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A Curriculum for the Heart of Young People: A Discerning Believer

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This is the second monograph in the series, “A Curriculum for the Heart of Young People,” and it focuses on how the graduate expectation, “A Discerning Believer” is foundational for Catholic curriculum.

A Discerning Believer

“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 students 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.”¹ Encouraging and nurturing students in this way invites them to become *“Discerning Believers who understand that their purpose or call in life comes from God and that they should strive to discern and live out this call throughout life’s journey.”*² By placing, “Jesus, his message, his mission, his community and his character at the centre of all learning”³ students can develop a relationship with Him and make this relationship part of their own life journey. In Catholic schools this relationship with Jesus is experienced through word, sacrament, prayer, forgiveness, reflection and moral living and the curriculum provides opportunities for students to hear Jesus’ invitation to follow him as they make meaning of his message and come to know him.

Catholic Curriculum

“A holistic Catholic approach to the curriculum enables the Catholic education community to flourish through an integration of life and faith.”⁴ Catholic curriculum is designed to provide layered opportunities for students to learn about Jesus and experience his love. Participation in daily prayer, the sacraments and activities that reflect the Catholic Social Justice Teachings, enhance students’ understanding of the importance of Jesus as a role model in their lives. “By helping students to develop a set of ‘skills’ that are contemplative,

“Encouraging and nurturing students in this way invites them to become *“Discerning Believers who understand that their purpose or call in life comes from God and that they should strive to discern and live out this call throughout life’s journey.”*²

compassionate, critical and celebratory; students can then integrate and apply them to studying the broader school curriculum.”⁵ The formation of a discerning believer is built upon learning experiences that require the head to think, analyze and reflect;

the heart to feel deeply for others and the hands to take action that reflect an integration of their Catholic faith, voice and worldview.

Start with the Story of Jesus

Becoming a *Discerning Believer*

“starts with understanding the story of Jesus’ life. Students learn about Jesus and come to appreciate the life lessons presented in each of the gospel stories. The liturgical calendar serves as a framework which provides a timeline and context for the events of Jesus’ life to unfold. For His life story to be fully understood by students, the stories need to be explicitly taught like pieces of literature.

Our goal is to lead our students to understand and be able to “illustrate a basic understanding of the saving story of our Christian faith.”⁶ It is important for students to be guided through these stories, looking at the purpose, the author’s message, the characters involved, the setting, the actions taken, the conflict that arises, the culminating events and the resulting conclusions. Examining whose voice is present and whose voice is missing, who the story narrator is and looking at alternative points of view is all part of story deconstruction. Focusing on universal truths that can be applied to a variety of situations is an entry point to begin gospel reflections. Using direct analogies to everyday life helps students understand and appreciate Jesus’ actions. Making comparisons to real life situations helps students to apply the thinking behind the story. Understanding literary devices, learning new vocabulary, comprehending the features of the writing style used (narrative, descriptive, persuasive, parables etc.) and applying grade appropriate learning strategies identified in the Language Arts and English curriculum enhances comprehension and student confidence as they try to make sense of the story of Jesus and learn in light of gospel values. Connecting the notion of head,



heart and hands to the gospel stories is a way to bring student understanding to a more personal level. Reflecting on the facts, what actually happened in the gospel story, how the story made students feel, how the story impacted others, how they respond to the events and what they might discern as believers is an approach that strengthens understanding.

The Search for Meaning: Religious Education Curriculum

“Catholic education addresses the fundamental human search for meaning: ...the desire of the person to understand human life as an integration of body, mind, and spirit. Rooted in this vision, Catholic education fosters the search for meaning as a lifelong spiritual and academic quest.”⁷ The religious education curriculum, rooted as it is in Sacred Scripture, the Catechism of the Catholic Church and creedal statements, is a kind of map of the rich treasury which is the deposit of faith. Study it; analyze it; know it — all that we may live it — and that map remains but a description of the spiritual journey in which we have been invited to participate.”⁸ Teachers share and preserve the faith map of this tradition through the Religious Education curriculum. “At the end of the day, each person must utter his or her own “yes” to Christ’s invitation. Catholic educators must rejoice when our teaching and our witness contribute to the transformation of a human life, now and for eternity.”⁹

