



Education in a Catholic Key

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FOREWORD

When John Cardinal O'Connor visited the Alliance for Catholic Education Program (ACE) on the campus of the University of Notre Dame in 1998, he challenged the members of faculty and staff to recognize that, far from simply a "Program," ACE had become a veritable "apostolic movement." Rather than primarily a matter of initiatives and results, Cardinal O'Connor realized that ACE was primarily about transforming lives, the lives of our faculty and staff, our participant teachers and principals, and most importantly the students we serve. Such transformation is a sure sign of the Holy Spirit, and Cardinal O'Connor encouraged all of us to think deeply about what the Holy Spirit was engendering in our lives, and in the teaching ministries of our participants.

In the following essay we were asked—in the context of an anthology on faith-based education—to reflect upon what it is that characterizes Catholic education. It is in this spirit that we offer this brief essay on "Education in a Catholic Key." It is not our intention to speak authoritatively in any way about what the nature of Catholic education must be in all times and places, but rather these words emerge out of our concrete experience as we have sought to serve the needs of the ministry of Catholic education across the United States over nearly quarter of a century.

We learned a great deal in writing this essay, but two things stand out. First, as you will read in this essay, our experience in ACE has taught that it is precisely those features that mark Catholic education as evangelization that make it outstanding education. Evangelization is not an impediment to or incidental to outstanding learning; it is an engine for excellence in education.

Second, the very same features that we name as emblematic of "Education in a Catholic key" can be said to characterize the precise

tone and tenor of our movement's particular vocation in service to the ministry of Catholic education. Personal and invitational Christocentric encounters; a robust sacramentality; Eucharistic service; and a unifying "both / and" approach: all of these characterize the charism of ACE, among its staff and faculty, in mentoring ACE teachers and leaders, and in serving others, especially students in Catholic schools. Thus the following essay is also a step toward articulating our particular "voice," part of an effort to capture what we have been led to understand of the particular promptings of the Holy Spirit in the life and ministry of those of us who are engaged in the Alliance for Catholic Education.

—*The Authors*
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“In articulating the features of education in a Catholic key, we have found that it is precisely in its most evangelical and ecclesial dimensions that this educational tradition is not only most Catholic, but also truly excellent in terms of the more proximate, but crucially important, ends of learning.”

INTRODUCTION

Even the most casual perusal of the contentious debates surrounding K-12 education policy in the United States at the outset of the 21st century cannot fail to observe the near obsession with “standards” and “accountability.” Even before the publication in 2004 of the landmark study, “Ready or Not: Creating a High School Diploma that Counts,” the focus of educational reform at the national level has been on overcoming the apparent absence of requisite skills and knowledge that America’s high school graduates need to succeed in their careers and compete in a global economy. The resulting adoption of the Common Core State Standards by all but a handful of states, the implementation of Secretary Duncan’s “Race to the Top” initiative (2009), and the bipartisan support for national legislation such as “Every Student Succeeds” (2015) reflects an uncommon degree of consensus that education ought to be about career-readiness in order to prepare America’s students for the labor market to compete effectively in a global economy. The road to achieve this set of objectives is equally clear: agree upon and teach to a common set of standards, and measure student achievement frequently and relentlessly to reach these standards. The philosophy driving the policy appears to be that, if a student meets or exceeds the standard for what is expected, then the task of education has been successful.

Of course, the more fundamental question that frequently goes unasked in these debates is, “Education for what?” What is the purpose of education? What, exactly, are we educating students for? What if the answer to this question is not simply career-readiness or successful competition in a global economy, as important as those goals are, but rather the full flourishing of the human person? Can many of the most important dimensions of preparing students for full human flourishing really be measured?

These questions are especially pertinent for Catholic education. Education steeped in the Gospel must focus not only on strictly academic achievement, or the materially “successful” career, but rather on a life of full human flourishing. Full human flourishing is marked not only by growth in intellectual and cognitive skills, but also by growth in wisdom—in the ability to discern what is truly important to live the good human life. It extends beyond what can be measured quantitatively. Furthermore, Catholic education is oriented toward full human flourishing but even beyond it. It is necessarily patterned on the life of Christ, and acknowledges and celebrates the mystery that “failure” in life, the way of the cross, is our only hope. Rather than being based exclusively on the secular logic of “cause and effect,” Catholic education is based on the logic of “cross and resurrection.” A crucial element of the formative experience that is sought in Catholic education is the conviction, in sharp contrast to secular values, that failure and suffering can actually be a path to deeper freedom and joy. True, Jesus touched some of his listeners so deeply that they spent the rest of their lives following him. Others, however, routinely tried to have him killed, and eventually succeeded! The transformed life of the disciple is patterned on the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. What if Catholic education in this context can teach us something about the goals of education more broadly, goals that extend beyond (even while including) college preparation and career-readiness, and concern full human flourishing?

What, then, characterizes Catholic education? Or, as we prefer to word the question, what characterizes education in “a Catholic key?” The art of education itself is obviously not uniquely Catholic. In fact “Catholic” qualifies an activity, education, that can be done and done well without being Catholic. But this recognition is potentially misleading. It could suggest that the qualifier “Catholic” is superfluous or otherwise unimportant to the task of education. We contend that nothing could be further from the truth.

We have chosen for this essay’s title the metaphor of a musical key because it conveys this sense of how something can permeate and transform an entire activity, and yet not be requisite for it. Different

musical pieces are composed in different keys. A musical key provides a coherence and unity that reverberates throughout every note of the composition. Nonetheless, there are outstanding compositions in a variety of musical keys. We find in education that “Catholic” functions much as a musical key, impacting every aspect of the endeavor and providing a coherence and unity.

We have no stake in carving out a vision of education in a Catholic key that is unique for uniqueness’ sake, or fundamentally discontinuous with other traditions of education. In fact, we have theological reasons (having to do with the axiom that grace perfects nature) that

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prevent us from doing so. We are intent on presenting a vision of education in a Catholic key that is unabashedly evangelical and ecclesial. Evangelization is at root an encounter between people and Jesus Christ, and the Church (“ecclesia”) is just that group of people who live out such friendship with Jesus Christ in community with others. In articulat-

ing the features of education in a Catholic key, we have found that it is precisely in its most evangelical and ecclesial dimensions that this educational tradition is not only most Catholic, but also truly excellent in terms of the more proximate, but crucially important, ends of learning.

