

# + A CATHOLIC PERSPECTIVE

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## Developing Faith and Identity in Our School Communities

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*This monograph in the Renewing the Promise series explores the fourth theme that was identified as part of the symposium conversation ‘Develop Faith and Catholic Identity’ and highlights the ongoing need for development in our school communities.*

“Start by doing what is necessary, then what is possible, and suddenly you are doing the impossible.” – St. Francis of Assisi

“Young people are hungry today for truth and justice and the highest calling of the Catholic educator is to respond to that hunger. Faced with many difficult and confusing choices young people may think that they are alone and knowing that they are never alone, that Jesus is always with them as a dear friend who will always be there and will never abandon them, provides them with sure support and a guide to give them the courage to be the best that they can be.” Ontario’s Catholic bishops give encouragement to students with these words: “While the world may sometimes make you feel that you are not good enough, not wealthy enough, not attractive enough, or not special enough, Jesus knows you perfectly, and loves you without limits. Catholic educators nurture students to recognize the human face of God in prayers and liturgical celebrations of the school community, and within the community itself, where

they find that they are loved and accepted, just as they are.”<sup>1</sup>

Catholic schools are places where young people find solid and enduring values to give hope, meaning and purpose to life. Through the experience of an authentic relationship with Jesus Christ and an understanding of God’s unwavering love, students develop a firm place to stand in shifting times. This true encounter with Jesus can and does take place each and every day in our Catholic schools. To develop faith and Catholic identity young people need to understand and integrate the Catholic faith tradition into their lives:

- To see the face of God in all things;
- To build trusting relationships with each other and the adults in the school community;
- To be able to respond to daily life as a good student, a true friend, a loving son or daughter, a responsible citizen;
- To be able to collaborate to learn from and contribute to the learning of others;
- To develop the integrity to recognize false values that hinder proper human development;

- To have the courage and resilience to self-regulate and persevere;
- To have the wisdom to solve problems and make responsible decisions with values that enhance human development and nurture hope for the future;
- To be able to critically analyze the arts, media, technology and information systems to make sense of the world they live in and construct meaningful knowledge.

The critical relationship between learning and believing, between knowledge and faith, is fundamental to understanding the mandate of Catholic schools. “Consequently, Catholic schools must be places where students can hear Jesus’ invitation to follow him, where they can receive his command to love all people, and where they can realize his presence and his promise to be with them always. Only in this way can they be nurtured and encouraged to become who they are meant to be: persons of dignity and freedom, created in the image and likeness of God as modelled in Jesus Christ.”<sup>2</sup>

### Framework for Understanding and Responding to Developing Faith and Identity:

Catholic educators are both formed in their faith and called to lead faith formation within their schools. They lead by sharing their faith stories as they continue developing their own personal spiritual identity. By their lives and witness, educators share the Good News in creative and faith-filled ways. In relationship with God and called to be co-creators of faith communities, educators are “part of a living history connected by faith and wisdom given and received, in a wondrous flow from generations” of educators.<sup>3</sup> When the question from students about ‘*how do we know God exists*’ surfaces, Catholic educators respond by giving a life-affirming way forward. The framework of ‘Heart, Head and Hands’ integrates our faith story with our personal story and serves as a vibrant process that empowers us to teach, challenge and nurture our students to develop their faith and identity. The framework invites reflections and response by students, teachers, education workers, principals, vice-principals, parents and support staff.

	HEART	HEAD	HANDS
A Framework for Understanding and Responding to Developing Faith and Identity	<i>“All that is good, all that is true, all that is beautiful brings us to God.”<sup>4</sup></i>	<i>“We need to get to know each other, listen to each other and improve our knowledge of the world around us.”<sup>5</sup></i>	<i>“Every person is a life-long learner; God is real, present and at work in the heart of each person in their lives.”<sup>6</sup></i>
Student	How does knowing God make me feel?  How is getting to know God going to make me a better person?	How does knowing God help me to get to know others?  What do I need to know and understand to make this happen in my life?	What do I need to do to feel God’s presence in my life?  Is it really possible to touch the heart of each person?
Teacher and Education Workers	How do I teach with the mind and heart of Jesus and bring my students to God?	How do I creatively share the good and the beautiful in ways that connect with students and affirm their identity?	How do I look at the world through the lens of faith and by doing so inspire the growth, the identity and the actions of others?

