

## **Catholic Identity in light of the Academic Curriculum**

Critical remarks based on *The Religious Dimension of Education in a Catholic School*

The *National Standards and Benchmarks for Effective Catholic Elementary and Secondary Schools* (hereafter *NSBECESS*) aims to assist schools in strengthening their Catholic identity. In a time of great confusion about Catholic identity, the attempt to help schools reflect on their fundamental mission is always welcome. But the document quite deliberately sets aside the way in which Catholic identity should determine curriculum. The "standards" and "benchmarks" are "offered as school effectiveness standards rather than curriculum content standards, although they support development consistent with national standards and Common Core State Standards." (p.vi) This is a grave defect. The content of the courses, what is actually taught, defines the school's identity more than anything else.

Many if not most Catholic schools have science, history, and literature curricula that are identical to their secular counterparts. The acceptance of secular curricula in Catholic schools is even treated as a sign of academic excellence (e.g. Advanced Placement courses). *NSBECESS* seems to comply with the *status quo*, stating baldly that their document supports development of the curriculum in accord with completely secular standards such as "Common Core State Standards." *NSBECESS* seems unaware that this has resulted in a "compartmentalizing" of the faith. Theology seems to have no bearing on the other subjects of the curriculum, unless by happy accident the teacher introduces it. The intellectual dimension of faith is sealed off from the rest of the subjects.

Cardinal Newman over a century ago explained the problem with this approach. A curriculum that acknowledges God as the universal cause of creation with theology as its center cannot and should not look the same as a curriculum for which this principle is doubted or denied. Why? Theology asserts that "All that is good, all that is true, all that is beautiful, all that is beneficent, be it great or small, be it perfect or fragmentary, natural as well as supernatural, moral as well as material, comes from Him." As a logical consequence, theology "considered as knowledge" must be expected "to exert a powerful influence on philosophy, literature, and every intellectual creation or discovery whatever." Newman asks rhetorically, "Does [theology] cast no light upon history? has it no influence upon the principles of ethics? is it without any sort of bearing on physics, metaphysics, and political science? Can we drop it out of the circle of knowledge, without allowing, either that that circle is thereby mutilated, or on the other hand, that Theology is really no science?" (*Idea of the University*, Discourse III, "Bearing of Theology on other branches of Knowledge," §§7-8)

*NSBECESS* draws its guidelines from *The Holy See's Teaching on Catholic Schools*, and from statements by Pope Benedict XVI and the American bishops. Well and good. But a document that goes unmentioned is *The Religious Dimension of Education in a Catholic School*, promulgated by the Congregation for Catholic Education (4/7/88) This is

particularly unfortunate, since that document specifically addresses the distinctive traits of the academic program in a Catholic school. In *The Religious Dimension of a Catholic School*, (hereafter *RDECS*) guidelines are given for four academic areas: 1) religion 2) science 3) history and 4) other "humanities" (philosophy, art, literature).

## **Religion**

The tendency for decades has been to make the religion class the "easy" class, the least academically challenging part of the core curriculum. Even when schools avoided the fads and fashions in religion that gutted the academic content for "projects" and "activities," religion texts were considerably lighter on content than science or history. Even today, religion courses are often the easiest, certainly never the hardest class in the school. *NSBECESS* states that "The school's Catholic identity requires excellence in academic and intellectual formation in all subjects, including religious education." But it does not make clear the comparative difficulty of religious instruction to other subjects.

*RDECS* insists that a Catholic secondary school "give special attention to the 'challenges' that human culture poses for faith. Students will be helped to attain that synthesis of faith and culture which is necessary for faith to be mature." (52) There is no way to address those challenges in an "easy" course. It should therefore be expected that the religion class should be required to have "the same systematic demands and the same rigour" as other classes, as is stated in the *General Directory for Catechesis*, promulgated by the Congregation for the Clergy a decade later. The *General Directory*, elaborating on this point from *RDECS*, explained that religious instruction "must present the Christian message and the Christian event with the same seriousness and the same depth with which other disciplines present their knowledge. It should not be an accessory alongside of these disciplines, but rather it should engage in a necessary inter-disciplinary dialogue." (73§5)

Many Catholic educators struggle with this directive, because they think of the content of a religion class as fundamentally a matter of "faith," while the secular courses offer "knowledge." But Christian teaching can be an invitation to non-believers, just as the explanations and responses that are made to non-believers can be illuminating for believers. Hence, "religious instruction cannot help but strengthen the faith of a believing student, just as catechesis cannot help but increase one's knowledge of the Christian message." (69) The rational account one gives for faith provides an important "common ground" for believers and unbelievers alike.