This should be unsurprising to those familiar with the gospels, where Jesus is called “Teacher” from the start of His public ministry (Jn 1:38) to his post-Resurrection appearances (Jn 20:16). Jesus is the Teacher who proclaims the good news of the Kingdom of God (Mk 1:15), a mission he imparts on his disciples (Mt 28:19-20). Education in a Catholic key is first and foremost an invitation to share in this mission, an invitation to fullness of life through Jesus Christ. Evangelization is a way of teaching, rooted in a personal and invitational encounter that reaches both the head and the heart and, in doing so, transforms lives. So it stands to reason that we can learn something

about good teaching, even teaching not explicitly evangelical, from Christ the Teacher and the Church’s mission of evangelization. This is our thesis. As we sketch out defining features of education in a Catholic key, we find that each one is paradigmatically present in the context of evangelization, and yet also offers an experience of high-quality education for human flourishing in general, flourishing that is richer than solely what can be measured by quantifiable standards.

In what follows we sketch an account of “education in a Catholic key.” The next section provides a necessary element of context to explain the difference it makes that, while Catholic education is practiced in a vast variety of national and international contexts across the world, we write this from the rather singular perspective of the American experience. The ensuing four sections each present a defining feature of education in a Catholic key. Such education is, first, *personal and invitational* in both method and substance, beckoning the student to a living relationship with Christ, and in doing so engaging the student as a whole person—body, mind, and soul—rather than simply as a learner. Second, education in a Catholic key is *sacramental*. It is not only undertaken in an environment where the Catholic sacraments are practiced, but also in an environment where the school’s ecclesial animating vision is “baked in” to every activity, reflecting the belief that God is found in all things. Third, education in a Catholic key is *Eucharistic*. Of course Catholic schools celebrate Mass. But they are also Eucharistic by incorporating students into a community, a community of members who are formed with the explicit hope that they will live to give themselves away to others in loving service. Finally, education in a Catholic key is catholic in the sense of being *unitive* or “universal.” After all, that’s what the word *katholikós* means. It boldly attends to all of reality—religion and science, faith and reason, natural and supernatural—out of the conviction that the truth is one, and that through faith and reason working in concert, we embark on the search for meaning together.

CONTEXT

Catholic Education Emerging from an American Experience

To set the context of the experience of Catholic Education in the United States, consider its beginnings. An immigrant minority, many poor and illiterate, a cultural and linguistic mosaic of peoples from every part of the “old world,” fleeing their circumstances, arrived on the shores of America during the mid-to-late 19th and early 20th centuries, searching for freedom and opportunity. As the storied Jewish Mayor of New York City, Ed Koch, colorfully put it, these immigrant people were greeted by two women: Lady Liberty, and Mother Church (2014, as quoted by Cardinal Timothy Dolan). They were, in large part, immigrants from Catholic countries, and they were greeted by the dominant culture with deep suspicion and hostility. In part because they were Catholic and foreign, and therefore “un-American,” they were largely excluded from the cultural and social institutions that defined American life and culture at that time. American “common schools” were—from their founding—permeated by practices, values, and attitudes couched in northern European Protestant ideology, and not so subtly engaged in promoting the notion that Catholicism was inimical to Americanism.

It was into this exceptionally hostile cultural, social, and political reality that communities of women and men, vowed Catholic religious, brought a vision for a network of schools that nourished both individual and collective identity, language, and culture—an approach that is akin to today’s “culturally responsive pedagogy” (Dallavis, 2008). While the growing public school system focused on Americanization, Catholic schools found their own strength in celebrating the kaleidoscope of the rich cultural heritages, languages, and identities of the families brought to America by an array of communities of varying

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national provenance. Beginning with educational entrepreneurs such as Elizabeth Ann Seton, Katherine Drexel, and John Neumann, these women and men gave their lives and gifts to build what would become the world's largest private school system. Such women and men built over 12,000 schools all across America, at its height in the mid-1960's educating over five million students, fully twelve percent of the American school population.

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Catholics still comprise nearly one-fourth of the nation's population, the doors of American Catholic schools have shuttered at an unprecedented rate. By 2015, nearly half of the Catholic schools in the United States have closed, and Catholic school enrollment has diminished by more than half, to 1.9 million. A confluence of factors was driving this unvirtuous dynamic, not the least of which was the virtual disappearance of the vowed religious women and men who comprised the vast majority of the leadership and

teaching personnel resources that fueled the life and success of these schools. These women and men had—since the inception of this impressive network of schools—constituted a “living endowment” and made it cost affordable to the emergent populations they were created to serve. Most importantly, in a most unique and powerful way, they had also served as living witnesses of the integration of faith and learning that characterizes a distinctive contribution of education in a Catholic key.

The birth and growth of Catholic schools in the United States is inseparable from evangelization. Teachers and principals, especially the women and men religious, have been witnesses to faith-permeat-

ed lives and passed on their faith and their wisdom to their students. Catholic schools are environments saturated in symbolism, imbuing students in the Catholic faith while welcoming children from a variety of ethnicities. And Catholic schools have had a special focus on the poor, while forming students, in turn, to be of service to those in need. This thoroughly evangelical endeavor has also been an outstanding vehicle for providing excellence in education more broadly.

