**The Mission of the Catholic School**

Sr. Teresa Benedicta, OP

I was 18 years old when God called me to be a Sister.   As you can imagine, my college experience was somewhat different from that of most students.   It was as a religious Sister that I earned my teaching credentials, finished my undergrad work, and completed graduate studies.  While my peers struggled to balance work and parties and papers, I struggled to reconcile my life as a student with my life as a Religious.

My fellow college students and professors often saw me a paradox.  How could one be a person of faith and a professional educator at the same time?  At one secular university, I vividly remember meeting with the head of the philosophy department, trying to convince him to accept credits from courses I had taken elsewhere.   He sniffed depreciatingly when he saw me in the habit and made a show of looking up the classes I had taken.   “You never know,” he said belittlingly. “You may have official-looking philosophy classes on your transcript, but, if you took them from a religious institution, there is no guarantee it was actually *real* philosophy.  I worry that your faith, your religion, replaced the intellectual rigor and thought required in our discipline.   I respect spiritual people like yourself, of course, but I need to know that you are academically qualified.”    I am happy to report that I was.

I’d like to say that the mindset displayed by the aforementioned department head was an isolated and rare incident.   Unfortunately, it is all too common.  In our day, we face what Pope Saint John Paul the Great called an “increasing fragmentation of knowledge” (FeR 8), wherein the various disciplines are isolated one from another.   More and more, we fail to see the essential unity behind all truth and instead compartmentalize knowledge into specialized fields of study.   For instance, science and the fine arts are seen as polar opposites so that, we are told, social studies and math have nothing in common.  We teach subjects but not the transcendent reality which gives each subject meaning.   And the result?  Not only does a woman studying philosophy as a Religious Sister seem paradoxical, but also the world increasingly insists on the separation of faith and reason. Religion is a private thing, and the world compartmentalizes the faith like any other subject.  Even more disturbing, though, is how common this mentality of separation has become even in our Catholic schools.

Recently, in the San Francisco Bay area, Archbishop Cordileone introduced an addendum to the faculty handbooks with the intention of making known Church teaching to all his diocesan employees and “to proclaim clearly areas of Catholic identity in light of the culture in which we now live.”

Archbishop Cordileone claimed:

In every generation, Catholic schools exist both as centers of evangelization and faith formation as well as centers of academic excellence. The primary goal of Catholic schools is to give students the direction they need to live a holy life in this world, deepening their relationship with God now so that they may enjoy eternal happiness with God as their ultimate end. A secondary goal of Catholic schools is to foster an academic culture aimed at the pursuit of truth. In accord with longstanding Catholic intellectual tradition, students are taught how to think logically, critically, and compassionately so as to prepare them to lead virtuous lives in human society.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Supporting these words, Archbishop Cordileone referred his teachers to a seminal document on education, namely *Gravissimum educationis*.   I imagine he was thinking of passages like this:

A Christian education does not merely strive for the maturing of a human person as just now described, but *has as its principal purpose this goal*: that the baptized, while they are gradually introduced to the knowledge of the mystery of salvation, become ever more aware of the gift of Faith they have received (GE 2, my emphasis).

Perhaps too, he may have been referring to this section:

No less than other schools does the Catholic school pursue cultural goals and the human formation of youth. 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 (GE 8, my emphasis).

Unfortunately, it has been my experience working in the archdiocese that the document was not well received.   Although much of the Catholic School teacher’s opposition in San Francisco was directed towards the tone of the original addendum and revolved around Church teaching on moral issues, some of the confusion regarded the very nature of the Catholic School.  It seems that a number of the teachers had bought into the secular world’s distrust of faith.   These educators had grown used to compartmentalizing knowledge, and so they separated the intellectual endeavors of man from his spiritual pursuits.   As a result, they were uncomfortable saying that the primary mission of an academic institution was something beyond academics.

Moreover, some teachers have pleaded instead for what they termed the “language of *Fides et Ratio*.”   What they meant by this was that they did not want to speak of the primacy of evangelization and faith, but rather of an *equality* between academics and faith in which both were “like two wings on which the human spirit rises to the contemplation of truth” (FeR 1).

