Characteristics of Catholic Education

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Introduction

What are Characteristics? What follows is a short description of five dimensions of Catholic education. To describe them as “characteristics,” is not to say that they are “unique.” To be unique means that only Catholicism has these characteristics. To say that they are characteristic means rather that they convey what Catholicism should mean in an educational institution that claims to be Catholic. They are not the only characteristics worth mentioning. I have limited myself to five. They provide a deeper theological and historical context for the Characteristics of Marianist education.

How old are Catholic and Marianist Educational Traditions? The Marianist tradition of spirituality and education began to take root at the turn of the 19th century in Fr. Chaminade’s lay groups who gathered in prayer, friendship, and study and then went forth to convert France. Historically, the Marianist tradition goes back not quite two hundred years, and was deeply shaped by Chaminade’s response to the destruction wrought by the French Revolution. The Church needed to be rebuilt, from the ground up. Catholicism, on the other hand, goes back two thousand years, and has taken shape through many historical events, including revolutions, in many parts of the world. The Catholic tradition is deeper and wider and more comprehensive than the Marianist tradition. There would be no Marianist tradition if Catholicism did not exist. That is why it is important to understand the foundation of the Marianist approach to education--namely, Catholicism.

Finally, what does Marianist add to Catholic? What are those distinctive qualities of Marianist spirituality, drawing on the rich and more ancient Catholic tradition, which shapes its approach to education? One has only to turn to the CME’s to find one example of how the Marianist tradition gives a distinctive application to the broad and all-encompassing tradition of Catholic education. The Jesuits offer another example, as do the School Sisters of Saint Joseph. The distinctiveness of the Marianist tradition can
best be seen if we show how they express in a distinctive way the characteristics of Catholic education. It is to those characteristics that I now turn.

(1) It is Sacramental

To say that Catholic education is sacramental is to suggest that there is nothing that is only secular. In other words, all of reality is suffused with the presence of God, including material reality. The Genesis creation stories make the point that everything that is, is from God, and therefore good. In Catholicism, matter matters. The body is important, as is the environment. What’s more, when we study creation with respect, we are encountering God’s art work. The study of chemistry, biology, physics, genetics—all these activities explore what God has made. Such study is sacred.

The same can be said of human experience. As C. S. Lewis once remarked, “you have never met a mere mortal.” Christianity affirms that though all persons have a beginning in time, their destiny is eternal. If God is love, then all loving friendships, communities, dialogues and encounters put us in touch with God, who is Love. Sinful and sordid humanity also reflect God, who is mercy and forgiveness. As poet and literary critic Dana Gioia, a graduate of a Marianist high school writes, “Catholic literature is rarely pious. In ways that sometimes trouble or puzzle both Protestant and secular readers, Catholic writing tends to be comic, rowdy, rude, and even violent. Catholics generally prefer to write about sinners rather than saints.”

At the foundation of sacramentality are the doctrines of creation and incarnation. Because creation is God’s handiwork, and Jesus is God with skin, both matter and humanity have been and continue to be vessels of divine revelation.

Educational Application: Catholic education affirms the importance of the sciences and social sciences, as they both reveal different aspects of God’s creation, both material and personal. Second, central to Catholicism is the sacredness of each human being, created in God’s image and likeness. Third, if every person is sacred, whether a person is male or female, white or black, old or young, unborn or dying, African or Asian—then everyone is respected, even reverenced. Finally, a sense of family spirit, the importance of community, and the value of friendships are central.
(2) It is Whole

From the very beginning of the Church, Christians described their experience of God as “Catholic,” since God showed no partiality. “Go forth and preach the Gospel to all nations.” They learned that they had to embrace all reality, all people, the heavens and the earth, the visible and the invisible. The word “universal” is often used in English to describe this characteristic. But universal is not quite the same as Catholic. As the late Jesuit Walter Ong explained, the word “universal” combines the Latin words *unum* and *vertere*. *Unum* suggests a point while *vertere* suggests to turn. One can picture a circle being drawn around a point. “Catholic” suggests something different. It means throughout the whole. It suggests no border, no circle with an inside and an outside. Jesus spoke of yeast placed in dough, which causes the whole mass to rise. To be Catholic is to be without borders, touches and transforms everything, and is capable of growing constantly.

The image of the yeast and the dough further suggests full transformation. The change is never only external; it affects everything. Fr. Chaminade wrote that the essential is the interior, but in doing so he never devalued the exterior. He was one of the great founders of groups, communities with a visible mission, people who were to be “spectacles,” embodiments of interior transformation. The essential, then, is the transformation of the whole, both interior and exterior. Catholicism affirms that every person, though a sinner, can be transformed by God’s love. Part of that holiness includes physical matter, the body. God through creation and incarnation makes possible the transformation of all reality, material and interpersonal.

**Educational application:** Catholicism is a religion of hope. There is nothing that cannot be transformed, beginning with bread and wine and including all of creation which “groans,” as St. Paul tells us, for full transformation. Hope prevents educators from giving up on difficult students. Hope keeps faculty and staff “at the table,” working together to create the best possible educational experience for everyone. Wholeness requires that Catholics be interdependent, not just independent, and concerned with the common good, not just what’s best for an individual. Contact through virtual means, though valuable, always takes second place. Catholicism welcomes everyone. Catholic education affirms patriotism but not nationalism—my country right and wrong. Catholics are Catholic first, and then, second, American or German or Italian.
(3) It Values Intelligence

The Catholic tradition treasures the intellect. To be created in God’s image is to be intelligent and free. To compromise intelligence (laziness in studies) or freedom (various forms of addiction), disfigures God’s image. Indoctrination, or brainwashing, disfigures God’s image. Nothing can replace a rigorous intellectual formation. It is not a question of being either intelligent or a believer. Rather, the goal is to become an intelligent believer. God wants all of us to grow, and that includes growth in our ability to think. In the New Testament (Luke 10:27) we read that we are to love God and our neighbor not just with all our heart, strength and soul, but also with all our minds.

