

**WHAT MAKES  
EDUCATION CATHOLIC**

**Spiritual Foundations**

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## Preface

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So, what makes education Catholic? What does it mean to place *Catholic* before such terms as *education*, *teacher*, or *school*? How can the deep spiritual values of Catholic faith shape and, hopefully, be rendered as promised?

The etymology of the word *education* is debatable. Does it originate from the Latin *educere* and signify “educing out of” people the potential and wisdom that is already within them, developing their inner capacities and insights? Or are its roots in the Latin *educare*, signifying “to lead out”—as in leading people out into new horizons and the world of knowledge and meaning that already await them? As this text proposes, we do well to embrace both emphases, drawing out from *within* and mediating in from *without*. For now, it is enough to note that both imply a significant intervention in people’s lives, one that is to engage their full human potential and access for them their rich legacy of learning as human beings.

To be a *teacher*—an *educator*—is to shape the very lives of students. Without sounding pretentious, teachers are ontological agents (from the Greek *ontos* meaning “being”); willy-nilly, we shape students’ very *being*—as both noun and verb—*who* they become and *how* they live. What an august vocation and sacred trust! Teachers walk on the holy ground of students’ lives; as the poet Yeats cautioned, we must ever “tread softly” lest we “tread on their dreams” (“Cloths of Heaven”).

From the nature of *education* and the vocation of *teacher*, therefore, conducting a *school* is a most significant and strategic civic enterprise. Schools shape the quality of the public realm through shaping the human agents within it—its citizens. They serve a critical social function toward the personal and common good of all!

Given, then, that *education*, *teacher*, and *school* are so significant for people and society, we well ask: How might the term *Catholic* qualify or further distinguish those terms and to what end?

Most patently, Catholic Christianity is a *faith* stance toward life in the world. A *Catholic* education, then, suggests educating *from* and *for* faith of some kind, grounding its foundations in a faith posture

toward life and proposing a similar take to students. While it should be informed by the best of educational philosophy and research, and committed to academic excellence, its defining characteristic is to be faith-based education—otherwise, why *Catholic*? At a minimum, this means encouraging students to live their lives with a sense of Ultimate Horizon—God, if you will—in order to find meaning and purpose, and values to live by. Such faith-based education should prepare students to engage in the immanent of life with a sense of the Transcendent.

Furthermore, Catholic faith is shaped by both reason and revelation, the latter high-pointed in Jesus, the Christ. The Horizon revealed in Jesus is of a personal God of love and compassion, who outreaches into our lives with grace—God’s effective love at work—to enable us to live well together and with hope as human family. Surely, being grounded in such faith foundations will encourage a distinctive *education, school, and teacher*. But what would lend such distinction in practice? And how do we ensure that Catholic education delivers as promised?

This is not an insignificant question. Might it be no exaggeration to say that it pertains to the present and future state of our world? When one considers the vast network of Catholic schools, ranging from kindergartens to research universities (some fifty-five thousand), located on every continent, in two hundred countries, and serving over one hundred and fifty million students, it likely constitutes the largest single system of education in the world today. Its funding varies greatly, ranging from church-sponsored schools that depend on student tuition to those funded by governments and managed by the church, often with elected boards of governance.

A growing phenomenon in Catholic schools now is that an ever-increasing number of students, faculty, and staff are from other or no faith traditions, and indeed, many of their Catholic participants are more cultural than affiliated in their faith. This expanding horizon for Catholic education should be welcomed rather than resisted. In his Apostolic Exhortation *Christus Vivit (Christ Lives, March 2019)*, Pope Francis states boldly that Catholic schools must “seek to welcome all young people, regardless of their religious choices, cultural origins and personal, family or social situation. In this way, the Church makes a fundamental contribution to the integral education of the young in various parts of the world” (no. 247). This being said, such a worldwide system of schools, so influential to the lives of so many persons and societies, should be clear about the education it promises and then fulfills.

Maintaining the Catholic identity of this worldwide network of schools is far from inevitable; now, more than ever, this must be

deliberately chosen and crafted. There was a time, not so long ago, when the identity and curriculum of Catholic schools seemed assured by the overwhelming presence of religious sisters, brothers, and priests as their teachers and administrators. For example, in 1950, vowed religious made up some 90 percent of the faculty of US Catholic grade and high schools, and laypeople were 10 percent; in 2020, this figure was reversed and more, with vowed religious making up less than 3 percent of the faculty. Of course, laypeople are equally capable of conducting a system of Catholic education, but they need to know and be prepared to render what this asks of them.

