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ANNIVERSARY  
EDITION  
1996-2021

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# Curriculum Matters

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*A Resource for Catholic Educators*



Published by the  
Institute for Catholic Education

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Institute for Catholic Education

Curriculum STILL Matters:  
A Resource for Catholic Educators  
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Twenty-five years ago, the Institute for Catholic Education gathered insights from thinkers across the Catholic Education community in Ontario naming the key contexts in Catholic Education in five articles that continue to resonate, inspire, and challenge under the title *Curriculum Matters*.

In 2021-2022, the themes for Catholic Education Week are *Rediscover, Rebuild, Restore, Renew, and Rejoice Together*. These five themes find their inspiration in the Book of Revelation, “Behold, I make all things new.” (Rev. 21:5)

In keeping with these themes, the Institute is pleased to issue this Anniversary Edition called *Curriculum STILL Matters*.

Our hope is that, together we:

**Rediscover** the treasure of the original insights of *Curriculum Matters*  
Reflect on the work of **rebuilding, restoring, and renewing** in the light  
of the current context of Catholic education in 2021.

**Rejoice** in our shared mission in Catholic education – excited for our future  
and confident that it is Christ who makes all things new.

May these thoughtful responses from our newest contributors continue to inspire the Catholic Education community in Ontario for decades to come.

With thanks to Bruce Rodrigues, “Curriculum STILL Matters”

Linda Staudt, “Response to the Contemporary Context”  
Richard Shields, “Response to the Philosophical Context”  
Patricia O’Reilly, “Response to the Theological Context”  
Denise Andre, “Response to the Curricular Context”  
Derek Haime, “Response to Contextualizing Curriculum”

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Executive Director, Institute for Catholic Education

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# Curriculum STILL Matters

Twenty-five years ago, Curriculum Matters, published by the Institute for Catholic Education, was birthed. The purpose of the document was to “evoke passionate discussion from the partners who comprise Catholic education in Ontario”; that purpose remains unchanged.

Five key areas were elucidated for conversation regarding Ontario Catholic Education: Its Contemporary Context,  
Its Philosophical Context,  
Its Theological Context,  
Its Curricular Context, and  
Contextualizing Curriculum.

The primary focus of the conversation was to ponder the essential character of a curriculum for Catholic schools. These five areas continue to have a place of relevance as we look back to probe our collective commitment as to how authentically we implemented what we believed to be necessary and as we look forward to plan where we go from here.

Language and definitions are important to appreciating context. Fundamental to our understanding is the constant debate of if we are speaking of a “Catholic curriculum” or a “curriculum infused by Catholic values and teaching”. Both are important, provided we are clear on what they mean. In the phrase “Catholic curriculum” one ought to infer that the word “Catholic” is a verb; it emphasizes the way we do curriculum. On the other hand, “Curriculum infused by Catholic values and teaching” is not about placing Catholic icons on its cover or using theological language to make it Catholic but rather about animating it with all that we know to be the lived experience of the Gospel.

Curriculum STILL matters—or does it? The world is different, new questions have emerged, relationships are more complex, the very essence of our deepest beliefs are at times ridiculed in an ever increasingly secularized culture. The constant push is to go faster, not to waste time, to forget about the other, and to embrace a planned obsolescence. Yet the central tenets of our faith call us to wait – Christ will come again; and Eucharist calls us to anamnesis, to remember. How does the curriculum teach us to live in this tension?

Curriculum is clearly not a static concept. However, there exist immutable characteristics related to curriculum in Catholic schools. A recognition that each child is made in the image and likeness of God and so it is that we teach children and not just content; the way in which we teach is

grounded in a Christian ethos and a Christian anthropology; the core of the purpose of teaching is not for the sake of evaluation but to facilitate a reverence for all creation, love of God and neighbour, search for truth, growth in wisdom and action towards justice. This is central to what is taught in Catholic schools.

Ontario has four publicly funded education systems; French Public, French Catholic, English Public and English Catholic. Both the French and English Catholic systems contribute uniquely to the educational landscape of the province. Inherent in the distinctiveness of Catholic education is its incarnational view of the world, the formation of the whole person and the call to evangelization. Much of what we contemplate with curriculum is often spoken about in ethereal ways and lacks the practicality of how it can be implemented concretely. Thus, it is incumbent upon all who contribute in any way to Catholic education to be attentive to the practical questions of who we teach, what is taught, and how it is taught.

### ***Who we teach?***

Curriculum still matters because of who we teach. As staff in Catholic schools, we are privileged to be provided the opportunity to influence and shape current and future generations. We recognize that parents are the first teachers of their children and that they have entrusted their best and most precious to us each day. We are provided with the awesome assignment of informing, forming, and transforming minds but more importantly hearts.

The young people in our care come to school each day with a rich, personal, and unique story. It is imperative that educators become familiar with their narrative, embrace it, and find ways to help them to own it. These young people are diverse in their backgrounds, orientation, thinking and lived experience. The teaching/learning process is one of reciprocity; so, educator and student can be both teacher and learner. But our shared journey of education is only for a time; our students graduate. And our great hope is that our shared journey will send these young ones into the world to lead as caring family members, responsible citizens, contributors, communicators, and reflective thinkers, disrupting injustices and working to strengthen all that promotes justice and mercy.

### ***What is taught?***

What is taught within the curriculum still matters. All curricula should require that students be engaged through discovering multiple points of entry that affirms their lived experience. Curriculum ought to be culturally relevant and responsive to the signs of the times. The curriculum should not shy away from inviting a critical examination of the questions of today's students even as those questions touch on our faith just as we encourage a critical examination of the culture and its embedded

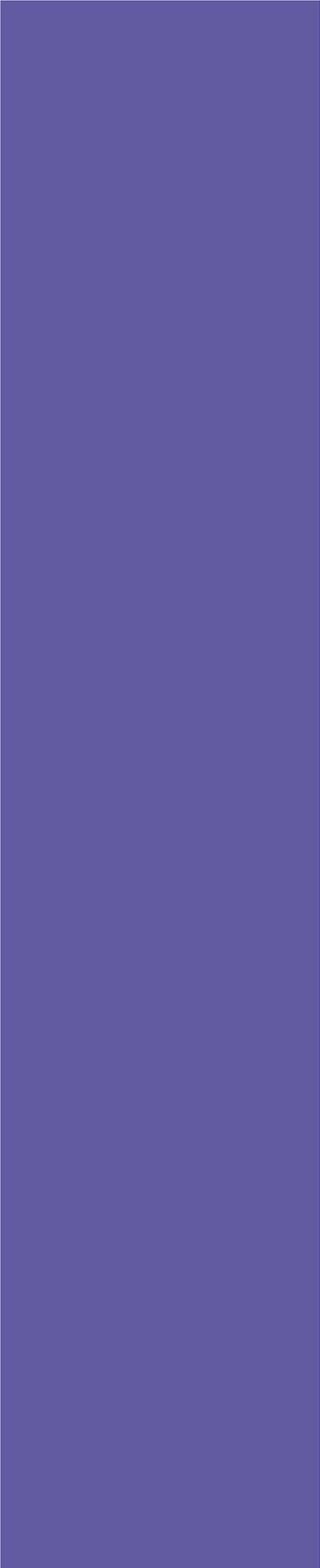
assumptions in the light of our faith. The curriculum should confront all oppression including racism and the multiplicity of intersectional fractured relationships.

In a world where global competencies and innovation are the hallmark of how curriculum is to be constructed; credence ought to be given to the knowledge, skills and actions that students will require to function in this ever-changing universe. Debate persists about what should comprise the essential body of knowledge that all students will learn and what are the critical transferable skills that all students will require. Catholic schools will need to be attentive to forming graduates through a curriculum that will enable them to discern ethical action and be unafraid to interrogate the injustices of the world. The Church has a rich tradition of social teaching and action that cannot be forgotten within the curriculum. Another key teaching for all learners is the development of the interior life. We need to teach young people to embrace moments of stillness, prayer, meditation and reflection.

### ***How is it taught?***

How curriculum is taught still matters. Regardless of the discipline, or who is doing the teaching formally or informally; intuitively there exist points of intersection that provide for integration of faith, reason and spirituality. Students are deeply spiritual and the responsibility of all who encounter each student is to aid them in naming their God experiences. Educators are catechists not theologians; their primary responsibility when teaching the curriculum is to be certain to teach what the Church teaches and more importantly to teach why the Church teaches what it does. Through the curriculum we can lead learners to a deeper sensitivity to distinguish between seemingly similar concepts like thanks and gratitude, work and ministry, optimism and hope, happiness and joy, or sadness and grief. The curriculum must also permit students to question, to grapple with the larger questions like life and death and life after death and ultimately how to live in the present moment and embrace the Paschal Mystery.

When one meets and engages with students' years after they graduate, they invariably have forgotten the formal curriculum that was taught. What they have not forgotten is who taught them and how they were treated. The learning here is that curriculum is not about a textbook narrative but rather about a student narrative. The individual's story is the curriculum and in Catholic education if each student can be valued for who they are and their God-given gifts they learn, thrive and find their place in the world. This is at the crux of our praxis in Catholic education, where we can assist individuals to see their own personal story in the light of THE story, coming to understand how their own lives are significant in the weaving together of all our stories. Perhaps the greatest testament to the success of our Catholic education system is our graduates and the way in which they have been able to live lives of authenticity that witness to the intentionality of the Ontario Catholic School Graduate Expectations



and more specifically to the Gospel values that inspire them.

Through a well implemented curriculum all should be inspired and motivated to change the civic conversation into a relevant parable where fairness, equity, peace and justice are central tenets of a global evangelization. Who better to facilitate both that conversation and the transformation it intends than those tasked with the ongoing mission and work of Catholic education.

Does curriculum still matter? Curriculum is at the heart of what facilitates the shaping of minds, hearts, relationships, culture and identity in an ever-changing world. It is precisely these moments that invite and compel us to a deeper understanding and acceptance of all that is mystery. May we be ever more attentive to the curriculum as we journey and collectively walk with each other rediscovering Jesus each time we break bread.

Let us be unapologetic and committed to making the next 25 years and beyond a transformative experience for all who choose to be a part of the Catholic education journey.

# Introduction

The Institute for Catholic Education (ICE) has published in this booklet entitled *Curriculum Matters - A Resource for Catholic Educators* a seminal document for the constituents of the Catholic educational community. The purpose of this booklet is to evoke passionate discussion from the partners who comprise Catholic education in Ontario.

The booklet contains five papers with the following headings:

**Ontario Catholic Education: Its Contemporary Context  
Its Philosophical Context  
Its Theological Context  
Its Curricular Context  
Contextualizing Curriculum**

The intent is to engage parents, teachers, trustees, supervisory officers, Bishops, clergy and the Board of Directors of the Regional Curriculum Cooperatives in dialogue on the important issue of a suitable curriculum for separate schools. All the major stakeholders in the Catholic education enterprise have the responsibility to fashion a curriculum whose foundation rests on the distinctive characteristics of the Roman Catholic tradition. Our young people have the right of access to the best possible curriculum the Catholic community can provide.

Brian McGowan in “Ontario Catholic Education: Its Contemporary Context” notes:

The Ministry knows that we (separate schools) are out there, because we educate about 30% of the students in this province. However, the Ministry, in the way it designs provincial curriculum, and organizes its internal departments, does not reflect the existence of a distinctive Catholic educational system and philosophy ... The simple truth however, is that until the Ministry changes its organizational practice, we are on our own in the area of developing curriculum acceptable for Catholic schools.

Current Ministry policy produces curriculum which is based primarily upon secular constructivism, a philosophy which

brackets all issues of the existence of God and presents human beings as the exclusive architects of their own destiny. Curriculum designed in such a fashion excludes from study and advocacy, the realms of spirituality, sacramentality and discipleship, which are essential in the formation of our young people.

