

The Vocation of the Catholic School Teacher

By Gerard O'Shea

In 1977, I began my work as a teacher in a Catholic school, and I have been involved with this vocation, in one way or another, for the whole of my adult life. For my heritage, I had inspiring predecessors who had worked hard to establish a Catholic educational system in my country of Australia. It seems that a major effort of evangelization for the Catholic Church throughout the nineteenth century was focused on the establishment of Catholic schools. The strategy was to pass on the faith by situating it in the context of an overall educational vision. This priority is reflected in the number of religious orders founded at this time, which had *teaching* as their main apostolic goal. In part, this was also a response to the rising challenge of secularization, which aimed to exclude, or at least to marginalize, the teaching of religion in the newly developing project of universal compulsory education in schools run by the state. This attack on religious education was vigorously resisted by the Church. The following Australian example is representative of similar efforts throughout the world, including the United States.

At their 1862 Provincial Council, the Australian bishops insisted on the integrated nature of Catholic education and refused to accept the notion that religious education could be quarantined from the overall educational curriculum, with no capacity to influence other subject areas:

Catholics do not believe that the education of a child is like a thing of mechanism that can be put together bit by bit. Now a morsel of instruction on religion, and then of instruction in secular learning – separate parcels. We hold that the subject taught, the teacher and his faith, the rule and practices of the school day, all combine to produce the result which we Catholics consider to be education.¹

The Pursuit of Holiness: the Key to Success in Catholic Schools

Moreover, Archbishop Roger Vaughan of Sydney, the man credited with organizing the Australian Catholic school system, insisted that a Catholic school would not be successful if it was simply a place of instruction; it needed to be a place of *holiness*. Therein was the key! It has always been my understanding that this lies at the very heart of what a teacher in a Catholic school is meant to be doing: striving for an ever deeper relationship with Christ through the Church, and passing on the fruits of this to the students. For some reason, nobody ever needed to tell me this; I

imbibed it by observing the behavior of the many fine Catholic teachers who taught me. The Church continues to assert this principle as evidenced in the 2007 document, *Educating Together in Catholic Schools*. The Catholic school is seen as “a place of integral education of the human person through a clear educational project of which Christ is the foundation, directed at creating a synthesis between faith, culture and life.”²

Archbishop Vaughan believed that the personal quest for holiness by the teachers was crucial to the whole venture. He believed that teachers needed to be properly formed in the first place, and then continually nourished by their participation in the sacraments and prayer. Only then would they be ready to undertake the apostolic mission of educating children in a Catholic world view. It was for this reason that Vaughan vigorously promoted the deployment of religious sisters and brothers in Catholic schools, and encouraged many young men and women to follow this noble vocation. Through his efforts, an alternate education system, designed to meet the needs of all Catholic children in the country, was set up and continues to operate today, although it is now largely staffed by Catholic lay teachers. To give an idea of the continuing impact of his system, the population of Australia is about 7% of the US, but the number of students in Catholic schools is roughly 50% of the American figure.

The Teacher's Broader Perspective

There has always been an obvious difference between the role of a parish catechist and a Catholic school teacher. The concern of the catechist is to draw students into intimacy with Jesus Christ and an ever-deepening induction into the life of the Church. The teacher shares this purpose, but the aims are much broader and more diverse. The school focuses on the integrated pursuit of all that is true and beautiful and good in support of a synthesis of faith, culture, and life. Moreover, the 1988 document from the Congregation for Catholic Education *The Religious Dimension of Education in a Catholic School* made it clear that when religious education is studied in a school context, it must be seen as a subject with the same systematic demands and rigor as other disciplines.³ By the same token, other subjects in the curriculum should be taught according to their own methodology, not mere adjuncts of faith.⁴

Unfortunately, in contemporary Catholic schools, challenged as they are by the pluralism of their classrooms,

this can be easily misinterpreted as meaning that religious education is simply an intellectual presentation of the content and history of the Catholic faith. I have even met Catholic school principals who believe that under these circumstances “any teacher” can teach religious education as if it were history, literature, or philosophy. My own experience tells me something different. The fact that a religious education class is not primarily about catechesis does not mean that teachers are prevented from witnessing to their own faith. Such witnessing in no way diminishes the quality of teaching in other subject areas. In his *Address to the Catholic Religion Teachers* in 2009, Pope Benedict XVI affirmed that there is a connection between the scholastic teaching of religion and the essential deepening of faith. He noted that Catholic teachers give witness in the classroom that God is the essential reference point in their own lives.⁵ I unreservedly concur and further suggest that in the teaching of any subject there is a Catholic perspective that can be proposed without interfering with instructional methods proper to the subject.

Presenting a Catholic Worldview

Recently, the Catholic Education Commission of New South Wales published a website that offers guidance to its teachers about how this presentation of a Catholic perspective might play out in different subject areas. In support of this project, I included the website as part of an essential *literature review* assignment for my university students preparing to work as Catholic primary school teachers. I was intrigued to discover that none of these prospective Catholic teachers had ever considered the idea that a Catholic school might need to incorporate a Catholic perspective and world view across the curriculum. Many students in their evaluative comments indicated that this was a very interesting and exciting prospect and they were looking forward to making it part of their teaching practice. The exercise showed me that I was taking something for granted, namely, that the whole narrative of why Catholic schools exist is no longer part of “the air that we breathe” for the contemporary generation of teachers in Catholic schools. It needs to be explicitly articulated and passed on to them.⁶



*St. John Baptiste de la Salle window
at St. Joseph Institute, Singapore*

The Teacher as Witness

There is one more significant issue to consider when looking at the vocation of teachers in a Catholic school. It relates to their role as witnesses in the process of evangelization. According to Blessed Paul VI's encyclical, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, “Modern man listens more willingly to witnesses than to teachers, and if he does listen to teachers, it is because they are witnesses.”⁷ He also asserts that the evangelizer should have a love of those being evangelized.⁸ In making this point, I don't think that the pope was saying anything that most people do not already realize. It seems to me that everyone learns best from someone who loves both the subject itself and the students being taught. There is ample evidence in contemporary educational research demonstrating this. I know it personally from my own teaching experience. I enjoyed every subject I

taught except one: mathematics. Not once did I mention this dislike to my students, but no class I taught failed to notice! Just recently, I came across a student I taught more than thirty years ago who had this to say to me: “It was great being in your class – we knew you enjoyed being there so we did too. Everybody knew that you didn't like math, but your favorite subject was religion.” What does this mean for the religious education teacher? To put an uncommitted teacher in front of a religious education class is to expose both the class and the teacher to a very unfortunate but predictable outcome, and this should be avoided. We teach best what we love best, and so this essentially “catechetical” dimension remains the primary qualification for teaching religious education in a Catholic school.

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Notes

- 1 Quoted in O'Farrell, Patrick. *The Catholic Church and Community in Australia. A History* (Melbourne: Thomas Nelson, 1977), 149.
- 2 *Educating Together in Catholic Schools. A Shared Mission between Consecrated Persons and the Lay Faithful* (2007), 3.
- 3 *Circular Letter to the Presidents of Bishop's Conferences on Religious Education in Schools* (2009), 18.
- 4 Sacred Congregation for Catholic Education, *The Catholic School* (1977), 39.
- 5 Benedict XVI, *Address to Catholic Religion Teachers* (2009).
- 6 For those interested, the web address is: <http://principleslanding.cecnsw.catholic.edu.au>. The logon is Catholic and the password is Principles.
- 7 Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (1975), art. 41.
- 8 *Ibid.*, art. 79.