

## ARTICLES

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# The Problem of Catholic School Teachers Deferring to the Home on Controversial Religious Issues

Graham P. McDonough  
University of Victoria, Canada

*This paper observes that an ironic tension occurs in the discussion of controversial issues in some Catholic schools. One technique that teachers use in response to student disagreement with the official Church view on a controversial issue like contraception, homosexuality, or female ordination is to present Church teaching but then suggest that students follow up at home with their parents for further information. While this technique is promising to some degree, it sits uneasily against the remarks that some Catholic education commentators make regarding deficiencies in the home regarding student formation and socialization in the faith. The discussion acknowledges some advantages in this technique, but ultimately concludes that it is flawed because it sidesteps the school's responsibility to promote higher-order religious thinking and undermines the home-school-Church partnership by placing the responsibilities of families and parishes into schools.*

Institutional schooling of any sort is not a one-sided or unidirectional affair. All schools can be characterized generally as the intersection of the state's interests on the one hand and students' intentions, interests, and learning needs on the other. Teachers, in particular, work at the convergence of these interests, and their professional obligation is to coordinate state requirements with what they diagnose as their students' pedagogical needs (Olson, 2003). This theoretical construct is a handy means for acknowledging and describing education's complexity in any secular place, but applying that same level of abstraction to religious-based enterprises reveals that they are even more complex than their secular counterparts, and for Catholic schools in particular this richness derives from the added constitutive dimension of Church<sup>1</sup> interests (Congregation for Catholic Education [CCE], 1988). The

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1 The meaning of "Church" is difficult to determine precisely for the risk of reduction. In the case of a particular school it might legitimately mean one or all of the Magisterium, the clergy, the diocese, the parish, or the people of God (Vatican Council II, 1965e). In this context, however, I use "Church" to mean "the official Church" as an institution in the juridical bureaucratic sense of its Magisterium.

Catholic school teacher's professional obligation, therefore, is to coordinate the converging foundational aims that these three general players present to the teaching-learning relationships in Catholic schools.

On the many occasions when these aims are generally congruent and uncontroversial, coordination is relatively easy. Catholic schools undoubtedly produce good citizens (Feinberg, 2006)—in some cases, receiving public funding to do so—or else the scandal of their graduates' inability to integrate into modern society would already be a long established subject of news media scrutiny and academic study. General curricular goals like “academic excellence,” “integrating faith across the whole school program,” or thinner notions of social justice concerning fair wages, meaningful work, and the dignity of persons in civil secular society are relatively uncontroversial among all players; disagreement, if it persists, is muted. Even on certain controversial civil secular issues there is arguably an agreement that the role of the Catholic school is to foster the kind of intellectual breadth and depth necessary to the reasonable development of its students as moral political subjects who must make informed decisions as citizens, and is not to tell them specifically what to think. If secular liberal society maintains that individual agency is primary in thinking about and responding to what one learns in institutional schooling, the Second Vatican Council's (1965b) *Declaration on Religious Freedom* carries the closest Catholic ecclesial equivalent of this stance. It maintains that since truth has its own binding power and no person should be forced to embrace faith against his or her will, individual religious freedom is presupposed and it is, therefore, each person's responsibility conscientiously to choose their faith and respond to its imperatives. So on an issue like, for instance, whether Canada's Aboriginal peoples have received fair treatment<sup>2</sup> from federal and provincial governments, one would expect Catholic school teachers confidently to be prepared to assist students in collecting information, assessing its validity as evidence, and developing their own opinions based on that work. Such is the stuff of good teaching for critical thinking, and could be seen as justifiable in the eyes of students, the school, parents, and the Church—in this case considered as the whole people of God, including the Magisterium—as a

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2 “Fair treatment,” as such, is a broad category. The Canadian government apologized in July 2008 for the errors and abuses of enforcing residential schooling on Aboriginal persons in the 19th and 20th centuries, but other issues remain as sources of social tension in certain places. These include Aboriginal persons' land claims; exemption from certain taxation, hunting, and fishing laws; access to free higher education when non-Aboriginals must pay; and apparent over representation on welfare and prison rolls. Some views would maintain that past wrongs have long been redressed and it is time for Aboriginal persons to “move on” and “accept responsibility” for their own achievement and well-being, while others maintain that much more needs to be done to rehabilitate past and current wrongs, like institutionalized social and economic racism and White society's denial of Aboriginal spirituality and ways of knowing. Controversy exists about the validity of assumptions at the root of these claims and arguments.

vital step in historical, multicultural, and citizenship education. Not all players may agree on *what* is right so far as *content* and *opinions* are concerned, but in general there is arguably no conflict or controversy in theory on *how* the educational institution ought to respond *in method* to this question for teaching and learning purposes because the method is linked to learning objectives that aim to develop students' critical (which is in this case *historical*) thinking. Those objectives require students to analyze and evaluate data in order to synthesize and substantiate their own learned opinions; as such, teaching students to think independently is less controversial than teaching them *what to think*.

