

Catholic Education and Doctrinal Vacuums

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Since retiring from teaching high school in 2019 and having been asked to give a number of faith day talks to Catholic staff, I have been reflecting more deeply on my entire career as a teacher, which began in 1987. My first interview was for a school in the Jane and Finch area of Toronto (Regina Pacis Secondary School), founded by Father Gerald Fitzgerald CSSp, who wished to establish a school for those students who could not get acceptance to St. Basil's College School, a school that only accepted the best and brightest at the time. Father Fitz wanted to open the doors to those in Jane and Finch who were left behind.

Father Fitz was very taken by a letter of recommendation written on my behalf by Father Tom Wells of the Archdiocese of Washington, D.C. I'm not sure of the exact content of that letter, but Father Tom basically told the story of how he met me back in May of 1979, on a highway just outside of Columbus, Ohio. I was on my way to Nashville, TN to make it big at the Grand Ole Opry. Although I was oblivious to the dangers of hitchhiking in the United States at the time, I was young, free-free to date and marry whomever I wished-, and I was not burdened by responsibilities and duties. This priest, on the other hand, was celibate, and burdened by all sorts of responsibilities and duties, but without any doubt in my mind, he was clearly happier than I was. I sensed he belonged to a world that I once belonged to, and I wanted back into that world. I had lots of pleasures in my life, but he had joy, and I seemed to have understood that the two are not quite the same thing. I used this opportunity with this priest to ask him as many questions as I could think of within the 2 or 3 hours ahead of us.

This letter so impressed Father Fitz that he picked up the phone and called me one morning in Montreal. I got on the train within a few days for my first interview at the school, which went very well. A formal interview at the school board on Sheppard Ave, E. was also required, and the outcome was positive. I vaguely recall, however, a final comment by one of the interviewers, a superintendent perhaps. It was a rather derogatory remark towards the very idea of "teaching doctrine", as if our task as teachers is to provide students with an "experience of God", rather than impose "doctrine". I was rather taken aback by the remark, and for some reason he seemed to believe that what I was saying throughout the interview agreed with his perspective. I remember sitting there with the intuitive sense to say nothing at all and to just keep smiling.

I was perplexed by his remark, because I never regarded the teaching of doctrine as something unworthy of students' time in the classroom, or something unimportant, or something to get passed as quickly as possible or omit altogether. My return to the Church was the result of the joyful witness of a young priest who loved being a priest, who loved the Eucharist, who loved the Church and all She professes, and who loved people and paid attention to them, took an interest in them, and mirrored back to each person their fundamental importance. That is likely why June 8th, 2000—the day he was brutally murdered—was virtually the only time the anti-Catholic Washington Post spoke positively about the Catholic Church. "Doctrine" is basically the formulation of the Church's self-understanding, and as a result of his witness, I wanted to understand Church "doctrine" because I wanted to understand the Church that he loved, for I wanted to belong to her world, which is Christ, the Lamb who was slain from the foundation of the world (Rev 13, 8). I saw no incompatibility between the learning of "doctrine" and a genuine experience of the Lord, because the two were not separated in my experience; I saw that the former is rooted in the latter.

To witness is to see, to behold, to experience. For example, I witnessed the accident, that is, I heard the sound of the two cars colliding, I heard the screams of the children in the back seats, and I saw the look of horror on the face of the mother in the passenger seat, I smelled the smoke from the engine, and my hands were shaking when I called 911. I had to provide a very disciplined account of what I saw to the officer when he arrived, who carefully wrote down everything I said; for justice depends upon such a disciplined account. In other words, witness implies an experience, and my disciplined account was rooted in that experience. There is no incompatibility between the two. During that 3-hour ride, which was the turning point in my life, I could see that Father Tom was a witness; he knew something, and the joy he radiated was rooted in a rich religious experience, and he provided a very well formulated account of what he saw. When I asked why he was so disappointed that neither I nor my parents attended Mass anymore and why we have to go to Mass in the first place, he bellowed out the answer:

“To receive the Body of Christ!” I hadn’t heard those words since the third grade, and when he spoke them, I knew that this was the way back into the world that he belonged to and which I wanted to be a part of once again.

