

CATHOLIC EDUCATION FIFTY YEARS AFTER *PACEM IN TERRIS*

■ KEVIN RYAN

The Catholic Church's education legacy began with Christ's preaching in the towns and cities of Judea and His instruction of His disciples. After His death and resurrection, His disciples rallied to His order to "Go you into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature" (Mark 16:15). In the context of today's understanding of the mission of education, theirs was a demanding, but narrow one: to spread the good news of the Gospels.

Over the centuries, the educational mission of the Catholic Church has grown and broadened. The process of evangelization begun by the disciples has developed today into the largest church in the world. The mission has expanded well beyond evangelizing the story of Christ. As the early missionaries of the Gospels spread the good news, they sought for a reasoned basis for faith. The early Church Fathers, in particular, laid the rationale foundations for Christian faith, and in the process launched the Catholic Church into the forefront of scholarship and reasoned discourse. A system of schooling which started out as small cathedral schools and seminaries, evolved into the university system. Great centers of learning were founded, manned and nurtured at Bologna, Paris, and Coimbra and throughout Europe. In the process, the Church became the repository, preserver and synthesize of knowledge both theological and natural from both old and emerging cultures. As the Church's evangelization mission spread to the New World, so did its broader educational mission. The idea of a university as an institution devoted to a focused expansion of human knowledge has been one of the great gifts of the Catholic Church to the world community.

Although it emerged much later, the idea of educating the masses received inspiration in the 16th and 17th Century from the life and work of clerics and religious, such as St. Francis de Sales. Religious orders were founded specifically to educate the laity. Currently, the Catholic Church has the world's largest educational system. The works of spreading the Gospels *and* developing the mind was fused with the spread of parish schools run by religious orders of priests, brothers and nuns that saw this work as their God-given charge.

A Catholic Philosophy of Education

Out of these efforts a Catholic philosophy of education evolved. The French philosopher, Jacques Maritain, wrote that the “education of man is a human awakening” to his spiritual and material nature (p. 9). He went on to observe, “The ultimate aim of education concerns the human person in his personal life and spiritual progress” (p. 13). And further that “What matters above all is the inner center, the living source of personal conscience in which originate idealism, and generosity, the sense of law and the sense of friendship, respect for others, but at the same time deep rooted independence with regard to common opinion” (p. 16). Education “is to guide man in the evolving dynamism through which he shapes himself as a human person – armed with knowledge, and moral virtues – while at the same time conveying to him the spiritual heritage of the nation and the civilization in which he is involved, and preserving in this way the century-old achievements of generations” (p. 10).

Blessed John XXIII in *Pacem in Terris* (1961) stated the official policy of the Church in these words:

The natural law also gives man the right to share in the benefits of culture, and therefore the right to a basic education and to technical and professional training in keeping with the stage of educational development in the country to which he belongs. Every effort should be made to ensure that persons be enabled, on the basis of merit, to go on to higher studies, so that, as far as possible, they may occupy posts and take on responsibilities in human society in accordance with their natural gifts and the skills they have acquired (13).

Even at the time, five and six decades ago, that Maritain and Blessed John XXIII laid out these educational ideals, they, also, acknowledged the substantial threats to the education of Christians. Chief among these is the hegemonistic overtaking of education by scientific knowledge (Maritain, p. 5). Few, however, can doubt the extraordinary human benefits which our understanding and application of the scientific method have wrought. It has ushered in untold human goods, but there has been and continues to be a human cost.

Most notable, modern education, that is, scientific education, has been all but stripped bare of its ontological content (Maritain, p. 4). Essential questions, such as, “What is man?” “Is there a soul or not?” “Does spirit exist or only matter?” “Is man free or determined?” “What is a noble life?” are rarely asked. If and when one such question is asked, the only approved answer is one that is observable and measurable. As Maritain stated, today’s

student may have a few answers to “What is man?”, but rarely will he or she encounter the Greek, Jewish and Christian idea of man:

man as an animal endowed with reason, whose supreme dignity is in the intellect; and man as a free individual in personal relation with God, whose supreme righteousness consists in voluntarily obeying the law of God; and man as a sinful and wounded creature called to divine life and the freedom of grace, whose supreme perfection consists of love (p. 7).

