

# **BEING OPEN TO OTHER CULTURES AND BELIEFS CATHOLIC SCHOOLS IN THE UNITED KINGDOM**

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## **Abstract**

Catholic schools exist in a state of uncertainty between their double identity as Church and civic institutions. Political pressure to conform to the prevailing cultural climate can be a source of tension between Catholic school leaders and the educational establishment. The source of this tension often lies in the degree of ‘hostility’ shown towards religious ideas more broadly. A recent report in the United Kingdom on the place of religion in public life, while reflecting much of the prevailing secular ways of thinking, recognised that religious beliefs have an important role to play in society. This welcome commitment to religious freedom can be aligned to recent developments in Catholic educational thought towards the need for intercultural dialogue in Catholic schools. This move is not without its conceptual challenges: there remain important questions to be addressed regarding the interplay between intercultural dialogue and the mission to evangelise.

**Keywords:** Catholic school, openness, intercultural dialogue, evangelisation, catholic intellectual tradition

Is it possible for a Catholic school, a place governed by the traditions and principles of one organised religion, to be ‘open to others’ while remaining anchored in its own rich array of inherited practices? Given the widespread contemporary commitment to equality and diversity in public life, is the Catholic school as a community of faith in danger of becoming an increasingly anachronistic reminder of times now past? Such burning questions must be central to the mind of Catholic educational policymakers and Episcopal Conferences across the Church.

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In broad terms, we can explore ‘being open to others’ in two ways in the context of Catholic education. First, in terms of admission policies, a Catholic school should be open to pupils from all religious and cultural traditions. Second, there should be an inherent openness to ways of thinking which originate outwith the Catholic tradition. The implications of both statements, especially the second, are reflected throughout the present essay.

Two documents from different sources offer both shared and contrasting perspectives on what openness to others can mean for educational systems and the daily life of schools. Both documents here studied are important indicators of much wider trends in contemporary educational thinking. It is interesting to note that the respective titles share an interest in the common good and in the promotion of cultural harmony. Furthermore, both see religion, broadly understood, as playing a major role in the strengthening of community bonds. The juxtaposition of two important documents allows us to bring into sharp focus the possibilities for dialogue offered by contemporary educational structures. It suggests that dialogue over the aims and purposes of education can open pathways for shared exploration of the good, the true, the beautiful. As such, both documents deserve to be given a prominent role in all discussions re the relationship between education and religion.

The first document, the report of the Commission for Religion and Belief in British Public Life (2015) is a useful starting point for a necessary exploration of progressive attitudes towards contemporary religious belief. The Report’s title, *Living with Difference: Community, Diversity and the Common Good* (henceforth *Living with Difference*) offers us a broad canvas against which we can map the Church’s ‘openness to others’ in its educational institutions. It is helpful to note that the title of the report provides a useful summary of one way of understanding what being open to others can mean in practice.

Of course, any Catholic school would surely see the promotion of ‘community, diversity and the common good’ as indispensable features of its mission, although this might be refracted through particular doctrinal lenses. Nonetheless, the report is encouraging as it exemplifies, at least initially, some shared territory between Catholic and secular understandings of education.

The second document, *Educating to Intercultural Dialogue in Catholic School: Living in Harmony for a Civilisation of Love* (Congregation for Catholic Education, 2013) (henceforth *Educating to Intercultural Dialogue*) manifests in broad terms the Church’s strengthening of its ongoing commitment to dialogue with other ways of thinking as proposed in *Gaudium et Spes* (1965). *Educating to Intercultural Dialogue* seeks to harmonise cultural and religious differences (itself an interesting aim) and shows some lines of convergence, as well as divergence, with *Living with Difference*. Although rooted in a different worldview, the impact of the Congregation for Catholic

Education's document would not be adversely affected if it were to drop its subtitle 'Living in Harmony for a Civilisation of Love' in favour of 'Community, Diversity and the Common Good'.

It is incumbent on Catholic educators to build bridges and foster informed attitudes to participation in public life. In the context of contemporary educational systems and structures, the present article explores selected issues arising from a desire for openness in Catholic schools. It locates the Church's established commitment to education in the context of *Living with Difference*'s interesting insights on the place of religion in schools. Owing to the school's vital role in offering a 'safe space' for the promotion of community cohesion, we need to think hard about the Catholic school's capacity to offer a necessary openness while retaining a commitment to an established worldview. There is hence a twofold argument at the heart of the present article:

- 'being open to others in Catholic schools' is an indispensable mark of catholicity;
- an option for 'openness' cannot be seen as a conduit for moral relativism and religious syncretism.

