is expressed in Sacred Scripture, in Tradition (including and especially liturgy and sacrament), and in the lives of people, past and present, who bear witness to that Word.¹⁶

⁹ Saint Paul VI, *Gravissimum Educationis* (1965) 8.

¹⁰ Congregation for Catholic Education (1977) 37.

¹¹ Congregation for Catholic Education (1977) 37.

¹² Congregation for Catholic Education (1977) 32.

¹³ Congregation for Catholic Education (2007) 5.

¹⁴ United States Conference of Catholic Bishops 13, 23.

¹⁵ Saint Paul VI 8.

¹⁶ Congregation for Catholic Education (1977) 54.

It is not just an “add-on” but a requirement of a Catholic school in faithfulness to its mission, to nurture a faith-based community in which students can receive an unadulterated and authentic and lived experience of Christian witness. Combined with Sacred Scripture, the Sacraments, and grace, such authentic witness lived in love is a sure way to help students grow in faith, for “faith is principally assimilated through contact with people whose daily life bears witness to it. Christian faith, in fact, is born and grows inside a community.”¹⁷

Ensuring an Authentic Catholic Community

Community is essential not only to a Catholic school's mission, but also to the intellectual, moral, emotional, and spiritual formation of the student. Therefore, schools must take great care to ensure they are free from scandal, which can dangerously mislead or malform. Scandal is any inadvertent “attitude or behavior which leads another to do evil.”¹⁸ It can be purposeful or inadvertent. It can also be an omission that leads another into a grave offense.¹⁹

Adults cannot be dismissive of potential scandal in a Catholic school. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* teaches that:

Scandal takes on a particular gravity by reason of the authority of those who cause it or the weakness of those who are scandalized. It prompted our Lord to utter this curse: “Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a great millstone fastened round his neck and to be drowned in the depth of the sea.” [Mt. 18:6]²⁰

Lay adults working in Catholic schools are “required to be witnesses of Jesus Christ and to demonstrate Christian life as bearing light and meaning for everyone” and “to exercise a specific mission within the Church by living, in faith, a secular vocation in the communitarian structure of the school.”²¹

The Congregation for Catholic Education notes that, particularly in these times of religious and moral confusion, everyone in Catholic schools needs to provide effective witness:

School managers, teaching staff and personnel all share the responsibility of both guaranteeing delivery of a high-quality service coherent with the Christian principles that lie at the heart of their educational project, as well as interpreting the challenges of their time while giving the daily witness of their understanding, objectivity and prudence. It is

¹⁷ Congregation for Catholic Education (1977) 53.

¹⁸ *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1993) 2284- 2285.

¹⁹ *Catechism* 2287.

²⁰ *Catechism* 2285.

²¹ Congregation for Catholic Education (2007) 15.

a commonly-accepted fact that “modern man listens more willingly to witnesses than to teachers, and if he does listen to teachers, it is because they are witnesses.”²²

The Congregation echoed a similar statement to include higher education:

Catholic schools and universities educate people, first and foremost, through the living context, i.e. the climate that both students and teachers establish in the environment where teaching and learning activities take place. This climate is pervaded not only by the values that are being expressed in universities, but also by the values that are lived out, by the quality of interpersonal relations between teachers and students and students amongst each other, by the care professors devote to student and local community needs, by the clear living testimony provided by teachers and educational institutions' entire staff.²³

St. John Paul II's *Ex corde Ecclesiae* finds in Catholic higher education an “institutional commitment” to “both a community of scholars representing various branches of human knowledge, and an academic institution in which Catholicism is vitally present and operative.”²⁴ It requires all teachers and administrators, when hired, be made aware of the university's Catholic identity and “their responsibility to promote, or at least to respect, that identity”²⁵ and that all non-Catholics are “to recognize and respect the distinctive Catholic identity of the university.” So important is the Catholic identity to the community culture, that the document goes on to say, “In order not to endanger the Catholic identity of the university or Institute of Higher Studies, the number of non-Catholic teachers should not be allowed to constitute a majority within the Institution, which is and must remain Catholic.”²⁶

At the elementary and secondary levels, in which younger students are still in early formation and the community witness is even more impactful, Catholic teachers should be the norm. Every teacher of catechesis or theology should be a faithful Catholic, while other disciplines—in which the integration of Catholic teaching is essential to Catholic education—benefit greatly from the witness of faithful Catholic teachers. At minimum, every teacher should commit to integrating the authentic Catholic faith into their teaching and to upholding Catholic moral principles in both word and witness. The *National Catechetical Directory* states that Catholic school principals

²² Congregation for Catholic Education, “*Male and Female He Created Them*”: *Towards a Path of Dialogue on the Question of Gender Theory in Education* (2019) 48. See also *Lay Catholics in Schools: Witnesses to Faith* 15: “...everyone who has a share in this formation is also to be included in the discussion: especially those who are responsible for the direction of the school, or are counsellors, tutors or coordinators; also those who complement and complete the educational activities of the teacher or help in administrative and auxiliary positions.”

²³ Congregation for Catholic Education, *Educating Today and Tomorrow: A Renewing Passion* (2014).

²⁴ Saint John Paul II, *Ex corde Ecclesiae* (1990) 14.

²⁵ Saint John Paul II, General Norms, Article 4, Sec. 2

²⁶ Saint John Paul II, 4.

must “recruit teachers who are practicing Catholics, who can understand and accept the teachings of the Catholic Church and the moral demands of the Gospel, and who can contribute to the achievement of the school’s Catholic identity and apostolic goals.”²⁷ The document continues:

All teachers in Catholic schools share in the catechetical ministry. “All members of the faculty, at least by their example, are an integral part of the process of religious formation... Teachers’ lifestyle and character are as important as their professional credentials.” Their daily witness to the meaning of mature faith and Christian living has a profound effect on the education and formation of their students. While some situations might entail compelling reasons for members of another faith tradition to teach in a Catholic school, as much as possible, all teachers in a Catholic school should be practicing Catholics.²⁸

Faithful Catholic faculty members play a central role in Catholic education and, in order to facilitate the journey toward perfection of human flourishing in Christ,²⁹ the entire community matters. Catholic education is integral and holistic. Students, faculty, administrators, and staff (from pre-school through college) working in harmony sustain the dynamism necessary to make that flourishing happen.

Conclusion

In Catholic education, community itself is a formative and educative principle and needs to be nurtured and safeguarded to remain viable, as sustenance, for human flourishing. The community acts as both a direct and interstitial means of transmitting the Catholic faith and aids students in integral self-discovery and development.

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²⁷ United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *National Catechetical Directory* (2005) 231. The Diocese of Springfield, IL views all Catholic school teachers as catechists and requires they possess, or are in the process of receiving, an advanced catechetical certificate. The requirements for their employment are thus dictated by the requirements as outlined in the *National Catechetical Directory*. See <https://www.dio.org/policy-book/10-300-personnel/file> (accessed on Apr. 15, 2020).

²⁸ United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (2005) 233.

²⁹ Jesus said to him, “If you wish to be perfect . . .” (Matt 19:21); “So be perfect, just as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Matt 5:48).