

May 2019

# "It's More Than Just Religion:" Teaching History in a Catholic School

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## Recommended Citation

Fitzpatrick, C. (2019). "It's More Than Just Religion:" Teaching History in a Catholic School. *Journal of Catholic Education*, 22 (1). Retrieved from <https://digitalcommons.lmu.edu/ce/vol22/iss1/22>

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## Introduction

In 2013 Pope Francis issued his first apostolic exhortation, *Evangelii Gaudium*, on Catholic education. *Evangelii Gaudium* outlined Pope Francis' vision for Catholic education to be an answer to secularization and "deterioration of ethics" in society (Pope Francis, 2013, para. 64). He continued to say "Catholic schools...are a most valuable resource for the evangelization of culture" (Pope Francis, 2013, para. 134). Various organizations in the United States echo the Pope's vision. The United States Council of Catholic Bishops (USCCB), for example, asserts that the purpose of Catholic schools is to provide a "sound education, rooted in the Gospel message, the Person of Jesus Christ, and rich in the cherished traditions and liturgical practices of our faith" (United States Council of Catholic Bishops, 2013, para 2). Pope Francis and the USCCB have outlined a clear purpose for Catholic schools to enact. But what implications do these statements of purpose have on day-to-day instruction in Catholic schools? Research in Catholic schools has focused on how the promotion of Catholic identity influences the leadership of the school (Wallace, 2000; Scanlan, 2011) and how the leadership of the school influences the Catholic identity of the school (Fuller & Johnson, 2014), but little attention has been given to how this purpose influences the classroom and pedagogical decisions of teachers in any subject.

History classrooms provide an interesting lens for exploring how Catholic identity is incorporated into content of the class because of the interconnectedness of religion and history. As Passe and Willox (2010) quip, "We cannot teach history without teaching about religion any more than we could prepare beer without using yeast. Something crucial would be missing" (p. 103). History is potentially the content area that students would most likely interact with issues relating to religion and Catholicism, outside of their religion course. Supreme Court Justice Tom Clark argued in his majority opinion for the 1963 *Abington v. Schempp* decision that "one's

education is not complete without a study of comparative religion or the history of religion and the relationship to the advancement of civilization.” Justice Clark and the Supreme Court understood the necessity of teaching about religion and the connection between history and religion. As Schweber (2006) argues “history and religion are one and the same, as are instruction in history and instruction in religion” (p. 408). Catholic history classrooms provide another layer of religion as they both examine the role religion has played in society as well as a way to discuss Catholic identity and faith

This study examines the day-to-day instructional choices of one history teacher in a Catholic School setting and explores how these decisions relate to the expressed purpose of the mission of Catholic schools. The question is important because of the connection between religion and history and whether (and how) teachers enact the purpose of Catholic identity has the most immediate and significant impact on students.

### **Catholic Identity**

There have been frequent calls by educators and researchers alike to examine the Catholicity of schools. Carrithers and Peterson (2010) argue that this exists for two potential, contrasting reasons. The first reason is the “natural desire for continuous quality improvement” while the other more, pessimistic reason, “comes from a suspicion that [educators at Catholic schools] are failing---that ‘Catholic’ is in fact merely a superfluous adjective” (p. 416). Catholic identity is a very personal and amorphous idea (Fuller & Johnson, 2013) that can differ among cultures, theological positions, and frequency of participation in the Church, either through attendance at services or active participation in Church organizations (Groome, 1996). Groome proposes five characteristics of Catholicism: 1) anthropology of the person, 2) sacramentality of life, 3) communal emphasis regarding human and Christian existence, 4) commitment to

