

Defining Characteristics of Catholic Schools

Catholic schools are not private schools. “Complementing the primary role of parents in educating their children, Catholic schools, which should be accessible, affordable, and available to all, build up the community of believers, evangelize the culture, and serve the common good of society” (Arch Bishop Miller, J. Michael, 2006). The defining characteristics flow directly from the Holy See’s teaching on Catholic schools and from Church documents. These characteristics are what set us apart from public and private schools, and it is the shared responsibility of all members of the school faith community to fulfill their role as a witness of faith with the ultimate goal of forming each child into a disciple of Jesus Christ.

Most parents have not read the many Church documents that define the purpose and mission of Catholic schools. Providing a quality academic education is only the beginning of the responsibility borne by the school and parents. Church documents repeatedly emphasize that certain characteristics must be present in a Catholic school. Just as the Creed proclaims the four marks of the Church as - one, holy, catholic, and apostolic- so, too, does the Holy See identify the principal features of a school if it is to be considered truly “*Catholic*” in the mind of the Church. These five defining characteristics form the backbone of the school’s Catholic identity, inspire its mission, enlist and challenge educators and parents; justify the Church’s heavy investment in Catholic schools.

INSPIRED BY A SUPERNATURAL VISION

Catholic schools in collaboration with parents and guardians as the primary educators seek to educate the whole child by providing an excellent education rooted in the Gospel values. Together with the parents and parish the school becomes a faith community bound by tradition and sharing in the moral responsibility to teach our children the Catholic faith.

Catholic schools participate in the evangelizing mission of the Church and provide students opportunities to practice and live their faith daily. Through the actions of the faculty and in conjunction with the parents, an environment is created where faith, culture and life are brought into harmony. Catholic schools should be a place of real and specified pastoral ministry where each child is challenged and nurtured to grow in faith and grace as they acquire the academic, social and emotional skills to fulfill God’s plan for them.

Blessed Pope John Paul II addressed Catholic educators about the challenge of providing an education that transmitted the full truth concerning the human person, created in God’s image and called to life in Christ. He emphasized the inalienable dignity of the human person - above all, his/her spiritual dimension as being especially necessary in Catholic schools. He stated that, unfortunately, far too many perceive education to be merely an instrument for the acquisition of information that will improve the chances of worldly success and a more comfortable standard of living. “Such an impoverished vision of education is not Catholic.” If Catholic educators, parents, and others involved in Catholic schools fail to keep in mind the higher supernatural vision that, “the ultimate goal of Catholic education is to form boys and girls who will be good citizens of this world, loving God and neighbor and enriching society with the leaven of the Gospel, and who will also be citizens of the world to come, thus fulfilling their destiny to become saints” (*Gravissimum Educationis*, 8), then all their efforts will be for nothing.

FOUNDED ON A CHRISTIAN ANTHROPOLOGY

Catholic education is rooted in the conviction that Jesus Christ provides the most comprehensive and compelling example of the realization of full human potential (*The Catholic School*, 34, 35). In other words, Jesus came to earth not only to save us but to model for us how we should live our lives. In every aspect of the school's programs, life, activities, and interactions, Catholic schools should foster a personal relationship with Jesus Christ and provide a communal witness to the Gospel message of love of God and neighbor and service to the world, especially for the poor and marginalized (Archbishop Miller, 2006, pp. 25-26). The Holy See's documents insist that, in order to be worthy of its name, a Catholic school must be founded on Jesus Christ. Christ is not an afterthought or an add-on to the Catholic educational philosophy; he is the center and fulcrum of the entire enterprise.

"The Catholic school is committed thus to the development of the whole child, since in Christ, all human values find their fulfillment and unity. Herein lies the specifically Catholic character of the school" (*The Catholic School*, 35). Christ is the teacher in Catholic schools, and all members of the school faith community have the task of helping the school become the living provocative memory of Christ. The education received in a Catholic school above all else should be a question of communication with Christ, of helping form Christ in the lives of others. The message of Jesus Christ must be translated from the Gospel to the real world by all members of the school faith community. "The Gospel spirit should be evident in a Christian way of thought and life which permeates all facets of the educational climate" (*The Religious Dimension of Education in a Catholic School*, 25).

ANIMATED BY COMMUNION AND COMMUNITY

A third mark of Catholicity is the emphasis of the school as a community - a community of persons and a community of faith. God calls each child, each family to be part of the community, to share their gifts, to interact, to accomplish, and to solve challenges. All these are opportunities to grow in faith and academics. The adults in the community accept the responsibility to help pass the faith to the next generation by witnessing and forming a faith community. This is accomplished through education and modeling and with the goal of working as a team for the school's common good. The clergy, educators and parents work together to guide the school to make choices that promote "overcoming individualistic self-promotion, solidarity instead of competition, assisting the weak instead of marginalization, responsible participation instead of indifference" (*Religious Dimensions in Education in a Catholic School*, 46).

