Trinitarian Theology as a Resource for the Theology of Education

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TRINITARIAN THEOLOGY AS A RESOURCE FOR THE THEOLOGY OF EDUCATION

by

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A Thesis submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School, Marquette University, in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts.

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ABSTRACT
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Anne Bullock, PhD
Marquette University, 2023

The character of Catholic education has been variously described but is often associated with educating the whole person, a statement that is usually inadequately explored. In the first place, this “holistic” approach is often reduced to character education, which is an insufficient explanation of what makes Catholic schools distinctive. Moreover, the approach relies on a dense theological account of the human person, which can make it difficult to integrate into the daily reality of school life. This thesis critiques some insufficient approaches to Catholic education in light of the Church’s vision for education, beginning with Vatican II and Gravissimis Educationis by Paul VI. There are resources within the Catholic theological tradition that can provide needed depth, and the thesis draws out three insights from Trinitarian theology, especially Augustine’s De Trinitate, and applies them to the messy reality of Catholic schools. First, every subject bristles with God’s presence because God is the self-revealing creator. Catholic theology therefore provides a foundation on which educators can build a case for the unity of reality and the interconnected nature of all academic subjects. Second, God’s self-revelation is not merely informational; it is relational. Through the incarnation of Jesus Christ, we learn that God invites us into a deep and intimate relationship. The third point is closely related, and both pertain particularly to Catholic secondary education. While relationship with God is an end in itself, it produces results, namely an increase of self-knowledge, which in turn orders the will more justly and allows human beings to live with greater intention and love. Developing a relationship with God is highly personal, just as acquiring self-knowledge is an intimate process. It follows that Catholic educators must provide both guidance and space for adolescents to mature, which is what will move them toward a whole and healthy character. When placed in conversation with the on the ground realities of Catholic schooling, these trinitarian ideas can be used to develop fresh ways of describing what it means to be engaged in the work of developing the human person toward the end of fulfilling the Church’s mission.
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THE PROBLEM OF DEFINING CATHOLIC EDUCATION

Introduction

It is not an easy thing to state clearly and succinctly what sets Catholic schools apart from other kinds of educational institutions. The source of a school’s Catholic identity is always the Bishop, of course; no one can call themselves a Catholic school community without his investment. It does not follow, however, that Catholic schools exist to educate Catholic communities. The vision of the Catholic Church is always wider than that. It is universalizing, by design, and in that sense, the Catholic school should embody the highest and best, the most authentic version of what human education is. These are high ideals, but they are in keeping with the ethos of Catholic theology. It is a wide lens, and the difficulty comes, as usual, when the ideals set out at the start must interact with the actual facts about the real human beings who do the work of teaching and learning in Catholic schools. This thesis is my best attempt to bring those two poles into conversation with one another to tease out some directions for talking about Catholic education in a theological mode.

To that end, I have two purposes here. The first is to move through and critique some of the easy, shorthand ways that Catholic education is described. The Church has a rich and compelling theological vision that embeds the educative process in a web of theological concepts that are not easily pulled apart. When attempts are made to clarify, too often they reduce what Catholic education is to the level of a soundbite. Pithy sayings that gesture toward deeper truths may be useful in professional development meetings, but they create problems when they feed into reductive models for Catholic schools. In the first half, I will explore some of what people say about Catholic education and hold it
up to the light of Church teachings to see where it falls short. Much that is written in popular discourse is true as far as it goes. The problem is that it doesn’t go very far. The models most often used to describe different kinds of Catholic schools are simplistic as well—and they are often used to critique entire schools or types of schools and dismiss them as insufficiently or inauthentically Catholic. There is always a kernel of truth in these critiques, but for the real people who inhabit those school communities, the culture of critique is discouraging. And when set against the theological backdrop of the Church’s vision, it becomes clear that every school community is subject to the same critique, suggesting that some self-reflection might be in order.

My second purpose is to gesture toward developing some fresh theological ideas about Catholic education that might further the conversation. For that, I turn to Trinitarian theology, especially Augustine’s work, because it holds together the anthropological and soteriological dimensions with admirable force. From these resources, I draw out two related ideas. The first pertains to the relationship between God and the world as a created order charged with God’s presence. Human beings have the capacity to understand something about the creation, which is at the heart of education. We come to know the world through study, and by studying the world, we can come to know something about God. At the same time, human beings are embedded in the created order, and we also come to know God through self-reflection. My second line of thinking is related to this proposition and rooted in discussion of adolescent faith formation. Taken together, these ideas a gesture toward a theologically grounded account of education and provide some context for what it means to live in relationship to Christ.
I submit this as an encouraging word. Education can be a difficult field, and Catholic education can be even more difficult if only because the stakes presented are so high. It is daunting to hear that we are engaged in the work of leading souls to Christ, particularly when the realities of the classroom are so comparatively dismal: apathy, disrespect, and a seemingly limitless well of criticism from outside. The value of good theology is that it gives language to our deepest longings and so my ultimate purpose here is to find new ways to talk about what it means to teach in a Catholic school that speak to the highest and best ideals while also acknowledging that the work is hard, the hours long, and the gains usually small.

The argument will follow a progression from a discussion of the theology of education that is both expository and critical. I present the Church’s teaching since Vatican II on Catholic education in a discussion framed around two commonplace but reductive statements about Catholic education: Catholic schools educate the whole person; and it is about getting to heaven. The next section proceeds in a similar mode by addressing the most common models for the Catholic school, which are often exceedingly narrow, excluding all but the most traditional parochial schools. These models are not entirely wrongheaded, but the conversation leaves very little room to talk about the work that takes place in other kinds of school—schools whose foundations and histories follow a very different trajectory. From there, I turn to my own theological ideas about the Trinity and outline three principles that can help shape a future conversation. The final sections are my best attempt to explore how that might look. The first one, that the world is pervaded by God’s self-revealed presence, is discussed in relationship to the
emerging conversation about classical education in Catholic circles. The other two ideas are explored using the story of Jacob wrestling the angel as a touchstone.

In the end, I hope to communicate that there are many good things taking place in the theology of Catholic education; but there are also shortcomings, and therefore there is much more work to do in order to frame a conversation that creates space for all kinds of teachers in all kinds of schools to find theological resources to talk about their work.

Engagement with an intelligible world is already a means of exploring God’s character. Likewise, increased self-knowledge, which is an essential part of the education process, fosters growth in the student’s relationship with God because self-knowledge and knowledge of God are so intimately linked. Viewed through this Trinitarian lens, even Catholics schools with challenges are able to participate in unique work of Catholic education.

The Theology of Catholic Education

The Church has a long history of involvement in education, and there are certain concepts that have become commonplace in conversations about Catholic schools. One of the truisms of Catholic education is that its end goal is the formation of the whole person. It is easily said but less easily parsed, particularly if we admit that, explicitly or implicitly, every school is engaged in the formation of a whole person. Public schools aim to form citizens, and the existence of physical education is enough to reveal that the project is more than intellectual. Private schools of all kinds both invest time and energy into creating their portraits of a graduate, an idealized description of a student who fully embodies the values of the institution. The exercise aims to increase the coherence of the community by casting a vision of a common goal—and it is even something that has been
considered as a way to create a cohesive sense of identity in public schools (Stewart 2020). Even contemporary approaches betray their ideals. Project-based learning (PBL), for instance, is often framed as a fresh approach to the learning process but its push to create a cooperative, participant-directed environment presumes that autonomy and engagement are obvious goods and that these ways of learning supersede models that center around the instructor. The approach therefore aligns best with a particular understanding of learning as socially constructed and humanistic (cf Güneş and Kalayci 779-782). There also is an orientation to power implicit in PBL that finds its source in a set of assumptions about what kind of people students should be on the other side of their education. At the very least, there is an impulse to form their relationship to power—both their own and the power wielded by others—with the goal of social and personal transformation like that described by Paolo Friere (Güneş and Kalayci 781). The skills and habits of mind and action inculcated are as essential as the content, no matter the approach.

In what sense, then, does Catholic education stake a unique claim on holistic formation? The short answer is that it does not stake a unique claim there per se, and Paul VI’s Vatican II treatise is the best starting point for unpacking what that means, *Gravissimis Educationis* (GE). The Vatican document sets the *Universal Declaration on Human Rights*, originally adopted by the United Nations in 1948 under a slightly different title; and the *Declaration on the Rights of the Child* that followed in 1959 as the background to the text. According to the United Nations, children are owed protection and a harmonious environment (socially and otherwise) that allows them to fully develop their personality. Education is a key support to that end. Education is guaranteed to all
children, including those who are disabled (Article 23). Parental education is likewise essential, so that parents can better care for their children (Article 24). A later article spells out the individual right of each child to an education, at least at the primary level (Article 28). The context is not economic, but rather cites “the development of the child’s personality, talents and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential,” which is essential preparation for “responsible life in a free society, in the spirit of peace, tolerance, equality of sexes, and friendship among all peoples, ethnic, moral, and religious groups” (Article 29). In fact, the only references to economics in the document are statements like the one protecting children from economic exploitation (Article 32). The benefit to each country is a citizenry formed in a particular set of values that should prevent violence and hatred and shore up a culture of cooperation and congeniality.

The language Paul VI uses in *GE* resonates with this vision. The school exists to support children in developing “harmoniously their physical, moral and intellectual endowments” toward helping them grow into responsible individuals who strive “to form their own lives properly and in pursuing true freedom as they surmount the vicissitudes of life with courage and constancy” (*GE* 1). Here there is perfect agreement with the UN declaration down to the inclusion of the terms “harmonious” and “responsibility.” Even the ideal of moral formation has a precedent in the notion of promoting social and moral well-being (Article 17). To this, *GE* adds a multi-faceted right:

Young people have the right to be motivated to appraise moral values with a right conscience, to embrace them with a personal adherence, together with a deeper knowledge and love of God (*GE* 1).

The right to be motivated to appraise is somewhat obscure at first glance, and the second two statements are easier to unpack: young people have the right to adhere to their
individual consciences—presumably as formed by the Church—and young people have the right to pursue a deeper love of God. The text goes on to entreat authorities to protect these rights, ostensibly under the auspices of a freedom of religion. These are easily understood because they are actions, but they are ultimately interior actions, which returns us to the beginning of the sentence. The initial statement highlights a personal orientation or disposition. It declares the right to be a particular sort of person—in this case, the kind who looks at the world through a particular evaluative lens. It comes first in the list, which suggests that from this critical vantage point, the individual discovers what she should embrace and through that comes to a deeper knowledge and love of God. That appears to be the sense, which means that Paul VI adds to the UN declaration the right to be a particular kind of person.

The statement suggests a portrait of a graduate for Catholic education: a person who appraises the world according to a well-formed conscience and then lives according to that evaluation. Like every approach to education, Catholic education aims to produce an interior disposition that results in particular actions, understood as a life well-lived in the context of a harmonious community. GE aligns itself with the UN’s goal of producing a tolerant and peaceful society in a way that asks for continued protection for the practice of religion, while also clarifying what a truly harmonious society looks like. GE declares that this is the true meaning of a universal right to education: the right to think with a conscience formed according to the truth. It is a position that comes alongside the UN declaration while also making its own programmatic statement that fully embraces the universalizing tendency of Catholic thought.
The next statements made in *GE* are more particular: there is a Christian right to an education that unfolds the whole truth of salvation as the individual grows in understanding of the gift they were given at baptism. Responsibility for this kind of education is laid at the feet of both pastors (*GE* 2) and parents (*GE* 3), and it is meant to take place in the parish, at least to some extent. *GE* makes it clear that parents need support in educating their children, a point that figures prominently in the *Declaration on the Rights of the Child*. Parents may look to civil society to assist with those things that are “required for the common temporal good,” the preservation of which is the function of the civil authorities (*GE* 3). The rights of the parent are protected and guaranteed by the State—or they ought to be, in any case (*GE* 3).

