



9-1-1997

The Culture of Catholic Schools

James L. Heft
University of Dayton

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.lmu.edu/ce>

Recommended Citation

Heft, J. L. (1997). The Culture of Catholic Schools. *Journal of Catholic Education*, 1 (1). <http://dx.doi.org/10.15365/joce.0101051997>

This Article is brought to you for free with open access by the School of Education at Digital Commons at Loyola Marymount University and Loyola Law School. It has been accepted for publication in *Journal of Catholic Education* by the journal's editorial board and has been published on the web by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons at Loyola Marymount University and Loyola Law School. For more information about Digital Commons, please contact digitalcommons@lmu.edu. To contact the editorial board of *Journal of Catholic Education*, please email JCE@nd.edu.

THE CULTURE OF CATHOLIC SCHOOLS

JAMES L. HEFT, S.M.

The University of Dayton

This article explores the elusive but important role culture plays in making Catholic schools distinctive. It examines the connection between ritual, especially the Eucharist, and the everyday practices and habits of those who constitute the school community. It further examines the relationship between dogma and dialogue, affirming that both are necessary for Christian life and community.

During the last 20 years, theologians have helped the Catholic Church acquire a sharper sense of the key characteristics of Catholicism. For example, Richard McBrien's widely read book *Catholicism* (1994) singles out the theological dimensions of sacramentality, mediation, and communion, and underscores Catholicism's characteristic openness to all truth and to every value. He emphasizes its comprehensiveness, its both/and rather than either/or approach to reason and faith, nature and grace, law and Gospel (pp. 1187-1200). Other theologians have offered similar descriptions of what they have named the Catholic experience, the Catholic intellectual tradition, or even the Catholic thing (Cunningham, 1985; Dulles, 1985; Haughton, 1979; Nichols, 1996).

What happens when these theological concepts inform and make distinctive educational institutions? Or, to pose the question in another way, how do such theological concepts, when applied to a school or a university, shape the expression of the nature and purpose of a Catholic school or university? Again, in recent years, many books and articles have been written about what ought to be distinctive about Catholic education (Bryk, Lee, & Holland, 1993; Convey, 1992; Hesburgh, 1994; McLaughlin, O'Keefe, & O'Keefe 1996; O'Brien, 1994). The articulations of both, that is, of the theological descriptions of Catholicism and the application of those descriptions to Catholic education, provide important conceptual clarifications of the essential elements of Catholicism.

This essay, however, does not address either of these areas directly. It presupposes the work of theologians who have described the core of Catholicism. It presupposes also the work of those theologians and scholars who have attempted to describe the identity of Catholic schools and colleges in the light of those theological traditions. What then is the purpose of this essay? It is rather to describe a more elusive but no less important factor in the identity of Catholic educational institutions: their culture.¹ Without a culture that palpably embodies and affectively supports the theological identity and mission of the institution, the institution runs the risk of being Catholic in name only. What are some of the elements of that elusive but important culture? In this essay, I shall consider first the importance of rituals and practices, and then the intricate relationship that dialogue and dogma or revelation should have in Catholic education.

RITUALS AND PRACTICES

One does not have to be a disciple of John Dewey to realize that what we do often deeply affects what we think. Christian anthropology affirms that we are embodied spirits, meaning that we are neither simply spiritual nor physical. It stands to reason then that both the body and the spirit should be involved in the educative process. This interplay requires more than the addition of a physical education class to courses that concentrate on the acquisition of concepts. What we do with our bodies and engage with our senses more likely remains in our minds. An ancient Chinese saying goes: what I hear, I forget; what I see, I remember; what I do, I understand.

An emphasis on rituals and practices in creating a culture can be exaggerated, and suggest mistakenly that it is impossible to get students to think when they are sitting still. In fact, an argument could be made (one that will not be made in this essay) that teachers do not challenge students to think critically, to imagine alternatives, to listen attentively and to debate incisively. Just getting students to sit still, to be still, is no small educational achievement!² Any emphasis on rituals and practices must include as an integral part an emphasis as well on thinking and reasoning.

