

Authentic Catholic Education. Paul Kelly. May 2024.

We begin with a prayer for all the students we have taught, currently teach, and will teach.

St Mary MacKillop, St Peter Canisius, Blessed Edmund Rice, pray for us.

What Does Authentic Catholic Education Look Like in 2024?

I will attempt to answer this question in the context of my life as a student in Catholic school and Catholic university, and in light of 26 years' experience as a Catholic educator.

My Catholic Education experience spans: primary and secondary co-ed Education in Scotland in the 1970s and 1980s (as a student); Tertiary Education in Australia in the 1990s (as a mature student); and then from 1998 to present (Primary & Secondary) co-ed and single sex Education as a teacher, Religious Education Co-ordinator and Deputy Principal. I have worked in the CEWA, PSA, EREA, AISWA sectors. My wife and I have homeschooled our 4 children: son (25) with Degrees in Law and Commerce; daughter (23) Higher Diploma in Fashion Design; son (21) electrical apprentice; son (18) plumbing apprentice. Two of our children were homeschooled right through to TAFE, the other two were homeschooled up to Year 10 and then attended school.

What inspires me? Matt 28: 19-20 – *“Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you; and behold, I am with you always, to the close of the age”*.

What haunts me? A Church full of people who accept compromise. Do I accept compromise? Woe to me if I do not preach the Gospel (1 Cor 9: 16) in season and out of season (2 Tim 4: 2), few should teach for we will be more harshly judged (James 3: 1), for we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ (2 Cor 5: 10).

In a talk in 1947, Servant of God, Archbishop Fulton Sheen prophesied:

“We are at the end of Christendom.” Now when he said that he made clear that he didn't mean the end of Christianity or the Church, for Sheen, Christendom is Christian civilisation, it is economic, political, social life as inspired by Christian principles. *“That”* said Sheen *“is ending”* — we've seen it die. Look at the symptoms: the breakup of the family, divorce, abortion, immorality etc.

Another Catholic luminary, living at the same time, was Christopher Dawson who believed that the study of Christian civilization should form the core of undergraduate programs at Catholic universities. (<https://boethiusinstitute.org/an-introduction-to-christopher-dawson/>). I would imagine therefore that both men would have hoped to see the campus of a Catholic School or University in the future to be counter-cultural.

So much for society, what about the Church? A year after his 1947 Christendom talk, in his book *Communism and the Conscience of the West*, Sheen described what he believed the Church would experience in the future. There would arise *a counter church which will be the ape of the real Church. It will have all the notes and characteristics of the Church, but in reverse and emptied of its divine content. It will be a mystical body of the Antichrist that will in all externals resemble the mystical body of Christ. . . .*

I fear that we might well be occupying Catholic institutions that resemble, to varying degrees, what Sheen envisioned. Hence, my encouragement for a return to traditional modes of Catholic education, without eschewing the positive aspects of modern educational practice. I will briefly address pedagogical, governmental, technological and cultural considerations.

Let's look at TECHNOLOGICAL & CULTURAL aspects first.

The cultural landscape for our young people is radically different to what it was when I began teaching in 1998. The electronic device is now all-encompassing, pervasive, intrusive, addictive. If it's not social media, it's continual entertainment with the ever-present possibility of questionable content; the gaming monster has seduced an immense population of young people to become sedentary recluses whiling away the hours in their own virtual reality worlds. I remember life without the smart phone, my students do not. I'm not so naïve as to think that the device is going away, but I do believe that schools, indeed any kind of schooling, can control its use, even in spite of benchmark testing being electronic now for our young Primary aged students (e.g. NAPLAN at Year 3).

We need to create times and places where we bore our students into activity without devices. In many respects, the device has stolen imagination from our youth, seldom do they need to use that beautiful and powerful innate God-given faculty of their soul. The device, sadly, gives them their imagination. Yet, in spite of all this technology, our tertiary entrance ATAR examinations in Secondary School still require 3 hour long handwritten output. "*Penmanship*" then, is still a thing. And it might even become a bigger thing in light of technology such as ChatGPT, which is making obsolete the "take home assignment" and is forcing administrators to increase use of in-class, closed-book, hand-written tests and assessments.