Both believers and non-believers are therefore poorly served by intellectually undemanding religion courses that seem to have little to say to the challenges posed by the larger culture. *RDECS* makes a helpful distinction between "catechesis" and "religious instruction." What a believing Christian learns in a religion class is "catechesis": "catechesis presupposes that the hearer is receiving the Christian message as a salvific reality." (68) What a non-believer receives is "religious instruction," that is, an

explanation of what the Churches teaches which does not presuppose acceptance of Church authority.

### Science

The engagement with the larger culture cannot be the sole responsibility of the religion faculty. It is the responsibility of all teachers in a Catholic school, albeit to varying degrees. It is perhaps no surprise that *RDECS* first raises the distinctive task of science instructors, who are exhorted to "help their students to understand that positive science, and the technology allied to it, is a part of the universe created by God." (54)

To take one example, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* teaches that "the eternal God gave a beginning to all that exists outside of himself; he alone is Creator....The totality of what exists...depends on the One who gives it being." (n.290) From this, the *Catechism* denounces *materialism* as an error, which "reject[s] any transcendent origin for the world, but see[s] it as merely the interplay of matter that has always existed." (n.285) And yet, secular science textbooks used in Catholic schools are overwhelmingly materialistic in their account. They virtually equate "materialism" with "the scientific method." Students learn that God is the creator of all in their religion class, but then this basic principle is systematically denied in their science textbooks.

The same problem occurs in science texts' treatment of the human person. *RDECS* condemns the "fragmented and insufficient curriculum" in which science does not "complement" religious knowledge of the human person, but merely contradicts it. Rather, "Teachers dealing with areas such as anthropology, biology, psychology, sociology and philosophy all have the opportunity to present a complete picture of the human person, including the religious dimension. Students should be helped to see the human person as a living creature having both a physical and a spiritual nature." (55) Students learn in a religion class that man is defined by the possession of a rational soul. Students then learn in their science class that either man has no soul, or that the religious notion of "soul" has no explanatory power.

The *Catechism* teaches that "The unity of soul and body is so profound that one has to consider the soul to be the "form" of the body: i.e., it is because of its spiritual soul that the body made of matter becomes a living, human body; spirit and matter, in man, are not two natures united, but rather their union forms a single nature." (365) As a logical consequence, "The Church teaches that every spiritual soul is created immediately by God—it is not 'produced' by the parents—and also that it is immortal." This is why the Church allows for an evolutionary development in the human body, but cannot allow a similar development in the human soul: "for the Catholic faith obliges us to hold that souls are immediately created by God." (Pius XII *Humani generis* n.36) Science textbooks however treat human origins entirely in terms of the body, implicitly or explicitly denying a soul. Man is merely a more advanced primate whose has evolved by

chance. He is not a being who is "made to the image and likeness of God" as part of a providential plan.

The *Constitution of the Church in the Modern World* ("Gaudium et spes") spoke to our time as well as its own when it declared "today's progress in science and technology can foster a certain exclusive emphasis on observable data, and an agnosticism about everything else. For the methods of investigation which these sciences use can be wrongly considered as the supreme rule of seeking the whole truth." (57) The Council Fathers declare that, while the sciences have their own principles that must be respected, the autonomy of the sciences does not mean that they are divorced from the creator. "Without the Creator, the creature becomes unintelligible." (GS 36) "Unintelligible" should not be taken as figurative speech. While having their own principles, natural things ultimately are not sufficient to explain themselves. We do not live in a universe governed "by chance, blind fate, anonymous necessity" but rather "by a transcendent, intelligent and good Being called 'God'." (CCC 284)

### **Philosophy and the "Humanities"**

In a time that has seen the development of the STEM school (Science/Technology/Engineering/Math), the "humanities" courses can appear only necessary to give the rudiments of literacy and a veneer of culture. But *RDECS* insists that the "increased attention given to science and technology must not lead to a neglect of the humanities: philosophy, history, literature and art." (60) For, in addition to the theoretical and practical knowledge that comes from the sciences, students still need an "understanding of all that is implied in the concept of 'person': intelligence and will, freedom and feelings, the capacity to be an active and creative agent; a being endowed with both rights and duties, capable of interpersonal relationships, called to a specific mission in the world." (55) This is not exclusively or even primarily the task of religion courses. History, literature, and philosophy each in their own way help students understand human nature and the distinctive dignity of human life. This is one among many reasons why they are called "humanities."