Father John van den Hengel in “Ontario Catholic Education: Its Philosophical Context” says:

The time seems ripe to reflect on the very aims of education and the role of education in a confessional context, for the very foundations of our life together as citizens of Ontario and as members of the Catholic community. It is to this end that we present in broad strokes the rationale and scope of such a Catholic philosophy of education and its principal features.

Meg Lavin in “Ontario Catholic Education: Its Theological Context” states:

Catholic schools are both places of learning and places of believing. Thus, they are both a public community, that is, a community of learners, and an ecclesial community, that is, a community of believers. This twofold dimension of learning and believing contributes to the integration of faith, life, and culture. As learners, Catholic students are encouraged by the community to cultivate their intellectual and aesthetic potentialities; as believers, they are inspired to grow in faith in the presence of Jesus Christ.

Larry Trafford in “Ontario Catholic Education: Its Curricular Context” observes:

Problems arise when religious concepts and ideas are forced into subject areas in the name of integration with little regard for the integrity of the academic discipline itself. To develop a unit theme based on “journeys” from the different program areas of language, self and society, and religion allows for an authentic curriculum fit. To state, explain, and use the Pythagorean Theorem and then instruct teachers to tell their students that Pythagoras was interested in religion does not.

Mary Heather MacKinnon, SSND, in “Ontario Catholic Education: Contextualizing Curriculum” makes the following points:

In Catholic schools the challenge is to help students situate their story and the story of all life within the mystery of the Christian story by engaging them in a process of theological reflection which helps them to integrate their personal experience, cultural context, the Christian tradition, and all areas of learning. In addition, the task is to help students to direct their learning toward the development of their gifts and talents and toward making real the vision of life and love exemplified by Jesus Christ.

Inherent in the gospel is the call for followers of Christ to see the relevance and relatedness of all creation and to direct one’s life toward the common good and the fulfilment of the “kingdom of God”.

In Catholic schools our foundational beliefs about teaching, learning, the profile of the learner, exit outcomes, essential and specific learnings, and program modification all relate directly to our foundational beliefs about the life and work of Jesus Christ and the tradition of the Roman Catholic community which seeks to embody those beliefs.

Each essay is topic specific and concludes with possible questions for discussion. While the papers have been prepared for an ICE symposium organized for the provincial leadership of the partners in Catholic education, the booklet also serves as a resource for all Catholic educators. This booklet published by the Institute for Catholic Education is shared with parents, teachers, students, trustees, supervisory officers, Bishops, clergy and the Boards of Directors of the Regional Curriculum Cooperatives.

May your dialogue, discussions and exchanges be vigorous and bear fruit for the young people in our separate schools in the year 2000 and beyond.

Joan Cronin, GSIC  
Executive Director,  
Institute for Catholic Education



# Ontario Catholic Education: Its Contemporary Context

Public Catholic education was born in Ontario on June 24, 1986. Of course Catholic schools existed for decades before this, but they operated as a truncated system with restricted access and limited programs. After years of petitions, rallies, protests and presentations before various provincial governments, action was finally taken.

With the passage of Bill 30, the separate school system became completely publicly funded. For the first time in our history, parents did not have to pay tuition fees to complete their child's education in a Catholic secondary school. For the first time, Catholic school boards, though not funded equally to public boards, had sufficient resources to build schools with facilities and programs for students of all academic abilities and interests. For the first time, teachers in Catholic schools had working conditions, salaries, and professional support services that were within hailing distance of their public school counterparts. In the eyes of most Catholic educational commentators at the time, the passage of Bill 30 was seen as an unqualified good, which would allow us to continue our work, much as we had in the past, but with better resources, facilities and programs.

Like the Hebrew slaves emerging from the wilderness of Sinai, we saw in the distance a land flowing with milk and honey. If we remember our scriptures however, we will recall that after they entered the promised land, the former slaves gradually forgot who they were, where they had come from, and what sort of work they were called to do. They became pre-occupied with building palaces, collecting taxes and establishing a kingdom. As their material well-being grew, their unique religious identity and moral imperative was diminished. They lost touch with their roots. Over time they became virtually indistinguishable from their neighbours. They managed to survive as a people only by remembering their covenant with God in the desert, preserving and enshrining the covenant in their laws and institutions, and interpreting it in the context of their new conditions. They realized that they had been freed from being slaves to Pharaoh so that they might become servants of the Lord. Is there a lesson here for Catholic education in the 1990's?

*In the eyes of most Catholic educational commentators at the time, the passage of Bill 30 was seen as an unqualified good, which would allow us to continue our work, much as we had in the past, but with better resources, facilities and programs.*

*It has become apparent that Bill 30, together with changes within Ontario education generally and within Catholic education specifically, have caused subtle but profound adjustments within the self definition, character, mandate and operation of Catholic schools and their boards.*

*Now that we are a system of education that is at once both Catholic and public, how can we be faithful to our religious origins and yet be authentic to our public mandate?*

## The “Signs of the Times”

It has become apparent that Bill 30, together with changes within Ontario education generally and within Catholic education specifically, have caused subtle but profound adjustments within the self definition, character, mandate and operation of Catholic schools and their boards. As early as 1989, in their pastoral letter on education, *This Moment of Promise*, Ontario’s Bishops said,

“Even though the financial viability of Catholic schools has been guaranteed, the task remains of ensuring their Catholic character.”<sup>1</sup>

These are prophetic words indeed. It is incontestable that the pre-Bill 30 Catholic educational enterprise, which was characterized by personalism, confessionalism, voluntarism and poverty has undergone radical transformation. Looking back, these qualities were due as much to necessity as to virtue, since the survival of Catholic education in Ontario rested upon sacrifices from parents, students, teachers, and religious and upon perennial fundraising activities like the sale of chocolate covered almonds and yearly raffle drives. There is a growing concern, however, that these historic education system qualities are being replaced in recent times by those of bureaucracy, secularism careerism, and financial enterprise.

We are not suggesting here that Catholic education should forfeit the hard-won benefits of Bill 30 and return to primitive facilities and inadequate resources. As we approach the tenth anniversary of the completion of the separate school system however, perhaps it is time to reaffirm what Catholic education is about and to identify what are its distinctive qualities. Now that we are a system of education that is at once both Catholic and public, how can we be faithful to our religious origins and yet be authentic to our public mandate? In biblical terms, how can we “give back to Caesar what belongs to Caesar - and to God what belongs to God?”

This new creature called Catholic public education is barely 10 years old; it is still a child. What it will grow into as it matures is not yet clear. It is possible that through default or through apathy it will lose its distinctive Catholic identity and largely resemble its public system equivalent. Should that occur, the taxpayers would not likely tolerate the existence of such a redundant and expensive duplicate system, nor should they. The next several years are critical for Catholic education in this province. We live in a time of extraordinary educational turmoil, social upheaval, and ecclesiastical polarization. We need to

begin with an examination of the times in which we find ourselves, in order to identify the pressure points on Catholic education and the opportunities which lie before it.

## **The Educational Context**

It would be a tremendous understatement to characterize the last ten years of education in Ontario as a time of change. In that period, we have seen four provincial governments, seven ministers of education, de-streaming, common curriculum, outcomes based education, benchmarks, ministry restructuring, and not the least, a Royal Commission on Learning which proposed 167 recommendations for educational reform. Throughout all of these initiatives, one thing has become very clear. The Catholic education system in Ontario is not recognized by the Ministry of Education as having distinctive organizational needs from those in the public school system. While there are several examples we could cite to demonstrate this point, let us focus on the single issue of curriculum development.

In the original version of *The Common Curriculum*, Catholic education is mentioned once as a footnote on the bottom of page 1. In the second version, written for parents, Catholic education is not mentioned at all. In the latest version, released in the Spring of 1995, Catholic education rates two sentences on page 14 and a reference on the inside back cover.

The Ministry knows that we are out there, because we educate about 30% of the students in this province. However, the Ministry, in the way it designs provincial curriculum, and organizes its internal departments, does not reflect the existence of a distinctive Catholic educational system and philosophy. The Royal Commission on Learning recognized this shortcoming within the Ministry and made several recommendations to change this situation. The simple truth, however, is that until the Ministry changes its organizational practice, we are on our own in the area of developing curriculum acceptable for Catholic schools. Current Ministry policy produces curriculum which is based primarily upon secular constructivism, a philosophy which brackets all issues of the existence of God and presents human beings as the exclusive architects of their own destiny. Curriculum designed in such a fashion excludes from study and advocacy, the realms of spirituality, sacramentality, and discipleship, which are essential in the formation of our young people.

Consequently, when areas such as Self and Society, the Arts etc. are identified in the curriculum, they are viewed from a perspective which

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*Current Ministry policy produces curriculum which is based primarily upon secular constructivism, a philosophy which brackets all issues of the existence of God and presents human beings as the exclusive architects of their own destiny.*

*Our response to this cannot be limited to adding Catholic topics and reference points to such documents and then assuming we have made them appropriate for use in Catholic schools.*

*The careful design of appropriate curriculum must be a priority for Catholic education at this time.*

*Our principles are those things which we live by when times are hard and choices are tough.*

is incomplete. The deficiency in such a curriculum is not just that certain “religious” topics are not covered, but more importantly, the topics which are covered are organized around a humanism which does not integrate faith with education. Our response to this cannot be limited to adding Catholic topics and reference points to such documents and then assuming we have made them appropriate for use in Catholic schools. If we do so, we essentially define Catholic education as being public education plus religion instruction in Catholicism. Catholic education defined in such a limited manner could be easily delivered in a public school with a religious studies option for Catholic students.

The careful design of appropriate curriculum must be a priority for Catholic education at this time. The Ministry is producing generic, one size fits all curriculum documents for use in English language schools, whether they be public or separate. In the absence of a Catholic Education Program and Policy Team at the Ministry, curriculum documents will require serious modification and re-design to meet the different educational objectives which we claim distinguish us from the public school system. It is through demonstrating a unique curriculum structure and educational philosophy that Catholic education will maintain its identity in the post Bill 30 era. On this issue, our fate is in our own hands.

### **The Economic Context**

Education has been told repeatedly over the last year that there are no new dollars for the system. Indeed, the new Minister has signalled that there will be fewer dollars for education, perhaps far fewer, and that structural change must occur. In this environment, the very fact of the existence of Catholic schools is a problem for many people outside our community. Historical guarantees and constitutional rights have a very difficult time in an atmosphere of severe economic restraint and restructuring. We need only look to Newfoundland’s recent referendum (September 5, 1995) on the issue of denominational schools to see that this is the case. Enormous pressure will be placed on school boards to streamline their operations, reduce costs, make cutbacks, and get back to the basics. But what are the basics in a Catholic school system?

Let there be no mistake, a school board’s budget is its functioning mission statement. Our principles are those things which we live by when times are hard and choices are tough. As Catholic education undergoes inevitable restructuring due to reduced government funding, what priorities will drive the agenda of change? Are chaplaincy

programs, student retreats, pastoral counselling, and social action activities “add ons” in Catholic schools or are they central to what we are? We need to understand clearly what are the essential qualities of Catholic schools and what are the central principles of a Catholic philosophy of education in order to determine our priorities as we are compelled to make difficult financial choices in the years ahead.

## **The Religious Context**

The most difficult moment in any discussion of Catholic education occurs when you are inevitably compelled to discuss the term “catholic”. You cannot talk about Catholic education without at some point getting into the broader issue of Catholicism and the Church. The simple truth is we are currently a house divided, a Church experiencing renewal, controversy, scandal, retrenchment, and defection. These explosive conditions cause many of us to divide into theological camps on the continuum between the radical right and the radical left. We tend to circle the wagons and then fire inward. Teachers, trustees, administrators, parents, and priests all get caught between or participate in the ensuing crossfire. The result is that most people in the system keep a low profile on Catholicism so as not to become a target. While our faith is the central defining component in our educational identity, it is also the most controversial. Such controversy leads us to ask the question of how can the Catholic educational community move forward?

