

March 2015

Dynamics of Catholic Education: Letting the Catholic School Be School (Book Review)

Leonardo Franchi

University of Glasgow, leonardo.franchi@glasgow.ac.uk

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Recommended Citation

Franchi, L. (2015). Dynamics of Catholic Education: Letting the Catholic School Be School (Book Review). *Journal of Catholic Education*, 18 (2). <http://dx.doi.org/10.15365/joce.1802122015>

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BOOK REVIEW

Dynamics of Catholic Education: Letting the Catholic School Be School

Louis DeThomasis, FSC

Chicago: ACTA Publications, 2013

144 Pages, \$14.95 USD (paperback)

ISBN: 978-0-87946-511-7 (paperback)

<http://www.actapublications.com/spirituality/dynamicsofcatholiceducation/>

Reviewed by Leonardo Franchi, University of Glasgow, Scotland

The year 2015 will mark the 50th anniversary of the Second Vatican Council's Declaration on Christian education, *Gravissimum educationis* (1965). This is an opportune time to revisit the Declaration itself, the successor documents issued by the Congregation for Catholic Education and, when possible, other contributions to the field of Catholic education. Catholic educators would do well to locate *Gravissimum educationis* within the wider conciliar corpus, especially in the context of the most recent Magisterial document on Catholic education *Educating to Intercultural Dialogue: Living in Harmony for a Civilization of Love* (2013). The key theme of the latest contribution from the Congregation for Catholic Education addresses the intersection between Catholic educational traditions and the currents of thought that originate in other cultural contexts.

Dynamics of Catholic Education: Letting the Catholic School Be School is written by Brother Louis DeThomasis, a De La Salle Christian Brother of many years standing. Its underlying theme is that the Catholic school can make a distinctive contribution to the life of the Church when it is *allowed* to be a school. Br. DeThomasis addresses many of the important issues raised by *Educating to Intercultural Dialogue*. As such, it is a timely contribution to the field.

Dynamics of Catholic Education is set out in two distinct but related parts: Part One is a succession of short chapters explaining particular aspects of the book's theme. Part Two offers a set of eight "dynamics" necessary for the transformation of Catholic schools today. The dynamics are as follows: Risk

and Invent, Develop Your Style, Paradigm This and Imagine That, See What Might Be Otherwise, Drink from the Same Water but With a Different Cup, Uncover and Celebrate What the Shadows Reveal, Nurture Nature Naturally and Go Faster. The appendix consists of a table contrasting the features of the Catholic Church and the Catholic school as related to the following: objective, focus, methodology, duty, authenticity, process, goal, and end. Each of these has an explanatory section.

The use of the word “dynamics” in the title of the book is revealing. It suggests, correctly, that the Catholic school should be place of growth, development, intellectual exploration, and fellowship. The Catholic school, like the Church itself, is not a static body and flourishes when nurtured by grace.

Br. DeThomasis is to be commended on his insistence that the school “be school” as opposed to an *annex* of the parish or the wider Church community. This proposition is in line with Catholic teaching on the nature of the school as a place of academic rigor and genuine pastoral support. Indeed one of the first indicators of the Catholicity of a school should be the quality of the educational experience it offers to all its pupils. A Catholic school with many occasions for worship but with mediocre academic programs would not be fulfilling its mission. To avoid such harmful situations, Catholic schools need committed and dedicated teachers fully formed in the Church’s long-standing educational vision. The eight dynamics outlined above offer the bones of an examination of conscience for Catholic educators and, properly used, could form part of a mission statement for a Catholic school. Each dynamic ends with a pithy statement designed to illuminate further the particular theme. Some of these would be suitable for display and discussion by staff and students in Catholic schools. For example, Dynamic Four, “See What Might be Otherwise,” ends with the following boxed text:

Don’t gaze into a mirror.
Look out the windows.
See what might be otherwise.

This advice is more than a piece of homespun wisdom but is a call to be creative in how one responds to the challenges facing Catholic schools today. As such, it is very much in line with the open-ended vision of education as envisioned by Pope Benedict and Pope Francis.

All of this important material needs framing within a properly understood vision of the relationship between the Church and the school. It is here

that we need to ponder the relationship of evangelization, catechesis, and education. In this context, the position adopted by Br. DeThomasis could be summed up as follows: (a) the Church *proclaims*, the school *explains*; and (b) the Catholic school must be the site of a new approach to understanding what it means to be the Church. The juxtaposition is helpful to a degree but leaves open the door for those who wish to detach the educational mission of the Church from the life of the Church.

To expand on this, it is curious that the text at times lacks nuance in its descriptions of the life and actions of the Church. The use of the term “institutional Church” as opposed to simply “Church” is a case in point: it seems to be adopted throughout the text to describe people and institutions who block what are regarded by the author as more creative and relevant approaches to living the Catholic faith. In addition, there is an attempt to categorize “Rome” and “Westernized” ideas as significant stumbling blocks to much-needed processes of dialogue and inclusivity. For Br. DeThomasis, the Catholic school seems to be a laboratory wherein a refreshed and inclusive Church is gradually stripped of the dead wood of traditionalism. While few would disagree with the need to avoid seeing the Church and its schools simply as curators of museums, an authentic sense of tradition is essential for the identity and life of the Catholic school.

Looking ahead, Catholic educators should not shy away from addressing shortcomings in the way in which Catholic schools, and, indeed, the Church operates. The Catholic academic community is indeed called to offer scholarly insights into ecclesial and societal developments. What is needed, however, is a positive Christocentric vision of education that draws upon and finds encouragement in the Church’s rich traditions of catechesis and education. An aerial view of developments in Catholic education would, in fact, reveal a Church that has continually reshaped its educational mission in order to address new intellectual and pastoral challenges from those with other worldviews. An appreciation of this historical datum is the first step towards the construction of a truly dynamic vision of Catholic education and schooling for the 21st century. Such an initiative, international in scope, would offer continuity with the past while remaining filled with hope for the future. Br. DeThomasis has offered some initial perspectives to guide the way.

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Dr. Leonardo Franchi is the Head of the St. Andrew's Foundation for Catholic Teacher Education, University of Glasgow, Scotland. Correspondence regarding this review can be sent to Dr. Franchi at Leonardo.Franchi@glasgow.ac.uk.