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VATICAN II AND NEW THINKING ABOUT CATHOLIC EDUCATION:
AGGIORNAMENTO THINKING and PRINCIPLES INTO PRACTICE

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Note on Contributor

Gerald Grace has researched and written widely on Catholic education. His latest book, *Faith, Mission and Challenge in Catholic Education* has been published by Routledge in the *World Library of Educationalists Series* (2016)

Part 1: Historical Background

INTRODUCTION: Gravissimum Educationis, 'a rather weak document' (Ratzinger, 1966)

Gravissimum Educationis (1965) failed to excite much interest and discussion at the time of its publication and subsequent comment upon it has been generally critical. Thus we find Professor Alan McClelland (1991) describing it as 'somewhat uninspiring and, in places almost platitudinous' (p.172). In a later scholarly paper entitled, 'Toward a Theology of Catholic Education' (1999), Dr. Brian Kelty lamented the fact that *Gravissimum Educationis* largely repeated the teaching of Pius XI that Christian education should be seen as 'preparation for eternal life in the world to come' (p.11), (an entirely proper and classic Catholic understanding), but failed to develop thinking about, 'preparing people capable of working for the transformation of this world' (p.13).

Perhaps the most influential judgment on the document had already been made by Professor Joseph Ratzinger in his book, *Theological Highlights of Vatican II* (1966) in which he described the *Decree on Christian Education* as 'unfortunately, a rather weak document' (p.254).

What interpretations can be made about the disappointing treatment of Catholic education in this initial document of the Second Vatican Council? My own view is that despite the presence of *aggiornamento*¹ thinking in Council deliberations, the focus of discussion was too exclusively concentrated upon the institutional Church per se and Catholic education in its schools, colleges and universities was relegated to a marginal status. **It is difficult to understand why the Council fathers did not appreciate that, in the modern age, it is largely in the contexts of Catholic education, in its schools, colleges and universities, that the future of the Catholic Church will be renewed or weakened in the next generation.**²

The late arrival of aggiornamento: the document, *The Catholic School* (1977)

The opportunity for new and inspirational thinking in Catholic education which had been missed in 1965 came, at last, in 1977 with the publication of the ground-breaking document, *The Catholic School* issued by The Sacred Congregation for Catholic Education in Rome. *The Catholic School* (CS) powerfully expressed a new spirit which it was hoped would characterise Catholic education internationally. CS inaugurated a post-Vatican II conception of what a Catholic Christian education should be in the era of late modernity. It can be called the 'foundation charter or mission statement' for contemporary Catholic education. The CS mission statement presented 8 foundation principles for the guidance of Catholic educators in the future and these, in my opinion, should be re-visited and discussed in all celebrations, seminars and conferences which are organised to mark the anniversary of the Second Vatican Council. These principles may be summarised as follows: -

On the distinctive and necessary role of the Catholic school.

In considering the mission of the Church in society and education, the document declared: -

'there is a pressing need to ensure the presence of a Christian mentality in the society of the present day, marked, among other things, by cultural pluralism. For it is Christian thought which constitutes a sound criterion of judgement in the midst of conflicting concepts and behaviour. Reference to Jesus Christ teaches man to discern the values which ennoble from those which degrade him. Cultural pluralism, therefore leads the Church to reaffirm her mission of education to ensure strong character formation. Her children, then, will be capable of resisting the debilitating influence of relativism and of

living up to the demands made on them by their baptism.... For this reason, the Church is prompted to mobilise her educational resources in the face of the materialism, pragmatism and technocracy of contemporary society' (paras 11-12)

This section of the charter stressed the importance of Catholic educational institutions as having a counter- cultural role in modern society. In a sense, Catholic schools were being asked to be critics and conscience of society. As it was expressed later in the document, 'the Catholic school..... becomes the Christian leaven in the world' (para 84)

Catholic schools and human formation

CS recognised tendencies in the modern age to reduce the concept of education to the acquisition of knowledge (shown by examination results) and the development of skills (needed for subsequent employment). While not denying that both of these are important, *The Catholic School* document insisted that a Catholic conception of education involved a more holistic concept, best expressed as human formation, rather than simply as 'training'. Such formation must involve the acquisition of Christian values:-

'It must develop persons who are responsible and inner-directed, capable of choosing freely in conformity with their conscience..... a school is not only a place where one is given a choice of intellectual values, but a place where one has presented an array of values which are actively lived.... Christ is the foundation of the whole educational enterprise in a Catholic school.... The Catholic school aims at forming in the Christian those particular virtues which will enable him to live a new life in Christ' (paras 31-36)

Since that statement was written the world of education internationally has become increasingly dominated by a language of 'training'. Against this,

Catholic educators need to continue to use the language of 'formation', since training is only one sub-set of the larger Catholic concept of human formation.