	HEART	HEAD	HANDS
Teacher and Education Workers ( <i>cont'd</i> )	How do I nurture my students to feel the immeasurable joy of knowing God?	How do I ignite my students to take passionate responsibility for the well-being of all of God's creation?	How do I encourage students to be instruments of peace and justice both locally and globally?
Principals and Vice-principals Parents	How do I share the good news of my own faith?  How do I create silence for prayer and reflection?	How does my encounter with each person reflect careful listening and true commitment to our faith traditions?  How do I facilitate staff faith formation based on their needs?	How do I frame everything I do with compassionate action?  How do I look at the world through the lens of faith and by doing so inspire others?
Parents	What kinds of things can I do at home to share in my developing my child's faith and identity?  How do I teach my children to appreciate and give thanks for the beauty of God's creation?	How does my knowledge and understanding of my faith need to grow?  How do my actions reflect our faith tradition and model what Jesus would do?	How do I transform challenges into faith opportunities?  How do I assure my children that Jesus is always at their side?
Support Staff	How do I ensure that each person feels welcomed and supported?  How does my welcome reflect the inclusiveness that Jesus modelled?	Do my skills and expertise contribute positively to the learning community?  How do my actions reflect the joy of knowing God?	How does my service to the school community reflect generosity of spirit?  How does the service I provide create a safe community for people to thrive in?
Trustees	How do I root my decisions in a faith perspective?	How do I ensure that my discourse is guided by faith?	How do I ensure my actions serve and respect the faith tradition?
Clergy	How do I ignite faith in the school communities I serve?	How do I nurture faith development in the students I serve?	How do I engage meaningfully with students who are questioning their faith?

	HEART	HEAD	HANDS
Chaplaincy Leaders	How do I support the school community in faith formation?	How do I support school leaders in providing faith development opportunities for the school community?	How do I support leaders in bringing virtues of our faith alive?

### Resources for Developing Catholic Faith and Identity:

The cornerstone resource for developing Catholic faith and identity is found in our Ontario Catholic Graduate Expectation which guide the journey of learning for all students. The Ontario Catholic Graduate Expectations are described not only in terms of knowledge and skills, but necessarily of values, attitudes and actions, formed by reason and faith. The following additional resources support the development of faith and identity:

STUDENTS		
Religious Education Program	Sacramental Preparation	Virtue Education/ Character
Family Life Education Program	Christian Meditation	Development
Catholic Graduate Expectations	Catholic History in Ontario	Assemblies
Daily Prayer	Social Justice Initiatives	Faith Initiatives
Class Liturgy	Parish Involvement	Student Leadership Activities
School Masses	Parish Involvement	
Student Retreats	Laudato Si	

EDUCATORS	
Staff Retreats	Parish-School Relationship, Pastoral Plan
Daily Prayer	Volunteer Service
Laudato Si, Praise Be	Community Service Projects
Staff Liturgies	Inclusion, Special Education
School Masses	Faith Formation Programs
Institute for Catholic Education Resources <a href="http://www.iceont.ca">www.iceont.ca</a>	Adult Faith Formation at staff meetings
	Catholic Culture, school policies
Catholic Curriculum Cooperative Resources <a href="http://www.catholiccurriculumcorp.org">www.catholiccurriculumcorp.org</a>	Parent/Student Nights
	School Council
CARFLEO Resources <a href="http://www.carfleo.com">www.carfleo.com</a>	

Active participation in faith formation opportunities deepens the educator's call to Christian community. Praying and worshipping together and supporting each other's faith journeys, broadens understanding of Catholic curriculum and world view. Ongoing learning provides occasions to connect with Church teachings and initiatives that inform the work of ministry in schools. All who are engaged in the work of Catholic education are encouraged to grow in their knowledge of faith and share that informed faith with students, since the future of Catholic education depends on our individual and communal commitment to faith.

