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Analysis of Secular Character Development Programs and Materials

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The following is part of The Cardinal Newman Society's series of analyses of secular materials and programs used in Catholic education. Such materials and programs must be carefully evaluated to determine if their underlying philosophy, content, and activities are aligned to the mission of Catholic education and, if used, what adaptations might be needed.

The Newman Society's "Policy Guidance Related to Secular Materials and Programs in Catholic Education" offers a framework for such evaluation and is the basis for this particular analysis.

Overview

By their very nature, schools form character; as long as schools have existed, there have been character development programs and materials. Many are designed for public schools and are therefore secular in orientation.¹

Because public schools cannot directly address the theological foundations of virtue, morality, and character, they primarily rely on cultural, psychological, or philosophical assumptions to ground their efforts. Unfortunately, many programs and materials designed primarily for public schools have been tainted by atheistic humanism or relativism. Other resources are more promising, based on concepts of natural law and a traditional Western understanding of the human person without explicitly teaching traditional Christian norms.

¹ There are numerous, widely varied programs. By way of example, but without endorsement, these include such programs as Alive to the World, an international character-building program; Character Counts, used in public schools across the U.S.; the Center for the 4th and 5th Rs, which promotes moral virtue; the Human Dignity Curriculum of World Youth Alliance; and the Heart2Heart program of Illinois Right to Life.

The latter approach may be a good choice for public schools seeking stronger, more thoughtful, and more compelling character education. However, Catholic schools should be wary of using such resources; if used, they should be adapted significantly.

Programs and materials written from a “morally neutral,” purely humanistic, or relativistic perspective should only be used after an extensive integration of Catholic values and morals to make them suitable for Catholic school use. Such adaptations will help counter the modern culture’s assumptions that humanity, on its own, can figure out and achieve human perfection and excellence without God’s guidance and grace. Such a humanistic sense is antithetical to the fundamental mission of Catholic education.

St. John Paul II reminds us that, “In Christ and through Christ man has acquired full awareness of his dignity, of the heights to which he is raised, of the surpassing worth of his own humanity, and of the meaning of his existence.”² In a Catholic school, any attempt to discuss humanity, morality, and goodness without final reference to Christ, who fully reveals man to himself, is unthinkable. The very reason we have Catholic schools is to address these critical issues in the fullness of truth and with the guidance of Christ’s teaching and grace. To import a secular program which *a priori* was forced to surrender these truths to suit an international or public-school restriction is inadvisable.

One of the critical functions of a Catholic school is to impart a Christian understanding of the world, which allows students to interpret and give order to human culture in the light of faith.³ Unadapted use of secular programs and materials related to human formation violates this principle of Catholic education. The Catholic school is called to transmit an understanding of humanity that is inspired by Catholic wisdom and scriptural insight. This understanding is not meant to remain theoretical but is meant to be put into practice in a student’s life, so as to provide for the integration of culture with faith and faith with living. Human wisdom is not enough in considering issues of humanity and human excellence; divine wisdom must also be carefully considered and applied. Secular efforts which are limited to defining human beings through their relationships with other human beings and with nature do not offer a complete answer to the unavoidable, fundamental question of, “Who is man?”

For Catholic schools, all routes must always explicitly end with Christ. This is because all human values find their fulfillment and unity in Christ. This awareness expresses the centrality of the

² St. Pope John Paul II, *Redemptor Hominis* (1979) 11 at http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_04031979_redemptor-hominis.html (accessed on June 12, 2020).

³ The Cardinal Newman Society, *Principles of Catholic Identity in Education Overview* (2017) at <https://newmansociety.org/principles-catholic-identity-overview/> (accessed on June 12, 2020).

human person in the educational project of the Catholic school, strengthens its educational endeavor, and renders it fit to form strong personalities.⁴

A strong personality and a mature faith will be able to integrate both natural and supernatural elements related to human nature and activity.

It is true that natural law cases can be made for things such as justice, loyalty, compassion, marriage between a man and woman, chastity, and honesty. It is also true that some of the writings of Catholic thinkers such as St. John Paul II can be marshalled to assist with natural law arguments. However, the strength of the thought of St. John Paul and the fullness of an understanding of these things cannot be presented without reference to the divine. John Paul beautifully proclaims, “Faith and reason are like two wings on which the human spirit rises to the contemplation of truth; and God has placed in the human heart a desire to know the truth—in a word, to know himself—so that, by knowing and loving God, men and women may also come to the fullness of truth about themselves.”⁵

Even if natural law and Christian value-based programs are inspired by Catholic thought or the philosophical or anthropological insights of St. John Paul II, to attempt to convey such teaching without uniting faith and reason ultimately obfuscates these critical teachings. Catholic schools must unleash the entirety and integrity of human wisdom, including the Church’s inspired wisdom, in their efforts to equip students to attain and practice heroic virtue in the post-modern world.