¹ Clifford Geertz, an anthropologist, provides a helpful definition of culture as a "network of interpretive frameworks or meaning structures, e.g., political, religious, ideological, in which people's actions makes sense to them" (cited in Portier, 1996, p. 77). In an article published in 1991 by the National Catholic Educational Association, I attempted to describe some elements of the culture of a Catholic school, but only after I treated "dogmatic teachings" and "traditions and emphases." I hope in the present essay to expand upon the third dimension I then called "institutional qualities," and now describe as part of the culture of a school (Heft, 1991). Besides a "network of interpretive frameworks," I am also stressing the importance of certain practices and rituals, in which, of course, are implicit meanings.

² Thus Louis Dupré, writing against the "pragmatist heresy" in education, states: "What is needed is a conversion to an attitude in which existing is more than taking, acting more than making, meaning more than function—an attitude in which there is enough leisure for wonder and enough detachment for transcendence. Culture requires freedom, but freedom requires spiritual space to act, play, and dream in. . . . The space for freedom is created by transcendence" (1996, p. 70).

Perhaps this integrated approach to education can be made clearer through a few examples. Over 50 years ago, Pope Pius XII published an encyclical on the liturgy, *Mediator Dei*, in which he made the extraordinary statement that the Eucharist is the “source and summit” of the Christian life. To speak of the Eucharist as the “source” of the Christian life indicates that without the Eucharist, both the power of the Word and the nourishment of the sacrament, the Christian life would have nothing to draw upon for its life. To speak of the Eucharist as the “summit” clarifies that to be joined in love with God and with others creates more than a “peak experience”; for the believer, such communion realizes the very purpose of life. That a single ritual can be both “source and summit” reveals both the paradoxical character and multi-valent meanings possible when a ritual is so profound and existential.

The Eucharist embodies and enacts a ritual that sustains and realizes the purpose of the Christian life. At its center is an action, a drama, an offering, a sacrifice, a transformation, a meal before which there is a proclamation of a saving word, and a preparation of gifts which are transformed, and then returned to the people, who also, through faithful participation, are to be transformed. During the celebration of the Eucharist people play different roles as presider and readers and communion ministers and musicians and singers. And if the congregation is blessed, the Eucharist will be celebrated in artistically-shaped sacred space, with statues and colorful windows, flowers and incense, podium and pulpit, altar, crucifix and candles. Finally, when all these elements come together, when these roles are enacted amidst song and silence, reverence and proclamation, then the participants partake in the source and summit of the Christian life.

When people who lead Catholic schools enact the Eucharist as it ought to be enacted, a profound dimension of Catholic education is realized: how to speak, to listen, to read in public, to sing, and how to be silent. How to understand symbols and enact ancient rituals of washing and genuflecting and blessing and bowing, standing, sitting and kneeling—all these actions educate, that is, draw out of people what is deepest in them—the desire for God and for communion with others. Is every Eucharist experienced as a “source and a summit”? Of course not, not any more than every meal at home is a family encounter. Yet, when the Eucharist is thoughtfully prepared, respectfully entered, and fully embraced—transformations abound, profound connections are made, and insight deepens.

Using the liturgy as an example of ritual underscores the importance of more than the cognitive and conceptual in education. If before the Second Vatican Council too many devotions unconnected with Scripture and the sacraments distracted Catholics from the heart of the Gospel, now after Vatican II we are only beginning to develop and rediscover devotions, that is, rituals, that help us individually and as communities to enter into the meaning and living of the Christian life. Rituals embody understandings in palpa-

ble and communal forms. Catholic schools should be recognized for devoting as much time and emphasis to the arts, to drama, music, and the humanities, as they do to science, social science and mathematics. The most elaborate, energizing and engaging rituals in our schools should not be our sporting events, the athletic marching band, the prom and the various steps of the homecoming weekend, though giving these things ritual dimensions is one thing Catholic education has long been very good at.