The modern student, then, inherits and inhabits a shrunken, mechanistic of who he is and, therefore, what he ought to do with his life. It is this prevailing educational philosophy and the culture it has spawned with which Catholic schools and universities must contend and must overcome. It would appear that not only the sanctification of souls is in the balance. While some products of our scientific education contribute to human flourishing, other technological products (e.g., nuclear weapons, and instruments of germ warfare) increasing threaten the very existence of the human race. The mission, then, of Catholic education has evolved beyond evangelization, but to be a counterweight or corrective to modern, scientific education’s distortions of our understanding of humanity and the meaning of existence.

The Nature of a Catholic Education

As Aristotle has taught us in the *Nicomachean Ethics* and as has been echoed by Catholic educators down through the centuries, the aim of education is happiness. In the Catholic understanding, the goal is happiness here and in the afterlife. What, then, is the nature of the education that the Church should foster to lead men to happiness?

In the modern mind, “education” is one of those words that when applied covers a great span of human experience. It has a womb to tomb range. Even when limited to schooling, the area of application is extensive. While there should be a consistent intellectual thread throughout, quite obviously what Catholic educators should offer to five-year-olds and to university students is different. Also, within any age group there are vast differences in intellectual capacity and abilities receive and benefit from a curriculum of study. That said, as philosopher Michael Pakaluk (2011) has written, three questions should animate the content of a good quality Catholic education: Is it good to know it? Is it useful to know it? Is it pleasant to know it?

The answer to the “good to know” question is Truth. While the secular world defines truth as a verified or indisputable fact, proposition, or principle, St. Thomas asserts that truth is the conformity of the intellect to the

things. *Veritas est adæquatio intellectus et rei* (S. Th., 1274). The “things” are reality, the stuff of life. Some are material and some are spiritual. Of particular interest to the Catholic educator are answers to those core human questions so often ignored or answered poorly by secular educators. Questions such as, “What is a person’s true nature and what is a worthy life?”; “What are the truths of God’s existence and how can man come to know God?”; “Is man free or determined, and if free, how should he use his freedom?” (Pakaluk, 2011).

The “useful to know” question is answered by whether or not it produces a good. “The most useful knowledge produces the greatest goods. So the most useful knowledge anyway would include: knowledge of the principles of a free society; knowledge of wealth creation; knowledge of a happy marriage and family life; knowledge of the virtues.” (Pakaluk, 2011) So, too, with bodies of knowledge, such as natural science, mathematics, languages, logic and other intellectual disciplines.

The “pleasurable to know” must be guided by our understanding and appreciation of the good. Men are drawn to both high and low pleasures and one of the realities of contemporary life is that we are surrounded by and the target of pleasures which reach out to our lower appetites, pleasures, such as pornography, which appeal to our carnal natures, and, such as blood sports, which cater to our bestial side. It is, therefore, important that a Catholic education exposes and educates students both to understand and appreciate good literature and poetry, music, sculpture and dance. The physical enjoyment of movement, whether in sport or dance, is also the fit material of a full education.

Except for specialized schools, such as vocational or professional schools, Catholic schools should be explicitly directed by the goal-oriented questions of universal truth, usefulness and pleasure. The curricula at each level should be dictated and tested by these criteria.

Education and Schooling

Until recent centuries, formal education was a rare and casual event. For reasons of mutual survival, parents were the child’s first educator. Except for those few fortunate to have tutors, parents and the extended family were the providers of an education. The goals of this survival education were continued existence and simply to replicate successfully the lives of one’s parents.