A more problematic circumstance arises, however, when the lesson's content concerns issues where there is significantly less, or even no, consensus between these educational partners. Consider the prevailing Church teachings on contraception (Paul VI, 1968), female ordination (John Paul II, 1994), and homosexuality<sup>3</sup> (Congregation for the Doctrine for the Faith, 1986) as examples. These are all non-infallible ordinary teachings,<sup>4</sup> which means that although they are due respect and thoughtful consideration as Catholicism's prevailing institutional orthodoxy, relative to (a) infallibly defined teachings (*definitive credenda*) and (b) teachings that are "proposed definitively, even if they have not been taught to be divinely revealed" (*definitive tendenda*; Boyle, 2000, p. 360), these are (c) what "the church proposes as true, though not defined as infallible and not necessarily unchangeable" (Pilarczyk, 1986, p. 175). As the Church publishes in three registers of teaching voice, depending on the subject, Catholic theology likewise describes different attitudes that the faithful can take toward these teachings, depending on the register in which it is expressed. Philip Kaufman (1995) observes in the documents of the Second Vatican Council a

careful distinction between assent due to infallible teaching of pope or council and *obsequium*, due to other hierarchical teaching (cf. *Dogmatic Constitution*, 25). Assent is an act of faith in a statement as true; *obsequium* involves only a response of submission or respect. (p. 6)<sup>5</sup>

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3 "Homosexual" is a contested word, especially when the speaker is exclusively heterosexual and/or maintains that any non heterosexual behavior is disordered. While efforts to change or redefine that term are problematic at best, I use that word here only because it mirrors the language in Church documents.

4 Referring to the categories presented immediately below, the official Catholic view on homosexuality maintains that "The doctrine on the 'intrinsic evil' of homosexual acts belongs to the second level of definitive doctrines, the teaching on the 'objective disorder' of the homosexual orientation relates to the non-infallible, third level teaching requiring *obsequium religiosum*" (Nugent, 1999, p. 142).

5 See Örsy, 1987; Coriden, Green, & Heintschel, 1985; and Boyle, 2000 for a further treatment of *obsequium*.

This difference in epistemic solemnity implies that institutional Catholic schools have, in theory at least, the latitude to develop different pedagogical attitudes and methods directed at the content knowledge and critical thinking relevant to non-infallible ordinary teachings. In many cases students disagree with Church teachings on contraception, ordination, and homosexuality (Bibby, 1993),<sup>6</sup> and so here is where a salient pedagogical problem emerges in both theory and practice. In cases where some students do not wish to dismiss the Church *in toto* on account of such particular disagreements—perhaps they identify as Catholic, love the Church, but wish to see some reform in certain areas—the pedagogical question arises for teachers on how to meet these students’ intellectual, spiritual, and ecclesial needs honestly and adequately in this regard.

The dilemma for religion teachers immediately becomes apparent. First, they are required to present and maintain the official Magisterial teaching because of the responsibility to *curricular content*, whether they or their students agree with it or not. Second, and in addition to this requirement for orthodoxy, the norms of good pedagogy dictate moving beyond rote memorization of content (i.e., doctrine, tradition, and Scripture) toward critical thinking (i.e., “thinking religiously” about authority, truth claims, moral dilemmas, exegesis, and many other things) as the context-specific brand of critical thinking in religion classes; such an approach to curriculum enables students to incorporate their intentions into the teaching-learning relationship by “thinking with the Church.” Certainly not all students disagree with the Church on these teachings, but looking into objections—and even especially loyal objections—to Church teaching is certainly not beyond the scope of critical religious thinking, even among those with the most rigorously fervent desire to adhere always to the Magisterium. This tradition is at least as old as St. Thomas Aquinas, who used a technique of replying to objections as his philosophical method. When these two concerns are in tension, the dilemma thus might severely trouble teachers’ practical professional approaches: If they are too rigid in their presentation of non-infallible ordinary teaching they can risk alienating their dissident students and abandoning an opportunity for critical religious thinking; however, they also risk reprimand, censure, dismissal, and certainly alienating students who *agree fully* with these teachings if they appear to be attempting to undermine or promote disloyalty to the Magisterium.

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6 Bibby’s data apply to his exclusively Canadian sample, but there is no evidence to suggest that Canadian Catholic youth are unique in this regard. These data suffice to ground the theoretical problem noted in at least one practical context; moreover, it would take only one skeptical student in any other place to arouse this theoretical problem in practice.