Although parents and society have a stake in education, there is also a particular duty that the Church has for education that deserves attention. According to *GE*,

the Church has the responsibility of announcing the way of salvation to all men, of communicating the life of Christ to those who believe, and, in her unfailing solicitude, of assisting men [sic] to be able to come to the fullness of this life. The Church is bound as a mother to give to these children of hers an education by which their whole life can be imbued with the spirit of Christ and at the same time do all she can to promote for all peoples the complete perfection of the human person, the good of earthly society and the building of a world that is more human (*GE* 3).

There are several parts to this statement, which operates according to a straightforward theological mechanism. The Church first has a duty to evangelize, which is the meaning of announcing salvation to all people. To those who believe, the Church has a further duty for an education that leads to deeper formation and therefore leads into salvation, since salvation is something that must be pursued through life in the Church. The baptized are like children who will flounder without guidance. If they are formed properly, however, their lives will be transformed. This is the real work of salvation and
the sense in which the Church participates in God’s mission on earth. Individuals transformed by grace embody a fuller humanity and, in turn, promote a more human society. That, in turn, is how the Church proclaims the Gospel. The individual participates in the work of becoming more human, but it is up to the Church, as mother, to see to it that they have every resource and a good understanding of how to proceed. What takes place in the particular with the individual is magnified in the Church, which is how God uses the Church as a smaller, self-contained society to reveal the truth to the whole world.

There is an obvious analogy with the Jewish people as a light to the nations (Cf. Isaiah 42.6), but there is also a New Testament referent in the Sermon on the Mount. The idea of the Church (or even the school) as a city on a hill (Matthew 5.14) is implicit, but GE chooses the language of leavening to describe the process (GE 8). It is an earthier metaphor but also more explanatory. Only a little yeast is needed to leaven enough dough to make bread, and it is not always immediately obvious that the yeast is present. Once it is incorporated, it is no longer visible, but its effects can be readily discerned. In keeping with what Jesus taught, it is not necessary for the Church to completely transform every person on earth in order to have a significant and easily observable impact.

Schools are only a part of this vision. GE charges pastors with seeing to this education (GE 3), and parochial schools are not the only context for catechesis in the parish. Religious education classes and homiletical instruction are important among other aids that encourage full participation in the liturgy, which is in many ways the best teacher (GE 4). Schools are an essential part of the picture, however, and the way GE describes the Catholic school helps further clarify the sense in which the Catholic school
particularly forms a whole person according to the principles already discussed. *GE* notes that schools are particularly focused on intellectual formation, and the Catholic school is no exception. Schools exist to develop those skills, but they also teach students “to judge rightly,” and “to hand on the cultural legacy of previous generations,” which seems to go hand in hand with fostering “a sense of values” (*GE 5*). By what is taught and how it is presented, both of which help form student judgements, Catholic schools foster values. Schools should also promote “friendly relations” and “foster a spirit of mutual understanding” among students who vary in their “talents and backgrounds” (*GE 5*) in the context of a harmonious school community.

To this point, there is not much here that would not apply to any school. What sets the Catholic school apart is its spirit, which is “animated by the Gospel” and which requires that the school both be open to “the situation of the contemporary world” and focused on preparing students to serve God by “leading an exemplary apostolic life” and therefore becoming “a saving leaven in the human community” (*GE 8*). The Catholic school is unique, then, because it participates in God’s mission in the world in a way that other schools do not. It is therefore the Church’s right to operate schools that fulfil this mission as part of its work in the world.

At this point, it is worth revisiting the truism that Catholic schools form the whole person. Catholic schools do indeed educate the whole person, but that cannot be a full account of what sets them apart from other schools. A document titled *The Catholic School*, published in 1977, affirms the same point. A Catholic school reproduces the characteristic features of the school in general as “a privileged place in which, through a living encounter with a cultural inheritance, integral formation occurs” (*The Catholic
School 26). It must be that or it cannot be called a school. To be called Catholic, however, it must have reference to Jesus Christ (The Catholic School 33). The distinctive character of Catholic schools is that they function as part of the Church’s work to fulfill God’s mission in the world, which is to raise up a transformed people to “leaven” the world and make it more like God’s kingdom come, on earth as it is in heaven. The vision is broader than the true yet unhelpful statement that Catholic schools teach the whole student because it encompasses the salvation of the whole world, beginning here and now and not as an individual concern deferred to a distant heaven.

The same charge of saying too little could be leveled at another popular truism: Catholic schools exist to get people into heaven. Emphasis on truth and salvation surely set Catholic schools apart from non-religious schools. There is at least a kernel of truth in the notion that Catholic schools are about the salvation of their students. Still, there is something narrow in it that leads away from GE’s comprehensive vision of the Catholic school as it relates to the salvation of humankind. In an essay written for NCEA’s Catholic Schools Week in 2020 and published by the National Catholic Register, Justin McClain argues that Catholic schools exist to proclaim the Gospel, but his understanding is apologetic rather than programmatic. He writes:

The 21st century world and the often aggressively unrelenting inroads of secularism will continue to pose numerous challenges to the role that Catholic education ought to play in leading students to the Good News of Jesus Christ. Especially in the areas of sexual morality, the dignity of all human life from the moment of conception until natural death, and the allure of materialism, Catholic schools do well to present an alternative message to the world’s specious ideologies. […] Catholic schools must redouble their efforts to proclaim that which is true, good and holy, in their approaches to both everyday and pandemic dilemmas. Otherwise, they will not be able to present a substantial, let alone rhetorically convincing, distinction when compared with any other educational institutions (McClain).
McClain’s anxiety about the state of the society and of Catholic schools is clearly articulated. And there is truth to what he observes. American Catholic schools can easily become spaces in which the Church and her teachings are figures of ridicule, for a variety of reasons. If nothing else, familiarity can breed contempt, but there is also the problem of changing social norms that increasingly cast Catholic teachings, like those on human sexuality and the dignity of human life, as problematic (at best). His prescription is a renewed apology for Catholic schools (McClain).

An editorial with a similarly apologetic bent ran one year earlier during Catholic Schools Week in 2019. The piece was published by Colorado Springs Gazette in response to the well-publicized incident between counter-protestors and a group of Catholic school students from Covington, Kentucky at the March for Life in Washington, D.C. It is titled “Catholic Schools aren’t ‘bastions of bigotry,’” and it marches through a long list of positives associated with Catholic schools from providing tuition assistance to struggling families to high graduation rates and first-rate outcomes for graduates (Bastions). It is a rhetorically effective move that counters the perception that Catholic schools are predominantly wealthy, white institutions that exist only for Catholics, a reading of Catholics schools that is plainly contradicted by the facts both historically and in the present.

An apologia for Catholic schools can come to feel necessary given the current cultural climate, and the Gazette editorial seems to strike a good balance between acknowledging the difficulties and highlighting the net benefit to society provided by Catholic schools. McClain’s approach is slightly different. He fixes his sights on the failures of some Catholic schools, which he argues have lost sight of their salvific
mission. Here salvation seems to amount to resistance to creeping secularism, since what he wants Catholic schools to teach is a rhetorically satisfying counter to what the world offers. A thorough Theology of the Body curriculum, for instance, functions as a curative for the questions surrounding gender that have dominated public discourse for the last several years (McClain).

This is worth considering, but there’s a distinction to be made first. Everything in *GE* presumes that evangelization works by forming baptized Catholics within the community so that they can be an example to the human community of a life well-lived, something they demonstrate by the good they do in the world. McClain presumes that Catholic schools must make an argument to their students that will lead them to see the world from a counter-cultural perspective and that this is how the Gospel will spread. The assumption leads him to the conclusion that Catholic schools will be more successful if they do this, and therefore that specific content and activities (like Theology of the Body) are an essential component of developing the proper counter-cultural perspective.

There is a marked contrast between McClain’s approach and the approach taken by Paul VI in *GE*. Paul VI begins from an area of agreement with contemporary secular culture by appealing to the United Nations, and then adds to it a universalizing perspective on human history and human salvation that is essentially Catholic in nature. It has two feet solidly planted in the world of its time, but its head exists on a transcendent plane that speaks for all humanity for all time. By contrast, McClain’s statements are focused with some urgency on a perceived crisis in American Catholicism, appealing only to a handful of documents to make claims about what Catholic schools need to do now to salvage a bad situation. It is an attempt at an apologetic that is essentially
polemical. Polemic has its place, but in this case, it misses the mark because its vision of salvation is too narrow, its portrait of a graduate skewed. Paul VI invites us to envision an individual with a well-formed conscience leading a life in harmony with God and the human community. McClain’s graduate adheres to a specific set of cultural beliefs that directly (and loudly) oppose the prevailing culture. More likely, his ideal graduate also votes Republican. The problem is not that the vision is entirely inconsistent with Catholic teachings, but rather that it is insufficiently theologically grounded to be truly compelling. The goal of educating individuals to hold specific views is not the same as Paul VI’s vision of an individual with a well-formed conscience who is able to tackle the difficulties of life. It is less persuasive, because it shortcuts its way through the development of moral reasoning in order to prescribe a ready-made conclusion.

The Vatican documents to which McClain appeals are worth exploring in more detail beginning with *Catechesi Tradendae* (CT) by St. John Paul II. This text introduces Christocentricity as a framework for understanding catechesis. The context for the exhortation is Vatican II and then the subsequent teachings on catechesis put forward by Paul VI and John Paul I (CT 2-3), but also the final command of Christ to carry on his mission, which imbues the authority and power to explain the things Christ taught, the signs and symbols he used, and the things he commanded us to do (CT 1). Christ gave the Spirit to this end, and so Christ should be at the center of all catechetical instruction. The purpose is more than inculcating a set of abstractions; in catechesis, Christ is the teacher and intimacy with Christ is the outcome (CT 5-7). This has several components. The first is that Christ is encountered as a mystery, the way any person but especially a divine Person is a mystery. Everything in God’s design reaches fulfillment in Christ, and so
encountering Christ means coming to understand how all parts of that design fit together (CT 5). This comes through a study of Christ’s words and actions, which “simultaneously hide and reveal his mystery” (CT 5). In Christ, God is revealed but also hidden—and in being hidden, we come to learn something of the mystery. But in any case, catechesis is meant to bring individuals into contact with Christ first and foremost.

The encounter comes through investigation of Christ’s teachings and not those of anyone else. In particular, it means seeking to avoid presenting one’s own ideas as the teaching of Jesus Christ (CT 6). The text includes a valuable exhortation for the catechist.

He will not seek to keep directed towards himself and his personal opinions and attitudes the attention and the consent of the mind and heart of the person he is catechizing. Above all, he will not try to inculcate his personal opinions and options as if they expressed Christ's teaching and the lessons of His life. Every catechist should be able to apply to himself the mysterious words of Jesus: "My teaching is not mine, but his who sent me." [...] What assiduous study of the word of God transmitted by the Church's magisterium, what profound familiarity with Christ and with the Father, what a spirit of prayer, what detachment from self must a catechist have in order that he can say: "My teaching is not mine!" (CT 6).

