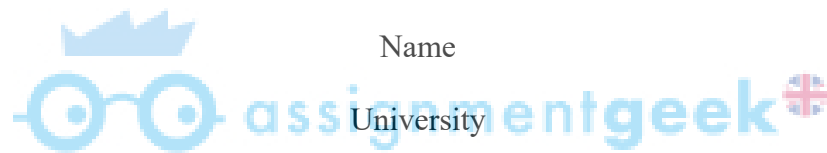


“Catholic Identity pervades the whole life of the school.” Discuss.



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Abstract

That education today, and globally, is subject to intense investigation is an inescapable reality. Societies struggle to comprehend both their own ambitions regarding students and how education, in any meaningful sense of the word, may best be promoted for the student's welfare. Further complicating debates are significant factors of commercial agendas, governmental funding, varying community perspectives, and other forces. Perhaps ironically, the Catholic school most represents the true initiative here, in that an authentic Catholic identity of the school invariably enhances the student's experience, through linking learning to the universality of human concerns. This has been my experience as well, in working within such a school and participating in the fundamental processes centred on Christ. As the following supports, Catholic identity creates a foundation of virtues and understanding guiding the student throughout life, and enhances the views and values affirming the humanity of the society through each individual student's ultimate awareness of the moral imperative to live as a true Catholic.

“Catholic Identity pervades the whole life of the school.” Discuss.

Education today faces inestimable challenges, perhaps more so than ever before. Ethnic diversity, globalization, funding, technology, governmental mandates, and other forces combine to reshape how schools function, and frequently in ways virtually experimental. Parents, administrations, and communities engage in endless debate as to what best serves the student’s interests and, all too often, the student becomes lost in the process. What appears to have developed, in fact, is a dangerous erosion of the understanding that the school exists as far more than an institution providing learning. Schools have always been central to the lives of students in all cultures, and chiefly because young people are exposed to the multiple facets of life and their societies at the most impressionable stages of the lives. Given this reality and largely derived from personal experience, I may confidently affirm that the school founded on a Catholic identity provides benefits for students as no other school may. This identity creates a foundation of ethics and understanding guiding the student through life, and enhancing the perceptions and values ultimately affirming the humanity of the society through each individual student’s greater awareness of the moral imperative to live as a true Catholic.

Discussion

To comprehend how the Catholic school so benefits the student and, consequently, the society, it is first necessary to explore the nature of Catholic identity itself. In no uncertain terms, this has been the subject of intense debate, as Catholicism has been associated with immoral, and sometimes criminal, conduct. In our globalized world, viewpoints are seized upon from culture to culture and, unfortunately, meaning is diffused or ignored through an emphasis on deviations from that identity. Then, and scandals in the Church aside, there has long been study indicating flaws in Catholic institutions, and largely focused on how the religious component tends to

impact only on those students from Catholic homes. Research in the mid-20th century, for example, supports that specific Catholic ideals are transitory at best in larger student populations composed of diverse faith backgrounds (Grace, 2002, p. 83). What such study neglects, however, is the entirety of the Catholic identity itself which, ironically, transcends denomination. From my own experience and through extensive involvement in my Catholic school's functioning, I have been consistently encouraged to comprehend the universality at the heart of the identity. What I witness and participate in, and what I feel must be reinforced, is that the Catholic identity in the school is the humanist identity necessary for all schools. It is odd that so much attention is directed at differences in religious ideologies when the dominant world religions espouse the same principles, and any interpretation of the "Catholic" as distanced from this commonality does a great disservice to the faith. It is an identity promoting the strongest adherence to morality, and morality in its innate meaning of concern for others.

In a very real sense, the Catholic identity is universal because it is concerned, not with punitive measures or judgments only rightly belonging to God, but with the universalism of humanity's obligation to attend to itself through attending to our brothers and sisters. Schools may endorse various ideologies upholding different social priorities, but the Catholic identity, in its inherent affirmation of the worth of life as bestowed by God, belongs to all. What seems to obfuscate this reality is an undue association with Church hierarchy, or a misguided identification between the Church and the core identity. To some extent, certainly, the connections are necessary, as so vast a faith must be rooted in structure and overseen by Catholic theologians: "The Catholic identity should be underpinned and nourished by explicit links to the Church" (McMullen, 2011, p. 6). At the same time, even Church structure reflects fundamental Catholic values, just the educational environment is largely removed from the organisation's

being as reinforcing Catholicism is various forms socially. Ultimately, any school exists to further the student's development in learning and as a human being. The Catholic identity is then a model for encouraging such development in the most humanist and expansive ways.