That the Catholic Church and its schools will meet this challenge is likewise far from inevitable. Simply note that many distinguished American universities were originally sponsored by a faith community: Yale by Episcopalians; Princeton by Presbyterians; Boston University by Methodists; and another, founded by Puritans to educate church ministers, was named after Rev. John Harvard, its first benefactor. Today, such institutions claim, and vehemently, no religious or spiritual identity. They assiduously avoid such association, embracing the *Enlightenment* posture that any semblance of faith would prove inimical to their academic freedom and to the critical rigor of their scholarship. Consider, for example, great American Catholic universities—Notre Dame and Boston College, Georgetown and Fordham, and others—how might they avoid going the same route and rise in our time to the challenges of continuing to offer a faith-based and formative (yet fully enlightened) university education?

The anti-faith legacy of modernity and its assumption that enlightenment would eradicate religion continues into our now postmodern times, well described as a *secular age*. While secularization is most obviously measured by the falling off of religious practice and influence, its more challenging feature is that the social conditions for faith have changed radically—and not in faith’s favor. Instead of an “enchanted age” (Max Weber)—not so long ago really—when faith and its practice permeated the whole sociocultural ethos, disposing people to follow suit, now conditions are reversed to propose “exclusive (of God) humanism” as a more *reasonable* alternative to a transcendent take on life (Charles Taylor). The tradition and rationale for faith-based schools cannot be taken for granted!

And yet, there is also growing evidence that our postmodern era is becoming more open to faith than modernity was and that more and more postmodern people are, in fact, “believers without belonging” (Grace Davie). To some amazement, many *enlightened* social commentators and thought leaders are recognizing again the need for a

“well-reasoned faith” that can provide a spiritual foundation for the public realm and especially to inspire its social ethic.

So, might it be possible that we are emerging into a new era of opportunity and a need for faith-based education? Of course, this should never mean proselytizing participants—students or teachers—to embrace a particular faith identity. Yet, giving access to a faith-inspired education that engages the souls as well as the minds of participants and leans them into a gracious Transcendent Horizon of meaning, purpose and values, can offer heightened hope for life lived well and for the common good of all. It does so precisely by drawing upon the full potential and capacities of the human person, offering an education that engages what the poet Yeats named well as “the marrow bone” of people rather than simply “the mind alone” (“Poem for Old Age”).

### SPIRITUAL FOUNDATIONS AND VISION

Much of public education is currently dominated by an empirical and disengaged rationality that favors science, technology, engineering, and math (the STEM curriculum). Such a mode of knowing is needed, of course, and yet alone is highly limited. It is unlikely to be formative of participants in humanizing ways or to encourage their shared responsibility for the common good as well as their own. Indeed, the ennui of spirit that is so evident in postmodern societies, coupled with the lack of moral compass in the public realm, suggests that faith-grounded education that engages the emotive and ethical (the soul) as well as the rational and empirical (the mind) was never more needed. The very challenges of our era, then, may well offer new opportunities and, indeed, an urgent need for truly *Catholic* education.

Such education must ground itself in a spiritual vision and then engage the very souls of its students. Note that much of the current scholarship regarding education, even in Catholic circles, is dominated by the social sciences and their empirical research. The empirical is certainly a valid and vital way of knowing and can make practical and tested recommendations to improve education of any kind. However, all education needs an empowering vision if it is to fulfill its ultimate purpose to promote human well-being. As the author of the Book of Proverbs wisely noted, “Where there is no vision, the people perish” (Prov 29:18, KJV).

Surely, Catholic education can draw a life-giving vision from its rich treasury of spiritual wisdom bequeathed by its Jewish roots, from Jesus of Nazareth, and then from across its two thousand years

of engaged faith tradition. This legacy can lend a spiritual vision for Catholic schools, encouraging them to educate for both their immanent and transcendent purposes, encouraging in students both a horizontal and vertical perspective on life in the world. And while I write from a Catholic perspective, my foundations and proposals are broadly Christian. What I propose here can ring true for schools sponsored by other communities of Christian faith—Episcopalian, Lutheran, Methodist, and so on.

