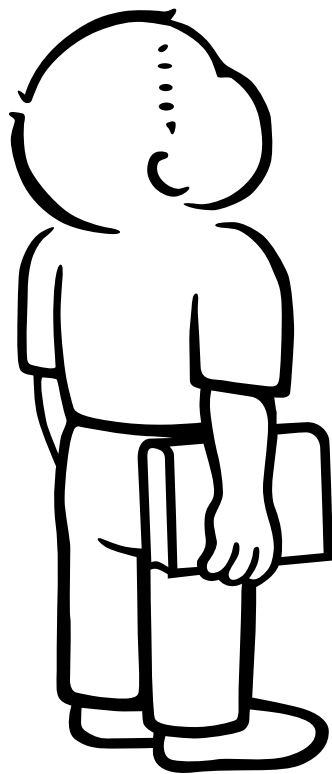


# Catholic Schools – Permeated by Faith



Published by the Alberta Catholic School Trustees' Association

# The Nature of a Catholic School

The Vatican II document *Gravissimum Educationis* provides a clear expression of the nature of a Catholic school:

*The Catholic school pursues cultural goals and the natural development of youth to the same degree as any other school. What makes the Catholic school distinctive is its attempt to generate a community climate in the school that is permeated by the Gospel spirit of freedom and love. It tries to guide the adolescents in such a way that personality development goes hand in hand with the development of the 'new creature' that each one has become through baptism. It tries to relate all of human culture to the good news of salvation so that the light of faith will illumine everything that the students will gradually come to know about the world, about life, and about the human person.*

In this learning environment, spiritual development complements intellectual development. The element of faith is integrated into every instruction plan in every program, to demonstrate its relationship to the world of human culture.

There is in fact no delineation between religious and non-religious learning in a Catholic school. Instead, teachers focus on integrating the faith dimension into every subject area. Whether the subject is science, math, or fine arts, students learn about the "whole person", including the concepts of intelligence, free will, feelings, rights and responsibilities, interpersonal relationships, and the call to a specific mission in the world.

The unique nature of the Catholic school is integral to its role in conveying the Catholic faith, a role shared by the home and the parish. That faith is modeled every day by teachers and staff in Catholic schools; and it has practical implications for every subject taught in the school.

*A Catholic school must be a place where all knowledge  
and relationships are transformed by questions of  
meaning, by the quest for meaning.  
We must have a profound respect  
for what is all too often repressed in this culture -  
that quiet voice which expresses  
the infinite desire of each person for God.*

*- This Moment of Promise*

# Theory Brought To Life

An integrated curriculum helps students make connections between ideas and reality, showing them that what they learn in school is meaningful in the world outside the school. In Catholic schools, the **integration** of faith development and academic development can take many forms, as in the following example:

*A Catholic junior high school in southern Alberta extends its eucharistic celebrations to involve a number of classes. The home economics class makes unleavened bread for the liturgy; the shop class builds portable crosses which transform the gymnasium into a place of worship; music students perform at the liturgy. Language arts and social studies classes select events from the Church calendar as themes for writing assignments. And when questions arise (for example dealing with the death of a fellow student), teachers feel confident in answering them based on Church teachings, whether they are in religion class, math class, or in the hallway.*

In this environment, the life, death, and resurrection of Christ, is upheld as the central event of all human development.

**Social studies** are based on the social teachings of Jesus Christ, who was himself a model of social reform. For example:

*One Catholic school has integrated references to a number of papal encyclicals in the social studies curriculum for grades 5 through 12. The principal states "Students are not ashamed to talk about Jesus and relate to His teachings, even in the student handbook."*

A teacher in another Catholic school writes:

*"In social studies, the Catholic school allows me the opportunity to discuss both the historical and spiritual life of Christ in relation to other historical events. This type of integration is something I value."*

In the context of a Catholic school, students are encouraged to **model the behaviour of Christ**, and discipline is based on the ideals of justice, love, and service, rather than on conventional standards of human ethics and morality. Catholic schools strive to build self-control, self-discipline, leadership, and discipleship within students. One teacher writes:

*"... during playground supervision, when disputes arise among the younger students it is always useful to rely on the teachings of Christ - the most basic concept of 'love one another' seems to be something younger minds can comprehend."*

When discussing **career opportunities**, Catholic schools allow students to explore social justice issues such as fair wages, the possibility of a call to ministry, and the concept of "service". The choice of a career is not seen as a question of how the student can realize the greatest material success, but of how they may be of most service.