Besides rituals, practices engaged in by faculty and students leave lasting effects. C. S. Lewis once remarked that while he could understand the philosophy of idealism, he could not live it. When he once referred in a conversation to philosophy as a subject, he was corrected by Bede Griffiths that philosophy was not a subject, but a way of life. In recent years, the central importance of traditions, that is, of sets of practices that existentially communicate meaning and supply understanding have been emphasized by thinkers such as Alisdair MacIntyre (1981, 1990) and Heinrich Fries (1993, 1996). These authors remind us that not only are we to practice what we preach, but we also end up preaching what we practice. Therefore, we need to pay careful attention to our practices as well as to our preaching.

Daily practices that constitute habits affect learning significantly. Those practices, for example, that develop in a student a capacity for study and an ability to concentrate make learning not only possible, but often even enjoyable. Parents who have carefully regulated the amount of television their children watch, who read to their children and then encourage them to read on their own, impart practices that become habits which the children follow for the rest of their lives.

Freud certainly stressed that the practices of childhood deeply affect the behavior of adults. William James, perhaps America's most famous psychologist, underscores the importance of repeating good deeds from the earliest age:

Could the young but realize how soon they will become mere walking bundles of habits, they could give more heed to their conduct while in the plastic state. . . . Every smallest stroke of virtue or vice leaves its never so little scar. The drunken Rip van Winkle, in Jefferson's play, excuses himself for every fresh dereliction by saying, "I won't count this time." Well! He may not count it, and a kind of heaven may not count it; but it is being counted none the less. Down among his nerve-cells and fibres the molecules are counting it, registering and storing it up to be used against him when the second temptation comes. . . . As we become permanent drunkards by so many separate drinks, so we become saints in the moral . . . sphere by so many separate acts. (1910, p. 127; as cited in Wilkens, 1995, p. 135)

This striking quotation from James suggests that educators need to be attentive not just to what their students think, but also to how they act. When the culture of a school trains students to be silent, to read in silence, to treat each other with respect, to perform acts of courtesy in the lunch room or on

the playing field—such daily practices constitute an essential part of the culture of a school.

If students learn through rituals and practices, they also learn by example, or by the practices of others. How something is said is as important as what is said. Once again, that which has an impact on how a person thinks and feels reaches deeper than the cognitive dimension, though of course both feeling and thinking are important. How teachers speak and act with themselves and with the students also contributes enormously to the culture of a school. If the heart is commonly reached, as John Henry Newman once put it, “not through reason, but through the imagination . . . by history . . .” and by persons,³ then those persons who have assumed central roles in the education of students—the teachers—can enter not just the minds of the students, but their hearts as well.

If people are moved by the example of others, if the deeds and behaviors of parents and teachers leave lasting impressions upon their children and students, then all schools, and especially Catholic schools, must attend not just to a teacher’s academic competence, but also to that teacher’s total impact upon students. How faculty teach, coach, supervise and walk the halls may have a more important impact than their best class presentations. If we need to be attentive to the “whole person” of the student, we need also to be just as attentive to the “whole person” of the faculty. For people in educational settings are ordinarily experienced as whole persons, not just as an auto mechanic one sees rarely in a garage or a computer programmer one may meet at a party. Assessment covers not only course outcomes, but also our daily interactions with others. As the philosopher and writer Iris Murdoch once put it:

When we apprehend and assess other people we do not consider only their solutions to specifiable practical problems, we consider something more elusive which may be called their total vision of life, as shown in their mode of speech or silence, their choice of words, their assessments of others, their conception of their own lives, what they think attractive or praise-worthy, what they think funny: in short, the configurations of their thought which show continually in their reactions and conversation. (1966, p. 202; as cited in Wilkens, 1995, p. 143)

In summary then, the culture of a Catholic school is deeply affected by the rituals it performs, especially the liturgy when it is enacted well and faithfully. Good liturgy presupposes participants who have learned to listen, to read, to speak, to be silent, to sing and play musical instruments, to be and

³ The entire famous quotation from Newman’s *An Essay in Aid of A Grammar of Assent* (1906, pp. 92-93): “. . . the heart is commonly reached, not through the reason, but through the imagination, by means of direct impressions, by the testimony of facts and events, by history, by description. Persons influence us, voices melt us, looks subdue us, deeds inflame us. Many a man will live and die upon a dogma; no man will be a martyr for a conclusion.” Obviously, Newman has a much richer notion of the meaning of the word “dogma” than typically is found today. For him, and for all informed Christians, dogmas express the saving interpersonal events of the Gospel and the Christian life.

appreciate the artistic—practices Catholic education must foster as part of its very identity, as the precondition for Catholics drawing from their deepest “source” and reaching for their highest “summit.”

