

# What Church Documents Say about Catholic Education

Church documents, from papal encyclicals, the Sacred Congregation of Catholic Education at the Vatican and the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, provide a treasury of inspiration for the Catholic educator

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**C**atholic education in the United States has gone through a great transformation in the past decades. The current American Catholic school system was built on the foundation of the hard work and selfless sacrifice of countless thousands of religious, a majority of them female, who opened, administered and taught in parish elementary schools and both parish and private secondary schools in response to the Council of Baltimore's challenge that every Catholic child have access to a Catholic parochial school (Fanning, 1907, Decree 13).

Over time, an immense Catholic school system was built and maintained by dedicated religious. Communities of sisters, brothers and priests each brought their specific

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charism of Christian education to the schools in which they ministered. Today, however, the vast majority of Catholic educators are lay people, completely reversing the situation that had existed from the Council of Baltimore in the late 1880s to the mid-1960s, where the majority of Catholic educators were vowed religious (Jones, 2003, p. 36).

Unlike their predecessors who belonged to religious orders and congregations, many Catholic lay administrators and educators have neither a religious background based on theological studies nor formation in the charism of a particular religious community. Church documents—from papal encyclicals, the Sacred Congregation of Catholic Education at the Vatican (SCCE) and the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB)—provide a treasury of inspiration for the Catholic educator of today, for both administrators and faculty alike. Although the documents address the situations of various eras and the cultural influences therein, they contain several consistent themes that can help to shape the ministry of Catholic education for the future.

The documents listed here are among those released in the past 100 years by the universal church and the church in the United States.

## Papal Documents

**Pope Pius XI:** (1929) *Divini Illius Magistri*: "On Christian Education"

**Pope Paul VI:** (1965): *Gravissimum Educationis*: "Declaration on Christian Education"

## Sacred Congregation of Catholic Education (SCCE)

(1977) "The Catholic School"

(1982) "Lay Catholics in Schools: Witness to Faith"

(1988) "The Religious Dimension of Education in a Catholic School"

(1997) "The Catholic School on the Verge of the Third Millennium"

(2002) "Consecrated Persons and Their Mission in Schools"

(2007) "Educating Together in Catholic Schools. A Shared Mission between Consecrated Persons and the Lay Faithful"

## United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB)

(1972) "To Teach as Jesus Did"

(2000) "In Support of Catholic Elementary and Secondary Schools"

(2005) "Renewing Our Commitment to Catholic Elementary and Secondary Schools in the Third Millennium"

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recounted faithfully and connected upon the progress and challenges of their time, including:

- the danger of political ideologies and how they are addressed by authentic Catholic education;
- the focus of the parents as primary educators of their children;
- the need for Catholic education to be accessible to all socioeconomic classes of families;
- the consistent need for dialogue between faith and culture;
- the inclusion of non-Catholics of good will in Catholic schools;
- the inherent dignity of the human person, and the fact that Catholic education must educate the whole person: mind, body and spirit;
- the search for truth in all academic areas leads to a better understanding of the wonder of God's creation;
- authentic Catholic education as an education in virtue;
- Catholic education's respect for freedom of conscience;
- the right of Catholic families to educate their children in Catholic schools and to receive financial support from the government to fund their educational choice;
- the recognition of the Catholic school as a worshipping, Christian community; and
- the church's consistent dedication and commitment to Catholic schools.

School administrators sometimes are overwhelmed by the immensity of professional development that needs to take place for all involved in education. In addition to all such essential professional development, those involved in Catholic education ministry also must be formed in the uniqueness of the mission of Catholic education, needing a "religious formation that is equal to their general, cultural, and most especially, profes-

sional formation" (SCCE, 1982, p. 60). Perhaps at times administrators feel unprepared to provide such a formation to their faculty and staff, and feel inappropriately formed themselves. Not only are the church documents the best source for Catholic educational formation, but also ministers in Catholic education have a need and a right to have the church's essential teachings on Catholic education presented and made available to them.

Each document provides insight in addressing the issues of its age. This article will present some of the many topics covered within the documents, all of which are worthy of further study.

