

+ A CATHOLIC PERSPECTIVE

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What's the value of Gospel Values?

by Marcelle DeFreitas and Michael Saver

Gospel values guide and direct how followers of Jesus live and behave. They are an essential aspect of Catholic education. Yet, there is often a lack of clarity about them. In this monograph, educators are invited to consider the nature and role of Gospel values in the formation of the next generation of disciples.

Catholic educators “are called to be transmitters of the faith as they help prepare young people to be ‘clothed in Christ’ and to become ‘salt for the earth and light for the world.’ ...While respecting each student, teachers engage in a dialogue on the meaning of life and the way to happiness revealed by Jesus Christ. In the same spirit, they present the Gospel values which they themselves witness to. They provide opportunities for students to relate their knowledge and skills to everyday life, they encourage them to take a critical look at the world around them and to make a commitment to witness with their lives to the kingdom of God, a kingdom of justice, peace and joy.”¹

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Gospel Values and “Values Education”

When considering Gospel Values in the context of Catholic education, it is important to recognize that values education is a mandated part of the curriculum in Ontario’s publicly funded schools. This is also true in many other parts of the world. For example,

Australia and Great Britain have a strong and explicit focus on values, virtues and character development throughout the K-12 curriculum.²

In Ontario, when addressing values education, the Ministry of Education website refers to its policy documents on Equity and Inclusive Education, Character Development, Safe and Inclusive Schools, Aboriginal education resources, and curriculum resources such as Health and Physical Education, 1-8. Learning about values

is an important aspect of all student learning.

“Values education (alternatively, moral education, character education) is the attempt, within schools, to craft pedagogies and supportive structures to foster the development of positive, ethical, pro-social

inclinations and competencies in youth, including around strengthening their academic focus and achievement. Recent research has uncovered evidence of effective practices that apply broadly to schools at different levels and varied contents.”³

“As with any other curriculum implementation in Ontario’s Catholic schools, there is a question of the lens an educator brings to the material. In the case of values, they are taught in Catholic schools not simply because they are a socially agreed upon set of principles and behaviours, but because they reflect Jesus’ way of being and relating in the world.

Values education supports the public educational goal of fostering citizenship, social justice and equity. Not surprisingly, there is often significant overlap between the values that are the focus of secular curricula, and those the Catholic community would identify as ‘Gospel values.’ Among the values identified in The National Framework for Values Education in Australian Schools are Care and Compassion; Integrity; Respect; Honesty and Trustworthiness. Any and all of these could be expected to appear on a list of Gospel values as well.

So, what is the difference? Why the need in Catholic schools to focus on ‘Gospel values’? Why not simply implement the secular curriculum?

As with any other curriculum implementation in Ontario’s Catholic schools, there is a question of the lens an educator brings to the material. In the case of values, they are taught in Catholic schools not simply because they are a socially agreed upon set of principles and behaviours, but because they reflect Jesus’ way of being and relating in the world. As disciples, Catholics constantly seek, as the song suggests, “to see thee more clearly, love thee more dearly, follow thee more nearly, day by day.”⁴

Gospel values have an essential scriptural and theological basis. This critical understanding supports Catholic educators to resist the temptation to adopt a generic and reductionist approach to values,

approaching them exactly as in other publicly funded schools. This could involve an extensive compromise in order to articulate an understanding of values that avoids any disagreement.

Gospel values have an essential scriptural and theological basis. Without understanding this, Catholic educators may be tempted to adopt a generic and reductionist approach to values, approaching them exactly as in other publicly funded schools. This could involve an extensive compromise in order to articulate an understanding of values that avoids any disagreement.

A further concern about the way that generic values education is often implemented in schools, is that it is delivered through an informational approach, rather than a formational one. Understanding discipleship, and growing into Jesus’ way of being and living in relationship with others, requires an ongoing personal faith journey, accompanied by spiritual guides. More is needed than a monthly announcement of a common value, or its display on the school sign.

Gospel Values and the Virtuous Life

Catholic educators must engage fully with values education while remaining faithful to Catholic tradition. Understanding the relationship between Gospel Values and virtues assists this faithful response. The Canadian philosopher Christine McKinnon asserts that the acquisition of virtues is fundamental to character development. Character formation has always been an essential part of the catechetical process, and an integral dimension of religious education. As well, the concept of virtue is central to Catholic moral doctrine. Reflecting on Gospel Values to develop Christian character enables us to live a virtuous life.

