

THE IDENTITY OF THE CATHOLIC SCHOOL

I. THE IDENTITY OF THE CATHOLIC SCHOOL IN GENERAL THE SPECIFIC CHARACTER OF THE CATHOLIC SCHOOL

A. THE AIM OF THE SCHOOL IN GENERAL

The aim of the school in general is to provide a personalized education to pupils, so that they can be autonomous, responsible, and capable to choose freely in conformity with their conscience (EC 31).

B. THE AIM OF THE CATHOLIC SCHOOL

The aim of the Catholic school is founded upon Jesus Christ (DEC 1).

The aim of the Catholic school is the promotion of the human person, with all human values, in the pursuit of his ultimate end and of the good of the societies (ECAS 9).

The proper character of the Catholic school firstly lies in its reference to a Christian concept of life centred on Jesus Christ (EC 33). A Catholic school tries to create a school community with a special atmosphere animated by the Gospel spirit of freedom and charity (DEC 8).

It wants to develop the personality of young people also as baptized, their condition of “new creature” (DR 100), and finally to order the whole of human culture to the news of salvation (DEC 8).

The Catholic school provides integral formation by means of a systematic and critical assimilation of culture (EC 26) and with an appropriate educational programme (see also ECAS 14).

The transmission of a culture ought to be especially attentive to the practical effects of that culture, and strengthen those aspects of it which will make a person more human. In particular, it ought to pay attention to the religious dimension of the culture and the emerging ethical requirements to be found in it (DR 108).

The words of the teachers, their witness, their encouragement and help, their advice and friendly correction are all important in achieving behaviour, and a religious dimension (DR 110).

Indeed, a Catholic school provides personalised education but it also makes the link between the contemporary world and the absolute values, stressing that all values find their fullest perfection in Jesus Christ (DR 25).

A school is a Christian school in its explicit reference to the Christian vision of reality. The evangelical values inspire its educational project as motivational drives and final goals. It has an ecclesial nature (EE 5).

Who is then guaranteeing the protection and promotion of the distinctive Catholic character? First of all, the hierarchical authorities for what concerns religious instruction and Christian moral principles. Then, the whole educational community. Then, the parents who also contribute in Christian education through their active presence in the participation structures. And finally, teachers by safeguarding and developing the distinctive mission of the Catholic school, particularly with regard to the Christian atmosphere (EC 73).

Another element in the description of the special character of the Catholic school is the quality of the religious instruction integrated into the overall education of the students (DR 66, LCER 15).

A Catholic school is Catholic through its educational project which provides a frame of reference (DR 100):

- This frame defines the school's identity by explaining the Gospel values which are its inspiration.
- It gives a precise description of the pedagogical, educational and cultural aims of the school.
- It presents the course content, along with the values that are to be transmitted through these courses.
- It describes the organization and the management of the school.
- It determines which policy decisions are to be reserved to professional staff (governors and teachers), which policies are to be developed with the help of parents and students, and which activities are to be left to the free initiative of teachers, parents, or students.
- It indicates the ways in which student progress is to be tested and evaluated.

We can also define the Catholic school as “centre of life” (DR 109) in which the formation process has both a horizontal and a vertical dimension.

A Catholic school is also a place of evangelization, of integral formation, of inculturation and apprenticeship in a life dialogue between youngsters of different religious and social backgrounds (ECAS 11). As far as non-Catholic pupils are concerned, Catholic teachers must have the greatest respect for them (LC 42) and their freedom. They should be open at all times to authentic dialogue.

The discovery of truth creates a characteristic atmosphere in a Catholic school. In the teaching of a Catholic school, knowledge is set in the concept of faith and becomes wisdom and life vision (ECAS 14). In all the various school subjects, reason and faith are interwoven, but also values have to be acquired and truths are to be discovered (EC 39).

II. CHRIST, FOUNDATION OF THE EDUCATIONAL PROJECT

The Christian concept of life is centred on Jesus Christ. He is the foundation of the whole educational project in a Catholic school. He is the model on whom the Christian is called to shape his life in his thought, his will and action (EC 33, 34, 47).

III. THE CATHOLIC SCHOOL, PART OF THE CHURCH MISSION

The Church has the mission to proclaim salvation in Christ to all men and must also be concerned with the whole of man’s life (DEC Introduction) so that he can be imbued with the spirit of Christ (DEC 3). So the Church has a role in education, based on a clear educational project of which Christ is the foundation (EE 3). Hence the Catholic school forms part of the evangelization of the Church (EC 7), the education in the faith (EC 9) and the proclamation of the good news of salvation for all (EC 7).

This mission also includes a dialogue between the Church and the human community in the safeguarding of freedom of conscience (DR 34).

In some situations, evangelization is not possible. We then should aim at pre-evangelization, openness, development of a sense of life, by distinguishing the “how” and the “what” (DR 108).