Relationships marked by mutual trust, close cooperation, and continuing dialogue are required for a genuine spirit of communion. Educators, parents and clergy should cooperate closely in fostering a school's Catholicity. Forming children into disciples of Christ should be the guiding principle of Catholic education; "...without this spiritual path, all external structures of cooperation serve very little purpose..." (Blessed John Paul II, *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, 43).

"The Catholic philosophy of education has always paid special attention to the quality of interpersonal relations in the school community. This concern ensures that the student is seen as a person whose intellectual growth is harmonized with spiritual, religious, emotional, and social growth" (*Consecrated Persons and Their Mission in Schools*, 61). As St. John Bosco said, "education is a thing of the heart" and the head and soul. In a Catholic school all adult Catholics should remember and understand that students need a guide during their period of growth, they need help to overcome misconceptions, doubts and disorientation; and, most importantly, they need adult Catholics who passionately model and live their Catholic faith.

IMBUED WITH A CATHOLIC WORLDVIEW THROUGHOUT ITS CURRICULUM

A distinctive characteristic of Catholic schools is that the “spirit of Catholicism” should permeate the entire curriculum. Catholic education is “intentionally directed to the growth of the whole person” (*The Catholic School*, 55). The goal is to develop gradually every capability of every student: his or her intellectual, physical, psychological, moral and religious capacities.

All educators in collaboration with parents should be “striving to form faith-filled responsible individuals, who are capable of making free and correct choices” and thus preparing young people “to open themselves more and more to reality, and to form in themselves a clear idea of the meaning of life” (*The Catholic School*, 31). To complete this goal Catholic schooling must be constantly inspired and guided by the Gospel; the school would betray its purpose to do otherwise, and it will require the trust and cooperation of all adult members of the school faith community to make it truly Catholic.

The Catholic school must embody its Catholicity in all aspects of the school. It is Catholic because it undertakes to educate the whole child, addressing the development of his or her natural and supernatural perfection. It is Catholic because it provides an education in the intellectual and moral virtues. It is Catholic because it prepares one for a life of service to others and for the life in the world to come.

Catholic educators want their students to learn wisdom and seek the truth. Unlike skeptics and relativists, they share a specific belief about the truth. The truth is founded in the teachings of Christ; and, to a limited but real extent, it can be attained and communicated to others. Catholic schools take up the daunting task of freeing boys and girls from the insidious consequences of what Pope Benedict XVI has called the “dictatorship of relativism”- one that cripples all genuine education. Catholic school teachers in conjunction with parents are to cultivate in themselves and develop in others a passion for truth that defeats moral and cultural relativism.

A second benefit that comes from communicating a Catholic worldview to children is that they realize they are called to transform culture in light of the Gospel. Schools prepare students to relate the Catholic faith to their particular culture and to live that faith in practice. Faith and culture are intimately related. Young Catholics must learn in an age-appropriate manner to make judgments based on religious and moral truths. Catholic schools seek to ensure children learn where “faith, culture, and life are brought into harmony” (*The Religious Dimensions of Education in a Catholic School*, 34). The Catholic school tries to create within its walls a climate in which the pupil’s faith will gradually mature and enable him/her to assume the responsibility placed on him by Baptism” (*The Catholic School*, 47).

“The greatest challenge to Catholic education in the United States today, and the greatest contribution that authentically Catholic education can make to American culture, is to restore to the culture the conviction that human beings can grasp the truth of things; and, in grasping that truth, can know their duties to God, to themselves and their neighbors” (Blessed John Paul II). The contemporary world urgently needs the service of educational institutions that uphold and teach that truth is “that fundamental value without which freedom, justice, and human dignity are extinguished” (*Veritatis Splendor*, 4).

SUSTAINED BY GOSPEL WITNESS

A final indicator of a school's authentic Catholicity is the vital witness of its teachers, administrators and parents. With them lies the primary responsibility for creating a Christian school climate, as individuals and as a community. A Catholic school depends on their witness to establish whether it fulfills its purpose and mission. The interactions of the members of a school faith community, in imitation of Christ, must reveal the Christian message not only by word but also by action. This is not an easy task, but it is essential to pass the faith to the children God has placed in and entrusted to the school faith community.

“Recruit teachers [and parent witnesses] who are practicing Christians who understand and accept... the moral demands of the Gospel, and who can contribute to the achievement of the school's Catholic identity and apostolic goals” (United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *National Directory for Catechesis*, 2005). Today, children listen more willingly to witnesses than to a teacher [or parent]; and if they do listen to teachers [and parents], it is because they are witnesses. What the adult Christians do and how they act are more significant than what they say. The more the adult members model Christ, the more this ideal will be believed and imitated. If boys and girls are to experience the splendor of the Church, the Christian example of the teachers of faith (administrators, teachers, parents and students) is indispensable, and every effort should be made to guarantee the presence of such witness in every Catholic school.