

# ***What the Public School Establishment Can Learn From Catholic Social Teaching***

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George Roche, President of Hillsdale College said recently; “We are not only doing a poor job of teaching the three Rs; but we are failing to teach our children the difference between right and wrong. Observers have characterized this problem as ‘a hole in the moral ozone,’ or ‘moral poverty,’ or ‘moral illiteracy.’”<sup>1</sup>

Our public school system, nationwide has collapsed and no one in the public school establishment seems to know what to do. We all know that average SAT scores fell from 980 to 890 between 1963 and 1980. It is common knowledge that many of our high school graduates are functional illiterates and in our large cities as many as 40% drop out of school. American students scored last in math and science when compared to foreign students. Korean students generally are superior to United States students. Furthermore, what some Americans may not know is that today it is possible to graduate from 78% of our colleges without ever taking a course in Western Civilization; 38% without taking a History course at all; 45% without taking a course in American or English Literature; 77% without taking a course in foreign language; 41% without studying Math; and 33% without studying Natural Sciences.<sup>2</sup>

Now if our educational problems in the United States were only academic their solutions would be less difficult. But they are not; they are moral, indeed spiritual. In 1940 teachers identified talking out of turn, chewing gum, making noise, running in the halls, cutting in line, dress code infractions, and littering as major problems in the public schools. In 1990 public school teachers identified the following as problems: drug abuse, alcohol abuse, pregnancy, suicide, rape, robbery, and assault.<sup>3</sup> We should not be surprised that these problems exist, for they are the result of the educational philosophy of the public school establishment that claims to have a neutral approach to education. William Bermett describes this so-called neutrality in his book, *The Devaluing of America*, wherein he quotes a 1985 *New York Times* article in which school officials proclaimed “they deliberately avoid telling students what is ethically right or wrong.” However, according to the article, a school counselor insists if a student admits stealing something and seeks his advise, his response would have to be he can’t “force his values on them.” This policy is hardly neutral. Indeed it is clearly teaching students that morality is relative and that each individual alone decides what is right and wrong.<sup>4</sup> The consequences of such a policy are now becoming a matter of public record. In another *New York Times* article in 1993 the headline reads: “School Crime Rises 16% Prompting Security Moves.” According to this story the number of violent incidents reported in the New York City public schools rose

more than 16% to 5,761 last year (1992). This number equals one violent incident for every 173 public school students. In all reports of crimes in the schools have risen 61% during Chancellor Fernandez's three-year term of office. School administrators expect to spend \$28 million for more metal detectors, and for the first time will use them to screen 6th graders as young as eleven years old.<sup>5</sup> Thomas Sowell, author of *Inside American Education* said in 1993: "Most parents, most voters, and most taxpayers have no idea what a war is being waged in the schools against the beliefs that children bring with them from their homes."<sup>6</sup> Our public school classrooms, have become cultural battlefields because the values taught in schools are contrary to those of parents. Yet we are asking the very same educators, who established the current system to reform it! That hasn't worked, it won't work! We must look elsewhere for solutions to this very serious, national educational crisis. At this point, it is important to note that none of the authors or studies I have referred to, nor do I as a former public school teacher and supervisor, suggest that all public schools or teachers are incompetent or ineffective; but rather, that the system, this virtual monopolistic system, is oppressive and spiritually bankrupt and needs reform. To the extent that some schools are successful is no doubt due to the dedicated teachers who remain in them. They are a beleaguered group!

I propose that researchers and serious writers concerned about the future of education in the United States look to the social teaching of the church for reform and renewal of American education.

The church's teaching on the subject is a sophisticated, well-developed body of doctrine, based on wisdom acquired by centuries of educational experience and it is applicable to the present age or any future age. Therefore, Americans can benefit greatly by knowing and understanding the principles that have been laid down by the church. In fact, it is my judgement that this body of knowledge is the only comprehensive philosophy of education that offers any hope out of our nation's current educational malaise.