IV. WITNESS. TESTIMONY. EXAMPLE

A Catholic school wants to offer its pupils an evangelical testimony of a living encounter with Christ (EE 4). This testimony is thus always in reference to Jesus Christ (EE 38).

Teachers are witnesses by their teaching and by living the truth they propose to their pupils, in simplicity and evangelical poverty (DEC 8, DR 29). Their witness to faith is revealed through their behaviour (LC 21). The privileged way for giving witness is direct and personal contact, and dialogue with pupils (LC 21, 33). This personal contact is established in a warm and sincere appreciation for anyone who is honestly seeking God (LC 42).

The promotion within the educational community of a Catholic school makes this testimony really effective (EE 16). Finally, it is important that this witness be nourished by prayer (EE 38).

V. RELATION BETWEEN FAITH, CULTURE AND LIFE

The duties of a Catholic School are double: on the one hand, the Catholic School has to reach a synthesis of culture and faith by integrating all the different aspects of human knowledge through the subjects taught, in the light of the Gospel. On the other hand, the Catholic school has to reach a synthesis of faith and life in the growth of the virtues characteristic of the Christian.

A RELATION BETWEEN FAITH AND CULTURE: INCULTURATION

We firstly must have in mind that there is a profound relationship between culture and the Church. This close relationship is a clear manifestation of the unity between creation and redemption (LC 20).

It is in this most profound sense that the mission of the educator has to be understood. It consists in helping pupils to achieve a dialogue between faith and culture, and gradually be led to a personal synthesis of these (LC 64).

If the communication of culture is to be a genuine educational activity, it must not only be organic but also critical, evaluative and historical. Faith will provide Catholic educators with some essential principles for critique and evaluation (LC 20). This dialogue between faith and culture has to be done in full respect for the autonomy of the different academic disciplines and the methodology proper to them (DR 53).

The synthesis between faith and culture is based on a deep concept of human knowledge (EC 38). Knowledge, set in the context of faith, becomes wisdom and life vision (ECAS 14). Moreover, this synthesis contributes to the total formation of man (EC 15). Therefore, the transmission of culture ought especially to strengthen all the aspects of culture which will make a person more human, in particular the religious dimension of the culture and the emerging ethical requirements to be found in it (DR 108). In this context, it is important to say that if the teacher wants to bring the interior synthesis of the student to this deeper level, this synthesis must already exist in the teacher himself (LC 29).

Of course, religious education is an extremely important instrument (LC 56) in the elaboration of this synthesis between faith and culture, but not exclusively. Not only in religious education, but in all the subjects teachers can search for points of contact between culture and religion (DR 51). The endeavour to interweave reason and faith, which has become the heart of all subjects, gives them unity, bringing forth within what is learnt in school a Christian vision of the world, of life, of culture and of history (ECAS 14).

In such situations where the school population is pluralistic in faith and ideologies, we cannot ignore the importance of culture.

In cultural pluralism, the Christian thought constitutes a good criterion of judgment in the midst of conflicting concepts and behaviours to discern the values which ennoble man from those which degrade him (EC 11).

B RELATION BETWEEN FAITH AND LIFE

The very purpose of evangelization is the incarnation of the Christian message in the lives of men and women (LC 31).

Knowledge, values, attitudes, and behaviour fully integrated with faith will result in the student's personal synthesis of life and faith (LC 31).

But, in the most profound sense, the integration of faith and life is part of a life-long process of conversion until the pupil becomes what God wishes him to be (EC 45). The Catholic school helps young people to share their personal lives with God. It helps them to overcome their individualism and discover, in the light of the faith, their specific vocation to live responsibly in a community with others. And it helps them to find in their life the way to commit themselves to serve God in their brethren and to make the world a better place for man to live in (EC 45). Helpfulness and service can be achieved labouring together in apostolic works and in efforts to relieve human suffering, with a preferential option for the less fortunate, the sick, the poor, the handicapped and the lonely (DR 87).

VI. AN INTEGRAL CONCEPT OF MAN EDUCATION OF THE WHOLE PERSON

The Catholic school appears "as a place of integral education of the human person through a clear educational project of which Christ is the foundation" (ECAS 4, EE 3). The educational process ought to be a unity, and focuses on the human person in his or her integral, transcendent, historical identity (ECAS 10).

The foundation of this educational unity is the conviction that it is only in the mystery of the Word made flesh that the mystery of man truly becomes clear (ECAS 10). In this Christian vision, all human values find their fulfilment and unity in Christ (EC 35).

Therefore the Catholic educator must help pupils to develop harmoniously their physical, moral and intellectual endowments (DEC 1). The Catholic educator will develop freedom, responsibility, sexuality, social life and moral values and finally their religious dimension (EC 19).

Catholic education always presupposes an integral concept of man and can thus not be reduced to its purely technical, practical and didactical aspects (ECAS 10).

Integral education demands that the school overcomes the problems of a fragmented and insufficient curriculum (DR 55) and that it proposes a unified version of man.