Integration of Faith and Life : on finding a vocation

The authors of the document also saw another reductionist tendency in modern education which was to see the purpose of a 'good' education strongly related to the chances of obtaining a desirable employment position in adult life. While understanding this as a reasonable aspiration of youth, *The Catholic School* document insisted that the Catholic student must not think simply in terms of, what I would call, 'the culture of the job', but also in terms of a 'culture of vocation'. This was expressed as follows:-

'The Catholic school has, as its specific duty, the complete Christian formation of its pupils, and this task is of special significance today because of the inadequacy of the family and societyYoung people have to be taught to share their personal lives with God. They are to overcome their individualism and discover, in the light of faith, their specific vocation.... and to make the world a better place' (para.45)

It is clear from this section of CS that the authors were not thinking only of religious vocations but also of lay vocations where a particular employment offered opportunities to be at the service of others and to contribute to the project of making the world a better place.³

On a Catholic conception of the purpose of knowledge

The importance of the theme of service to others was repeated in the way that CS presented the purpose of knowledge:-

'This is the basis of a Catholic school's educational work. Education is not given for the purpose of gaining power, but as an aid towards a fuller understanding of, and communion with, man, events and things. Knowledge

is not to be considered as a means of material prosperity and success, but as a call to serve and to be responsible for others'.(para.56)

The authors of *The Catholic School* saw an external world in which knowledge itself was being transformed into a market commodity associated with power, wealth and personal status. Catholic schools were called upon to resist an individualistic 'success culture' and a market conception of knowledge, by affirming a Catholic conception that knowledge entails service to the common good.

It should be noted, that one of the strongest statements in support of *The Catholic School's* view of knowledge was made in 1997 by the Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales in their publication, *The Common Good in Education*. This asserted:-

'Education is not a commodity to be offered for sale. The distribution of funding solely according to the dictates of market forces is contrary to the Catholic doctrine of the common good..... Education is a service provided by society for the benefit of all its young people, in particular for the benefit of the most vulnerable and the most disadvantaged....'(p.13)

On teachers as witnesses

'The Catholic school depends not so much on subject matter or methodology as on the people who work there. The extent to which the Christian message is transmitted through education depends, to a very large extent, on the teachers The nobility of the task to which teachers are called demands that, in imitation of Christ, they reveal the Christian message not only by word, but also by every gesture of their behaviour. This is what makes the difference between a school whose education is permeated by the Christian spirit and one in which religion is only regarded as an academic subject like any other' (para.43)

This statement was clearly influenced by Pope Paul VI's (now famous)

Apostolic Exhortation 1975:-

'Modern man does not listen seriously to teachers, but if he does listen to teachers, it is because they are also witnesses'

Catholic schools, the poor and social justice

In 1977 the Sacred Congregation for Catholic Education was clearly concerned that Catholic schools internationally, which had historically started their mission primarily in the service of the poor had, for various social and economic reasons, experienced 'mission drift'⁴.

The Catholic School document was therefore designed to remind Catholic school administrators and leaders of that original purpose:-

'Since it is motivated by the Christian ideal, the Catholic school is particularly sensitive to the call, from every part of the world, for a more just society, and it tries to make its own contribution towards it.....

