

Special Section Introduction

Education as a Core Ministry of the Catholic Community

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The main reason behind this special section is to bring together scholars from different contexts to reflect and share their research on the contribution of the Catholic community in the area of formal education, mainly in the areas of schooling and Religious Education.

The Catholic community has always treasured education as one of its core ministries (see for instance Eph 4:1, 1Cor 12:28-29, 2 Tim 2:2). From the very beginning, this mission was both *ad intra* and *ad extra*. It was a means for the community to grow in its identity and awareness of the Word as well as a means of dialogue with the world. This led to the development of reflections on education and pedagogy as well as to ramifications within the very ministry of education.

Van den Hoek (1997) suggests how already by the mid-second century, a number of house churches within the Churches in Rome, Alexandria, and possibly also in Jerusalem actually developed into school churches. The members of these school churches gathered around an elder (presbyter) who was also a teacher (didaskalos) to study the Scriptures, to eat meals and to celebrate the Eucharist. Both Young (1997) and Markowski (2008) point to the centrality of the teaching ministry in constructing a Christian culture. At a time when Christians were a minority in a pluralistic and pagan society, Christian scholarly and pedagogical reflection was not done in isolation from the literature and thought of the prevailing culture. In its dialogue with other worldviews, the Church constructed its own worldview. It was precisely in the pedagogical act of retrieval, dialogue with others, and hermeneutics that meanings were elucidated and constructed. Likewise, it was in this pedagogical endeavour that Christian educators developed a sensitivity towards different audiences. A glimpse of the will to dialogue and to present a worldview that is different from the predominant one may be noted in the exposition of the teachings of Christianity by Origen to the mother of the emperor, Julia Mamaea, well before Christianity was even tolerated by the Roman empire (van den Hoek 1997).

Over the centuries believing scholars and practitioners, such as Augustine, Anselm of Canterbury, Thomas Aquinas, Ignatius of Loyola, Huarte de San Juan, Jean Baptist de La Salle, Montessori, and Milani developed pedagogical theory and methods in dialogue with the ‘secular’ knowledge of the time. Their endeavour would not have been possible were they not passionate about the possibility of contributing to the construction of the kingdom of God on earth and their openness to explore new frontiers. The past should not only fill us with pride, that would be vainglorious, but it should, first and foremost remind us that education is at the core of Catholic mission and identity.

All this would not have been possible had the Church not taken to heart its mission to be truly the salt and light of the earth and consequently, to dialogue and journey with humanity. The apex of this will to dialogue is summed up in the documents of the Second Vatican Council and specifically in the Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et Spes* (Second Vatican Council 1965). Indeed, it is when the Church embraces the challenges of a dialogue that it can make a significant contribution to humanity. It thus transpires that the main aim of Catholic education, as well as of Catholic Religious Education that occurs in schools is not primarily catechetical in nature but a means of educating the whole person within secular reality and to prepare the way for the Christian gospel in the world.

Throughout these two millennia, the list of endeavours to educate and to create a culture of love is impressive. History shows that Church schools and catholic educators were at the forefront in providing education for the poor and in raising standards and the social capital of society. Through their research, Greeley (1998) and Grace (2003) point to the contribution of Catholic schools to meet the needs of the disadvantaged communities, to achieve academic excellence and to promote leadership, social justice and the values of community and solidarity.

With the advance of secularisation in many parts of the world, the identity of the Catholic school, and Religious Education in schools within a continuously changing society seems to be one of the most recurring and pressing issues. A cursory look at recent international publications leads to the conclusion that the apprehension about maintaining a Catholic ethos in Church schools as well as the identity of Religious Education is a concern shared by various in most part of the Catholic world. The issue of identity is both topical and recurring and will never be fully settled. Precisely because context and society at large are in continuous change, the identity of Catholic school and the nature and aims of Catholic Religious Education need to be constantly revisited. This challenge should be taken on by clarifying the language that guides this ministry, by going back to the roots and define what has always been proper to the mission and identity of the Catholic believing community.