The inclusion of these lines suggests that this is a real temptation, and McClain would doubtless agree that there are many teachers in Catholic schools, particularly at the secondary level and in higher education, who teach to their own agenda instead of faithfully transmitting the teachings of Jesus Christ. To do so would certainly be contrary to the instruction given here, but it is equally important to observe that the warning is general. Surely it would be just as easy for McClain to mistake his own ideas for Christ’s teaching, a fact belied by his confidence. The posture required is humble and the work continuous, encompassing study, intimacy with Christ developed through prayer, and the pursuit of a selfless disposition. It is an admonition that is meant for all people because every person has room to grow in their understanding of Christ.
It is worth recalling what I have termed Paul VI’s portrait of a graduate because it forms the other side of the equation. He described a person with a well-formed conscience who was able to appraise the world and form right judgments about it. Making those judgments is not easy. It can be difficult to parse how the teachings of Jesus should be contextualized. It’s a truth that stands at the heart of theology—and it is also a decent way of understanding the function of the Magisterium. Christ gave the Church the authority to teach definitively on matters not explicitly addressed in scripture because there are times when it is needed. Hence, the catechist must continue to study God’s word as transmitted through this mechanism. But the goal is not to produce individuals who slavishly follow some particular interpretation of Christ’s word. Rather, catechesis should introduce students the person of Jesus Christ. The process of formation in Christlikeness brings people to the maturity embodied by the catechist and motivates them, to use Paul VI’s language, to appraise the world around them and act according to their best judgment.

The connection between formation and action resonates with the next section in CT, which advises examining Christ’s words and his actions as different but deeply connected modes of teaching.

[Christ’s] teaching can only be explained by the fact that His words, His parables and His arguments are never separable from His life and His very being. Accordingly, the whole of Christ's life was a continual teaching: His silences, His miracles, His gestures, His prayer, His love for people, His special affection for the little and the poor, His acceptance of the total sacrifice on the cross for the redemption of the world, and His resurrection are the actualization of His word and the fulfillment of revelation. Hence for Christians the crucifix is one of the most sublime and popular images of Christ the Teacher (CT 7).

The things Christ did are as significant as what he said. As an approach to teaching, it makes the case that the catechist’s life must align with Christ in order to be effective. But
it also establishes an approach to the content of catechesis. It is essential to encounter Christ’s words in the context of what he did. Only from there the whole history of salvation can be approached without drifting into abstraction. In fact, JPII advises the total avoidance of abstraction in this section, suggesting instead that all catechesis be rooted in exploring the person of Jesus Christ because that best brings the student into an encounter with the “living mystery of God” (CT 7).

To return to McClain, his argument is that Catholic schools should promote the salvation of students by teaching what the Church teaches, which is a way of saying they should teach Christ and a specifically Christ-imbued view of the world, which will necessarily be counter-cultural (especially given the current climate). But in point of fact, he is also arguing that Catholic schools should teach a specific understanding of Christ’s word that aligns with a particular pole in the contemporary American culture wars. McClain implicitly makes the case that what he proposes is aligned with the Magisterium, not only by referring to CT but by appealing to another Vatican document, Male and Female He Created Them: Toward a Path of Dialogue on the Question of Gender Theory in Education, which was produced by the Congregation for Catholic Education in 2019. Much of its content is beyond the scope of the current argument, but the overall approach is worth consideration.

This brief text is intended to provide guidance for dialogue on the question of gender. Dialogue is admittedly difficult in the current climate, a fact acknowledged in the introduction (Male and Female 6). Even so, the outline of the text is organized around the idea of dialogue: we listen, reason, and then propose. The listening section gives a brief account of the history of gender in recent secular thought (Male and Female 8-14). Points
of agreement are set out first (Male and Female 15-18), followed by critique (Male and Female 19-23), and then a section laying out some rational principles that guide the Catholic response (Male and Female 24-29). The careful (and distinct) attention to reasoning demonstrates that the Church’s position is not fideist or reductive in any way, but rather is rooted in long and thorough philosophical tradition. Only at that point are proposals made that are relevant to different sectors of society (Male and Female 30-51), including the Catholic school (Male and Female 39-42).

The advice given to those working in Catholic schools is to recognize the centrality of the human person. Acknowledging the very human element of gender, particularly when it comes to gender confusion, is a helpful place to start, and the next paragraph recommends creating the space necessary for individuals to sort out who they are. Individuals must be able to express themselves and grow in the context of a Catholic educational community. This is another way of describing the harmonious community of different kinds of people that Paul VI discussed in GE, framed here as a means to “overcome their individualism and discover…their specific vocation to live responsibly in a community with others” (Male and Female 40).

The teaching presented in Male and Female leans heavily on a document called The Catholic School on the Threshold of the Millennium, which also deserves consideration. The challenges presented by social and cultural changes are the general context for the teaching, as laid out in the opening sections. The document names the media, structural changes, advancing technology, and the widening gap between the rich and the poor among the problems faced by the world. To that, it adds pluralism, which is a challenge for communal identity, and multi-culturalism, which is framed as both a
positive and a challenge. Finally, the document names the marginalization of Christianity among the problems facing Catholic schools in the late 1990s (Millennium 1-3). The tone is hopeful, however; Catholic schools are poised to meet these challenges using “prudent innovation” in a spirit of evangelization that meets people where they are (Millennium 3).

To this, the text adds some additional issues specific to Catholic schools by outlining the positives and negatives of Catholic schools as they appeared at the time. Catholic schools have been an essential part of the evangelizing mission of the Church and participated in the social and cultural development of many nations. Most relevant to the United States, the Catholic school is often a site for “organic pastoral work” and authentic and sensitive “pastoral care for the family,” which is increasingly important as connections to parish life wane (Millennium 5). In fact, the problem of indifferent, apathetic, and non-practicing students is named first among the challenges, followed by a variety of cultural and economic obstacles to attendance (Millennium 6-7). The conclusion is that certain fundamental characteristics need to be strengthened as Catholic schools move into the next age.

Like other Church teachings, there is special attention paid to the salvific mission of Catholic schools:

The Catholic school sets out to be a school for the human person and of human persons. "The person of each individual human being, in his or her material and spiritual needs, is at the heart of Christ's teaching: this is why the promotion of the human person is the goal of the Catholic school". This affirmation, stressing man's vital relationship with Christ, reminds us that it is in His person that the fullness of the truth concerning man is to be found. For this reason the Catholic school, in committing itself to the development of the whole man, does so in obedience to the solicitude of the Church, in the awareness that all human values find their fulfilment and unity in Christ (Millennium 9).
The statement that Catholic schools educate the whole person appears here, but it is embedded in a dense theological context. In the first place, the material and spiritual needs of each person are central because they are at the center of Christ’s mission and teaching. The quotation is from an address given by JPII to the National Meeting of the Catholic School in Italy in 1991, and it reflects his commitment to a Christocentric approach to Catholic education. It also sets out the order of things: Catholic education emphasizes the human person because the teachings of Christ do so. The vital relationship is therefore between each person and Jesus Christ. The commitment of Catholic education to the development of each person is identical to the commitments of other educational institutions. The source and end of that commitment is what sets Catholic education apart—which is to say that Christ makes the difference.

The central charge for the Catholic school is to recall the purpose of education: to develop the whole person. This is not a claim about the unique character of Catholic schools, however. The force of argument is shifted to the reason Catholic schools work to develop the whole person, namely out of “obedience to the solicitude of the Church, in the awareness that all human values find their fulfilment and unity in Christ” (Millennium 9).

In fact, the document later argues explicitly that it is impossible for schooling to be value neutral. Education has become fragmented and focused on the acquisition of disparate facts and speaks generically of values in a way that weakens the power of education. The culprit is a lack of attention to the human person.

There is a tendency to forget that education always presupposes and involves a definite concept of man and life. […] [A] correct pedagogical approach ought to be open to the more decisive sphere of ultimate objectives, attending not only to "how", but also to "why", overcoming any misunderstanding as regards the claim
to neutrality in education, restoring to the educational process the unity which saves it from dispersion amid the meandering of knowledge and acquired facts, and focuses on the human person in his or her integral, transcendent, historical identity (Millennium 10).

The claim to formation of the whole person takes on new meaning in this context. Every school presupposes a goal, the kind of ideal graduate who is well-formed in all the ways the school values. But here, the argument is that many schools have tried so hard to remain neutral that their core identities are obscure. The unifying focus of education is the human person. The Catholic school must lean into the Church’s account of the human person to tap into the transformative power of the educative process. The Catholic school is uniquely positioned for this because of its mission, which is “inspired by the Gospel” and rooted in “the mystery of the Word made flesh” that clarifies “the mystery of man” (Millennium 10).

These words bring back into focus the two statements that have framed this discussion. Catholic education necessarily focuses on the mystery of our humanity, which is why there is such a consistent emphasis on forming the whole person, while at the same time connecting the mission of the school with the call to spread the Gospel. In the end, each statement—that Catholic schools form the whole person and that they exist to help students get to heaven—addresses a distinct but related aspects of the goal of Catholic education. It is true that the Catholic school aims to form the whole person, but every school aims to form students into a particular sort of person. The Church is set apart by the reason why: Christ. The human person is mentioned so often in conversation about Catholic education because it relates directly to the second truism that Catholic schools exist “to get people into heaven.” There is an intimate and integral relationship between growing in true humanity and salvation. The further we progress in embodying
the fullness of our humanity, the more closely we come into communion with God in Jesus Christ. Since the Catholic school is meant to facilitate that process, it is therefore meant to bring us into the fullness of salvation.

There are limitations to terms like “whole person” and “getting into heaven.” To say that Catholic schools form children does not distinguish them enough or clarify their particular character. And the idea of making it to heaven is a poor way of expressing the fullness of salvation. At least, these ways of speaking do not always capture the messy reality of schools on the ground. Each account of the character of Catholic schools produced by the Church includes a contextualization that links theological questions to the real challenges faced by schools. In spite of historical distance, many of them ring true for educators today. For example, education seems to become more complex every year as the scope of the school (and what is expected of teachers) continues to expand, and it remains challenging to establish a core, communal identity in a diverse, pluralistic society (Millennium 1-2). Catholic schools do not all concur, however, in how to approach their mission, which adds an additional layer of complexity. The next section will take up and explore the challenges presented by the variety of approaches embraced by Catholic schools to fulfilling their shared mission and the different kinds of Catholic schools that exist as a result.

Meeting the Messy Reality of Catholic Schools

The lofty ideals presented in Church teaching about Catholic schools have to meet the messy reality of schools filled with human students and students, teachers and administrators—all of them imperfectly fulfilling their roles. The constant need to return to the question of the Catholic school, to renew and clarify the vision, speaks to the
difficulty of maintaining the right perspective on mission and identity. The style of each school is as unique as its community, but the ethos of the learning community is an essential theological dimension of the Catholic school. Formation takes place within the context of interpersonal relationships, and “what is taught has greater influence on the student’s formation when placed in a context of personal involvement” and the community must function as “a place of complete formation” (Millennium 18).

It can be hard to see how this totalizing statement coincides with the reality of many Catholic schools, and it can be tempting to ignore the many ways in which a genuinely Catholic mission can find expression through a school community. This section will explore some modes of thinking about Catholic schools and unpack ways in which they privilege certain expressions of the Catholic mission and fail to recognize others. This is a necessary piece of context for this work, which aims to address teachers who find themselves in challenging schools and in need of encouragement.