tradition, and 5) appreciation of rationality and learning. Groome argues these characteristics are “bound” by three cardinal characteristics: commitment to personhood, basic justice, and catholicity. Each of the cardinal characteristics pervades the five characteristics of Catholicism and unites them to form Catholic identity. It is logical to follow that these aspects, in some combination, influence what makes a school Catholic. Convey (2012) builds upon Groome’s definition to model the various ways schools could incorporate Catholic identity. In his hierarchical model, first developed by DeFiore, Convey, and Schuttloffell (2009), people are placed at the top as they are able to “communicate the message and create the environment that compromise the essence of a Catholic school” (DeFiore, Convey, and Schuttloffell, 2009, p. 34). These individuals transmit Catholic identity into the culture of the school through service projects or through religious symbols, such as crucifixes and religious statues. Catholic identity can also be infused into the curriculum of the classroom, both religion classes and other content areas. Convey (2012) argues Catholic identity can and should be easily incorporated into the religion classes and any sacrament preparation programs the school offers. Convey argues that while Catholic identity may be overtly present in religion classes, it still should be present, no matter how implicit, in the general curriculum courses, such as math, science, language arts, and social studies.

### **Religious Identity & Teaching**

Few empirical studies examine how Catholic identity is incorporated into disciplinary classrooms. Carrithers and Peterson (2010) argued that in order to encourage faculty to engage in Catholicity with their teaching, studies should occur at disciplinary levels. While focusing on economics and business classes at the university level, Carrithers and Peterson argued that disconnecting disciplinary classes from Catholic teachings can be detrimental to student learning

and understanding of concepts. Hall and Sink (2015) examined the different classroom environments in Catholic school math classrooms. They compared their findings with studies on classroom environments in public schools and found that students in Catholic schools had a more positive inclination towards mathematics. While Hall and Sink were interested in how the Catholicity of schools influenced the classroom environment, they did not specifically examine how teachers did or did not explicitly and implicitly include Catholic identity in the classroom. Jarvie and Burke (2015) theorized how high school English teachers could incorporate Catholic identity when teaching about difficult knowledge, using the example of Cormac McCarthy's (2006) *The Road*. Their writing provides a potential way to examine Catholic identity in classrooms, but relies solely on anecdotal evidence. These studies provide the foundation for what teaching in Catholic classrooms might look like, but they are few studies that examine what teaching and learning in Catholic classrooms looks like.

Some research, however, has been conducted in fundamentalist Christian schools (see, for example Hess & McAvoy, 2015; Schweber, 2006; Schweber & Irwin, 2003) and has indicated that the context and religious mission of the school influenced the decisions teachers made in the classroom in interesting ways, including the choice of texts used in the classroom and how teachers approached controversial issues. In history classrooms, teacher's religious identity has the potential to impact the historical narratives they present as well as the pedagogical choices they make in their classrooms (James, 2010; White, 2009). Schweber and Irwin (2003) examined how one teacher in a fundamentalist Christian school taught about the Holocaust and how students made sense of the teacher's enacted curriculum. The teacher, Mrs. Barrett, articulated her purpose was to "mint strong Christians, Christians who understand the past and consider the present only...through the prism of a proud Christian tradition" (Schweber

& Irwin, 2003, p. 1714). She chose to base the unit on Corrie ten Boom's (1984) *The Hiding Place*, a story focused on ten Boom's rescue of her Jewish neighbors and imprisonment in concentration camps, but ultimately the memoir is a testament to ten Boom's Christian faith. Mrs. Barrett selected this book because she believed the book would act as a "manual" to the inevitable persecution she believed her students would face for being Christian (p. 1700). Not only did Mrs. Barrett's faith influence how she taught the unit, it also influenced how students understood the Holocaust. Similarly, Hess and McAvoy (2015) in a large-scale study exploring discussion and deliberation in social studies classrooms found that a teacher in a Christian school carefully selected the topics open for discussion based on the religious nature of the school. This teacher described feeling constrained by the potential of discussing particular current events or controversial issues as directly contradicting religious teachings and the religious mission of the school. The teachers in these studies acted as what Thornton (1991) terms "curricular-instructional gatekeepers"—that is teachers play the primary role in determining what happens in the classroom in terms of sequence, content, and instructional strategy, regardless of the official curriculum. This current study explores an interesting question – how do Catholic history teachers' make sense of their role as a "gatekeeper," how do they teach both secular and religious content, or determine how to balance both (Bryk, Lee, & Holland, 1993)? What is the role of Catholic identity in teaching and learning history?

