

# **Catholic schools and the ecclesial construction of the laity**

## **Consequences for the future church**

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**Abstract.** *The concluding lines in the Second Vatican Council's Declaration on Christian Education articulate a hope that the students of Catholic education will be able to "promote the internal renewal of the Church" (1996, §12). Surprisingly, in spite of the significant changes that Vatican II brought to ecclesiology and understanding the role of lay persons, this statement is made with no references to the post-conciliar theological norms and updated Catholic context. Three questions thus emerge: (1) What is meant by "internal renewal"; (2) What role might education have within this renewal; and (3) What is an educated lay person? This paper examines documents from the council and post-conciliar period to consider where and how this "internal renewal" is important, and what role the Catholic schools have in enabling lay students to "think ecclesially" and "with the Church" in fulfilling the renewal(s) that might obtain.*

## **Introduction**

Major developments in educational theory tend not to translate immediately into practice. Two general examples illustrate this point. First, Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Emile* stands as one of Western education's strongest statements for following a natural course of development and hence ensuring that the individual is not corrupted by the institution. In spite of its strong theoretical impact, it affected little reform of practice until well after Rousseau's death. Second, roughly 150 years later, John Dewey's proposals to coordinate the child's interest within that of the democratic community aroused some following, but even today mainstream public schooling has not adopted in full force his adage that democracy is a 'way of life'. This brief illustration is not an indictment of education; to the contrary, it shows that some time is normally required before educational practice can adapt to new thought — sometimes even modifying it to apply best in particular contexts. Many educators today reject *Emile's* radical individualism, for example, even though it influences their healthy skepticism toward any socialization or institutional acquiescence that might miseducate children. Similarly, although many schools today remain benevolent autocracies, thanks to Dewey they are better able to coordinate student interest within the socially determined curriculum.

I argue that Catholic Education faces a similar lag between theory and practice. In this case, the major theoretical shift occurred with the Second Vatican Council's (1962-1965) changes in ecclesiology. Although post-conciliar Catholic education has not fully appreciated Vatican II's ecclesiological significance, this lag does not reflect any recalcitrance among practitioners, but instead demonstrates gaps in Catholic educational theory. The concluding lines in the Council's *Declaration on Christian Education* provide the initial source for demonstrating this gap. These lines articulate a hope that the students of Catholic education will be able to "promote the internal renewal of the Church" (1996, §12). Since most recipients of Catholic education are lay persons, it is reasonable to conclude that this task of "internal renewal" refers to some vision for them. Surprisingly, in spite of the significant changes that Vatican II brought to understanding the ecclesial role of lay persons, this statement is made without reference to the updated theological norms and renewed ecclesiological context. Three questions thus emerge: (1) What is meant by "internal renewal"; (2) What role might education have within this renewal; and (3) What is an educated lay person? This paper examines Church documents from before, during, and after the council to consider what role the Catholic school has in enabling lay students to "think ecclesially" and "with the Church" in fulfilling the renewal(s) that might obtain.

### **Catholic ecclesiology and the laity**

The term *laity* refers to those who are not *clergy*, and the way in which laity and clergy relate has been re-conceptualized as the result of the council and then again in response to its aftermath. Prior to Vatican II, Pope Pius X's 1906 encyclical *On the French law of separation* solidly illustrates the attitude that the laity was subordinate to clergy:

[T]he Church is essentially an unequal society, that is, a society comprising two categories of persons, the Pastors and the flock, those who occupy a rank in the different degrees of the hierarchy and the multitude of the faithful. So distinct are these categories that with the pastoral body only rests the necessary right and authority for promoting the end of the society and directing all its members towards that end; the one duty of the multitude is to allow themselves to be led, and, like a docile flock, to follow the Pastors. (§8)

Pius X's distinction clearly represents an idea that ordination, not competence, confers the ability and right to govern in the Church. The laity might have constituted the pre-conciliar Church, but only to the degree that they submissively attached themselves to their clerical superiors.