That sounds good on the surface, but, taken the wrong way, a plea for equality is still a false understanding of the very mission of the Catholic school.  To miss the primacy of the transcendent is to ultimately destroy the value of the finite and the good of any education at all.   Certainly faith and reason, or in this case academic and spiritual goals, are complementary; but they are not the same.   Nor do they have equal weight in the life of the human person, as the ultimate end of reason is not reason itself but transcendent reality: truth, goodness, beauty; contemplation of God Himself.   Thus, the ultimate goal of academics is not academics alone, but our final end: eternal bliss with God.   If one reads beyond the first line of *Fides et Ratio*, one sees that the encyclical further states:

Wherever men and women discover a call to the absolute and transcendent, the metaphysical dimension of reality opens up before them: in truth, in beauty, in moral values, in other persons, in being itself, in God. We face a great challenge at the end of this millennium to move from *phenomenon* to *foundation*, a step as necessary as it is urgent. We cannot stop short at experience alone…speculative thinking must penetrate to the spiritual core and the ground from which it rises (FeR 83).

In clear terms, *Fides et Ratio* is acknowledging the limits of an enclosed intellectual system.   Whenever the academic subject becomes an end in itself (when knowledge is isolated and learning compartmentalized), then that subject actually loses its ability to deeply impact humanity.   Mere experience and a culmination of facts doesn’t satisfy the human person.   Rather, people look for meaning, and they hunger for a knowledge that answers the deepest questions of the heart. This is a natural outcome of what it means to be human.

The human person is a magnificent part of creation.   Moreover, we stand unique in the universe because we are made from the earth and yet made for eternal happiness with God in Heaven.  Or, to use more philosophical terms, we have a finite body and an immortal soul.  We have a marvelous capacity to know and love which we express through physical gestures and words.   We are a harmony of matter and mind, of love and logic.

There are those who would reduce the person to the level of a complex machine, trying to explain the person by biology alone.  Thus, for instance, when two people fall in love, they would define “love” simply as a chemical response to neurons firing in the brain.   They would see our existence as an insignificant moment in the wide expanse of time, useful only insofar as we contribute to the continued evolution of the human race.

In sharp contrast to this is the good news of Christianity (and I might add the good news of “real philosophers” like Aristotle and Aquinas).   I am not just the product of chance and the randomness of matter.[[2]](#footnote-2) No, within me there is a spirit that is able to reason, will, and love.  I am made in the image and likeness of God.  I am more than matter; *I* matter; my life has meaning and purpose.   I live in this world, and the concerns of the world are my concerns, while, at the same time, I am a citizen of Heaven: I have an eternal inheritance that is waiting for me and my “forever after” will be with God Himself.

How do I reconcile the two dimensions of my being: body and soul?   Plato thought it was impossible to do so.  He saw the soul as being trapped within the confines of our corporeal needs.   For instance, one could talk about great ideas for hours were it not for the body demanding food, rest, and sleep.   Plato interpreted this as evidence that the body dragged the spirit down.  He saw the body as a separate tool to be used by the soul in order to achieve its will; the important thing being human choice.

Does this sound familiar?   I hear it echoed in the slogan: “It is my body, I can do what I want with it.”  Here the body isn’t a part of who I am, it is merely a thing to be used.   Likewise, this idea is also manifested in the notion that faith is only a private and personal conviction.   Faith is acknowledged to be a part of life, but it is seen as an isolated part.   In this worldview, we have a body and soul, temporal and transcendent desires, but there is no essential harmony between what we do and who we are.   I believe this is also the logic behind a separation of academics from faith.

In contrast, Aristotle, Plato’s pupil, compellingly argued for the unity of body and soul.   He argued that the body isn’t a cage for the spirit or a mechanism to be manipulated at will.   Rather, the body is an essential part of who we are and the visible expression of our invisible spirit.   Body and soul are distinct but they work together. Within the body-soul relationship (known by philosophers as hylomorphism), there is a proper ordering.   The rational part of man is meant to direct his irrational parts to a higher end.   For instance, when the body craves food, it is the soul that determines the suitable amount of nourishment and at the appropriate time.   The soul chooses to moderate the body’s urges in a healthy manner so that the entire person may live longer on earth.   Or, perhaps the soul chooses to fast, to go against the body’s natural hunger, in honor of Jesus’ suffering on the Cross.    Whatever the case, while body and soul are both necessary, the soul has primacy.   The body-soul relationship reflects both the natural and supernatural vocation of each human person.

