

# **The Case for Catholic Education:**

**Why Parents, Teachers, and Politicians Should Reclaim  
the Principles of Catholic Pedagogy**

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## **The Crisis of Catholic Education: A History with a Lesson**

Defending education feels a little bit like defending spring. Who could argue against fresh air and sunshine? Yet we have grown accustomed to frost. And so the defence of education, at least one noble conception of it, is what the day demands. I wish to open these essays on the principles of Catholic education by sketching our need for their recovery, by offering a history with a lesson. Beyond the obligation to secure funding, to reduce class sizes, and to produce well-trained teachers – conditions necessary for the health of all schools – is the need to renew our understanding. The crisis of Catholic education, which the next generation of students and teachers must overcome, is a crisis born chiefly of our lack of confidence in truth. This lack of confidence has led us to accept an uninspired and an uninspiring view of the human person.

I begin by noting observations made two generations ago. Already in 1961 the eminent English convert and Harvard historian Christopher Dawson (1889-1970) identified the cultural conditions which undermine our practice in his seminal work, the *Crisis of Western Education*.<sup>1</sup> The malaise that afflicts the West, so he argued, has two components. The first is directly intellectual. Since Immanuel Kant's rejection of metaphysics and our now habitual reliance upon technology as a pseudo-substitute for religion, confidence in reason has dried up. Reason still has a place. But it no longer serves, so we imagine, as an instrument for knowing ultimate truths. For us, only empirical observations count. Nature cannot teach us about what is good. This positivistic conception of reason is a macabre image of our own creating. It is at once a gruesome and arid edifice which Benedict XVI likened in one of his finest speeches to "a concrete bunker with no windows";<sup>2</sup> and it suffocates. It suffocates because it crushes the moral

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<sup>1</sup> For background see Bradley J. Birzer, *Sanctifying the World: The Augustinian Life and Mind of Christopher Dawson* (Front Royal, VA: Christendom Press, 2007).

<sup>2</sup> Benedict XVI, *Address to the German Bundestag* (National Parliament), 22 September 2011.

imagination; it stifles because it arbitrarily narrows the range within which modern man is willing to think about thinking. Thus, instead of openness to wonder, openness to beauty, to truth, goodness, angels, eternity, the music of the spheres, the soul, and the like, the scope of reason is reduced to aims dictated largely by the economy and the imperatives of technological innovation, to computer chips and airplanes.

A dozen examples from the daily news could illustrate. Here is one. Recently, criticism has been leveled against the “Common Core Standards” initiative, now adopted by some 46 American states, and which will be approved by countless Catholic and Charter schools in the wake. Most would agree that the intention of the Common Core effort is laudable. Public education in the U.S. is poor. American students lag behind kids from other industrialized nations. On standardized tests, at age 15, Americans rank 27<sup>th</sup> in Science and a bit better in Reading, at 24<sup>th</sup> (that’s one up from the Czech Republic).<sup>3</sup>

While social conservatives may be more likely to protest this initiative, the Common Core represents, in some way, the culmination of the standards movement. Conservative opinion of the previous generation gathered around the 1983 Department of Education’s landmark publication of *A Nation at Risk*. That document was the first to name the deleterious effects of “cafeteria curricula” upon students; it was also the first to generate wide-spread doubt as to whether America should continue the long slide toward vocational and therapeutic education.

Still, not everyone is cheering. Some have objected to the federal government’s functional imposition of a national curriculum; others wonder about the wisdom of adopting nation-wide standards that have not yet been field-tested; still others disagree with the content and structure mandated, for instance, that 70% of a high-school senior’s reading must be “informational” as opposed to “literary”.<sup>4</sup> I wish to speak to none of these concerns. Whatever else may be said for or against the project, I observe only that its aims are brutally utilitarian. Its founding document makes this plain: the Core exists to “ensure that all students are college and career ready in literacy no later than the end of high school.” Is that all for which we can hope?