### **Methods**

Using a case study method, I studied one middle school teacher at a Catholic school over one semester during her world history course. This approach allowed me to examine the context of the school and the classroom in depth and explore the complexities that surround teaching history in a Catholic school. Using a single-case design allowed me to "capture the

circumstances and conditions” (Yin, 2009, p. 48) that exist in the day-to-day realities of teaching in a Catholic school. Thus because the study was embedded within a contemporary context a case study is an appropriate methodology (Yin, 2009). This study explored the following research questions:

1. How, if at all, does one Catholic school history teacher incorporate Catholic identity into the classroom?
2. In what ways, if any, did the context and mission of the school influence her approach to teaching?

### **Context**

St. John the Baptist Catholic School<sup>1</sup> is a co-educational K-8 Catholic school located in a small city on the east coast. Despite the closures of Catholic grade schools throughout the country over the past few decades, St. John’s opened its doors in the mid 1990s and has grown consistently ever since, currently enrolling approximately 360 students. There currently is a wait list for many grades and the school has recently added a pre-school. St. John’s was recognized as a 2014 Blue Ribbon school by the US Department of Education. St. John’s is the only Catholic school, elementary, middle or high school, in the nearby vicinity. It does not have to compete with other Catholic grade schools for enrollment and is considered an inter-regional parochial school, supported by multiple parishes.

Rebecca, the teacher focused on in this study, teaches the social studies classes for grades six through eight. She teaches sixth grade American history II, seventh grade civics, and eighth grade world history. With the exception of one 8th grade world history class, Rebecca teaches every social studies class in the middle school. Rebecca and the other teacher do not follow the

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<sup>1</sup> All names and locations are pseudonyms.

same pacing guide or curriculum for the world history class. While they share some videos and resources, little contact exists between the two teachers. For these reasons, Rebecca's classroom was chosen as a single-case design (Yin, 2009). Rebecca's 8th world history class was selected for this study out of the three grade levels because the diocese's curriculum for world history explicitly covers issues pertaining to Catholicism and religion in general. For example, the curriculum Rebecca is supposed to cover includes the Roman Empire and beginnings of Christianity as well as many ancient polytheistic religions, the Islamic Empire, and the Crusades.

Over the course of a three-month period, 15 classes were observed. Days were chosen based on the researcher's availability and St. John the Baptist's schedule. The researcher also attempted to observe classes that overtly related to religious topics. Observations lasted a full class period, either 40 or 100 minutes, depending on St. John the Baptist's bell schedule. Field notes were taken and each class period was audio-recorded. After each class, the field notes were written up and parts of the recordings were transcribed. All audio-recordings, field notes, and transcriptions were stored in a password-protected file. Rebecca also provided access to all handouts, tests, and quizzes that the students received as well as the PowerPoints she used for each class. Throughout the study, three chapter tests were given and ten section quizzes. These documents add more access points to examine how Rebecca enacted her purpose through formative and summative assessments.

Informal interviews occurred with Rebecca after almost every observation. These interviews lasted 10-30 minutes and focused on specific events of the class period. Each interview was audio-recorded. After each observation and interview, the field notes were turned into write-ups and analytic memos (Erickson, 1986). A semi-structured interview with Rebecca occurred at the beginning and end of the study. Each semi-structured interview lasted



approximately 45 minutes. A semi-structured interview with Adam, the principal of St. John's, occurred partway through the study. All semi-structured interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, and detailed field notes were taken. Data were analyzed using Erickson's (1986) analytic induction. Working assertions, conclusions about what was occurring, were developed in the early stages of data collection and analysis. Data were then examined for confirming and disconfirming evidence of the assertions. When disconfirming evidence was found, the assertions were modified to reflect the new patterns in the data.

Throughout the study, I was careful to keep in mind my positionality as a former teacher at Catholic middle and high schools. Through my experience in teaching at Catholic schools, I have learned about the issues that arise teaching history, especially world history, in a Catholic school. While my positionality allowed me to understand the classroom, using member checking with the teacher and other reviewers ensured that my biases did not enter analysis.

