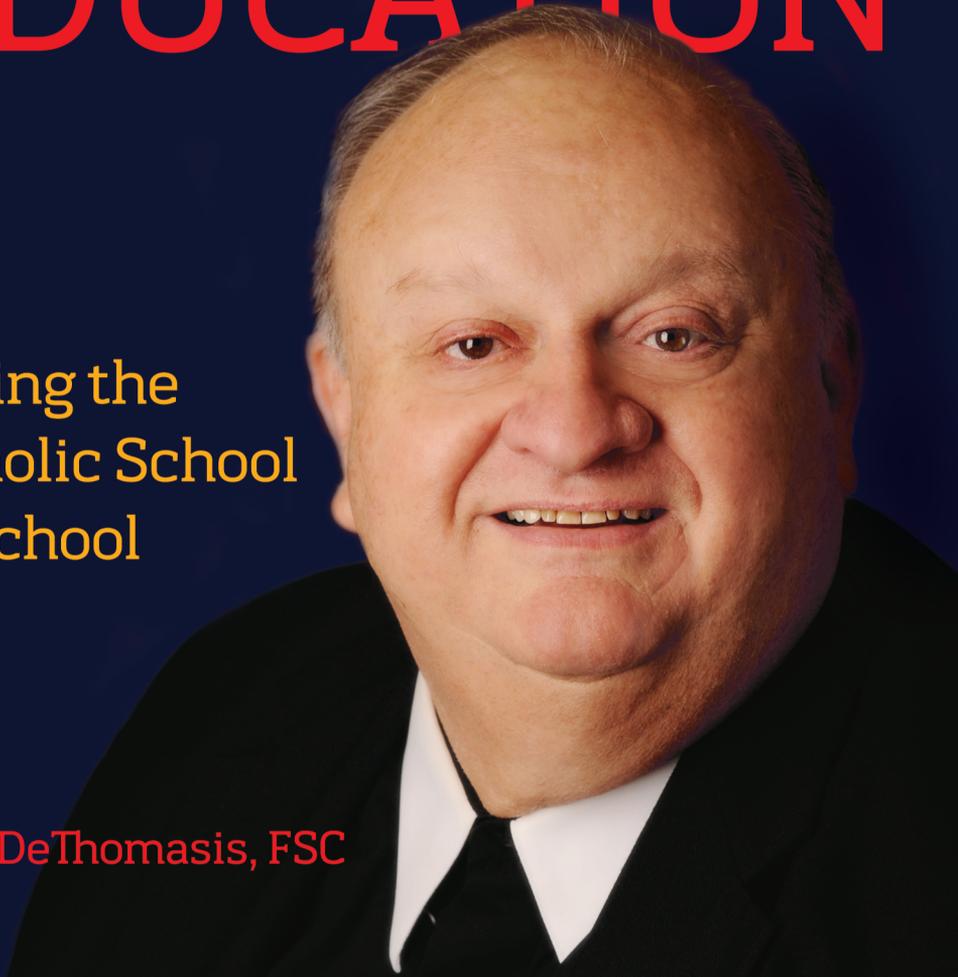


DYNAMICS OF CATHOLIC EDUCATION

Letting the
Catholic School
Be School

Louis DeThomas, FSC



Dynamics of Catholic Education

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Letting the Catholic School Be School

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INTRODUCTION



Jesus of Nazareth could have chosen simply to express himself in moral precepts; but like a great poet he chose the form of the parable, wonderful short stories that entertained and clothed the moral precept in an eternal form. It is not sufficient to catch man's mind, you must also catch the imaginative faculties of his mind.

DUDLEY NICHOLS



As I did in my book, *Flying in the Face of Tradition—Listening to the Lived Experience of the Faithful* (2012), I have attempted to make this work more approachable and readable to a wider audience; therefore, I do not approach the subject matter with a formalized, academic-research structure. In that book, I presented my conviction that a quandary exists in today's institutional Catholic Church. At the core of this quandary is the institutional church's reluctance to embrace the idea of tradition as a source of divine revelation obtained by effectively listening to and learning from the lived experience of the faithful followers of Jesus Christ.