In some countries, because of local laws and economic conditions, the Catholic school runs the risk of giving counter-witness by admitting a majority of children from wealthier families..... This situation is of great concern to those responsible for Catholic education because first and foremost the Church offers its educational service to the poor, or those who are deprived of family help and affection or those who are far from the faith' (para.58)

Catholic schools and the common good

The authors of *The Catholic School* saw a late modernity marked by the growth of an acquisitive and competitive individualism in an era of global marketisation. They also saw the growing ideological influence of New Right policies in politics and economics which seemed to encourage a form of self-centred individualism. As a counter-cultural message to these tendencies, CS

specifically rearticulated and re-emphasised Catholic social teaching about the common good and its relationship to education:-

‘Today, especially, one sees a world which clamours for solidarity and yet experiences the rise of new forms of individualism. Society can take note from the Catholic school that it is possible to create true communities out of a common effort, for the common good’ (para.62)

Catholic schools and the principle of openness

Against widely held views that Catholic schools admitted Catholics only, the Congregation for Catholic Education made it explicit that Catholic schools (subject to available places) were at the service of all those who wished to enter. The concept of the ghetto school (for Catholics only) was to be replaced everywhere by the Catholic school at the service of the wider community⁵ :-

‘In the certainty that the Spirit is at work in every person, the Catholic school offers itself to all, non-Christians included, with all its distinctive aims and means, acknowledging, preserving, and promoting the spiritual and moral qualities.... which characterise different civilisations’ (para.85)

This new principle of openness to, and dialogue with, the external world was very much in the spirit of Vatican II aggiornamento. It resonated with and confirmed the earlier statement in paragraph 58, that Catholic schools were available to those who were ‘far from the faith’.

From ‘a weak document’ to an inspirational mission statement

50th anniversary celebrations, seminars and conferences related to the Second Vatican Council should look beyond the limitations of *Gravissimum Educationis* (1965) to the full flowering of Vatican II aggiornamento, in the truly inspirational document that is *The Catholic School* (1977). This

document presents the authentic principles which should be shaping and guiding Catholic educational institutions across the world.

The crucial question is, to what extent are these principles actually being implemented in the work and life of our educational institutions today?

Part 2 of this paper will attempt to begin to answer this question.

Part 2.

On the need for more systematic scholarship and research ie. new praxis

Vatican II and new thinking about Catholic education can be analyzed as a bilateral project. In the first place, what was required was 'aggiornamento thinking' and this was brilliantly provided by The Catholic School document of 1977. However a second stage was needed, which may be called 'principles into practice', or 'praxis'. The authors of The Catholic School had concluded their text in these terms:-

'We appeal to each Episcopal conference to consider and develop these principles which should inspire the Catholic school and to translate them into concrete programmes which will meet the real needs of the educational systems operating in their countries' (para 92).

This appeal implied that what was also required was more systematic theological and philosophical thinking to 'develop' the principles and more research and empirical studies to evaluate new programmes in schools arising from 'aggiornamento thinking'.

It can be claimed that what was needed as a crucial follow-up to a new paradigm in Catholic education was the development of an established field of Catholic education studies receiving scholarly contribution from theologians, philosophers, historians, social and economic scientists, natural scientists, empirical educational researchers and school leaders and teachers.

Viewed historically, it is possible to see that such a field began to develop after the Second Vatican Council, especially in the USA and Australia but its progress across the world has been very uneven.

The publication in 2007 of the International Handbook of Catholic Education: Challenges for School Systems in the 21st Century was designed to provide a stimulus for more scholarly thinking about Catholic education and for more empirical research studies to evaluate the practice of post-Vatican II Catholic education internationally. This project received strong support from the then Secretary of the Congregation for Catholic Education, Archbishop Michael Miller, CSB. who wrote in his contributory chapter:-

‘Since research should serve the human person, it is altogether fitting that the Church’s institution of higher education take up the pressing challenge of fostering serious studies that further the common good of Catholic schooling. This research should include longitudinal, cross-cultural and interdisciplinary studies that would enable educators to gain a more international and empirically based perspective on the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and challenges faced by Catholic schools across the globe’ (477-478).

In response to this call from Archbishop Michael Miller the journal International Studies in Catholic Education (ISCE) was launched in March 2009 to resource the emerging field Catholic Education Studies post-Vatican II and to clarify principles and evaluate practice.

A post-Vatican II agenda for scholarship and research in Catholic education: some suggested lines for future development.