### **Participants:**

There were 15 students enrolled in the world history class, eight male and seven female. The class was offered as a high school credit course for the local public school. Students could choose if they wanted to take the state end of year examination to try to earn high school credit. However, if students were going to attend a private high school, they could not earn any credit for the course. Taking the test was completely optional and many students in the study choose not to take the test. At the conclusion of the study, approximately two weeks before the end of the school year, only four students had decided to take the test.

The main participant in this study, Rebecca, agreed to participate in the study after the researcher contacted the teachers listed as social studies teachers on St. John's website. The other teacher did not respond to e-mails sent by the researcher. At the time of the study, it was

Rebecca's second year at St. John the Baptist and her third year teaching overall, all in Catholic schools. Before becoming a teacher, Rebecca worked as a journalist for a few years. She stated that she left journalism because she didn't find any personal fulfillment and realized that teaching was her "true passion" (Interview, 2/9). She received her masters of teaching with an endorsement in social studies education from a small public university where she did her student teaching in public elementary schools. She enjoyed working at the public schools, but also felt comfortable with Catholic schools because she attended Catholic schools from third grade on. Many members of her family, including her mother, were and are teachers at Catholic schools. Rebecca's first job was teaching religion and language arts at a Catholic elementary school. Rebecca moved to the town St. John's is located in when her spouse got a job at the local hospital. When Rebecca was looking for jobs, she applied to both public schools and St. John's. St. John's was the only school that responded to Rebecca and she accepted the job. Rebecca says that she will probably end up moving in the next few years and will once again apply to both public and Catholic schools.

Rebecca's classroom was fairly spacious with a large picture window on one wall looking into a small wooded park. On the opposite wall from the window, there was a large built-in bookshelf housing a class set of textbooks as well as numerous other history books. During our conversations after class, Rebecca would frequently pull out a particular book to show me a specific image or piece of text that she found interesting. However, Rebecca never utilized these books during class. Next to the bookshelf, Rebecca had a class set of laptops students would periodically utilize at the end of class to complete homework. The students' desks were in rows facing the front white board where Rebecca projected her PowerPoints and any movie the class watched. The walls were adorned with posters from all of the classes

Rebecca taught. There was a timeline of the history of the world, pictures of American presidents, and a large world map. There were very few symbolic references to Catholicism, outside a few Bible verses posted on the wall in the back corner and an unused holy water font at the entrance to the classroom.

In addition to observations of the teacher and the class, the principal of St. John's, Adam, consented to be interviewed. Adam is a former social studies teacher and is currently working on an Ed.D. in Educational Planning, Policy, and Leadership. At the time of the study, he had been at St. John the Baptist for three years, but had been in the diocese for many more years in different capacities, both administrative and faculty. Adam saw the purpose of Catholic education as "enabling [the students] to learn within the context of their faith, creating good Catholics... that's our main goal and the main mission of Catholic education is to get these students, the ultimate goal is to get to heaven" (Interview, 4/1). Catholic schools are to provide what Adam refers to as "moral armor" for students as they move to public school and then into the real world. Adam sees the "moral armor" as especially important for St. John's students to develop because there are no Catholic high schools in the area and he believes that most of the students will attend public high school. Adam frequently mentioned incorporating ideas of social justice and responsible citizenship when teaching social studies in Catholic schools. According to Adam, social justice is a "big pillar" of Catholic faith and history classes in a Catholic school should be taught through a social justice lens. Catholic schools "tie [social justice] there and hope that we've created a responsible citizen moving forward" (Interview, 4/1). In Adam's opinion, by addressing issues such as civil rights and women's suffrage, social studies teachers are able to teach moral judgments and readily incorporate church teaching into the classroom.

