

The True Meaning of Catholic School

ความหมายที่แท้จริงของโรงเรียนคาทอลิก

Phiranant Numkanisorn

Department of Educational Administration and Leadership, St. John University

Abstract

The vision of Catholic education and the meaning of Catholic School in general has changed dramatically in the 50 years since the promulgation of Gravissimum Educationis (Declaration on Christian Education). The Church clearly states the reason in this document why she has to be involved in Catholic Education and outlines the fundamental principles of being Catholic School. The attempt of this article is to dig deep into the Church related Documents to Catholic School supported by some research authors to discover the true meaning of the Catholic School that can be applied not only for Catholic schools as a whole but also for any Thai school whose identity and distinction of their schooling go beyond the formation of the total person intertwined with the principles of integrity and morality of the person.

Keywords: Christian Education, Principles of Catholic Education Catholic School

Introduction

Catholic schools serve 62.2 million students globally at the preschool, primary, and secondary levels (Wodon, 2020). In Thailand they had first taken their operation in Ayutthaya more than 300 years by the Missionaries from Portugal (Pongpit, 2005).

Since then, the Catholic Schools have been spreading and serving all walk of lives in Thai society. Only in Diocese of Bangkok alone there are more than 300 schools under its jurisdiction. Catholic Education in Thailand therefore has become the main Mission of Thai Catholic Church and very much appreciated by Thai Parents and Society. Amid new challenges Catholic schools all over world are facing which are the result of a new socio-political and cultural context in which the values of subjectivism, moral relativism and nihilism are pervading contemporary society leads to behaviour patterns which are at times so opposed to one another as to undermine any idea of community identity. Moreover, rapid structural changes, profound technical innovations and the globalization of the economy affect human life more and more throughout the world. (Congregation For Catholic Education, 1997: 1) As a result it widens the gap between rich and poor, as well as massive migration from underdeveloped to highly developed countries are occurring all over the world. In that phenomenon it leads to a growing marginalization of the Christian faith as a reference point and a source of light for an effective and convincing interpretation of existence.

The Church is aware of such serious problems which are an integral part of Christian education in a pluralistic society (The Sacred Congregation for Catholic Education, 1977, no 1) and realizes that for Catholic Education would only survive it must focus its attention on the nature and distinctive characteristics of school which would present itself as Catholic.

Conception of the Catholic School

The Second Vatican Council was instrumental in the renewal of the church especially its inner life, educational provision and relationship with other Christian traditions, religions and the world at large (Maureen, 2002:17). After this council the church had embraced a spirit of ecumenism at almost all levels of cultural and social life hence the more favorable relations it has gained over the years at a global level. She therefore determines to continue his work of salvation, through her visible organism, guided by the power of the spirit. She also realizes that to fulfil her mission faithfully and effectively she must deepen Her awareness and meditating on the mystery of her being and mission by the same Spirit. To fulfill the mission, she has received from her divine founder of proclaiming good news and salvation to all men and thus restoring all things in Christ, the Church therefore must be concerned with the whole of man's life, even the secular part of it insofar as it has a bearing on his heavenly calling. Therefore, she has a role in the progress and development of education. (Gravissimum Educationis, 1965)

With this realization she intends to use all the means that she has to proclaim and the Kingdom of God. In such manner she reads the sign of the time and cultural factors for her consideration, to promoting the development of the human person. In one of her means she establishes her own schools because she considers them as a privileged means of promoting the formation of the whole man, since the school is a centre in which a specific concept of the world, of man, and of history is developed and conveyed (The Sacred Congregation for Catholic Education, 1977) and foster in her children a full awareness of their rebirth to a new life. (The Sacred Congregation for Catholic Education, 1977). Such a concept of Education is in line with National Educational Act 1999 that spells out “Education shall aim at full development of the Thai people in all aspects: physical and mental health; intellect; and knowledge; morality; integrity; and desirable way of life so as to be able to live happily with other people” (Section 6).

Principles of Catholic School

To make Catholic school distinct and distinguished fundamental principles must be laid. Its first Principle is the same as mentioned in National Educational Act (1999) that states all individuals should have equal rights and opportunities to receive basic education... . (Section 10) In Gravissimum Educationis, No 1 clearly spells out that “All men of every race, condition, and age, since they enjoy the dignity of a human being, have an inalienable right to an education. In the same article the Document

emphasizes that “For a true education aims at the formation of the human person in the pursuit of his ultimate end and of the good of the societies of which, as man, he is a member, and in whose obligations, as an adult, he will share”.

Second principle is based on the meaning of Catholic Education. Gravissimum Education is states clearly that Catholic Education should not strive just for full development of the person but also on the knowledge of the mystery of salvation and their awareness of the gift of faith in which they need to learn to worship and to render service to the society (no 2).