In the midst of this technological revolution, the 21st century learning skills still include character as one of the key competencies required by our youth. What are the 6 C's of Education for the 21st Century that one will find on wikipedia? The Six Cs of Education, we are told, are a set of core competencies that students need to survive and thrive in an ever-changing global world. I think it is significant that Character sits amongst Citizenship, Collaboration, Communication, Creativity and Critical Thinking. When we think of character, from a traditional Catholic outlook, we think of virtue: the theological virtues of faith, hope and charity; the cardinal virtues of temperance, fortitude, justice and prudence. **They are not new.** They are perennial. So, on an authentic Catholic school campus, the use of devices should be limited to only that required by the curriculum. You know that the students will, in many cases, have unfettered access at home. We cannot legislate for that, but we can insist that students spend at least recess and lunch socially interacting with each other without technology. How

refreshing to walk through the campus of such a school at recess or lunch; you'd be hard pushed to witness such a phenomenon anywhere else in youth culture today.

For Aristotle, the purpose of education is the cultivation of wisdom and virtue. St Thomas Aquinas defines education as the formation of the man up to the point of virtue. But, Our Blessed Lord asks us to consider what it profits a man if he gains the whole world and loses his own soul (Mark 8: 36). In Catholicism, merely exhibiting natural virtue is not enough, we need to be in-graced with the Sacramental system: Baptism John 3: 5; Eucharist John 6: 53; Confirmation Acts 8: 14-17; Confession John 20: 23. Secular education wants children to be employable, authentic Catholic education wants children to be employable saints. Character education, from a Traditional Catholic perspective, also includes self-knowledge by way of the 4 temperaments: sanguine, choleric, phlegmatic and melancholic. It draws on St Thomas Aquinas' treatment of temperament and its relation to virtue in the *Summa Theologica*. Here, Aquinas draws on the knowledge of Hippocrates (d. 370BC). Again, **nothing new.** As Ecclesiastes 1: 9 says: "*there is nothing new under the sun*".

I shift focus now to GOVERNMENTAL considerations.

Education is a political football. School administrators and teachers are at the mercy of the latest received wisdom. In previous years, Outcomes-based education was popular; in it no child could "fail". That eventually gave way to us ranking students based on their performance on assessments. Such is the pendulum swing as one educational philosophy holds sway over another.

In *Gravissimum Educationes*, the Vatican II document on education (7), the Church esteems highly civil authorities which assist families so that the education of their children can be imparted in all schools according to the individual moral and religious principles of families. In light of new Government regulations in recent years in the area of human sexuality education, I have found that the following points help Catholic educators to steer a course which is faithful to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. In *Created & Loved* (CL), a guide produced by the Australian Catholic Bishops' Conference in 2022, when it comes to Curriculum in a Catholic educational

setting, be it Religious Education, Health & Physical Education, wellbeing and pastoral programs – it is important that these accurately reflect **Christian** anthropology, and use shared understandings and language. Catholic educators are to be aware of the **differences** between, and convergences in, government and diocesan policies (CL p. 5, emphasis mine). The recognition of differences between government and diocesan policies is key for the delivery of authentic Catholic Education. An authentic Catholic Education is a shared responsibility between the Catholic School and the home.

This collaboration is underscored in *Male & Female He Created Them* (MF), a document produced by the Congregation for Catholic Education in 2019. School managers and teaching staff share the responsibility of guaranteeing delivery of a high-quality service coherent with **Christian principles** (MF48). Catholic educators are called to go beyond **relativism** by remaining faithful to their own **gospel-based** identity (MF54). The document goes on to state that there is an urgent need to promote a new alliance that is genuine and not simply at the level of bureaucracy, a shared project that can offer a “positive and prudent sexual education” that can harmonise the **primary responsibility of parents** with the **work of teachers** (MF45).

What this should look like at the local level is made clear in a document approved by the Catholic Bishops of Western Australia: *The Teaching of Human Sexuality (Guidelines for Catholic Schools in Western Australia)*

Notable principles outlined in this document include:

- 1.1 Human sexuality should not be taught in isolation
- 1.2 Information about it should always be imparted in the context of faith and Catholic Moral teachings
- 1.5 The staff in all curriculum areas need to consult and cooperate in the presentation of such content
- 1.7 The ‘values clarification approach’ should not be used as it implies that all values are equal and it neglects the objective reality of moral law
- 2.3 The presentation of Catholic teachings must always include what the Church teaches and explanations for these teachings must be provided

I want to particularly highlight **Principle 3** in this document which states that

Since parents are the first educators of their children, the family is the preferential place for the education of young people in human sexuality.

3.1 Parents must be informed when the school plans to present materials in this area.

3.2 Parents have the right to withdraw their children from such classes, in that case they have the duty to provide adequate formation to their children.