As an example of this, Adam discussed one lesson he used to use that incorporated Catholic identity into history. He explained:

*I remember teaching my Holocaust lessons to 7<sup>th</sup> graders and that's a pretty heavy topic. I didn't really pull any punches from that you know. I gave a permission slip to parents so they would know photos, descriptions, but it was always great in a Catholic context to see the looks on their faces and know that it had gotten too heavy for them, close the books, walk to the chapel, and pray about that. I think there's a beauty to be able to teach social studies. I was really able to show them what, for the Holocaust the evil that was there, in a context where we could go and pray and help settle them and move forward. (Interview, 4/1).*

Adam does not see a tension between Catholic identity and the content in history courses. He finds it easy to incorporate Catholic identity into the classroom. Not only is teaching history and Catholicism connected, but there's a "real beauty there." He has never taught in a public school and feels as though something would be missing if he could not discuss moral and social justice issues with his class. Rebecca, however, never discussed her personal faith during interviews and rarely discussed faith with her students. Rebecca never prayed with her students and faith played a minimal role in her classroom. She also never referred to the Catholic mission of the school when talking about her approach to the teaching of history.

### **Rebecca's Goals and Aims for the course**

Unlike Adam, Rebecca did not focus on religious belief when discussing her approach to teaching or the classroom. Rebecca's stated purpose for teaching in a Catholic school focused on "accountability and responsibility." She believes "it's harder to get away with things because the teachers and the education of Catholic schools expect

you to rise above” (Interview, 4/28). For Rebecca, accountability and responsibility come in the form of homework and organization. Rebecca requires her students to have each test signed by a parent or guardian so that they “know what his grade is and it shows him accountability and responsibility. He needs to be accountable for that grade” (Interview, 4/28). By eighth grade, Rebecca believes students should be responsible for their homework and doesn’t accept any late work. Rebecca believes these values are lacking in society and wants to ensure her students learn them. Rebecca credits her family and the Catholic schools she attended as a student for instilling these values in her. To her, these values represent Catholic schools as Catholic schools in her mind are “more than just religion” (Interview, 2/9).

While the study focused on a world history classroom, when asked why students should study history, Rebecca focused on knowledge of American history. She believes that “if you’re living in a country you need to know how it operates. It really bothers me that like people can’t identify who the president is or they have no idea we have three branches of government” (Interview, 4/28). Rebecca fears that there is not enough focus on history in schools and that current society does not value historical knowledge. She believes “a lot of it is because of this huge push for STEM [science, technology, engineering, and mathematics] that history just falls behind” (Interview, 4/28). While Rebecca articulates these goals as her larger purpose, her enacted curriculum focuses on content acquisition and memorization of facts. Rebecca sees the factual knowledge students gain in history as preparing them for the real world. “These kids are going to be running this country soon, they should probably know a little bit about it” (Interview, 4/28). Although Rebecca claims to focus on making historical connections with current

events, only one instance was observed or discussed in an interview of when she actually focused on connections with modern times in the classroom. Ultimately, Rebecca's goal for her students was for them to "not end up on Jimmy Kimmel"—that is she wants her students to be able to quickly answer factual questions (Interview, 2/9).

### **A typical day in Rebecca's classroom**

When she was hired at St. John's, Rebecca was told she could choose a textbook for use in her classroom, if she wanted. She selected *World History: Patterns of Interaction* published by Holt McDougal, and observations indicated that Rebecca used the tests, quizzes, and handouts provided by the textbook company and that the only variation she would make was the elimination of writing activities or extended response questions. Her tests, quizzes, and homework all relied on student recall of factual information. Rebecca moved chapter by chapter, section by section through the textbook. The only alteration to this progression was when she skipped sections related to Christianity because "they already got that in religion" (Interview, 2/12). Her days followed a set routine and a typical day looked like the vignette below.

Everyday class began with a starter and reviewing homework from the previous night. Quizzes were given approximately every other day. Rebecca would then lecture for the majority of class. She had created a PowerPoint that paralleled the textbook chapter and would have slides delineating different sections (i.e. Section 2: The Punic Wars). Periodically, Rebecca would show clips from the History Channel's *Mankind: The story of all of us* or incorporate handouts produced by the textbook. Rebecca would finish her lecture anywhere from 10-30 minutes before class ended and allowed students to work on their homework for whatever time was remaining. Homework was assigned every night. This format was followed everyday, with the exception of test review days and test days.