James Arthur describes three models of the Catholic school: dualistic, pluralistic, and holistic (Arthur 225-244), which provides a useful (and often cited) heuristic. According to Arthur, the holistic school is strictly confessional. It seeks a “synthesis of faith and culture and looks to sustain and develop the faith community, together with the home and parish, to transmit a specific Catholic vision of life” (Morris 379; cf Arthur 227-233). Dualistic schools see their Catholicity as an adjunct to the intellectual or educational function of the school, as though the school operated in two concurrent realities simultaneously (Arthur 227). In such schools, the Catholic element often resides primarily in theology or religious education classes and school liturgies. Still others try to
maintain a pluralistic approach to Catholic schooling that embraces the “full diversity of religious faith and commitment within a school” (Arthur 229).

For Arthur, the holistic Catholic school is the only model that adequately meets the requirements set out by the Church. The others fail because the ways in which they diverge do not align with the mission set out there. Further, he argues that the kind of formation Catholic schools are called to presupposes faith more than produces it and the function of a holistic Catholic school, as described by Arthur, must be supported by a committed body of Catholic believers, most likely in the context of a parish (Arthur 231).

The holistic model resonates in many ways with the vision set out for Catholic Schools by the Church post-Vatican II, but is such a school the only one where God’s work can take place? The question is worth asking because the reality for many Catholic schools is quite different. In many (if not most) Catholic schools in the United States, religious practice is extremely varied. This reality was already named in “The Catholic School on the Threshold of the Millennium” (Millennium 6) and continues to be the case for many schools. It’s easy to see how relegating religious themes to theology classes or liturgies seems like a solution—it nods to the Catholic identity of the school without allowing Catholic theology to occupy so much space that it makes anyone uncomfortable. For families, the solution is often to seek a school that more closely aligns with their preferred model of the Catholic school, but for teachers, the options are not always so simple. Moreover, the answer cannot be to abandon the schools in which we find ourselves, with all of their challenges and shortcomings, for greener pastures. Surely God can work in the midst of human failures.
Discounting the possibility of other kinds of Catholic schools also obscures the pitfalls of what Arthur calls a holistic school. For instance, many schools attempt to attend to the human person by focusing on character education. As one example, Lapsley and Kelley argue that the unique value offered by Catholic schools is found in two things: Catholic identity; and “moral-character formation” (Lapsley and Kelley 159). They offer this in the face of declining enrollments and lack of public interest in Catholic schooling. Catholic schools, they argue, ought to position themselves as places in which students can develop a personal Catholic identity (and ostensibly retain it through college into adulthood), while also being formed in a Catholic understanding of virtue. They admit that there is no real evidence that Catholic schools do that, at least not as an explicit project, but they could—or so the authors argue. They conclude by proposing that “Thomistic ethics would have ready resources for the design of moral-character pedagogy” (Lapsley and Kelley 171).

Lapsley and Kelley take their mission statement for Catholic education from the pastoral letter *To Teach as Jesus Did: A Pastoral Message on Catholic Education* (1972): the mission of the Catholic school is to “teach doctrine, to build community, and to serve” (Lapsley and Kelley, 161). The pastoral letter proposes this threefold approach to education as an approximation of a dynamic already at work in the Church. Namely the things that are revealed by God are proclaimed by the Church; we find community in the life of the Church through the Holy Spirit; and our community overflows into service to the world (To Teach 14). Lapsley and Kelley’s proposals are meant to describe the distinguishing characteristics of a Catholic school graduate (Lapsley and Kelley 162), but
they clearly take the pastoral letter’s simple, threefold outline as a statement of mission for Catholic schools.

As a description of the purpose of Catholic education, the formula put forward by Lapsley and Kelley, “to teach doctrine, build community, and serve” seems insufficient if only because it lacks any discussion of the deeper purpose of education. Lapsley and Kelley do not address any deeper reasons or higher purpose for Catholic education before leaning into moral formation as the key component of Catholic schooling, which is a strong tendency in conversations about education. For their part, the bishops seem to be aware of this pitfall in “To Teach”; they carefully limit the scope of the letter, which is intended to be neither comprehensive nor definitive, and refer the reader to GE for a fuller theological account of the purpose of Catholic education (To Teach 2-4). Without further consideration of salvation or the human person (or both), statements that lean on character formation convey little beyond that Catholic school children are well-behaved.

There is a tendency among some who champion a certain kind of Catholic school to reduce the Catholic of Catholic education to character education or some other gloss on moral formation. If there is nothing to Catholic education but moral instruction, Catholic schools run the risk of falling into moralism. The work of Charles Taylor is enlightening on this point. Taylor tracks a movement from a religious world of communal ritual to one of personal commitment and devotion that runs in parallel to a move away from the transcendent and toward the immanent, which in turn entailed a completely new conception of the self. The pre-modern self was porous, subject to external influence for good or ill and expressed itself religious through communal ritual. The modern self is
regarded as bounded, impermeable, and self-sufficient as fits a religion focused on the necessity of personal transformation (Taylor 215-221).

Both approaches to religion include moral frameworks but only the latter meets the definition of moralism Taylor puts forward. According to Taylor, Latin Christianity’s “disciplined remaking of behavior [was] thoroughly disembedding” (Taylor 225). Put another way, by virtue of the emphasis on personal devotion, Western Christianity served as a catalyst for a radically different understanding of the self—a process accelerated by the post-medieval reformations. As Christians leaned into the idea of religion as a personal commitment, a version of Christianity emerged that was more immanent than transcendent, and which ultimately served as the perfect vehicle for a moral vision that could operate “outside of the original theological framework…and in certain cases even against it” (Taylor 227). The idea of a God whose providence guided human life was jettisoned by some who nevertheless retained a kind of “Christian” morality. Christians opposed the resulting atheism, a system in which the immanent is all that exists, but in response, continued to work from the same assumptions. Attempts to draw people in during the 19th century also focused on the immanent by emphasizing adherence to behavioral codes (Taylor 249-250; cf 365). This is what Taylor ultimately calls moralism or “nomolatry”: the elevation of strict adherence to rigid codes that drive people away from the Church by placing pastoral concerns in the last place (365).

Taylor argues that these are all forms of humanism, particularly where humanism is understood as the triumph of the immanent over the transcendent, which is a key underpinning of secularism for Taylor. I would argue that the tendency to downplay the truly cosmic theological character of the drama of salvation by reducing it to the
formation of a positive character falls into this category of mistake, and it is pervasive, as Taylor suggests, because even those who oppose the erosion of transcendental categories often tacitly operate from the same assumptions as those they oppose.

This reductive tendency is pervasive among those who argue exclusively for Arthur’s holistic school model. Similarly reductive statements regarding the general mission or purpose of Catholic education are not difficult to find in practical conversations about Catholic schools. In a brief essay penned before Vatican II, George Johnson writes: “It goes without saying that the development of character has ever been the aim of the Catholic Church in whatever educational program she has undertaken” (Johnson 54). The goal is framed as either ethical or moral without being apparently theological. Later, Thomas Lickona makes a genuine but limited theological statement when he writes that “the purpose of the Church and of Catholic education is to turn us into little Christs” (Lickona 160). The mention of Christ is refreshing, but the statement also conflates the purpose of the Church and Catholic education without attending to their subsidiary relationship or mentioning the role of the family. Speaking of Catholic education in general, Anthony J. Dosen states that “the mission of Catholic schools is to proclaim the Gospel, which is the heart of the Church’s own mission” (Dosen 20). While the statement does have theological content, like Lickona, he conflates the mission of the Church and the school without mentioning their relationship and shortchanges the leavening mechanism set out in Church teaching.

My purpose is not only to take issue with the specific points being made. Character education is a reasonable extension of what the Church has to say about Catholic education, and the purpose of the Catholic school is tightly bound up with the
mission of the Church. But the Church’s position is richer and more profound than these ways convey, and there are pitfalls associated with a reductive account of the mission of the Catholic school. With Taylor, I argue that neglecting the transcendent component of theology plays into the secular humanism and relativism of our age by setting up the Church as one more voice competing for attention in a crowded square. Our vision may be simpler to grasp when we speak that way, but it is also less authentically Catholic.

There is nothing wrong with the model of a school that functions as a direct extension of parish life, but so long as the conversation only addresses those kinds of schools (while disparaging others), it fails to offer support to teachers in other kinds of Catholic school environments. Envisioning the Catholic school as an outgrowth of a parish community can produce additional distortions in our thinking about Catholic education. Sean Whittle identifies this as a key problem in Catholic educational philosophy, and he rejects what he calls a “confessional account of Catholic education” (Whittle 180). He holds that Catholic education should not bring students to faith per se, but to an understanding of theology as “a set of responses and answer to the presence of unsolvable mystery in human life” (Whittle 181). This mirrors the theological approach of Karl Rahner and engages more with the transcendent as a means of rational (that is, human) development, and it resonates with much in what the Church has to say about education. In particular, it aligns with JPII’s principle of Christocentricity, which highlights the encounter between the student and the mystery that is Christ. Put in these terms, it is clear a truly Catholic vision of education requires overcoming the deficiency of a reductive “confessional” vision. The so-called confessional approach emphasizes “forming pupils in the Catholic faith” but a truly Catholic theory of education, according
to Whittle, must make “a claim about how education as a whole (for all children) ought to be organized” (Whittle 185). For Whittle, education cannot be called Catholic otherwise. Catholic education must make a statement about what education itself is or it cannot be truly universal. This point dovetails nicely with Taylor’s argument about secularism. Catholic theology must be universal and therefore transcendent; it speaks of all and for all, from a universalizing standpoint and not only to the members of the Catholic community invested in their local parochial school.

All theologies ought to be conversant with the experiences of real human beings, and a theology of education is no exception. In this case, however, there is often a disconnect between certain aspects of the conversation about Catholic education and the experience of teachers working in Catholic schools. There is a tendency among some to privilege some types of Catholic schools as more inherently faithful to the vision set out by Vatican II, but the conversation is also frequently reductive. There is a “tendency to portray the aims of Catholic education or schooling in too-narrow terms” in a way that “overshadows other elements of Catholic experience…including one’s personal relationship with the divine” (McDonough 161-162). Put differently, there is often little in the conversation that is of use to teachers caught in the thick of the identity crisis unfolding in Catholic schools. This is particularly the case for teachers, some of them earnest, practicing Catholics, who work in schools that were not founded under the preferred model.
CATHOLIC EDUCATION IN LIGHT OF TRINITARIAN THEOLOGY

Resources Gleaned from Trinitarian Theology

The truisms that often frame conversations about Catholic education feed into simplified models for the ideal Catholic school, and while my purpose has been to expose these shortcomings, the foregoing account also demonstrates that the Catholic school has an advantage in that it has an easy to identify center in Jesus Christ. It can be easy to lose sight of the fullness of Church teaching, but the Church’s teaching and the whole tradition of Christian theology offer plenty of resources to help reshape the conversation. This section will explore some ways in which it might be possible to galvanize the discourse by mining resources from other areas of theology, with the goal of developing more robust ways to think about what Catholics schools do.

If Catholic education is about developing the humanity of the student, it follows that a full account of humanity and the end of human life, understood theologically, should be an essential part of a Catholic educational philosophy. Theological anthropology or soteriology seem like the most obvious touchstones, and there are ways in which those dimensions of Catholic theology can contribute to the conversation about Catholic education. I have chosen Trinitarian theology—in particular, Augustine’s Trinitarian theology as expressed in *De Trinitate (DT)*—as a point of contact instead because it approaches the question of the relationship between the human and divine from a different angle.

