



TAKING
THE HIGH
GROUND

Virtues and
Values in
Catholic
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1.0 INTRODUCTION

The school is “a privileged means of promoting the formation of the whole person.” It aims for “the acquisition of values and the discovery of truth, ... the bringing forth of the power of Christian virtue by the integration of culture with faith and of faith with living.”¹

Catholic schools rightly see the development of values and virtues as central to their work in education. This paper presents some ideas which may be useful to trustees, principals and teachers as they focus on implementing the values aspect of the National Curriculum and the virtues embedded in Catholic Character and Religious Education.

1.1 Definitions

Values are internalised sets of beliefs or principles of behaviour. Not all values are consonant with moral or ethical behaviour, even though they may be strongly upheld. Nor do people necessarily act in accordance with the values they hold.

Virtues are qualities of moral goodness or excellence. Many virtues can be derived from universally accepted principles. To be effective, they need to be nurtured and practised so that individuals live by them, not merely believe in them. (See also the definition from the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, below.)

1.2 Catholic Schools, Virtues and Values

For Catholic schools the following are all crucial activities:

- the analysis of the school’s current values as they actually operate,
- the development of those values that the school wishes to live by, and
- the development of programmes to support the growth in virtue of each individual.

In Catholic schools work on virtues is central to the school’s role of proclaiming the Good News of Jesus Christ. Catholic schools promote both human and spiritual values and virtues, so that all in the school community can see that their ultimate purpose is to develop the divine potentialities within themselves. Where State schools seek to develop persons of virtue, Catholic schools seek to transform a person of virtue into a person of Christ.

1.3 Catholic Schools as “Schools of Holiness”²

Catholic schools need to be obviously and unashamedly Catholic

- knowing what they stand for
- living what they stand for

“within an atmosphere enlivened by the gospel spirit of freedom and charity.”³

¹ *The Catholic School*, Sacred Congregation for Catholic Education. 1977

² Pope John Paul II

³ *The Documents of Vatican II*, Declaration on Christian Education, Geoffrey Chapman, London, Dublin 1966

2.0 OUR CATHOLIC TRADITION

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Part 3, Article 7, p 443-451) is an invaluable reference on virtues. It provides material for staff reflection or discussion.

The *Catechism* defines a **virtue** as “an habitual and firm disposition to do good. It allows the person not only to perform good acts, but to give the best of himself. ... ‘The goal of a virtuous life is to become like God.’ (St Gregory of Nyssa)”

- The **Four Cardinal Virtues** (i.e. the pivotal human virtues)
Prudence, justice, fortitude (courage) and temperance. (Wisdom 8:7)
- The **Three Theological Virtues** (which enable human beings to participate in the divine nature)
Faith, Hope, Charity. (2. Peter 1:4)
- The **Seven Gifts of the Holy Spirit** (which sustain the moral life of Christians)
Wisdom, understanding, counsel or right judgment, fortitude or courage, knowledge, piety or reverence, fear of the Lord or wonder and awe. (Isaiah 11:1-2)
- The **Twelve Fruits of the Spirit** (“perfections that the Holy Spirit forms in us as the first fruits of eternal glory”)
Charity, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, generosity, gentleness, faithfulness, modesty, self-control, chastity. (Galatians 5:22-23)
- **The Beatitudes** (the actions and attitudes that should characterise Christian living)
“Happy are the poor in spirit: theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
Happy are the gentle: they shall have the earth for their heritage.
Happy are those who mourn: they shall be comforted.
Happy those who hunger and thirst for what is right: they shall be satisfied.
Happy the merciful: they shall have mercy shown them.
Happy are the pure in heart: they shall see God.
Happy are the peacemakers: they shall be called the children of God.
Happy are those who are persecuted in the cause of right: theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
Happy are you when people abuse you and persecute you and speak all kinds of calumny against you on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward will be great in heaven; this is how they persecuted the prophets before you.” (Matthew 5, 3-12)⁴
- The **Corporal Works of Mercy**
To feed the hungry
To shelter the homeless
To clothe the naked
To visit the sick and imprisoned
To bury the dead. (Matthew 25: 31-46):
- The **Spiritual Works of Mercy**
To teach the ignorant
To counsel the doubtful
To convert the sinner
To bear wrongs patiently
To forgive enemies
To comfort the sorrowful
To pray for the living and the dead.

⁴ See the commentary on the Beatitudes in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, Part 3, article 2, p 426 ff.