*The Blishen Report*, released by the Institute for Catholic Education in 1990, provides us with a starting point. We have to begin with the recognition that large numbers of Catholics have removed themselves from participation in the institutional church. *The Blishen Report* indicates that 63% of parents and 50% of grade 12 students attend mass more than twice a month. The result is a significant portion of the broader Catholic educational community is unchurched. This is a problem for the entire community and not the fault of any one part of it. Yes, some parishes are moribund. Yes, some parents don’t take seriously their own spiritual lives or their responsibility to raise their children within the faith. Yes, some teachers are indifferent toward the vocation aspect of teaching. But pointing fingers at one another will not solve this problem. Since it is a problem for the entire church community, its solution is beyond the mandate and competence of the school. The school is merely the location where the pre-existing divisions within the community become most evident. Nevertheless, certain school based issues can be addressed.

*You cannot talk about Catholic education without at some point getting into the broader issue of Catholicism and the Church.*

*But pointing fingers at one another will not solve this problem. Since it is a problem for the entire church community, its solution is beyond the mandate and competence of the school. The school is merely the location where the pre-existing divisions within the community become most evident.*

*We need to collectively address all of these issues as a community, and not identify any one group as the cause of our difficulties.*

*Hinduism, Buddhism, Sikhism, and Islam are no longer exotic foreign religions, but the living faiths of our next door neighbours.*

Teachers need to accept that there is a Christian ministry component in their teaching and that their witness to the faith is important to the religious life of the school. Trustees and administrators need to recognize that the catholicity of the system is not solely resident in the sacramental practice of the teachers. A Catholic school is Catholic not just because it has teachers and students in the building who are Catholic (or who are Catholic in the building). A school is Catholic because its structure and curriculum are Christ-centred and sacramental. The clergy needs to recognize that the students in Catholic schools include the 50% of Catholic young people that they never see at church on Sunday, and that this situation is not the school's fault. We need to collectively address all of these questions as a community, and not identify any one group as the cause of our difficulties.

### **The Provincial Context**

As we chronicle the changes which have occurred within the Catholic educational community, we should not lose sight of the extraordinary changes which have also taken place in the demographics and culture of Ontario. At the time of the establishment of the Catholic school system, the public school system was in fact the Protestant school system. It was immersed in the traditions of mainstream Protestantism, many of its leader were Protestant ministers, and it began the school day with the Lord's prayer. This overtly Christian culture was dominant in the public school system until well into the second half of this century. Two unrelated but concomitant social changes have occurred over the last several decades which have profoundly altered this situation.

The first is the gradual decline of Christianity as a significant social force in Ontario, and the subsequent rise of secularism. This circumstance is hardly unique to Ontario and is apparently being experienced throughout the entire North Atlantic world. Whether this is a temporary eclipse of Christianity or a more permanent diminishment in its status is unclear.

The second change is the diversification of the general population of Ontario due to widespread immigration from traditionally non-Christian countries. Hinduism, Buddhism, Sikhism, and Islam are no longer exotic foreign religions, but the living faiths of our next door neighbours. This dual change has profound consequences for both the public and separate school systems in Ontario.

The public school system has become gradually non-denominational in response to both secularization and diversification. While the bias toward Christianity needed to be removed from the public school system, it was done by removing all religion completely from schools and creating a learning environment in which the students' religious heritage and beliefs are irrelevant to their education. This development has caused many religious families of all faiths to question the appropriateness of the secular public school system as the vehicle for their children's education. The growth in private denominational schools and the constitutional and charter challenges which have taken place in the last several years reflects this dissatisfaction.

The existence of a separate Catholic school system and a secular public school system is increasingly seen by many Ontarians as an historical anomaly and a constitutional anachronism. One segment of the population would like to see the elimination of the separate school system, resulting in a single, universal, secular public system. Another segment has no difficulty with a separate school system for Catholics, but believes that their church or faith should also enjoy the same privilege. This debate is not going to go away and is likely to become more heated in the future.

The post Bill 30 era is a time of both opportunity and crisis for Catholic education. We have behind us a rich legacy of communal life, theology, and philosophy to guide us as we make the critical choices which will shape our educational future and curriculum framework. Let us begin by examining what are the foundations of a Catholic philosophy of education.

## **Discussion Questions**

1. How have the changing "contexts" of Catholic education in this province influenced your work in Catholic education?

- Educational
- Economic
- Religious
- Provincial

2. What would you name as the essential features of curriculum in Catholic schools prior to Bill 30? How are these features still present in Catholic schools today?

*The existence of a separate Catholic school system and a secular public school system is increasingly seen by many Ontarians as an historical anomaly and a constitutional anachronism.*

*The post Bill 30 era is a time of both opportunity and crisis for Catholic education.*

# 1A

## Ontario Catholic Education: Response to the Contemporary Context

Twenty-five years ago, in addressing the Contemporary Context, the pressure points on Catholic education as well as the opportunities which lie before it were examined. They have remained relevant and include:

- The careful design of appropriate curriculum. Integration of faith in the curriculum cannot be limited to simply adding Catholic topics and then assuming they have been made appropriate for use in Catholic schools. The Ontario Catholic School Graduate Expectations, since their first release in 1998, have provided a valuable framework for designing distinctly Catholic curriculum.
- A clear understanding of what are the central principles of a Catholic philosophy of education. It will be these principles that determine priorities as difficult financial choices are made amid ongoing pressure to streamline operations and reduce costs.
- While our Catholic faith is the central defining component of our educational identity, it remains a point of challenge in the unity or lack thereof in the Catholic community. Collectively, as a Catholic community we need to ask how we can move forward from the further challenges we have faced recently, including the COVID-19 pandemic and the disruptions it has caused to family life, work life, school life and parish life, as well as the recent reminders of the tragedy of residential schools in the discovery of unmarked graves.
- The demographics and culture of Ontario continues to change as evidenced in a gradual decline in Christianity and a diversification of the general population. There remains, now as then, a segment of the population that would like to see the elimination of the separate school system, and another segment that has no difficulty with a separate school system for Catholics but believe that their church or faith should enjoy the same privilege.



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as a Catholic  
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forward.*

*As was identified: “The post Bill 30 era is time of both opportunity and crisis for Catholic education. We have behind us a rich legacy of communal life, theology, and philosophy to guide us as we make critical choices which will shape our educational future and curriculum framework.” (p.9)*

Today, 25 years later, both ‘crisis and opportunity’ are still evidenced in our world including climate disasters and international armed conflicts that result in millions being displaced. Close to home, we are facing the painful discoveries of unmarked graves of residential school children in Canada and the tragic events that lead to the death of Mr. George Floyd in the United States. These events have laid bare the crushing

and devastating impact of residential schools and of racism and call us to consider how we are being called to respond as a Catholic education system.

The Pope's encyclical *Fratelli Tutti* reminds us of an important truth: we belong to one another. "*Instances of racism continue to shame us, for they show that our supposed social progress is not as real or definitive as we think.*"<sup>i</sup> Racism contradicts the truth that all people are born with equal dignity in the image and likeness of God, eliminating it involves the intentional work and learning of each person.

Our Catholic schools and communities have an important role in the intentional work and learning in addressing overt and systemic racism in all its forms. The events of present day call us to embrace and move forward on a journey of healing and reconciliation. This journey requires of us, our schools, our communities a commitment to learn the history from the lived experiences of residential school survivors and all those marginalized and oppressed. As we learn the truth and acknowledge the harmful impact, concrete acts of healing and reconciliation must follow. It is about taking the time to walk alongside one another, to listen and to teach and in so doing to transform. It is about modelling the Emmaus experience, what Pope Francis describes as the art of patient accompaniment.<sup>ii</sup>

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i Pope Francis. (2020) *Fratelli Tutti*, 20.

ii Assembly of Catholic Bishops of Ontario, (2018), page 6, "*Renewing the Promise: A Pastoral Letter for Catholic Education.*"

## QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

### **Educators**

How can I help students to make sense of the world as they are experiencing it, in a way that is enlightened by faith?

### **Curriculum Developers/Supporters**

How does our curriculum reflect awareness of the context in which students are living and learning, and bring faith-based perspectives to this context?

### **System Leaders**

Do our strategic plans, policies and budget priorities reflect a commitment to the intentional work of ensuring equity of outcome for all students? How might we further uncover and remove discriminatory biases and barriers?

“

*It is about taking the time to walk alongside one another, to listen and to teach and in so doing to transform.*

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# Ontario Catholic Education: Its Philosophical Context

## Catholic Vision of Education

In *This Moment of Promise* the Ontario Conference of Catholic Bishops made a brief comment about the need for a Catholic philosophy of education:

We need to develop further and to articulate a Catholic philosophy of education for our times so that our distinctive vision of education will permeate every aspect of our curriculum and all dimensions of the learning process.<sup>2</sup>

The Bishops wrote of this need shortly after the extension of funding for secondary education became available to the Separate Schools. It is even more urgent now when we are asked to rethink the whole process and content of the education of our children. The time seems ripe to reflect on the very aims of education and the role of education in a confessional context, for it touches on the very foundations of our life together as citizens of Ontario and as members of the Catholic community. It is to this end that we present in broad strokes the rationale and scope of such a Catholic philosophy of education and its principal features.

The reason for the existence of more than one system of education in Ontario is more than historical circumstance (the School Act of 1841). The deepest reason lies in a conviction. It is the conviction about the role of religion and faith in the good order of society, the well-being of the earth, and the wholeness of individuals. Faith, as the Christian tradition has understood it, is not a private affair between individuals and God but a vision of life that pervades all the energy and activity that shape human existence economically, politically, ethically, religiously, socially. Christian faith demands that it become also a public gesture.

How faith is to become part of the social fabric is a matter of debate. For some, the Christian vision opposes whatever society and its culture has

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*There are also those who hold that there is a tension between Christianity and the societies in which they live. The tension exists because the Christian vision inserts the “law of love” as a norm for human living*

*In the main, Christian communities see themselves as positive forces in the shaping of a more hope-filled and just society.*

to offer. Culture is perceived as so destructive and distorted that these Christians see it as obligation to separate themselves from public society.

Others see no danger and go so far as to say that church and society have identical aims. Christians should engage themselves wholeheartedly in the promotion of the cultural wealth of their society because they see their society as an incarnation of the “Kingdom of God.”

Both of these positions are judged to be extreme by the mainstream traditions of Christianity.

There are also those who hold that there is a tension between Christianity and the societies in which they live. The tension exists because the Christian vision inserts the “law of love” as a norm for human living. Hence there is the experience of the call to be perfect in the midst of the turmoil of daily living. This vision manifests itself in either one of two ways.

First, some Christians experience this vision as a mission to become paradoxes in society. By their witness they want to raise questions, to prick the consciences of others, to reveal another reality and different values. Like the prophets of old they make people uncomfortable with their common sense lives. Second, other Christians experience this vision as an urge to become active in the process of the transformation of their society. They see Christianity as a force of change for society. And so they throw all their energies into the various cultural activities and institutions of society in order to allow them to reflect better the “Kingdom of God” as lived and proclaimed by Jesus Christ. In the main, Christian communities see themselves as positive forces in the shaping of a more hope-filled and just society.

### **A Catholic Philosophy of Education**

In developing a philosophy of education, the Catholic community thinks through the possible impact of this vision upon the process and content of education. How *does* our Christian faith transform the society of which we are a part? How does this conviction shape an educational system and its curriculum? A Catholic philosophy of education sets itself as task to work out the answers to these questions. Philosophy, after all, is the reflective thinking about our human situation.

Within the Separate School system then, we think and reflect about our human condition as Catholics. And we think and reflect on relationship between Roman Catholicism and the educational process. Education is like the practical arm of the community, shaping and transmitting its vision of life; it plays the role of midwife for the creation of the human community.

