



We may need to modify
our expectations for
Catholic schools.

Help Their Unbelief

BY MATT EMERSON

I am the Xavier success story," she said. "I used to be a total atheist downer, and now I'm reading *The Seven Storey Mountain*."

The speaker was a senior, one of several with whom I was chatting as we returned to Palm Desert, Calif., from Riverside, where nine Xavier College Preparatory students had argued and objected their way to victory in a mock trial. As Interstate 10 curved past a chain of outlet stores and a casino hotel, our conversation moved from the night's competition to God. Recalling a column about Catholic education, I asked my students about Xavier's influence on their faith and about their view of Catholicism. It was the question that led to my student's response, and then to Thomas Merton's book.

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The column I remembered was written by Charles J. Chaput, the archbishop of Philadelphia. Published on Jan. 21, 2012, in *The Philadelphia Tribune*, the archbishop wrote, “Catholic schools exist, first and foremost, to form believing Catholic Christians; people of the Gospel; people of justice, mercy and charity. If they produce something less, then we need to ask ourselves whether they *deserve* to survive.”

Initially, the archbishop’s statements struck me as truisms, no more provocative than saying a U.S. history course should be about U.S. history. But on second thought, his comments raise serious questions for educators. If Catholic schools produce something less than believing Catholic Christians, then shouldn’t we try to figure out why? And what might be changed? Some basic terms would also need to be defined: What is a “believing Catholic Christian”? And how does a Catholic school know it has formed one?

The answers to these questions are not obvious, and a failure to attend to their nuances could lead people to determine that Catholic schools are failing in their mission and therefore do not deserve to survive.

What Is a ‘Believing Catholic Christian’?

Consider again Archbishop Chaput’s remark that the purpose of a Catholic school is to “form believing Catholic Christians.” In light of that, imagine a hypothetical senior at a Catholic high school, whom we will call Sarah.

Imagine that Sarah wants to help the poor and offers a compassionate heart to both stranger and friend. Though Sarah comes from a conventionally secular home and began high school without interest in a creator, she has developed a nascent belief in a loving God. She has attended retreats and led immersion trips, including a week of service and solidarity in Latin America. During her senior year, she continues to tutor children in a poor immigrant community even though she has already completed her school’s required hours of service. As a direct result of her time at the Catholic high school, she is now applying to colleges that combine faith and service, something that would have been unthinkable to her four years prior.

But imagine also that Sarah is unsure about Jesus’ identity as the incarnate God and doubts the exclusive claims of the Catholic Church. She disagrees with the church’s positions on major social issues, especially on contraception and

homosexuality. She attends Mass only when the school requires it.

Is Sarah a “believing Catholic Christian”?

Much can be said on her behalf. Though Sarah cannot (at least not yet) affirm essential Catholic dogmas, she serves her school and community in ways that are Jesus-like. Her warm heart and service to the marginalized call to mind the self-sacrificing love revealed in the Gospels, an

admirable commitment to the corporal and spiritual works of mercy. Sarah is not explicitly or formally Catholic, however, and she does not believe in central Catholic claims about God and reality.

Can a Catholic high school be said to have failed if it produces people like Sarah, or if the majority of students are like

her? Is the threshold for Catholic success someone like another student, call her Maria, who knows and understands the doctrines of the faith, commits to the church’s moral and social positions and also lives out these teachings consistently and concretely? Is anything short of Maria a disappointment? A failure?

I do not think so. A Catholic school can remain true to its mission and identity and fairly be labeled Catholic, not only when it forms students like Sarah but precisely because it forms students like her.

Schools of Today

To understand why that is the case, note the context in which today’s Catholic high school finds itself.

In his collection of lectures titled *Faith Seeking*, the great philosopher-theologian Denys Turner of Yale University, speaking of the question of God’s existence, writes that “for very large sectors of the populations of Western countries, life is lived broadly in a mental and emotional condition of indifference to the question.” Professor Turner’s statement is not simply a sociological description; its meaning and effects are embodied in individual lives—the lives that produce music, make movies, write books, lead schools, coach teams, tuck in children at night and send in applications to Catholic schools. Anyone interested in Catholic education must acknowledge that today’s students emerge from a culture indifferent to the existence of God. And to the extent they do consider the matter, students typically doubt that God exists. They are skeptical about religious belief and sometimes hostile to it, and they are convinced that there is no objective truth.

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What might account for this outlook?

In addition to the influences of culture, religious belief rarely receives support in the crucible of faith formation, the home. If religion receives any attention, it is often one item on a menu of activities that compete for the family's time. A surprising percentage of students are also wounded. Every week, as a teacher of sophomores and seniors, I learn something that stuns me, something of the powerful aftershocks of divorce, alcoholism or depression. Many young people have no consistent, loving authority figure, no reliable model of virtue and no stable community. They often have no one to trust.