*On the French law of separation* illustrates one segment of the ecclesiological baseline from which Vatican II is said to have reformed the Church. It is well known, for example, that in crafting the *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church* the Council Fathers emphasized first that the Church is the "People of God" (in Chapter 2). That chapter maintains that shared baptism,

confirmation, and Eucharist define ‘Church.’ It was only after establishing this sacramental foundation that the Council Fathers moved to define the Church as a hierarchical institution (in Chapter 3). Where the pre-conciliar relationship was more easily conceived in terms of a superiority-inferiority model, Vatican II speaks of clergy and laity cooperating and allocating their energies based on presumed competencies. The laity is thus directed to renew the temporal order (Vatican Council II, 1965/1996a; cf. Vatican Council II, 1965/1996b, 1964/1996c) by infusing the Holy Spirit into the world, although it is to remain constant in its reference to pastoral norms (Vatican Council II, 1965/1996a) and cooperation with the hierarchy (Vatican Council II, 1964/1996c). Vatican II thus retains ecclesial duality within an enhanced conception of unity.

The most forceful teaching in the post-conciliar period is Pope John Paul II’s (1988) apostolic exhortation *Vocation and the mission of the lay faithful in the Church and in the World*. This document does not break new ground like Vatican II, but instead strongly reminds that Church governance is based on a relationship of dependence between clergy and laity. John Paul vigorously asserts that the clergy is superior “not simply in degree but in essence, from the participation given to all the lay faithful through Baptism and Confirmation” (§66). John Paul’s assessment of the effect Holy Orders confers upon a person is so confident that he maintains it precludes a lay person’s competence: “[N]o charism [gift],” he asserts, “dispenses a person from reference and submission to the pastors of the Church” (§24). According to theologian Jon Nilson, *Vocation and mission* “seemed too concerned about regulating and controlling the level of lay activity within the Church itself,” and that within the post-conciliar Church “the traditional distinction between clergy and laity has been reasserted, even as that distinction has become more and more problematic, both theologically and practically” (2000, 406). For educational theorists, this problematic conceptualization prompts questions of what implications it holds for Catholic Education: Does a lay person’s education have any bearing on his or her ecclesial station?

## **Education and ecclesiology**

Before considering what implications ecclesiology has for Catholic Schools, some qualification of their aims must be appreciated. Catholic Schools have a broader mandate than the exclusive service of Catholic students, and moreover they are not parishes. Catholic schools also face the challenge of whether (or what combination of) *religious education* or *catechesis* is most appropriate for the students in their care. Even when catechesis is the aim, schools offer it as an invitation because coercion and indoctrination are contrary to Catholic teaching (Vatican Council II 1996d). So while it might be tempting to assume that Catholic Schools have a primary function to create lay persons who are both competent within the temporal world and cognizant

of their ecclesial subordination, the preceding demonstrates that the nature of Catholic Schooling does not allow this conclusion to articulate its exclusive concern.

It is also reasonably tempting to assert *prima facie* that the aims of Catholic Schools reflect Vatican II's conciliar objectives. In many ways this assertion is valid; for some examples, Catholic Schools support students' religious freedom, promote social justice, and follow the Council's scriptural exegesis. At the same time, however, there has been no explicit post-conciliar theoretical discussion of the Catholic School's intentions regarding lay ecclesial participation. If their current aims and structures do not explicitly extend from and reify the pre-conciliar tradition, they are certainly ambiguous as a result. Vatican II's new norms for lay participation thus present some conceptual difficulties to the aims and reasons for educating lay persons in the Church.