Catholic teaching on education can be found in Pius XI's important encyclical, *Christian Education of Youth* (1929), Vatican Council II's *Declaration on Christian Education* (1965); and the more recent teaching by Pope John Paul II in his *Apostolic Exhortation on the Family* (1981).

Church teaching differs at the very outset with modern educational thinking. The very purpose of education is different from these two perspectives. Whereas, current educational literature stresses man's earthly happiness and self-fulfillment, Christ and his church have always taught that the ultimate purpose of education must be directed toward man's eternal salvation or as Pius XI stated it:

Education consists essentially in preparing man for what he must be and for what he must do here below, in order to attain the sublime end for

which he was created....there can be no ideally perfect education which is not Christian education.<sup>7</sup>

From these two quite different view points on the purpose of education one can easily see that the very definition of education cannot be the same. In the church's view education by its very nature is broad. It includes the development of each individual, spiritually, morally, aesthetically, physically, psychologically, and intellectually. As a consequence there are many educational agencies in society, the school only being one. Of all the educational agencies in society—the church, the Boy Scouts, the Girl Scouts, sports organizations, social groups, after-school clubs—the family is the most important. Contemporary secular thinking is at variance with this view. Dr. Robert Hutchins referred to the educationist's notion that the school should teach the “whole child” as the most meaningless, anti-intellectual concept in educational discussion.<sup>8</sup> This view that the school can do the whole job or, to put it another way, that it is the sole educational agency in society explains why the public schools over the last several decades have expanded their responsibilities into so many nonacademic programs. As Thomas Sowell states in *Inside American Education*:

All across this country the school curriculum has been invaded by psychological conditioning programs which not only take up time sorely needed for intellectual development, but also promote an emotionalized and anti-intellectual way of responding to the challenges facing every individual and every society. Worst of all, the psychotherapeutic curriculum systematically undermines the parent-child relationship and the shared values which make a society possible.<sup>9</sup>

The church looks on the school as one of many agencies in society and one which must always be a complement to and never in opposition to the primary educational agency, the family. Such divergent thinking can only be resolved by granting either to the state or to the family the final control over education. The church insists this right must rest with the parents, which brings us to the role of the state. The role of the state in education logically must depend on one's belief as to whom is primarily responsible for the education of our youth. The modern educator would clearly give this right to the state, whereas the church maintains that the parents have this fundamental natural right; the state's task is to protect and defend this natural right. Or to quote the *Declaration on Christian Education* from the Second Vatican Council:

Parents who have the primary and unalienable right and duty to educate their children must enjoy true liberty in their choice of schools.

Consequently the government which has the obligation to protect and defend the right of citizens must see to it....that parents are truly free to choose, according to their consciences, the school they want for their children.<sup>10</sup>

What may come as a surprise to many Americans and especially members of the public school establishment, is that the church's view on the natural right of parents in education is more consistent with the U.S. constitutional tradition than the prevailing view of the modern educator. The landmark case in our own history was the famous Oregon case which upheld this primary right of parents, *Pierce v. Society of Sisters*. Both churchmen and the judges in the highest court in the land based their conclusions on the natural law. This 1925 decision has been reaffirmed in several important subsequent decisions. The most recent being *Fernandez v. Alfonse*, denying the public schools the right to distribute condoms to students without parental permission. Regrettably, the natural law tradition is not generally known or understood in society today, particularly among members of the public school administration. Nevertheless, it is the heart of our legal history and is best expressed in the Declaration of Independence. One important element in this legal understanding of man, is the idea that these natural rights are inalienable. As the Declaration put it "man is endowed with certain inalienable rights." These rights then do not come from government but from God! And they are individual therefore they can not be taken away by man made law, certainly not by majority rule. Indeed, the primary function of the State is to protect these individual natural rights, the Declaration goes on to tell us.

