

What makes a school truly Catholic?

Jim Quillinan



What makes a school truly Catholic is one of the most commonly asked questions today. In recent years the Church has not only reaffirmed her belief in the purpose and value of Catholic schools but has also enunciated many of their distinctive characteristics. Four such distinctive characteristics have been identified:

- the educational climate;
- the personal development of each student;
- the relationship established between the culture of the Gospel, and
- the illumination of all knowledge with the light of faith. (Religious Dimension #1).

In more recent documents, however, the underlying view of the nature of the person which permeates all that happens in the school appears to have become a further and possibly the most significant determinant of what makes the school truly Catholic. According to recent documents on the Catholic school such person centred education is premised on the following tenets of Catholic teaching:

- we are made in the image of God. God is manifested personally to human beings, making the human person a participant in the divine nature;
- a human being has a dignity and greatness exceeding that of all other creatures, a work of God that has been elevated to the supernatural order as a child of God, and therefore having both a divine origin and an eternal destiny which transcend this physical universe;
- human persons are animated by a spiritual principal, traditionally called the soul. This spiritual dimension enables this

intimate relationship with God and a unique relationship with every person;

- Jesus completed and perfected this revelation of God through his words and works, signs and miracles and above all by his death and resurrection. **Thus Jesus Christ—his life, vision, mission and his death and resurrection illuminates all questions about the value and meaning of human existence.** Through His resurrection Jesus invites Christians to live their lives as if there is a future beyond death;
- being made in God's image means that we live most humanly in partnership with others, in community and interdependence, and when we work for the common good as well as for our own;
- the human person is distinguished from all other creatures by the gift of freedom.

This promotion of the human person is the goal of the Catholic school, because *"the person of each individual human being, in his or her material and spiritual needs, is at the heart of Christ's teaching"*. (Third Millennium #9). In order to appreciate why this is so, the Catholic school in its teaching and witness endeavours to reveal something of the mystery of Christ (Catholic School #47). This mystery, in the words of Vatican II, reveals Jesus Christ as *"the goal of human history, the focal point of the longings of history and of civilization, the centre of the human race, the joy of every heart, and the answer to all its yearnings"*. (Gaudium et Spes #45). **Therefore the promotion of a personal relationship with Christ and an exploration of his teaching are fundamental priorities for any Catholic school.** Having such a belief then virtually impels the Church to set up schools to enable students to become aware of the living presence of Jesus in an educational climate permeated by the Gospel. (Religious Dimension #25)

What are the identifiable features that distinguish a Catholic school? To what extent do they feature in your school? These are good questions all Catholic Schools need to reflect on regularly.

Jim Quillinan is currently Deputy Director of the Townsville Catholic Education Office. He has responsibility for Religious Education and Curriculum in Catholic School across the Diocese. Jim is also a member of the National Catholic Education Commission's Religious Education Committee and Queensland Catholic Education Commission's Religious Education Committee. During 2000, Jim undertook study leave in the UK and Ireland looking at programs for the ongoing formation of Teachers in Catholic Schools. He offers formation programs for teachers in the Diocese of Townsville and interstate.

All education is influenced by a particular concept of the human person. **The Catholic philosophy of education is founded on the concept that human persons are inherently religious beings,** that is they possess a spiritual dimension and are thus capable of coming to know and enjoy an intimate and loving relationship with God. In a Catholic school this religious dimension is an integral part of the students' search for meaning and purpose in life. Thus knowledge, values, attitudes and behaviour fully integrated with faith will result in the students' personal synthesis of life and faith (Religious Dimension #31). In this journey of discovery all teachers should be sensitive to those opportunities in which they can help students to see beyond the limited horizon of human reality, **taking the opportunity to present a complete picture of the human person, including the religious dimension.**

The belief that humans are made in the image of God highlights the fact that Catholics, in common with other Christians, believe in a personal and intimate God who continues to be active in all aspects of people's lives. The Catechism of the Catholic Church eloquently explains this belief in these terms: *"The first man was not only created good, but also established in friendship with his Creator and in harmony with himself and with creation around him..."* (Catechism #374). Although this original relationship with God was damaged, in this spirit of friendship **God "reaches out to each person in the experience of day to day life using a pedagogy to reveal himself to the human person: he uses human events and words to communicate his plan; he does so progressively and in stages, so as to draw even closer to man..."** (General Directory for Catechesis 38). Thus an authentic Catholic school is not simply a place where lessons are taught; rather it has an operative

The human person is distinguished from all other creatures by the gift of freedom.

educational philosophy illuminated by the gospel message, a philosophy which is attentive to the needs of its students in their search for meaning and purpose in life (Religious Dimension #22). Such a philosophy recognizes that the human person has: *"intelligence and will, the capacity to be an active and creative agent, capable of interpersonal relationships, called to a specific mission in the world"*. (Religious Dimension #55). It is also responsive to the understanding that God is revealed to us progressively and in stages and that Christian faith moves a person from within to

wonder, to question, to seek greater understanding (Catechism #158). Such an approach recognizes that it is through the day to day experiences in the classroom and in the daily life of the school that students (and teachers) can come to know God. **It is also aware that students can discover the true value of the human person: loved by God, with a mission on earth and a destiny that is immortal.** It is for this reason that education from this perspective is regarded as a human enterprise. God is involved. Thus the Church regards teaching in a Catholic school as a ministry.