The Second Vatican Council was alarmed at the way that "the denial of God or of religion" had influenced "literature, the arts, the interpretation of the humanities and of history and civil laws themselves." (7) While the scientific method yields impressive discoveries, its focus on controlled experimentation prevents it from answering questions "about the place and role of man in the universe, about the meaning of its individual and collective strivings, and about the ultimate destiny of reality and of humanity." (3) The Council exhorted modern men to seek "wisdom": "The intellectual nature of the human person is perfected by wisdom and needs to be, for wisdom gently attracts the mind of man to a quest and a love for what is true and good. Steeped in wisdom, man passes through visible realities to those which are unseen." (15) Wisdom is not just another way of saying "theology"; the patrimony of philosophic and literary reflection offers wisdom too. (cf. GS 44, 56)

The Catholic school therefore should not emphasize science to the detriment of other forms of "knowing." Indeed, it should help students see that one can reason about human nature and the universe in which he lives in other ways than the scientific method. The most evident way of seeing this is moral knowledge: "In the depths of his conscience, man detects a law which he does not impose upon himself, but which holds him to obedience. Always summoning him to love good and avoid evil, the voice of conscience when necessary speaks to his heart: do this, shun that." (16) The moral law (or "natural law") is known to all. It is evident in its basic commands in cultures throughout history." (CCC 1958)

But for many students, all they know is moral disagreement and confusion. As *RDECS* notes, "Concepts such as truth, beauty and goodness have become so vague today that young people do not know where to turn to find help. " (9) Indeed, they often live "in a one dimensional universe in which the only criterion is practical utility and the only value is economic and technological progress." (10) While STEM programs can contribute to our physical well-being, courses in the humanities should contribute to understanding nature and purpose of human life. The exploration of cultures and the study of literature, for example, can bring to light the essential goods of human life: bravery, self-control, justice, judgment, love, friendship and ultimately wisdom.

### **History**

The Catholic identity of a school does not demand that it teach history with an emphasis on "Church history" or a revisionist "pro-Catholic" version of secular history. Certainly, these might be more desirable than history texts that either ignore or denigrate the Church, which is too often the case. But *RDECS* does not call for merely "partisan" history that ignores or minimizes the moral failings of Catholics and other Christians.

Rather, it exhorts teachers in a Catholic school to consider history as a means for understanding human nature, and its supernatural possibilities. History is not, as many "progressive" history texts would have it, a narrative in which cultures proceed from religion and other forms of "superstition" to science and enlightenment. Rather, it is a "drama of human grandeur and human misery," a "monumental struggle" between "the good and the evil that is within each individual." (58)

This struggle is not resolved as the result of advances in technology, economic development and government reform. As *Gaudium et spes* makes clear, "man is split within himself. As a result, all of human life, whether individual or collective, shows itself to be a dramatic struggle between good and evil, between light and darkness. Indeed, man finds that by himself he is incapable of battling the assaults of evil successfully, so that everyone feels as though he is bound by chains." (13) One does not have to believe in a doctrine of "original sin" to see that the human problem is not solved "technical" inventions, by having the "right" people in power, or better schools and public institutions, for "the disturbances which so frequently occur in the social order" ultimately "flow from man's pride and selfishness." (GS 25§3)

At the same, the study of history in a Catholic school should allow for hope. "When they are ready to appreciate it, students can be invited to reflect on the fact that this human struggle takes place within the divine history of universal salvation. At this moment, the religious dimension of history begins to shine forth in all its luminous grandeur" (*RDECS* 59) The "progressive" view of history always looks toward some heaven on earth, and is profoundly disappointed when it never comes. Indeed, many political projects in the name of "progress" have made life a hell on earth.

For its part, Christian belief and practice have given rise to real social progress, despite the sinful behavior of Christians. As John Paul II observed, "Through the power of the Gospel, down the centuries monks tilled the land, men and women Religious founded hospitals and shelters for the poor, Confraternities as well as individual men and women of all states of life devoted themselves to the needy and to those on the margins of society, convinced as they were that Christ's words 'as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me' (Mt 25:40) were not intended to remain a pious wish, but were meant to become a concrete life commitment." (*Centesimus annus* 57) Indeed, learning about these forms of genuine progress that can provide a reasonable optimism for students and "help to offset the disgust that comes from learning about the darker side of human history." (*RDECS* 59) Catholic school students would be ill served if they graduated ignorant of the concrete ways in which the Gospel has improved human life.