Without diminishing the church's formal teaching authority, i.e. the *magisterium*, Catholic tradition unfolds over time—and continues to unfold—as the followers of Jesus of Nazareth also contribute their insights of Holy Scripture and especially the sacred stories within the Old and New Testaments based on their lived experiences and the culture that surrounds them. This is called the *sensus fidelium* or sense of the faithful. Tradition is the dynamic that propels the story of the response to Jesus throughout the two millennia since the Word came into the world. Or, as it was eloquently said by the Prefect of the Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith, Archbishop Gerhard Muller, that

the development of a culture of communion implies “...that equal attention be given to communion with the bishops of the Church, communion with the local dioceses and parishes, communion with the Catholic faithful, and the bonds of charity and friendship with those still separated from the Church.”

The powerful gospel story of Peter as the Rock upon which the church is built is considered a true and timeless justification for the institutional structures that have evolved over the centuries. Indeed, that compelling sacred story and image have been the explanation that the institutional church embraces to justify the transitions and paradigm shifts that have emerged. However, some ambiguity exists with this image. Does the lived experience of the faithful today

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tell us that when what I call here “the institutional church” speaks, listeners are hearing the voice of Peter, the Rock, on which the church stands; or are we hearing the voice of the church on which Peter, the Rock, stands? There is ambiguity when we try to clearly answer the “who, what, where, and why” of how tradition as a source of revelation works today. Some of us in the church are still seeking clarification, while others see this as a blessed ambiguity needing no answer, because *Roma locuta est, Causa finita est!* (Rome has spoken. The question is closed!)

In today’s world, however, because the actions of the institutional church are reported immediately throughout the globe, there are very few secrets that actually stay secrets. Likewise, there are very few questions that are closed just because Rome says so. The undeniable fact is that there is a growing number of us who have been faithful all our lives and are having difficulty recognizing the institutional church as the Rock that Jesus established. Rather they now experience these “man-made” organizational structures (and I do mean *man* made) as a departure from what Jesus had in mind. We fail to see Christ in many of the directives and pronouncements coming out of Rome.

In essence, the question I am asking is this: Are today's actions of the institutional church, not its words or pietistic exhortations making us a church of *communio* (that we may all be one) as Jesus established with Peter; or are its actions making us a church where we all must be the same by excluding those who differ with or question the Rock?

Seeking oneness through inclusion rather than exclusion is the tradition I was taught, the one that is so clearly unfolded by the sacred stories in Holy Scripture. Based on this realization, I observed in *Flying in the Face of Tradition*:

Sexual abuse, corruption, authoritarianism, lack of transparency, and cover-ups have all been collapsing into and on top of the institutional church. It does not matter whether one is liberal or conservative, orthodox or unorthodox, believer or non-believer. One cannot help but be amazed that the prestige, reverence, and esteem that once belonged to the institutional church and its leaders are no longer there. The tipping point has been reached, and the moral authority, honor, and respect that the institutional church once elicited from most peoples and secular institutions around the globe simply no longer exist.

If we do not unravel the quandary that has been caused by the institutional church's own actions, the resulting negative stories exploding all over the world, coupled with the institutional church's restrictive imposition on open dialogue among the faithful, will cause the church to continue to be mired and steeped in division. The successor to Peter once again must be seen standing firmly as the Rock—not with a distorted view of tradition that calls for recreating some nostalgic past but rather with a dynamic, grace-filled, and Holy Spirit-inspired living tradition that creates a new future for the People of God in the new globalized world. The core truth found in the sacred story of the Rock is not Peter seeking to control reality by issuing doctrines, dogma, and dictums. It is a tradition of preaching the Gospel of Jesus Christ in an engaging, transparent, candid, and open dialogue to the emerging People of God so that we may freely respond to Christ's message of love. Peter, the Rock, brought the freedom, forgiveness, acceptance, and love of Jesus Christ to the people of

the world. He did not try to bring the people of the world into a regal and rigid institution!