Building Relationships: Family Life Education

In the Family Life Education program students learn the skills needed to express themselves to their parents, other family members, friends and trusted adults while growing in appreciation of God’s love for them, and the love they receive from their relationships with family members, friends and others. The curriculum is based on the vision that

the knowledge, skills, attitudes and values acquired in the program will benefit students throughout their lives and help them to thrive in an ever-changing world by enabling them to acquire a Christian vision of personhood, relationships, and sexuality and to develop the comprehension, capacity, and commitment needed to lead fully human lives.”¹⁰ The family life education program complements those values instilled by families, and reflects a distinctively Catholic view of human life, sexuality, marriage, and family. “The focus of family life education is the developing person, its content is an extended

exploration of what it means to be human, and its core message is hope: The God who created you, the Son who redeemed you, and the Holy Spirit who lives within you will not abandon you.”¹¹

The Thinking Framework

The “*Discerning Believer*” thinking framework below offers ways to consider and deepen understanding of how the life and actions of Jesus integrate into each of our lives and provides an opportunity for discerning believers to reflect on ways to put the layered components of faith and life together.

| Thinking Framework and The Discerning Believer | INSPIRE Jesus as role model | UNDERSTAND Understanding Jesus through the lens of heart, head and hands | CONNECT Connecting Jesus’ life and teaching to my life experience | REFLECT Reflecting on my role in my family and community | ENGAGE Taking action to improve the common good for myself and the world |
|--|--|---|---|--|--|
| Student | Growing in love and faith as followers of Jesus. | Cultivate intellectual and artistic appreciation. | Lives Jesus’ commandment to love all people. | Respects the worth and dignity of each person. | Demonstrates love and respect for all creation. |
| Educator | Celebrates creation through prayer and worship. | Understands that one’s call in life comes from God. | Teaches God’s word and forgiveness as part of the human journey. | Promotes social responsibility. | Protects and cherishes life as a gift. Promotes social action. |
| Catholic School Leaders | Ground the mission and vision in gospel values. | Encourage symbols and narratives that reflect Jesus’ teachings and values. | Use the language of the Catholic tradition in the school’s essential messaging. | Nurture and encourage positive relationships with families and the school community. | Support the school community in addressing the tensions of society through Jesus’ message. |

The Gifts of the Holy Spirit

The Gifts of the Holy Spirit reflect the characteristics of a “*Discerning Believer*.” Four of these gifts - wisdom, understanding, knowledge and counsel direct the intellect and belong to our cognitive powers. As our students grow in understanding of the ‘saving story of our Christian faith’ their knowledge of scripture and understanding that ‘one’s purpose in life comes from God’ enhances both their wisdom about the faith tradition and their life’s journey. The other three

gifts, fortitude, piety, and wonder and awe of the Lord direct the will toward God.¹² Combined, these seven gifts integrate the Catholic Intellectual Tradition (CIT) with spirituality. This CIT invites students to find a partnership between faith and reason, revelation and science, wisdom and knowledge, spirituality and academic excellence, and through such pairings both formation and learning grow. The chart below invites reflection about the growth of formation and learning and outlines the connections between “A Discerning

Believer” expectation, the Gifts of the Holy Spirit and how Catholic curriculum connects to both in ways that teachers can lead students to grow in understanding

of the gifts as part of a greater whole that requires a life-long process of reflection and transformation of the whole person.