Catholic institutions of higher education across the world, (numbering over 1,000), should assist the development of the field of Catholic Education

Studies by engaging with some aspects of this intellectual agenda. This would involve studies relating to:-

A Contemporary Philosophy of Catholic Education.

While the documents provided by the Congregation for Catholic Education in 1977, 1982, 1988, 1997, 2003, 2007, 2009, 2013 and 2014⁶ give a rich source of 'documents for guidance' for Catholic educators, there is still a need for a fully articulated and developed Philosophy of Catholic education which addresses challenges at a more fundamental level. Important contributions in this area have been made by Carmody (2011), Sullivan (2012) and Whittle (2014: 2015) but this is still a work in progress and more writing in this sector needs to be done.

Theology, Spirituality and Catholic Education.

The pursuit of questions such as 'what are the theological foundations of the contemporary mission' and 'what is the nature of the spirituality which has empowered the mission in the past and which characterizes it today' constitute a crucial field for scholarship and research. The work of Lydon (2009:2011), Grace (2010), Rossiter (2010: 2011) Graham (2011), D' Souza (2012), Boland (2012), Casson (2013), Richardson (2014) and Groome (2014) has established a firm foundation for future studies and new thinking. Concepts such as 'charism', 'spiritual capital', 'from and for faith', 'contemporary youth spirituality' and 'spiritual formation' need further critical analysis and inquiry.

The Preferential Option for the Poor.

The strong declaration in The Catholic School (1977) that:-
'first and foremost the Church offers its educational service to the poor',
(para 58) is a paradigm case of a principled commitment in need of international empirical investigation. What is at stake here is the mission

integrity of the whole Catholic schooling system. In a world survey of existing research involving this subject undertaken by 60 scholars representing 40 countries and published in the *International Handbook of Catholic Education*, 2 vols (2007), great contrasts were revealed. In some countries which received strong state financial support for Catholic schooling, real service to the poor was possible. In many others, access to Catholic education was mediated by the ability to pay ever rising school fees. This situation had arisen as the ability of Religious Congregations to provide a 'strategic subsidy' for the provision of Catholic education had declined over time. This development has made the question 'how can the poor access Catholic education in many countries?' one that needs 'new thinking' and continued empirical investigation. At present, there is a major contradiction between a formal mission statement from Rome and the reality of educational practice in many countries: See, Gutiérrez (2009), Guzman et al (2012).

There are many other questions in this agenda which require the attention of theologians, philosophers, historians, social and economic scientists and others involved in the Catholic education mission. Questions such as:-

- How is secularization and secularism affecting Catholic education and especially teacher-student relationships? See the work of Arthur (2009)
- What do we know about how contemporary students perceive and experience a Catholic education? Where is 'student voice'?
- Can there be, in present conditions, a distinctive Catholic curriculum?
- What is to be understood about 'leadership' and 'effectiveness' in Catholic schooling? How is this different from secular understandings?
- How do Church-State relations in educational policy vary in different countries? What can be learned from these differences?

- What are the implications of Catholic education understood as ‘ongoing translation?’ See the work of Sullivan (2012) and Wilkin (2014).
- How can the Science-Religion relation be more effectively presented in the education of adolescents? See Polkinghorne (2011), Consolmagno (2012).

Conclusion.

The new paradigm in Catholic education inaugurated by The Catholic School document of 1977 and subsequent publications from the Congregation of Catholic education call us to new thinking, new interdisciplinary enquiry and more intensive and extensive empirical research studies. The Catholic intellectual tradition has the resources to engage with these issues, what is needed now is the will to do so.

Notes

¹ Father Joseph Ratzinger (1966) defined this as ‘bringing up to date’ (p.ix)

² For research evidence that many Catholic school leaders hold this view, see Grace (2002 a,pp.223-225)

³ See Jamison (2013), *International Studies in Catholic Education* Vol.5.No.1.March.

⁴ ‘Mission drift’ refers to a gradual moving away from declared mission principles. See Grace (2002 b) pp.427-449

⁵ This was already true for Catholic schools in ‘mission territories’ in the Middle East, Africa and Asia. It was now developed as a universal principle for all Catholic schools.

⁶ The titles of all these publications may be found in *International Studies in Catholic Education* 7(2) 2015. P 142.

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