Both parts of this argument are developed over three sections. In Part 1, I begin with an exploration of what 'living with difference' could mean for contemporary Catholic schools. In Part 2 I consider how dialogue can be understood as pedagogy. In Part Three I look at how we can develop a rich and meaningful pedagogy of dialogue. Finally, I offer three keys for the future direction of this important and timely debate.

## **Part 1 Catholic Schools: Living with Difference**

While *Living with Difference* is localised in the sense of being of immediate relevance to public life in Britain, its stated attitudes towards religion in schools are reflective of much wider cultural and political currents (Franchi et al., 2016). *Living with Difference* steers a difficult course between the promotion of respect for religion and a commitment to the higher narrative of a secular/religious polity (Cf. White, 2004; Wright, 2004; Aldridge 2015).

*Living with Difference* groups its arguments around six pertinent themes, or 'Conversations' thus: vision; education; media; dialogue; action and law. Each theme has a checklist of associated action points. In the field of education, two points merit highlighting as summaries of the wider approach adopted: a) there should be a statutory right to education in non-religious worldviews as part of the religious education syllabus (4.27) and b) greater effort should be made to form teachers in matters to

do with religion using a pedagogy of ‘encounter’ with those from other religious/non-religious traditions (4. 25).

From the perspective of Catholic education, there is much to commend in the approach proposed here, especially the clear understanding of the importance of the study of religion (broadly defined) in schools. The writers of *Living with Difference* are aware that the reach of religious beliefs, so to speak, cannot be reduced to the private sphere as many people with firm religious beliefs continue to play an active role in public affairs across the world. Whatever our views on the tenets of particular religious traditions and the phenomenon of religion itself, it is not possible to label religious belief as peripheral activity of interest solely to those on the margins of society (Jimenez Lobeira, 2014). Furthermore, recent widespread migration across the Middle East/Europe has brought to the fore the centrality of religion and associated culture vis-a-vis the promotion of social harmony.

The commitment in *Living with Difference* to the value of properly-funded and academically rigorous religious education in schools has the potential to be a positive legacy of the report. The recognition of its subject status and the associated need for teachers with increasing expertise in the discipline, does set a high bar for governments and associated policy-makers given the financial and legal commitments this would entail. Of course, this raises the question of curricular content and the underpinning philosophical foundation of any proposed new syllabi in religious education. For policy-makers in Catholic education, it raises the further question of how best to respond to calls which, on the one hand, offer support for the ‘religious’ dimension of education in schools yet, simultaneously, seem to minimise the importance of the established faith traditions which lie at the heart of Catholic education.

There is much to ponder in *Living with Difference*’s oscillating approach. It steers a fine line between the acceptance of a religious dimension to education while holding on to secular thinking as the final arbiter of what can and cannot be taught in schools. Its comments on the the appropriate *content* of a religious education syllabus bring to the fore an element of tension: the desire to esteem religion sits uneasily alongside the commitment to a so-called neutrality suspicious of firm commitment to a particular *religious* way of thinking. In other words, the welcome offered to religion is conditional on acceptance of the ‘superiority’ of secular mores.

This tension is further exemplified in the report’s proposal that religious education should offer equal space to non-religious (humanist) worldviews (2015, 4.15, 4.27). While it could be argued that non-religious worldviews cannot, by definition, be part of a syllabus of *religious* education, such a reaction on the part of Catholic educators would be inadequate given the many layers of nuance necessary for a mature grasp of the links between morality and religious commitment. A properly

crafted religious education syllabus in a Catholic school, for example, cannot ignore challenges to religious belief. On the contrary, an authentically academic approach to religious education would be inspired by the scholastic method in which the ‘case against’ a particular proposition is the seed of further study and intellectual exploration. Such a methodological approach, while ambitious and aspirational, is a fine example of a genuine dialogue of ideas.