An abiding love and respect for the church and its *magisterium* (teaching authority) can be realized only if the Rock upon which the faithful stand today is the same Rock that Jesus gave to us in Peter: the Rock that helps create our future, not duplicate our past; the Rock that is an invitation to an abundant life, not the caretaker of historical details and artifacts; the Rock that acts out of love and sensitivity, not dictums and threats of excommunication. It is in the spirit of tradition, properly understood, that the Holy Spirit creates the church of the People of God. It is that tradition, properly understood, that will rescue the church from its current quandary and transform it into the loving servant it was called to be from the initial call to Peter.

In Part One, *Letting the Catholic School Be School*, I present a case for the role of Catholic education as a major source to help the church reestablish its relevance and vitality, becoming the exemplar of a spiritual dynamic that is so needed in our new, globalized world. I believe it is a very realistic possibility that Catholic education can respond to our need for transformation because it has always responded with great effectiveness and dedication to the needs of the church and the world alike.

I will explore the future of Catholic education, going down two paths at once: how Catholic education can help the church begin to unravel the difficult quandary it has gotten itself into and how it can help the church improve its relationship with its own members and the world at large.

Although this overview presents a case for the role of Catholic education in general, it will be obvious that there is a distinct focus on Catholic higher education, which is where I spent much of my career. Even with this slant toward higher education, however, my hope is that the basic principles—with adaptations—could be applied pedagogically, in appropriate and relevant ways, at all levels of Catholic educational institutions.

There is a persistent and valid question asked today by many dedicated Catholic educators: Will the institutional church cooperate in this effort at transformation and let Catholic schools really be schools rather than propaganda venues? Significant pressures, criticisms, and intrusions from Catho-

lic conservative and even fundamentalist ideologues within the church have caused much turmoil and anxiety among many Catholic educators and their institutions. However, the twin graces of zeal and faith at the core of Catholic education are dynamic enough to lead the People of God and all people of good will beyond their nostalgic beliefs. These two core graces are at the heart and soul of Catholic education. They are how relationships are born and flourish as the hallmark of a distinct and unique approach to Catholic education around the world.

To accomplish its mission, Catholic education must continue with courageous, dynamic, and effective initiatives. It must ensure that it remains a vital and relevant force for good in the third millennium. If it does this, it will continue to be vibrant and relevant in today's world, which is in desperate need of a practical

witness to Christ's unconditional love. But the institutional church must permit the Catholic education system to truly educate and not just catechize. It must let the Catholic school really be school!

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In Part Two, *Dynamics Needed for the Transformation of Catholic Schools*, I explore ingredients that are needed in order to transform any institution in today's globalized society. For intentional transformation to take place, specific and effective dynamics and

qualities must be utilized in order to accomplish a new and vital existence for an institution. These basic and foundational assumptions must first be identified and then incorporated into the culture of all institutions—Catholic schools and the Catholic Church included.

Transformation is always difficult, and there will always be those who resist efforts to do things differently. However, in a world that is so different from the past, it is important for all of us to understand the basic qualities needed for an institution to be responsive to the world that exists in the here and now. It is my hope that the Catholic Church, which cherishes so dearly its beautiful, rich traditions, will begin to live in the new emerging world and invent a future that

will make the Gospel come alive again now. Catholic education can make that dream happen.

That leads me to a final note. Throughout the book I refer to “the church” or “the Catholic Church” and use the two terms pretty much interchangeably. Specifically I am referring to the Roman Catholic Church, of which I am a lifelong, faithful member. I am a Catholic school teacher and administrator, an educational consultant, a trustee to various Catholic organizations, and a De LaSalle Christian Brother for over forty years. I am not a theologian. So, I write this book as a committed and engaged Catholic educator using reasoned and informed Christian common sense—which is another word for tradition, properly understood.

As I started to work my way through the quandary the church is facing and how to unravel it, I constantly kept in mind and heeded advice from—of all people—that wonderful comedian, Gracie Allen, who said, “Don’t place a period where God has placed a comma. God is still speaking.”

So I begin now and try to write this book with as many commas and as few periods as possible.