Within my Catholic school, moreover, I have had the opportunity to witness firsthand the myriad effects and benefits when this identity is pervasively expressed in the environment. In plain terms, there is no aspect or function of the school not reflective of the Catholic identity, which is evident in behaviours of staff and students, departmental policies, and community interactions. I daily see students and teachers conducting themselves on what I term a foundation of morality. Speech and actions are defined by what, in fact, is absent; there are few, if any, exchanges in which disrespect is heard, just as authority positions, while maintaining their roles, are marked by consideration for the other. At the same time, these Catholic models of respectful interaction encompass a further quality of the identity. More exactly, and within virtually all instruction, there is an active commitment to an Apostolic strategy. Subject matter notwithstanding, a radical and energised dialogue occurs as each subject is traced, to some extent, to its quintessential meaning (McMullen, 2011, p. 4). This is crucial to the Catholic identity as advancing student interest, if only because it accentuates the innate value of each subject and relates it to life. It is no coincidence that "catholic" as an adjective translates to the universal, or all-embracing, because only such a perspective may accommodate all that concerns humanity. The student is enabled to perceive how all matters exist within the greater whole, as even the most seemingly insignificant matter has meaning when properly understood.

As I further reflect on my own experiences, I am also aware of how a particular trajectory derives from these interactions. As instructors and students work together to explore various studies, the platform of the Catholic identity inevitably expands discussion in ways directly

linking it to Gospel. An exponential process occurs in which fundamental truth is served by, and serves, extensions of that truth, and the humanist universality of the faith as synonymous with living is all the more enhanced. This sets apart the Catholic school from the secular, and emphatically so. There is a critical distinction between generalized and Catholic approaches to education, in that the latter encompasses the totality of the student's life in ways secular education does not (Grace, O'Keefe, 2007, p. 126). Through the recontextualising of Scripture and the Gospels, and through their application to human concerns, all is seen through widening perspectives. Just as the student gains a deeper appreciation for a subject by perceiving it through the "lens" of the Catholic worldview, so too are the teachings of the Church open to fresh interpretation. The inestimably valuable processes of story-telling, intrinsically developing in interactive processes, create new stories about God, humanity, and the relationships between the mortal and the divine (Pollefeyt, Bouwens, 2014, p. 312). In no uncertain terms, this is the visceral meaning of education itself.

Lastly, in my school, there is as well a living relationship between Gospel preaching, Catholic iconography, and education. To begin with, there is no pejorative connotation to preaching in this context, as the words has become synonymous with dogma. Rather, the preaching is engaged in as revelatory, and inviting response from students. An embracing of inquiry is essential if any ideology or faith is to affirm itself as confident, and I am pleased to assert that I have often witnessed this in the school's practices. Then, and importantly, the school exhibits crucifixes and other forms of Catholic iconography in classrooms and other settings, and this has, as I perceive it, a remarkable effect. Visual impact is to an extent diffused by the consistent presence of the icons, yet they also reinforce, subliminally or otherwise, the need to always consider the origins of the faith and its primal link to humanity through Christ. They are

markers, but they are powerful symbols as well, drawing the viewer of them more deeply into the living relationship with Christ (Pollefeyt, Bouwens, 2014, p. 297). The icons, in a word, send a message, and perhaps the most critical message a student may receive: service, faith, and action are mutually inclusive. Beyond anything else, understanding Christ as the centre of existence is empowering as nothing else may be, because the Catholic identity based upon the understanding exalts the student's self, and desires to achieve, to fulfill the best they may be.

Conclusion

In a world confronting increasing educational challenges, the Catholic school dedicated to Catholic ideals stands alone, and as a model of education necessarily encompassing the true goals of any school. Learning in any area is of little value unless the student understands it as inextricable to their own life, and the lives of those around them demanding the same considerations. Catholicism, beyond any other definition, is humanist universalism embodied in Christ and service to Him. Personally, I have been privileged to work within such an environment and observe firsthand how Catholic beliefs exalt learning in all ways. Ultimately, the Catholic identity in the school is a foundation of morality and understanding guiding the student through life, and enhancing the thinking, behaviours, and values affirming the humanity of the society through each student's greater awareness of the moral imperative to live as a true Catholic.

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