Over the centuries, the Catholic community recognized that its faith in God and Jesus has radical repercussions on how humans conduct their affairs in political, economic, and cultural spheres of life. Catholics have shaped a powerful vision of social and economic justice. They considered it a right, as well as a right of other communities, to educate their members toward a fuller understanding and realization of their beliefs. A Catholic philosophy of education, therefore, will include a clear understanding of the Catholic tradition and its revelation about God and human life. It will also have a thorough understanding of the culture in which it lives: its language and literature, artistic achievements, history, scientific endeavours, theories of knowledge, social and political institutions, etc. To that end, it will establish the links between faith and the intellectual, practical and aesthetic achievements of society, culture, and of humanity in general. Likewise, an authentic Catholic philosophy of education will remain in constant conversation with the other philosophical positions regarding education. Particularly when it is publicly funded, as it is in Ontario, it will seek to be part of the public discourse about education so that it can contribute to the well-being of the larger community.

To draw an outline of such a Catholic philosophy of education is not an easy matter. It is not as if Catholics have available a fixed eternal truth which needs only to be applied. Our Catholic identity is shaped by historical and cultural forces. As a consequence, we search with others, not blindly but nonetheless with modesty, how God's revelation in Christ is still "Good News" to us at the end of the twentieth century. Our faith gives us only glimpses of the infinitely wide range of bonds which link our human lives to the environment, to the social and political network, and ultimately to God.

To that end, the following outline of a Catholic philosophy of education draws on our tradition of faith and applies it to a Catholic vision of education. It does so in two ways. First, the outline examines the philosophical traits underlying education in general. These traits, for better or for worse, set the main agenda for educational curricula in schools. It is certainly the reason why Catholic education in Ontario

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is currently undertaking such a careful look at itself. Second, the outline identifies the essential features of a Catholic philosophy of education.

### **Philosophical Influences in Contemporary Education**

The philosophical influences in contemporary education are most frequently seen as rooted in a Western philosophical tradition whose contours became more and more clear since the seventeenth century. These influences now pervade the aims, goals, and curriculum initiatives found within much of contemporary education. It is without a doubt also the subtext of the discussions on education in Ontario. It is in conversation with - but also at times in conflict with - these philosophical influences that a Catholic philosophy of education is shaped. Although prone to generalization, here are some of the traits of this philosophical tradition as they apply to education.

- **emancipatory trait**

The main thrust of the modern philosophical tradition has been suspicion and critique. The suspicion concerns the use of power. The suspicion is directed towards the powerful institutions and traditions which hold authority over people without being able to justify their power. Since the seventeenth century whoever carries authority must legitimate their power before the court of reason. Hence the emphasis in our culture on critique: we demand to know the reasons. Historically this critique initiated movements committed to the “freeing” of Western civilization from the authority and the power vested in the Church, the Bible, the monarchy, tradition, patriarchy, and ultimately God. In the process, education in the West was wrested away from churches and became the domain of the nation state.

- **secular trait**

Even though the existence of God is not necessarily denied, God is not thought to make a difference one way or another to the practices of day-to-day living. God becomes one hypothesis alongside others to give meaning to existence. In a secular education the reference to God is made only in a historical, psychological or sociological context. A confessional acknowledgement of God is deemed inappropriate. It is seen as favouring one religious group over another. *The Common Curriculum* document, for example, makes no reference to religion as a vital element of education or of human existence.

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- **rational trait**

Human reason and human freedom are regarded as the ultimate basis of life. Although the hold of logical positivism has diminished, the ideal of rationalism to explain everything through reason still has much influence. Rationalism has led to the favouring of those disciplines in education which allow for a scientific approach often with the methods of the natural sciences as their ideal. Along these lines, what is to be known in education is transformed into an hypothesis which must be validated by data (experience) which is gathered in a variety of ways. Rationalism favours a technological/technocratic approach to resolve issues and problems. Human betterment is a result of human planning.

- **pragmatic trait**

In those areas where it is difficult to place rational controls, pragmatism tends to take hold. Hence, in the area of human action, morality, and behaviour, pragmatism proclaims that whatever works must be valid. The ethical field struggles to find a generally acceptable rationality for human behaviour. Right reason or practical reason can easily give way to majority opinion or crafty rhetoric. In North America pragmatism has become a strong force in the field of education. The pragmatic streak tends to make educational policy volatile. In our time education has become skills oriented, easily influenced by market forces, and determined by employment.

- **temporal trait**

The experience of time is quite unique. With the past no longer as a guide, there is a very strong thrust in our culture toward the future, towards a time when through human planning and technology the present ills will be solved. This hope in progress and for a utopia has been severely tested in this century. Trust in the capacity of reason and technology to create a better future for all is evaporating. There remains a tendency, such as in *The Common Curriculum* document, to keep the eyes on the future but a future perceived as a time of constant and unpredictable change. What once was perceived as progress is now experienced as a threat, where, in a Darwinian style, only the fittest (the technologically literate elite) will survive. What results is crisis education.

- **social trait**

Life in society is seen as based on the rights and interests of individuals. The state is the guarantor of the protection of these rights. Competition is valued as a primary drive particularly in the economic field (capitalism). Over time the Western democracies have developed a charter of

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human rights and freedoms that operate like a social contract binding individuals to live together in good order and right governance. Central among these rights and freedoms are equality, the right to one's own person, freedom from discrimination on the basis of religion, race, sex, and age. The emphasis is placed upon the individual. Social and communitary values as well as a sense of responsibility to the whole are more difficult to maintain.

This list of Western philosophical influences in contemporary education is, of course, incomplete. It needs to be nuanced by the particular circumstances of the different Western democracies. But such a list alerts us to the fact that all educational systems operate within a philosophical vision. In its choices for a philosophy of education, Ontario's public system has drawn on the philosophy of secular humanism because it seems to be part of a consensus to which the majority of people in the Province can subscribe. This philosophy is not likely to be explicitly stated as a curriculum item in educational systems at the elementary and secondary levels, but this does not mean that it is not the pervasive, unarticulated orientation of its educational policy. In fact, these traits are not discussed because they have gradually become commonly accepted as normative, as the foundations of a philosophy of public life. Interestingly enough, the present debate about the merits of a Catholic or confessional system of education in Ontario may well serve to create a greater awareness of the role which these traits play as value statements of what we are about as a people.

## **Features Of A Catholic Philosophy of Education**

### **• passing on living faith**

What then would be the thrust of a Catholic philosophy of education? On one hand, it can be seen as a passing on of a tradition of faith. Catholic education seeks to make explicit its beliefs and the appropriation of its tradition by making a reflection on faith a subject area in the curriculum. It is openly confessional in its approach to religious education and in the exigencies placed upon its teachers.

### **• committed to learning excellence**

On the other hand, a Catholic philosophy of education also takes seriously its mission to be a ferment in society. This means that the curriculum will be attentive to the ethos or understanding of human

existence as it is proclaimed by Christian revelation. This attentiveness will be deeply imbued with the desire to make a contribution to the wellbeing of all. At the level of cognitional theories or in its search for truth, goodness, and beauty a Catholic philosophy of education will wish to vie with the best that is available. If Christianity's role is to act as a transformer of culture, the second dimension of its educational mission will be to give form to the testimony of faith in the institutions of society. Catholic education wants to be recognized for learning excellence.

- **imbued with revealed wisdom**

But Catholic education is imbued by another wisdom. This is a wisdom that is not innate but found in divine revelation. It is a wisdom that comes as a gift and as a promise. When it educates to citizenship, it wants to have this citizenship respond as well to this revealed wisdom. It wants this other voice to be heard not only in its religious education but also in other program areas and in the school community at large.

- **in search of the common good**

According to Bernard Lonergan in his *Topics in Education*<sup>3</sup>, differences in philosophies of education lie in the particular goods they pursue. A philosophy of education of any stripe, he says, is formed by a common schema. All education aims at obtaining a good. But this good is defined, he adds, in the face of a perceived lack, limit or evil (illiteracy, poverty, lack of skills, etc.). Education is the deliberate process whereby societies work towards obtaining these goods (particular goods, the good of order, values) in the full awareness of the obstacles, the deprivations of human society, the negative forces, the limitations of life and resources, etc. In the 1990s, education cannot underestimate the need for such awareness.

For example, we need only look at the popular culture of our youth on television, in videos, movies, and in song to notice how they are affected by the experience of family conflict, marriage break-up, fear of the future, death, illness, poverty, unemployment, meaninglessness and violence. A philosophy of education ought to determine, therefore, not only what learning theories, subject areas, and teacher training ought to be pursued but also the larger good to be aimed at and the evils to be kept at bay. If a philosophy of education is to be of service to these young, it needs to provide a message of hope for a fuller and better life.

Differences in philosophies of education are, at heart, differences in perceptions of the good and of the relationship of the good with its

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opposite, the evils or negative consequences which seem to invade whatever we undertake. The Judea-Christian tradition reflects an elaborate account of the presence and interaction of good and evil in the midst of human life.

### • **part of a history of salvation**

Traditionally, Christianity has presented an account of salvation which contained a story of our origin with God in a good universe, a story of an origin of a fault (sin) which accompanied and constantly threatened the good creation and a story of a gracious initiative by God in the person of Jesus Christ which in its power far exceeds the force of sin over human life. This story of creation, sin, and redemption with all its ramifications and variations underlies the Christian story of hope and ought to underlie the basic thrust of its philosophies of education. Those who have studied Western literature have been struck how this Christian myth has pervaded most of our cultural artifacts. Northrop Frye called it the code whereby we can decipher our culture.<sup>4</sup> The good sought in a Catholic philosophy of education must be permeated by the hope held out to us by this story of salvation. This it will do not only in religious education but also in the other subject areas as, well as in the effort to bring the vision and dream of God's rule to every facet of Catholic education.

These features of a Catholic philosophy of education provide the framework from which to address the distinctive theological context operative in Catholic schools.

### **Discussion Questions**

1. Considering the philosophical traits underlying contemporary education, how would a Catholic philosophy of education be different? Which aspects can it espouse? Which features are more problematic?
2. How would you define the good(s) for which education ought to strive? What can education hope to achieve at the personal, economic, social, political or religious level? Or, to approach it from a negative side, what evils can it help avoid?
3. What is the hope which you wish to leave with your students? Does the curriculum succeed in supporting or activating this hope? If not, what appears to you to be the underlying message we give to students? What changes would be helpful?

# Ontario Catholic Education: Response to the Philosophical Context

## A Catholic Philosophy of Education

In what Catholic philosopher Charles Taylor has called a “Secular Age,” a sound Catholic philosophy of education is critical to fulfilling the mission of Catholic schools.

Philosophy is about making sense of the world we experience. A Catholic philosophy of education helps us make sense out of what actually goes on in Catholic schools, not simply from a doctrinal perspective, but in the lived context of the political, economic, and cultural factors that influence how education is viewed and valued in today’s society. Over the years we have witnessed a succession of curriculum revisions and redesigns in Ontario’s schools. Government mandated, they often embody implicit assumptions about the aims and scope of education, the values that schools should instill in their students, and the content and methods to make this happen. Some of these assumptions are based on political advantage, economic outcomes, or societal trends. Others reflect the bias of competing and often contradictory educational theories. In this context, curriculum usually refers to the content of a course, its delivery and how outcomes are measured.

Religious educator Maria Harris reminds us that curriculum goes beyond the content of individual courses and includes all the factors of school life that impact on what a student learns and values. When we understand curriculum as the whole “course” of school life, we are prompted to explore what motivates us to do what we are doing. We begin to ask questions that bring us to the core of our professional identity and are vital for understanding the distinctive identity of Catholic schools.

The discussion of philosophy and education in this section provides words and themes that lead to insight into how we see the world and how that worldview advances or undermines the promise Catholic education makes to our students, our parishes, and our communities. Reflecting on a Catholic philosophy of education, educators come to recognize themselves and their own faith struggles. This kind of thinking is needed to make a difference in the practice of Catholic education.

Practice is the life of philosophy. A Catholic philosophy of education comes to life when it examines what is happening in Catholic schools. Canadian Jesuit Bernard Lonergan reminds us that philosophy is not a top-down process that appeals to dogmatic authority.