CHAPTER ONE

The Catholic School and Its Critics

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I know no safe depository of the ultimate powers of the society but the people themselves; and if we think them not enlightened enough to exercise their control with a wholesome discretion, the remedy is not to take it from them, but to inform their discretion by education.

THOMAS JEFFERSON

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Imagine a time traveler from today's globalized society going back to the day that Moses came down from the Mount with the Ten Commandments. As he stands next to the golden calf and hears the people complaining about the long list of commandments, you can hear him shout, "Hey you guys, if you think these Ten Commandments etched on two stone tablets have too many 'do's and don'ts', be thankful I didn't come down with a couple of MP3s!" Indeed, it would take at least a couple of hard drives with many gigabytes of storage for Catholic education to save all the advice from different constituencies telling them what they must do to be "Catholic." And not even Bill Gates could develop a computer program that would reconcile the various and competing expectations of Catholic education from so many well-intentioned people and produce a reasonable mission statement that would be accepted by everyone.

In this minefield of strongly competing forces and opinions, Catholic education should not try to walk a tight-rope in its attempt to balance its role as an educational institution and its responsibility to the Gospel. Religious fundamentalists, religious relativists, a few bishops, or ideologues of all stripes (who

are often the loudest voices) should not be permitted to push the schools in one direction or the other.

Here is the main point of this book, and if you read no further at least take this away: The Catholic school must serve its students first. That may seem obvious, and it certainly is open to interpretation, but it is a truth that cannot be forgotten. For if a Catholic school does not serve its students first, it fails by definition. A school is not a church. May I repeat that? A school is not a church. It will not benefit those entrusted to its care—nor will it help the insti-

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tutional church unravel its present quandary—if Catholic education does not provide a liberating intellectual education and an experience of human and religious development for its students.

No amount of rote learning or access to digitally stored information is sufficient to illuminate and resolve the new emerging issues confronting students in today's globalized society. Our young people are confronted with a multitude of social and religious questions; some of the most pressing concern abortion and birth control; how to effectively employ a "preferential option for the poor;" relating new scientific knowledge about human sexuality to traditional church teachings; exploring ethical implications of human DNA engineering and manipulation of human genetic composition;

embracing the concerns of women and men who, in growing numbers, feel abandoned by the institutional church; and so much more.

These issues and many additional and complex situations can be addressed by Catholic education only to the degree that schools are permitted to discuss them in an open and free environment. This is a vital concern for Catholic schools and strikes at the very heart of what it means to be a Catholic school. Consider a very real and specific contemporary situation that demonstrates this point.

Youngsters in primary, secondary, or university levels, who are developing

as persons, may experience significant sexual uncertainties among their many other developmental dynamics, causing much confusion in their psychological journey to maturity. In this confusing period, some are confronted with internal psychological and hormonal episodes that psychologists tell us lead adolescent youngsters to be temporarily unsure of their sexuality. It is not uncommon that some may experience what they perceive as homosexual tendencies. They simply don't understand what is going on within their own developing body.

This is a time in young peoples' lives when they desperately need support and compassion from the church, the school, and their families, including sound professional and educational assistance. Yet, when they turn to the teachings of the institutional church, the official answer is that homosexuality is "disordered" and to act out of this disorder is seriously sinful. They are also told that love between two people of the same sex is condemned in Holy Scripture and that they can never get married or have a sexual relationship. No matter how much those in the institutional church may then use some intellectual gyrations and carefully nuanced distinctions about hating the sin and not the sinner, and no matter how much they contend they know everything there is to know about adolescent sexual development, nevertheless the young distraught persons only hear that they are condemned and disordered.

Making matters worse, those same youngsters are often terrified to openly discuss this question with their parents, and they certainly are not going anywhere near a church they feel is condemning them to hell for being a disordered human being! Let it be clearly said without any qualification, equivocation, or theological gyration: In a Catholic school at any level, these youngsters—in fact any confused or distressed young person—should find Jesus' *unconditional* love, support, understanding, solace, and relief. Nothing less!