It means Catholic Education is more than general aim of education. It is just for the formation of the total person but also the leading realization of the baptized person to the knowledge of the mystery of salvation, to become aware of the gift of Faith they have received and striving for the growth of the Mystical Body and bearing witness to the whole society.

The same document also recognize the involvement of parents in choosing and providing Education for the children and support from the community. It clearly states, “The family which has the primary duty of imparting education needs help of the whole community. They also have the right of parents in choosing the school for their children and the civil society, whose role is to direct what is required for the common temporal good (no 3). In this regard it corresponds with National

Educational Act (1999) that states “Parents or guardians shall arrange for their children to receive compulsory education..... (Section 11).

The same document also indicates that the Church is willing and committed to fulfilling her educational role, using all the aids that she has especially catechetical instruction which can be used to enlighten and strengthen the faith, nourish life according to the spirit of Christ, that leads to intelligent and active participation in the liturgical mystery and motivation for apostolic activity (no 4). That means the primary function of a Catholic school is to provide forms of education through which the essential doctrines and devotions of Catholicism are transmitted and the provision of this education is a non-negotiable duty (Haldane, 1996). Therefore, forming a major part of the meaning of the term ‘Catholic School’ points to the evangelization mission of such schools.

Next significant principle that this document attaches to is the importance of teacher. The document emphasizes the importance of school in developing not only the intellectual faculties but also to form the ability to judge rightly, to hand on the cultural legacy of previous generations, to foster a sense of values, to prepare for professional life (no 5). However, the function of the school will never be metalized if there is a lack of Teacher Promotion. Their duty is to work between pupils of different talents and backgrounds in friendly relations and fosters a spirit of mutual understanding in cultural, civic, and religious life, as well as by civil society and the entire human community (Art 5).

Another principles worth mentioned in this document is the function and duty of Catholic School. The Church in her salvific mission has been using the field of education in a special manner shown by the Catholic school to fulfil her mandate. In the first place the Catholic School needs to create itself a school community in a special atmosphere animated by the Gospel spirit of freedom and charity. In its proper function it must assist students growing according to the new creatures they were made through baptism as they develop their own personalities, while they gradually acquire the knowledge of the world, life and man illumined by faith. Such knowledges must lead to promote efficaciously the good of the earthly city and prepares them for service in the spread of the Kingdom of God (no 6).

Based on the fundamental Principles mentioned above this Article further its exploration for the authentic meaning of Catholic School in the following section.

The Contemporary Context

The document on the Catholic School on the Threshold of the Third Millennium clearly indicates the contemporary context the Catholic school is now facing. The Church considers it as new Challenges in which the crisis of values in all forms spreading all over the world particularly in highly developed societies. It assumes the form, often exalted by the media, of subjectivism, moral relativism and nihilism together with rapid structural changes, profound technical innovations and

the globalization of the economy affecting human life more and more throughout the world. Moreover, the Church sees that such phenomena has caused the widening of the gap between rich and poor, as well as massive migration from underdeveloped to highly developed countries. She also considers that this phenomenon of multiculturalism and an increasingly multi-ethnic and multi-religious society offer at the same time both an enrichment and a source of further problems (no 1). In light of these problems, the Church invokes the Catholic schools which are part of Salvific Mission to embrace a spiritual renewal of their energy and vision.

The general purpose of a school

As mentioned above true education aims at the formation of the human person with respect to his ultimate goal, and simultaneously with respect to the good of those societies of which, as man, he is a member, and in whose responsibilities, as an adult, he or she will share (Abbott, 1966: 639) which is also in line with the National Education Act B.E. 1999 which states “Education shall aim at full development of Thai people in all aspects: physical and mental health; intellect; morality; integrity; and desirable way of life so as to live in harmony with other people (Section 6). However, to get into the core of Catholic Education the Church introduces basic concept of what a school is so that the Catholic School will distinct its characteristic features from the common school cannot be a Catholic school (The Sacred Congregation for Catholic Education, 1977: 25).

In general, a school is school is a place of integral formation by means of a systematic and critical assimilation of culture. A school is, therefore, a privileged place in which, through a living encounter with a cultural inheritance, integral formation occurs (The Sacred Congregation for Catholic Education, 1977, no 26). It is a place where young people can relate their study to real-life situations with which they are familiar. The school must stimulate the pupil to exercise his intelligence through the dynamics of understanding to attain clarity and inventiveness. It must help him spell out the meaning of his experiences and their truths. Any school which neglects this duty, and which offers merely pre-cast conclusions hinders the personal development of its pupils (The Sacred Congregation for Catholic Education, 1977, no 27). Above all the school must be the place to draw out the ethical dimension for the precise purpose of arousing the individual's inner spiritual dynamism and to aid his achieving that moral freedom which complements the psychological. Behind this moral freedom (The Sacred Congregation for Catholic Education, 1977, no 30).