Similarly, attempts to protect and promote human dignity cannot be fully advanced without grounding such dignity in a transcendent and objective source. Humanity simply affirming its own dignity does not guarantee that dignity. There has to be something outside of humanity guaranteeing this dignity and the freedom which it protects from hostile forces. Vatican II affirms that it is God’s revelation which discloses and affirms the dignity of the human person in its full dimensions.⁶ Human dignity is ultimately anchored in man’s status as being made in the image of God and being redeemed by Him through the incarnation, death, and resurrection of Christ. St. John Paul II’s sense of human anthropology is built on the centrality of this notion which inspires his teaching, “God so loved the human being that, in the Incarnation, human flesh was divinized. The act of the Incarnation, in which the eternal Word of God took on human flesh, reveals the ‘greatness, dignity, and value’ of the human being.”⁷

⁴ Congregation for Catholic Education, *The Catholic School on the Threshold of the Third Millennium* (2002) 9.

⁵ St. John Paul II, *Fides et Ratio* (1998) introduction.

⁶ Pope Paul VI, *Dignitatis Humanae* (1965) at

http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decl_19651207_dignitatis-humanae_en.html (accessed on June 12, 2020).

⁷ John Paul II, *Redemptor Hominis*, supra note 39, at 59.

Catholic schools must ensure that their students fully appreciate that they, and all whom they meet and serve, are made in God's image and redeemed by Him. The fullness of this teaching can help them better understand their individual significance and the significance and dignity of all others as well. Simply teaching them that man has dignity *de facto* is not enough to withstand the massive and complex assaults on human dignity taking place all around them.

While good-willed secular character and dignity programs fight the good fight as best they can within the limitations placed on them by national and international government entities, Catholic schools must use their freedom to dig much deeper in preparing their students for the intensity of the battles ahead. They must assert their autonomy and the broader worldview such autonomy currently allows. They must not pre-emptively surrender or silence themselves by attempting to simply ground morality and dignity on secular grounds. This is sandy soil which cannot support the edifice of human dignity, which must be built on Christ. Efforts limited to natural reason alone are not only unfaithful to Catholicism's broader insights but are also destined to fail if left on their own. Pope Leo XIII warns about strictly secular youth formation efforts:

Let nobody easily persuade himself that piety can be separated from instruction with impunity. In fact, if in no period of life, whether in public or private affairs, can religion be dispensed with, much less can that inexperienced age, full of life, yet surrounded by so many corrupt temptations, be excused from religious obligations. Whosoever, therefore, organizes education so as to neglect any point of contact with religion is destroying beauty and honesty at their very roots, and instead of helping the country, is preparing for the deterioration and destruction of the human race. For, once God is eliminated, who can make young people realize their duties or redeem those who have deviated from the right path of virtue and fallen into the abyss of vice?⁸

Recommendations

- The Catholic school ought to first consider specifically Catholic character-formation programs and materials before looking to secular school programs that do not openly teach Catholic doctrine and ethics, even when claiming to be consistent with Catholic teaching.
- The Catholic school that chooses a secular character-formation program or material must ensure that additional Catholic resources are explicitly and intentionally integrated into the course's standards, lesson plans, and curriculum.

⁸ Pope Leo XIII, *Militantis Ecclesiae* (1897) at http://w2.vatican.va/content/leo-xiii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_l-xiii_enc_01081897_militantis-ecclesiae.html (accessed on June 12, 2020 6/12/20).

- The Catholic school must ensure that the concept of human dignity taught in the program is rooted in man's status of having been made in the image and likeness of God and in the incarnation, passion, and resurrection of Christ.
- The Catholic school must seek first to emphasize the timeless and piercing insights from Scripture, Church teaching, and great Catholic philosophers and saints and attempt to avoid anecdotal and story-based activities that eventually become dated and lend themselves to meandering opinions of youth.
- The Catholic school must be aware that, without firm theology and philosophy, such programs may not meet the needs of well-formed Catholic students. Whenever possible, older students should work directly with Scripture and original Church documents and encyclicals.

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