We educators cannot simply blame the media or parents and assume that Catholic schools and the church will produce disciples simply by modifying outside forces. Even students from stable and devoutly Catholic homes reject or resist formation in Catholic faith. Why?

Not Simply Catechesis

We have to be honest; part of the reason for this inertia lies within Catholicism itself. The deposit of Judeo-Christian faith confronts students as both rational and mysterious; even, at times, disturbing and strange. It involves doctrines and dispositions, liturgies and practices and a way of life that threatens what teenagers (and adults) usually presume to be necessary for happiness. It intersects with history, with politics, with anthropology, with archaeology, with etymology, with philosophy and with literature. While this is fascinating, it means there are snares along the way.

If you doubt it, spend a week teaching high school religion. Imagine a 15-year-old who emerges from the setting I described above. Imagine that one of the first things he learns in freshman religion class is that God has not only entered the world through a virgin, but that now Jesus wants us to eat and drink his blood. How do you think the student will react? His incomprehension will usually mirror that of Jesus' listeners in John 6. (One sophomore, after hearing my explanation of the real presence, said, "Ugh, that's disgusting.") But the snags are not just the teaching of the real presence or the more shocking assertions of faith. Engage a group of teenagers on how suffering can be reconciled with a loving God, or how Scripture is inspired, or on the allegorical nature of the first 11 chapters of Genesis. Try talking to teenagers about the church's position on homosexuality and contraception or the reasons for a male-only, celibate priesthood.

Sometimes there is progress. Most of the time, however, you will find resistance and argument; you may not even be taken seriously.

It is not the case, as many tend to believe (and I once did), that more or better catechesis will solve the problem. Ultimately, formation in the Catholic faith is not simply a

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matter of reading or memorizing, or knowing a “bunch of stuff.” I have had students who could list the seven sacraments, expound on the real presence and discourse beautifully on the meaning of Jesus—but who did not believe in any of it. Belief, as Pope Benedict XVI told Peter Seewald in an interview (published in *God and the World*), “is something living, which is inclusive of the whole person in all his dimensions—understanding, will and feelings.”

Those who have studied the Catholic intellectual tradition sometimes think that if one reads enough and if one thinks enough, one will gradually accept the truths of Catholicism. We forget that brilliant minds—minds well acquainted with history, philosophy and theology—have rejected Christianity; others have taken years to accept it. We forget that faith is a mystery and a gift, something outside human control and not the result of even the best-designed curriculum.

Accepting Sarahs

Given these factors, we have to be realistic when we talk about a Catholic school creating “believing Catholic Christians.” We must be mindful of the milieu that shapes the students we teach, the challenges Catholicism itself pre-

sents and the mystery of belief. When our students enter into formal study of the Catholic faith, they can find it off-putting in complexity or strangeness, or in its apparent unverifiability. Combine this with the students’ widespread relativism, throw in parental agnosticism, and you have a high percentage of students entering Catholic school primed to reject or resist formation. In some sense, this is a clash of civilizations.

What is a Catholic school to do? Are we to despair and conclude that Catholic schools should abandon their mission to form believing Catholics? Absolutely not. Outstanding young men and women enroll in Catholic schools, and we educators are privileged to be among their guides as they begin their journey toward faith. Yet we may have to modify expectations and sacrifice a surface Catholicism for a deeper receptivity to foundational principles of faith.

What would it mean to refashion our expectations in this way? In Catholic schools there is a necessary and graced place for someone like the hypothetical Sarah and many others like her. A student like Sarah will leave her Catholic school having made significant strides in the spiritual life. She will have grown from a position of skepticism to a position of belief; the seed of faith—no minor matter given the widespread indifference to the question of God—will have sprouted. She will have moved from praying not at all to praying frequently. She will have developed a genuine sympathy for the poor, the homeless and the immigrant. She will have undergone a transformation in self-perception and priorities hinting at the *metanoia* called for by Christ (Mk 1:15).

In other words, Sarah’s personal exodus has begun. Maybe that can be the role of a Catholic high school today: to liberate students from slavery and to point them in the right direction, toward the desert, knowing that confusions and idolatries will persist but having faith that these students will continue their transformation.

I am not suggesting that Catholic schools should give up on a fuller formation in Catholic Christianity. These “preambles” to faith (to borrow from Aquinas), which a Catholic school can instill in Sarah, are not ends in themselves. Ultimately, a Catholic school seeks to develop Sarah’s belief in Jesus as Lord, her desire for the sacraments and her commitment to Catholic moral and social principles. But a failure to develop all those, especially in today’s culture, cannot obscure the tremendous progress in the spiritual life that Catholic schools can and do provide.

A student like Sarah is a success story, a great example of the need for Catholic schools and of their salutary effect in the modern world. 

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