Today despite the precipitous decline in the number of students served in Catholic schools in the United States, the evidence of the educational effectiveness of Catholic schooling, especially for those most disadvantaged, has never been stronger. Indeed, no single system of schools—charter, private, or public—has demonstrated such documented academic and achievement efficacy for the very children most vulnerable to unsatisfactory schooling (Altonji, Elder, and Taber, 2005; Benson, Yeager, Guerra, and Manno, 1986; Bryk, Holland, and Lee, 1993; Coleman and Hoffer, 1987; Coleman, Hoffer, and Kilgore, 1982; Evans and Schwab, 1995; Greeley, 1982; Grogger and Neal, 2000; Jaynes, 2007; Marks and Lee, 1989; Neal, 1997; Sander, 1996; Sander and Krautman, 1995). Research also tells us that Catholic school graduates are more tolerant of diverse views, are more likely to vote, are more likely to be civically engaged, and even earn higher wages than their public school counterparts (Campbell, 2001a; 2001b; 2002; Dee, 2005; Goodwin, et al, 1999; 2001; 2002; Greene, 1998; Greene et al., 1999a; 1999b, Schneider, et al., 1997; Wolf et al., 1998; 2001; Peterson and Campbell, 2001; Peterson, Campbell, and West, 2001; Howell et al., 2002; Hoxby, 1994; Neal, 1997). Furthermore, no system of schools achieves this success with such exceptional economic efficiency, typically educating students at less than half of the cost of neighboring public and charter schools (Ouchi, 2003). Additionally, these schools have come to constitute community institutions that generate important social capital in urban neighborhoods, “sacred places serving civic purposes” (DiIulio, 2009). As such, the consequences of the massive closures of Catholic schools, primarily taking place in urban areas, are greatly deleterious for the common good. Research has even demonstrated that, when urban neighborhood Cath-

olic schools close, social cohesion and collective efficacy decrease and crime, delinquency, and disorder increase (Brinig and Garnett, 2015).

In one sense, America's Catholic schools are the 19th- and early 20th-century product of what has been described as the most intensive

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period of social entrepreneurship in the history of the United States (Putnam, 2000). However, the institutions created under the set of conditions of a given period, if they are to survive and prosper over time, must often reinvent themselves in subsequent eras, while at the same time remaining true to their animating vision. Upon closer inspection, one can perhaps see the stirrings in the second decade of the

21st century of a new and perhaps equally creative age of institutional invention in Catholic schooling. Innovative models to find and form talented, faith-inspired teachers and leaders, renewed efforts to enhance the quality and identity of faith-based education and to design new forms of governance, and initiatives to make Catholic schools more affordable and accessible, have emerged in dioceses across the country. While the ultimate outcome of these particular efforts to reinvigorate Catholic education in America is uncertain, there can be little doubt that there remains a dire need in the United States for Catholic schools that are true to their evangelical origin and, precisely as such, venues of outstanding education.

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ONE

Education in a Personal and Invitational Key

At its very core, Catholic education is learning in the context of evangelization, an invitation to discipleship. We maintain that many of the same features that make for good evangelization make for good education. Perhaps no feature of evangelization is more important than its being a personal encounter, an invitation to “trans-formation” (not simply “in-formation”) primarily through witness. Evangelization, like education, is attainment of knowledge, in this case, faith. For evangelization as with good education, that attainment of knowledge happens through a personal and invitational encounter with a teacher. The disciple or student not only learns intellectually, but is transformed in the heart. And the teacher’s personal invitation to such transformation is achieved mainly through witness. This section explains what the Catholic tradition has to offer on the import of personal and invitational encounters for the transmission of the faith, in order to help explain how this dynamic characterizes education more broadly when done in a Catholic key.

Evangelization is always a personal and communal encounter with Christ. When Jesus walked the earth we can see this continual personal and invitational encounter with his disciples. After the resurrection that personal invitation is mediated through the Body of Christ, the Church. The story of mysterious invitation and response has played out over and over again throughout the history of our faith tradition. We look at Christ the Teacher’s first such encounter as a paradigm of personal encounter that is witness-based and transformative. The Gospel of John records the very first time that this story of Christian invitation unfolded:

The next day John was there again with two of his disciples, and as he watched Jesus walk by, he said “Behold, the Lamb of God.” The two disciples heard what he said and followed Jesus. Jesus turned and saw them following him and said this to them, “What are you looking for?” They said to him, “Rabbi” (which translated means Teacher), “Where are you staying?” He said to them, “Come and you will see.” So they went and saw where he was staying, and they stayed with him that day. (Jn 1:35-39)

At first, these followers have no idea who or what they are following. Jesus stops and asks them the very question that is burning, yet largely unarticulated, in their hearts: “What are you looking for?” It is really their question, not Jesus’ question, and so it is not surprising that they have no ready answer for him. So they simply address him, “Teacher”—that is, “Teach us what it is we are looking for.” They ask him, “Where are you staying?”—that is, “Can we come and see what it is that beats so wildly within our hearts?” Jesus’ answer, of course, as always, is “Yes! Come and you will see.” There is much to learn, to know, to “see.” And in order to do so one must “come,” and through that personal encounter one will “see.” Primordially, then, evangelization is an encounter with Jesus who invites us to “come and see,” and through that encounter a person grasps the good news.

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This passage from John’s Gospel ends with an easily overlooked sentence, but one beautiful and compelling in its intimacy: “So they went and saw where Jesus was staying, and they stayed with him all that day.” The very first act that Jesus performed with his disciples was not to barrage them with information or teach them a skill. It was to invite them into his life, to spend the day with him. What happened that day? We do not know exactly, but clearly a deep and abiding friendship began between Jesus and his first disciples, a friendship transformative

in character. It would be in this personal relationship that the disciples, literally “students,” would learn the good news from their Teacher.

Why is it that faith is attained through a personal invitation? In his first encyclical *Lumen Fidei*, Pope Francis describes faith as a sort of knowledge, a “light” by which we see things—an image resonant with John’s recounting that Jesus spent the “day,” a time of light, with his first students. Pope Francis gives extensive attention to how this light, this guiding knowledge, is attained. He claims that faith is “a form of hearing,” as distinguished from—though not opposed to, since it

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in fact leads to—seeing. Whereas knowledge gained by sight (according to this metaphor) is immediate and does not rely on interpersonal engagement, the knowledge attained through hearing is an inherently “personal knowledge.” It relies on an encounter with another, the

“voice of the one speaking,” and is “knowledge bound to the passage of time” (Pope Francis, 2013, s. 29). The knowledge attained by faith is known by trusting, believing, the person who speaks to us. For evangelization, we trust Jesus, through His Body the Church.