Augustine’s relevance to contemporary thinking about Catholic education is established by his core assumption that becoming educated is “about learning to love rightly” (Sullivan 34). What is loved must first be known, which means that the goal of
loving God must be accessed through the path of knowledge, which in turn means being transformed by God. The real goal of human life is knowing (and therefore enjoying) God, which in turn means being transformed by God (Sullivan 35). Teaching is a matter of forming the affections or tuning the heart to discern where God is, and it must take place in the context of a relationship that is sensitive to the student’s comfort while also adjusting according to their preparation and capacity (Sullivan 35-37). In other words, Augustine’s theological framework leads him to conclude that teaching is an essentially human and relational activity because he is focused on the growth of the individual toward the end goal of properly ordered affections.

The agreement between an Augustinian vision of teaching and learning and the rest of what the Church teaches about Catholic education should be obvious, and it is therefore not surprising that Augustine figures in so many Catholic educational philosophies. For example, Mario D’Souza acknowledges Bernard Lonergan’s debt to Augustine in his discussion of Lonergan’s contribution to Catholic philosophy of education. Lonergan rejects the idea that knowing something means merely having the information. Instead, “coming to know is a human process, involving the whole person” (D’Souza 101). Augustine argues that we discover truth, even knowledge of God, by looking within, which roots knowing in our being. There is an intimate and absolute connection between being a human person and coming to know something, and it follows that education is a fundamentally human process.

Augustine’s Trinitarian theology is especially generative for this discussion because it approaches questions about humanity obliquely. The main goal of *DT* is not to make a case about the identity of humankind. Augustine spends Books I-IV examining
biblical evidence, particularly the idea that the Son and Holy Spirit are sent by the Father, in order to argue against subordinationism (Hill 65-185). Books V-VII present a linguistic argument that distinguishes between what we can say about God in substance and what we can say about God in relationship to others (Hill 189-236). Book VIII is a turning point in the argument. From there, Augustine begins to examine how we come to know (and therefore love) what is good, which is how human beings ultimately connect with God (Hill 241-257). He unpacks a variety of analogies for the Trinity, including the lover and the beloved (and the love between them) (DT 9.1; Hill 272-275); and the so-called psychological analogy for the Trinity found in the human person as memory, intellect, and will (DT 10.4; Hill 298-302).

As a whole, Augustine’s project is to clarify how God reveals Godself, particularly in scripture, and to set out the boundaries of what we can know (and therefore) say about God. The account of the human person in DT rises from this consideration of knowledge. If the question is how human beings come to know God, Augustine’s answer necessarily refers to revelation, although not simply. Knowledge is a Trinitarian matter insofar as the Trinity is a form of revelation. At the beginning of Book I, he writes that “when the Father is shown, the Son who is in him is shown also, and when the Son is shown, the Father who is in him is shown, too” (DT 1.3; Hill 79). The incarnation is an important part of God’s self-revelation because of the unity of Father and Son and it accounts for some of what scripture says—for instance, when Jesus states that whoever has seen him has seen the Father (John 14.9).

Other parts of scripture present a challenge for Augustine’s view, namely the language of being sent, which appears in a number of places, not least just one chapter
before the verse quoted above in John 13.20: “Whoever receives me receives the one who sent me.” As above, there is an identification between Father and Son, but what does it mean for the Son (and later the Holy Spirit) to be sent by the Father? Much of Books I-IV of *DT* are spent puzzling out the underlying dilemma, namely that the Father’s sending out of the Son seems to imply that they exist in a hierarchical relationship. Their equality is the central focus of Augustine’s discussion of God’s mission, which refers both to God’s purpose in the world and to the narrower sense of *missio* as being sent. For Augustine, this was intended to counter those who argued that the disparate activities of the members of the Trinity were an indication of their inequality (Joseph 176). A subordinationist account of the Trinity provides an easy solution to the conundrum of how one can be sent by another and yet be so entirely identified with them that it would make sense to say that one reveals the other.

Part of Augustine’s solution is to read *missio* itself as a revelation of inner unity: “Thus events which are put on outwardly in the sight of our bodily eyes are aptly called *missa* because they stem from the inner designs of our spiritual nature,” (*DT* 2.2; Hill 103). The visible manifestation is called “things sent” because they come from a unified interior place. This is not the whole of his argument, of course, but Augustine interprets the apparent diversity of the economic Trinity through the lens of their unity in order to account for the “incongruity between the economy taken at face value, and the teaching that the three divine persons are equal and inseparable” (LaCugna 84). In that sense, he presumes that what scripture reveals about God speaks to the equality of the persons of the Trinity.
Augustine’s conviction that God is revealed in the Trinity was absolute, and it makes sense that it would be given how central revelation is to his account of salvation. Book IV addresses missio considering the work of the mediator, which is Christ, the Word made flesh, which relates revelation to salvation. Much like Athanasius in *On the Incarnation of the Word*, Augustine begins by naming the problem created by sin, which he describes as an exile from eternal joy (*DT* 4.1; Hill 153). His purpose is to interpret God’s motivation for sending the Son, which was redemption. He makes a connection here that links revelation to salvation explicitly: “Our enlightenment is to participate in the Word,” (*DT* 4.1; Hill 154-155). Our redemption was the reason for God’s revelation, which was at the same time a completion of the dynamic of creation. Human beings are sinful and mortal and so the divine took on sinless mortality in order to justify us through a freely chosen death (rather than through condemnation). Augustine is quite taken with the doubling, what he describes as harmonia or a kind of consonance between the events (*DT* 4.1; Hill 155). His vision of the working of salvation here hinges on this idea that there is some mirroring between Christ’s death and resurrection and our own. Christ’s resurrection reveals our own interior resurrection through grace, but it also mirrors our outer resurrection in the flesh. His death resonates with the death of our death to sin, but his human death also mirrors our own actual deaths. In sum, there is a “curative accord or symmetry” revealed by Christ’s body, which is “a sacrament of our inner man and…the model of our outer man” (*DT* 4.1; Hill 157). Revelation culminates in Christ because revelation is only possible if “the eternal God enters into our created world and unites himself to our mutable human condition” (Joseph 179; cf *DT* 4.26), which places our salvation at the center of revelation.
Revelation is intimately linked to our salvation, and it is through revelation that we come to know God since “mission is the self-communication of the Father” (Joseph 175; cf DT 2.7-9). That particularly refers to the incarnation, which reveals the Trinity in a particular way. The Trinity is a linguistic construct intended to approximate the reality of the divine, and thus, after spending Books I-IV discussing the missio of God, he turns to a discussion of language and how we use it to describe God (Books V-VII), preceding the shift in Book VIII toward a exploring a series of analogies for the Trinity. In Books VIII and following, Augustine explores the intimate connection between knowledge of God and knowledge of self, which begins to flesh out what he means in Book IV when he says that our enlightenment comes through participation in the Word.

These analogies are often read as different ways of looking at the image of God. Augustine draws from Platonic ideas to describe the eternal return of the soul. Catherine LaCugna’s summary is both thorough and succinct:

Augustine’s premise is that the soul is created in the image and after the likeness of God (Gen. 1:26). The journey of the soul is cyclic: The soul loves God and seeks to return to God. Moreover, in drawing the soul back to Godself, God bestows on the soul true knowledge of itself. Thus if God is a Trinity, then the soul must resemble that which it images and that to which it seeks to return. The rational soul is a mirror (speculum) that reflects, if only dimly, the reality of God that eventually we shall see face to face (LaCugna 93).

Salvation is the soul’s return to God, which is what it means to love God. God is sought after as a mystery that cannot be fully grasped, only more fully experienced. It is not enough to know that one is created in God’s image, however. There is an implied movement by which God draws the soul closer and the soul, receiving new knowledge of itself, is transformed. The mechanism is not passive. Rather, for Augustine, “the Imago
Dei impels a work to be undertaken” (England 33), again connecting his doctrine of the Trinity to the movement of salvation.

The point is clearer with reference to the so-called psychological analogy for the Trinity—memory, intellect, and will—that appears in Book X, and it describes how three aspects of the soul can be distinguished and function independently while also being effectively indivisible. But, as LaCugna points out, the analogy is necessarily imperfect; it neither perfectly describes the human person nor God (LaCugna 95). It would contradict Augustine’s purpose to attempt to do either. Instead, he is engaged in the kind of demonstration he undertakes in Confessions, by which he models what it looks like to seek God. And, in this case, he models deep contemplation of the self with the goal of ordering it properly. Augustine admonishes his reader:

Let the mind then recognize itself and not go looking for itself as if it were absent, but rather turn on to itself the interest of its will, which had it straying about through other things, and think about itself. In this way it will see that there never was a time when it did not love itself, when it did not know itself. What it did was to mix itself up with something else that it loved together with itself and to coalesce with it in some way or other; and as a result, by comprising divergent things as a unity in itself, it came to think that these things which really are divergent were one with itself (DT 10.3; Hill 295).

The search for self-knowledge is not aimless, and it is not the search for something lost. It is a turn inward to examine something that is already present in cooperation with the will, which should be ordered such that it can perceive the self correctly. The idea that the self should recognize what has always been appeals to the concept of return. This should not be understood as a return to a state that has always been and now is, but rather as a correction of something misapprehended because it was confused with something else. The underlying suggestion is that contemplation of self allows the individual to sort through what is truly the self and what is an accretion, something that can be discarded.
For the will to love something that falsely coalesced with the self is a misdirection of the will, which means that clarification of self-knowledge is related to the right ordering of the will.

This discussion of *DT* has not been exhaustive (nor even particularly systematic), but it provides some additional language for thinking about Catholic education. Augustine’s work suggests a Trinitarian amendment to the idea that our pedagogy should be Christocentric. Christ, as the Word incarnate, should be understood in terms of revelation, broadly construed. The revelation of God in Jesus Christ is full and rich, and it reveals God just as it reveals the fullness of humanity. To say that Catholic education is Christocentric necessarily implies a connection to the movement of God the Father toward humanity.

Speaking to the idea that Catholic education is engaged with God’s work in the world, Trinitarian language contextualizes key concepts. Our friendship with Jesus is possible because of God’s gracious self-communication, which is God’s way of connecting with us for the sake of our redemption. Grace invites us into a relationship with God, which in turn leads to a deeper and more intimate knowledge of God’s personhood. At the same time, our more intimate knowledge of God is linked to self-knowledge. It is not that we come to know God through thinking about ourselves, but rather that self-reflection allows us to discern what is spiritual and to order our wills more correctly so that we love what we ought, namely God. When we love God, we seek God. Therefore, pursuing knowledge of self helps to facilitate a closer experience of (and thus knowledge about) God. Nothing here is at odds with what has come before, nor does it offer anything truly new. What Trinitarian language does is force the connection between
concepts like human development and the full drama of God’s mission into the foreground, which is an advantage for avoiding reductive modes of talking about Catholic education.

There is one further point to address regarding knowledge of God as it relates to the created world, and it is better explored with reference to Aquinas than Augustine. Vivian Boland’s work is helpful. Aquinas’s account of education is also engaged with anthropological reflection, but it is also deeply metaphysical, touching on what Vivian Boland characterizes as “the sacramental and pedagogical character of revelation” (Boland 49). As Aquinas understands them, human beings are creatures that belong to a wider order, and thus beneath an account of the human person is a base understanding of reality itself that is perhaps best called sacramental (Boland 55-56). Like Augustine, Aquinas begins with an epistemological question about how we learn through our senses, but the real work of education is something deeper. For Aquinas, it requires understanding the workings of the human mind, what Aquinas calls the intellectus agens or “the creative mind” (Boland 52). The teacher’s work is to participate in God’s mission in the world by furthering the work of revelation, which is to follow in the footsteps of Christ (Boland 56). The mechanism is to engage deeply with the human person as created by God.