"the person of each individual human being, in his or her material and spiritual needs, is at the heart of Christ's teaching".

Such a concept of the human person recognizes that we are created as essentially social beings (Church in the Modern World #12). Our essence as persons implies a connectedness with every living thing, each is part of the other. Being made in the image and likeness of God means that we live most humanly or most alive as it were, in partnership with others, in community and interdependence, and when we work in service for the welfare of others as well as for our own. Therefore authentic education emphasizes the 'person in community' approach and calls for the individual to examine his or her goals in the light of the common good. Such an approach encourages a genuine contemplation of our society. Such contemplation encourages not only profound care and compassion for those who suffer injustice and poverty but also a **careful examination of the causes of those dehumanising conditions.** Such contemplation seeks to identify and value what enhances life so that each student will be encouraged to develop a willingness to *"embrace life, and also his or her own unique vocation, as a fulfillment of God's will"* (Religious Dimension #76). In this way, along with all Christians, students are enabled to cherish a deep feeling of solidarity with the human race (Decree on the Church in the Modern World #1). In reality this means that the Catholic school endeavours to provide experiences to enable students essentially to become 'fully alive' human beings, committed to the same freedoms, rights, and responsibilities in others as they enjoy.

Such experiences also seek to enable students to appreciate that one of the greatest attributes of being human is the fact that we can love and, perhaps even more importantly, we know that we are lovable and that we are loved. The Catholic school then needs to be a **profoundly human place** where people feel welcomed, affirmed and thus

hope-filled, a place characterised by sincere and genuine relationships between teacher and student. As a result students learn the virtues of self respect and self love. But that love is also a call to service. To enable this to happen, an authentic Catholic school should not only be a place where students are able to experience, celebrate and rejoice in the love of God but it should also be a place which **offers opportunities for students to share that love in the service to others.** Jesus' new commandment to love one another calls each person to active service of one another. With this in mind one of the critical aims of the curriculum is to help the students appreciate the ultimate significance of their lives – that, **in the service of others, they can and should make a difference.**

Therefore authentic education emphasizes the 'person in community' approach and calls for the individual to examine his or her goals in the light of the common good.

For Christians, to be a human person is to be a spiritual person. In a sense this is at the heart of Augustine's adage that our hearts are restless until they rest in God. In other words this spiritual dimension creates in each person a yearning to think about 'the real self' in *"those deep recesses of his being where God who probes the heart awaits him, and where he himself decides his own destiny in the sight of God"* (Church in the Modern World #10). Within this probing of the 'real self' one finds human creativity, a desire for goodness over evil, the ability and desire to relate, and the capacity to exercise free will – these are, in their own limited way, reflections of a creator God. Thus the human person has: *"intelligence and will, the capacity to be an active and creative agent, a being endowed with both rights and duties, capable of interpersonal relationships, called to a specific mission in the world."* (Religious Dimension, #55). **In this view, such persons have far more than simply the work they can produce.** Two important consequences for the Catholic school emerge from this understanding of the human person. Firstly, the liturgical and prayer life of the school become critically important. **Liturgy and worship create opportunities for public celebrations of God's relationship with God's people.** Appropriate and creative liturgy draws the members of the school community together in worship, thus enabling the school community to both celebrate its faith in Jesus Christ and to build up its own Christian spirit. The prayer life recognizes God's desire to communicate in friendship with each person. Secondly, the opportunities provided to students to explore this 'real self' become essential features of this synthesis of culture and

The very purpose of education is this synthesis of faith and culture, that is, the integration of religious meaning and the way a person chooses to live their life.

faith. Opportunities for such reflection enable each person to enter this trust relationship with God and, in so doing, to understand its implications for living in the service of others to create a better world. Such contemplation should enable each person to appreciate that he or she is appointed by God to be co-creators with God and stewards of both the world and its history (*Pastoral Constitution of the Church in the Modern World, 12, 39*).