While *Living with Difference*, as we have seen, offers support for a rigorous study of religious ways of thinking in schools, it cannot escape the conundrum posed by contemporary secular ideology: religion is a socio-cultural phenomenon to be observed and analysed as an expression of difference. Such differences, however, have to fit into a framework moulded by political and cultural ideas themselves rooted in an expressed liberal secularist agenda. In other words, religious belief and associated cultural expressions are permitted as long as they do not offend the self-same secular ideology. Of course, secularism can be either ‘benevolent’ or ‘hostile’ in the sense of the level of support it offers to religion’s place in the public square (Adhar, 2013). While *Living with Difference* is closer to a ‘benevolent’ model of secularism, it still fails to deal adequately with how diverse claims to truth can co-exist and work together for the common good.

It would be easy to frame the debate between faith-based religious education and more phenomenological approaches as a challenge by powerful secular bodies to people of religious faith, not just in education but in public life more generally. Given the observed numerical decline in practising Christians in most western countries, we must avoid the temptation to ‘close the door’ on possible means of dialogue in favour of a fortress mentality. Recent moves in Catholic educational circles reflect a much more robust commitment to the Catholic school as a site of dialogue and religious literacy. While this approach is not without its internal challenges vis-a-vis the relationship between evangelisation and dialogue (see below), it is not necessarily a reaction to wider political and cultural critiques of religion but a thoughtful development of the Church’s own rich educational traditions. The following section will explore this new direction with reference principally to *Educating to Intercultural Dialogue in Catholic School: Living in Harmony for a Civilisation of Love* (Congregation for Catholic Education, 2013).

## **Part 2 Dialogue as Pedagogy**

When does a commitment to openness and dialogue in Catholic schools become an embrace of moral and cultural relativism? Before looking further at this pressing question, we consider first what we understand by ‘dialogue’ in this professional context and whether we can describe dialogue as a form of pedagogy.

To enter into dialogue with another marks a willingness to learn from an encounter with ways of thinking which are not our ways. To take a simple example from another field, a professional dialogue between medical experts over the best way to treat a patient with a rare illness allows different evidence bases and experiential knowledge to come together with, hopefully, a positive outcome for the patient. Who would claim that all points of view would be equally valid if some of the evidence bases were wholly or even partially inadequate?

In educational, moral and cultural matters, authentic professional dialogue is the robust encounter between ideas. This conversation, ideally underpinned by a spirit of amicable openness, is a means to facilitate understanding and, indeed, harmony between contrasting worldviews. Catholic education cannot remain indifferent to this process given the high profile of Catholic schools in many countries. *A fortiori*, Catholic educational institutions should be the leaders of such discussions and not reluctant participants: the mission to ‘teach all nations’ (Matthew 28:19) limits all possibilities for self-referential and enclosed attitudes to public life. If Catholic educational thought emerges, as it should, from what is known as the *Catholic intellectual tradition* (Royal, 2015), we see how, at its best, Catholic education has the capacity and self-confidence to draw from its own considerable historical sources in order to address the challenges it faces from a range of particular circumstances. In a sense we can state, perhaps curiously, that the Catholic intellectual tradition is an example of Catholicism in dialogue with its own body of thought. As such, it manifests a ‘hermeneutic of continuity’ which is both forward-thinking but open to insights from tradition.

Of course, it is self-evident that dialogue needs to be undertaken with those who are not part of own tradition if it is not to become a monologue. Furthermore, in theological terms, we could rightly ask how a body with a universal reach (a *catholic* Church) could be anything but open to others if it were to remain true to the command to ‘teach all nations’ (see above). This suggests that the Christian message is worthy of teaching universally because it is of greater ‘value’ than other worldviews. Two questions necessarily follow from this: do those who, for whatever reason, are not part of the communion of the Church somehow live in a form of spiritual darkness? If this is the case, is the Church’s commitment to dialogue no more than a cipher for covert evangelisation of those yet to be enlightened by the Gospel?

A key reference point here is the relationship between the reality of pluralism and the promotion of relativism. *Educating to Intercultural Dialogue* helpfully describes this as follows: ‘Being aware of the relative nature of cultures and opting for relativism are two profoundly different things’

(Congregation for Catholic Education, 2013, 22). It is undeniable that different cultures have particular ethical/moral narratives: difference means a lack of uniformity. To know where these differences lie and the philosophical arguments *pro et contra* certain traditions are the signs of an educated and open minded person. To opt for relativism, on the other hand, is to seek to flatten differences and claim, for example, that different traditions are simply culturally-conditioned expressions of a greater religious reality.