Recently I had a discussion with a friend of mine, a criminal defense lawyer and very devout Catholic—he might have even defended a student or two of mine before I ever knew him. In the course of our discussion, he made the point that “each generation that doesn’t get catechized (and there have been several since Vatican II) is a lost generation, spending a lifetime trying to sort out feelings without guideposts and (worse) being told that our feelings are what make us unique. What nonsense! Discipline and self-denial are so much harder when it has never been taught or practiced at all. Doctrine has to be taught over and over again. What brings it alive, makes it new and interesting, is charity.”

Of course, I couldn’t agree with him more, but as I have been reflecting on my years as a teacher, I have become more explicitly aware that a good number of my colleagues in teaching and administration, who were for the most part genuinely good and talented people and who did a great deal of good over the years, were, at least in terms of a knowledge and understanding of the Catholic faith, part of a “lost generation”. Many of them were brought up on a false dichotomy between “doctrine” and “experience” and were thereby deprived of a solid catechesis. I was somewhat of an enigma to many of them. That is why I have often regarded my departure from the Church in grade 3 and my return at 17 years of age (1979) through the witness of an American priest, as a blessing; for I was spared something within that time which might have disposed me to fall for this false dichotomy, and a number of my colleagues were deprived of something that I was given.

Moreover, the Catholicism that I encountered in a good number of my teaching colleagues as I began my career as a religion teacher was a Catholicism that was by and large reduced to an ethics. The gospel was, for the most part, reduced to a social justice morality, and one could say that discipleship was reduced to social activism. The "good news of the coming of the kingdom" was reduced to something that did not require the gift of supernatural faith and its light (*lumen fidei*), for the kingdom of God was more akin to a utopia that we bring about through our own political efforts; the story of the Exodus was the paradigm instance of an oppressed class freed from their economic oppressors, and so the paschal mystery which the Exodus foreshadows was thereby emptied of its mystical and supernatural content.

I was not the least bit interested in politics when hitchhiking to the American south, but I was interested in and hungry for something that would give my life ultimate significance, i.e., the good news that Christ has died, Christ has risen, and Christ will come again, that Christ has conquered death and that the joy of eternal life begins now, and that I have God’s undivided attention at every instant of my existence, that I am known and, as Catherine of Siena points out, loved as if I am the only person that exists. It was not the divisive and polarized nature of left versus right politics that turned my life around, but the good news of the gospel that the risen Christ commissioned his Apostles to proclaim, and I knew that this alone had relevance for my students. So, I taught what I knew, that is, “doctrine”, or the fundamentals of the faith and a well-rounded curriculum in personal morality. The few of us who were operating on the same wavelength eventually found each other and collaborated over the years. But it was only a matter of time before the gospel of cultural Marxism—disguised as Catholic social teaching—morphed into applied postmodernism, which in turn took shape as equity, diversity, and inclusion.

It was a great blessing when in the early 90s philosophy was introduced into the Ontario high school curriculum. My philosophy professors at St. Jerome’s College in Waterloo were convinced that this was an experiment that was bound to fail. Happily, they were wrong about that. Senior students benefited tremendously from an introduction to Catholic philosophy. Moreover, teaching young students the historical roots of postmodernism often generated conflict between departments. Science departments, of course, had no use for the postmodern denial of the possibility of possessing truth at all, the idea that all science is a fiction, a yarn spun by the trickeries of language, which is likely why science teachers were generally a pain in the neck for up and coming administrators who were ready and willing to embrace the latest educational fads and ideological trends, for science teachers are typically skeptical of claims founded upon anecdotal evidence and demand evidence of a more rigorous variety. But some departments, on the other hand, warmed to the postmodern ethos that was spreading, and this, at times, caused some friction between students, who came to understand something of postmodernism’s roots in Hegel and

Nietzsche, and some of their English teachers, who appeared to believe postmodernism a good thing. Critical thinking became a fad for a brief period, but that seemed to be nothing more than taking a position on the left and speaking critically of the right, on the basis of arguments that were not much deeper than what one would find in the *Toronto Star*.

