

A CATHOLIC PERSPECTIVE

Identity and Mission Series | Monograph #1 Spring 2018 | Published by Institute for Catholic Education

The More...The More

“For the Catholic tradition at its richest, it is not a question of either faith formation or formation for service. Rather, both as individuals and as a community, the more we enter into scripture, doctrine and worship, the more we ought to be drawn into expressing our faith in deeds of love for the neighbour.”

In preparation for the provincial symposium on Catholic Education hosted in November, 2017, The Institute for Catholic Education (ICE) and l'Office provincial de l'éducation de la foi catholique en Ontario (OPÉCO) initiated a province wide process of consultation, engaging stakeholders within the Catholic Education community in conversation about contemporary issues. Commencing in February 2017, ICE and OPÉCO asked school boards to reach out within their own communities, through a series of face to face meetings, town halls, and through an online platform called **Thoughtexchange**, to start a conversation about Catholic education. Through the online platform, participants were invited to focus on three open-ended questions. The insights and experiences of thousands of individuals from across the province were then used to frame the conversation for the two days of the Renewing the Promise symposium. An Insights and Results Report, posted on the ICE website (www.iceont.ca) provides

an overview of the top themes that emerged from the responses to each question.

At a provincial level, there was great consistency among respondents as they identified both established strengths and perceived challenges for Catholic schools. Universally, respondents recognized

and affirmed that Catholic education is deeply valued for the critical role it plays in supporting the efforts of the family in shaping students' personal values and moral sense, and as an effective vehicle for ensuring an introduction to our beliefs and traditions as Catholics. Similarly, there was broad agreement in recognizing the challenge faced as we experience the ambiguities

and conflicts of our contemporary society marked by enormous changes in social values, in economic circumstances, and in technological innovation. This pervasive and increasingly secular culture challenges our schools to be open to new cultural influences while capable of interpreting them for our students in the light of our Christian faith.



One perspective that seems particularly fruitful for this conversation and for our times is the one offered by Saint Thomas Aquinas: we love our neighbour for the sake of God whom we love, who loves them.

Overview of Interests



A review of the responses reveals that those participating in the conversation describe mission for Catholic schools from a variety of perspectives. When asked to identify the fundamental purpose of Catholic education, the responses separate out rather neatly into two broad categories. The thought exchange data suggests that 51% of respondents began by expressing a significant commitment to what we might call “Catholic education as faith formation” while 49% began by expressing a commitment to what we might call “Catholic education as formation for witness to justice.”

These results are not entirely new to the challenge of understanding Catholic education in Ontario today; but they contain a temptation, the temptation to divide along the lines of an apparent either/or tension: either faith formation or witness to justice. So much of our current societal and political context is dominated by rampant polarization of opinion, and limited capacity to engage in respectful dialogue. A shared sense of purpose, and a clear sense of mission and vision is essential for Catholic

educators if we are to continue to move forward as a community, and so it is important to understand, and to find ways to avoid falling prey to similar rhetoric or dialogue as we engage with one another.

In an effort to understand this apparent tension, for our purposes, it is a useful starting point to ask

“Throughout the development of the Christian tradition, the question of how to hold together the two parts of the double commandment to love has challenged theologians, pastors and educators alike.”

“What do the Scriptures and our Church Tradition say about this dichotomy?” How might we think differently, indeed counter-culturally, and from a gospel perspective, about these two varying perceptions?

Seen in this light, these results reflect the two parts of Jesus’ commandment to love: in the Gospels Jesus teaches us and

shows us that at one and the same time we are to love the Lord our God with all our heart, with all our soul, with all our minds and with all our strength, and to love our neighbour as ourselves.

One perspective that seems particularly fruitful for this conversation and for our times is the one offered by Saint Thomas Aquinas: we love our neighbour for the sake of God whom we love, who loves them. He

roots this in an analogy from human experiences of family and friendship: we love the children of a close friend or family member, and we seek to do good to them, even though they may not love us in return. We love those who are loved by those we love.

How does this apply to our present situation? Well, faith formation is about helping our students fall in love with God who loves them. The teaching of doctrine, the introduction of Scripture, the commitment to common worship and full

participation in liturgy and Eucharist, and the presence of chaplains in our schools — these are all attempts, within the setting of a Catholic school, to communicate the experience of God’s love expressed to us in Jesus Christ. The more our students know

themselves as beloved of God, the more they will love God with all their heart, with all their mind, with all their soul and with all their strength. And the more they love God, the more they will desire to love those whom God loves, and thus to do good for their neighbour and bear witness to justice.

For the Catholic tradition at its richest, it is not a question of either faith formation or formation for service. Rather, both as individuals and as a community, the more we enter into scripture, doctrine and worship, the more we ought to be drawn into expressing our faith in deeds of love for the neighbour. In this light, the apparent polarization of opinion, inviting stark choice between irreconcilable differences simply disappears, giving way to a much more sound and authentic understanding that we are called to embrace both parts of Jesus’ commandment to love. As a community of believers, searching for common ground, shared purpose, and singular vision, we need to shift away from “Either/Or” thinking, and discipline ourselves to think in terms of “The More/The More.”

- the more we love God, the more we love our neighbour;
- the more deeply we are formed in Catholic faith and morals,
- the more we will be able to bear witness in acts of

service and justice;

- the more we share the Good News within our Catholic community, the more all members of our Catholic community will be able to reach beyond our boundaries in service to all with a sense of vocation and mission.
- the more we foster Catholic identity, the more we ought to promote the expression of that identity in service and witness to the world.