This covers much of the same terrain as Augustine, although they are not in agreement. Aquinas has a more limited sense of the intellect’s ability to comprehend God’s substance, as for instance in ST I.88 where the first objection contains a statement made by Augustine in DT 9.1 (Hill 272-273) that the mind takes its ability to understand incorporeal things from its incorporeal nature. Aquinas qualifies the statement in his
reply so as not to disagree with Augustine, although he clearly thinks it is not possible for the mind to know incorporeal substances. But they agree that there is something important about understanding the human mind. To this Aquinas adds that there is something powerful and informative about understanding the created world. Human beings, as created, necessarily begin with what they can understand through their senses and then rise to higher levels.

Put it in terms that can be used to guide a theology of education, there is a transcendence inherent in the physical world. The created order bears the mark of God because it is God’s creation. There is therefore something to be gained from understanding it because it is part of God’s revelatory self-communication. In that sense, all of education is theological because all of creation is endowed with God’s presence.

In sum, I propose that certain principles drawn from Trinitarian theology can help shape conversation about Catholic schools. In the first place, God’s free and revelatory self-communication is paramount. There is a transcendence in the world that vivifies the theological significance of every subject that exists because of God’s role as self-revealing creator. God’s self-communication is not limited to creation. It finds its highest expression through Jesus Christ, which further communicates that God’s self-communication is purposeful. It is not merely informational; it invites us to relationship, and it is in relationship with God that we come to know God more deeply and intimately. While relationship with God is an end in itself, it produces results, namely an increase of self-knowledge, which in turn orders the will more justly and allows us to live with great intention and love. When placed in conversation with the on the ground realities of Catholic schooling, these ideas can be used to develop fresh ways of describing what it
means to be engaged in the work of developing the human person toward the end of fulfilling the Church’s mission.

**The World and God in the Story of Education**

The messy reality of schools invites a less reductive approach to the question of Catholic schools. The theological resources gleaned from my earlier discussion of Trinitarian theology suggest a particular direction that encourages a thoroughly theological understanding of the process of education. The next two sections will explore how Trinitarian language can vivify conversations about Catholic schools and invite members of school communities to reflect on the work of God already taking place in their hallways. The path forward coincides with classical education, by which I mean an approach to education that proposes a revised understanding of the nature of reality and the educative process rather than merely as a recovery of the Western tradition.

Classical education is often presented as a rejection of the failed progressivist model of education and a return to former methods that are supposed to function as a panacea for the ills that plague not only our schools but our society. According to R. Jared Staudt:

> With the collapse of the secular, progressive model of education in America—manifested by the need for remedial instruction in college, plummeting test scores compared to other nations, and the unrest and confusion of youth—the time has come for renewal. In fact, our Catholic schools are needed more now than ever before! Catholic schools are poised to lead the charge of renewal if they embrace the vibrant and rich tradition of education handed down to us by Catholics throughout the centuries (Staudt 15).

Staudt is correct that there are major problems in the American education system, but his case is far overstated. The ills of contemporary society, even the problems present in our educational system, cannot be laid entirely at the feet of the schools. Moreover, the
problems he names cannot all be considered manifestations of the collapse of progressive education. If nothing else, the unrest and confusion of our youth have as much to do with social problems and failures of the family as they do with the school system. A more measured (and perhaps stronger) case could be made that the progressivist model operates from a problematic understanding of the human person, but Staudt chooses this framing because it makes a powerful case to his audience that schools are both the problem and the solution.

It is a rhetorical move that belies the value of the classical approach, particularly for a Catholic school. Classical education presumes a world charged with God’s presence, and Staudt’s own discussion of education as sacramental is a helpful starting point for exploring the idea. He argues that education is necessarily sacramental because we are “sacramental creatures, with bodies to express a spiritual nature in the physical world” (Staudt 44). Learning to love rightly begins in the physical realm with the senses and ascends from there to the divine; that is the order of things as we experience them, and it is a fundamentally sacramental point of view.

The point resonates with Aquinas’s observations about the pedagogy of revelation: God begins with what is intelligible to us in order to lead us onward (cf Boland 49). God’s self-revelation through creation is the starting point, but the incarnation, a further revelation of God, secures a sacramental view of the world. Through the incarnation of the Word, we come to know the invisible God. Through gifts of bread and wine, we experience the presence of Christ. It is tempting to think of God’s self-communication through creation in terms of the natural world, but nature includes humanity. Human beings exist as embodied spirits because they were created that way,
and they engage in sacramental life at God’s invitation. It is God who designed the sacraments, and it is God who makes Godself known in them.

Staudt argues on this basis that keeping the physical bodies and emotional lives of students in focus is essential for a Catholic school (Staudt 45-49), which resonates with statements made by others about the education of the whole person, including Paul VI, who includes the physical development of the student in the scope of education (GE 4). The body is not an end in itself, of course. Rather, the whole person exists as a composite of body and soul. The educative connection is that bodily experiences can inspire “the emotions and imagination in truth, beauty, and goodness” which allows students to move from the mere acquisition of information to “the right ordering and application of knowledge” (Staudt 50).

A sacramental approach to reality coincides with a point of Trinitarian doctrine outlined previously. Encountering God as creator is synonymous with encountering God as Trinity: the Triune God is the primary cause of creation. The God revealed there, then, is the Triune God who imbuces the universe with God’s own attributes. Beauty, meaning, even mystery are part of the picture, and the created world we encounter, whether in nature or in one another, is a source of encounter with the divine. Framing education as sacramental brings us to an embodied place and simultaneously brings the implications of claiming that there is a transcendent aspect embedded in the creation into focus.

There is more to say about the relationship between the human and the divine than is covered by referring to the sacramental nature of reality. Fleshing out the relationship between human and divine as it relates to the development of the human person through education can be accomplished in conversation with another touchstone of contemporary
classical education, Stratford Caldecott. His book *Beauty for Truth’s Sake: The Re-Enchantment of Education*, aligns with the preceding discussion and following his thought all the way through further clarifies how Trinitarian theology can inform an understanding of education.

Caldecott begins from the assumption that education makes us better people, although he manages to avoid moralizing. More specifically, he claims that education is “our path to true humanity and wisdom” but here wisdom is explicitly connected to truth and truth is identified with the very being of God (Caldecott 1). When he states that education “begins in the family and ends in the Trinity” (Caldecott 17), he means it in a fully Thomistic sense. The telos of education aligns with the telos of human life in both the ethical and metaphysical senses. The end goal is not the moral or intellectual superiority of the individual but the vision of God: a union with the Holy Trinity. Human beings improve through education specifically through their greater apprehension of the divine, a thought that lines up with Augustine, Aquinas, and the rest of the tradition of Catholic thinking about education.

Perhaps most significantly, Caldecott means this as a feature of education in general, and not of education in a specific set of moral principles. Caldecott noticeably does not talk about Catholic education as a particular sub-species of education. He regards education as that which moves us toward God. The reason is theological, namely that proper formation of the human person will necessarily bring us closer to the Creator. But it is worth noting that he does not define this as a special feature of Catholic education or Catholic schools, but rather as the essential character of what education does, if it is to be called education at all. In this, he tacitly concurs with Whittle: if it is
Catholic it must be universal; or, as we might infer from Caldecott, if it is universal, then it is Catholic.

Caldecott defines the subject of an education in similarly theocentric terms. No matter what a person might study, God is the implicit subject of contemplation because of the intimate connection between God and the world as Creator and created order. The universe itself is “a deeply ordered whole” the beauty of which “becomes more apparent the more carefully and deeply we study it” (Caldecott 116). Caldecott relies on a variety of thinkers, but he quotes from Pope Benedict at some length in his introduction describing the order and logic of the universe, which springs from the mind of the creator. The world exists as contingent, but it makes sense, and its intelligibility is rooted in its source, which is God (Caldecott 12-14).

The world’s contingency and intelligibility both deserve consideration here. The world as a site of God’s self-revelation has already been discussed, but Caldecott adds that the world therefore depends on God, which is a helpful caveat to any approach to the natural world that would elevate it to divine status. The world brims with divine energy, but that energy is God’s. It is neither *sui generis* nor evidence of anything approaching pantheism. On the other hand, the world is intelligible because God is its author. Augustine’s work suggests that we should stop short of inferring that God is intelligible—at least not fully. God is a mystery, and in some sense, the world is also a mystery. We understand it up to a point, but cannot ever grasp the full picture. But we do not understand God in any comprehensive way, and our account of revelation should always reserve some element of mystery. On the other hand, God’s self-communication
is intentional and, as previously mentioned, pedagogical. It is a reasonable inference, then, that God’s world should be intelligible to us in some way.

It may not seem like a significant point, but a hefty part of Caldecott’s argument—and of the classical approach to education—hinge on the idea of intelligibility. The bulk of Caldecott’s book is an exploration of the relationship between God and the world. He begins with mathematics, which he describes as a deeply symbolic subject, the study of which necessarily leads to the Trinity because the deeper we move into the underlying logic of the universe, the more we encounter the Logos as the archetype of logic (Caldecott 78-81). He moves from math into music (90-96) and from there to the rhythm and beauty encoded in architecture (Caldecott 97-104). From those academic subjects, he turns to the physical world itself, describing insights drawn from ecology (104-109) and astronomy (109-116). Caldecott even sees a link between his unified vision of the cosmos and the search for a theory of everything in physics (Caldecott 117-118), which places cosmology in its proper position as a study that leads up “to the threshold of theology” (Caldecott 118).

As a direct outgrowth of this account, Caldecott argues that all subjects should be taught “in the poetic mode” and with an eye toward the beauty contained in them (Caldecott 45). Beauty and order are part of the logic of the universe, which Caldecott connects with the Logos, which is to say he connects it back to God. Connecting mathematics to God, for instance, only seems strange if we think of the world as fragmented (Caldecott 73), as if there were any subject that did not ultimately reveal the world more deeply and thus draw us closer to God as Creator.
To this point, everything Caldecott describes requires that the world be understood as an intelligible artifact of God. The other options radically transform the idea of education. If the world is opaque because it is too mysterious for us to understand, then there can be no education, at least not along the lines of mathematics, art, music, and poetry set out by Caldecott here. Again, God’s world communicates God’s mind as an intentional self-revelation, limited though it may be by the measure of the human mind.

The other option is that God is not the creator, and the world is random and only organized by categories we have invented ourselves, rather than according to a logic placed there by God. This view of the universe as fragmentary does not coincide with Caldecott’s account of education at all. Instead, it coincides with an approach to education that divides knowledge into discrete subjects and disciplines that can be compartmentalized and studied independently. There is no loss of meaning because the meaning is not inherent; it is determined by human beings who divide math from language from music without discerning any deeper connection or order between them. A fragmented approach to education reinforces the idea that the world is made of parts that do not add up to a sensible whole (Caldecott 16).