Religious faith is not the only sort of knowledge we attain through personal and invitational relationships with others. Pope Francis notes that “in many areas in our lives we trust others who know more than we do. We trust the architect who builds our home, the pharmacist who gives us medicine for healing, the lawyer who defends us in court” (Pope Francis, 2013, s. 18). In these cases, our trusting relationship with another person is a catalyst for our grasping something as true. This theme of the human person attaining all sorts of knowledge through belief or trust, which always entails an encounter with a person whom we trust, is also described by Pope John Paul II in *Fides et ratio* (1998):

(I) here are in the life of a human being many more truths which are simply believed than truths which are acquired by way of per-

sonal verification. Who, for instance, could assess critically the countless scientific findings upon which modern life is based? Who could personally examine the flow of information which comes day after day from all parts of the world and which is generally accepted as true? Who in the end could forge anew the paths of experience and thought which have yielded the treasures of human wisdom and religion? This means that the human being—the one who seeks the truth—is also *the one who lives by belief* (s. 31).

Pope John Paul II reminds us that the human person is one who believes. This is, in part, because of the sheer quantity of knowledge before us that, even if in principle verifiable, could not possibly all be verified by one person. We also believe because there are some things in a human life that, while subject to analysis with our reason, are not fully verifiable. In all these matters, our personal relationships are not incidental to what we know; they are engines for attaining truth.

The human person is one who knows by belief, and belief is powered by personal relationships. Therefore, faith is an inherently communal endeavor. Pope Francis relates a humorous story about Jean Jacques Rousseau:

“Rousseau once lamented that he could not see God for himself: ‘How many people stand between God and me!’ ... ‘Is it really so simple and natural that God would have sought out Moses in order to speak to Jean Jacques Rousseau?’” (Pope Francis, 2013, s. 110).

Rousseau laments that the knowledge of faith is attained through the mediation of a community, here the people of Israel and ultimately the Church. The Pope calls this an “individualistic and narrow conception of knowledge.” Our reliance upon others for faith is not some unfortunate liability in the attainment of knowledge. It is the way the human person as a social creature learns, and indeed flourishes; the community setting for the transmission of faith in evangelization is a case where the “medium is the message.” Pope Francis (2013) describes this personal mediation of faith in the following manner:

Faith, in fact, needs a setting in which it can be witnessed to and communicated, a means which is suitable and proportionate to what is communicated. For transmitting a purely doctrinal content, an idea might suffice, or perhaps a book, or the repetition of a spoken message. But what is communicated in the Church, what is handed down in her living Tradition, is the new light born of an encounter with the true God, a light which touches us at the core of our being and engages our minds, wills, and emotions, opening us to relationships lived in communion (s. 40).

The good news is God's saving love for us, a call to interpersonal communion with God and others in God, and through God's grace. The fact that the knowledge of faith is attained precisely through such communion is a case where that transmission is an instantiation of, indeed the very beginning of, what is sought.

The child is a person, not just a learner. The trusting encounter between teacher and students is not incidental to their learning, but the very engine of that learning.

What has any of this to do with education in a Catholic key? The personal and invitational encounters that are essential to faith are also essential to learning in school. This is not at all to downplay the importance of acquiring technical pedagogical skills. But especially with children, those skills are not enough. The child is a person, not just a learner. The trusting encounter

between teacher and students is not incidental to their learning, but the very engine of that learning. One could imagine a Rousseau-like lament with regard to education: why can't students just come in and "fill up," via a dispenser of knowledge—human or computer—on what they need to know?! While training in skills and passing on information are indeed crucial parts of education, to reduce education to such training reinforces an individualistic and pragmatist view of the person. Not only is this not how human persons operate, but it would also be an alternate occasion where the medium is the message. In this

case the message and medium would be pragmatic individualism. This is not education in a Catholic key. Catholic education is inherently interpersonal, since that communal setting is both effective in the attainment of knowledge, and teaches the reality of the communal nature of the human person and indeed of God's very Self.

Before turning to the next feature of education in a Catholic key, it is worth pausing to note two further observations that concern the personally invitational character of Catholic education. Again we take a cue from evangelization and the personal encounter between the disciples and Christ the Teacher. Catholic Education is not exclusively, nor even primarily, about transmitting information, though this transmission is important, but more fundamentally about human transformation, about changing lives. It is a matter of engaging the heart as well as the head. In his 2008 address to U.S. Catholic educators, Pope Benedict XVI (2008) expressed concern that "while we have sought diligently to engage the intellect of our young, perhaps we have neglected the will." This engagement of the heart—the ancient locus of the will—and mind is evident in John's gospel. When Jesus was ready to turn his worldly ministry over to Peter and the other disciples before his ascension, he appeared to them. During this encounter, Jesus asked Peter one question, and he asked it three times. The question does not elicit from Peter a recitation of facts about Jesus' teaching or ministry, but is rather, simply and over and over again, "Do you love me?" The heart of Jesus' mission, and so the heart of the mission of Catholic Education, is to transform our students' lives into lives of love of God and for one another.

Next, a crucial characteristic of education in a Catholic key is that the personal encounter be based on the quality and integrity of personal witness. In a 2016 talk at Notre Dame on Catholic education, Archbishop Joseph Tobin claimed that the biggest challenge to Catholic education today is not financial, as one might assume. It is a "chasm between faith and life" (Tobin, 2016). Particularly in these days of a decline in the presence of religious women and men in schools, Catholic schools must be places where students see witnesses to faith in life. Jesus spoke to his disciples in such a way that they not only de-

decided to spend the rest of that first day with him, but eventually dedicated the rest of their lives, and their deaths, to him as his disciples. Moreover, the very first thing these disciples did after spending the day with Jesus, as John records, was to find their friends and invite them to Jesus. “Andrew was one of the two who heard John and followed Jesus. He first found his brother Simon and told him, ‘We have found

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the Messiah!’” (Jn 1:40-41). Jesus’ teaching was so compelling because there existed no gap between his teaching and his action. If he taught about the importance of prayer, then he prayed. If he talked about the importance of sharing, then he shared. If he taught that the greatest love was to lay down one’s life, then

he hung from the cross. Jesus captured his disciples by teaching, and living, in a challenging and deeply compelling way.