By simple logic, Catholic schools are to reflect the deep values, truths, and wisdom of this faith tradition as they pertain to the practice of education. Because so shaped by faith, we can say that the foundations of Catholic education are spiritual more than philosophical, arising more from faith than reason (though the latter is a crucial partner). Spirituality is variously understood now and especially in what is alleged to be a “new age” for it. From a Catholic perspective, however, the generic sense of spirituality is simply *faith put to work*. To ground Catholic education in its spiritual foundations, therefore, means to take the core values and wisdom reflected in Catholic faith and put them to work throughout the whole ethos and curriculum of a school. For example, and at its core, Catholic faith reflects an essentially positive understanding of the human person, is committed to the dignity and rights of all people, and is convinced of their potential to be agents for their own good and the common good of all. Imagine, then, what such faith might mean when put to work as a spiritual foundation of Catholic education.

I hasten to reiterate that this does not require all participants in Catholic education—teachers, staff, and students—to be confessing Catholics. All, however, must embrace the spiritual values that ground and identify *Catholic* education, with non-Christian participants inspired, perhaps, by echoes in other religious or humanist traditions. Here, we raise up the core spiritual values for education that confessing Catholics can embrace and put to work out of faith conviction. Yet they are, in fact, universal values that can be embraced by any person of good will—educator or student. Pragmatically, however, it is imperative that Catholic school principals be spiritual leaders who embrace and can articulate the school’s faith-based vision, and that they have a core cadre of faculty and staff who are effective custodians of the spiritual foundations of the school.

Furthermore, such education must reach beyond teaching *about* Catholic values, truths, and wisdom; these must be put to work as formative for students throughout the whole curriculum. Consequently, all participants in Catholic education can at least learn *from* the values



it represents to enrich their own lives and spiritual journey, and those from Catholic traditions can be disposed to learn *into* them as their identity in faith. In Chapter 10 we take up the particular challenge this offers for religious education in Catholic schools that have religiously diverse student populations. For now, and at a minimum, education done *from* such faith foundations can encourage students to embrace a transcendent rather than an exclusively immanent stance toward life. In other words, by educating *from* faith, Catholic schools are to educate *for* faith as well—yet ever respecting the particular faith and spiritual values that people may choose as their personal posture toward life in the world.

### JESUS AND THE CATHOLIC INTELLECTUAL TRADITION

But where, pray tell, should we search for the spiritual foundation and vision of such faith-based education? My proposal surely sounds like a tautology: *Jesus Christ is the heart of Christian faith and thus should be at the heart of Catholic education.* At first blush, this seems obvious. But truth be told, focusing on Jesus as portrayed in the Gospels is something of a new consciousness for Catholic Christians (more below). Following on, to bring an *educational* hermeneutic to contemporary Jesus scholarship is still work to be done; I hope to make a small contribution here.

Ask any Christian what is the heart of their faith and Protestants are most likely to say “the Bible” and Catholics “the church.” The Bible, the church, and then the creeds and commandments, the sacraments and symbols, the values and virtues, and so on are all constitutive of Christian faith. Yet, as the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* well summarizes: “At the heart . . . we find a Person, the Person of Jesus of Nazareth, the only Son from the Father” (§426; hereafter CCC). By simple logic, the “heart” of Christian faith should be the “heart” of Catholic education.

Note well the CCC’s insistence on both—the historical person, Jesus (a carpenter from Nazareth), who also was, in Christian conviction, the Christ of faith (Son from God). In Christian doctrine the two natures—human and Divine—existed in one person and without compromising either. Both should shape the *heart* of Catholic education, with the gospel portrayal of Jesus modeling and inspiring a distinctive kind of life-giving education and the Risen Christ being the source of hope and grace for realizing its learning outcomes.

To pose Jesus, the Christ, as the “cornerstone” (Acts 4:11) of Catholic education means to return to its scriptural foundations in the New Testament and likewise to the Hebrew scriptures (commonly called the Old Testament) that nurtured Jesus’s own faith and pedagogy. In Chapter 1 we begin this retrieval of what New Testament scholar Jose Pagola describes as a “historical approximation” of Jesus, given that the Gospels are primarily texts of faith, and especially as relevant for Catholic education. This reclaiming of the centrality of Jesus continues throughout the whole text.

Focusing on the core values of Jesus as reflected in the Gospels enables us to appreciate all the more the hope that God offered to humankind—and thus to those who would educate—by raising him up, as Christians believe, as the Christ of faith (Chapter 2). We propose that God raised up Jesus precisely that we might educate for hope. We will also note how the values of Jesus continued to shape Catholic education across the centuries as we distill pedagogical wisdom from some great historical proponents of the Catholic intellectual tradition (Chapters 3, 4, 5, and 6). We have much to learn for Catholic education from two thousand years of tradition, and yet Jesus must ever remain the “heart” of it all.