Early on, the mission of Catholic education expanded beyond evangelization to knowledge production and dissemination. Formal schooling followed, first to the clergy and then to secular elites. The great expansion of education occurred when the Church extended this mission further to embrace the

laity in general. Initially in the 16th and 17th centuries, the Church championed the development of what became elementary and secondary schooling. As the mechanisms of the state evolved, it embraced schooling, but typically in cooperation and with shared goals with the religious authorities.

The history of the last three centuries, however, has seen an increasing breakdown and division between the educational goals and activities of the church and the state. In the 18th Century, French scholars and policymakers developed the justification for an attempt at State monopoly of the schooling for the common people. Their goal was to use schools as a means to impose a unifying ideology of secular nationalism. In the 19th Century, the new republican “experiments”, that is, France and the United States of America, developed extensive state-run school systems, systems which gradually have extinguished the religious element and perspective from schooling.

The American experience is an example for this gradually, but seemingly inexorable secularization of schooling in many parts of the globe. Early settlers in the New World colony of Massachusetts were frightened that their children, cut off from what they saw as the civilized world, were endangered. In 1647, the fledgling legislature of the Massachusetts colony responded and passed the Old Deluder Satan Law (Eberling, 1999). The settlers’ motivation was to establish schools in order to teach literacy for the expressed purpose of reading the Bible. Access to the Bible was considered the most effective way to escape the snares of Satan. They, in effect, used the power of the state to establish a system of elementary and secondary schools for a spiritual propose. That is, to ensure their children learned the truths of Christianity.

The Protestant Bible and Christian moral principles were mainstays in schools through the American Colonial period and into the early years of the United States as an independent nation. The leaders of the American Revolution and founders of the new country championed the establishment of tax-supported public schools and justified religious based moral teaching in order to raise “the mass of people to the high ground of moral responsibility necessary for their own safety and orderly government” (Ryan and Bohlin, 1999, p. 20).

Tensions over the control of the content of schooling, however, began in the 19th Century. First, under the justification of “promoting public virtue”, state educational authorities, such as Horace Mann and others, worked to substitute church sponsored schools with the public “common school”. Mann insisted that “the teacher at his desk exercised a more sacred calling than the minister in his pulpit” (Glenn, 2012, p. 40). Second, the issue of the state promoting a particular religion came into sharp relief with the 19th Century’s

large immigration of Irish and German Catholics who, chaffing under their children's exposure to the Protestant Bible, left the public school in large numbers and established an extensive network of Catholic schools.

This growing secularism of the nation led in the late 19th Century and into the 20th Century to the gradual removal of the religious perspective from public, state-supported schools. Vestiges of Christianity, such as Christmas pageants and carols, remained, but shortly after World War II, a conscious effort was made to make public schools "religion-free zones". So over a period of some 140 years, the state has gained what Charles Glenn has called "the public school's near-monopoly of education" (p. 40), an education that systematically excludes and rejects a theological understanding of human life.

A dozen years into the 21st Century, the American public schools educate 88% of the elementary and secondary students with only a shrinking 6% attending the once extensive Catholic schools. While the intellectual flaccidity of the public school system's curriculum and the moral vacuousness of its culture is widely acknowledged, Catholic parents have few choices. They are heavily taxed to pay for a state-sponsored school system which annually spends on average close to 12,000 dollars per pupil (Ryan and Cooper, 2013, p. 365). To attend to the theological education of their children, the great majority of Catholic parents fall back on once-a-week, short programs run by parishes. While taught by many well-meaning volunteer teachers, few have the theological background or Biblical preparation for the work. Their good will aside, the religious education of American youth has been a striking failure.