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Any apparent division then is a false dichotomy. Our challenge is not to reconcile opposites that are in tension with each other, but rather to understand more deeply how one flows into the other, and to be creative in fostering opportunities for our students to experience this movement from love of God into love of neighbour.

This is the work that Catholic education in the province of Ontario has been about since the earliest days. Those who today share responsibility for Catholic education are the successors of communities of religious and lay people who built Catholic education in Ontario over the past 175 years. Those communities brought particular charisms to that important ministry. Everyone who serves in Catholic education across the province, carries the charism of all who came before us. This can be a source of great strength and inspiration for us to respond to the call of the gospel in this time and place.

Many of the pioneers of Catholic education in Ontario were members of religious congregations who were dedicated to discerning how the spirit was guiding them to respond to the signs of the times in light of the mission and vision of Jesus Christ. They recognized that in addition to providing excellent education to their students, they were responsive to the gospel imperative to witness to the love of

God freely given to all people through His Son, Jesus. Their response to the challenges of their time reflected, in equal measure, acceptance of the invitation to seek to love God with their mind, a full heart, and strength, and their heroic examples of sacrifice and generous ministry, their acceptance of the invitation to love their neighbour.

Today, this same commitment is reflected in the Catholic Graduate Expectations that describe what we hope for, for every student who attends a Catholic school. For example, those pioneers were discerning believers who celebrated the signs and sacred mystery of God's presence. They were effective communicators who responded critically in light of gospel values. They gave witness to Catholic social teaching by promoting peace, justice and the sacredness of human life.

As we seek to renew the great promise of Catholic education, we are reminded that we bring particular gifts and charisms that are responsive to this time and place. The pioneers of Catholic education in Ontario could not imagine our current context, with both its challenges and its graced opportunities: accessibility to a fully funded Catholic system, the presence of a well-educated Catholic laity in Catholic schools, the complexity of strengths and needs presented by a rich diversity of students, the presence of a well-developed Catholic curriculum,

do, the omnipresence of social media, a culture that distrusts religion and religious insight, serious ethical challenges of our time, and the social pressures on families, parishes and school communities.



“...the invitation to understand and embrace our shared mission in Catholic education is open to all. Indeed, our collective success requires us to continue the conversation, to understand ourselves and the other and to know deeply that together we make up the body of Christ.”

As we work together to renew the promise of Catholic Education, we must seek to listen, to discern and to ask the question ‘how is the Spirit calling us to respond individually, communally’, to the challenges and opportunities that present themselves to us. Each one of us is called by name. God has called us to be in this time and place, and God calls us to make this time and place more just, and more peaceful, because we are here.

Renewing our call is not an individual task but a shared responsibility; an organic, ongoing commitment to dialogue and discernment. While renewing our call was a topic for conversation amongst nearly 700 participants in the provincial symposium in November 2017, the invitation to understand and embrace our shared mission in Catholic education is open to all. Indeed, our

collective success requires us to continue the conversation, to understand ourselves and the other and to know deeply that together we make up the body of Christ.

The mission of Catholic education has not changed. It is the same as it was for the pioneers. It is the context that has changed, and continues to change. How can we be grounded and responsive in an authentic way that honours the different

perspectives and wisdom brought by all members of our community? The point of the ongoing dialogue is not only to share thoughts and perspective, but to meet Jesus in each of those we encounter and



It has always been difficult to be a Christian, and even more difficult to be a truly Christian witness, especially when we are called to bear witness from within such a secular society. Every age presents a new set of challenges as well as fresh opportunities to witness to the redemptive love of Jesus Christ.”

the passionate commitment to social justice and environmental stewardship of so many students and educators throughout the province, the pressures of a culture that does not celebrate life the way we

listen for the prompting of the Spirit; to discern what God is asking of us in this time. Discernment roots us in the love of God. The more we are rooted in the love of God, the more we can respond authentically to one another as we seek to address together the challenges of our present context. Communal discernment is a spiritual process as well as an intellectual one.

It is through respective dialogue, and through this process of communal discernment that we re-focus on the common ground which unites us, rather than being distracted by apparent differences of perspective or polarized opinion. In this way, we are able to shift away from “Either/Or” thinking, and discipline ourselves to think in terms of “The More/The More:”

- The more we offer up our rhetoric and entrenched positions, the more the light of wisdom will illuminate our thoughts.

- The more we create structures for listening and dialogue, the more we will deepen our understanding of one another and build relationships.
- The more we offer up our need to have our opinions prevail, the more we will see more clearly all the gifts we truly have.
- The more we offer up working in isolation, or competition, the more we will use our gifts for the common good.
- The more we offer our uncertainty and doubt, the more confidence and trust we will have to renew our call and the more God’s spirit will burn afresh within us and our community.
- The more we foster Catholic identity, the more we ought to promote the expression of that identity in service and witness to the world.

So, what is the promise of Catholic education, and what is the gift we offer, individually and communally to this time and place?

“Catholic schools are places where children and young people may find solid and enduring values to give hope, meaning and purpose to life through an authentic relationship with Jesus Christ. This relationship, and the certain knowledge of God’s unwavering love for us, provides a firm place to stand in shifting times. The promise is that this true encounter with Jesus can and does take place, each and every day, within our Catholic schools. Together, we renew that promise by continuing to strengthen our Catholic schools as communities that exemplify the Good News of Jesus in word and deed.” – Renewing the Promise, 2018

Published by:



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