The tension here is manifest in the difference between modern professional norms of an educational institution that remains committed to the pedagogical 'best practices,' on the one hand, and an ecclesiology where the authority to teach and govern belongs to the Pope and Bishops. In 'secular' subjects like history, for instance, students encounter student-centered methods like role-play and debates so that they might imagine and appreciate the choices that historical actors made, and how issues are genuinely controversial in civil society. The expectation, if even hidden, is that upon graduation students will encounter the adult world with a mature (and maturing) political agency whereby they contribute to various functions of governance in family, business, leisure, and politics. Teachers might use student-centered methods for engaging learners with religious subject matter, but in cases where that subject matter concerns an issue that is controversial within the Church (like contraception, female ordination, or homosexuality), Catholic students will find that when they express opinions that do not match Magisterial teaching they will not receive the same intellectual support that is given those who do agree, and so find their views ultimately judged as relativistic and inconsequential to real ecclesial life outside the classroom (McDonough 2009, 198). Moreover, "[t]eachers may follow a student-centered method, but ultimately find it disingenuous because its admission of student experience defaults to bad pedagogical faith" because it creates a false impression that the school hopes to foster the kind of 'ecclesial agency' in students which would not relegate their dissent on controversial topics to the basement of the Church's public life (McDonough 2011, 288). As the 1983 Code of Canon Law states, only ordained men are able to exercise ecclesial power, and the role of the laity is limited to cooperation (§129).

The result for Catholic schools is the experience of theoretical and practical ambiguity. Although Vatican II enabled noticeable updates in catechetical materials, religious education curriculum, and events like Eucharistic celebrations celebrated at schools, the ecclesial aims for educating Catholic laity did not change with them. Vatican II's *Declaration on Christian Education*, is considered to have shortcomings (Carter, 1966) and this evaluation is only confirmed when one observes that the educational implications of Vatican II's major reforms in

its *Dogmatic* and *Pastoral* constitutions and its *Decree on the Laity* were not explored in the *Declaration on Christian Education*. So far as aims and governance are concerned, Catholic Education's pre-conciliar heritage remained untouched. Given that Vatican II on the one hand promises greater lay participation, while on the other a resilient pre-conciliar institutional structure and John Paul II's firm statements reify traditional notions of dependence, it seems that the modern education Catholic Schools provide sits within an institutional model that ambiguously mixes competing ecclesiological ideas.

### **Renewal of the laity's spirit**

What meaning does ecclesiology have for Catholic education in the post-conciliar era? Although Vatican II's *Declaration on Religious Education* is neither as comprehensive, innovative, nor inspiring as its conciliar counterparts, it does end with an optimistic expression of hope that the students of Catholic education will be able to "promote the internal renewal of the Church" (1996, §12). The Council fathers do not define their idea of "internal renewal" any further, but it would seem logical that *internal renewal* as such would be consistent with (A) the constitutional reforms that they had just enacted in the Council, and (B) any response one makes to the consequences of these reforms as the Church finds itself encountering "new ethical horizons" and responding to the signs of the times in today's world (Baum, 2005, 26-29). Furthermore, one might follow a line of thought that places the hope for continuing "internal renewal" within the spirit of a conciliar context that had just enacted great constitutional changes — especially those concerning lay participation. From that perspective it seems reasonable to assert that some persons within the Church would entertain a proposal that the contributions that students are hoped to make toward *internal renewal* also carries implications of an increasingly participatory ecclesiology in the worldwide Church.

Any proposals for a kind of renewed *participatory* ecclesiology which would extend the laity's role past "cooperation" and into *franchise* in governing the Church, however, runs counter to the current prevailing trend within the Church which reifies the laity's dependence on clergy Nilson (2000). Such proposals would also meet resistance from those who maintain that progressive voices in the Church have transformed the phrase 'spirit of the Council' into a rhetorical weapon for abolishing tradition (Novak 1964/2002, xix). The conceptual problems that theorists like Nilson find within the contemporary ecclesiology, or that critics of progressive triumphalism observe in the aftermath of Vatican II, transpose into the educational question of how Catholic Schools should respond to this debate as they articulate their role in serving Catholic students. Should Catholic Schools follow the prevailing trends, their aims would ostensibly reinforce the ecclesiology of a dependent laity. On the other hand, should they articulate their aims in consultation with all those who constitute the school — including students, parents, and

professionals — it would suggest openness to both the prevailing teachings *and* any views which would challenge an ecclesiology of ‘dependence.’

