

Report on *The Catholic Educator's Resource Center*

-J. Fraser Field

Vatican II's *Declaration on Christian Education* directs Catholic schools to integrate the Christian faith into the whole pattern of human life in all its aspects. It enjoins Catholic educators to strive "to relate all human culture eventually to the news of salvation, so that the life of faith will illumine the knowledge which students gradually gain of the world, of life, and of humankind."¹ Dominic Aquila develops this thought when he writes, "Rather than seeing Catholic education as merely the addition of a religion course to the usual academic subjects, we want our students to make Christian sense out of what they learn in their natural science, math, and history courses, in their study of art, music, and literature".² Yet textbooks and other resources now being used in Catholic schools can in no way be considered sufficient to this task.

In 1986, Paul Vitz wrote *Censorship: Evidence of Bias in our Children's Textbooks*, in which he outlined the findings of a research project set up by the National Institute of Education (ME) to determine if there is bias in text books used in public schools in the United States. In this, the only systematic study of religion and traditional values in U.S. public school textbooks to date, Vitz and his research group concluded that public school textbooks are biased. Religion, traditional family values, and conservative political and economic positions have been systematically excluded from our children's textbooks.³

No one even vaguely familiar with the direction American public education has charted for itself over the past 35 years could be much surprised by this finding. What may surprise and should certainly concern Catholics is the fact that Catholic schools in the United States and Canada are using these same resources. These resources are predictably silent about the Catholic perspective on how social life should be conducted and on the contribution of Catholic faith and culture to the progress of history and our current cultural context.

In 1996, a group of concerned Catholic teachers, academics, and three priests from the Vancouver B.C. area organized the Catholic Social Studies Project (known as The Catholic Educator's Resource Center since June 1998) to begin to address this problem. My own experience in the Catholic schools is representative of the concerns which had brought us together. In 1991 I was hired to teach at St. Patrick's Catholic elementary school in Maple Ridge, British Columbia. Maple Ridge is under the umbrella of the Vancouver archdiocese and the steady hand of an intelligent and courageous defender of Catholic orthodoxy, His Grace Archbishop Adam Exner.

But the relative orthodoxy of our environs was not reflected in the teaching materials available to us in the schools. Among other things, I taught early man and ancient history (Egypt, Rome, Greece, etc.) in grade seven, and Native culture and the early explorers of Canada in grade four. The word Christianity

rarely appeared in any of the texts we were using or else was given cursory and dismissive treatment. The Hebrew civilization of ancient Israel was never mentioned, despite the fact that the early history of the Jews is of foundational significance to Western civilization in many respects and is as important as ancient Greece and far more important than ancient Egypt. The birth and life of Christ was mentioned, but in a perfunctory manner (one paragraph in the text I was using) with no hint as to its significance in the subsequent development of Western civilization. Teaching "early man," I was given resources which outlined the discovery of early fossils and explained the theory of evolution, but no resources for teaching the perspective of the Church on the theory or on reconciling its implications with the creation story of the Bible. The important role of Catholic missionaries in the exploration and settlement of Canada was not even mentioned. I discovered that texts in other subject areas, other grades, and in other Catholic school districts were guilty of a similar omission of the Christian contribution and perspective.

Of course, the fact that the resources we were using were written with the public schools in mind shouldn't have made any difference. Paul Vitz has pointed out that the central issue is a question of the facts of our past and present. Those facts are clear: "[R]eligion, especially Christianity, has played and continues to play a central role in our culture and history. To neglect to report this is simply to fail to carry out the major duty of any textbook writer--the duty to tell the truth."² The study of Western civilization remains incomplete and distorted without an adequate consideration of the influence of Christianity. The Holy Father puts it forcefully: "The exclusion of Christ from the history of man is an act against man."