The culture of the Catholic school is also deeply shaped by the practices and habits of the people who constitute the community of the school, the students and the teachers. A theological vision ought, of course, to determine the mission of the Catholic school community; but it is the day-to-day rituals and practices that make that mission visible, palpable, and educative.

DOGMA AND DIALOGUE

The culture of a Catholic school makes possible what most people, including some Catholics, believe is impossible: believing both in dogmas and in dialogue. Typically, people presume that dogma closes the door to dialogue. They believe dialogue is possible only about those things about which we are not sure, or about which we have no convictions. Those who see religion as an authoritarian system see Catholic education as indoctrination. How can Catholic educators, they would ask, teach critical thinking when critical thinking is not valued by the Church?

This suspicion about Catholicism’s openness has been around a long time. In the United States, from the earliest days of the colonies when Catholics first arrived, many people thought Catholics had to take all their orders from a foreign ruler, the pope. And indeed, it was only at Vatican II that the Church finally affirmed, for the political realm, freedom in matters of religious belief. The history that led to that important declaration is long and complex. And exactly what the ramifications of the doctrine of religious freedom are for believers within the Church continues to be worked on by theologians. Suffice it here to argue that one of the most important roles of Catholic education in our society is to demonstrate that the affirmation of dogma is not the death of intelligence, but rather the result of thoughtful participation in a dynamic tradition.

The matter is not simple, for indeed there is a certain “givenness” to dogma that a believer simply accepts. But there is also a place within Catholicism for people who exercise critical intelligence before, during, and after they affirm and adhere to a dogma of the faith. The philosopher John Smith once stated that when the angels appeared to the shepherd they did not say, “Behold I bring you a topic for discussion!” (O’Brien, 1997, p. 13). But believing the glad tidings does not prohibit discussion. A clarification of the meanings of dialogue and dogma may shed light on why dogma and discussion flow back and forth.

Consider first the idea of discussion, or, as it is called more frequently today, dialogue. It is commonly assumed today that for a dialogue to be fruitful, the participants must be “completely open.” Furthermore, to be com-

pletely open, the participants need to suspend all their beliefs; otherwise, they will be unable to hear what is said or, once they have heard what is said, be unwilling to change.⁴ Such assumptions about dialogue are mistaken, for it is one thing to be open to examining one's beliefs in dialogue with someone who has different beliefs; it is quite another to try to bracket one's beliefs, thinking that by doing so one somehow succeeds in preventing those beliefs from obstructing the dialogue. Admittedly, dogmas can be affirmed in a way that closes off dialogue about their nature, their meaning, and their relevance. Then again, dogmas can be affirmed precisely because one has thought about them⁵ and has been moved by their meaning, persuaded by the witness of others whose lives as believers have been empowered and enriched by them. In the last analysis, people believe because of reflection and love, and more particularly because of the love manifested in the lives of believers.

If open and thoughtful dialogue is possible for people with beliefs, what can be said of the nature of dogma? A dogma is an ever-imperfect but necessary effort to affirm the central mysteries (events) of the Christian faith. The creed, for example, affirms the action of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Dogmas do not explain as much as they affirm. Dogmas preserve the depth and complexity of the truths of faith. The word heresy, in Greek, means to choose; a heresy is to choose one truth and exaggerate it, or, more typically, to remove it from other truths that balance it. Heresy is a truth gone mad because of loneliness. McBrien (1994) speaks of Catholicism's comprehensiveness, its capacity to affirm realities that often are pitted against each other.