A better understanding and application of this idea in education could resolve a number of contemporary controversies. With public schools approaching a near monopoly, whatever policy they adopt, it is "one policy fits all." By that I mean it must apply to all the students in that school or system yet, if several families or even one family objects, this one family is trapped unless it can afford to send its children elsewhere, which, most can not, especially in our big cities. The result then is that large numbers of families are denied their natural rights. And this is why Thomas Sowell writes that our schools have become cultural battlegrounds.

On the other hand, recognizing the inalienable rights of parents could defuse many of our current school problems peacefully. I am not even referring here to the most explosive difficulties that now beset our schools. What I have in mind are programs that have divided educators themselves: phonics and whole word reading; traditional and progressive education; grading systems; language programs; strict and progressive discipline policies; required and optional courses. The tendency in education today is to be eclectic; which comes down to using a little of both of the competing programs. That usually leaves everyone unhappy. The important aspect of the natural inalienable rights foundation to school programming is that even the

most explosive agenda of the public schools could be resolved if parents' rights as their children's principal educators were respected. In the end all parents, not just the majority, would be able to choose their children's programs and schools. This freedom is suppressed today; therefore we are constantly reading about conflicts, demonstrations, and disruptions in our schools over sex education, drug programs, death education, sensitivity training, values clarification, dress codes—the list goes on and so does the deterioration of our schools' academic quality.

In this age of professionalism, some discussion is needed on the subject of parents being primary educators. "The task of giving education," Pope John Paul II wrote, "is rooted in the primary vocation of married couples to participate in God's creative activity."<sup>11</sup> Parents qualify as teachers by virtue of the grace of the Sacrament of Matrimony and the intimate knowledge they have of their children as a consequence of their love for them. The Second Vatican Council emphasized the indispensability of this role as follows:

Parents must be recognized as the first and foremost educators of their children. This role as educator is so decisive that scarcely anything can compensate for their failure in it....Hence the family is the first school of social virtues which every society needs.<sup>12</sup>

Parents then are authentic teachers not just individuals who hire professionals for their children. It is in the affective domain that parents are the most influential and effective as educators. That is why understanding education in the broad sense is important. Most of the developmental areas cited by the church in its definition of education involve the affective realm. Spirituality, morality, values, virtue, emotional security, these are developed in the family not in a formal school setting. Therefore it is primarily informal education that is the domain of parents with their intimate knowledge of each child. Of the other educational agencies the school is best suited for the academic areas. Many contemporary educators confuse the two and lately have tended to stress the former instead of the latter. This concept of the importance of the family in education is not simply a theory or an idea limited to Catholics. Indeed these principles have been affirmed by empirical studies over the years. In a recent *New York Times* article, Daniel Patrick Moynihan, paid tribute to one of the nation's great sociologists, James S. Coleman. During the 1960s Coleman conducted the monumental federal study that demonstrated the importance of the family in the education of disadvantaged black children. After two exhausting years of study, Coleman found that per pupil expenditure had little impact on the successful education of children. What mattered was family.<sup>13</sup> It can be said then, that the family is central to a child's education, not only in light of church teaching but from our own constitutional and political history, and current empirical studies. Yet all of this has been ignored by the public school authorities.

No society however, has the luxury of disregarding this evidence. No, serious consequence are bound to flow from such ignorance. As early as 1929 Pius XI predicted the problems that would emerge from the secularization of the public schools. “The school....from which religion is excluded....can not exist in practice, it is bound to become irreligious.”

The school is by its very nature, an institution subsidiary and complementary to the family and to the church....It follows...that it must not be in opposition to but in positive accord with those other two elements...otherwise, it is doomed to fail, and become instead an agent of destruction.<sup>14</sup>

Imagine almost seventy years ago, when American public education was just beginning, Pius XI anticipated that secular schools would become agents of destruction if they operated in opposition to the desires of parents. Agents of destruction—is it too harsh a description of our schools today? I think not. The violence alone warrants such a characterization. But more important is the insight that these terrible conditions result from a disregard, even a contempt, for the central role of the family in the education of children.