### Continuing the Conversation

To believe in Jesus Christ and to want to share this experience of faith with students is at the heart of the vocation of the Catholic educator. It is the understanding and daily living out of this faith, more than anything else, that imprints the distinctive Catholic character on Catholic education. To understand one's faith and more effectively witness to Jesus and to the gospel in the challenging context of today's Catholic schools, demands effort on the part of all partners in Catholic education.

### Students

Catholic schools nurture in each student a deeper understanding of what it means to be a human person, made in the image of God, to live in relationship. Schools support the ongoing development of each student to live their lives as: a discerning believer; an effective communicator; a reflective, creative and holistic thinker; a self-directed, responsible, lifelong learner; a collaborative contributor; a caring family member; a responsible citizen. In the early grades, the achievement of these expectations may seem far off, but the

journey toward Christian maturity begins at birth and continues long after formal education has been completed. The Ontario Catholic School Graduate Expectations identify distinctive faith formation opportunities that encourage active participation in

the community both locally and globally. Involvement in social justice initiatives, volunteer work, community service all develop faith and identity and improve the human condition.<sup>7</sup>

### Teachers and Education Workers

"The Catholic educator possesses a sense of adventure to engage the world. Their calling is more than a selfless devotion and more than a personal matter. It is both active and compelling while being unique in every individual. It is the inner work of the person that leads to the outer journey of the educator."<sup>8</sup> Teaching about faith and integrity provides unique opportunities for educators because discussions

related to faith and integrity are closely tied to students personal lives. This allows educators to learn about their students in different ways and requires the educator to structure the learning in a way that protects self-respect and promotes the well-being of all students. When teaching, the educator connects the relationship between Catholic School Graduate Expectations and curriculum. The creation of faith development opportunities that enhance student's learning is the day to day work of the educator.

### Principals and Vice-Principals

"The Catholic school principal of today is a person who recognizes the sacredness of their call, and their primary task as developing community and striving for excellence. They are people who respect their role as being servant leaders in the mission of educating students. It is a vocation described as



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“the most widespread and effective ministry in the church today.”<sup>9</sup> School leaders have the unique opportunity to create the character and climate of the school and personally reflect the vision of the Ontario Catholic School Graduate Expectations. Bringing their own faith experience to the role, Catholic leaders are challenged with the mandate to bring the gospel message alive in the daily life of the school. “The spiritual attributes that the school leader brings to the role through their own faith experience is a sign of hope for the future of Catholic schools.”<sup>10</sup>

### **Parents**

As primary educators, parents are significant role models for their children. Aware of their great responsibility as their children’s first and most important teachers, they know that it is through them that their children first learn of God’s love. Within the family, the generous and unselfish love of parents, provides children with the lessons in life that cannot be learned anywhere else. Catholic schools, in partnership with parents, do all that they can to help parents fulfill their great responsibilities while recognizing parents’ diverse backgrounds and the importance of building trusting partnerships. Generous cooperation that acknowledges and celebrates the accomplishments of all is essential in supporting the faith development and identity of students.<sup>11</sup>

### **Support Staff**

The strength of any organization is in its staff. This is certainly true of Catholic Education, where together with educators and leaders, support staff play an integral role in the Catholic education effort. It is often due to the high quality of their service that schools and boards function as effectively as they do.<sup>12</sup> Support staff need opportunities to deepen and nurture their spiritual lives, especially in relation to their role as ambassadors of Catholic Education. Opportunities to discuss the Catholic character of the school and issues of contemporary spirituality in relation to their work, supports their commitment and dedication. “Support staff’s model of service, and

generosity of spirit offers important witness to the faith development and identity of the school community.”<sup>13</sup>

### **Clergy**

“The Catholic school community, like the Church itself, is ever in need of evangelization and conversion. Your partnership with our schools and your ministry to them has long been a foundation for the success of Catholic education.”<sup>14</sup>

### **Trustees**

“Let your public discourse be guided by the respect and commitment to the truth Jesus modelled for his disciples. Your effectiveness is best determined by the extent to which you allow your faith, your love of God and your compassion and respect for one another, to inform your decisions.”<sup>15</sup>

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## Monograph Series — Renewing the Promise

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