*It is, rather, a process of paying attention to experience, asking probing questions, testing our first responses, and leading to responsible decisions and actions.*



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In matters of curriculum, philosophy serves an operative, rather than ideological purpose. The movement between philosophy and life is reciprocal. A Catholic philosophy of education should not be approached as a set of rules or principles that must be applied or used to measure and evaluate our professional behaviour. Instead, starting from what is happening, philosophy provides a critical lens for understanding who we are and what we are doing as educators in Catholic schools.

## **QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION**

### **Educators**

How do I express Catholic beliefs and values in my work as a Catholic school educator? Do I need any support to help me further my understanding of the Catholic faith and what it means to be a Catholic educator? Where can I look for this support?

### **Curriculum Developers/Supporters**

How will our curriculum reflect a Catholic philosophy of education, even as we work with curriculum outcomes required by the Ministry of Education? What opportunities are there to incorporate features of Catholic philosophy, such as “passing on living faith” or “in search of the common good”, in the learning content and practices of the curriculum we develop and support?

### **System Leaders**

In 1993 Ontario’s Catholic Bishops reminded trustees and senior administrators that the most basic challenge they face is “to develop further and to articulate a Catholic philosophy of education for our times.”<sup>i</sup> Can we articulate our Catholic philosophy? How does it shape our approach to governance and leadership as we negotiate the sometimes conflicting public expectations of schooling in Ontario today?

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<sup>i</sup> Assembly of Catholic Bishops of Ontario, (1993), page 1, *Fulfilling the Promise*.

# Ontario Catholic Education: Its Theological Context

The features of a Catholic philosophy of education operate within a theological framework integrally linked to the unique principles of Catholicism. This framework is an outline of those concepts which we believe gives meaning to our human existence and which forms our Catholic identity. This framework also defines and sustains the Catholic character of education in Catholic schools. This theological framework has four major identifiable characteristics:

- its faith is Christ-centred
- its anthropology is incarnational
- its worldview is sacramental
- its sense of community is ecclesial

## • its faith is Christ-centred

A basic human value that permeates the structure and function of every Catholic school is that life is not merely about survival, it is about being fully alive. We can only be fully alive when we live to our full human potential, and, as Catholics, we believe that this can only happen when we accept the invitation to follow Jesus Christ. This personal invitation to follow Christ is the mainstay of our religious tradition. Our tradition discloses to us that when Jesus invited people to follow him, he gave them one single directive: Love one another as I have loved you, and love your neighbour as yourself. Our invitation to follow Jesus is nothing less than an invitation to change the world by developing and living out a Christian worldview. And we are encouraged and strengthened to accept this radical invitation by the grace of God in the Spirit of Jesus Christ. When Jesus invites us, he promises to remain amongst us. He is present with us always, but especially when we pray and worship together as a believing community in Jesus' name.

In accepting this invitation, Catholic schools seek to transform the world according to the way of love. Essentially, it is the very presence of Jesus Christ that incarnates Catholic schools. Catholic schools came into existence, and continue to exist, because they are places where

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*The story is not simply told and known, but enlivened and lived out in daily praxis.*

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people can hear and accept the invitation to follow Jesus Christ. Thus, the most basic principle of Catholic schools is to teach about Jesus Christ.

When we do this, we teach that our Catholic tradition is a unity that stretches from the believers of Israel to believers of the present age. Our tradition is the entire narrative that tells the story of the people of Israel; the story of those believers who were the first witnesses to the revelation of God in the person and preaching of Jesus Christ; the story of those believers after the Risen Jesus who continued to develop their understanding of Jesus, and of their attempts to articulate this belief and to live their lives accordingly; and, finally, the story of the subsequent living of this tradition in the community of Christian believers today.

While this story is always centred on the self-revelation of God in the person of Jesus Christ, it is not simply repeated, but re-enacted and re-appropriated by each new generation of believers. The story is not simply told and known, but enlivened and lived out in daily praxis.

It is the story of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, as revealed to us in the New Testament, that is central to our Catholic tradition. It is this Catholic tradition, in which Jesus Christ is normative, that must be taught, lived, and passed on in every Catholic school.

- **its anthropology is incarnational**

The self-revelation of God in Jesus Christ is the love of God turned toward us in our human existence. This graced nature of the love of God turning toward us is the central element in the Christian understanding of the human person. Its foundational principle is that we are all created in the image and likeness of God, and are, thus, essentially more good than evil.

When students in Catholic schools hear about this revelation in Jesus Christ, they learn that Jesus Christ, in his Incarnation, transformed human life and dignity. They gain a deeper insight into an appreciation of their rights and responsibilities, and they realize that their dignity is not just a human right, but one that is grounded in God's relationship with every human person. Catholic schools are privileged places where students can develop a strong sense of their human dignity and freedom in relationship to God.

Working with these anthropological principles, Catholic schools affirm this basic goodness in their students and ceaselessly promote their dignity and fundamental rights. They provide an education that helps students to live responsibly, with the help of God's grace, and encourage students to live their graced lives in the service of, and for the well-being of others.

In our Christ-centredness, we believe that in the self-revelation of God in Jesus Christ the grace of God is turned toward us to nurture and strengthen our life and dignity. The whole of the Catholic school environment should be permeated with this life-affirming anthropology, and the essence of the curriculum should be to teach that each person is created and loved by God in the continued presence of Jesus Christ.

- **its worldview is sacramental**

Our life-affirming anthropology that permeates all aspects of the Christian life is what inspires a sacramentality that is able to see God in all things. Sacramentality is a major theological focus of Catholicism, and there is no other specific characteristic that is more central to its identity and function.

The seven sacraments are our most characteristic instances of this principle of sacramentality, in which we believe that the Risen Jesus is present to us through the Holy Spirit. But even these mediations between God and ourselves are of the ordinary structure of our lives: bread, wine, oil, all brought together in the celebration of love in our church community.

Thus, the practice of sacramentality reflects the central Catholic conviction that we encounter the presence and grace of God through everything in the ordinary encounters of our lives. To be aware of this presence of God in all things is to be imbued with a sacramental consciousness. A sacramental consciousness engages the imagination of believers as it stirs us to imagine what ought to be and what can be. It helps us, through grace, to have a glimpse of what God wills for all of humanity. In nurturing our imagination with the vision of God's reign, a sacramental consciousness calls us to live a life of faith that brings justice to all of creation; a justice that enlivens the vision that all of God's creation will live to the fullest of its potential. It is such a sacramental consciousness that enables believers to oppose those structures that deny the dignity and freedom of the human person.

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*Everything that is taught and lived in a Catholic school must encourage a love and respect for all of creation.*

*As learners, Catholic students are encouraged by the community to cultivate their intellectual and aesthetic potentialities; as believers, they are inspired to grow in faith in the presence of Jesus Christ.*

It is our sacramental consciousness that sustains our belief that the presence and grace of God is alive in all of creation, and the direct intention of forming students in a sacramental consciousness is, therefore, one of the distinctive qualities of Catholic education. Everything that is taught and lived in a Catholic school must encourage a love and respect for all of creation.

- **its sense of community is ecclesial**

Because it is based on a relationship with God and with all of creation, this sacramental consciousness is celebrated, above all, in community. The principle of sacramentality points to the role of the church community as the sacrament of Christ's presence in the world. While the church community is regarded as the locus in which the principle of sacramentality operates, our communal aspect of Catholicism is also embodied in the Catholic school.

In Catholic schools there is a strong emphasis placed on the communal nature of human existence. This is based on the fundamental principle that we find our true identity only in the structure of our relationships with others. We are created for each other, in order to love and to serve one another. This communal nature combines the other major Catholic characteristics of Christ-centredness, anthropology, and sacramentality. Created in the image of God, and invited to follow Jesus Christ, our anthropology suggests that we have a natural affinity for relationships. Imbued with the grace of God and celebrated in sacrament, our communal structures can be instruments of God's grace.

### **Learning and Believing in Catholic Schools**

The communal dimension of Catholic schools is embodied in two interconnected ways: learning and believing. Catholic schools are both places of learning and places of believing. Thus, they are both a public community, that is, a community of learners, and an ecclesial community, that is, a community of believers. This twofold dimension of learning and believing contributes to the integration of faith, life, and culture. As learners, Catholic students are encouraged by the community to cultivate their intellectual and aesthetic potentialities; as believers, they are inspired to grow in faith in the presence of Jesus Christ.

This twofold dimension also points to the reason why Catholic schools were brought into existence in the first place. Catholic schools are not

primarily a social arrangement; they are primarily a spiritual arrangement, born of the Holy Spirit, with a common vision of the meaning of life, and brought into existence by believers. The Catholic school is one of the cultural expressions of the vision of life for which the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ is normative.

But while brought into existence by believers, our Catholic schools, and our Catholic tradition, have a long-standing commitment to rationality. Learning and believing are united in this commitment to human reason as it is brought to bear on our belief structure. It is in combining these two attributes of learning and believing that Catholic education can remain faithful to its tradition while fulfilling its public mandate.

In its teaching, the Catholic school does not tell people what to think, but develops in students the habit of critical reflection. Students are taught that there is a responsibility attached to knowledge. They are encouraged to develop a trust in their own discernment as moral agents. What students know and what they believe are synthesized, and those who teach and nurture this synthesis witness to its importance in their own intentions to link faith and life. In this way, Catholic schools intentionally inform and form the very being of their students. Knowledge is never reduced to 'know-how' for the sake of productivity, and a person's knowing is never severed from his or her being.

Two major consequences result from this twofold dimension of Catholic schools. First of all, as a public community, the Catholic school educates its students in a social responsibility that is counter to the mores of individualism and social indifference that permeate much of our culture. Students are encouraged to contribute to the common good.

Secondly, as an ecclesial community, the Catholic school emphasizes its close association and partnership with the local parish, and, consequently, links itself to the church operating throughout the world. But it also emphasizes its way of being a Catholic faith community within itself. While a Catholic school is not a parish, its very nature and purpose calls it to be a community of Christian faith. It encourages, in an educational way, the mission of God's reign in Jesus Christ. And, as Thomas Groome points out, in fulfilling this responsibility the Catholic school embodies the four main tasks of the Christian community:

to teach, preach, and evangelize the Word of God in scripture and tradition (kerygma); to Witness as a community of faith, hope and love in the world (koinonia); to Worship God in prayer and communal liturgy (leitourgia); and to care for human Welfare (diakonia).<sup>5</sup>

*Catholic schools intentionally inform and form the very being of their students. Knowledge is never reduced to 'know-how' for the sake of productivity, and a person's knowing is never severed from his or her being.*

*While a Catholic school is not a parish, its very nature and purpose calls it to be a community of Christian faith.*

These four main tasks of Word, Witness, Worship, and Welfare, permeate the entire life and curriculum of the Catholic school community.

Ultimately, we believe that we find our true identity only in the structures of our relationships with others, and that this manifests itself above all in the Christian community. Thus, in nurturing both the learning and believing dimension of its students, the Catholic school can encourage the whole person in a process of informing and forming personal identity in a combination of their intellectual, aesthetic, relational, and spiritual potentialities.

### **The Mandate of Catholic Schools**

In summary, our theology teaches us that the mission of God's reign as revealed in Jesus Christ is central to our Catholic tradition, and that this self-revelation of God in Jesus is turned toward us in grace. It also teaches us that the grace of God is fully alive in the sacramental presence of all creation, and that we exist in this graced communal nature of creation in order to accept the radical invitation to follow Jesus Christ, and, thus, to transform the world in which we live.

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.

Obviously, then, it is not simply enough to insert these theological characteristics abstractly into existing curriculum. They are the *raison d'être* of our Catholic educational system, and must permeate every thing that we do in our Catholic schools.

### **Discussion Questions**

1. What is the connection between the invitation to follow Jesus and the pursuit of academic excellence in Catholic schools?
2. What evidence is there that our Catholic schools are permeated with a life-affirming anthropology?
3. What does it mean to have a 'sacramental consciousness'?
4. In what ways can we create a community of Word, Witness, Worship, and Welfare in our Catholic schools?