In the early years of the 21st Century, the United States' largest and most carefully crafted study of the religious practices and beliefs of American youth was conducted in by a team of sociologists led by Christian Smith. Entitled the National Study of Youth and Religion, it surveyed a carefully selected sample of 3340 teenagers. One of the most startling findings of this study was the relatively lower level of religiosity and laxity of Catholic teenagers compared with teenagers in other U.S. Christian traditions. Among their findings were those when compared with Conservative Protestants, Black Protestants and Mormons, Catholic teens:

- Have lower levels of attendance at religious services;
- Would attend religious services less if totally up to themselves;
- Report that their religion is less important in shaping their daily lives and life decisions;
- Substantially feel themselves less close to God;
- Have somewhat more doubts about their religious beliefs;

- Believe less that God is a personal being involved in the lives of people today;
- Believe substantially less in a judgment day when God will reward some and punish others;
- Believe less in miracles, the existence of angels, and life after death;
- Believe more in reincarnation, astrology and in psychics and fortune-tellers;
- Less have made a personal commitment to live life for God;
- Pray less frequently;
- Fewer are involved in a religious youth group;
- Have less frequently attended Sunday School/CCD, been on a religious retreat, attended a religious conference or rally or camp, or been on a religious mission or service project;
- More frequently report that they are bored in church;
- Less frequently report that their congregation has helped them understand their own sexuality and sexual morality (Smith, 2005, pp. 272–291).

The survey also reports that only 19% of U.S. Catholic teenagers attend mass on a weekly basis and that 40% never attend. In summary, the light which the National Study of Youth and Religion shines of Catholic teenagers is of a group that does not know or understand what are the core teachings of their church and do not appear to care very much about the religion into which they were born (Smith, p. 194).

Similar, though less empirically rigorous, critiques of Catholic college and university education point to equally dismal results from efforts to ground students in the truths of the Gospel and to gain commitment to the work of the church (Hendershott, 2009; Arthurs, 2008; Reilly, 2003). For instance, a 2003 study found that at Catholic colleges, agreement with Church doctrine on an array of issues, such as abortion, pre-marital sex and same-sex marriage, declines from freshman to senior year (McMurtrie, p. A 38). It would appear that in spite of the historical efforts of generations of priest, nuns and committed laity, the current efforts of the Catholic Church in America to provide an education that is both theologically and scientifically sound have failed. Whether these failures are unique to the United States is highly doubtful.

The Wisdom of the State as Primary Educator

As Pope John XXIII established in *Pacem in Terris*, public authorities, that is, state authorities, derive their authority from God (a. 46), and must derive their obligatory force from the moral order (a. 47), so that its first appeal is

not the fear of punishment or promise of reward but to individual consciences (a. 48). Also, the primary concern of civil authorities is to insure that personal rights are acknowledged, respected, coordinated with other rights, defended and promoted (a. 60). Further, state authorities must promote both the material and the spiritual welfare of citizens (a. 57), and sometimes civil authorities must give more attention to the members of the community less able to defend their rights and assert their legitimate claims (a. 56).

In the light of the guidance provided by Pope John XXIII, the current hegemony of state authorities over education would appear to poise a severe danger to the publics they claim to serve. Certainly, the state has an interest in an educated citizenry. It has an interest in ensuring that the young establish the attitudes and habits necessary to live together in harmony. But does it have the right to answer the most central and critical questions in education, “What is most worth knowing?” and “What should a person strive to be and do with his life?”

It would appear that for state authorities to provide the answers to these most fundamental educational questions, and therefore, to shape and control the beliefs and worldviews of children, threatens the right to the free exercise of religion and the rights of parents to control the education of their children. The 20th Century witnessed two devastating examples of state control of education in Nazi Germany and Soviet Russia where schools became explicit instruments of state oppression to religion.

While these examples are extreme, the potential for tyrannical state control of education is a global reality. More subtle, and perhaps more dangerous because it is quietly imposed by state commissions and unaccountable bureaucrats, is the type new curricula imposed a few years ago in once staunchly Catholic Quebec. Since 2008, a new religious curriculum, entitled “Ethics and Religious Culture” must be taught in all schools, state-run, private and religious (Benson, 2011). The alleged purpose of the course is “to sensitize students to the tenets of Quebec’s rich array of religious beliefs – the major religions, plus native myths and even Wiccan beliefs – in order to facilitate the spiritual development of students so as to promote self-fulfillment”. (Kay, 2011)