### **Parents as Primary Educators**

While never neglecting the unique and special vocation that a Catholic educator has in the education of the young, it must be remembered that the parents are the primary educators of their children, and that teachers and administrators in Catholic education are collaborators with the family. The church has been consistent on the role of parents: "This duty on the part of the parents continues up to the time when the child is in a position to provide for itself...." (Pius XI, 1929, para. 33).

The Catholic Church in America recognized, however, that while the primary responsibility rests with the parents, the complexity of their mission necessitates collaboration with educators: "While it was relatively easy in more stable times for parents to educate their children and transmit their values to them, the immense complexity of today's society makes this a truly awesome task" (USCCB, 1972, para. 52). Today's young people can lead intense lives regimented by complex and challenging schedules (academics, athletics, clubs, parish activities, sacramental preparation,

scouts, community service). In addition, modern technology, whether it be cell phones with texting and camera capabilities or the unregulated Internet, literally throws all kinds of unfiltered stimuli directly to minors who have yet to develop the skills to adequately deal with that to which they are exposed. It creates a dilemma where parents, busy with their own work and professional responsibilities, may feel powerless to deal with the growing technological complexity that their children adapt to with great ease and appear to incorporate into their lives in a manner that leaves parents well behind. The Catholic educator in the third millennium thus has a more intimate and pressing responsibility to collaborate with parents. "In a true sense schools are extensions of the home" (Miller, 2007, p. 9).

### **Successful Catholic Education is not about Financial Success**

Many Catholic educators are saddened when Catholic schools are referred to merely as "private schools," with a connotation that private schools are exclusive, with the goal of producing prominent citizens who are financially successful. While it is true that Catholic schools build a solid education that often leads to both the attainment of a distinguished higher education and the possibility for financial success, the church's attention always has been to a) educate all of its children rather than exclusively those who can afford a "private" education, and to b) form Christian men and women of integrity who confront a sinful world armed with Gospel values in order to create a more just society.

*If the Catholic school were to turn its attention exclusively or predominantly to those from the*

*wealthier social classes, it would be contributing towards maintaining their privileged position, and could thereby continue to favor a society which is unjust. (SCCE, 1977, para. 58)*

The church has affirmed and reaffirmed the special role that the Catholic school plays in educating all social classes, especially the poor: "In its ecclesial dimension another characteristic of the Catholic school has its root: It is a school for all, with special attention to those who are weakest" (SCCE, 1997, para. 15). In addition, whatever their ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds, Catholic education must attend to the growth of future active citizens who will attend to all of God's creation and the many implications therein, rather than give attention predominantly to the narrow concerns of their own self interest.

*A Christian education must promote respect for the state and its representatives, the observance of just laws, and a search for the common good. Therefore, traditional civic values such as freedom, justice, the nobility of work and the need to pursue social progress are all included among the school goals, and the life of the school gives witness to them (SCCE, 1988, para. 89).*

Some occasionally draw the conclusion that the motivation of some parents in sending their children to Catholic schools is more for academic and thus financial success, and less for the Christian values fostered by the Catholic school (Baker & Riordan, 1998). Some studies have shown this perception to be highly exaggerated (Huber, 2004). The extent to which the perception is true does not mean that the mission of Catholic education necessarily is compromised. It is not impossible to believe that the values taught in a Catholic school will not only evangelize the student, but also

the parents of a child as she or he has absorbed them and takes them home to the family.

### **The Catholic School as Christian Community**

Whether a school is public, religious, parochial or private, it provides a social arena for its students. While some parents understandably are concerned about exposing their children to human weakness and sinfulness that is present in any social arena, the school as a community provides the opportunity for the individual student to learn to deal with the social arena of life in general. This must include making choices to avoid what is evil and strive to participate in what is good.

The Catholic school not only shares in all of the attributes of a social educational community, it also is called to go far beyond and create a Christian worshiping community based on the Gospel of Jesus Christ and the teachings of the church. While always promoting the search of truth and wisdom across the curriculum, the learning community that is the Catholic school is also one that strives to understand the truth within the context of baptized believers.