# Ontario Catholic Education: Response to the Theological Context

In 1996, Dr. Margaret Lavin wrote the chapter on theological context in Catholic education. Twenty-five years later that theological framework continues to inform Catholic identity. It assists in defining and sustaining the Catholic character of education in Catholic schools. The four theological characteristics are foundational to any dialogue and decision making about Catholic curriculum. A Christ-centered faith, incarnational anthropology, sacramental world view and ecclesial community are vital components to ensure curriculum remains grounded in faith as it adjusts to a constantly changing global context.

In 2008, James Mulligan, CSC challenged Catholic educators with a litmus test of how Catholic education would survive in a secular culture. “Are there a sufficient number of Catholic educators....who know the Catholic Christian story? Is there a core group of Catholic educators who see their work as living out their baptismal commitment and are able to tell that story, sharing their faith with students?” His challenge to Catholic educators to shape the direction and vision of their school is dependent on their ability to ensure that they are grounded in a theology that is articulated and demonstrated in their teaching.

Society has changed significantly in last twenty-five years. Issues such as the environment and climate change, changes in family structures, the raising of voices and calls for justice from and in solidarity with marginalized communities, communities of colour, and Indigenous communities, and a renewed attention to anti-discrimination all have to be addressed through the lens of the theology and faith of the learning community. Catholic education is meant to be holistic in a way that integrates experience, reflection and action. This is done by incorporating current issues within a framework of theology that enriches the learner and cultivates their intellectual potential.

Essential to the passing on of faith is the understanding that a personal relationship with Jesus is fundamental to understanding the Christian story. Christian anthropology demonstrates how we become holy through active participation in the community. A sacramental consciousness is central to faith as it calls the learner to see ‘God in all things’ and encourages a love and respect for all creation.

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*Catholic education is meant to be holistic in a way that integrates experience, reflection and action.*

We are called to love and serve one another. The community gathers in and for the name of God in a common faith and common mission that reflects the characteristics of Catholic theology. This theology outlined in “Curriculum Matters” informs a response to the numerous challenging issues in society today. This theology, when applied, emphasizes the development of people of dignity and freedom created in the image and likeness of God. “What we believe, is what we teach. We can do no other.”<sup>ii</sup>

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i James T. Mulligan, CSC, (2008) “Reflections on the Paradigm Shift Affecting Catholic Education in Ontario: A Work in Progress.”

ii Patricia O'Reilly & Ralph Bertram, (2009), page 7, What We Believe Practical Theology for Teachers Study Guide” Novalis Publishing.

## QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

### **Educators**

How does my classroom (be it a physical or virtual place of encounter with students) reflect Catholic beliefs and practices, such as the role and importance of Jesus Christ, the sacraments, the liturgical year, etc.?

### **Curriculum Developers/Supporters**

How will characteristics of Catholic theology be evident in the curriculum? What opportunities to explore our Christ-centered faith would fit appropriately with the content and activities in this subject or course?

### **System Leaders**

How is continual conversion evident in our school board? How are we fulfilling our role as caretakers of the life-giving Christian story?



# Ontario Catholic Education: Its Curricular Context

If there is any one place where the philosophy of Catholic education and the theological framework of Catholic schools should be clearly visible, it is in the area of curriculum. And yet, no state of affairs within contemporary education seems to be more confusing.

This confusion stems from many sources - from multiple definitions as to what curriculum is, to questions over whose responsible for its review, design and implementation, to disagreements over its organization and content. In many ways, the disarray surrounding the various opinions about the nature and purpose of curriculum seems to mirror the present turmoil that exists within the educational world itself.

Trying to determine the Catholic character of curriculum for schools therefore, is not always easy. Indeed, it seems that Catholic educators are often faced with a double burden, that of writing programs and producing curriculum materials for an educational field in the midst of dramatic change as well as determining what makes this curriculum Catholic and, therefore, distinct from that of other schools.

To that end, the following curriculum guidelines are offered to educators in the hope that it brings some clarity and understanding to the task of producing materials and resources for Catholic schools.

## **1. Establish the Catholic “terms of reference” of the curriculum task**

One of the first steps in any curriculum writing process is to establish the task’s “terms of reference”. Terms of reference refers to the purpose and scope of the task; it defines the framework or parameters within which the work is to be conceived. Indeed, it determines the very orientation of the curriculum’s content.

Although this step appears to be an obvious one, it is not uncommon for educators to find themselves operating from certain assumptions

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about these terms only to discover later on that these assumptions were unfounded and all their work has been for naught.

This is especially true when educators are asked to include “Catholic” terms of reference, concepts such as “Catholicity”, “gospel values”, or “the religious dimension of learning”. Too often the assumption is made that these terms are self-explanatory and if they are placed within the curriculum resource their use alone brings credibility to the distinctive nature of Catholic schools.

The difficulty with such a view is twofold: 1) it assumes that these terms are normally part of the “shoptalk” of educators, that all educators know exactly what they mean and can be readily applied to curriculum delivery; and 2) it assumes that the Catholic character of curriculum is “value-added”; it can be added on to the process of curriculum writing by looking for entry points where the words “catholic” or “gospel values” or ‘Jesus” can be inserted. Both assumptions undermine the very integrity of curriculum writing for Catholic schools and often lead to the production of resources that appear Catholic in name only.

A far better approach is to determine at the outset whether the references to the Catholic character of the curriculum process fits best in reference to what might be called curriculum “separation”, “permeation”, or “integration”. Once this is known, the task takes on a clearer focus.

#### • **Separation: A Subject-Specific Task**

Curriculum separation refers to curriculum and program development where the study of religion or religious experience functions as a separate area of learning. For that reason, the religious dimension of learning is explicitly defined as a curriculum framework. Its primary goal is the development of religious literacy and formation and the incentive to produce such explicit religious material comes from within the Catholic community itself.

As well, this approach works from an understanding of curriculum consistent with conventional usage, namely, as a course of study. Religion is treated as an area of learning similar to other academic disciplines. It has its own curriculum materials, content, learning outcomes, teaching/learning strategies, and evaluation process.

One can find a Canadian example of this approach in the *Born of the Spirit* series produced by the National Office of Religious Education.

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Educators who work on this series know from its outset that the terms of reference for curriculum writing are explicitly religious. The content, for example, includes resources such as Sacred Scripture, liturgical tradition, and *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*. Likewise, teaching/learning strategies allow for the organization of student experiences based on the Catholic character of religious formation. Where appropriate, learning forms from other disciplines (i.e. art, drama, history) are used as well, a practice which gives credibility to the term “religion across the curriculum”.

When separation is the task, the Catholic character of curriculum writing poses less of a challenge. Since Catholic schools teach religion, building curriculum materials that assist in the development of religious literacy and formation makes eminent sense. One would expect to discover resources for the prayer life of elementary schools, text books and multimedia resources in secondary schools on such topics as World Religions, and support documents for Catholic educators on the use of the Church’s social teachings within the classroom.

In many ways, the same expectations as to the explicit use of religious terms and references applies to the task of curriculum permeation as well.

#### • **Permeation: A School-Wide Task**

Permeation refers to curriculum materials that address the role of the Catholic school’s culture and its communal features in the process of learning. In this case, curriculum is no longer defined in the narrow sense of a course of study but as the educational experiences planned and guided by the school. It recognizes that learning takes place beyond the classroom and focuses attention on the social environment of the school as essential to its curriculum.

It also acknowledges the importance of a school’s culture in determining “the core beliefs, values, traditions, and symbols which provide meaning to the school community and which shapes the lives of students, staff and parents.”<sup>6</sup> Often, this culture is most tangible in the ethos of the school, in the school’s atmosphere and spirit and in the quality of relationships that exist between teachers/students, parents/staff.

The task of curriculum permeation is primarily confessional; it describes the various ways in which the Catholic character of the school’s

*Permeation refers to curriculum materials that address the role of the Catholic school’s culture and its communal features in the process of learning.*

culture and community permeates the learning experiences of the students. It identifies the connection between faith and life, church and school, learning and the call to community service and ministry in Jesus' name.

Features of the school's curriculum that fall under these terms of reference include: quality and role of pastoral care within the school, parish and school religious celebrations, the place of evangelization within the school, the nurturing of student/staff/parent spirituality, outreach programs to the wider community, and the promotion of a holistic vision of life.

What makes the task of writing for permeation similar to that of separation is its explicit religious framework. Although curriculum is defined within broader terms and the task is now school-wide rather than subject-specific, the case still remains that the initiative to address the Catholic character of a school's culture and community often originates within the Catholic community itself.

Likewise, as curriculum, the school's social environment acts as a powerful influence in the learning of what it means to be Catholic. To that end, teachers are at liberty to use Church publications, resources, and references in their development of programs and materials for the purpose of school renewal and transformation. Such is not the case, however, for curriculum integration.

#### • **Integration: A Cross-Curricular Task**

This curriculum task is more difficult for two reasons. First, integration shifts the construction and delivery of curriculum away from subject matter to the connections, relationships, and life problems that exist within an increasingly complex and interdependent world. Broad areas of study are brought together from the traditional subjects to address themes, skills, and role performances in a meaningful way. Learning occurs in a holistic fashion and the curriculum is described as an interdisciplinary or transdisciplinary experience.

Likewise, integration shifts or broadens the definition of curriculum to include the knowledge, values and skills that bring about a critical perspective on social and global issues. Curriculum now functions in a transformative way, as a vehicle for personal and social change based on the principles of justice and the view of learner as agent-of-change.

*As curriculum, the school's social environment acts as a powerful influence in the learning of what it means to be Catholic.*

The difficulty such shifts create is primarily one of curriculum “fit”. With few precedents to choose from and few reference points to consider, curriculum writers seldom know when their attempts at integration are truly integral to the task and when they are superimposed, a situation that creates the pretense of integration but little more. In other words, there is little in the way of criteria to determine whether the “fit” with various subjects is an authentic one.

This temptation to “superimpose” often arises when curriculum writers disregard one of the fundamental principles of Catholic anthropology, namely, the importance of human reason as a means of understanding reality in all its forms. The mind and its capacity for rational analysis are seen as gifts from God by which reality can be scrutinized and the divine and human more deeply understood.

Problems arise when religious concepts and ideas are forced into subject areas in the name of integration with little regard for the integrity of the academic discipline itself. To develop a unit theme based on “journeys” from the different program areas of language, self and society, and religion allows for an authentic curriculum fit. To state, explain, and use the Pythagorean Theorem and then instruct teachers to tell their students that Pythagoras was interested in religion does not.

Within Catholic schools, therefore, there is no need for understanding or thinking to be at odds with faith. There is no need for a “cognitive split” between the religious dimension of learning and subject areas such as science and math, literature and the arts. Although there is no such thing as Catholic math for instance, the Catholic vision of human knowledge proclaims that all truth leads ultimately to the knowledge of God; the point being that Christian intelligence is necessary for both faith and cognitive skill development. What is critical, therefore, is that efforts to produce curriculum integration search for an authentic fit between the knowledge, values, and skills of the program areas in question with that of religious dimension of learning so that these connections do not appear as an add-on.

This question of authentic fit leads to the second reason why integration is more difficult than either separation and permeation, namely, the lack of an explicit religious framework from which to approach the curriculum. Most subject areas avoid religious references entirely. They are truly secular in their worldview and knowledge; if religion is mentioned at all, it is usually as an historical reference or as a personal preference.

*Problems arise when religious concepts and ideas are forced into subject areas in the name of integration with little regard for the integrity of the academic discipline itself.*

*What is critical, therefore, is that efforts to produce curriculum integration search for an authentic fit.*

*Curriculum integration carries within it the capacity to develop curriculum that visibly demonstrates the Catholic character of learning.*

The same can be said about the religious dimension of learning. In the past, little time and effort has been given to the task of discovering the relationship between such areas as religion and science, religion and social studies, religion and business.