One of the consequences of original sin has been the weakening of the proper order between our body and soul.  The body, which was designed to be guided by reason, now sometimes appears to be in conflict with it.  One might know it isn’t generally good to eat between meals; but, when feeling hungry or stressed, the body craves the quick satisfaction even if unreasonable.  As a result, it is a daily human challenge to choose reason over the irrational demands of the body.   Likewise, when the emotions do a blitz on our reason, it is a challenge to stand strong by what we know is right.   Such self-control and proper ordering, though, is what leads to human flourishing.

The body eventually dies and decays. The soul, however, is immortal.   Both philosophy and theology confirm that the human person isn’t just made for this life; we’re made for eternal life with God.  The eternal vocation of the human person has primacy over his temporal, earthly vocation.

On earth, everything passes.   Fortunes are made while wealth is lost, careers are advanced while individuals are laid off from jobs, Fame is achieved while popularity plummets.  All living things have moments of glory, and all have a time when they die.   One can’t hold on to possessions, to power, or to people forever.   But love, justice, kindness—these are the things that endure.    On a certain level, what we do is irrelevant; but *how* we do it is essential.  All the people one befriends and all the jobs held or successes accomplished are ordered to a life beyond this one.    Our eternal destiny depends on the love with which we acted on earth.  That is what makes our deeds significant: There is a transcendent reality giving meaning to the most trivial human act.

This fact is closely related to the mission of the Catholic school.   The school is a place of education, but the Catholic vision of education encompasses the whole person.   Its educational philosophy is one in which faith, culture, academics—all of life—is brought into harmony.[[3]](#footnote-3) It recognizes that the person is destined both for life in a human society and life with God. The school is meant to be a place both of academic instruction and of evangelization.[[4]](#footnote-4) To quote *Gravissimum educationis,* the school’s mission is “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 (GE 8).

Like any other school, the Catholic school will teach science and math, reading and writing.    The distinguishing characteristic of the Catholic school, however, is the fact that Christ, and consequently the human person, is at its center.   The Catholic school proudly affirms that all knowledge and academic studies are ordered to transcendent reality.   There are no isolated subjects.  Everything is charged with meaning and purpose.

To be sure, each academic field has its own proper autonomy, methodologies and structure; these ought to be preserved.   Ye,t each field reaches its highest potential when ordered to ultimate realities which endure.[[5]](#footnote-5) Far from lessening the academic excellence of a Catholic school, this recognition strengthens and upholds it.   When academic subjects point to the transcendent, they are assured of real meaning and value.   Faith in no way replaces intellectual rigor or substitutes for genuine learning, but rather, when the ultimate end of man is referenced, academic subjects are freed to reach their highest potential and to truly change society for the better.  Learning ceases to be fragmented knowledge; rather it becomes a cohesive search for truth and virtue.    The glorious fruit of grace perfecting nature is apparent.

For example, the Catholic mathematician should teach math according to the best practices of the discipline.    But math isn’t simply about producing engineers or constructing useful objects.   It is also about wonder and truth.   Mathematicians often say that mathematical beauty is the principle virtue that attracts them in their field.   When the transcendent is recognized, the math teacher and student are free to delight in it.

Likewise, English isn’t just about memorizing grammar rules, passing the AP exams, and correctly analyzing a text.  A good book expresses the very soul of the person and conveys the deepest realities of life.   Words have the power to move one to greatness or self-destruction. Literature is breathtakingly wonderful when it points beyond itself.   In contrast, when literature is simply a tool for pushing the latest social agenda, it has no enduring significance.   Fifty years from now people will still be reading Shakespeare and Dante, but no one will care about the latest dime-store novels.  Why?   The former’s works are transcendent; the latter are not.

In the same manner, science is the joy of discovering the order and complexity of our world.  Science uncovers the mysteries of the universe and “the whole of creation, from the distant celestial bodies and the immeasurable cosmic forces down to the infinitesimal particles and waves of matter and energy, all bear the imprint of the Creator's wisdom and power.”[[6]](#footnote-6) Science isn’t theology, but science is strengthened and ennobled when it acknowledges truth beyond itself.   It was this enduring desire for truth that pushed great scientists like Copernicus and Mendel to keep seeking answers when their answers seemed improbable and unwelcome.  Likewise, it is faith or the reality of the transcendent, which reminds the Victor Frankensteins of our world that unless science is ordered by love and a respect for nature’s inherent design, havoc will result.