The Common Core is a reasonable document. Its influence will extend well beyond the United States. It was composed, we are told, after wide consultation. And, who could not wish that, at the end of thirteen years of institutional discipline, paid at public expense, students would be employable? The problem with the document is not that it is wicked but that it is banal. Thomas Gradgrind, that dreary caricature of a functionary head-master of Charles Dickens’ *Hard Times*, comes to look every day more like a visionary when set beside our educational experts. The interesting question to ask is not whether 13 years of industrial education will equip a child

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<sup>3</sup> International statistics are gathered through the Organization of Economic Co-Operation and Development’s *Program for International Student Assessment (PISA)*. The PISA study compares educational outcomes among 65 nations including all 34 OECD member countries. For these figures see the publication *PISA 2012 Snapshot of performance in mathematics, reading and science* at <http://www.oecd.org/pisa/keyfindings/PISA-2012-results-snapshot-Volume-I-ENG.pdf>.

<sup>4</sup> See Anne Hendershott “The Ambitions of Bill and Melinda Gates: Controlling Population and Public Education” in *Crisis Magazine*, 25 March 2013. The “Key Design Considerations” for the English curriculum (accessible at [www.corestandards.org](http://www.corestandards.org)) notes that the 70/30 requirement does not specify the ratio to be taught in any specific English course, but as a total reading distribution representing “the sum of student reading” in the senior year.

to feed himself. The interesting question to ask is whether we will have supplied him with a reason to live. And for that matter: what is a good life? Students, we suppose, will learn eventually how to fill in that blank.

To educate, from the Latin *educō*, means to draw out. To teach a child is to “pull out” of their nature some things and to leave behind others. The Common Core document, and others like it, presumes that in our public speech we should not raise, let alone attempt to answer, the ultimate justifications for education that make success in college and career worthwhile goals to pursue. Mark this: clever students note the absence. To educate is to act. And to act is to move on the basis of some precept stated or implied. To refuse to answer the question of ultimate ends is to supply an answer. In our time, public reason can deliver the iPhone but must play deaf to the aims of sex, to the meaning of life, and even, as it appears, to the reasons for literature. Our educational objectives and methods proceed accordingly. From the nursery till the university, our schools promote at once two opposing and mutually destructive tendencies: vocationalism and hyper-specialisation. What has been lost from view even within Catholic schools is a sense of the unifying vision of a liberal education.

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A distinction is in order. In a democratic society all students must read, write, and if they are to survive in a market economy, compute. The three Rs fulfill this just political ambition. But education has aims that are supra political. We don’t educate our children simply so that they will become good citizens, or good capitalists. Before they are our charge, they are God’s children. Each carries dual citizenship. Man requires bread. The Good Samaritan needed coins in his pocket to offer some; it is proper that we teach kids how to find them. But we need more than bread. Far more important is the good we do with the little or much we make. From this two-fold necessity arises the two classes of education. Where *servile* education focuses only on the means of life, *liberal* education considers also the ends life. We need skilled carpenters, accountants, and nurses. But before anyone is a good house-builder, he ought to be a good man.

Liberal education, then, aims to teach a man or a woman how to be good. Since the Greeks, the seven liberal arts – grammar, logic, rhetoric, geometry, arithmetic, astronomy, music – have been enlisted as the formal means in the service of this ambition. It was defined first by Plato and Aristotle, extended by Augustine, and applied by Medieval and Renaissance humanists. The nature and shape of liberal education was commonly understood in the West up through the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In recent times, Dorothy Sayers’s essay “The Lost Tools of Learning” has served as a marvelous introduction to this tradition.<sup>5</sup>

If the first aspect of this crisis undermines the intellect, the second impoverishes the imagination. This other failure perpetuated by contemporary education is the loss of contact with our past, specifically Christianity’s contribution to the West. Simply as a point of fact,

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<sup>5</sup> Reprinted in Topping, *Renewing the Mind: A Reader in the Philosophy of Catholic Education* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University Press of America, 2015).

apart from the martyrs, the monks, the crusaders, the schoolmen, the missionaries, and apart from the Mass, there would have been no such thing as “the West”. Dawson’s prescient observation nearly half a century ago was to see that not only is faith disappearing; history, too, is receding from our view, and with it, a living connection to our cultural roots. It is the loss of contact with our spiritual and cultural legacy, so Dawson warned, that accounts for our contemporary rootlessness. We believe in rights, but have no idea from whence they came; we preach free speech, but jail politically incorrect ministers.