### **Literature**

Literature, like history, has its way of helping students understand their own humanity. The Second Vatican Council noted the contribution of "literature and the arts" for the way in which they "strive to make known the proper nature of man, his problems and his experiences in trying to know and perfect both himself and the world." (*GS* 62 §2) Our lived experience can often be very narrow, but the broader range of experience that literature makes possible can help the student to see true human potential for nobility and wickedness.

There is always the temptation to give students stories primarily from their own culture and time, but the stories from far away places and the remote past provide greater opportunities for seeing our shared humanity. In great literature such as Homer's *Odyssey*, Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, and Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, one sees "the struggles of societies, of families, and of individuals" which "spring from the depths of the human heart, revealing its lights and its shadows, its hope and its despair." (*RDECS* 61)

The trend of secular education has been to turn literature into "consciousness raising" and other forms of political indoctrination. To be sure, politics is a part of literature. But students are denied the true greatness of literature if it is seen primarily through a "feminist," or "pacifist" or "multiculturalist" lens. More important than political "categories" are the character "types" that manifest the moral and spiritual dimension of human life. To see the world through the eyes of a Rosalind or Antigone broadens the students ability to see the consequences of moral choices. C. S. Lewis put it best when he

wrote "in reading great literature I become a thousand men and yet remain myself. Like the night sky in the Greek poem, I see with a myriad eyes, but it is still I who see. Here, as in worship, in love, in moral action, and in knowing, I transcend myself; and am never more myself than when I do." (*An Experiment in Criticism*, p.141)

Within a Catholic school, literature courses should also allow students to encounter stories with a spiritual dimension. Even pre-Christian and non-Christian literature can do this to some extent, for "in every human culture, art and literature have been closely linked to religious beliefs." (*RDECS* 60) But of course there is no substitute for exposure to classics informed by a Christian perspective: "The artistic and literary patrimony of Christianity, is vast and gives visible testimony to a faith that has been handed down through centuries." (*ibid*)

### **Conclusion**

The concerns of *National Standards and Benchmarks for Effective Catholic Elementary and Secondary Schools* to recall the faithful to a greater involvement and investment in our Catholic schools is laudable. The effort to have Catholic schools better governed, more affordable, and academically respectable however will bear little fruit if what the students learn merely imitates the curriculum of their secular counterparts, as if the Catholic intellectual tradition offered no distinctive perspective of its own. The "standards" and "benchmarks" call for an "integration of religious, spiritual, moral and ethical dimensions of learning in all subjects" (7.2), but they give no guidance for how that integration would begin to happen. This deficiency is aggravated by the document's unqualified acceptance of "national standards and Common Core State Standards." (p.vi) The Catholic school, in this document's presentation, has no distinctive intellectual contribution.

The problem with integrating the Catholic intellectual tradition goes beyond the secular books that dominate the curriculum. Catholic schools are staffed by teachers who have largely secular formations in their various disciplines. God has no place in the science book, and the science teacher, even if personally devout, has no formation in how He would be added. The science teacher indeed may have no formation in any other mental categories besides "faith" and "science" -- no place for the rational or "philosophic" exploration of man and nature apart from the "scientific method." The same is true for the history teacher and the literature teacher; they are Catholics, and they are teachers, but they have little to no preparation in the Catholic intellectual tradition that would allow their subject to integrate the "religious, spiritual, moral and ethical dimensions of learning," as *NSBECESS* requires.

Unless and until Catholic primary and secondary schools reform their curricula in view of the Catholic intellectual tradition, its philosophic and literary contributions, they will merely be a part of the larger secularized intellectual climate around them. They will be

"private schools" with religious rituals and mottos. The symbolism of the school will be Catholic, but the substance, alas will not.



## Summary Benchmarks

1. Religious instruction "must present the Christian message and the Christian event with the same seriousness and the same depth with which other disciplines present their knowledge. It should not be an accessory alongside of these disciplines, but rather it should engage in a necessary inter-disciplinary dialogue." (73§5)
2. Scientific instruction should "help their students to understand that positive science, and the technology allied to it, is a part of the universe created by God." (54)
3. Even in science classes, "Students should be helped to see the human person as a living creature having both a physical and a spiritual nature." (55)
4. History should neither treat human beings as merely the instruments of social forces, nor the beneficiaries of inevitable progress. Humans are both morally wounded and capable of transformation by grace.
5. The study of history should not conflict with, but rather contribute to the study of salvation history.
6. Literature should help students understand "the proper nature of man, his problems and his experiences in trying to know and perfect both himself and the world."
7. The study of literature should happen especially in light of the Christian perspective which "goes beyond the merely human, and offers more penetrating criteria for understanding the human struggle and the mysteries of the human spirit."