The dogma of the Incarnation, for example, affirms that Jesus is both human and divine, and not schizophrenic. The history of Christology includes many who have mistakenly affirmed either his humanity, or more often his divinity, but not both; rather, what ought to be affirmed are both humanity and divinity in a person who is not half human and half divine, but wholly human and divine. The dogma of the Incarnation does not explain how this duality and unity works; it simply affirms it as the truth. It has been left for believers to reflect on this mystery, to think about its consequences, and to rejoice in its truth. At the core of the Christian faith is a person, indeed three persons, and Christian life offers communion with these persons.

4 For a person who does not hold deep religious beliefs, it is much less of a problem to suspend one's beliefs in order to enter "true" dialogue. The story is told of a pig and a chicken who were out for a morning walk and came upon a restaurant which had in its front window a sign that read, "Bacon and Eggs." The chicken said to the pig, "Hey, let's get some breakfast." The pig replied, "No way!" The chicken, puzzled, asked why not. The pig responded, "What for you is only a contribution, for me is a major commitment!"

5 Augustine once wrote: "No one believes anything unless one first thought it to be believable. . . . Everything which is believed should be believed after thought has preceded. . . . Not everyone who thinks believes, since many think in order not to believe; but everyone who believes thinks. . . ." (as cited in Wilkens, 1995, p. 20). Of course, some believe in order not to think—but such people should find little support in a Catholic tradition which affirms the value of both faith and reason.

What are the consequences of understanding that the love of another person, Jesus Christ, and everyone in him, stands at the center of the Catholic tradition? One clear consequence for Catholic education is that it must help people become people who love people, and in the act of loving others find God. At the end of the powerful play *Les Miserables*, borrowing from the New Testament, one of its characters sings that to “love another person is to see the face of God.” To love another person is not to recite a dogma; it is to be transformed by the dogma, or more existentially, to be formed in a tradition, a culture if you will, that recognizes the importance of how we treat one another. It is to be formed in an educational tradition that teaches practices that make it more possible to listen with attentiveness and to speak with reverence. Thought of in this light, Christian dogma, which affirms the radically personal nature of God as love and relationship, requires a capacity for encounter, for meeting and embracing the other as someone created in God’s image. And in this same light, the culture of Catholic education, when it pursues thoughtfully what theologically undergirds it, fosters practices and rituals which help people to affirm the mysteries of the faith, to think critically about what they have affirmed, and to develop habits as persons in a learning community who do not oppose dogma and dialogue.⁶

CONCLUSION

The great Lutheran historian of doctrine, Jaraslov Pelikan, once remarked that he was doing everything he could to pass on a tradition for his grandchildren to reject. Pelikan wanted to pass on more than a history of doctrine; he wanted to pass on a tradition. I have used a different word that has much in common with tradition: culture. A culture is a network not just of meanings, but also of rituals and practices that embody certain convictions and beliefs of a community. Without attention to all of the details that constitute the formation of a living culture that intends to be Catholic, conceptual clarity about the faith alone will not suffice. At Medellin in 1986 Pope John Paul II said:

A faith that places itself on the margin of what is human, of what is therefore culture, would be a faith unfaithful to the fullness of what the word of God manifests and reveals, a decapitated faith, worse still, a faith in the process of self-annihilation.

The vision of Catholic education that needs to guide us into the 21st century must pay as much attention to the total educational experience, that is,

⁶ Only in the last few years has the dynamic and interactive character of tradition been recovered by the Catholic Church, especially through the work of Yves Congar (1966), which had such an impact on the thinking of the participants in the Second Vatican Council. It should be no surprise then that many Catholics, even bishops and cardinals in the United States, have had difficulty realizing that a call to dialogue is not a call to water down the faith of the Church (see Bishop Kenneth E. Untener’s thoughtful commentary on the critical reactions of other bishops and cardinals to the late Cardinal Bernardin’s call for dialogue among Catholics to find “common ground” [1996]).

to the culture of the school, as it does to the theological teachings that constitute the distinctiveness of Catholicism. Without that holistic vision, Catholic education will pass on not a rich tradition to be understood, affirmed or rejected, but a decapitated faith incapable of educating whole persons and animating vibrant communities.