But critical thinking is important nonetheless. The only drawback is that it requires more than a few classroom activities; it requires a long and rigorous introduction to logic, both deductive and inductive or investigative reasoning. I don't watch a lot of television, but for the past few years, the shows that I do enjoy are investigative in nature, shows that follow the trajectory of a real-life investigation of a murder or robbery. The most interesting investigations are those that show a gradual accumulation of data and the resulting shift in the plausibility index of potential suspects. For example, the initial set of data might reveal a number of possible suspects; more data then narrows the focus to a most plausible suspect, along with one or two less plausible ones. However, further data, as a result of new leads, has at times eliminated that suspect who was previously the most plausible candidate only to raise another suspect, formerly less plausible, to the maximally plausible rung on the ladder. Sometimes the most recent piece of new data eliminates all previous suspects and points to an entirely new one.

These are important cases, because they teach a critical lesson about knowledge that we as a culture have yet to fully appropriate—although those in the hard sciences seem to have a firm grasp of it, at least when they reason within the context of a scientific inquiry. I'm referring to the precarious nature of human knowledge. In short, knowledge is hard to achieve. A large set of evidential data may point to a person who is entirely innocent, and so cultivating a healthy skepticism and a disposition to test our claims is necessary. But ideologies do not work that way. Ideological thinking begins in the realm of ideas and stays there. An ideology is a kind of grand hypothesis, a worldview, that is meant to explain a vast array of empirical data, for example, the world we live in with all its inequalities, crimes, injustices, poverty, oppressions, murder rates, suicide and divorce rates, drop-out rates, etc. It then proceeds to formulate a conditional statement, which is essentially a grand idea: "If x is an essentially oppressive, racist and discriminatory system (or nation), then x will give rise to oppression, inequality, racism—not to mention other evils". And since there are plenty of instances of oppression, racism and inequality, the hypothesis is easily corroborated (x is an essentially—not incidentally—oppressive, racist and discriminatory system, or nation).

A basic principle of logic, however, is that corroboration (or confirmation) does not prove a hypothesis. The requirement to test a hypothesis remains, because the conclusion does not necessarily follow. The difficulty is that such a hypothesis cannot be tested in a laboratory. At this point we need to look for disconfirmatory evidence, that is, facts in evidence that falsify the conclusion, as an investigator would do with respect to a prime suspect in a homicide.

The problem with such grand hypotheses/ideas is that they are seductive, for they are emotionally satisfying insofar as they simplify a highly complex reality, and they are easy to corroborate (i.e., render us susceptible to confirmation bias). However, if such an idea is wrong, it can be falsified. But falsification requires some research, specifically data that is inconsistent with the grand hypothesis that essentially constitutes the ideology (i.e., America is an essentially racist country; all minorities are oppressed; Israel and everything Israel does is bad; corporations are essentially greedy and immoral, white people are privileged, etc.). And so, there is tremendous incentive, especially when we are young, to hang on to such a grand idea and pay no attention to evidence that falsifies it—falsification only complicates matters.

The ideological thinking that has gained significant ground today is of course applied postmodernism, or Critical Theory and all its ever-diversifying branches (postcolonial theory, queer theory, critical race theory, critical whiteness theory, critical disability theory, gender ideology, etc.). Postmodernism has its roots in the philosophy of G. W. F. Hegel, Friedrich Nietzsche and Martin Heidegger. For Nietzsche, knowledge in any objective sense is impossible because the universe is unknowable and unintelligible. Why? Because there are no fixed natures. Both philosophy and science have traditionally been regarded as the study of the natures of things (i.e., human nature, the nature of organic or non-organic substances, the nature of time, space, etc.), but there are no "natures"; nothing is stable in the world outside the mind; there is only "becoming", pure flux, and thus there is no "being" or "beings" to study or know. In order to know, there must be a stable intelligible structure (an essence) that the mind can wrap its head around and penetrate more and more deeply, but there isn't, according to Nietzsche.

Definitions, which have as their purpose the expression of what something is essentially, are just constructs that delimit what in reality has no boundaries (such as the male/female binary). It is language (the sound) which provides the illusion of stability or permanency, or the illusion of “being” and distinction. Language constitutes being, constructs it, thus giving the appearance that reality is made up of stable entities or things.