Is it possible to square the awkward circle between holding sincerely to a proclaimed religious truth and exemplifying openness to other ways of understanding the human condition? In educational matters, it is important to test the relationship between evangelisation and interreligious dialogue (Heft, 2011). This contentious issue is as old as Christianity itself. Indeed, Pope Benedict XVI (writing as Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger) identified the heart of the theological and cultural ‘problem’ arising from a proclamation of Jesus Christ as the saviour of all humanity. If other religions are seen as ‘preparatory to Christianity’ or simply ‘insufficient, anti-Christian, contrary to the truth’ (2004, p. 19), the potential for dialogue and the possibilities it offers for cross-community cohesion could be limited or even erased from the mind of the believer.

The Catholic school occupies a unique space as it brings the mind of the Church to the world of education. To do so successfully, the proclamation of its message must be integrated within a pedagogy of dialogue which offers the Catholic worldview to all with an interest in human flourishing. Part Three will consider how this pedagogy of dialogue could be developed.

### **Part 3 Developing a Pedagogy of Dialogue**

*Educating to Intercultural Dialogue* brings together many of the insights on cultural dialogue which have been offered in the Magisterium’s recent educational corpus. Indeed, the focus in the title on ‘intercultural dialogue’ suggests not just a new angle on already established ways of thinking but a significant shift in the DNA of Catholic education.

The document identifies three approaches to dialogue: *relativistic* (22-23), *assimilation* (24-25) and *intercultural* (26-28). Unsurprisingly, it sees the third approach as the most effective for the Christian mission today and suggests that its goal is ‘to construct a new intercultural approach, which aims at realizing an integration of cultures in mutual recognition’ (2015, 28). The promotion of intercultural dialogue in the school is, perhaps, less easy to achieve than such a sentence would admit. Two difficulties present themselves: what would intercultural dialogue look like when achieved and what

processes would be put in place as the means to this end? Is it the case that the *process* is the actual goal and that to have pre-set plans and/or a fixed outcome in mind is not in the spirit of authentic dialogue?

Before we explore further the scope of ‘intercultural dialogue’ it is necessary to set out some lines of engagement regarding the implementation of processes and aims of intercultural dialogue. A conceptual challenge lies in the gap between the language and expectations enshrined in Magisterial documents and the lack of examples of what this *could* mean in practice for educational institutions. This leaves open the possibility of a Church with many different cultural ‘traditions’ co-existing alongside common doctrine. For example, some Catholics retain the practice of abstention from meat on Fridays. While ‘fish on Fridays’ is often seen as a traditional Catholic practice, the reality is quite different as such a collective form of abstention is no longer part of the lived of many Catholics. This is a challenge, albeit a relatively small one, to catholicity.

If we take the starting position that religious culture in the Catholic school is the practical expression of shared doctrine, we can quickly see that not all aspects of ‘Catholic culture’ are of equal standing. For example, it should be taught clearly that the Mass is the centre of all Catholic worship but exploration about what the Mass means for the Church could be part of a wider discussion of the nature of religious commitments across different religious traditions. This would show the various ways in which humanity has sought meaning in religion but without necessarily lessening the uniqueness of Catholic sacramental theology. Of course, such a way of working requires committed and well formed teachers who are at ease with Catholic doctrine, confident in their teaching methods and genuinely committed to the integral formation of the student body.

These examples, limited as they are, offer an insight into the potential of intercultural dialogue for the building of a broader religious awareness. While we must be wary of seeing such cross-community dialogue as simply a study of the things other religious people do, it does offer a window into the life of religious believers through the cultural lenses of attitudes to food, dress and the arts. An authentic study of religious culture would not see these as the ends of a discussion but as a door opening into the beating heart of the religion: this is where we would expect further exploration of the nature of the relationship between God and humanity and what it means to live as a committed adherent of a particular religion.