The interpersonal character of education in a Catholic key means that it can never be “proselytization,” but must always be invitation. And there is no better way to invite than through compelling personal witness. Consider the words of Pope Paul VI (1975) in his encyclical, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*:

Above all the Gospel must be proclaimed by witness. Take a Christian or a handful of Christians who, in the midst of their own community, show their capacity for understanding and acceptance, their sharing of life and destiny with other people, their solidarity with the efforts of all for whatever is noble and good. Let us suppose that, in addition, they radiate in an altogether simple and unaffected way their faith in values that go beyond current values, and their hope in something that is not seen and that one would not dare to imagine. Through this wordless witness these Christians stir up irresistible questions in the heart of those who see how they live: Why are they like this? Why do they live in this way? What or who is it that inspires them? Why are they in our

midst? Such a witness is already a silent proclamation of the Good News and a very powerful and effective one. . . . Other questions will arise, deeper and more demanding ones, questions evoked by this witness which involves presence, sharing, solidarity, and which is an essential element, and generally the first one, in evangelization (s. 21).

It is this personal witness, this closing of the gap between faith and life, that the vowed religious men and women who founded the American Catholic school system provided in a unique and compelling way, and which constitutes the greatest challenge to the system’s future thriving. A new generation of faithful lay men and women must take up the mantle of this life-changing apostolate if it is to have any future at all.

In sum, education in a Catholic key is personal and invitational. Evangelization is an invitation to come to know Christ—in the Eucharist, in the Gospels, on the playground, in the laboratory, in the witness of the school community, in one another, and within the deepest longings of their own hearts— always in a personal encounter. The personal and invitational encounters that are at the heart of evangelization also characterize education more broadly in Catholic schools, and serve as a defining feature of education in a Catholic key.

Education in a Sacramental Key

Another of the defining features of education in a Catholic key is the prominence of the sacramental life. For Catholics this term refers paradigmatically to the seven sacraments, and especially to the Eucharist, which as the next section describes is the “source and summit of the Christian life” (*Lumen Gentium*, 1965). But it also refers more broadly to the way that God’s presence is mediated in all things, even the not explicitly religious, even the mundane. This section begins with a reflection on the sacraments and sacramentality in general, and then turns to examine how Catholic education is sacramental in its attention to a richly symbolic environment that mediates its animating vision in all things. Here we will find, once again, that the context of evangelization in Catholic schools offers lessons for education more broadly.

Consider first a necessarily brief vision of the sacraments as revelatory of God’s presence in the world. Many Christians view their participation in the sacraments as occasions to encounter God in explicitly religious activity, so as to “fuel up” in preparation for their activity in the secular world, a world devoid of God’s presence. Counter to this, St. Ignatius Loyola famously exhorted us to seek and recognize “God in all things.” God is the Creator of all, and therefore all the world is shot through with the presence of God. True, God is hidden and never fully revealed in this life. But the seven sacraments are not discontinuous with a de-sacralized world. Rather, the sacraments of the Church are especially intense occasions, “strong moments,” where we worship God, always with the things of this world, and in doing so are reminded of the holiness of the world while we participate in God’s redemption of the world (Irwin, 2002). Catholic education is thus “sacramental,” not only because it entails the celebration of

“Thus education in a Catholic key is sacramental because it is permeated by a shared, intentional culture, one where the mystery of God’s love for us, seen climactically in Jesus Christ, is inextricably linked to all school practices, those that are explicitly religious and those that are not.”

sacraments, but because the sacraments remind us of the reality of God's presence in all things. The advantage of a Catholic view of sacramentality is the continuity between those strong moments of God's presence and more everyday mundane moments. The question then becomes, how can we see that sacramentality permeates the entire learning environment and culture of Catholic schools?

A key feature of education in a Catholic key is the central importance of cultivating a life of prayer, of transcendence, and a deepening of one's communion and friendship with, God. Catholic education teaches toward a supernatural end—to transform our students' lives

Catholic education is thus 'sacramental,' not only because it entails the celebration of sacraments, but because the sacraments remind us of the reality of God's presence in all things.

into lives of love—and this transformation depends upon God's grace toward this end. Jesus prayed constantly. He prayed alone, he prayed with his friends, and he prayed with those he taught. He prayed in petition, he prayed for discernment, he prayed in desolation, he prayed for consolation, he prayed in thanksgiving. As always, Jesus taught others to do the same. Cultivating habits of prayer before class, on the playing

field, and at particularly salient moments of joy and sorrow in the life of the school community, sheds a revealing light on both the supernatural end of its mission and an utter dependence on God to achieve this end.

However, though the pervasive presence of prayer is essential to Catholic education, the sacramentality of such education is not simply due to frequent occasions of prayer. In Catholic education, sacramentality must permeate all school activities, and it must enable community members to recognize God in all things. First, consider just how thoroughly this sacramentality pervades Catholic schools. The importance of a pervasive and formative culture is of course not unique to Catholic schools. A shared, intentional culture is the key to truly exceptional education in just about any educational endeavor. In

successful schools, beliefs and values are “baked in” to every policy, program, and procedure of the school in an open and intentional way. Through reinforcement from teachers, daily routines and practices, rituals, and even rules and classroom decorations, those values and beliefs are clearly, consistently, and effectively communicated by the school environment itself. But this pervasive culture is indeed common to Catholic education. As described by recent scholars of Catholic schools, “literally every aspect of school life provides an occasion for teaching” (Bryk, Lee, & Holland, 1993).

Secondly, however, it is not just the fact that a culture of any sort is pervasive in Catholic schools. It is the culture of seeing God in all things. The real presence of God is not limited to moments of prayer, or Mass, as important as those are. Rather, gospel values transform everything in the Catholic school. In a school culture where God is seen in all things, it is meant to change the way every interaction with others is approached. It is meant to change how science class is approached. It is intended to transform how poetry, history, biology, and math are understood and appreciated. It changes how children are treated—even, or especially, how children who present the greatest challenges are treated. It changes how discipline is enforced. The belief that God is in all things, is meant to transform every single dimension of a school.