All too often, and in growing numbers, there are young people with many real personal moral conflicts who feel isolated and abandoned by the church. If only the institutional church leaders relied more on Catholic educators to assist them in such situations, they could develop a more useful and profoundly human way to address these issues. My criticism is not a negative observation of the moral principle involved; rather it is a criticism of the growing perception that some in the institutional church are more concerned with the cold dogma

than with the warm body hearing it. If people on both sides of the ideological spectrum would simply stop policing the Catholic schools and trust them to be truly Catholic by letting them do their jobs in a sensitive and correct pedagogical manner, there would be more healthy psychological support for young people who could be drawn to the church instead of abandoning it.

Catholic education can be a significant help to the church if it is able to resist the inappropriate infringement of its mission by the forces that see orthodoxy in terms of rigid formulistic statements of truth rather than the inclusive and holistic spirit of Christian love. Perhaps this current state of interaction between the Catholic school and the institutional church is similar to the situation of the nineteenth century short story writer, Guy de Maupassant: It was said of him that he ate his lunch each day at the restaurant on top of the Eiffel Tower because it was the only restaurant in Paris where he could eat without having to look at what he considered an architectural monstrosity!

Likewise, it seems that, because of the institutional church's increasing attempt to control its own people, the Catholic school is being forced to retreat into its own intellectual tower so it does not have to look on the ugliness of outside ideological and fundamentalist forces within its own church.

Catholic educators regularly experience complex and intricate forces that infringe on their identity. However, as long as they remain in their Eiffel Tower and turn a blind eye to what is happening to their schools, their future is unsure and unimpressive.

Catholic educators must be open to transforming themselves in order to respond to the very different needs of their students. They must have the courage to lead both the institutional church and all the People of God on the path to being a faithful Catholic, while at the same time running an excellent school. Catholic schools must guard against a conscious twisting of the truth in order to satisfy and keep peace with the growing intrusions in their pedagogical duties: what books are permitted, who should speak at the school, which teachers to hire or let go. How to relate the Catholic faith in conformity with the *magisterium* while embracing the rich and varied Catholic intellectual traditions is the responsibility of Catholic schools, not the institutional church. In essence, Catholic educators cannot bend to the demands of what their critics consider

orthodoxy in order to keep peace. Of course Catholic schools have the responsibility to teach the Catholic faith accurately and responsibly. However, they are not to become automatons that are controlled by the click of a key from the institutional church's mainframe!

Catholic schools freely choose to be Catholic and, therefore, must be trusted to meet modern professional educational standards while concurrently unfolding the Catholic faith in ways that can produce understanding in world cultures of the third millennium. In this light, the Catholic school must walk a different and more treacherous tight-rope than the institutional church. After all, the institutional church is charged with proclaiming the Gospel to all by presenting its story using Scripture and tradition, while the Catholic school must take students beyond the story into the world. If we take a good look at the world today, there is no safety net under the Catholic schools walking that tight-rope as they try to accommodate their students, parents, faculties, benefactors, public accrediting agencies, the institutional church, and the ever-present orthodoxy police. Quite a formidable task!

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If the Catholic school tries to please everyone and be all things to all people, it will not be a school nor will it be Catholic.

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If the Catholic school tries to please everyone and be all things to all people, it will not be a school nor will it be Catholic. Such conscious circling around the truth and attempting to be all things to all people is not something peculiar at this moment in the history of the church. Consider for instance Tycho Brahe, a sixteenth-century Danish mathematician-philosopher, who “manufactured” a solution to Copernicus’ then most distasteful (for the institutional church at the time) revelation that the Earth was not the center of the universe. Brahe made Copernicus’ discovery much more palatable to the institutional church by agreeing that, indeed, all the planets revolved around the sun, just as Copernicus said. But, said Brahe, all those planets and the sun revolved around the Earth! What a pleasant intellectual and nuanced gyration, satisfying the institutional church with such a logical fabrication while, of course, simultaneously obfuscating the truth. Ah, but alas, all were

then pleased with this intellectually rigorous (but truly tacky and ultimately untruthful) line of reasoning.