For Catholic teachers involved in curriculum integration, therefore, there is an absence of ready-made references that connect a religious worldview with a theme or comprehensive life problem. Consequently, even when the fit is authentic, there is no guarantee that religious references exist for curriculum inclusion.

In some cases, it may only be a question of recognizing that the opportunity for integration has always been there but never developed and now can be. In others however, the forging of curriculum connections between religion and other subject areas will entail further research and development.

At present, curriculum integration carries within it the capacity to develop curriculum that visibly demonstrates the Catholic character of learning but also the temptation to create cross-curricular connections that are superficial, trivial, and contain only a veneer of this character. The following guidelines provide two examples of how to prevent such occurrences.

## **2. Look for pathways to God in existing program areas**

The first is theological in its orientation. It asks curriculum writers to consider whether there is anything in their task that allows for the discovery of God as part of the learning dynamic.

Theology tells us that God's works through the material realities of creation, historical events, and the lives of persons. This sacramental sensibility enables us to recognize the divine in our midst. Attention to this sacred order is critical to the Catholic character of the curriculum.

Various program areas act as natural pathways to this sacred order, especially in their capacity to use religious symbol, language, and vocation.

The arts, for example, are a central means of human expression and creativity. Music and dance, drama and the visual arts are more than just artistic forms; they are also conduits of religious feelings, imagination and understanding. Their use of religious symbol and their capacity

to evoke religious meaning from material creation ensure their value as a pathway to the sacred.

The same can be said of language. Through poetry and narrative, drama and media, God's creative and liberating actions are revealed to each generation in both spoken and written forms. Language serves not only as the pathway of communication between people but as the primary form of encounter between God and humanity as well.

And finally, vocation raises the question of purpose (i.e. what is it that God wants me to do with my life?). Self and Society is one program area, for instance, that attempts to address this question through its exploration of relationships with family and peers, its themes of personal and social change, and its investigation of different social, political, and economic systems.

Likewise, its focus on life and career skills leads students to gradually inquire as to their role in society. These inquiries provide ample opportunity for guidance and discussion of future life choices and the possibility of a vocation to contribute to human wellbeing through service in God's name.

When theological pathways like these are intentionally woven into existing program areas, then the Catholic character of the curriculum becomes more visible.

### **3. Embed the moral framework of Catholicism into the curriculum whenever possible**

The second draws attention to the moral dimension of curriculum. It operates from the premise that curriculum is never "values" neutral; that it is a product of someone's reasoning and set of beliefs.

Consequently, it is imperative that the curriculum of Catholic schools reflect the teachings and values found within the moral framework of Catholicism. This can be achieved in any one of three ways.

First, embed the church's moral teachings directly into the instructional curriculum of the school, especially in areas that involve learning about human dignity, sexuality, world hunger, reproductive technologies, peace and justice. In this way, the moral teaching and values of the church are part of the explicit curriculum of the school.

*It operates from the premise that curriculum is never "values" neutral; that it is a product of someone's reasoning and set of beliefs.*

*The values that shape the curriculum proceed from a moral framework. When this framework originates within the moral tradition of Catholicism, the Catholic character of the curriculum becomes clearer.*

Second, embed a consistent “ethic of life” across the curriculum. Through its culture and ethos, the school fosters the development of a “community of conscience” where the principle to protect and cherish all human life and all creation is at the core of the school’s vision and mission statement. In this way, the moral teachings of the church are part of the curriculum of the school by what it values.

And thirdly, the co-curricular activities of the school (i.e food drives, breakfast programs, peer ministry) provide opportunities for moral witness through assistance and service to the poor, the suffering, and those in need. In this way, the moral imperatives of discipleship are embedded into the school’s curriculum through its contribution to the common good.

In each instance, the values that shape the curriculum proceed from a moral framework. When this framework originates within the moral tradition of Catholicism, the Catholic character of the curriculum becomes clearer.

The task of ensuring the Catholic character of a school’s curriculum lies with those within the educational community who take on the responsibility to develop resources and materials for use within program areas.

### **Discussion Questions**

1. What relationship do you think ought to exist between religious education as a subject area and the rest of the curriculum?
2. What examples would you cite from your teaching experience of curriculum permeation and integration?
3. How should curriculum materials and resources be developed for Catholic schools? What role can the classroom practitioner play in this process?

# Ontario Catholic Education: Response to the Curricular Context

Curriculum continues to be critical to the authentic delivery of a Catholic education. The Ontario curriculum has undergone many iterations over the past twenty-five years. As a Catholic community, we have been called to respond to these changes, along with accelerating globalization, environmental challenges, technological advancements, and many societal pressures that must be addressed authentically and distinctively in our Catholic schools. Faced with these opportunities and challenges, the Catholic educational community continues to respond to the need to develop high quality Catholic curriculum. This has been undertaken as a shared responsibility of the many Catholic partners collaborating to create these rich resources. The Institute for Catholic Education's development of the Ontario Catholic School Graduate Expectations (OCSGEs), as well as the creation of the Catholic Curriculum Corporations (CCC, EOCCC), provide the framework and networks to ensure that curriculum continues to remain relevant and true to the gospel values. As stated in *Renewing the Promise*, "Just as all the parts must work together to ensure a healthy body, so too must all the educational partners collaborate and rely upon one another in order to ensure that Catholic education remains healthy and strong."<sup>i</sup>

When presented with curriculum guidelines, we were asked to begin by establishing the Catholic "terms of reference" of the curriculum task, which can be that of separation, permeation or integration. Curriculum separation, or the distinct teaching of Religion and Family Life, has been supported through the development of the Ontario Catholic Elementary and Secondary Religious Education Curriculum Policy Documents, and the Family Life Education Policy Document, with the corresponding resources, both print and digital, that accompany these documents. The permeation, or school-wide task of addressing the Catholic character of the school community continues to be evident in our schools' environments through endeavours such as social justice and social entrepreneurship rooted in gospel values, pastoral care, community service, mission trips, partnerships with First Nations, Métis and Inuit communities, and environmental stewardship. Through a deep learning approach in all curriculum areas, the integration or cross-curricular approach can find natural and authentic connections to the global competencies and Catholic Social Teachings. A common language used as a framework for curriculum development and implementation found in the OCSGEs continues to support the integration of Catholic values throughout all curriculum areas, supporting the task to create authentic connections across all subject areas.

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“*Through a deep learning approach in all curriculum areas, the integration or cross-curricular approach can find natural and authentic connections to the global competencies and Catholic Social Teachings.*”

The following statement that concludes the original chapter still rings true: “The task of ensuring the Catholic character of a school’s curriculum lies with those within the educational community who take on the responsibility to develop resources and materials for use within program areas”. That task has been taken up with vision and purpose by the partners in Catholic education and is brought to life each day in our schools by dedicated faith-filled educators who accompany our students on their journey to become “discerning believers, effective communicators, reflective, creative and holistic thinkers, self-directed, responsible, lifelong learners, collaborative contributors, caring family members and responsible citizens”. (OCSGEs)

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i Assembly of Catholic Bishops of Ontario, (2018), page 9, “*Renewing the Promise: A Pastoral Letter for Catholic Education*”

## QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

### **Educators**

How do my pedagogical practices provide opportunities for all learning to be rooted in faith, supporting the development of students’ knowledge, skills, values, attitudes and actions in their journey to become Ontario Catholic School Graduates?

### **Curriculum Developers/Supporters**

What steps do we take to support school leaders and educators in the delivery of an authentic Catholic curriculum through both the distinct teaching of the religious education and family life curriculum as well as embedding faith in all curriculum areas?

### **System Leaders**

How do our strategic and improvement planning processes address the Catholic character of the curriculum, especially as it relates to the school-wide task of ensuring the Catholic identity of the schools in our district?



# Ontario Catholic Education: Contextualizing Curriculum

As we have seen so far, Catholic education today finds itself situated in the midst of dramatic change. Roman Catholics recognize that there is a critical need for Catholic education in Ontario to articulate more clearly its philosophical, theological and curricular contexts for learning.

We know that our philosophy is grounded in the gospel vision and life of Jesus Christ and is characterized by the distinctive theological foundations of the Roman Catholic tradition which attempt to elucidate this vision. As Catholic educators in Ontario, we realize that our philosophy and theological framework of Catholic education must be embodied in our entire way of living. While they must characterize every fibre of our existence, we realize that they must be particularly recognizable in the programs and curriculum of our Catholic schools.

Currently, one of the key tasks assigned to educators in Ontario by the Ministry of Education and Training is the development and implementation of educational programs which “meet the learning needs of a changing society.”<sup>7</sup> The Ministry notes that the need for effective renewal, assessment, and evaluation is of utmost concern to all “educators, parents, students, and other community members” who genuinely seek “to provide our children with the education that will best equip them to live in a complex and changing world.”<sup>8</sup>

A similar challenge was voiced several decades ago to Roman Catholic education by Vatican II when it called the people of God to adapt the gospel to meet “the signs of the times.” More recently, the Bishops of Ontario have encouraged educators to develop curriculum which is specific to Catholic schools. Such curriculum, they propose, does not limit religious education to single courses but makes the entire educational process a religious activity whereby faith can infuse every subject and aspect of the curriculum.<sup>9</sup>

We have examined in the previous section ways in which we can establish the Catholic character of our curriculum through methods of curriculum separation, permeation, or integration; through the theo-

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logical orientation of existing programs; and through conscious attention to the moral dimension of any learning experience. As in all good program design, therefore, Catholic education must ensure that its programs are developed to meet the needs of students. We must know where students are and where we want them to be. Good education creates meaningful and effective ways to help students make this journey. This is particularly important in light of “the present cultural context within which Catholic education takes place.”<sup>10</sup> The primary goal of Catholic education is to invite students into the fullness of the Mystery of faith in God’s love for them as present in Jesus Christ and as celebrated in the Catholic community. This poses a special challenge to Catholic educators to be apostolic witnesses and living examples of all they teach.

*The vision of education in Catholic schools in Ontario, therefore, includes more than what is outlined in The Common Curriculum.*

*The Bishops of Ontario note that at this moment of our history as a believing community the leadership of Catholic schools is clearly in the hands of lay people.*

The vision of education in Catholic schools in Ontario, therefore, includes more than what is outlined in *The Common Curriculum*. Programs in Catholic schools must be designed from additional perspectives to those delineated for Ontario schools in the areas of “The Arts; Language; Mathematics, Science, Technology, and Self and Society.”<sup>11</sup>

In this time of curriculum change and development in Ontario Catholic School Boards will reflect their commitment to Catholic education in many ways, but in particular by how they allocate funds and resources to make the creation of new Catholic programs possible. The Bishops of Ontario note that at this moment of our history as a believing community the leadership of Catholic schools is clearly in the hands of lay people.<sup>12</sup> Lay Catholic educators need to have regular opportunities for professional development in contemporary theological education and spirituality in order that Boards will have writing teams and classroom teachers capable of designing, implementing, assessing, and evaluating curriculum that is true to the essential philosophical and theological framework of Catholic education.

*The Common Curriculum* also declares that our current process of curriculum review, development, and implementation, needs to be ongoing and to be based on a continuing dialogue among all partners in education. Dialogue and partnership are not new to Roman Catholic Schools in Ontario. The world in which we live demonstrates to us that our traditional understanding of partnership and dialogue among home, school and church needs, however, to be far more inclusive of the broader society.

Similarly, the call of *The Common Curriculum* to a commitment to “antiracism” and “ethnocultural equity” in education encourages the Roman Catholic community to reclaim the universal and egalitarian character of its gospel foundations and to the spirit of human dignity and religious freedom proclaimed by Vatican II. *The Common Curriculum* directs educators to link policies regarding curriculum development to Ministry of Education policies seeking “the elimination of inequities based on gender, disability, socio-economic background, and sexual orientation.”<sup>13</sup> Here, Roman Catholic educators have a powerful resource to draw upon in the rich tradition of the social teachings of the Catholic Church.