Typically, in the preparation for priestly ordination, seminarians are expected to get a degree in philosophy before they pursue their theological studies. Rightly understood, Catholicism assumes that critical thinking supports and strengthens faith. In Catholicism there is no room for fundamentalists. Fundamentalists assert without questioning; Mary questioned the Angel Gabriel, “How can this be?” Catholics founded universities, not Bible schools. Dogmas do not close off thought, but point to the mystery of God. A person of faith does not believe because there is no evidence. Rather, a person believes because their experience of creation, love, forgiveness, and community points to love, and God is love.

Unlike the Jewish tradition, Catholicism has not always valued debate and disagreement as it should. However, during the Middle Ages and especially over the past fifty years, debate has enriched the Church. Part of this is due to the simple fact that more and more Catholic lay persons are getting doctorates, writing books, leading universities and expressing their views on the meaning of their faith. Among them are more and more women—theologians, scientists, philosophers and artists. Some Catholics fear that all these new voices create a cacophony. History will show, however, that out of these debates and disagreements, an even richer and more capacious form of Catholicism will take root and flower.

**Educational Application:** Asking questions can form the lifeblood of faith. Critical thinking can enrich the faith. The purpose of Catholic education is not indoctrination, but the formation of intelligent believers. If probing questions and challenging hypotheses forms the heart of scientific research, an intelligent faith welcomes questions and probes hypotheses.
(4) It Celebrates Saints

If all reality, including human reality, is sacramental, then it can become a reflection of God, a window through which we sense the divine presence. Some Christians think humanity is so sinful, that holiness is an illusion. Catholics know that saints are not perfect; rather, saints are sinners who, through the grace of God, have been enabled to do great things with the cards they have been dealt. They inspire us, heroes and heroines who reassure us that despite our flaws, God’s love continues to flow through us. Some Christians object that Catholics worship saints, especially Mary. In truth, Catholics venerate saints, not worship them. God alone is to be worshiped. Some Christians fear that the veneration of saints puts a wall between the believer and Jesus; they prefer, as it were, to go directly to Jesus, not through other human beings. Catholics believe that anyone who reflects the love of Jesus, as does a saint, acts like a bridge rather than a wall, a reflection of God rather than a distortion. Like all good mentors, saints draw us closer to God.

To use another metaphor, saints help catch a glimpse of Jesus. If Christians were to go “directly” to God, they would bypass Jesus too, at least in his humanity. Jesus never intended to do it all alone. He called the twelve apostles, and now, more clearly than ever before in the Church, he calls every baptized person to be a witness to his love for others.

**Educational Application.** Most people believe because they have found people who believe believable. History is a great teacher. The history of Christians who wrestled with their faith, intellectually worked at it, became extraordinary lovers of the poor and dispossessed, who made visible the love of God—makes today’s journey hopeful. Saints are embedded in history. They live in different historical contexts. In an age of “breaking news” and instant communication, Catholic education values history and treasure tradition.

(5) It Builds Institutions and Communities

No movement lasts unless it acquires some organization. Organizations are never perfect; at their worst, they can fragment or calcify. Americans are deep-seated individualists; they distrust institutions, including religious ones. Some Catholics refer to the “institutional Church” as a way of referring to everything they don’t like about the Church. All that said, if we did not have some form of organization, we’d have no
schools, parishes or hospitals. The Catholic Church is the world’s oldest multi-national organization in the world. That fact alone says something about its unusual character, history, and resilience.

Internally, the laity forms 99% of the membership in the Church. The hierarchy exists to serve the laity and protect the unity of the community. Unity is not the same as uniformity. Viewed globally, Catholicism is hardly uniform. All Catholics profess the same Creed; nevertheless, Catholics celebrate the Mass in many different ways.

The Church is not a democracy; neither is it a dictatorship. Popes and Bishops can make decisions, but the truth of many of their decisions may turn out to be partial, and in some cases, even false. Even the pope does not have the authority to define teachings for the entire Church unless those teachings are consistent with Scripture, and reflect the faith of Catholics world-wide. According to Vatican II, Catholics taken together are blessed with an unerring sense of what makes for true doctrine. Like the pope, they too are blessed with a certain infallibility. Every Catholic by his or her baptism is anointed with the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of truth, which over time gradually makes clear what the Christian life requires. The best institutions keep everyone connected, building the kingdom of God.

**Educational Application.** By baptism, all Catholics are called to holiness. All Catholics have responsibility to embody the faith, reflect on it intelligently, and make decisions about how best to live it. There are different gifts and different roles in the Church. The main responsibility of the hierarchy is to foster unity, globally and within dioceses. The work of building bridges of understanding and doing works of justice, however, belongs to all the baptized. The Spirit can work through everyone. Even out of the “mouth of babes” one can find wisdom. Learning what it means to be a leader and how to form a community with a mission belongs to everyone, but in different ways: bishops in dioceses, mothers and fathers in families, educators in their schools, and the pope for the entire Church. Catholics are not anti-authority, but anti-authoritarian. In other words, Catholic education recognizes that institutions are important, that organizationally there are different roles, and that everyone bears responsibility, in their own way and with their different gifts, for the mission of the Church.