Recently, in the U.S. State of California the Legislature overwhelmingly passed and the governor enthusiastically signed into law the FAIR Education Act (SB 48). The FAIR Education Act is the seventh sexual indoctrination law to teach the state’s children to regard homosexuality, transsexuality (sex-changes operations) and bisexuality as good and natural. Among the bill’s provisions are that textbooks and instructional materials

must positively promote “lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender Americans” as role models and that children as young as 6 will be taught to admire homosexuality, same-sex “marriages”, bisexuality, and transsexuality (Badash, 2011). These two state imposed curricula, courses from which in both cases neither student nor teachers are allowed to opt out, are examples of the growing confidence of state authorities to shape the education of the young. Schooling, then, is not only threatened by the dominancy of empiricism, as suggested seventy years ago by Maritain, but also by the current secular ideology of the state.

Concluding Questions

This inquiry into the educational thought expressed in *Pacem in Terris* is intended to provoke two questions. First, will the Church provide leadership to Catholics and other religious peoples to reclaim parents’ primary authority and responsibility to oversee the education of their children? That is, will the Church work to limit the role of the State to facilitating the efforts of parents and their chosen delegates to educate the young?

Second, will the recent calls of Popes John Paul II and Benedict XVI for evangelization be undercut by the weakened state of Catholic education? Has the Church’s educational mission been so diminished, become so ineffective, and so degraded as to undermine the capacity of Catholics to respond to the papal call to spread the Good News of the Gospels? Will Catholic education adequately prepared the “troops” to fulfill this mission of evangelization?

References

- Aquinas, St. Thomas (1274) *Summa Theologica* I.16.1.
- Arthur, James (2008) “Faith and Secularization in Religious Colleges and Universities”. *Journal of Beliefs*. Vol. 29, issue 2. pp. 197–202.
- David Badash (2011) SB 48: California’s FAIR Education Act Is This Year’s Prop 8. Is It DOA? In *Bigotry Watch, News, Politics, Religion*. September 2, 2011.
- Benson, Iain. What can be Learned from the Experiences of Various Societies in Dealing with their Principal Trouble Spots? In *Universal Rights in a World of Diversity - The Case of Religious Freedom*, XVII Plenary Session of the Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences, Acta 17, eds M.A. Glendon and H. Zacher, Vatican City, 2012, pp. 253–290.
- Eberling, E.R. Massachusetts Education Laws of 1642, 1647, and 1648, in *Historical Dictionary of American Education*, ed. Richard J. Altenbaugh. Greenwood Press, 1999.
- Hendershott, A. (2009) *Status Envy: The Politics of Catholic Higher Education*. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Press.
- Glenn, C.L. (2011) Disestablishing Our Secular Schools in *First Things*. January, 2012, pp. 39–43.

- Kay, B. (2011) *The court will decide if Quebec allows a choice in religious education*. Accessed January 30, 2012. Available at <http://fullcomment.nationalpost.com/2011/05/18/barbara-kay-court-will-decide-if-quebec-allows-a-choice-in-religious-education/>
- Maritain, Jacques (1943) *Education at the Crossroads*. New Haven, CN: Yale University Press.
- McMurtrie, B. (2003) Catholic Colleges Fail to Impart Church's Teaching, Study's Author Says. *The Chronicle of Higher Education* 48 (March 21, 2003).
- Pakaluk, Michael (2011) What every well-educated Catholic should know. *The Boston Pilot*, June 3, p. 14.
- Reilly, Patrick J. (2003) Are Catholic Colleges Leading Students Astray? *The Catholic World Report*, March 2003: 38-46.
- Ryan, K. and Cooper, J.M. (2013) *Those Who Can, Teach*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Cengage Learning.
- Ryan, K. and Bohlin, K.E. (1999) *Building Character in Schools*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey Bass.
- Smith, C. with Denton, M.L. (2005) *Soul Searching: the Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers*. Oxford, UK: Oxford Press.