A related aspect is the promotion of knowledge about religion and (associated) religious ways of living. *Living with Difference* is clear on the importance of ‘religion and belief literacy’ (2015, p. 2) which, it asserts, is a more inclusive term than the common term ‘religious literacy’ (2015, p. 16). While a debate about the conceptual relationship between religion and belief is for another time, the



importance of clarity when teaching the expressed culture of particular religions needs to be set alongside a knowledge of its principal doctrines. For those involved in education, the continued high level of religious adherence across the world demands a commitment by teachers in Catholic schools to systematic study of the philosophical, theological and cultural bases of (at least) the major monotheistic traditions. This cognitive challenge is not to be seen as a rejection of pastoral approaches to education. Indeed, a questioning of the value of the cognitive dimension to education in favour of more therapeutic pedagogies is to break the pact between the mind and the heart which is central to a pedagogy of religious education. To be clear, we would not wish teachers to be asking children questions such as ‘What is the Muslim equivalent of Baptism?’ or to teach that Ramadan is the Muslim version of Lent! In a similar vein, it is also necessary to explain why the established Catholic position on ‘same-sex’ marriage is not grounded in hostility towards anyone but reflects a strong theologically-rooted anthropological vision which cannot be reconstructed to suit the prevailing ideology of a liberal society.

Intercultural dialogue as so understood, when facilitated with nuance and sensitivity in the Catholic school, offers multiple opportunities for the promotion of religion and belief literacy. It serves as a welcome reminder that intercultural education is a process of shared exploration of the human story. Given the complexities arising from any study of what intercultural dialogue means in practice, it would be a grave mistake to narrow Catholic education’s frame of reference. Any historical study of Catholic educational traditions reveals that it is much more than a series of systematically-planned catechetical moments or evangelical projects but, at its best, is an inclusive project rooted in ‘authentic humanism’. The Jesuit *Ratio Studiorum* is one example of how the Church has shaped educational history. The phrase ‘authentic humanism’ has taken on a fresh impetus in recent years thanks to the work first of Pope Benedict and now Pope Francis. Pope Benedict certainly saw the advocacy of ‘humanism’, *pace* much secular thinking, as a Christian concept. In so doing he drew on Pope Paul’s comments in *Popolorum Progressio* on the need for a humanism which drew people towards God (Pope Paul, 1967, *passim*). For Benedict, writing in *Caritas in Veritate*, a humanism without God was a charade as only ‘the Absolute can guide us in the promotion and building of forms of social and civic life’ (2009, 780).

Benedict here proposes that which is inclusive and distinctive in the Catholic understanding of anthropology. The choice of the words ‘promotion and building’ suggests a strong dialogic process designed to build more a humane society which cannot be aligned too closely with some contemporary cultural fads. We note also how a traditional understanding of Christian anthropology is at the base of Benedict’s thinking and, by extension, his understanding of Catholic social teaching: without God, there can be no proper appreciation of the dignity of the human being.

Pope Francis, in turn, has added another layer to the proposal for Christian humanism. He has reminded the Church that the humanism of Catholic tradition is, essentially, Christological. In so doing, Francis takes the divine nature of Jesus as the model: in other words, he is not designing a ‘new humanism’ but looking afresh at how Jesus taught and lived (Pope Francis, 2015). The position of Pope Francis seems initially to lean more towards the distinctiveness, as opposed to the inclusiveness, of Catholic thinking in education. Therein lies the gist of the conundrum explored in this essay regarding the relationship between openness to others and a stated attachment to a specific religious tradition.

### **Concluding Remarks: Being Open to the Future**

The relationship in Catholic schools between what is distinctive and what is inclusive was, is and will remain an important research theme in Catholic education (Sullivan 2001). Given the tense relationship between dialogue and evangelisation, is it possible to find a way forward? Perhaps we need to think more broadly about what the Church sees as its mission to educate and offer a creative response to the call to evangelise while offering a genuine welcome to all who knock at the door of the Catholic school. How can this be done?

I now suggest three ‘keys’ to developing a spirit of openness to others in the Catholic school. Each key ends with a question for reflection.

#### ***First Key: Intercultural Education as Overarching Theme of Catholic Education***

Much of the debate over community cohesion in schools in recent decades in the United Kingdom has accepted that different cultures and religions are almost unrelated features of a modern society: in this multicultural line of thinking, to criticise aspects of the culture of the ‘other’ is, at best, interference and at worst a form of western cultural imperialism. When this happens, complete autonomy seems to be afforded to expressions of individual cultures and thus squeezes out the possibilities of genuine intercultural dialogue (ibid 23).