REFERENCES

- Bryk, A. S., Lee, V. E., & Holland, P. B. (1993). *Catholic schools and the common good*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Congar, Y. (1967 [©1966]). *Tradition and traditions: An historical and a theological essay [La tradition et les traditions]*. New York: Macmillan. (Original work published 1960)
- Convey, J. (1992). *Catholic schools make a difference: Twenty-five years of research*. Washington, DC: National Catholic Educational Association.
- Cunningham, L. (1985). *The Catholic experience*. New York: Crossroad.
- Dulles, A. (1985). *The catholicity of the Church*. New York: Oxford.
- Dupré, L. (1996). The joys and responsibilities of being a Catholic teacher. In J. L. Heft., S.M. (Ed.), *Faith and the intellectual life* (pp. 61-70). South Bend, IN: University of Notre Dame Press.
- Fries, H. (1993). *Theology and narrative: Selected essays*. (G. Hunsinger & W. Placher, Eds.). New York: Oxford University Press.
- Fries, H. (1996). *Fundamental theology [Fundamentaltheologie]* (R. J. Daly, S.J., Trans.). Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press. (Original work published 1985)
- Geertz, C. (1973). *The interpretation of cultures: Selected essays*. New York: Basic Books.
- Haughton, R. (1979). *The Catholic thing*. Springfield, IL: Templegate.
- Heft, J. L. (1991). Catholic identity and the future of Catholic schools. In *The Catholic identity of Catholic schools*. Lighting New Fires: American Catholic Schools for the 21st Century, vol. 2. Washington, DC: National Catholic Educational Association.
- Hesburgh, T. M. (Ed.). (1994). *The challenge and promise of a Catholic university*. South Bend, IN: University of Notre Dame Press.
- James, W. (1910). *The principles of psychology*. New York: Holt.
- MacIntyre, A. (1981). *After virtue: A study in moral theory*. South Bend, IN: University of Notre Dame Press.
- MacIntyre, A. (1990). *Three rival versions of moral enquiry: Encyclopaedia, genealogy and tradition*. South Bend, IN: University of Notre Dame Press.
- McBrien, R. (1994). *Catholicism*. San Francisco: Harper/SanFrancisco.
- McLaughlin, T., O'Keefe, J., S.J., & O'Keefe, B. (Eds.). (1996). *The contemporary Catholic school*. London and Washington, DC: Falmer Press.
- Murdoch, I. (1966). Vision and choice in morality. In Paul Ramsey (Ed.), *Christian ethics and contemporary philosophy*. (pp. 195-218). New York: Macmillan.
- Newman, J. H. (1906). *An essay in aid of a grammar of assent*. London: Longmans, Green, and Company. (Original work published 1870)
- Nichols, A., O.P. (1996). *Epiphany: A theological introduction to Catholicism*. Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press.
- O'Brien, D. (1997). The uncommon ground of dialogue. *America*, 176, 12-15.
- O'Brien, D. J. (1994). *From the heart of the American church: Catholic higher education and American culture*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books.
- Portier, W. (1996). Dialogue between gospel and culture: Historical perspectives. *Current issues in Catholic higher education*, 16 (2), 73-90.
- Untener, K. E. (1996). How bishops talk. *America*, 175, 9-15.
- Wilkens, R. (1995). *Remembering the Christian past*. Grand Rapids, MI: W. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company.

Rev. James L. Heft, S.M., Ph.D., is currently university professor of faith and culture and chancellor of the University of Dayton. Formerly provost of UD, Fr. Heft holds a doctorate in historical theology from the University of Toronto (1977) and has served on the faculty of UD's Department of Religious Studies since 1978. He has written on a wide variety of subjects, including the historical origins of papal infallibility, Catholic higher education, the theology of Mary, and the role of morality and character development in education. Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Rev. James L. Heft, S.M., Ph.D., Chancellor, The University of Dayton, 300 College Park, Dayton, OH 45469-1549.

Copyright of *Catholic Education: A Journal of Inquiry & Practice* is the property of Catholic Education: A Journal of Inquiry & Practice and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.