That means the presence of the Catholic School doesn't exist merely as an alternative to the ordinary school. Its mission is far more profound than "human formation which will be more elaborated in the next section.

The Catholic School

Based on the prior understanding of the characteristic features of a school the Church firmly insists that the foundation of the

whole educational enterprise in a Catholic school is on Christ. Upon this foundation the Catholic School draw out its meaning, its vision and its educational norms in accordance with the Gospels' values. In practice Catholic School has its aim to provide the total formation of the individual in the form and likeness of Christ in which student draw their meaning as new creations. By application Catholic School has its task fundamentally to make a synthesis of culture and faith, and a synthesis of faith and life through the subjects taught, in the light of the Gospel; the second in the growth of the virtues characteristic of the Christian (nn 35-37).

In application for helping students to achieve through the medium of its teaching an integration of faith, culture and life, the Catholic School needs to sets out with a deep awareness of the value of knowledge knowing that Individual subjects must be taught according to their own particular methods with the aims of attaining knowledge coupled with the acquisition of values and the discovery of truth.

In addition, Catholic School must consider human knowledge as a truth to be discovered knowing that discovery and awareness of truth leads man to the discovery of Truth itself (no 41). The Document further reminding that the fundamental aim of teaching is not just the assimilation of objective values, undertaken for an apostolic purpose, but also an integration of faith and culture that leads the students on their path to personal integration of faith and life which is a life-long process of conversion. In such process the

young people will be taught to share their personal lives with God, overcoming their individualism and ultimately discovering, their specific vocation to live responsibly in a community with others in the light of faith.

Lastly, Catholic school should work hand in hand with other Christian bodies (the family, the parish and Christian community, youth associations, etc.) to create the systematic formation of the students' critical faculties that help bringing them to a measure of self-control and the ability to choose freely and conscientiously in the face of what is offered by the organs of social communication and choose what is good, and integrate it into their Christian human culture (no 47).

Catholic School's concern for the Poor

Catholic schools have an essential element of their mission a sincere concern for the poor and weak. The Document states that " 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 " In addition the Church reminds Catholic school administrators and leaders the realization 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..... It is a school for all. with special attention to those who are weakest.... The Catholic school can must find in the context of the old and new

forms of poverty that original synthesis of ardour and fervent dedication which is a manifestation of Christ's love for the poor, the humble, the masses seeking for truth. (Congregation for Catholic Education, 1998: 15)

Conclusion

As indicated above, the concept of a ‘ Catholic school’ is not a simplistic one but a highly complex or multi-faceted one. This is owing to the various features that combine to form a holistic identity of such educational institutions. She drew her mission out from the Salvific Mission handed down by her Savior, Jesus Christ to continue His mysterious plan of love. To carry out her saving mission, the Church uses all the means which Jesus Christ has given her at different times and in different cultures in achieving and, promoting the development of the human person and the Catholic school forms part of the saving mission of the Church, especially for education in the faith

To realize its existence the Church insists that the Catholic School must found its aim and purpose on its evangelization in providing Education for all walks of life with concern for the Poor, with the total formation of the Person, through the synthesis of Faith, Culture and Life by using the methods according to the nature of Subjects guided by the same aim that is to discover truth and meaning of life with the help and cooperation of all the bodies concerned such as parents, society, and government.

The Church foresees that amid new challenges caused by a crisis of values exalted by the media, of subjectivism, moral relativism and nihilism the mission of Catholic School will survive only if it focuses its attention on the nature and distinctive characteristics of a school which would present itself as Catholic" (Congregation for Catholic Education, 1998: 4).

References

- Abbott, W. (Ed.). (1966). *Gravissimum Educationis (Declaration on Christian Education)*. In The Documents of Vatican II. London: Chapman.
- Council Vatican II. (1965). *Declaration on Christian Education Gravissimum Educationis*. Italy: Vatican City.
- Congregation for Catholic Education. (1977). *The Catholic School, Vatican City, Liberia Editrice Vaticana*. Italy: Vatican City.
- Congregation for Catholic Education. (1998). *The Catholic School on the Threshold of the Third Millennium*. Homebush, NSW: St Paul Publications.
- Haldane, J. (1996). *Catholic Education and Catholic Identity*. In: McLaughlin, T., & O' Keeffe, B. (Eds.) *The Contemporary Catholic School*. London: Falmer, pp.126-135.
- Maureen, S. (2002). *Questions and Answers on Vatican II*. New York: Paulist Press.
- Office of Prime Minister. (1999). *National Educational Act B.E. 1999*. Bangkok: Office of the National Education Commission.
- Pongpit, S. (2005). *Catholic School in the next Decade*. Chonburi: Burapa University Press. [in Thai]
- Wodon, Q. (2020). *Global Catholic Education Report 2020: Achievements and Challenges at a Time of Crisis*. Rome: International Office of Catholic Education.