Caldecott’s stated project is the “re-enchantment” of education. He means returning to a poetic mode of teaching that conveys more accurately the integrity of the cosmos and therefore of knowledge. If education can achieve that, it reconnects humanity with the world as charged with God’s presence. Caldecott closes with the following comments:

The things [the mind] sees will become opaque and dark, no longer radiant, because they will no longer seem to possess an interior, or any intrinsic relationship to the ideas and the wisdom and the love of God. This is the world of darkness and dust that many of us inhabit. But it is as easy and as difficult as it
has always been to raise our heads to the sky. The angels are closer than we think (Caldecott 143)

A world unenchanted is unintelligible. Events occur at random. They are disconnected—and Caldecott argues, individuals who learn to see the world that way are disconnected, too. The point recalls Taylor’s argument about the “disembedding” effects of secularism that fail to recognize the larger whole. The contours of a classical curriculum are intended to undo this fragmentation, instead treating the world as a singular whole that is not only intelligible but beautiful. And in that sense, it leads us closer to God.

To this point, I have addressed the first of three Trinitarian principles, namely that God’s presence pervades the world. This has not been a thorough account of classical education, but it suggests a possible direction for thinking about how an educational program can be Catholic in the most authentic sense. Catholic theology provides a foundation on which educators can build their case for the unity of reality and the interconnected nature of all academic subjects.

Wrestling with God in the Catholic School

The previous section explored how the idea that God’s presence pervades the world can reshape how we describe the project of education and make it more authentically Catholic in the process. This principle was drawn from my earlier account of Trinitarian theology, which also proposed two additional principles: 1) God’s gracious self-communication invites us into a relationship with God, which leads to a deeper and more intimate knowledge of God’s personhood; and 2) Intimate knowledge of God is linked to self-knowledge; pursuing knowledge of self, facilitates a closer experience of (and thus some sort of knowledge about) God. This section will explore the value of these to the conversation about Catholic education from the standpoint of adolescent faith formation.
Relationship is a highly personal form of encounter and acquiring self-knowledge is a process that requires both guidance and space in a way that aligns with the requirements of adolescents in the process of attaining maturity, making this theological framework a good match for understanding Catholic secondary education.

Most of our understanding of adolescent faith development is built on Erikson’s work on identity formation (Armet 280), and much of the conversation centers on how faith is transmitted from one generation to the next. This creates some tension, since Erikson highlights the need for adolescents to establish an identity separate from their parents, while the concern of many (if not most) parents in religious communities is raising children who continue to practice the faith. The fact that parents are their children’s biggest influences religiously is well-established; families that practice religion together and make religion a part of daily life tend to raise people who continue religious practice (Goodman and Dyer 178-190). But if the main task of adolescence is to establish an independent identity, there must be a point of diminishing returns. Anecdotes of children raised in highly religious homes who later reject their religious upbringing abound. Most theorists recommend providing adequate space for exploration within reasonable limits. For example, Lanker highlights increased need of adolescents for non-parental relationships “from which to discover [a] unique identity” as part of his proposal for structure mentoring in religious communities (Lanker 267). And Brandes suggests that healthy spiritual development requires openness, freedom from judgment, and access to narratives that are sturdy but open to questions to establish the necessary “acceptance, respect, and trust” that are so “critical in serving adolescents” in a religious context (Brandes 200-201).
There is a kind of intuitive wisdom in the idea that if teenagers are caught up in a search for identity, they need the space to accomplish that task or the transmission of religious belief will be more likely to fail. Stephen Armet set out to test the assumption that parental rigidity can “inhibit the formation of an adolescent’s religious identity and thus negatively affect retention” in religious communities (Armet 277). He expected something like what Marcia calls “identity foreclosure,” a phenomenon in which the parenting style does not permit enough exploration to allow the development of an authentic, autonomous identity (Marcia; cf Armet 280).

Armet’s initial results seemed counterintuitive: young people who grew up in high-tension religions with stricter parental enforcement of religious participation tended to adhere more closely to their religious practices in early adulthood. But Armet ultimately argues for a balance between parental authority and adolescent autonomy, citing that the bond between parent and child is at least as significant as other factors when it comes to transmitting religious belief and practice (Armet 292). He writes:

Transmission of religious values appears to be an intermediate goal in fulfillment of identity achievement. Therefore, parents, educators, and researchers may find it helpful to evaluate socialization paradigms and look for ways to optimize identity achievement and autonomy as an end goal of socialization, not simply focus on overt behavioral outcomes (Armet 293).

Young people may manifest more religious behavior, but there is not a one-to-one correlation between identity formation and retention of religious beliefs and behaviors. It is a decidedly non-religious perspective, but Armet’s point is worth considering. As parents and as educators, we are not only called to form children as Catholics but as human beings. Our scope cannot be so narrow that we forget to foster the whole person. Without realizing the significance, Armet himself emphasized behaviors like attendance
at religious services and devotional practices, which might continue even without a core religious identity in place. Catholic identity is inclusive of a total orientation to reality; it cannot be reduced to a list of behaviors, although there are actions and habits that should appear in the life of a well-formed human being. Still, promoting the continued practice of a religion into early adulthood is not enough if we do not also support young people in achieving a cohesive and autonomous identity built on religious values. Encouraging religious behavior and inculcating religious values seem to be the easy part, and they are best accomplished under the guidance of a firm parental authority. Developing an autonomous sense of self in relationship to God is a deeper task that requires more trust in God, and a more fully realized theological framework to support it.

The story of Jacob at the river Jabbok is a helpful touchstone for further exploration of the process of adolescent identity formation as it relates to spirituality. The episode occurs in Genesis 32 as part of a longer story about Jacob’s final separation from his past. Jacob is a complicated figure whose decisions are often morally questionable. After stealing his brother Esau’s blessing (Genesis 27), he proceeds to Paddan Aram to find a wife in obedience to his father’s instruction (Genesis. 29), only to flee from Laban after tricking him (Genesis 29-31). When he finally arrives at the riverbank in Chapter 32, he is still being pursued by his past transgressions. After the episode in which he wrestles with the unknown divine being, often referred to as an angel, and receives his new name, Israel (Genesis 32:28), he must face Esau (Genesis 33). These “tension-filled encounters with kin…bookend Jacob’s meeting with the opponent at the Jabbok, highlighting that Jacob is indeed the one who struggles with both God and humanity” (Anderson 32).
Interpreting the encounter is difficult, first because the identity of the figure Jacob wrestles is ambiguous. Many early interpretations try to “exempt the divine” from participating in a wrestling match, including Hermann Gunkel, who draws on ancient near eastern precedents to suggest that the “angel” is really a semi-divine being, perhaps a river-spirit that wants to prevent Jacob from crossing (Howell 29-30; Anderson 36). Rabbinical tradition suggests that the “man” Jacob wrestled was not an angel at all, but that the text intends to present him as “Esau’s guardian angel” as a kind of stand-in for their larger conflict (Anderson 35; cf Davis 55-56). Others interpret the passage allegorically. Philo reads the story in terms of the human soul prevailing over human evil, while Augustine suggests that the angel is a type of Christ (Howell 29). Still others take a psychological view: the angel represents Jacob’s guilt from his prior actions (Anderson 36) or some other figurative representation of his struggles (Howell 34).

There are other oddities in the text that contribute to the ambiguity, but the passage is also rich ground for theological reflection. Andrew R. Davis takes what he calls a “cultural-historical” approach to the text by reading it together with August Wilson’s play, Fences. He sees a parallel between Jacob’s “struggles and peregrinations” and the “dislocation and sorrow as well as hope and blessing” that characterize the African-American cultural experience (Davis 48). He addresses the images and touchstones present in the original text, drawing comparisons to Wilson’s play. He finds his most fruitful point of contact in the fraught relationship between Jacob and Esau. Jacob’s actions are characterized by bald self-interest, which initiates a “cycle of estrangement” in which selfish behavior leads to alienation and isolation, which in turn causes him to insist on his own self-interest with even more zeal (Davis 54). The
wrestling match stands at the center of the episode and acts as an encapsulation of all past conflicts, leading to a conclusion that suggests some hope for the next generation (Davis 57-60).

Whether that hope is realized is up for debate, but the story of Jacob wrestling the angel can act as a template for conflict, both internal and external, is a strong starting point for developing this story as a biblical image for adolescent formation in the context of Catholic schools. Struggling with both God and humanity is a decent description of adolescence in general. Adolescence is defined by its location in between childhood and adulthood, a liminal space through which young people move on their way to a stronger, more cohesive sense of identity. It is in this space that adolescents require the kind of non-parental adult support prescribed by Lanker, particularly since the process of individuation can place stress on their other relationships (Lanker 266-267). The struggle for identity is part of the work of individuation, an essential aspect of human development, of which spiritual development is an essential component, and not an afterthought (Brandes 193-194).

The contours of the story further suggest a direction. In Genesis 32, Jacob is fleeing from Esau, pursued by Laban, and ready to leave everything behind to cross over, literally and metaphorically, to a new life. Fording the river is a step on the journey that places an obstacle between himself and his pursuers, and yet, after he carries his family and his belongings across, he returns and is left alone (v. 25). His intention to spend the night is interrupted immediately by a “man” who engages him in wrestling until “the break of dawn” (v. 25). It is on the other side of this situation that he steps into a new life as a new man, indicated by his new name. The process has been painful—he is left with a
limp. He will always bear the mark of that experience, but he is stronger because of it.

The story succeeds as a metaphor for the process of maturation, envisioned in the most human terms possible, a text that oozes with blood and sweat.

The story is a dramatic presentation of what it means to come into relationship with God. This is a God who deals with the individual in solitude according to the needs of the situation, and who appears as God will, in whatever guise is necessary. This is a mysterious image of God, who cannot be defined or named. In fact, the divine figure never reveals a name, even though Jacob asks, but there can be no question that it is God. No other encounter would produce such a result in the life of Jacob. Catholic education seeks to bring students into relationship with God, invited by God’s self-revelation. The story of Jacob at Jabbok is one of the more shocking and sublime images of what that might look like—and one that resonates with the painful reality of growing from a child into an adult.

Paul Gauguin’s painting of the scene presents the same earthy reality as the biblical text, in which the divine presence is “physically manifest and…writ large” (Powers 93). Gauguin imagines the plain of Jabbok in a wash of red against the stark white caps of a group of women gathered in the foreground dressed in the contemporary fashion of Gauguin’s time. They are ordinary women and Jabbok is settled in Brittany, but the scene still feels unearthly. Beyond an apple bough that cuts through the center, Jacob and angel are centered and “serve to test the same fleshy reality which…differentiates the physical humanity of Christ from the intangible nature of his Divinity” (Powers 93). This glimpse into divinity is set in the most concrete context possible in order to demonstrate the way God enters our reality—and in doing so,
directly engages us. Jacob is engaged physically in the structure. The women gathered spectate as listeners at a sermon that opens these mysteries to them. Their remoteness from the intimate relationship between Jacob and the angel emphasizes his absolute solitude, the way every human being is ultimately alone in their relationship with God. The apple bough and field create a kind of crucible for him, where he is surrounded—and supported—but the struggle is his alone.

The loneliness of the scene brings into focus the final point, which is that self-knowledge is an essential outcome of the process of seeking God. In our search for God, we come to know something of ourselves as bearers of God’s image. It is a gift that God gives us, to know better who we are. It is also an essential part of our formation. As Augustine points out, it is in sorting out what is truly myself and what is not, I come to know what should be loved and what should not be, and the proper ordering of affections is an integral part of growth into true humanity. Jacob receives a new name on the other side of his wrestling match, which is not only a ready analogy for maturity, but an image of salvation: the old man has passed away and the new man has come into being.