We want tolerance without truth. This hole in our heart has made us prey to a string of violent and bizarre fanaticisms from the French revolution to the Fascist and Communist revolutions, to the sexual revolution now upon us. As the international regime of *Human Rights Commissions* prove – or the fact that now high-profile CEOs can be bullied out of their positions for supporting traditional marriage – such tolerance turns out to be tyrannical.<sup>6</sup> We are what Nietzsche called the “last men”: agnostic moralists, fueled by righteous indignation, guided by irreligious conviction. Without a recovery of the sources of Christian culture, the art, history, and institutions that shaped us, Western technological man will find no way of saving himself from degrading servitude, if not to despots, then to his own passions.

Dawson’s solution was suggestive. He advocated not so much a return to the Great Books (though these must play a role in any rescue of modern education); what he proposed was a return, more broadly, to the study of that culture out of which the Great Books themselves were formed. The problem, as he described it, is not so much that we are anti-religious. The problem is that we have made ourselves sub-religious – a condition which is also sub-human. The best means to reawaken our contemporaries, he thought, was through an historically-inspired, religiously-informed rebirth of Catholic liberal education.

Since the 1960s evidence of the crisis described by Dawson has only mounted. Even if one disagrees with Dawson’s practical recommendations, the effects of the breakdown in the mental and moral discipline of Catholic schools and colleges are hard to miss. My focus is on the education of teens, roughly from the ages of 13 to 21. Because it is customary to divide high school sharply from college, throughout I’ll focus more on the early years of liberal education. Here let me only mention a few signs of the loss of a Catholic ethos, in colleges.

In 1967 leading dissident Catholic university presidents signed a manifesto known as the *Land O’Lakes Statement*. The text formally declared their independence from the institutional Church. A widely cited study of the belief and behavior of students at US Catholic colleges quantified the consequences then set in motion: that 31% of students now become more supportive of legalized abortion after their years at college (16% become more pro-life); that 32% decrease their Mass attendance (7% increase it); that 54% of students say that their experience of attending a Catholic college has no effect on their support for Catholic teachings.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Such as, for instance, Mozilla’s CEO Brendan Eich, see “Mozilla head’s resignation over marriage stance sparks outcry” by Elise Harris in *Catholic News Agency*, April 4, 2014, or among others, Philip Jenkins’ *The New Anti-Catholicism: The Last Acceptable Prejudice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

<sup>7</sup> Stephen Wagner, “Behaviors and Beliefs of Current and Recent Students at U.S. Catholic Colleges” in *Studies in Catholic Higher Education* (October 2008).

The situation in Canada is worse. At the time of the Second Vatican Council (1962-65), Canadians attended church more often than did Americans, and could boast of a broad network of Catholic colleges – some 57, not counting those inside Quebec. In the fifteen years after the Council that network unravelled. By the early 1980s two out of three Catholic colleges had closed or been absorbed by the provincial universities. Presently, only a few colleges even claim to offer something of an integrated Catholic formation.

Any sharp divide between high school and undergraduate formation is arbitrary. Decay in the identity of colleges is bound to affect the lower schools. When we lost the universities, Catholic high schools also lost somewhere to send their best kids, and along with it, seem to have lost something of their own core identity. Think of it this way. Education is like sport. When you lose your major leagues, the best athletes have nowhere to go, and your minor leagues have nowhere to send them. When the identity of universities collapsed, Catholics lost their major leagues. And so, the minors became just a bit less serious about their task of evangelizing students, of forming them in the Christian intellectual tradition.

What is to be done? What we ought not to do is to wait for a bureaucratic solution. The problem is not even that we need more money, though endowments must be grown. The source of our crisis is of the mind, and of the heart. What we need is a rebirth of a thousand Christian communities, and among them, a renewed understanding of and loyalty to the principles of learning that has animated our tradition for centuries. What we need in our homes and in our schools is to welcome a new spring-time of Catholic education. Even now the days grow brighter. But before I propose principles for renewal, our first task will be to survey the craters on the landscape.