The school is designed of course to develop the intellectual faculties (DEC 5). This intellectual labour requires sacrifice and perseverance (DR 49). At the same time, the Catholic school forms the ability to judge, to foster the sense of values (DEC 5), and to assimilate culture in a systematic and critical way (EC 26). This vision also implies a religious dimension, because any human person needs redemption in order to be able to integrate the religious dimension.

Integral education implies that students should be helped to realize the human person has physical and spiritual powers, an ability to be an active and creative agent in service to society, and a religious dimension (DR 63). The concept of “person” implies indeed intelligence and will, freedom and feelings, the capacity to be active and creative, being endowed with both rights and duties, capable of interpersonal relationships, called to a specific mission in the world and in history (DR 55).

VII. PERSONAL RELATIONSHIP

It is through interpersonal relations that the educational community is called to provide the complete formation (ECAS 18).

Teachers show their love for pupils in the way they interact with them. They encourage and strengthen them in those areas which will help to achieve the pedagogical project. Their words, their witness, their encouragement and help, their advice and friendly correction are all important for achieving these goals.

This pedagogical project must always be understood to include academic achievement, moral behaviour and religious dimension (DR 110).

Christian pedagogy gives special emphasis to direct and personal contact with the pupils. Those are active agents in their own formation process (DR 105). This personal contact must lead to a dialogue (rather than a monologue) which will facilitate an understanding of the witness to faith (LC 21).

This personal contact is the means by which teachers learn what they need to know about the pupils in order to guide them adequately. Therefore, the Catholic teacher must always be conscious of his mission (LC 33).

VIII. A CHRISTIAN ATMOSPHERE

One of the key texts on the Catholic school (DEC 8) mentions that one of its fundamental characteristics is to create “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.”

As a consequence, the school climate includes a religious dimension and is expressed through the celebration of Christian values in Word and Sacrament, in individual behaviour, in friendly and harmonious interpersonal relationships, and in a ready availability (DR 26).

IX. CHRISTIAN WAY OF LIFE

The Gospel spirit of freedom and charity should be evident in a Christian way of life (DR 25). This way of life permeates both the thought and the life of educators (EE 38). The Catholic educators are required to be witnesses of Jesus Christ and to live their faith and vocation in the school community (EE 15).

This Christian style is present in the climate and the style of personal relations. It is question here of personal involvement, genuine reciprocity, coherence of attitudes, live-styles and day to day behaviour (ECAS 18).

X. THE COMMUNITY

These commitment, reciprocity and coherence make the quality of the school community. The community dimension is one of the fundamental characteristics of the Catholic school. This school is a community whose aim is the transmission of values, which find their fulfilment in the Person of Christ (EC 53).

It is not simply because of the nature of man and the nature of education that the community aspect of the Catholic school is necessary, but also because of the nature of faith in Jesus Christ (EC 54). The community dimension is primarily a theological concept rather than a sociological category (DR 31).

This dimension can only be achieved when the educational community helps its members to adopt a Christian way of life. In such a community mutual respect means service to the Person of Christ (EC 60).

The educational community should be trying to become a Christian community: a genuine community of faith. This will not take place, and will not even begin to happen, unless there is a sharing of the Christian commitment among at least a portion of each of the principal groups that make up the educational community: parents, teachers, and students (LC 41).

The quality of the school community can be found in personal involvement, genuine reciprocity, and coherence of attitudes, life-styles and day to day behaviour (ECAS 18). If this vision inspires the school and animates the community, the school can make its own positive contribution, in a spirit of cooperation, with the building up of the secular society (EC 12). It is thus important that values are expressed in an active way within the school community. This involves that Christian values are mediated by authentic interpersonal relationships of its members and through both individual and corporative adherence to the vision that inspires the school (EC 32, EE 39). The educational community, taken as a whole, can further the objective of a school as a place of complete formation (ECAS 18).

ABBREVIATIONS REFER TO THE FRENCH TITLES OF THE TEXTS

- DEC** [Déclaration sur l'Éducation Chrétienne]
Declaration on Christian Education (*Gravissimum educationis*)
28 October 1965
- EC** [L'École Catholique]
The Catholic School
19 March 1977
- LC** [Le Laïc Catholique : Témoin de la Foi dans l'École]
Lay Catholics in Schools: Witnesses to Faith
15 October 1982
- DR** [La Dimension Religieuse de l'Éducation dans l'École Catholique]
The Religious Dimension of Education in a Catholic School
7 April 1988
- ECAS** [L'École Catholique au Seuil du Troisième Millénaire]
The Catholic School on the Threshold of the Third Millennium
28 December 1997
- EE** [Éduquer Ensemble dans l'École Catholique]
Educating Together in a Catholic School
8 September 2007
- LCER** [Lettre circulaire sur l'Enseignement de la Religion dans l'École]
Circular Letter on Religious Education in Schools
5 May 2009

Etienne VERHACK
Secretary General CEEC
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