Surely one of the great tragedies of public education today is the fact that the average young person leaving our school systems has no conception of the positive influence Christianity has had on society and culture. As citizens of the modern world our young people are destined to live off the spiritual and cultural capital of our Judeo-Christian heritage without ever recognizing or acknowledging their debt. Yet given the ideological agendas now driving curriculum development in public education, it is hardly surprising that public schools fail to give Christian faith and culture their rightful place; the reaction against Christianity is just too strong.

In the Catholic schools one would expect a well developed study of Christian culture to have been worked out long ago. This has not occurred. In the 1960s state governments in the United States began supplying Catholic schools with free text books. This government action helped relieve financial pressure on Catholic schools, but, as public education increasingly committed itself to an exclusively secular vision, public school texts became less and less reflective of Christian values, Christian content, and, in the areas of history and social studies, Christian based criteria of interpretation. In addition, having received their training in secular universities, the average Catholic same content as the

public teacher is poorly equipped to appreciate the positive historical and cultural impact of Catholicism and is therefore generally lacking in the background necessary to share these riches with his or her students.

As a consequence, most Catholic schools in the United States and Canada, having come to depend on the same textbooks as those used in the public schools and now staffed by graduates of the same universities as the public schools, are (outside of the subject of religious education) teaching almost exactly the schools, content that is decidedly impoverished in the rich heritage and meaning of Christian faith and culture.

This situation is a serious concern, because the relationship between instruction in Catholic faith and instruction in Christian culture is a critical and interdependent one. In a sense faith needs culture to incarnate itself. If Catholic students are not made aware of the great wealth they have inherited in terms of culture, they may well end up, as Christopher Dawson predicted, "divided personalities - with a Christian faith and a pagan culture which contradict one another continually." The challenge and importance of the study of Christian culture for Catholic education can hardly be overstated.

Sharing my own concerns about this situation I found I was far from alone, and in 1996 the Catholic Educator's Resource Center (CERC) was established. Presently working under a grant from the Homeland Foundation, CERC (www.catholiceducation.org) is now developing an internet library of journal articles, essays, book excerpts, and other texts chosen for their objective, concise, and clear presentation of Catholic teachings, history, and culture, particularly in those areas in which the Church's role is unknown or misunderstood. The library is divided into ten major categories: Arts & Literature, Education, Culture and Civilization, Current Issues, Facts & Misconceptions, History, Miscellaneous, Politics and Government, Religion/Ethics, and Science. Texts are selected to assist teachers in Catholic schools, home schooling parents, as well as all other interested educators, to supplement and refine their current texts and curricula with scholarly yet accessible resources. The site draws from a range of academic journals and popular periodicals to provide teachers and others with some of the most articulate and cogent resources available explaining the Church's position on a broad range of social, moral, and historical issues. Any of these articles may be downloaded and copied for use in the classroom as supplementary reading materials for the students, or used simply as background by the teacher wishing to be better informed.

The response to this initiative has been encouraging. Don D'Elia invited me to join the *Society of Catholic Social Scientists* and to present a paper on CERC at the SCSS's annual meeting at Franciscan University in October of 1996. As a result of my time at the conference, eleven SCSS members expressed an interest in the project and signed on to our advisory board. These members have made an invaluable contribution by promoting the work of the project and by

recommending articles for our web site library.

In 1998 we attracted the attention of the Catholic press and were the subject of feature articles in *The Catholic Register* out of Toronto (March 23), the *National Catholic Register* (Oct. 4-10), the *Boston Pilot* (Oct.16), the *BC Catholic* (Oct.19), and various other diocesan papers.

To date we have received a good deal of encouragement and permission to offer articles from: *America*, *Catholic Dossier*, *Catholic World Report*, *Christendom Press*, *Columbia*, *Commonweal*, *Crisis magazine*, *Faith and Reason*, *First Things*, *Franciscan University Press*, *Ignatius Press*, *Imprimis*, *Inter Mirifica*, *Interim*, *L'Osservatore Romano*, *New Oxford Review*, *Newsweek*, *Scepter Press*, *Sophia Press*, *Southeast Asian Science Foundation*, *St. Anthony Messenger*, *The Atlantic Monthly*, *The Catholic Register*, *The Catholic Social Science Review*, *The Fellowship of Catholic Scholars Quarterly*, *The National Catholic Register*, *the Homiletic and Pastoral Review*, and *This Rock*.