3.3 With parental consent however, children can be prepared for the onset of puberty by the school.

Obviously, from a traditional Catholic perspective, it is the parent that determines the readiness of students as regards education in human sexuality which will occur **solely in the sphere of the home**. Whilst such parents do withdraw their children from these classes, their number is, relatively speaking, small. In view of the fact that the majority of families now populating Catholic schools are not practising Catholics, the current Catholic School structure and policies make possible sharing the Catholic Sexual Ethic with a constituency that would otherwise not hear of the truth and meaning of human sexuality as espoused by official Catholic Teaching. Catholic Schools often call on the services of archdiocesan-approved groups such as the highly experienced Loving For Life Team who have supported schools in this area with distinction since 1992.

And finally, I turn to PEDAGOGICAL considerations. But I want to firstly recognise all the hard-working staff, in any subject, that I have interacted with in Catholic Education, both as a student and still do as a teacher, many of whom are not Catholic, and who, nonetheless, give the best years of their working lives to Catholic Education.

According to the Bishops’ Mandate of Western Australia (61), *the First Learning Area in a Catholic School is Religious Education*. So, let’s ask a key question. What has worked best as regards passing on the Catholic Faith to the next generation? You need to ask the grandparents and great grandparents, because it is their generation that kept the Faith and who were scandalised to see it lost in their children and their children’s children. They will tell you that they were taught the Faith via rote learning from the catechism; they were taught Latin; they were taught apologetics. I’m actually old enough to remember my older sister coming home from school with a catechism and a Latin Grammar textbook, she was born in 1964 (the

last year of the baby boomers). I was born in 1966 so that makes me a classic Vatican II baby as the Council finished in 1965. There was no catechism, Latin or apologetics for me.

Rote Learning of the Catechism works, but it terrifies modern educational administrators. I have firsthand experience of rote learning of the catechism working both as a home educator of my own children and as a Catholic Religious Education Teacher. The catechism I have had success with is the work of Australia's very own Father James Tierney (B.Sc., Dip.Ed., M.A.C.E.), author of the *Catholic Family Catechism* (CFC) first published in 1992 (CFC, Newman Centre Publications; Nihil obstat: David Orr, O.S.B., S.T.D.; Imprimatur: +Patrick L. Murphy, Bishop of Broken Bay, 19 December 1991. ISBN 0 9587535 4 7).

In Tierney's mind, a catechism is merely a skeleton, therefore it is a necessity, but a catechism is not sufficient by itself. It depends on 3 additional essentials that I'd like to explore: a **believing teacher**, **other texts** and a **worshipping community**. Thus, to simply incorporate rote learning of the Catechism into a school's Religious Education Program will have modest results without believing teachers, but in my experience, still better results than anything else that has replaced it. A nominally Catholic educator is not, in Tierney's opinion, a believing teacher. For Tierney, a **believing teacher** is a well-informed, practicing Catholic; one who attends Sunday Mass every week and frequents the Sacrament of Confession on a regular basis.

The "**other texts**" to which Tierney refers include a Catholic Prayer Book, a Bible, a Sunday Missal, an encyclopaedic dictionary, an atlas, and access to Biblical Maps via the Internet. This is multi-modal religious literacy at its best. For the student, the whole process is a daily drum beat lasting no more than 20 minutes, so the buy-in from students is generally high (10 minutes a day being taught; 10 minutes on your own). As this catechetical habit forms, the student is encouraged to be a self-directed learner. What's not to like about that? I recall a visiting university lecturer being appalled that I had taught Year 8 students transubstantiation from Fr Tierney's catechism. I replied that they teach big words in English classes, so why can't we teach big words in RE too?

Students who take longer to memorise information, if they are diligent, can be just as ready for a Catechism Test as their classmates who are initially quicker on the uptake. Regular Catechism Tests are a must, because

what gets measured gets done. Multiple-choice tests are popular. This process engenders lots of little victories with the majority of students who buy-in. I once asked a girl from a secular background who excels in Latin why she chose Latin as an elective in Year 10. Her answer: "*Because I have been good at it in Middle School*". Success is a great motivator. A happy memory from my first year as a teacher, is to recall a Year 8 Boarder, a country boy from the Wheat Belt, telling me after a year of Tierney's Catechism: "*That book taught me heaps*".

What about a **worshipping community**? We do the best that we can. I often have enthusiastic students telling me their parents are ok with them receiving the Sacraments, until their parents realise that Sunday Mass is a weekly obligation.