When we design programs in Catholic schools, we hope that these programs will facilitate an educational process whereby students gain knowledge, skills, and values. Regarding the development of the explicit and implicit dimensions of our entire curriculum in Catholic schools, there is available to us a fundamental content and series of recurring theological themes from which we can build our programs and through which we can filter our goals and objectives.<sup>14</sup> For example, the fundamental content of the curriculum in Catholic schools is rooted in our beliefs about scripture; in our beliefs about doctrines concerning God, revelation, Christ, the church, and human destiny; in our beliefs about sacraments; and in our beliefs about prayer and morality. In addition, the following themes run like threads throughout (our) programs: grace, freedom, sin, justice, faith, hope, and love.<sup>15</sup> Because of this, the Catholic character of our schools reaches into every facet of our program and is reflected in every area of the curriculum, not just in our religion and family life programs.

Much of the current Ministry directives for renewal in education reflect a conviction that learning needs to be grounded in the everyday experience of the learner while at the same time it is to be directed toward the acquisition of the knowledge, values and skills which will equip students to become responsible and productive citizens. Hence, there is tremendous emphasis on outcomes based learning which can be measured and evaluated. The public seek more and more accountability for educators to have the learning process to be meaningful and relevant to the everyday world of the learner and at the same time to help students relate what they learn to the world outside their classrooms.

In the context of Ontario Catholic education, meaningful, integrative, transformative, and holistic learning which speak to the life-long education of the whole person and the good of society are hardly new or

*The following themes run like threads throughout (our) programs: grace, freedom, sin, justice, faith, hope, and love.*

*In Catholic schools our foundational beliefs about teaching, learning, the profile of the learner, exit outcomes, essential and specific learnings, and program modification all relate directly to our foundational beliefs about the life and work of Jesus Christ and the tradition of the Roman Catholic community which seeks to embody those beliefs.*

novel notions. One need only to look at the catechetical renewal in our time to see concrete examples of the development of programs which are transformative, integrative, relevant and holistic in design and intent. In such programs, Catholic educators have an excellent model for designing programs in the other areas identified in *The Common Curriculum*: the Arts; Mathematics, Science, and Technology; Personal and Social Studies: Self and Society. In Catholic schools, the challenge is to help students situate their story and the story of all life within the mystery of the Christian story by engaging them in a process of theological reflection which helps them to integrate their personal experience, cultural context, the Christian tradition, and all areas of learning. In addition, the task is to help students to direct their learning toward the development of their gifts and talents and toward making real the vision of life and love exemplified by Jesus Christ. Inherent in the gospel is the call for followers of Christ to see the relevance and relatedness of all of creation and to direct one's life toward the common good and the fulfilment of the "reign of God". In Catholic schools our foundational beliefs about teaching, learning, the profile of the learner, exit outcomes, essential and specific learnings, and program modification all relate directly to our foundational beliefs about the life and work of Jesus Christ and the tradition of the Roman Catholic community which seeks to embody those beliefs.

### **Writing curriculum for Catholic schools**

The following questions are intended to assist curriculum writers, especially those working in the area of curriculum integration. It is our hope that these questions will serve as critical reference points both prior to and during the process of designing and developing resource materials. Although some of the questions may not apply in every program area, they call the project to account for its claim to the description of Catholic curriculum. These questions ask curriculum writers to take seriously the philosophical and theological context of Ontario Catholic education.

#### **• passing on living faith**

- in what ways does this curriculum project make explicit references to the story of God's activity in the history of our faith community as found in scripture and tradition?
- how is the link between faith and life addressed in this curriculum project?

- **committed to learning excellence**

- in what ways does this curriculum show that the pursuit of what is most true, good and beautiful is also to seek for God?
- what makes this project to be of the highest quality? In other words, how does it reflect the best of human intelligence that God has granted humankind?

- **imbued with revealed wisdom**

- how has this curriculum project kept open the existence and experience of God as a dimension of human and cosmic experience?
- how does this curriculum project respect that human existence is not first of all a human work but an initiative of God?

- **in search of the common good**

- if your curriculum writing touches on the experiences of suffering and evil, how does it retain a balance between the enormity of evil and the goodness of God's creation? In what manner does it express the power of Christian hope?
- how has the curriculum project incorporated the teachings of the social encyclicals of the last century regarding social justice, property rights, rights of labour to organize, capitalism, equality between men and women, with issues such as racism, sexism, militarism, and consumerism?
- does this curriculum offer a prophetic call to peace and justice?

- **part of a history of salvation**

- what image of human stewardship does this curriculum project? How does it deal with the limits of human planning and technological solutions? What role does it give to science and technology? How does it reflect the highest ecological standards?
- in what ways does this curriculum present the social and personal evils as sin from the perspective of our faith, that is, as wounding not only self, the world, and our relations to others but also our bond with the source of life, God?
- in what manner is it possible to promote an awareness of the power of Christian hope in this project?

- **its faith is Christ-centered**

- how does this curriculum point to Jesus' life as a model for fashioning an active community of hope and loving care?
- how does this curriculum address those value systems that base worth and dignity on possessions, position, production, gender or race?

- **its anthropology is incarnational**

- in what ways does this material support the belief that all persons are created in the image of God and that they are free agents able to make decisions?
- does the material celebrate a theology of the person as called to relationship with self, others, and creation?

- **its worldview is sacramental**

- does this material offer a sacramental view of life and the world?
- does this material encourage students to see God in the world and to respond the wonder and deep mystery of this presence?

- **its sense of community is ecclesial**

- how does the curriculum material invite students to recognize church as a sign of our union with God, humankind and all creation?
- how does this curriculum invite the school community to participate in the local parish and to fashion a community of faith?
- does this curriculum material promote understanding, inclusivity, and respect for different expressions of belief?

The task of writing curriculum for Ontario Catholic schools in the post Bill 30 era offers a dynamic challenge to all educators. Hopefully, these questions will assist in this process. What still remains, however, is some method whereby such curriculum projects can be validated by the various partners within the Catholic education community to ensure its Catholic character. At present, this process is yet to be determined.

# Ontario Catholic Education: Response to Contextualizing Curriculum

In Ontario, we are continually working to contextualize curriculum, from a base of thorough research, testing hypotheses, and forming conclusions. However, we also continue to struggle to put theory into practice.

The contextualization of curriculum “stresses the inducement of initiative, strengthening the sense of aesthetic feeling, focusing on development, permeating the humanistic and breakthrough practices in schooling”.<sup>i</sup> This applies to all curricula including distinctly Catholic curriculum. “The gap between theory and teachers’ practice is a barrier to education improvement.”<sup>ii</sup> In the case of Catholic education in Ontario, this is a fundamental challenge we must address. The vocation of Catholic education workers is a calling which demands both a grounding in educational theory and a publicly proclaimed, lived experience of faith.

In the 25 years since, “Ontario Catholic Education: Contextualizing Curriculum” was published, the ideas presented therein have remained relevant; continuing to be a roadmap for addressing the challenges in the Ontario Catholic Education system’s philosophical and theoretical framework. This framework must not only be understood but embodied by each of us in Catholic education, which presents a challenge today more than ever.

Education requires a continuous growth mindset from teachers in all areas of curriculum, and these same principles of professional practice need to be brought to bear on a Catholic teacher’s professional faith formation including in challenging areas such as the pastoral support of the 2SLGBTQI community. A Catholic teacher must have the tools to identify gaps in their own knowledge and the motivation to fill those gaps, both as a commitment to their personal faith journey and because it is a professional duty owed to their students.

Reginald Bibby has studied religious trends for much of his career. Secularization and revitalization are two major theoretical approaches to religious change he addresses.<sup>iii</sup> The decrease of religion’s influence on the social and individual life of our Catholic education workers is a trend I have observed over much of my vocation as a Catholic education worker, which is now entering its fourth decade. Bibby speaks about how to refute this secularization, which is to re-sacralize the religious participation of our teachers. This will better equip Catholic education workers to make teaching and learning a religious activity through which faith can infuse every subject and aspect of the curriculum.

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*A Catholic teacher must have the tools to identify gaps and the motivation to fill those gaps, both as a commitment to their personal faith journey and because it is a professional duty owed to their students.*

Catholic education workers require regular opportunities for professional development in theological education and spirituality so they can work to name and eliminate all inequity. Our faith tradition offers the best template for this work. Jesus invited those who were most marginalized by society to “come to the centre.” Most importantly, we must continue to highlight that, “In Catholic schools our foundational beliefs about teaching, learning, the profile of the learner ... all relate directly to our foundational beliefs about the life and work of Jesus Christ and the tradition of the Roman Catholic community which seeks to embody those beliefs”.<sup>iv</sup> It is incumbent upon all of us to heed and animate the prophetic words put forth in “Ontario Catholic Education: Contextualizing Curriculum” as they remain as relevant today as they did 25 years ago.

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## QUESTION FOR REFLECTION

### **Educators**

How can I learn more about the life and work of Jesus Christ and bring this learning to my work with students and colleagues?

### **Curriculum Developers/Supporters**

How can we create teams and processes to continually review and renew our curriculum to ensure it remains valid, relevant and faith-filled in the current context? How can we maintain opportunities for educators to become familiar and comfortable with our Catholic curriculum, and to generate and share their insights on how to integrate our faith in learning content and activities?

### **System Leaders**

What can we do to articulate the philosophical and theoretical framework of Catholic education in the face of increasing secularization? How can we fan the flames of the needed re-sacralization of those who work and learn in our school board?



# Contributors to the Anniversary Edition

*Bruce Rodrigues* is a husband and father. He is currently the government appointed supervisor of the Peel District School Board and the Chancellor of the University of St. Jerome's at the University of Waterloo. Bruce is the former Deputy Minister of Education and Early Years and Child Care in the Province of Ontario. Before joining the ministry, he was the CEO of Ontario's Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO) where he led a new strategic plan for the organization and worked to modernize the provincial assessment program. Bruce has held several senior leadership roles including as Director of Education of the Toronto Catholic District School Board and Associate Director of Education of the Waterloo Catholic District School Board. Mr. Rodrigues was also responsible for the creation of the Equity Secretariat at the Ministry while Deputy Minister. Of all the roles Bruce has held he loved teaching and always placed students at the centre of his work.

*Linda Staudt* is the retired Director of Education from the London District Catholic School Board where she served for 8 years. She is a former Manager and Education Officer with the Ministry of Education, Student Achievement Division Student Success Branch. Her previous experience includes serving 25 years with the Windsor-Essex Catholic District Board as superintendent, principal, vice-principal, and teacher. She has been a member of the Board of Governors for both King's University College (London) and Assumption University (Windsor).

*Richard Shields* has taught at Catholic schools and universities and has directed the OCSTA-OECTA Religious Education (AQ) program in Hamilton, as well as the OCSTA-University of St. Michael's College joint program in Catholic School Governance. His interests focus on Catholic Church structures and practices, including Catholic Education. Richard holds a doctorate in Religious Studies (McMaster University), Master's degrees in Education (McGill University) and Franciscan Studies (St. Bonaventure University, and a BA in philosophy (St. Hyacinth College). His research has been published in several theological journals in North American and in Europe.

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*Denise Andre* is the Executive Director of the Eastern Ontario Staff Development Network, a consortium of twelve eastern Ontario school boards and Queen's University Faculty of Education. Denise has over 40 years of experience in Catholic education, most recently as Director of Education of the Ottawa Catholic School Board. She also serves as Senior Administrator Portfolio Lead for School Mental Health Ontario. Denise holds a Masters in Education from the University of Ottawa.

*Derek Haime* is currently the Registrar and Chief Executive Officer of the Ontario College of Teachers. He holds specialists in Special Education and Religious Education as well as an Ed.D. from Western University in the area of educational leadership. He has been an educator in the Ontario Catholic school system for 28 years. He has also worked at Lakehead University as a course developer and instructor of educational leadership and Indigenous education programs. He is a proud father, grandfather and husband.

# Contributors

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# Endnotes

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11. *The Common Curriculum*, p. 31.

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