Conditional upon an extension of our funding, we will, over the next year, be adding to our web site library hundreds of the best articles available on a wide range of issues. On the technical side, we will be adding high quality representative graphics for each of our ten categories, installing a search engine to help visitors locate materials, and providing a page of links to other sites Catholic educators might want to explore. We would also like to publish a book of readings, chosen from our web site offerings and touching on a range of issues that we believe all Catholic students should have a passing familiarity with before leaving high school.

As well, we will begin to approach individual Catholic teachers, schools, school districts, and various Catholic educational organizations across the United States and Canada with the message that our schools need to be strengthened in their Catholicity, that our Catholic vision and philosophy of education needs urgently to be clarified and then confidently and widely proclaimed among Catholic educators. In thinking through the larger issues of what an education should mean today, we need to pay a good deal of attention to our Catholic philosophy of education, recognizing the fact that our theory will affect our practice. Otherwise, as de Tocqueville suggested many years ago, by

...confining ourselves to practice we may lose sight of basic principles, and when these have been entirely forgotten, we may apply the methods derived from them badly....[I]f the lights that guide us ever go out, they will fade little by little, as if of their own accord.⁴

In other words, without constant attention to the distinct meaning of Catholic education, our Catholic schools face the danger of gradually coming under the influence of the current ideology of the surrounding culture. To avoid this, we must first of all become clear about who we are and what we stand for,

so that when we enter the marketplace of educational ideas we are not swept away by an offering which, however attractively packaged, is incompatible with our own first principles and ends up clouding our Catholic vision and weakening our Catholic identity.

There is much value in modern educational and psychological methods, but we must be sensitive to educational philosophies which contradict our Catholic understanding, and we must borrow from public school resources much more selectively. Yet, while recognizing the limitations of secular public school resources and goals, we must also avoid the temptation to isolate ourselves in a "separate" Catholic world. We must work to create a Catholic education which is wider, not narrower than that of the secular public school.

Catholic culture is a historical and sociological fact about which Catholic teachers need to learn more about, and to which they need to pay much more honour and attention in their own teaching. Working with parents and priests, they need to initiate their students into both the spiritual and cultural reality of Catholicism. As Stephen M. Krasen has said, Catholic social teaching remains ". . . one of the best kept secrets in America." Initiatives like CERC have a vital role to play in bringing the good news of Catholic social teaching--and so many other aspects of Catholic culture--to the minds and hearts of our young Catholic students.

To achieve this goal and to better approximate the ideal of Catholic education, Catholic educators will need to work closely with Catholic academics to develop resources which tell our Catholic story and represent the gospel truths in the context of our times in new ways that are both challenging and compelling. Please support this initiative by sending articles to our editorial board, whether your own or those written by others, which you believe might suit our purposes. (We always get permission from the author and/or publisher before posting anything on the site.)

For further information about the Catholic Educator's Resource Center contact J. Fraser Field, Executive Officer, The Catholic Educator's Resource Center, info@catholiceducation.org (604)820-1796; fax (604) 820-7619; 32486 Badger Avenue, Mission, B.C. V2V 5S6.

Notes

1. Walter Abbott, S.J. and Joseph Gallagher, eds., "Declaration on Christian Education" (*Gravissimum Educationis*), *Documents of Vatican II* (New York: Corpus Books), p. 646.
2. Dominic Aquila, "The Value of a Catholic Liberal Arts Education." This talk was given to the board members and parents of students of Aquinas Academy in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania on October 3, 1997.
3. Paul C. Vitz, *Censorship: Evidence of Bias in our Children's Textbooks* (Ann Arbor, MI: Servant Books, 1986).
4. Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (New York: Harper & Row, 1956), vol. 2, chap. 10, pp. 430-431.