Hence, the mind is not measured by reality, rather, reality is measured by the mind. Moreover, science rests on first principles, such as the principle of identity, which is that “each being is what it is”, as well as the principle of non-contradiction, which runs: “nothing can both be and not be at the same time and in the same respect”. But these principles are mere constructs, according to Nietzsche. Hence, nothing has any objective and intrinsic identity; rather, identities are imposed on reality through language. All that exists in the world are various centers of power that are constantly in flux, encroaching upon other centers of power. Thus, language is about power, and if science is nothing more than a product of language, then science is fundamentally about power, not knowledge *per se*. Morality has no objective grounding, for it too is nothing more than a linguistic system that is fundamentally oppressive, a tool of the majority crafted to oppress the minority (one center of power encroaching upon a smaller center).

Within this postmodern framework, the logic of science with its basic requirement to test hypotheses is simply a part of this oppressive power system. Hence, to insist on evidence for one’s claims is to reveal a western oppressive colonial bias that assumes the objectivity and universal nature of the rules of logic. Hence, demanding evidence is a perpetuation of oppression. Reasoning cannot therefore be the way to overcome an impasse, because the rules of reasoning are again white European constructs; the only option that remains is power and struggle.

In the end, all that exists are constructed narratives. In the postmodern world, there is always someone or something to demonize and a narrative to deconstruct, because there is always an oppressor and always an oppressed (a majority and minorities). There cannot be peace in such a cynical world, only dialectic and conflict.

When postmodernism is traced back to its roots, it is obvious how utterly and “radically” irrational it is. For the postmodernist, however, “irrational” is not a derogatory word, for reality is in itself absurd, and intelligibility is constructed, not discovered. To the rest of us who believe in reason, such tenets are unsupportable and entirely self-refuting. Most people, however, don’t take the time to examine ideological trends at that level—they don’t have the time, or the patience, or the interest. This is a problem, because on the surface, postmodernism in its applied form will often appear to dovetail with some very basic religious tenets. But they are not compatible with religion, especially the Judeo-Christian religion. Follow the trajectory of the two projections as they lead away from the joint in the dovetail and we see that the two modes of thinking are irreconcilable and diametrically opposed. Both speak of equity, liberation, justice, and inclusion, and thus condemn inequity, oppression, injustice and exclusion, but to conclude that the two are thereby consistent, much less essentially the same or interchangeable, could not be more mistaken. For Catholics, one must show evidence that a behavior, a system, culture or nation, etc., is unjust or oppressive using rational data and universal moral principles, something that postmodernism rejects outright.

Catholicism is not an ideology, but a religion, and religion is first and foremost a “relationship”. It is a revealed religion that has its roots in Judaism. Contrary to postmodernism, God, who is Being Itself (I Am Who Am), created all that is visible and invisible, and so the universe is a cosmos, not an unintelligible chaos; science is not a fiction. Material things are beings, and a being is a composite of essence and existence. Material things do change, but for every change, there is always something that remains unchanged, namely matter, or some other substrate, such as a determinate entity or substance. The human person is created in the image and likeness of God, that is, in the image of mind and heart. To know is, among other things, to apprehend to some degree the natures of things, their intelligible structure or “logos”, which are images of the Proto-Image of the Logos through whom all things came to be. In this light, reality is intelligible, liturgical in fact, and is the measure of the mind, not vice versa. A person is a *per/sona*, a “through sound”, that is, a communicator. To communicate is to enter into a kind of communion, a union of minds. Language does not distort the real, but unveils it, albeit limitedly. The only “word” that

constructs being is the divine Word (Logos): “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came to be through him, and without him, nothing came to be” (Jn 1, 1-3). That Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. He came to liberate, to free us from the worst kind of oppression, namely the oppression and slavery of sin and death, but he did this through his sacrificial death on the cross and subsequent resurrection. Male and female are indeed binary, for as such they represent the fundamental binary into which reality is divided, namely “Creator and creation”, that is, God who is preeminently Father, and creation who is Mother. Marriage is a two in one flesh union in which a third, namely a child, is loved into existence as the fruit and living testimony of that one flesh union—a distant image of the Trinity. Not all power is unjust and oppressive; at its best, authority exists for the good of those subject to it, such as children to parents, or the law abiding to law grounded in reason; and so not all rejection of authority amounts to liberation from oppression. In fact, rejection of legitimate authority typically ends in oppression.