In the roots of Catholic tradition, “virtue (was understood) as a mark of excellence and strength in the human person.... (Virtues are) the manifestation of a depth of being transformed, nourished and sustained by God’s Spirit. The virtuous person, in this perspective, is the human person fully alive, free to respond to the challenges of life in a creative, mature and deeply human way.”⁵

How can educators assist students to develop and live a full and virtuous life? The Association of Catholic Bishops of Ontario considers this to be a key question for educators: “How can we help the baptized integrate their faith in every aspect of their lives. In other words, how can we make sure that the faithful life is not limited to beliefs and sentiments, devotions and rituals. How can we help others grow in the practice of virtues...?”⁶

The Golden Chain of Love

Coming to know Jesus provides students with an exemplary model of the virtuous life. Teaching students about Jesus inspires them to practice virtues. Guided by scripture the Catholic school community embraces the practice of virtues as a tradition that is guided by the Spirit and foundational to character development.

“There is a thread — more of a golden chain - that runs through all of the New Testament writings. The chain is love; not a warm and fuzzy feeling, but an unceasing concern for the well-being and happiness of others and for the common good.”⁷ As St. Paul writes in the first letter to the Corinthian community, *“If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing.”*⁸

Educators in Catholic schools work together every day to prepare students for something more profound, something that is more meaningful than academic success. More than the presence of Religious Education classes, prayers and liturgies, this golden chain of love is woven permanently into the school’s Catholic identity and is evident in every aspect of the

school’s daily operation and curriculum. All Gospel values flow from this chain of love, and serve to help all members of a school community to live with an ever-increasing commitment to love.

“To fulfill their responsibility as ministers of the Gospel, Catholic educators must first embrace and commit to their own ongoing spiritual formation in living Gospel values, both individually and together as a professional community. The ancient Latin saying ‘Nemo dat quod non habet’ expresses the wisdom of this — ‘you cannot give what you do not have’. Commitment to ongoing formation also recognizes that one’s sense of how to live fully and faithfully is shaped by experience. As is the case for each of us, an educator’s sense of what it means to live Gospel values changes and deepens with time.

As with the Corinthian community that St. Paul addresses, Catholic educators are called to a love which is demonstrated in maturity, patience, kindness, humility and selflessness. In particular, Catholic educators have an essential role as active ministers of the Gospel. Like St. Paul, they ensure that moral practices in the school reflect Jesus’ teaching. They persistently

shape students understanding of how these moral practices demonstrate support for each other and the community by building each person’s identity, integrity and hope. As Pope Francis notes, “No one can strip us of the dignity bestowed upon us by his boundless and unending love. With a tenderness that never disappoints, but is always capable of restoring our joy, he makes it possible for us to lift up our heads and start anew.”⁹

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Gospel Values In Catholic Schools

Catholic schools place Christ at the center of all

experiences and this focus is not in addition to the quest for academic excellence, but is integral to it.

The work of relating the values of Jesus to those of contemporary Canadian culture is lived out in the intimacy of the Catholic school community, where deeper connections between students' lives are cultivated as students are taught how to live with meaning and purpose — lives lived as Jesus lived.

Catholic educators strive to develop an entire school culture that helps to shape students' character through the explicit Ontario curriculum and through an implicit curriculum of Gospel values. In Catholic schools this implicit curriculum is taught when educators model Gospel values, bringing them

to life for students today, and making connections between those values and the curriculum. Gospel stories powerfully assist educators to relate Jesus' teachings to the lives of students today, recognizing each student's need to feel that they matter, they belong, that their concerns are taken seriously, and that the wellbeing of others depends on them.

Every part of the school, from instruction to assessment, from prayers to retreats, from decision-making to discipline, is designed to encourage students to cultivate a strong and healthy sense of identity and purpose through demonstrations of living as Jesus did, with personal and social responsibility. Consistently modelling personal responsibility teaches students to see themselves as having voice and agency in every situation, and supports them to be accountable for the choices they make, and to seek reconciliation and offer forgiveness when necessary.