At the Eucharist Catholics celebrate the mystery of God's salvation through Jesus Christ. We remember the goodness of all God's creation. We remember the tragedy of human brokenness, the sinfulness by which we alienate ourselves from God and the suffering that ensues. We remember God's relentless redemption, his loving mercy, and the sacrifice of His only Son to reconcile us with the Father through the Spirit. When this God is found in all things in the Catholic school, it enables teachers and students to revel in the beauty and goodness of God's creation, especially each other. It enables us to recognize our own and others' brokenness and struggles, and to be merciful with one another. And it fills up with hope in the power of God's grace to redeem, even where it was not thought possible. Catholic education is thereby permeated with the logic of God's mercy and

love, with the logic of the cross and the resurrection.

Thus education in a Catholic key is sacramental because it is permeated by a shared, intentional culture, one where the mystery of God's love for us, seen climactically in Jesus Christ, is inextricably linked to all school practices, those that are explicitly religious and those that are not. This pervasive culture, this sacramentality, provides a thoroughgoing formation of the student. The culture inculcates a vision of reality and therefore shapes how students come to see reality. The school's daily rituals and practices carry this vision and lead students to act with a growing awareness of the presence of God. The Catholic school's pervasive sacramental culture, by shaping how we act and how we see things, shapes students' characters. Intellectual and moral virtues are developed in students by exactly this sort of habituation fostered in the school culture. In sum, the theological commitment to find God in all things gives rise to a sacramental environment that forms students in their hearts as well as heads.

“We are a Eucharistic people
when we become one body, in a
communion of self-giving love
that turns us into self-giving love
in service to others.”

THREE

Education in a Eucharistic Key

Few things—if any—are more associated with the Catholic faith than the Eucharist, celebrated at Mass. And so it is perhaps unsurprising that education in a Catholic key is “Eucharistic.” But what does that mean? In line with the previous section on sacramentality, it of course means that the Eucharist is celebrated frequently in Catholic schools. Mass is such a common feature of Catholic school life precisely because the Eucharist, in the Catholic tradition, is the “source and summit of the Christian life” (*Lumen Gentium*, 1965). But we call the entire endeavor of Catholic education Eucharistic, and not simply due to the frequent celebration of Mass. The Eucharist is an encounter with the real presence of Jesus. We share the body and blood of Christ, and in doing so become the Body of Christ. We are a Eucharistic people when we become one body, in a communion of self-giving love that turns us into self-giving love in service to others. Education in a Catholic key is Eucharistic because it forms us into a community, a community of self-gift in service to others.

St. Augustine helps us see what it means to be Eucharistic in a sermon he preached over 1600 years ago at an Easter Vigil sermon to newly baptized catechumens who were about to receive the Eucharist for the first time. He states boldly:

So now, if you want to understand the body of Christ, listen to the Apostle Paul speaking to the faithful: “You are the body of Christ, member for member.” [1 Cor. 12.27] If you, therefore, are Christ’s body and members, it is your own mystery that is placed on the Lord’s table! It is your own mystery that you are receiving! . . . Be what you see; receive what you are! (St. Augustine, 1993, p. 272).

Augustine’s very first injunction to these newly baptized is that they are the Body of Christ, the Eucharist. He reiterates this by reminding them of the significance of the elements of Holy Communion, bread and wine. “What is this one bread? Is it not the ‘one body,’ formed from many? Remember: bread doesn’t come from a single grain, but from many.” As to the wine, he reminds them how wine is made.

Individual grapes hang together in a bunch, but the juice from them all is mingled to become a single brew. This is the image chosen by Christ our Lord to show how, at his own table, the mystery of our unity and peace is solemnly consecrated.

Both bread and wine are made from many individuals, grain and grapes, “mingled” to become one. In the same way God’s people, the body of Christ, are called to be one. Pope Benedict (2005) makes this point in his encyclical *God is Love*:

As Saint Paul says, “Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread” (1 Cor 10:17). Union with Christ is also union with all those to whom he gives himself. I cannot possess Christ just for myself; I can belong to him only in union with all those who have become, or who will become, his own. Communion draws me out of myself towards him, and thus also towards unity with all Christians. We become “one body”, completely joined in a single existence (s. 14).

The Eucharist reminds us that we are many members but one body.

This theological point accentuates a philosophical truth recognized since Aristotle and even before, namely, that the human person is a social animal. Our inherently communal nature means that we thrive in right relationship with others. We are interdependent, and our reliance on one another is not accidental or an unfortunate situation to be endured. We only flourish in community with others. Catholic

education affirms the communal nature of the human person. The entire culture of Catholic schools, in all of its reach described in the previous section, fosters in children an awareness of their interdependence, and invites a life of solidarity with others. Pope John Paul II (1987) describes solidarity in this way:

When interdependence becomes recognized in this way, the correlative response as a moral and social attitude, as a “virtue,” is solidarity. This then is not a feeling of vague compassion or shallow distress at the misfortunes of so many people, both near and far. On the contrary, it is a firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good; that is to say to the good of all and of each individual, because we are all really responsible for all (s. 38).

Affirmation of the communal nature of the human person leads to solidarity, a commitment to the common good. In Catholic education this unity is understood as Eucharistic, for we are one body in Christ.

As evident in John Paul II’s words on solidarity, an accurate recognition of interdependence leads to solidarity. And thus education in a Catholic key is also Eucharistic in its focus on service. At the Last Supper, the first Eucharist, John the evangelist begins his account of the supper with the story of Jesus’ washing the disciples’ feet and instructing them to do the same: “I have given you a model to follow, so that as I have done for you, you should also do” (Jn 13:15). From the very beginning, the Eucharist has been inseparable from service.