The genius of Tierney's catechism is that it is accessible for students as young as 8 years. It is clear, brief and easily assimilated. It is presented in a question-and-answer format; the answers being deliberately laid out in what Tierney calls "sense lines". These "sense lines" help to embed on the memory an enduring visual shape of the response.

An example of a question:

What is the Liturgy?

The answer follows in sense lines.

In bold: **The Liturgy is the public worship of God**

and sanctification of man

by Jesus Christ the Priest

through His Mystical Body.

The student writes out the question and answer, keeping the same words per line, read aloud, then recited. It's straightforward and effective. It brings to mind the old Latin maxim: *Repetitio Mater Studiorum* (Repetition is the Mother of Learning).

20 minutes of Catechism in a 45 minute RE period provides time for the teacher to unpack, in an age-specific manner, the doctrine that is being memorised. Instruction and some understanding must precede memorisation; but once answers are memorised, they will be "gradually understood in depth". It is no surprise that Tierney, a convert from Anglicanism, owes his inspiration for writing his catechism to an extract from *The Idea of a University* by St John Henry Cardinal Newman (Image Books, 1959, p. 350). It begins:

*“Three friends of mine, [Anglican] clergymen, making a tour through Ireland, pedestrians for the day, took a boy of thirteen to be their guide. They amused themselves by putting questions to him on the subject of his religion; and one of them confessed to me on his return that the poor child had put them all to silence. How? Not, of course, by any train of arguments, or refined theological disquisition, but **merely by knowing and understanding the answers in his catechism**”.*

And in case anyone wants to argue that the idea of memorising prescribed lists is pre-Vatican II, allow me to share a couple of notable quotes. One from Pope Saint John Paul II’s *Catechesis in Our Time* (1975), which provides a list of what should be memorised by the faithful; and this one from Pope Saint John XXIII’s opening speech for Vatican II (11 October, 1962): *“The greatest concern of the Second Vatican Council is that the Sacred Deposit of Christian Doctrine should be more effectively guarded and taught”* (Abbot, p. 713).

As regards Pope Saint John Paul’s list, we read in section 55 of *Catechesi Tradendae*:

At a time when, in non-religious teaching in certain countries, more and more complaints are being made about the unfortunate consequences of disregarding the human faculty of memory, should we not attempt to put this faculty back into use in an intelligent and even an original way in catechesis, all the more since the celebration or "memorial" of the great events of the history of salvation require a precise knowledge of them? A certain memorisation of the words of Jesus, of important Bible passages, of the Ten Commandments, of the formulas of profession of the faith, of the liturgical texts, of the essential prayers, of key doctrinal ideas, etc., far from being opposed to the dignity of young Christians, or constituting an obstacle to personal dialogue with the Lord, is a real need, as the synod fathers forcefully recalled. We must be realists. The blossoms, if we may call them that, of faith and piety do not grow in the desert places of a memory - less catechesis.

In addition to Greek classes in Primary School, the independent Catholic school at which I currently teach (*Immaculate Heart College*) runs a successful Latin Programme for students from Year 7 to Year 10. Whilst we have had our share of gold and silver medal winners in the internationally acclaimed Latin Examination, if you ask our Latin teacher Scott O’Callaghan, **all** students benefit from the intellectual

rigour involved in Latin Grammar, to say nothing of the significance of Latin as the official language of the Church and its relevance to many other subjects taught at school. In the July school holidays we are running a Winter Liberal Arts Intensive, we are inviting university age students and middle school students as young as 13 to a whole week devoted to answering the question: What is a good life? We’ll be answering that question with the help of philosophy and literature seminars provided by Ben McCabe of the Augustine Academy in New South Wales.

The Liberal Arts: are undergoing a renaissance with an increase in Independent Colleges offering a Classical Curriculum. What we today call literacy and numeracy, the ancients called The Trivium and the Quadrivium. The Trivium (grammar, logic and rhetoric); The Quadrivium (arithmetic, geometry, astronomy not astrology, music what the Church calls the highest art form CCC 1156).

Let’s consider the genius of the Trivium for a moment. Picture the grammatical stage in primary school and its focus on the students absorbing lots of information at the time in their lives when they are “little sponges”. Then picture the logical stage in Middle School, where reasons for the information already supplied in Primary School is given in age-appropriate depth to all those “rebels without a cause”. Finally, the rhetorical stage in Senior Secondary School, where the student, now a young adult, is capable of defending and expounding in public upon topics learned and explained in previous years. This educational picture that I am describing doesn’t just pay lip service to the phrase “teaching the whole person”. It really does cater for the upper faculties of the soul: intellect and will, and, the lower faculties of emotion, memory and imagination; with a virtues program catering for emotions, rote learning catering for memory and a control put on technology so as to properly cater for the imagination.