In Chapters 7 to 10 we continue to ground the deep spiritual foundations of Catholic education, retrieving further aspects of the gospel curriculum of Jesus, coupled with contemporary Catholic theology as relevant to foundational issues for educators in our postmodern era. In sum, learning from Jesus for Catholic education runs throughout the whole text, with suggestions for every aspect of its curriculum today. Note parenthetically that here *curriculum* means not simply *what* is taught but also *how* (the pedagogy), for *whom* (understanding of person), *where* (the learning environment), and *why* (the intended learning outcomes).

I noted above that focusing on the human person, Jesus, can be a new consciousness for Catholics; we are more accustomed to relating to the Risen Christ of faith, the Son of God, the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity, and so on. This is due to a variety of historical circumstances, but perhaps the most causative is that the doctrinal section of traditional Catholic catechisms, which so shaped the “sense of the faithful” up to the Second Vatican Council (1962–65), was based solely on the Apostles’ Creed. So, the catechisms took each article of the creed and catechized it, typically using a question-and-answer format.

The problematic for a comprehensive catechesis, however, was that the Creed’s article “born of the virgin Mary” is followed immediately by “suffered under Pontius Pilate”—as if Jesus had no life between his

birth and death, and in particular overlooking his three years (according to John's Gospel) of public ministry and teaching. And just as the Creed skipped the public life of Jesus, the catechisms did likewise—lending little awareness of it in Catholic faith and practice.

In addition to this, until the Second Vatican Council Catholics generally were not Bible readers and had only a limited and one-year cycle of scripture readings at mass (unlike the current three-year cycle that is more representative). Gratefully, we have made progress in embracing the scriptures as central to Catholic faith, beginning with Vatican II. However, it takes time to erase old patterns; more traditional Catholics, at least, still tend to “think church” as the core of their faith. Instead, we should first “think Jesus,” including for Catholic education. This shift to “the centrality of Jesus Christ and of his Gospel” has well marked the pontificate of Pope Francis (*Directory for Catechesis*, no. 102).

The good news is that critical biblical scholarship, after many “quests for the historical Jesus,” can now say reliably what were the core themes and commitments of his public ministry as reflected in the faith of the first Christian communities. Such scholarship draws upon the findings of biblical archaeology and historical anthropology, analyzes the literary forms of the scripture texts, makes comparison between Christian texts and other ancient manuscripts, and employs a host of other scholarly research methods.

This has heightened appreciation of Jesus's public ministry by locating him in his sociocultural context as a first-century Palestinian Jew, in a world ruled with an iron fist by the Roman Empire, and with which his core teachings were often in contrast. This situating of his teaching ministry in its historical context heightens the often radical nature of the gospel and of his call to live for the reign of God.

The upshot is that New Testament scholars can suggest what José Pagola calls “an historical approximation” of who Jesus actually was, the sociocultural characteristics of the time and place in which he carried on his teaching, and the core values and truths he taught and lived—often against the grain. This will greatly aid our imagining of what his teachings and pedagogy mean for us today, and in particular, for the curriculum of Catholic education.

Jesus's values and perspectives, and especially his teaching praxis—what he did, said, and taught—are surely germane to education that claims Christian faith as its spiritual foundation. Indeed, the most frequent description of Jesus and his work in the four Gospels is as teacher and teaching—so described over one hundred times. So our hermeneutical interest will be that of educators, explicitly focusing on what Jesus taught, how he taught it, and toward what “learning

outcomes”—our key concern. Allowing for the differences between his and our historical contexts, Catholic educators are to teach in keeping with what and how Jesus is portrayed to have taught, having his curriculum inspire and shape our own.

Even as the pedagogical praxis of Jesus is to inspire Catholic education and lend its spiritual foundations, Christians believe that this same Jesus was the Christ, the long-promised Messiah, “raised up by God” (Acts 2:24) as Savior and Liberator of all humankind. Christian faith is that Easter has changed the course of history, turning it, however slowly, toward realizing God’s reign of fullness of life for all people and creation. Christian faith holds that this paschal mystery, that is, Jesus’s living, dying, and rising, released into human history what Saint Paul repeatedly describes as “God’s abundant grace” (see, for example, Rom 5:17; 1 Tim 1:14; 2 Cor 4:15) and is for all people and creation.

Christians believe that we are assured now of God’s love at work in all people’s lives and for free—*gratis*. God’s grace is to empower people’s own best efforts to live well, wisely, and always with hope, even in the most difficult circumstances. Such faith-for-hope conviction can encourage a most life-giving vision to inspire Catholic education, not with historical naivete but with confidence that the great potential of students as human beings and their best efforts toward their own and the common good are empowered and sustained with God’s help. That such grace is available to all people, whether they believe so or not, has been a constant Christian conviction since the early centuries of the church; it is a core spiritual foundation of Catholic education.