In an age of globalisation and of digital communication, the Catholic communities spread around the globe are called to live up their vocation of catholicity. Indeed, it is only by embracing universality in all its dimensions that the Catholic community may redefine its mission in and through education. As Catholics, ethnicity and geographic locations should not be a barrier. On the contrary they should be considered as opportunities to delve deeper, through different entry points, in the richness of reality as announced to us by Christ. In so doing we should be able to contribute to restore the fragmentation that exist among the human community, and more so in the way humans conceptualize knowledge and live reality.

Catholic education provides formation of millions of students around the world and seals many institutions of college and scholar education with its mark, through schools and church universities, and also in spaces of formation and public reflection. This special section seeks to make visible some examples of evidence of investigation associated to Catholic education.

The first article written by Raby and Nocetti, Chile, deals exclusively with the discussion, concerning what Saint Father emeritus Benedicto XVI called “Educative emergency”, in order to describe the attitudes that students had toward school evangelization and explore the teachers’ perception in this area. The current debate in Chile, characterized by constant questions about the educative system, demonstrates that in spite of the advances in the last decades, a worrisome objective exists which not only needs to be taken care of but must be answered by the distinctive features which Catholic education offers within Chile and beyond our country as well.

Of course, the final goal of schooling is not evangelization, but is however, as the Chilean General Law of Education establishes, the development of people in all their dimensions, including the spiritual sphere. To reach this objective diverse educative projects are offered, among them those of confessional and particularly Catholic character. For a Catholic educational establishment, evangelization lures students and their families to follow a road of faith and just as the authors of the Church established, the Catholic school complies with a primordial function, wherefore by excellence it is the place where the Christian message and its thinking are transmitted (Sagrada Congregación para la Educación Católica, 1977).

The richness of the project lies in the originality of its themes and the necessity of empirically investigating the attitude of the educative community towards this dimension so typical of Catholic education, while at the same not being specifically outlined as it tends to be defined in common places.

The second article presented in this edition comes from the work developed by Luisa Roa, Colombia, who addresses Religious Education as an obligatory subject of the educational curriculum, which is a topic of strong discussion today in many countries.

The article finds the growing consciousness of the religious and cultural plurality, which is intertwined with the emerging demands of the native peoples. It poses challenges for many Latin American countries, especially those in which the Catholic religion is predominant.

Roa's questioning gives us a glimpse of how to produce spaces for fertile and true dialogue in the schooling context and in the Catholic schools, highly demanded for providing the answers to this new edge on religious school education. From this quandary two big themes are tackled. On one side, the religious beliefs of students in the Cauca Valley and the other, the curricular design of Religious Education as an obligatory curriculum subject in this area of Colombia. The findings and conclusions in this article are a valuable provision for other multi-religious contexts.

Finally, *Laudato Si* and *Ecological Education: Implications for Religious Education*, by Leonardo Franchi, Scotland, offers an attractive re-reading of the concepts of "integral humanism" and "educative emergency" which suggests that these may be actualized and operationalized by its pair, "human ecology" and "ecological education". With the terminology and concept of ecological education Pope Francis points out a promising spotlight and identifies a profile and argument for developing the possibility of connecting Catholic education in the public school context with those predominantly secular.

The study comes closer to Catholic education in general more than religious education in particular, embodying an interpretive analysis of the implications of Catholic education and in particular, the concepts of human ecology in the Catholic school – such as the actualization of integral humanism – and ecological education for resolving the educational emergency in new ways, by highlighting the support of diverse Magisterial documents that look at pedagogical questions.

Franchi's main contribution is revitalizing and contextualizing the impact that this concept of ecological education has produced on religious education.

Thus, the articles in this special section contribute to the understanding of religious education and the importance of developing world-class research in Catholic education. The authors contribute to the creation of knowledge from three aspects which are an important part of the public debate: religious education in a plural context, providing key readings allowing for its incorporation into much of Latin America; the proposal of the present Pope Francis on a human ecology that helps us consider education from a comprehensive perspective, which reflects current issues such as sustainability; and finally, a local approach that raises evidence nationwide concerning the attitudes of teachers and students in the role of student evangelization in schools. Undoubtedly, the three papers presented represent a step towards meeting the debt the academic world has with Catholic education in the world. We hope to continue supporting applied research in a fascinating and unexplored field that can contribute to the Education of many students throughout the world.

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