The Church teaches that “education always presupposes and involves a definite concept of man and life.”[[7]](#footnote-7) The Catholic school proposes to its students this clear understanding of humanity.   In both the moral and academic culture of the school, the meaning of life and the dignity of each human person is reflected.  Reason is sustained and academics strengthened when the Catholic school communicates that there is objective truth and that it can be known.  The arts are ennobled and lives enriched when beauty is promoted and experienced. Humans flourish and society is perfected when goodness is taught and encouraged.  In the Catholic school, everything is ordered to excellence in this life and in the next.  Consequently, by insisting on the primacy of the spiritual and ordering all things accordingly, the Catholic School is at the forefront of education.

Instead of being afraid that putting faith first will corrode their classes, I wish that all contemporary Catholic school teachers could see how ultimate reality actually opens each subject to its greatest potential.  If I could give them a glimpse of Tommy studying the nervous system, trying to grasp the complexity of every single cell functioning, I would want them to see Tommy in awe of the intricate structure of the human person, not just Tommy memorizing parts on a diagram.   If the faculty peered into an English class, I hope they would see Laura agonizing over Sidney Carton’s declaration that he is incapable of giving himself in marriage.   I would want them to be moved not merely by the intelligence of the instructor, but by Laura herself grasping what true love entails. I would want the faculty to see the seamless harmony between Kyra’s character on the sport’s field, serving in the soup kitchen, and studying U.S. History.  This is what Catholic education looks like in practice.   All of life is integrated and ordered.  Catholic education is faith calling every discipline to the transcendent.

In summary, through the pursuit of ultimate reality, God is manifested and each student is invited to a deeper relationship with Him no matter which discipline he/she is studying.    Nevertheless, this invitation to find God in all things, experienced in every class, is concretely formalized in both the theology classroom and in the liturgical life of the school.   Here God is manifested not just as ultimate reality, but in the person of Jesus Christ himself. Only when Christ is at the center, does the Catholic school effectively educate its young people for this life and for all eternity.   This is the mission of the Catholic school.

1. This quotation is from the handbook addendum of the Archdiocese of San Francisco's Catholic High Schools. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. “And only where God is seen does life truly begin. Only when we meet the living God in Christ do we know what life is. We are not some casual and meaningless product of evolution. Each of us is the result of a thought of God. Each of us is willed, each of us is loved, each of us is necessary.” – Pope Benedict XVI, Inaugural homily, April 24th, 2005: [https://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/homilies/2005/documents/hf\_ben-xvi\_hom\_20050424\_inizio-pontificato.html](https://mail01.avemaria.edu/owa/redir.aspx?C=5p8RJiu9kkOaoQas_qZJAcPtkppRqtMIdQLf2kQz-ekrtwR28HKUjT1Ww7IAJUmu5_w3Dl4dpy4.&URL=https%3a%2f%2fw2.vatican.va%2fcontent%2fbenedict-xvi%2fen%2fhomilies%2f2005%2fdocuments%2fhf_ben-xvi_hom_20050424_inizio-pontificato.html) [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. “The Catholic school…is based on an educational philosophy in which faith, culture and life are brought into harmony. Through it, the local Church evangelizes, educates, and contributes to the formation of a healthy and morally sound life-style among its members. … the Catholic school helps in achieving a double objective: "of its nature it guides men and women to human and Christian perfection, and at the same time helps them to become mature in their faith. For those who believe in Christ, these are two facets of a single reality"” – *The Religious Dimension of Education in the Catholic School*, n. 34 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. “The Catholic school has had a clear identity, not only as a presence of the Church in society, but also as a genuine and proper instrument of the Church. It is a place of evangelization, of authentic apostolate and of pastoral action - not through complementary or parallel or extracurricular activity, but of its very nature: its work of educating the Christian person.” – *The Religious Dimension of Education in the Catholic School*, n. 33 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. “…giving order to human culture in the light of the message of salvation cannot mean a lack of respect for the autonomy of the different academic disciplines and the methodology proper to them; nor can it mean that these disciplines are to be seen merely as subservient to faith. On the other hand, it is necessary to point out that a proper autonomy of culture has to be distinguished from a vision of the human person or of the world as totally autonomous, implying that one can negate spiritual values or prescind from them.”  – *The Religious Dimension of Education in the Catholic School*, n. 53 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. *The Religious Dimension of Education in the Catholic School*, n. 54. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. *The Catholic School on the Threshold of the 3rd Millenium*, n. 10. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)