*The Catholic teacher... cannot be content simply to present Christian values as a set of abstract objectives to be admired, even if this is done positively and with imagination; they must be presented as values which generate human attitudes, and these attitudes must be encouraged in the students. Examples of such attitudes would be these: a freedom which includes respect for others; conscientious responsibility; a sincere and constant search for truth; a calm and peaceful critical spirit; a spirit of solidarity with and service toward all other persons; a sensitivity for justice; a special awareness of being called to be positive agents of change in a society that is undergoing continuous transformation.*

*- Lay Catholics in Schools: Witnesses to Faith*

In the **sciences**, teachers consistently address moral and ethical dilemmas such as euthanasia, genetic engineering, and advances in reproductive technologies, from the viewpoint of Catholic theology and philosophy. A number of support documents have been developed for teachers' reference; for example, "Topics in Bioethics for Science and Religion Teachers", a series of articles written by specialists from the Catholic Bioethics Centre and St. Joseph's College (University of Alberta). Each article raises a number of ethical considerations, relates them specifically to the current science curriculum, and addresses them from a Catholic perspective. For example:

*The intrinsic meaning of science and technology is connected with 'unconditional respect for the fundamental criteria of the moral law,' that is, 'they must be at the service of the human person, of his or her inalienable rights and his or her true and integral good according to the design and will of God. If prenatal diagnosis respects the life and integrity of the embryo and the human fetus and is directed toward its safeguarding or healing as an individual, then it is morally acceptable.*

*Any link between prenatal diagnosis and abortion is to be discouraged and condemned. It is regarded as an abuse of the unborn child's right to life.*

When discussing **human relationships**, teachers are free to reinforce the morals espoused by the Catholic Church, and taught by parents at home: the value of abstinence from sexual relations until marriage, the sacred nature of marriage as a lifelong commitment, and the development of a loving relationship with God, which forms the basis of relationships with others.

Most importantly, Catholic schools provide **religious education programs** and strong support for the sacramental preparation provided through the parish and at home, to give students a firm base from which they can grow in an understanding of their faith. Through prayer, eucharistic celebrations, social justice projects, and retreat days, students learn how to build a deeper personal relationship with Jesus Christ and a commitment to the Gospel's call to transformation.

*"I don't think there have been any educators that have done a better job of preparing our children for the reality of the world to come than those who in the name of our faith have taught them patience, openness, tolerance, kindness, respect, responsibility, knowledge, and care... We want to make a world of technology, efficiency, and lower deficits, but also a world of kindness and compassion, that sees the bottom line in love."*

*- Fr. Erik Riechers, 1994 ACSTA Convention*

This focus on spiritual growth holds true for staff as well as students. Many Catholic schools begin each day with **staff prayer** or reflection, and many districts involve all their staff in regular retreat days. The strength which comes from sharing prayer and providing time for reflection empowers teachers and all staff to be strong, consistent models of their faith. In some cases, the witnessing has been so powerful that non-Catholic students have been moved to become baptized members of the Catholic community.

At the same time, the faith that is studied, witnessed, and modeled in a Catholic school is reflected in the **physical environment** of the school through the presence of crucifixes, religious icons, sculptures and other artwork, banners, chapels, and prayer corners. These concrete symbols reinforce the integration of the faith life throughout the everyday school life of students and staff.

From these few brief examples it is clear that the permeation of the Catholic faith throughout the life of a Catholic school is not an idealistic theory - it is a theory at work in schools across Alberta.

## The Trustee's Role

The trustee is an important link in the partnership of home, school, and parish. As representatives of the Catholic community to the government, trustees have the opportunity and the responsibility to model their faith in the political arena. Implicit in that role is the responsibility to speak out when legislation or political action threatens to compromise the unique nature of Catholic education. Catholic school trustees must continually call for a discerning, visionary interpretation of legislation which recognizes the essence of Catholic education and its significance to society.

It is important to remember that when our province was formed in 1905, separate schools were considered so intrinsic to the nature of society that they were constitutionally protected. With the constant transformation of society over the past hundred years, it is more vital than ever that we continue to provide students with an education based on Gospel values - values such as the sacred character of each person, his or her relationship with God, with all God's people, and with creation. These values will guide students in creating a more caring, responsible, just, and faith-filled world.

It is not possible to confine the instruction or the demonstration of those values to an occasional religious studies class. This would only undermine the importance of what is being taught. It is equally impossible to remove certain students from the influence of those values. To do so would exclude them from the whole experience of a faith-filled education.

Instead, we must continue to ensure that:

- as the trustees of Catholic education, we develop within ourselves a deeper understanding of and commitment to the nature of Catholic education;
- the essence of Catholic education, formed through the partnership of home, school, and parish, is recognized and supported in the political arena;
- our teachers are supported, encouraged, and provided with opportunities to further study Catholic philosophy and theology;
- our principals are allowed opportunities to examine their unique role in shaping the faith life of their school; and
- our students are seen as individuals, offered the unique opportunity to study in a learning environment permeated by the Gospel values of truth, justice, and love.

*"The Catholic School aims at academic excellence in every area without excluding God from any area."*

*- from an address by Philip F. Pocock  
to the Catholic Education Association of Ontario  
March 1971*

**Alberta Catholic School Trustees' Association  
August 1996**

**Copying of this document for educational purposes is encouraged.**