The following field notes (Field Notes, 2/27) exemplify a typical scene from the beginning of class.

*The starter is on the board. Students pull out sheet from binder and begin to work on the starter. Students put homework on desk without being asked and teacher checks for completion.*

*Two sample starter questions: The group that lived on Crete and dominated sea trade in the Mediterranean was called what? Name the present day country of Phoenicia.*

After the students finished their starter, they would close their notebooks and clear their desk of everything but their homework. Rebecca would stand at the front of the classroom with the teacher's edition of the textbook on the podium. She would call on students to answer questions from the previous night's homework. The homework was either to answer the questions at the end of the section or complete a worksheet on the section.

On this particular day, the homework review took about 15 minutes of the 40-minute class. About once or twice a week, the students would take a quiz, produced by the textbook company, on the textbook section they had just completed homework on. The quiz on this day had 11 matching questions and 10 true/false questions. Rebecca gave the students 10 minutes to complete the quiz, before going over it as a class. Once the class had checked the quizzes and turned them in, Rebecca would begin her lecture. Rebecca did not require students to take notes and none of the students took notes. Rebecca used one PowerPoint presentation of 50-60 slides per unit. Some of the slides contained images or links to videos, but the majority of the slides featured only text.

Twice during the observations, Rebecca distributed a handout that accompanied the section the class was discussing. The worksheets and other additional sources were always

produced by the textbook company. During this time, Rebecca did not stray from the questions written by the textbook. When she did ask follow up questions, they focused on the factual content and not any higher order thinking.

After going through the supplementary material, Rebecca would return to her lecture until she reached what she determined was a good stopping point. Class would end anywhere from 10-30 minutes early, depending on the length of the class period, so that students could work on their homework, silently by themselves. Rebecca would sit at her desk and work on the computer. The only exceptions to this format were test review days and the actual test days.

As this vignette highlights, Rebecca's classroom focused on student acquisition of content knowledge. Critical thinking was not encouraged and students rarely engaged in higher level thinking. In addition, class never began with a prayer and very rarely did Rebecca discuss religion or faith in her classroom. A few opportunities naturally arose to discuss Catholicism based on content Rebecca was covering in the classroom, but she continued to focus on content acquisition.

### **Catholicism in the social studies curriculum**

*Ancient Rome:* Due to the nature of world history, Catholicism appeared periodically in the course content. The first occasion Catholicism arose was at the beginning of the Ancient Rome unit, the first unit taught during the observations. When Rebecca was explaining how her class worked and aligned with the textbook, she used Rome as an example of how she sometimes skips units. "Ancient Rome is five sections long. I usually skip the third section on Christianity because the students already get that in religion" (Interview, 2/12). During this unit, Rebecca followed the typical daily schedule as previously described; however, some of the PowerPoint slides had large red Xs over them. Most of these slides related to the rise of Christianity and the



formation of the Roman Catholic Church. Some slides Rebecca skipped were related to Roman culture, specifically the Circus Maximus. She skipped these because she believed the students learned about chariot racing in their Latin class.

During the lesson on the fall of Rome, the class read four brief source excerpts. Three of the four sources were secondary sources written by historians. The fourth source was St. Jerome's account of the fall of Rome. Rebecca never asked the class how the source might differ, either religiously or historically, from the other three.

*Rebecca: How does he sound compared to the other ones?*

*Student: Sad, upset.*

*Rebecca: Yea, he sounds emotional. The other three are talking about it in a very factual way. St. Jerome brought in more emotion in a way.*

*Student: But St. Jerome is way more old then the others. I'm not sure when he lived and died, but that could...*

*Rebecca: So. He's just upset about it.*

*Student: But it's different if you live through it.*

*Rebecca: It's different if you live in the empire. (sounds angry. She's not really agreeing with the student and seems upset that this line of questioning is happening.) But this is to show you guys different ways things are described. When writing a research paper, you have to use a lot of different sources because one person's opinion isn't the same as another's... Okay. So put that away. I just wanted you guys to see different perspectives.*

*Analyzing sources and all. (Observation, 3/2)*

Rebecca and the students never recognized St. Jerome's religion and most students appeared to have never heard of St. Jerome. While one student attempted to discuss how St. Jerome's

perspective might be different based on when he was writing, Rebecca shut that line of discussion down and never discussed St. Jerome's religious belief or theology.