Of course, such a binary comparison has clear flaws. We need to think hard about what is understood by intercultural dialogue, especially its limits and its possibilities in the context of a Catholic school in the plural society. *Educating to Intercultural Dialogue* (2013), seems to place increasing emphasis on the need for Catholic schools to act as sites of intercultural education. The advocacy of intercultural education here rests on its ability to promote ‘encounter, dialogue and mutual transformation’ (2013, 28). Of course, what is not said here is equally important as that which is: what can ‘mutual transformation’ mean?

**Question for reflection.** Are we not in danger of sailing too close to relativism and applying a cautious lens to the possibility of the Christian tradition being the energy and the goal of transformative processes?

***Second Key: A Commitment to Hospitality in Catholic Schools***

The aspect of welcome, or hospitality, is a case in point. It cannot be repeated too often that a Catholic school which seeks only to educate Catholic children is not giving witness to the catholicity of the Church. Cardinal Parolin's important address to UNESCO (2015) began with a reminder to his audience of the Church's traditional commitment to a broader education in its network as opposed to mere catechetical projects:

La culture et l'éducation n'ont jamais été considérées par l'Église catholique comme de simples instruments pour l'évangélisation mais comme des dimensions humaines dotées d'une haute valeur intrinsèque.

This important intervention highlights the essential *educational* framework of the Catholic school. The speech in general is a reiteration of the themes of *Gravissimum Educationis* for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Cardinal Parolin, rightly, makes much of the need for education to be in the front line of universal moves to combat illiteracy, hunger and illness but has something much more profound to say. The mention of the 'haute valeur intrinsèque' cannot pass by without comment. This is a neat summary of the lines of thought sketched out by Popes Benedict and Francis in their many addresses on education and schooling in recent years. For Parolin, education (in the Catholic school) sheds the light of Christianity on the problems of the modern world and proposes the Christian view of the world as a much-needed antidote to educational systems with more than one eye of instrumentalism and economic measurements. To locate this argument in the context of 'being open to others', the good Catholic school should be a magnet which attracts all people and where ideas are explored and critiqued in the spirit of faith and critical thinking which marks the best of the Catholic educational tradition (Chambers, 2012).

**Question for reflection.** To what extent should the Catholic school see itself as a place of evangelisation?

***Third Key: Catholic Schools as Leaven in Society***

The recent moves by Pope Francis regarding the importance of encounter—itsself a development of the *Courtyard of the Gentiles* initiative of Pope Benedict—suggests that the conceptual framework of Catholic education is moving, albeit at a cautious pace, in the wake of the energy unleashed by

*Gaudium et Spes* in 1965. To be clear, the substantial advances in Catholic educational thought in recent decades represent a significant reform of one of the principal means of engagement between the Church and the ‘world’ of which it is part. Nonetheless, it is perhaps time to look again at how the Church can best act as leaven in the world of education given the recent 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of *Gravissimum Educationis* and the major challenges facing education from pluralism and secularism. Pope Francis alluded to this in the question and answer session held at the close of the *World Congress on Catholic Education* in Rome (November 2016). His comments on the need for ‘informal education’ were put in the context of a formal education ‘impoverished due to the legacy of positivism’. By this he alludes to those who value most that which can be measured. Catholic schools cannot ignore the political landscape but somehow need to articulate a radical vision of Catholic education which will influence broader educational thought.

**Question for reflection.** For Pope Francis, the three languages of education—the languages of the head/heart/hands—offer a more rounded, harmonious and humane scholastic experience. This is a big claim: is it justified?

As we consider the best routes for Catholic education to follow in the years ahead, it is important to bear in mind that Christianity is often a sign of contradiction. The tension explored here between dialogue and evangelisation is one indicator of how the Christian message demands hard and deep thinking if it is to be a force for good in society. *Living with Difference* (2015) as we have seen, welcomes the contribution of religious thought to the building of the common good but somehow finds it hard to accept that committed religious believers are just that: *believers* in the truth of their own religion. The desire in the report to flatten religious and cultural differences in favour of a broad ‘contribution of religion’ is less a sign of openness than an indicator of suspicion towards those who do not follow the liberal narrative. Catholic education, if it is to be increasingly open to other people and ways of thinking, must show an equally robust commitment to its own grand narrative.

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