Certainly, drawing upon Jesus the Christ as model, inspiration, and source of empowerment does not imply and certainly should not require that all students, faculty, and staff in Catholic schools confess him as their liberating Savior. Again, because the values he represented are universal—love, mercy, compassion, peace, justice, honesty, responsibility, and so on—the education they inspire can enrich the lives and lend spiritual wisdom to people of any or no religious background. Indeed, the symbol of Jesus being raised up by God is the *Christian* grounding of hope for all. However, people from other traditions can benefit from such hope mediated through a Catholic education, even as they find their own personal symbols of faith and spiritual foundations for keeping their hope alive.

As hinted earlier, and following on from Jesus, Catholic education has been forged and enhanced by a long conversation with the traditions of Western philosophy and education that began with the early Christian encounter with Plato, Aristotle, and the Greco-Roman culture. From the beginning this encounter encouraged education marked

by some crucial partnerships of faith and reason, of revelation and science, of knowledge and wisdom, of academic rigor and formation in values, and so on. Such partnerships constitute the rich legacy of the *Catholic intellectual tradition* and can be a powerful resource for Catholic education today.

Chapters 3, 4, 5 and 6 draw upon the wisdom of some chief exponents of the Catholic intellectual tradition regarding education, such as Augustine and Aquinas, Julian of Norwich and Angela Merici. Shaped by its original faith in Jesus Christ and by its encounter with the philosophical and sociocultural movements across the past two thousand years, especially in the West, the Catholic intellectual tradition offers a rich spiritual legacy for how to craft Catholic education in our time.

Chapters 7, 8, and 9 take up some central themes for Catholic education as informed by contemporary theology, highlighting the spiritual foundations it suggests. With a view to the whole curriculum of Catholic education, Chapter 7 reflects on an essentially positive understanding of the person as a relational being intent on the common good of all (anthropology cum sociology); Chapter 8 focuses on a Catholic cosmology as a hopeful outlook on life in the world and its epistemology of the engaged ways of knowing that it favors; Chapter 9 elaborates on the public nature of Christian faith and the responsibility of Catholic education to educate citizens who are committed to justice and the works of compassion in the public realm—consistent themes throughout the whole work. Chapter 10 offers reflections and a proposal to meet the particular challenge of religious education in Catholic schools with increasingly diverse faculty, staff, and students.

The Postlude draws together wisdom and insights from all the chapters to propose a *Catholic pedagogy*. Departing from the format of previous chapters, it summarizes their practical wisdom and insights as might be put to work in a spiritually grounded pedagogy, that is, approach to teaching.

## A PEDAGOGY THROUGHOUT

The structure of the chapters will, in fact, reflect the overarching pedagogy that I recommend for Catholic education. I begin each chapter by establishing a general theme of importance to education *from* and *for* faith, and then invite readers to pause to reflect upon the theme from their own life experience and context. Then, drawing variously upon the scriptures, the curriculum of Jesus, and the tradition of Catholic education across two thousand years, I propose responses to the theme

and suggest educational implications. I invite the reader to recognize how to take such spiritual wisdom to heart and to implement it as a Catholic educator. I end each chapter with curriculum implications and then invite what the chapter theme and proposals might mean for the educator's *soul*, for their teaching *style*, and for the educational *space*—all three being integral to implementing the spiritual foundations of Catholic education.

By way of language patterns, readers may already have noted that I often use a plural pronoun to refer to a singular noun, as in “every educator is to shape *their* own pedagogy,” or as Shakespeare would have it, “May God send everyone *their* heart's desire.” Indeed, this returns to the grammatical pattern of the Elizabethan era and has been approved by the US National Council of Teachers of English. My commitment is to promote gender inclusive language while avoiding the awkward “he/she” and “his/her” constructs.

On a similar note I avoid using male images and pronouns for God, except when quoting the original scriptures. Because human language is never sufficient for God, we simply cannot be fully *inclusive* of all that can be said of the Divine. But surely we can be more *expansive*, as the Bible is frequently, beyond male-only imagery for God (see Ps 18:1–2 for twelve different images, in just two verses). For some, this may be a new horizon. I respectfully invite you to consider it. Last, I avoid footnoting, recognizing the sources of direct quotations within the text. And now read on.