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Patricia McCormack

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CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT IN THE CATHOLIC SCHOOL

PATRICIA H. CRONIN. NATIONAL CATHOLIC EDUCATIONAL ASSOCIATION, 1999.

Reviewed by Patricia McCormack, IHM

Presented in the format of a position paper and reflective essays, *Character Development in the Catholic School* integrates theory and practice to yield an agenda for character formation from birth through graduate-level education. Patricia Cronin, psychologist and consultant on character development, outlines the distinguishing attributes which she views as essential elements of a Christ-like character; cites specific, age-appropriate content, objectives, and skills; suggests teaching methodology proper to grade-level instruction; and addresses the role that parents and teachers contribute to the “progressive and cumulative process” (p. 18) of character development.

Cronin provides a comprehensive framework for character formation that resonates with the organization expressed earlier by Lickona (1991). Her synthesis includes ongoing development of effective skills, reasoning skills, and the practice of virtues suited to age-appropriate developmental readiness.

Seven reflective essays enrich the discussion of Christian character, “an enduring configuration of attitudes, abilities, and habits that shape and govern behavior in accordance with objective standards” (p. 4). One parent maintains that character formation begins at birth. She asserts that a stability void created by a transient, fast-paced society is best countered in the Catholic school that includes a program of character formation in every year of schooling where “children are exposed daily to an environment that resonates with the home, a seamless experience of love, example, and caring” (p. 29).

Responding as the leader of an elementary Catholic school, the principal provides administrators with a “how to” manual to integrate character education into the mission of the Catholic elementary school. She illustrates how prayer, school theme, partnering with other schools, community service, daily journaling of good deeds, a school “families” program, and peer mediation are concrete ways to develop responsible, caring Christians.

A high school principal affirms that decision-making skills are a necessary focus in character formation among adolescents but cautions against formula-style decision making and moral rationalization. Adolescents need to reflect on who it is they are called to be and to counterbalance “the relative values dictated by self-interest and individual satisfaction” (p. 2) with objective standards, the recognition of grace, and the virtue that a person of char-

acter would exhibit in a given situation. The principal urges teachers to recognize and respond generously to the formational opportunities afforded during extracurricular activities, community service, and retreat programs.

A parish religious education program comes under discussion as well. The program strives to awaken within children a genuine, conscious desire to integrate faith, compassion, ownership, and action in their daily living. The director of the program maintains that “character is the very core of our being” (p. 44) and a hallmark of Catholic education. Character formation is soul formation.

A diocesan superintendent of schools acknowledges that character formation requires an intensive, coordinated effort at partnership between home and school especially because a dichotomy sometimes exists between the values formally presented at school and those practiced at home, by peers, and in society. The superintendent calls for ongoing formation programs for both parents and teachers that contribute to a well-formed, active conscience and the practice of virtuous living in the adolescent. Specifically, he challenges diocesan school offices and local administrators to give priority to personnel training that will support the efforts of staff members to model Gospel values in all interactions and to integrate those values throughout the entire curriculum through consistent experiences of prayer, critical thinking, and moral decision making.

A director of a university program in Catholic leadership contributes scholarship to several issues related to character development. The research differentiates teacher formation from teacher accreditation, indicating that the inner person of the teacher is key to character development. The professor challenges Catholic universities to provide Catholic school teachers with formation that assists them to develop their inner person; to give visibility to their own moral goodness; to know and love Church teachings; to develop a comfort level that integrates didactic teachings with behavior on a consistent basis; to recognize their position as role models; to pursue good reading; to give witness to the relationship between discipleship and behavior; “to know how to impart moral teachings so that children internalize and take ownership of them for their own use” (p. 59); and “to design structured opportunities that provide for moral awareness, reflection, and exposure to goodness in living situations and in vicarious experiences” (p. 62).

A textbook publisher speaks to the heart of character formation by saying that “character development in Catholic schools must be Gospel-centered, environmental, cross-curricular and non-negotiable” (p. 66). Christian character is motivated by love and discipleship. Prayer, reflection, and worship as well as a balance of formation and information permeate the curriculum and school climate. The publisher wisely counsels, “single events may spark interest, but continuous practice, reflection, and reinforcement are what alter behavior” (p. 65). Regardless of title or function, all adults

involved in the school must articulate Gospel values in word and deed “and fully commit themselves to use every teachable occasion to instruct, model, encourage, and praise” (p. 11). Baptism calls us to evangelize by living our faith, that is, to internalize and witness Christian character. Faithfulness to the process is non-negotiable in a Catholic school as is the partnership of parents and teachers to provide purposeful, systematic, age-appropriate experiences of soul formation in the home and at school.

Cronin’s framework provides focus and direction for character development in the Catholic school. Consequently, the scope of the book is limited to school-age children and the author views a “consistent, interrelated, and progressive effort beginning in the primary grades” (p. 23) as an absolute necessity and a responsibility of the Catholic school. I agree with Cronin that “a child’s early years are the crucial time for parents through love and example to establish the elements of conscience, some basic empathetic responses to others, some acceptance of rules and limits, and the potential for a positive self-appraisal as a worthy person” (p. 21), but I submit that the first three years of life are crucial to that process. Formative parenting support must begin at or before the birth of a child and the Catholic school, as an educational mainstay of the Church, is called to be an agent of that formation.

Cronin makes a significant contribution to the educational mission of the Church. This book offers direction for all persons involved in soul formation, education, child-rearing, and parish life. The more closely we approximate a “seamless experience” (p. 29) of character formation for persons at all ages and stages of life, the more faithfully we respond to our Baptismal call to further the kingdom of God on earth.

REFERENCE

Lickona, T. (1991). *Educating for character*. New York: Bantam Books.

Patricia McCormack, IHM, Ed.D., is director of Formative Parenting Support Services, Los Altos, CA.

TOUCHING THE HEARTS OF STUDENTS: CHARACTERISTICS OF A LASALLIAN SCHOOL

GEORGE VAN GRIEKEN, FSC. DE LA SALLE INSTITUTE, 1999.

Reviewed by Jeffrey Gros, FSC

As the age of the laity emerges, providing vision and formation for Catholic schools formerly staffed by religious remains a challenge and an opportunity. Religious communities are developing training programs, lit-

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