As with any dilemma there is a desire to find a third option that provides an acceptable path toward resolution, and one such path is a reframing of the problem's terms within the Catholic understanding of education. The responsibility for education, according to the Second Vatican Council (1965d), rests on a partnership between home, school, and Church, with particular respect given to the position and contribution of parents as the primary educators of their children. Within the theoretical construct above, therefore, the relationship of Catholic education thus extends beyond the state-Church-student triad and into the intentions and agency of students' parents, families, and homes. This dimension is most interesting because of the pedagogical opportunity it opens to teachers who desire to sidestep this dilemma: When faced with the pedagogical problem of dealing with controversial religious issues and student disagreement with non-infallible ordinary teaching, one possible option in pedagogical method is to refer students to their parents if they have further questions regarding the official, prevailing view.

This paper argues that the pedagogical technique of deferring to the home for further information, debate, and discussion teachers use when faced with the dilemma of how to handle disagreements on non-infallible ordinary teaching is limited and problematic. The argument examines the problem through an analysis of Church documents, commentary by Catholic educators, and an empirical study of teachers' statements that are grounded in their professional response to the practical dilemma. Generally speaking, while the findings and conclusions of this study illustrate and support some of the benefits of using this technique, they ultimately also uncover a competing phenomenon that significantly mitigates its theoretical usefulness, the consequences of which reflect back upon the teacher, the school, and, perhaps most importantly, the obligation for Catholic educational theorists to provide more creative options and legitimate theoretical justification for a more preferable response.

The competing phenomena are thus summarized: In brief, some respondents illustrate the sentiment that their work is made more difficult due to the fact that they report having to overcome deficiencies in the religious education, socialization, and formation that their students receive at home. At the same time, however, other respondents illustrate the hope that students will confer with their parents on the very issues that are at the heart of the disagreement with Church teaching. The criticism of this "deferring to the home" technique is thus structured around two argumentative pivots: one minor and the other major. The minor pivot concerns the ironic fact that teachers defer to the home even while simultaneously regarding it as unreliable, and the major pivot concerns a philosophical examination of the epistemic, political, and moral strengths and weaknesses of the technique in terms of the intellectual,

spiritual, and ecclesial service that it provides students. Ultimately, these critiques do not blame teachers for using theoretically inadequate techniques, but note that they are positioned so that they have recourse to nothing more preferable in response to this dilemma. The conclusions, thus, claim that the theory of Catholic education ought to be improved in order to provide the kind of pedagogical latitude that is necessary to promote more open and high-quality philosophical discussion of the content and method of faithful disagreement concerning controversial, non-infallible ordinary teaching.

### **The Home-School-Church Triad**

The culture of schooling today informs, invites, and attempts to nurture parental participation almost by habit and without question, and Catholic schools are no exception to this fact. In the Catholic school, however, the justification for this practice extends beyond a secular norm or instrumental aim and sits within the Magisterium's understanding of education and schooling's proper role in society. Church documents affirm that the education of learners (and especially youth) is not the sole responsibility of Catholic schools. The Second Vatican Council recognizes that parents and families are the primary educators of their children, names the larger community and society as supporting institutions for parents, and maintains the Church in the final place for its social role in proclaiming the Gospel (Vatican Council II, 1965d; cf. Vatican Council II, 1965e), and John Paul II (1981) confirms this view in his encyclical *On the Role of the Christian Family in the Modern World*. Parents are free to organize the form of religious life in their own households and to raise their children in accord with their decisions (Vatican Council II, 1965b), and according to the principle of subsidiarity (see Pius XI, 1931) the family's primacy should not be supplanted nor should educational interventions take place without "due considerations...for the wishes of parents" (Vatican Council II, 1965d, n. 3). The Congregation for Catholic Education recognizes that students and their families should learn in accord with the Christian principles of religious freedom and freedom of conscience (CCE, 1988; cf. Vatican Council II, 1965b, 1965c), and that specific, local educational aims under the broader rubric *Catholic education* should be created in "dialogue" (CCE, 1988, 1998) and "partnership" with families (CCE 1988). So far as the school depends upon the Magisterium as a Catholic institution (Vatican Council II, 1965a), and the family or home is recognized as a major partner in education, the Second Vatican Council documents undoubtedly support a theoretical model of Catholic education as the partnership between home, school, and Church. More localized documents, published by lay educators,

follow these Magisterial teachings and affirm this partnership “of home, school, and parish that accepts responsibility for educating the young in the way and service of the Gospel” (Trafford, 1998, p. 8-9).