*The Ark of the Covenant:* The most prolonged conversation related to Catholicism began when the class was learning about Aksum, the ancient African kingdom. During class, Rebecca showed a CNN video on a potential current location of the Ark of the Covenant, a chest that, according to the Book of Exodus, was built by Moses during the Israelites' wanderings in the desert and holds the tablets the Ten Commandments were written on. Rebecca showed the video after the students had discussed how Ezana, the king of Aksum, converted to Christianity. The video discussed a theory that the Ark of the Covenant is located in a Christian church in modern day Ethiopia. After viewing the clip, Rebecca led the class in a 15-minute conversation about if the Ark of the Covenant were to be in Ethiopia, what should happen to it. This 15-minute period had an explicitly Catholic bias by Rebecca's reliance on students' knowledge of the Ark of the Covenant and the Vatican. This excerpt from the conversation demonstrates the higher level, albeit at times fantastical, thinking demonstrated by the students.

*Student: another thing that's good about the Vatican is that it doesn't have any set government that could take advantage of it being there. That's why they have the Vatican so he wouldn't be swayed by political forces.*

*Rebecca: you think the Vatican is void of corruption?*

*Student: No (seems flustered)*

*Rebecca: I'm just asking, the Vatican doesn't have a great track record in certain areas.*

*Student: I thought you liked Francis.*

*Rebecca: Oh I'm not saying Francis is corrupt. I wish we could be buds...Here's the other thing...they have replicas of the Ark of the Covenant. You know how Pandora's box*

*worked? So I by no means...when I grew up Indiana Jones was like...well do I know that that's true, you're going to open the box and your face is going to melt off, I don't know. But have you guys ever seen Indiana Jones and the Ark of the Covenant? But that's the other thing. Pandora's box...Pandora was given a box and told not to open it. You know the Ark of the Covenant is not supposed to be reopened. It's not like you're supposed to reopen and go see what's in there. Remember this is a sacred text that was given to Moses and then protected by Moses. Is this something that because of human nature, all humans are like this, when something is presented to us and told don't touch you do what. You want to touch. Do you think exposing it is really a good idea because of that part of human nature and curiosity killed the cat? Or is it that you would be able to restrain yourself?*

Some of the students began to discuss whether or not the pope should release the location of the Ark of the Covenant. Some students believed that releasing it would help people convert to Christianity. Other students worried about the safety of the Ark of the Covenant and wanted to “secretly move it to the Vatican or Israel” or to “just send people from the Vatican or the church of Judaism to guard it.” One student believed that what “we need to do is combine all the religions and build a new Vatican and allow this Ark of the Covenant so that all the religions...the three religious leaders are there and build a wall around it.” After these statements from students Rebecca ended the conversation by saying

*well thank you very much for that discussion. That went very well. I wasn't sure how that was going to go but I appreciate your input. This is a current event, this was released last night. So this type of stuff that you guys have talked about in world history, I know it seems so ancient to you, but eventually this type of stuff comes back*

*around. Um so thank you guys. So last 15 minutes to work on the worksheet.*

(Observation 4/22)

This brief fifteen-minute discussion relied on students' knowledge of the Vatican and their belief in the Ark of the Covenant. While students had clear misconceptions about other religions (i.e. the church of Judaism), Rebecca never stopped to correct them. Rebecca did not discuss the differences between the three religions or even ask what the three religions were that the student wanted to combine. But for Rebecca, this was higher order thinking for the students. When discussing the exchange with Rebecca after class, she focused on the current events connection instead of the religious connection. The news story was intended to make world history "real" for the students.