A Discerning Believer, The Gifts of the Holy Spirit and Curriculum Connections

*Elementary Religious Education Policy Document 2012

#Secondary Religious Education Policy Document 2016

| Gifts of the Holy Spirit¹³ | INDICATORS OF A DISCERNING BELIEVER | CATHOLIC CURRICULUM CONNECTIONS |
|---|--|---|
| <p>Wisdom Helps students to recognize the importance of others and the importance of keeping God central in their lives.</p> | <p>C. Actively reflects on God’s Word as communicated through the Hebrew and Christian scriptures. B. Participates in the sacramental life of the church and demonstrates an understanding of the centrality of the Eucharist to our Catholic story.</p> | <p>The presentation of sacred scripture and tradition as God’s ongoing revelation.* Development of specific skills related to religious education as a distinct discipline (critical thinking and analysis, interpretation, reflection, application of learning to life).* Catholic-Christian Anthropology includes the understanding of the Catholic Tradition regarding what it means to be a human person.#</p> |
| <p>Understanding Helps students to develop the ability to comprehend the meaning of God’s message.</p> | <p>A. Illustrates a basic understanding of the saving story of our Christian faith.</p> | <p>Opportunities for self-reflection, and critique of oneself and society in light of Christ’s message and tradition. * Development of appreciation for the Catholic tradition to promote willing participation in the life of the Church.* Religious knowledge and literacy include teaching, understanding and using appropriately the language of the faith and Tradition.#</p> |
| <p>Knowledge Helps students to develop the ability to think about and explore God’s revelation, and to recognize there are mysteries of faith beyond us.</p> | <p>D. Develops attitudes and values founded on Catholic social teaching and acts to promote social responsibility, human solidarity and the common good</p> | <p>Promoting Knowledge of the faith and knowledge of the meaning of Liturgy and sacraments.* Theological Reflection includes the Christian/human search for meaning and understanding of life in the context of our relationship with God.# Living in Christ-Filled Hope: to have students understand their call to ACT for the good; makes increasingly present the Reign of Heaven on earth, which will be fulfilled in eternal life with God.#</p> |
| <p>Counsel Helps students develop the ability to see the best way to follow God’s plan when we have choices that relate to Him.</p> | <p>G. Understands that one’s purpose or call in life comes from God and strives to discern and live this call throughout life’s journey. I. Integrates faith with life.</p> | <p>Promoting moral formation in Jesus Christ.* <i>Living Moral Lives</i> includes developing one’s conscience in order that sound moral choices and judgments in both the personal and social spheres of life can be made.#</p> |

| Gifts of the Holy Spirit ¹³ | INDICATORS OF A DISCERNING BELIEVER | CATHOLIC CURRICULUM CONNECTIONS |
|--|--|--|
| <p>Piety Helps students to pray to God in true devotion.</p> | <p>F. Seeks intimacy with God and celebrates communion with God, others and creation through prayer and worship. H. Respects the faith traditions, world religions and life-journeys of all people of good will.</p> | <p>Teaching the Christian how to pray with Christ. Preparing the Christian to live in community and to participate actively in the life and mission of the Church.* Celebrating in the Faith Community includes the various ways the Church expresses its faith in worship and prayer, primarily to the actions that demonstrate thankful awareness of God's presence in the world.#</p> |
| <p>Fortitude Helps students to develop the courage to do what one knows is right.</p> | <p>E. Speaks the language of life..." recognizing that life is an unearned gift and that a person entrusted with life doesn't own it but that one is called to protect and cherish it.</p> | <p>Promoting moral formation in Jesus Christ. * Development of moral responsibility, Gospel values and Christian virtues which form students to be good citizens for society.* What Does it Mean to be Human/a person? To be uniquely human/a person means to be created in the image and likeness of our Triune God, to respect the inherent dignity of the human body, to know we are spiritual beings; relational/social beings; emotional beings; moral beings; and intellectual beings. Who Are We in the Eyes of the Creator? We are people of the Covenant, which means we are in relationship with God and consequently there are responsibilities in that relationship (stewardship, love of God, love of neighbour). Our call to holiness and our destiny is to return to God and be united with God eternally in heaven.#</p> |
| <p>Wonder and Awe of the Lord Helps students to feel amazement before God, who is all-present, and whose friendship we do not want to lose.</p> | <p>J. Recognizes that "sin, human weakness, conflict and forgiveness are part of the human journey" and that the cross, the ultimate sign of forgiveness is at the heart of redemption.</p> | <p>Opportunities for sharing through story, discussion and community service the experience of God and faith.* Transformation and Service (from head heart hands). In Transformation, the components of critical thinking, exercising free will, conscience formation, and decision-making lead to interior conversion which causes one to do more than just reflect on what needs to be done — it encourages one to ACT to do good in service to others to bring about the Reign of God. Critical thinking and analytical skills assist in the efforts to integrate a Catholic worldview into decisions concerning moral issues.#</p> |

Catholic Education in Today's World

The Ontario Catholic School Graduate Expectations manifest themselves as 21st century competencies and prepare students in Catholic schools to thrive in today's world. Being 'A Discerning Believer' is the graduate expectation that opens the door to a relationship with Jesus, who students come to know along with the wisdom, knowledge and beauty of the faith tradition. It is an exciting moment when students say, "I get it" and this personal appropriation of who

Jesus is a s friend and saviour allows learners to reinvent his life and teachings to make meaning in their own lives. Engaging their very souls in Jesus saving story, giving students firm ground to stand on in the 21st century.

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