Throughout history, patterns of rationalizations manifest how people and institutions consciously work around the truth. Even in the history of the institutional church one can observe many partners in a dance of standard assumptions, phrases, actions, euphemisms, and hidden agendas. Procrustes, the robber in Greek mythology, cut people up to fit in his bed. Catholic educators today also live in a Procrustean world that they must resist. If they do not, then they will eventually be cut up and molded by the institutional church or the orthodoxy police to be something other than free, faithful, and relevant Catholic educators. They need to remember that a Catholic school is not the Catholic Church.

In no way should this warning be interpreted as a recommendation that the Catholic school should ignore the teaching authority of the church through its *magisterium*. The Catholic school has the obligation to present in a full and authentic way the teachings of the church. In my entire career as a Catholic educator, I was able to accomplish this goal. What I am saying is that the institutional church should stand clear of the Catholic school and trust the Catholic school to be Catholic. There is nothing wrong with encouraging helpful dialogue and candid discussion between the Catholic school and the institutional church. There is something very wrong, though, if the institutional church attempts to control the Catholic school and tries to cut it up and mold it to fit some preconceived, ideological form of the Catholic Church.

There has been much shouting directed against the Catholic school as it attempts to do its job of teaching as Jesus did. There is criticism when a Catholic school honors someone who deserves to be acknowledged if that honoree holds any single position that the critics believe to be against church orthodoxy—even if the honoree is not Catholic! There is likewise criticism from the official institutional church when theological research or speculation questions traditional church teachings in light of new knowledge that has been discovered, especially if it involves human sexuality. There are even religious ideologues from inside and from outside the church that criticize the Catholic school when it makes the distinction that there is necessarily a difference between the public's

civil law and religious moral practice in a democratic society.

For example, a Catholic school should inform its students of the current position of the church that marriage is between a man and a woman. However, students should also be informed of the rationale from the opposite position as expounded in the realm of civil society if they are to be truly educated on the issues and the culture in which they live.

Ideological critics of Catholic schools certainly make their indignation known in a public way. The late Senator Huey Long once wrote in the margin of a speech that he was presenting, “Weak point, shout!” Catholic schools must not be intimidated by the decibel rating of the criticism. As a Catholic school interacts with the church, its students, and the culture it operates in, there will always be a multiplicity of considerations. And, usually, those shouting the loudest are the ones who deify their notion of correctness to the exclusion of any other reasonable voice on a particular topic. When any side in a controversy seeks to expand its moral force beyond logical constraints, it results in frightening and forced polarities. Perhaps more accurately such people should be described as the lunatic fringe!

Challenging such polarities unleashes great consternation and indignation that continues to hide the truth. Then the label throwing begins: “liberal,” “conservative,” “orthodox,” “unorthodox,” “faithful,” “unfaithful,” or—ultimately—“heretic.” This label throwing does accomplish one thing—it divides people and thereby prevents them from coming together in celebration of Jesus’ love.

When these combatant labels begin to be used, then all sides put on encumbering blinders that tarnish both the Catholic faith and its spirit of communion. The pit of ideology into which groups fall makes it as impossible for us to see reality as it was for de Maupassant to see the Eiffel Tower as he sat and ate his lunch atop the very tower he was avoiding. The results of such unproductive clashes are contrived and false. The Catholic school must identify itself to all as a true community of learners seeking information, knowledge, truth, and wisdom. In such a community there can be no prohibition or curtailment of inquiry that would inhibit the truly free and reasonable academic pursuit of knowledge and understanding. No interest group—not even the pope and the bishops—should encumber responsible academic freedom.

The Catholic school must be free to be a school so that it can truly educate a person seeking meaningfulness in a world of competing religions, philosophies, and values. The Catholic school conducts this search for truth within a commitment and dedication to the Catholic expression of faith, values, and teachings. There is an inestimable qualitative dimension created when the word “Catholic” is placed before “school.” In essence the duty is established to bring the enlightenment of the Christian expression of faith and revelation to the noble pursuit of seeking truth and knowledge. And all must remember that faith is a gift from God and can be expressed in many different ways.