American public education has been in a state of deterioration since the 1960s. This deterioration coincided with the rapid centralization of public education away from parental control and local control and into the hands of state and federal bureaucracies. These trends must be reversed, and, in my judgement, the principles of Catholic social teaching ought to be the basis for overall reform. This teaching can provide the principles for a change that are well within the constitutional traditions of our nation, which has always advocated local control of education.

Surprisingly, there is a growing consensus among diverse leaders and organizations of all political persuasions on the type of educational reform necessary to reverse the deteriorating trends of the current system. Choice in education, is now being advocated by such different groups as the liberal Brookings Institution and the conservative Heritage Foundation. Jack Kemp, the Republican candidate for Vice President of the United States and A. Polly Williams, the Black State Representative from Wisconsin, both agree that choice is the only hope for inner-city kids. John E. Chubb and Terry M. Moe recently published, *Politics, Markets, and America's School*, in which they conclude that “choice is indeed a panacea,” and propose politically feasible ways of shifting to a fundamentally different kind of educational system. Bill Bennett's book, *The Devaluing of America*, also endorses some form of choice in American education.

I would not suggest that choice is a “panacea”; Moe and Chubb base their conclusion almost exclusively on the idea of competition and a market economy. Education is much more subtle and many faceted to be improved by choice alone. But it is an important first step away from the current near monopoly of govern-

ment-run schools and that is why the principles of Catholic social teaching on education could be so important for American education. As proposals for reform are made, first principles provide a basis for discussion and analysis, without subjecting the system to a general change only to find the new way does not improve the system. The relation between and among the family, school, church, other educational agencies, and the state is crucial. Other issues of educational importance must also be considered: higher standards, the pursuit of excellence, character training, discipline, encouragement of virtue, spiritual and religious values, must all be addressed. The church's principles of education offer a framework within which such a reform of American education can take place, while respecting the diversity of our society. In his forward to Father Virgil C. Blum's *Freedom of Choice in Education* (1958), Will Herberg noted:

Pluralism is the mark of every open society. American society has its pluralistic diversity built into its institutions at every level of life. In economics, in politics, in culture, we are proud of our pluralism, and the corresponding freedom it assures. There is one field, however, in which pluralism seems to arouse the suspicion, even the resentment...and that is the field of education. In education, especially in education at the lower level, many Americans otherwise committed to diversity seem to feel that uniformity is mandatory, and that pluralism is divisive and undemocratic.<sup>15</sup>

This attitude remains the prevailing view among those in the secular school establishment today. It's time to look elsewhere for the solutions to this nationwide crisis.

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### Notes

1. George Roche, *Imprimis*, March 1996, 2.
2. Lynne V. Cheney, *Imprimis*, May 1990, 1.
3. William Bennett, *The Index of Leading Cultural Indicators* (Washington, D.C.: Heritage Foundation, 1993), ii.
4. William Bennett, *The Devaluing of America* (New York: Summit Books, 1992), 56-57.
5. "School Crime Rises 16% Prompting Security Moves," *New York Times* 16 September, 1993, B3.
6. Thomas Sowell, *Our Town U.S.A.* (17 September 1993): 16.
7. Pope Pius XI "Christian Education of Youth," *Five Great Encyclicals*, ed., Rev. Gerald Treacy, S. J. (New York: Paulist Press, 1939), 39.

8. Robert M. Hutchins, *Freedom for Education* (New York: Grove Press, Inc, 1963).
9. Thomas Sowell, *Inside American Education* (New York: The Free Press, 1993), ix.
10. Vatican Council II, *Declaration on Christian Education*, 1965, #6.
11. Pope John Paul II, *Apostolic Exhortation on the Family*, November 1981, #34.
12. Vatican Council II op. cit., #3.
13. Daniel Patrick Moynihan, *New York Times Magazine*, 31 December, 1995, 25.
14. Pope Pius XI, "Christian Education of Youth," *Five Great Encyclicals*, 60.
15. Will Herberg (Foreword) in Virgil C. Blum S.J., *Freedom of Choice in Education* (New York: Paulist Press, 1958).