As Pope Benedict (2005) states in that same encyclical, “a Eucharist which does not pass over into the concrete practice of love is intrinsically fragmented” (s. 14). Referencing the saints, who live out the call to all of us to give ourselves away in service, he goes on to say:

The saints—consider the example of Blessed Teresa of Calcutta—constantly renewed their capacity for love of neighbour from their encounter with the Eucharistic Lord, and conversely this encounter acquired its real-ism and depth in their service to others (Benedict XVI, 2005, s. 18).

Service is obviously not a uniquely Catholic endeavor. Improving the lives of others and benefiting society are thankfully recognized and practiced throughout the world of education. But for education in a Catholic and therefore Eucharistic key, service provides a *telos* for learning itself, one that, imitating the life of Christ, eclipses the betterment of one’s own self or career. In this way education in a Catholic key seeks to cultivate in its students not only an appreciation for the great achievements of human beings but also a disciplined sensibility to poverty, injustice, and oppression. The aim is to create a sense of human solidarity and concern for the common good that will bear fruit. For Catholic education, service is not ancillary to learning, but rather “learning becomes service to justice” (University of Notre Dame, 2016).

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Therefore education in a Catholic key is Eucharistic, in its emphasis on community and its commitment to service. “The Eucharist draws us into Jesus’ act of self-oblation. More than just statically receiving the incarnate *Logos*, we enter into the very dynamic of his self-giving” (Benedict XVI, 2005, s. 13). We become Eucharistic when we become this self-giving love, a self-giving love that makes us community and turns us in service toward others.

Education in a Unitive Key

In an address on Catholic education at Notre Dame, Bishop Joseph Caggiano opined that the most important word in the Catholic faith is a simple three letter one that we use hundreds of times a day: “and.” Fully God *and* fully human. Faith *and* reason. Person *and* community. Science *and* religion. Head *and* heart. Human freedom *and* God’s guiding grace. Education in a Catholic key therefore conjoins, or is unitive. What that terms refers to in this section is, again, the root meaning of the word “catholic” as “universal.” It is comprehensive, attending to the whole. Catholic education boldly takes on everything. Faith, but not to the exclusion of reason. The supernatural, but not to the exclusion of the natural. The heart, but not to the exclusion of the head.

Thus there is no conflict between the truths of salvation passed on in evangelization, and the wondrous truths about creation accessed through human reason and passed on in an educational environment. What lies beneath this bold comprehensiveness is of course a faith in God who both creates and redeems. Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life, and so all truth is unified and ultimately leads us to Him. How is this evident in Catholic education?

Education in a Catholic key relies on both faith and reason. Pope John Paul II (1998) describes this beautifully in his encyclical on faith and reason:

Faith and reason are like two wings on which the human spirit rises to the contemplation of truth; and God has placed in the human heart a desire to know the truth—in a word, to know himself—so that, by knowing and loving God, men and women may also come to the fullness of truth about themselves (Prologue).

“Education in a Catholic key is marked by a freedom to address all reality, and even transcendent realities, a freedom unavailable in public education.”

Catholic education does not focus on reason alone, an approach prompted by the Enlightenment's distrust of (especially religious) authority and the concomitant attempt to establish ethics and politics on foundations that are based on pure (or more commonly today, public) reason alone. A Catholic approach to education recognizes there are facets of reality that transcend that capacity of unaided human reason and therefore require belief. As Pope John Paul II (1998) says later in his encyclical:

[W]ith the light of reason human beings can know which path to take, but they can follow that path to its end, quickly and unhindered, only if with a rightly tuned spirit they search for it within the horizon of faith. Therefore, reason and faith cannot be separated without diminishing the capacity of men and women to know themselves, the world and God in an appropriate way (s. 16).

This reliance on faith is clearly evident in the study of theology that is crucial to Catholic education. But even the study of other disciplines that do not require faith—such as the sciences, literature, and history—is done in a manner that is open to the contextualization by and contributions of faith.

Along with this attunement to faith, education in a Catholic key is also deeply consonant with a trust in the existence and accessibility of truth, and thus reason is at the heart of the educational endeavor. Therefore, Catholic education should never be a fundamentalist fideism where belief confines or trumps human reason. Catholic education is marked by a trust that rational, scientific inquiry always leads to the Word of God. Faith and reason complement one another, even holding one another accountable.

This reliance upon both faith and reason is rooted in an openness to all of reality. This is in contrast to a secularizing education where attention to transcendent questions is avoided, an avoidance that can

(explicitly or implicitly) suggest there is no reality beyond the comprehension of human reason. That avoidance is justified of course by American constitutional provisions of non-establishment, and by an understandable reticence to address transcendent questions when different religious worldviews and ontologies can be so significantly different. It may seem that the learning environment of Catholic schools is more “closed” given its attention to ultimate matters in the context of evangelization. Yet here again that context of evangelization actually aids the educational endeavor.

Education in a Catholic key is marked by a freedom to address all reality, and even transcendent realities, a freedom unavailable in public education. Even for teachers and students at all different places on their religious journeys, including non-Catholics and non-Christians, Catholic education's insistence on the importance of human reason and eschewal of fundamentalist fideism translate into a hospitality where rigorous dialogue on ultimate matters is more possible (Bryk et al, 1993 & Donlevy, 2007). That the evangelical context provides a (perhaps surprising to some) space for dialogue is indicated by the U.S. Bishops in a 2005 document renewing their support for Catholic schools:

[Catholic schools] are the privileged environment in which Christian education is carried out . . . Catholic schools are at once places of evangelization, of complete formation, of inculturation, of apprenticeship in a lively dialogue between young people of different religions and social backgrounds (USCCB, 2005).

Recall the earlier quote from Pope Paul VI, who affirms that it is precisely in the context of evangelization, with Christians witnessing faith, that transcendent questions can be addressed by people at whatever stage or direction in their faith journey:

The above [ultimate] questions will [be asked by many non-Christians,] whether they are people to whom Christ has never been proclaimed, or baptized people who do not practice, or people

who live as nominal Christians but according to principles that are in no way Christian, or people who are seeking, and not without suffering, something or someone whom they sense but cannot name. Other questions will arise, deeper and more demanding ones, questions evoked by this witness which involves presence, sharing, solidarity, and which is an essential element, and generally the first one, in evangelization.