Before concluding, I want to briefly pivot to apologetics. The study of Vocation is mandated for Year 10 students in Catholic Schools in Western Australia. For years, I dutifully taught students about God’s call in their lives. I focussed on topics such as Religious Life and the Sacraments of Marriage and the Priesthood. But, as time went on, it was obvious to me that a significant proportion of the students I taught had serious doubts as to whether God actually exists in the first place - not a great basis from which to proceed with the topic of God’s call in one’s life. What these

students needed was a course in Catholic apologetics to precede the topic of Vocation. Apologetics provides students with the reasons WHY we believe what we believe.

Again, I had recourse to a book fit for purpose: A new edition revised by Fr Peter Joseph, of the 1962 classic *Apologetics & Catholic Doctrine*, originally written by Archbishop Michael Sheehan, the former Co-adjutor Archbishop of Sydney. For years, this book gave to many young Catholics the support and knowledge to sustain their faith throughout their lifetime. They knew the Catholic Religion, and they knew the reasons for it. Among some other resources, I complemented this text with the internet. The internet can be used for ill, but it can also be used to evangelise. This is the Golden Age for Catholic apologetics on the internet. In honest debate, sooner or later, you tend to see the truth bubble up to the surface. Youtube is replete with just such debates. World Class apologists are now at everyone's fingertips. I think that this is one of the recent ingredients contributing to what we might call a "Catholic moment" in pop culture with some notable recent converts such as Candace Owens and Shia Labeouf, and dare I predict Jordan Peterson and perhaps even Joe Rogan?

So, to conclude, it's not pie in the sky, in my experience, to have tradies and farmers drilled in Latin and apologetics, or, to have university bound students with robust memories because of rote learning the Catechism. The Gospel is just as relevant in Trade School as it is at University. Young people have an innate attraction towards Tradition because Tradition is forever young. Christopher Dawson once stated that Christian Tradition is the most fundamental element in Western culture (*Christianity & European Culture*, 1998). I recall Pope Benedict XVI reminding us that Tradition is "*not a collection of dead things*" (General Audience, 26 April 2006). Our Tradition, as Catholics, is a Living Tradition – it will never die.

When Pope Benedict visited Australia for World Youth Day in 2008, 400,000 young people turned out to see and hear him in Randwick Racecourse in Sydney. On the way into the open-air Mass, a friend of mine took a photograph of a remarkable sight, Tradies on scaffolding in a work site had hand fashioned a large cross out of iron bars. They weren't joining us for Mass, but the sentiment of solidarity was most certainly not lost amongst the many pilgrims making their way down to meet the Pope. It's a picture of hope, but we also have to be realistic.

I think that the night is far spent (Romans 13: 12) in mainstream Catholic Education. And now that you know my life story based on my 50 years' experience as a student and teacher, I can confidently report that the Modernist Catholic Education experiment has run its course and has failed. The *raison d'être* of authentic Catholic Education is the Gospel mandate to go forth and teach all nations. Ask yourself which version of Catholic Education is closest to that call of Jesus in Matthew 28: 19-20 – the Modernist or the Traditional?

A prominent phrase in church circles since Vatican II is "the signs of the times" (we read that phrase in several Council Documents such as *Unitatis Redintegratio* 4; *Dignitatis Humane* 15; *Presbyterorum Ordinis* 9; *Gaudium et Spes* 4). The phrase encouraged the faithful to observe and learn from the world around us. I'd like to add another phrase that springs to mind: "By their fruits, you will know them" (Matt 7: 16). If you look at areas of genuine growth right now, then the typical Catholic Homeschool Network deserves a mention, as at least 75% of the young adults that it educates are practicing Catholics, the majority of whom, when canvassed, will homeschool their own children. This small but growing demographic has embraced Traditional Catholic Education and its positive results speak for themselves both in religious practice and in vocations to the Priesthood and Religious Life.

And, whilst Homeschooling is not for everyone, one thing is for sure, the systemic Catholic School System as it is, has a relatively small and ever dwindling number of practicing Catholics in its midst. As Catholic educators, our principal goal, no matter the Catholic Educational setting, should be focused on producing practicing Catholic students, constantly endeavouring to keep themselves in a state of grace, who grow into adulthood and keep the Faith. It is time for a return to a traditional Catholic Education, **all** our students deserve nothing less.