This final point suggests that the process of human development and the movement of spiritual maturation cannot be separated. I would argue that is the case. Catholic education supports and fosters the development of the human person, not only their acquisition of Catholic knowledge or Catholic virtues. If it is to be Catholic, it must be universal, and if it is universally human, it must speak to the true development of all human beings. The task for teachers (and parents) in observing adolescent formation is to clear the branches, to follow the child as far as possible, to lead them to the crucible, and then to wait and watch prayerfully as the women in the foreground of Gauguin’s painting.
CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

The preceding discussion has traced a path from the purpose of Catholic education to some suggestions for new directions. These directions are an attempt to bring more theological richness and depth into practical discussions about Catholic schools and the work of Catholic educators because theological richness and depth are so often lacking in those conversations. There are many shorthand ways of speaking that, while not incorrect, are reductive. Tracing their implications leads to problematic assumptions and incorrect conclusions. The current state of the conversation also creates hierarchies within the community of Catholic schools. Those whose institutional models and histories align with a simplified account of what the Catholic school ought to be place themselves above institutions with more complicated histories as though the latter were inauthentic or inferior in their Catholicity. The truth is that every institution falls short of the ideals laid out in the teachings of the Church. This must be true; it is the way of human institutions. And, in the end, there is more value in self-reflection than in spending even one minute critiquing the failures of another school.

There are some givens in the world of Catholic education. No matter how many of a school’s students are Catholic or how many of their families are devout, practicing Catholics, there will always be a range of adherence to Church teaching and a wide variety in the way students relate to God. The purpose of a Catholic school remains the same, which is Christ. I have tried here to bring new language to what that means. It is not a program of character education, nor is it a set of data about devotional practices. It is formation in a way of life.
It is first in introducing students to the world as intelligible because it is God’s. The intentional communication of Godself to humanity through the world is the basis of a sacramental worldview and by all means necessary; Catholic schools should operate from that principle. That means operating as though students have bodies that need to rest and recharge, that need to move, and that need to be fed. That means operating as though the way we speak of bodies matters and that what happens to our bodies matters, that our bodies should not be ignored, our needs overlooked, our physical boundaries violated without consent. It means placing the Eucharist at the center of liturgical life, and it means inviting every student to approach that encounter with reverence and respect. And it means leading students gently to the other sacraments as the Holy Spirit allows. Further, the intelligibility of the world means introducing students to subjects as integrated. It means taking an interdisciplinary approach as much as possible. Teachers working in concert to present subjects in an integrated way should be the norm. Cooperation should be the ethos. Silos must be shunned if the whole of human knowledge about the world is cohesive. To do otherwise is to subvert the truth we hope to convey.

Finally, students need the space to encounter God and engage in real relationship with the divine. It is a messy process. It can be painful. It can leave scars. It commands the change that comes with maturation. It cannot be managed from the outside, but it can be fostered through the creation of an environment in which is it safe to be open and authentic. Our classrooms should be spaces where questions are welcome, and disagreement is allowed so long as there is respect. The pursuit of relationship with God leads to greater knowledge of self, and our assignments should make space for that, not
as an exercise in solipsism but as a way of creating the space necessary for the kind of contemplation and engagement in self-reflection that invites God’s Holy Spirit. True self-knowledge aligns the heart with love, which leads to God, which leads to great self-knowledge. This is the flaming circle of our days, where the Loves come and go in a great circle that leads us to gave within and grow full of compassion to paraphrase William Butler Yeats.

None of this is easy. The daily stuff of working in a Catholic school is exhausting—and made all the more so by a keen awareness of our failures. There is so much ugliness and apathy in every school, so many complaints and criticisms. There are days when none of it seems worthwhile and the successes are few and far between. Reminders of the failures and shortcomings are constant. And the rare occasions when we see the results of our work, even just for a moment, are the beautiful stuff of the very ordinary ways God shows up in our world. Those moments of joy don’t come from the thanks we receive, or appreciation expressed. Joy comes from hearing that a student from a non-practicing family is attending Mass regularly in college, or that a student wants to be confirmed. There is a peaceful satisfaction in telling a student who hasn’t been to confession since they were eight not to worry because Father will walk them through it. It comes from the subtle realization that a student who was estranged from God is no longer or that a child who so clearly felt unsafe in the world has relaxed a little. The joys are small. We never measure up, but we never stop trying. In the end, that’s all we’re asked to do.


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Lapsley, Daniel and Katheryn Kelley. “On the Catholic Identity of Students and Schools:


APPENDIX

This appendix contains a plan for a professional development seminar for Catholic school teachers drawing on the principles proposed in my thesis. Participants would leave with a lesson or unit plan that uses these same principles as a guide. I have included a sample unit plan from my own course that illustrates the principles in a more concrete form.

Professional Development Seminar

**Learner Objectives:**

The goal of this workshop is for participants to understand how Trinitarian theology can inform their classrooms. By the end, they will create a lesson (or unit) plan modeled on Trinitarian principles for their own subject areas.

**Anticipatory Set:**

Ask participants define what makes a Catholic school different to share anonymously with the group. Invite further reflection at table groups on what sets Catholic schools apart. Share out with the entire group, drawing out the following themes:

- Educating the whole child
- Character education/morality
- Commitment to service/social justice

**Direct Instruction:**

Using a whiteboard or prepared slide, establish a continuum between character education and social justice as two poles. There is a tendency to reduce Catholic identity to one or the other, which creates a skewed picture. Invite discussion of what is missing when too much emphasis is placed on one or the other extreme. Potential points of focus:

- Losing sight of the beauty of Catholic theology.
• Encouraging service for its own sake without examining the motivation for
  service or inculcating the proper spirit.
• Serving others without amending our own lives.
• Focusing on personal holiness without developing empathy.
• Creating a culture that is rooted in shame or pride.
• Excluding those who do not share the Catholic faith.

The language of educating the whole child is intended to overcome this dichotomy:
we ought to encourage high moral character but also develop an affinity for service to
others. This is a first step toward an account of educating the whole child. In order to
continue, it’s important to explore what it means to be a human being.

**Group Activity:**

Allow time for reflection on this question: “What is a human being?” Then ask
participants to spend time at table groups sharing answers and continuing discussing,
including these follow up questions:

• What is the purpose of a human life? Is it possible to miss out on being
  fully human? If so, what would that look like?

Based on this discussion, create a poster that defines a human person. Do a brief gallery
walk to view what other groups have created, leaving notes to highlight points of
agreement. Gather points of agreement to build a shared understanding of what it means
to be a human person.

As discussion progresses, propose that in the context of Catholic theology, it is
possible to decline from one’s own humanity, and that to do so distances a person both
from themselves and from God. Therefore, the purpose of Catholic education is to bring
students into greater connection with themselves and with God as part of forming them more fully as human beings. The question is how we make that concrete in our classrooms and departments. Further propose two guiding principles to the group, namely that students must:

- Know the world as intelligible.
- Know themselves.

Explain each in turn. The world can be understood because it has order and form as God’s creation; whether or not we mention God directly, highlighting the process of coming to comprehend the world and the ways in which the various sciences coalesce around a cohesive (though constantly evolving) understanding of how things work, both in terms of the physical creation and human society, is a fundamental part of Catholic education.

Pause to reflect on how instruction in the scientific method, instruction in the history of science and innovation, and even our own collaboration and cross or interdisciplinary work aligns with this principle. Conversely, treating science, history, or mathematics as a collection of disparate facts to be memorized without engaging the underlying logic of those disciplines runs counter to this principle.

There is a direct relationship between self-knowledge and knowledge of God; as students come to reflect on who they are as individuals, they are able to grow in their relationship with the divine. Whether this is made explicit or not, practices that encourage the development of interpersonal and intrapersonal skills support this basic aspect of Catholic education.
Pause and reflect on the value of instructional practices that allow students to make personal connections with one another through collaboration and open communication for Catholic schools. Time for personal reflection and self-scrutiny, including self-assessment of learning, also allows students to develop as human beings. Creating personal connection with class material is another way to support this aspect of a Catholic education.

**Workshop:**

In conclusion, instruct participants to gather by departments and spend time creating a lesson or unit plan that makes use of one or both of the principles addressed here. Department members share ideas as they work, and then summarize together the application of these principles that seems most relevant to their department’s content.

**Example Unit Plan**

**Course Title:** Theology IV: Sacred Spaces: Catholic and Comparative Examples

**Unit Title:** Values and Ideals in Chartres Cathedral

**Unit Objective:** Students will connect the way a medieval gothic cathedral functions as a microcosm to a contemporary example of the same mechanism in order to deepen their understanding of how spaces shape identity.

**Lesson One:** Brief intro lecture on features of gothic architecture; intro to Notre-Dame de Chartres. Include discussion of exterior and interior features as well as the interior floorplan in comparison to the basilica. Students should have a basic working vocabulary for gothic architecture and be able to define how Notre-Dame de Chartres embodies those characteristics.
**Lesson Two:** Introduce the concept of the cathedral as microcosm and explain that the iconography of Chartres provides a clue to the cosmos as imagined by the communities that constructed the cathedral. Continue by exploring the iconography of Chartres’s windows. Working in groups, students categorize and catalog the subjects of the stained glass windows inside the cathedral in a shared class spreadsheet. Conclude by reviewing what is depicted and how the images are presented. Draw out the emphasis on a gathered community of key figures in the life of the Church stretching from contemporary donors back to the creation.

**Lesson Three:** Reading questions on two short articles, “Light, Beauty, and Emotion in Chartres Cathedral” by Sarah Randles and “Labyrinth of Chartres,” followed by a discussion of what they add to our understanding of the subjective experience of being inside Notre-Dame de Chartres.

**Lesson Four:** Review reading, “Twelve Criteria for Sacred Architecture” by Keith Critchlow, focusing on “mesocosm,” defined as link or bridge between the macro- and microcosm, located in the experience of the individual who is shaped by the space. Transition to discussion of how they imagine an individual is intended to feel while experiencing the space inside Notre-Dame de Chartres. Students should be able to define microcosm, macrocosm, and mesocosm. Students should also be able to articulate the relationship between the web of human and divine connections present in the iconography and the humble, even penitent posture of the individual, who is nevertheless part of the grander whole.

**Lesson Five:** Students select a space from their own experience and describe how it reflects the values held by the community that created or uses the space. Using the
comparison with Notre-Dame de Chartres, they will also articulate how the space functions as a mesocosm by bringing the viewer into relationship with those values, thereby shaping their view of the world and themselves.

**Lesson Six:** Closing in which students share their insights in an informal conversation.

**Reflection on Trinitarian Principles:**

This unit was conceived as part of a conceptual Church History course focused on the idea of sacred spaces. While it deals with a built environment rather than a natural one, the approach emphasizes intelligibility through careful study. Requiring students to catalog and process the content of the windows together, they come to understand how significant the body of knowledge contained there is, how varied it is, and how rich the content of medieval thought is. The ideas embedded there can be understood through effort. This functions as an analogy and not as a direct application of the idea that the world is imbued with meaning.

The work of understanding the meaning present in the architecture and iconography of the space leads to an opportunity to reflect on the experience of the individual and the way spaces reflect but also shape a sense of self in the second half of the unit. The student is meant to learn that human beings build spaces that reflect what they believe to be important, but those spaces also create subjective experiences that reinforce ways of life. The conclusion affords the student an opportunity to apply this knowledge to a contemporary context, which allows them to consider how the spaces they inhabit shape them. It is a chance to reflect more deeply on who they are as human beings.