Education in a Catholic key is unitive, attending to all facets of reality, including those accessible by faith *and* reason. This bold attention to all of reality also makes Catholic education unitive with regard to people at all different places in their journeys of facing these transcendent questions: Catholics of whatever degree of formation, non-Catholic Christians, and non-Christians alike. There is a trust that all persons are seeking responses to questions of ultimate reality, and education in a Catholic key resists the temptation to avoid facing transcendent questions.

Finally, education in a Catholic key is also unitive in its affirmation of the unity and integration of knowledge, a coherence that is not imposed from the outside by theology or faith, but which characterizes the truth as sought through

The sciences, math, arts, literature, and history are all studied to open to students different facets of reality that cohere to form a unified whole.

math, the sciences, literature, history, etc. A tenant of liberal arts education, which of course need not be Catholic, is that the various disciplines of knowledge are undertaken as distinct ways of accessing reality. Though distinct, they are unified in their search for a common truth,

even as that truth is accessed through distinct methods. The unity of the truth sought in education means that the various disciplines are all integral parts of a common endeavor, each one providing some distinct and essential contribution yet none sufficient on its own. The various “subjects” in Catholic schools are not undertaken for the simple sake of diversity, or solely as venues for the teaching of skills.

They are undertaken as an affirmation of the unity and integration of knowledge. Research on Catholic high schools shows that they are far more likely to require a common curriculum, rather than allow students’ individual preferences to dictate a large portion of the curriculum (Bryk et al, 1993). This is revelatory of how Catholic education regards the body of knowledge into which students are inaugurated. What students learn are not simply competencies and skills that equip them to operate effectively in the world. Nor is what they learn primarily a function of their personal interest. Rather, the sciences, math, arts, literature, and history are all studied to open to students different facets of reality that cohere to form a unified whole. That same research indicates that that this commonality helps inculcate the communal identity described in the previous section (Bryk et al, 1993). But rather than simply an instrumental way to achieve community, the commitment to lead students on a path of wisdom to understand the whole through its integral parts reflects the unitive dimension of education in a Catholic key.

CONCLUSION

This essay began with observations about the contemporary focus on standards and accountability. This fixation can occlude attention to more fundamental matters, such as the very purpose of education. We claim that the purpose of education is the full human flourishing of the student, which extends beyond quantifiable measures, to the transcendent. Further, Catholic education is oriented toward aiding students to flourish in a manner steeped in the reality of God's salvation in Jesus Christ—to live like Jesus Christ, the exemplar of flourishing. To explain how this occurs we sought to describe education “in a Catholic key.”

The Catholic tradition offers robust resources for the education in faith called evangelization, somewhat in contrast to “proselytization.” Though education more broadly speaking is an endeavor that is not dependent on Catholic faith, we contend that Catholic teaching on evangelization helps illuminate education of a high quality. Indeed, education in a Catholic key represents a more effective education precisely the more evangelical and ecclesial it is. And thus we identified four characteristics of Catholic education from the context of evangelization. First, attainment of knowledge is energized by an invitation to a personal encounter with others who pass on faith and wisdom, most powerfully by their witness and in a manner that not only informs the heads but transforms the hearts of those who learn, those who “come and see.” This same personal and invitational dynamic energizes all learning and formation and so characterizes education in a Catholic key. Second, education in a Catholic key is sacramental. Catholic thinking on the sacraments explains how not only “strong moments” of celebration but indeed our entire environment can be permeated by an intentional culture, “to see God in all things.” Such sacramentality is

“The art of Christian Education is bringing the person to wholeness in the person of Jesus Christ.”

—*Blessed Basil Moreau, C.S.C.*
Founder of the Congregation of Holy Cross

crucial to evangelization but also to a rich vision of education. Third, education in a Catholic key is Eucharistic, incorporating members into one body. Catholic education affirms the communal nature of the person, builds communities, and forms people to give themselves away in loving service to others. This dynamic is found paradigmatically in the Eucharist, but also characterizes education in a Catholic key. Fourth, education in a Catholic key is unitive, attending to all facets of reality through faith and reason, and affirming coherence of the truth in a manner that impacts curriculum, prompts bold engagement of transcendent realities, and engenders a hospitable school environment where people at different places in their respective faith journeys can seek the truth together. In each of these four characteristics, we see how a dynamic that marks rigorously Catholic evangelization also fosters excellence in education.

A daunting challenge in writing an essay on Catholic education is depicting how an endeavor that is neither dependent upon nor unique to the Catholic faith can be done well in a manner thoroughly permeated by Catholic faith. It turns out this apparent problem provides yet another occasion to see how grace perfects nature, fulfilling the natural human orientation toward flourishing even while surpassing it in partaking of divine life. St. Irenaeus famously writes that “The glory of God is the human person fully alive.” Blessed Basil Moreau, C.S.C., the founder of the Congregation of Holy Cross, which sponsors the University of Notre Dame, describes how education helps lead people to fullness of life when he says, “The art of Christian Education is bringing the person to wholeness in the person of Jesus Christ,” and moreover that the “head shall never be educated at the expense of the heart” (Moreau, 2014, p. 417). These great Christian thinkers affirm the continuity between fully human flourishing becoming whole in the person of Jesus Christ.

We began noting the purpose of education should be more robust than competencies; it should be the fullness of human flourishing. Indeed, the central aspiration of education in a Catholic key is even bolder: to become saints, that is, to live the life of Christ as revealed in the Gospels and lived out as Church. It consists of an invitation to

become his very presence in the world in the ever-unfolding mystery of the Incarnation. It consists of an invitation to hear and act upon the words of Saint Teresa of Avila that:

“Christ has no body now but yours. No hands, no feet on earth but yours. Yours are the eyes through which he looks compassion on this world. Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good. Yours are the hands through which he blesses all the world. Yours are the hands, yours are the feet, yours are the eyes, you are his body. Christ has no body now on earth but yours” (Teresa, 2003).

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