The use of student-centered methods in some religious education courses reveals the problematic deficiency in the Catholic educational theory regarding aims for lay persons’ ecclesial agency. A very ‘progressive’ Catholic school might encourage its students — if they are interested — to assume a highly ‘enfranchised’ agency, for example, when confronting controversial questions like contraception and ordination. This might succeed in some communities, but obviously remain limited to like-minded groupings. Such an approach to student-centeredness would ultimately give students a distorted view of their current place in the worldwide Church. At the same time, a school which stands by a very traditional ecclesiology might use student-centered methods for their proven value as an educational ‘best practice,’ only to leave students in a position where their classroom participation offers a very different experience than real ecclesial life. Even if teachers in this latter example very clearly state that the use of debate and role play is restricted to academic exercise, the net result is to reinforce gaps between (1) theory and practice, and (2) schooling and real life (McDonough 2009, 195).

Institutions of Catholic Education and Schooling arguably have the potential to ignite some renewal of the laity’s spirit within the Church, but the main problem they face in taking seriously the *Declaration on Religious Education’s* hope for ‘renewal’ is that the question of what this renewal might look like has not been adequately met in the post-conciliar period. This lack of theoretical treatment leaves many lay Catholics — educators, learners, and parents alike — in a position where they are forced to act without the benefit of theoretical support when confronting some of the tough questions upon which persons decide their future in the Church. As sociologist Andrew Greeley demonstrates, many American Catholics remain attached to their faith because of the personal relationships and closeness it brings them to God, but at the same time they remain on the periphery of Church life because traditional ecclesial models leave them feeling excluded (2004, 76). Likewise, Reginald Bibby’s work reports that many Canadians continue to identify as Catholic even though their attendance at Mass continues to decline and significant numbers of them disagree with Church teachings on contraception, female ordination, and homosexuality (Bibby 2004, 57). I infer that this same disposition applies to their engagement with Catholic Schools: they highly appreciate its academic service and its function as a public gathering place for Catholic persons, but this appreciation does not affect their support for the parish or worldwide Church.

### **Educated Catholic lay person**

The school’s potential ability to organize a curricular program which explicitly aims to have lay persons ‘think ecclesially’ or ‘religiously’ about the Church and their relationship with it (as part of a Catholic attitude of critical thinking) is one way in which the school can nurture an adult

faith that is more appropriate for today's post-conciliar context. At the end of Vatican II Religious Educator Gabriel Moran recognized this and asserted that while formation in the faith is an admirable aim, it is perhaps best left out of the Catholic school and replaced with an emphasis on "appealing to children's intelligences" that focuses on the intellectual questions that they bring to school (1968, 44, cf. 140). More recently Thomas Groome echoes these views to the degree that he maintains students ought best learn to "appropriate" religious tradition for themselves (1998, 438), and Graham Rossiter maintains that Catholic schools require "a greater emphasis on critical, interpretive, and evaluative inquiry" because in today's educative, social, and ecclesial context "it is no longer adequate to aim exclusively at reproducing a traditional Catholic spirituality" (2011, 58). Students who present questions about the aims of Catholic Education therefore need to be answered honestly and immediately, or else their hopes for the future Church will transform to anxieties (2011, 66-67).

Catholic school students in this post-conciliar age at least require that some articulation of what is hoped for them in the future Church be made explicit. Conceivably, even multiple models of an educated lay person could coexist in a Catholic school, since currently Catholic schools already entertain the diverse aims of Catholic and non-Catholic students. The vague meaning and implications of Catholic schools promoting "the internal renewal of the Church," is part of Vatican II's legacy. Therefore one might imagine a "renewal" and model of an educated lay person that squares itself with John Paul II's views, just as we might also imagine an educative model which would orient itself upon assumptions of an enhanced lay franchise that promotes a 'more progressive' ecclesiology. The twin phenomena of ambiguous educational aims and diversity of opinion on controversial issues already exists within the Church. The way in which the Catholic school responds in theory to the challenges these present will undoubtedly have a large effect on the way in which students discover themselves moving toward an adult faith.

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