A Catholic understanding of education shares with a number of other educational philosophies the idea that education is concerned with the growth of the whole person. This growth comes about by liberating the student *"from that conditioning which would prevent him from becoming a fully integrated human being"*. (Catholic School #29). Thus such a philosophy of education holds that all people are free to seek the truth and be formed as seekers of truth. Personal freedom, not indoctrination, should be characteristic of the education in Catholic schools. Thus the school is expected *"to help students spell out the meaning of their experiences and their truths. Any school which neglects this duty and which offers merely pre-cast conclusions, hinders the personal development of its pupils."* (Catholic School #27). For the educator in the Catholic school, the purpose of knowledge is to enlighten students' experiences so that they are enriched by them. The world of human culture and the world of religion are not like two parallel lines that never meet; points of contact are established within the human person (Religious Dimension #51). **This interrelationship between intellectual development, religious faith, and personal growth is central to the Catholic philosophy of education.** The very purpose of education is this synthesis of faith and culture, that is, the integration of religious meaning and the way a person chooses to live their life. **In other words, what is believed should find its fullest expression in how it is lived.** The Religious Education program in the authentic Catholic school is particularly important. A comprehensive Religious Education program will help young people become fully informed about their Catholic faith tradition and about the importance of religion and religious issues generally in their search for meaning in life. In this way, they will be in a better position to see what religious faith and practice might contribute to their lives.

Beliefs of the authentic Catholic school

- We are all created in the image and likeness of God, capable of knowing and loving God.
- The person of Jesus Christ – his life, vision, mission and his death and resurrection illuminates all questions about the value and meaning of human existence. Through His resurrection Jesus invites Christians to live their lives as if there is a future beyond death.
- Human persons are inherently spiritual beings. In a Catholic school this spiritual dimension is an integral part of the students' search for meaning in life.
- This spiritual dimension enables an intimate relationship with God.

• Through this spiritual dimension we are also intimately related to one another so that anything which diminishes the integrity of one person diminishes the well being of all humanity.

• Our highest human calling is to love and be loved, with love that calls us to service, that is working for justice and peace.

• We live most humanly in partnership with others, in community and interdependence, when we work for the common good as well as for our own.

• God reaches out to us in our experience of day to day life. In this way God is revealed to us progressively and in stages. Thus each person is capable of lifelong growth, of being an active agent of knowledge rather than simply a recipient.

• We all possess an inalienable dignity and each person is called to greatness.

• The human person is an individual creature distinguished from all other creatures by the gift of freedom. Thus we all have inalienable freedoms, rights, and responsibilities - essentially to become a fully alive human being committed to the same freedoms, rights, and responsibilities for all others.

• Personal freedom, not indoctrination, should

be characteristic of the education in Catholic schools.

• Our lives have a lasting worth and are ultimately worthwhile, having a purpose that reaches beyond ourselves and our own time.

• Christians are joined with the rest of humanity in the search for truth, a search for meaning and for the genuine solution to the many problems which arise for individuals for society as a whole.

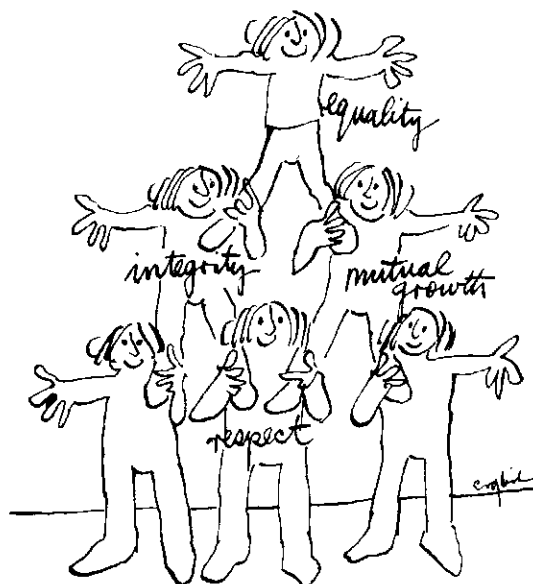
• We are appointed by God to be stewards and co-creators with God of both the world and its history. (Pastoral Constitution of the Church in the Modern World, 12, 39: Genesis 1:26).

• Each person is capable of making her or his own unique contribution to society and history.

• The authentic Catholic school offers opportunities for students to act in the service to others.

• The interrelationship between intellectual development, religious faith, and personal growth is central to the Catholic philosophy of education.

• An authentic Catholic school is a place where students are able to experience, celebrate and rejoice in the love of God and models an educational approach which encourages reflection and discovery.



A class act.

Bibliography

Congregation for Catholic Education, (1998), *The Catholic School on the Threshold of the Third Millennium*, Strathfield NSW, St Paul's Publications.

Congregation for Catholic Education, (1977), *The Catholic School*, Homebush NSW, St Paul's Publications.

Congregation for the Clergy, (Rome 1997), *General Directory for Catechesis*, Catholic Truth Society, London.

Groome, T. *Educating for Life*, Thomas More Publications, Allen, Texas.

Congregation for Catholic Education, (1988), *The Religious Dimension of Education in a Catholic School*, Strathfield NSW, St Paul's Publication.