From the origins of our faith, teachers have encouraged their students to live a fully human life in imitation of Jesus. As St. Paul wrote to the Church community in Rome: *"Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony*

with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all."¹⁰

Assuming social responsibility is intrinsic to being members of a Christian community, and to feeling a sense of belonging and purpose in community.

Catholic schools teach the importance of being

responsible for one another, especially the most vulnerable, as well as for ourselves. Students regularly participate in community service, plan school events and work together in clubs and activities that support social justice and the common good, learning that living

“ Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.”¹⁰

Gospel values in imitation of Jesus results in a courageous, caring and thriving community.

Reaching out and connecting fully with students and having the courage to address the eternal and formidable questions of meaning – Who am I? Where am I going? What's important to me? — educators find relevant ways to weave these into the curriculum through the lens of Gospel values. Jesus reveals to all who they are, where they're going and what's important to consider. As with Jesus, an educator's steadfast commitment to reach out to all of their students is a generous and courageous act of hospitality.

The opportunity to really listen to students' voices in classrooms carved out by questions of profound importance, sustains the work of educators' vocations. Learning about the meaning of life through Gospel values invites students to grow beyond their own limited experiences and engage with realities different from their own.

Gospel stories frequently present the movement from fear and despair to hope, wisdom and love for all who encounter Jesus. St. Paul expresses this well in his letter to the Romans: *"Let love be genuine;*

hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honour. Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers.”¹¹

“Gospel values emerge from a response to these two commandments – to love God and love our neighbour as our self. Two thousand years later, we still strive to understand and wholeheartedly respond to these commandments. Exploring the stories of Jesus in the gospels allows us to reflect as we ask ourselves how his way of living and being informs our way of living and being today.”

Identifying Gospel Values

Wisely the Church has not created a single list of values that must be embraced in order to authentically follow Jesus. Having said that, there is a time-tested way to identify an essential list of Gospel values. That is, we turn to Jesus in the Gospels. At the very core of the New Testament’s golden chain of love is the question posed to Jesus about which of the commandments is the greatest.

“One of the scribes came near and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing that (Jesus) answered them well, he asked him, “Which commandment is the first of all?” Jesus answered, “The first is, ‘Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strengths.’ The second is this, ‘You shall love your neighbour as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these.” The scribe said to him, “You are right, Teacher; you have truly said that ‘he is one and besides him there is no other’; and ‘to love him with all the heart, and with all the understanding, and with all the strength,’ and ‘to love one’s neighbour as oneself,’ — this is much more important than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices.” When Jesus saw that he answered wisely,

he said to him, “You are not far from the kingdom of God.”¹²

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As we are reminded in the pastoral letter, ***Renewing the Promise***, we are called to listen with faith and humility as we ask the questions: How is the Spirit calling us to respond, individually and communally to our present context? Drawing from our Catholic faith and tradition, how can we respond creatively to the challenges and opportunities that we face today?¹³

Meeting Jesus in the curriculum and the liturgical life of the school, students discover that Jesus loves them for who they are, and they are inspired to learn to love others, appreciating rather than fearing differences, and understanding what it means to belong to one another, as we belong to God. Students learn about Jesus who separated people from their guilt, made well again those who desired to be well and broke bread with broken people. Jesus taught his followers not to worry about power or prestige.

Reflecting about Jesus in these examples reveals clearly the Gospel values of love; hope; honesty; courage; service; forgiveness; compassion; equality; justice; simplicity; trust in God; respect; peace; community; patience; perseverance; servant leadership; gratitude. Different local school communities create a list based on their understanding of how Jesus calls them to live faithfully in this time and place. Catholic educators need to constantly be reflecting on the Gospel values that most authentically respond to the needs of their community, of humanity and care for the earth, our common home.

As St. John Paul II encourages us, “Become friends to those who have no friends. Become family to those who have no family. Become community to

those who have no community. If we want peace, we must reach out to the poor. May the rich and poor of the world recognize that we are all brothers and sisters. May we all share what we have with one another as children of the one God, who loves everyone and who offers to everyone the gift of peace.”¹⁴

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Institute for
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Ontario Institute for Catholic Education
44 Hunt Street, Suite 2F
Hamilton, Ontario, L8R 3R1
Tel: 905-523-2469 | E-mail: office@iceont.ca

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