3.0 PRACTICAL STEPS SCHOOLS CAN TAKE

- Make use of the richness of the Biblical and Church tradition, so that the community can be inspired and sustained by the living heritage of Catholicism. Every virtue or value promoted by the school can be linked to Scripture, particularly sayings or parables of Jesus.
- Identify the values and virtues of the school's particular tradition or charism and promote these.
- Identify (through discussions, focus groups and questionnaires) the values that staff, students and parents think the school actually operates by and what changes might need to be made to bring the school into line with its aspirations. These two exercises provide formative development for everyone in the school community. (Parents as first educators of their children need to be involved with defining the values the school is to live by.)
- Ensure that values, virtues and aspirations are on display, regularly mentioned in school newsletters, printed in the school's promotional material, referred to frequently in discussion, and that all staff, students and (as far as possible) parents can state what these values are, and know what sort of behaviour is expected as a result.
- Design experiences that take up the moral questions encountered by students.
- Offer students of all ages programmes that centre on self-understanding, philosophical enquiry and personal challenge, as well as an exploration of the spiritual dimension of their lives.
- Provide students (and staff) with opportunities for solitude, silence and meditation.
- Set up practical learning experiences which enable students to practise values and virtues, including a Service Charter or other volunteering and service programmes, where these do not already exist. Community outreach programmes are a traditional part of service learning.
- Programmes such as peer mediation, 'cool schools' and other recent developments also enable students to make values and virtues their own in a practical way.
- Find ways to remind teachers that values are caught not taught, that students need to feel that their teachers care deeply about them, and that their teachers model a way of behaviour worth emulating. Students are seeking an inspiring vision of life mediated to them by loving individuals.
- Build into the heart of the school attitudes of respect for every student, teacher and parent, making space for individual freedom and individual conscience, and for forgiveness and reconciliation. These attitudes are crucial to the love that every member of the community strives to put into practice. Restorative justice programmes are part of this behaviour.
- Tell stories that communicate gospel values, and encourage listeners to wonder about the implications of these stories.
- Use words that promote and support the idealism of the young, and that challenge them to higher levels of commitment to virtues and to service. Talk about the value and meaning of human existence, illuminated in the person of Jesus Christ.

4.0 CATHOLIC SCHOOL CULTURE Cook, T.J. *Architects of Catholic Culture*

4.1 Core Values in Catholic Schooling

Catholic school culture is a “way of life rooted in Christ, a Gospel-based creed and code, and a Catholic vision that provides inspiration and identity, is shaped over time, and is passed from one generation to the next through devices that capture and stimulate the Catholic imagination such as symbols and traditions.”

“Certain core values and beliefs, as a configuration, distinguish Catholicism from other Christian denominations: sacramentality, mediation and communion:

Catholics acknowledge God’s presence in the world and therefore view the world and life as *sacrament*, believing they can encounter God in the world through the *mediated* presence of Christ and His Church.

The Catholic experience of God also occurs within *community*, a community that is *universal* and *inclusive*, which includes the *communion of saints*.

Catholics believe that God is revealed through Scripture as well as through historical *tradition*.

Believing in the interplay of *faith and reason*, Catholics imagine God through analogy and metaphor, and experience religion through the five senses.

Catholics believe in basic *human goodness*; therefore, each individual has a *personhood* deserving of dignity and respect. Because of this, Catholics believe that all people have a social responsibility to protect all human life by working for *justice*.

These core beliefs and values should permeate all Catholic institutions, including Catholic schools.”⁵

4.2 Gospel Values Animating Catholic School Culture

- Faith:
Truth, fidelity, tradition, doctrine, prayer, revelation, reading scripture
- Service:
Commitment, caring, concern, involvement, empathy, almsgiving
- Courage:
Sacrifice, self-denial, fortitude, restraint, discipline, patience, temperance
- Justice:
Courage, risk, human dignity, stewardship, prophecy, interdependence, peace-seeking, equal distribution of goods, fortitude, empathy
- Hope:
Optimism, confidence, joy, realism, providence, trust, prophecy
- Love:
Oriented towards God - reverence, worship, submission, prayer; oriented towards self - self-esteem, prudence, temperance, creativity; oriented towards others - care, concern, respect, acceptance
- Reconciliation:
Forgiveness, mercy, compassion, humility, conflict resolution, working to eliminate evil, love of enemy
- Community:
Personal dignity, belonging, equality, fellowship, trust, care⁶

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⁵ Cook, T.J., *Architects of Catholic Culture*, pp 16-21, Washington DC, NCEA, 2001

⁶ Reck, C, 'Vision and Values', quoted in Cook, T.J., *Architects of Catholic Culture*, p19, Washington DC, NCEA 1983