*But its proper function is to create for the school community a special atmosphere animated by the Gospel spirit of freedom and charity, to help youth grow according to the new creatures they were made through baptism as they develop their own personalities, and finally to order the whole of human culture to the news of salvation so that the knowledge the students gradually acquire of the world, life and man is illumined by faith (Paul IV, 1965, Section 8).*

The Catholic school thus serves as a quality academic institution and as a community of followers of Jesus who pray, worship, celebrate and mourn together as one community.

The positive aspects of the parish community also should be present in the Catholic school. Even non-Catholic researchers have identified that the communal characteristics of the Catholic school contribute to the academic success within the school, which almost always exists with fewer financial resources than their public school counterparts.

*Coleman's research, refined and expanded in 1987, reported the outstanding academic performance of Catholic school students. Catholic schools had high records of attendance, low dropout rates, and orderly, disciplined school environments. These results, Coleman pointed out, could be explained in large measure by the functional community surrounding and reinforcing the Catholic school. According to Coleman, the religiously grounded community, which connects families to one another and to the school through the church, constitutes the Catholic school's greatest capital asset (Catholic Conference of Ohio, 1990).*

While the goal of the Catholic school as Christian community is spiritual rather than academic, the fact that the communitarian aspect of our schools also has a positive academic impact is encouraging. The church documents have argued consistently that Catholic schools have a right to be at least partially financed by the government (SCCE, 1998, para.17).

Perhaps one positive outcome of the constant need for fundraising, however, is that so many of the fundraising activities enhance the communitarian aspect of the school. The University of San Francisco's Institute for Catholic Educational Leadership sums up rather well what Catholic schools as communities endeavor to accomplish: "Students and faculty study, pray, serve, and recreate together in [an]... environ-

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ment of scholarly pursuit on behalf of Catholic Education" (ICEL, 2008). (need cite)

### **Unique Mission of the Lay Educator in a Catholic School**

Perhaps one of the most important and under-utilized documents is one specifically written to encourage lay Catholic educators (including all Catholic educators whether they work in Catholic or non-Catholic schools), "Lay Catholics in schools: Witnesses to Faith" (SCCE, 1982). This document often quotes *Lumen Gentium*, from the Second Vatican Council, which stresses the importance and the sacredness of the lay Catholic educator.

While acknowledging the unique contributions of religious sisters, brothers and priests to Catholic education in the past and present, the church recognizes that especially in the complexity of our time, dedicated lay people have the unique ability to guide young people to live and follow Gospel values as members of the church. Lay people "live in the midst of the world's activities and professions and in the ordinary circumstances of family and social life" (Second Vatican Council, 1965, n. 32). Lay educators are able to show, through their actions, attitudes and approach to the dignity of the human person, that fidelity to the Gospel and to the church is not something uniquely reserved for those who choose a religious vocation, but is indeed a way of life for all baptized Christians.

The most recent document from the Congregation for Catholic Education, "Educating Together in Catholic Schools. A Shared Mission between Consecrated Persons and the Lay Faithful" (SCCE, 2007), reaffirms

what the 1982 document had already stated: "In fact, by living their faith in the everyday conditions of their families and society, they can help the entire educational community to distinguish more precisely the evangelical values and the opposite values that these signs contain" (SCCE, 2007).

### **Church Encourages and Supports Catholic Educators**

This article has attempted to point out in a very limited way the treasure contained within documents from the Vatican, which address Catholic education from a global perspective, and from the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, which incorporate the situation of Catholic education in our country. In their most recent pronouncement, the bishops emphatically state:

*Our vision is clear: our Catholic schools are a vital part of the teaching mission of the church. The challenges ahead are many, but our spirit and will to succeed are strong. We...are committed to overcoming these challenges.... We must respond to challenging times with faith, vision, and the will to succeed because the Catholic school's mission is vital to the future of our young people, our nation, and most especially our church (UCCB, 2005, p.16).*

The Lord Jesus has gifted us with tremendous capabilities of furthering his Gospel through the ministry of Catholic education. His promise of the Holy Spirit's guidance in our daily lives is evidenced in uncountable ways within our schools. May the Holy Spirit continue to guide all those dedicated to Catholic education now and far into the future.

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