Catholic education must begin at the roots, not at the surface, that is, not with issues that are on trend, and which happen in some way to dovetail with certain elements of the Catholic faith. It must begin with the mystery of Christ as the permanent and inexhaustible reservoir out of which our understanding of the world, its history, and the nature of man arise. It must ever more deeply penetrate the mysteries of the Incarnation, the Trinity, the Paschal mystery, the Eucharist, and the supernatural life of divine grace, and from this foundation draw out the moral and spiritual implications of living one’s life as a new creation in the Person of Christ, for example, the requirements to a greater prudence, discernment, honesty, affability, purity, modesty, humility, courage, perseverance, magnanimity, natural piety, devotion to the common good and above all a single minded devotion to the kingdom of God.

Social justice, oppression, and racism mean entirely different things for the postmodernist than for the Catholic. It is very important that Catholic educators get a firm grasp on this point: for the applied postmodernist, the very norms of Catholicism are oppressive at their roots and must be thoroughly deconstructed. We, on the contrary, would argue that any injustice, including racism, is impossible unless there is a stable and underlying human nature in light of which we apprehend that all men, despite accidental differences, are essentially the same and thus essentially equal. Postmodernism does not have what it takes to cry out in any definitive way against racism, colonial oppression, exploitation, etc., because postmodernism denies universals, such as “humanity”, human nature, universal rights and moral obligations, and it maintains that all knowledge, including moral knowledge, is nothing more than a construct. On what basis then are inequity or exclusion or discrimination to be condemned? For there are no universal moral norms in light of which the postmodernist can assert that any action is absolutely unjust and morally repugnant.

For postmodernism, reality is essentially conflict which can never be resolved; for in a postmodern framework, change is not a movement from the imperfect to the perfection of full realization and completeness, for that implies existing natures, beings that are composites of essence and existence and which are open to the fulfillment of their own natures. Rather, change is pure and total, without an underlying substrate or stable essence, and so it is always a matter of power, dominance, and loss—at least for one party. Philosophy becomes a matter of deconstructing language and the power structures they conceal, and not a study of the ultimate nature of things. But to insist that power structures and hierarchies are unjust is inconsistent and arbitrary, at least for those who believe in reason; but to insist that postmodernist claims are inconsistent and arbitrary is, in their minds, the perpetuation of colonial oppression.

When Catholic education is reduced to postmodern activism under the appearance of being inclusive and equitable, students are in the end deprived of the wisdom to distinguish those elements that are ultimately destructive of Catholic education from its essential constituents. Inclusivity and equity are indeed good words; for the very word “Catholic” is from the Greek *katabolos*, which means “on the whole” or universal: Catholic is inclusive of all nations, which is why Christ sent his disciples out to all nations. Moreover, for centuries equity was understood to be a part of the virtue of justice, which involves the application of principles of justice to contingencies in which the letter of the law falls short. But for the postmodernist, whatever is outside the “norm” is unincluded, and so Catholic moral norms in particular must be deconstructed and liquidated, for they exclude. The Catholic understanding of marriage, for instance, as a two in one flesh union and the moral

implication that sexual acts outside of marriage are morally deficient are seen as “heteronormative” and thus oppressive, unsafe, giving rise to homophobia and “straight” privilege.

Catholic educators must be more shrewd and wary of ideological trends that eventually die out, only to be replaced by newer but nonetheless temporary fads. If we teach the mysteries of the faith in which our students have been baptized, with genuine evangelical zeal and understanding, and relate to those students with a living faith, and actually pray with them and expose them to the rich spiritual and theological heritage that is ours in the Church, it is not a stretch to suggest that social justice will take care of itself; a glance back at those saints who are the true face of the Church strongly suggests as much: i.e., St. John Bosco, Venerable Nelson Baker, Blessed Michael McGivney, St. Vincent de Paul, St. Jean Baptiste de LaSalle, St. Catherine Drexel, St. Mother Teresa, the monks of those monasteries that were the first hospitals, etc. If students are going to receive the specifically Catholic education to which their baptism gives them a right, then parents, teachers, administrators and trustees must be grounded in the mystery of Christ as revealed in Scripture and expounded ever more deeply throughout the history of the Church, the mystery from which springs the entire moral and spiritual heritage of the Church.