### **Discussion**

Rebecca taught in a very specific context in which there was a clearly articulated Catholic purpose for schooling, but she was not "expected" to cover a curriculum (there was no mandated curriculum), nor were there any high-stakes tests. Rebecca did not articulate a Catholic purpose for schools and schooling and her faith did not emerge as a major influence in her thinking about history. While she was involved in the school's religious life outside of the classroom, it did not enter into her classroom. Rather, her articulated purpose—for her students to have a basic grounding in the facts of history—trumped other possible influences and appeared to guide her decision-making. For Rebecca, her personal ideals and purpose outweighed that of the context. Convey (2012) highlights the importance teachers play in the development of a Catholic school's religious identity. In Convey's study, many of the teachers ranked "Catholic Teachings Integrated in Curriculum" as an important part of a school's Catholic identity (p. 204). However, the case of Rebecca raises questions about what Catholic teachings are incorporated in the

curriculum and how teachers are incorporating their understandings of Catholic teachings.

Despite these articulated beliefs and the importance of Catholic identity in classrooms, questions remain about what is happening in the classroom. If Catholic schools rely on general curriculum courses to teach Catholic identity (Carrithers & Peterson, 2010), then we need to have a greater understanding as to what is being taught and learned in the classroom.

Because this study draws only on one participant, future research should focus on a larger sample of Catholic school history teachers. In addition, this study focused on a teacher trained at a program not specifically geared towards teaching in Catholic schools. Are there differences between teachers trained at programs geared towards preparing teachers to work at Catholic schools and those preparing teachers for public school and how they approach Catholic identity in the classroom? Once teachers are in the classroom, what content specific professional development are they receiving? Many Catholic school teachers, like Rebecca, are the only teacher in their content area for the school. What opportunities are they given to understand the relationship between their content area and Catholicism? This study also has implications for administrators in Catholic schools. Despite Adam's commitment to incorporating Catholic identity into the classroom and curriculum areas, it did not translate into what was actually happening in the classroom. Future studies could examine how Catholic school administrators are providing feedback and helping teachers understand the role Catholic identity plays in their classroom and curriculum.

History classrooms are uniquely positioned in Catholic schools to address religious issues and to incorporate Catholic teachings. As history is the subject that students will most likely interact with religion outside of their religion class, it becomes increasingly important to understand what is happening in classrooms. How will students understand the connectivity

between religion and history if it is not taught? How will students understand their faith and use it to understand historical events and the world around them if classroom teachers do not provide students the opportunity to engage in this line of thinking. If “so much of our identity is both shaped by and bound up with our history” (MacMillan, 2009, p. 49), then disconnecting religion from history can greatly influence how students understand both historical and current events.

### **Conclusion**

Over the past century, Catholic schools have seen a decline in the number of religious (i.e. nuns and priests) that teach in their schools. The high numbers of religious in schools allowed Catholic schools to not focus on their Catholic identity because it was naturally incorporated by the religious in the schools (McDonald, 2008). However, in recent decades Catholic schools have had to rely more on lay teachers, as many as 96% of teachers are members of the laity (McDonald, 2008). As this transition occurs, schools and diocese need to think how they are incorporating Catholic identity into the classrooms. There needs to be clear and explicit expectations for teachers. This can come in the form of clearly defining Catholic identity and providing professional development for teachers to model how to better incorporate Catholic identity. While the principal, Adam, had a clear vision for what teaching history in a Catholic school, Rebecca’s vision and implementation of that vision widely differed. I began to wonder if Adam had an understanding of what went on in Rebecca’s classroom. Rebecca chose to not include Catholic identity in her daily classroom routines and effectively ignored Catholicism when it appeared in the curriculum. But why? If teachers claim that Catholic identity is necessary to include in the classroom (Convey, 2012), questions remain about how they are implementing it in their classrooms.

This study falls under Carrithers and Peterson's (2010) second argument for looking at the Catholicity of schools—that we are “failing---that ‘Catholic’ is in fact merely a superfluous adjective” (p. 416). We, as teacher-educators, administrators, and K-12 teachers, need to ensure that our students are receiving a “sound education, rooted in the Gospel message” (USCCB, 2013, para. 2). And if we are to do that, we need to better understand what is happening in the classrooms and actively and explicitly encourage teachers to infuse Catholic identity into their teaching.

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