Far from romanticizing this triad, the Congregation for Catholic Education (1988) acknowledges that deficiencies can exist within it. In addition to the material deficiencies that impede education in some places, it also notes that independent of their socioeconomic status, some youth also sadly exist within a spiritual and emotional poverty caused by a deficiency in human relationships. In the Congregation’s opinion, the outcomes of this poverty are depression, disaffection, and rejection of faith, and while the Congregation points to the deterioration of the family’s structure and strength as one of the major causes of these phenomena, it also admits that a deficiency in the school, parish, or worldwide Church could also be responsible. From a general, comprehensive perspective, the Church thus expresses its concern for the state of the family as it affects the primary development of youth and the future of human community.

In addition to the malaise and depression that youth feel as the result of broken, corrupted, and deteriorating families, there is also the problem of a general discontent that families have with the institutional-juridical Church. In his commentary on Catholic education in Canada, Dennis Murphy (2001) points to a widespread phenomenon where Catholicism is becoming decreasingly relevant to today’s youth, particularly because of their discomfort with a few of its moral teachings:

What is evident everywhere is a high level of disenchantment with the church by both young and middle-aged Catholics. These latter attach no great credibility to the teaching of the church, particularly on moral issues. Hardly anyone pays attention to church teaching on birth control; and this arguably is the reason for a lack of credibility in other areas, particularly areas of personal morality. (p. 16)

If these middle-aged Catholics Murphy refers to are the parents of young Catholics, then it would appear in his view that a critical mass of Catholic households is tending toward only nominal Catholicism, and their disaffection with the Church is to the degree that it is starting to erode both the community and the authority of the institution. The general deterioration of faith in individual youths, their families, and community at large thus also affects the Church itself.

James Mulligan (2005), another prominent writer on Canadian Catholic education, takes a step (or leap) further than Murphy and specifically points to the family as the cause of deterioration of Catholic identity in the school.

He exhorts families to ameliorate the Catholic identity of Catholic schools by providing more “Catholic socialization” so that Catholic schools are not saddled with the responsibilities for teaching what students in past generations learned at home and *brought* to school. While Mulligan may be hopeful that Catholic homes can somehow initiate and accomplish this task of the religious revival that will pull Catholic education from such perceived malaise, his open letter to parents places *blame* for a lack of socialization, knowledge, and faith on the shoulders of Catholic households:

Unfortunately, the home is the fragile link in the process and content of Catholic education today. This fragility is seen clearly in the astonishing absence of parental involvement, parental values and parental guidance in the lives of too many of our students. Teachers are overburdened, supplementing—and at times doing entirely—what should be the parental vocation of socializing children. In Catholic education this means “Catholic socialization”: introducing children to Jesus, teaching them to pray and, to the greatest degree possible, instilling Gospel values in the children and proposing to them a Christian attitude and perspective on life. As the primary educators of their children, you will agree, parents should see to this Catholic socialization at home. Alas, in too many homes, it does not happen! (p. 330)

As is apparent from his plea, Mulligan hopes that the home will change in order to conform to an image of Catholic education promoted by the institutional Church and by some major players in the administration and delivery of Catholic education. The home is clearly not viewed favorably, either.

From this condensed review it is apparent that there is a competing tension in theory. The comprehensive Catholic view of education in conciliar decrees and Vatican statements, and echoed in local mission statements and literature, upholds the family or home as an integral partner in the education of youth, although Church documents do not, however, specifically assign socialization to the home and academics to the school nor claim that such a division of labor is even the necessary character of this partnership. At the same time, however, this model is also troubled, according to the authors of these documents, because of a generalized shortcoming in these same homes. In the interests of this particular study, the questions that remain are those of (a) whether and how teacher statements illustrate and confirm the theoretical problem identified above in practice, and (b) how this problem relates to the discussion of controversial religious issues in the classroom.



## Method

The investigator interviewed 14 high school religion teachers on questions of how they address tensions (a) between sacred and secular authority, and (b) within Catholicism. These teachers work for five different Catholic separate school districts in Ontario, Canada, represent the range from Grades 9 to 12, and are in career points from beginning (less than 10 years) middle (10 to 20 years) and later stages (more than 20 years). Participants worked with the investigator on a semistructured interview in a one-on-one setting that lasted between 60 and 90 minutes, and was recorded, transcribed, and analyzed for themes. Participants received copies of their individual transcripts and corrected and approved them for use before analysis began.

Interviews of this nature and design satisfy the theoretical concern to gather verbal illustrations of teachers' actions, and, most importantly, the justifications that they provide for them (Boyd & Arnold, 2000). These data are instances of theory in practice that can bear theoretical scrutiny and offer a model for future theorizing. This method does not, to be sure, provide analyses or conclusions that (a) generalize to a population, (b) show the extent of an action's use, or (c) demonstrate the probability of a particular outcome in a given situation. These are claims that descend from other kinds of methods. Rather, this method grounds the theoretical problem within the vicissitudes of practice and determines its qualities as a real and legitimate concern in teachers' minds, and, more generally, within that arena. Generalizing "to a theory is to provide evidence that supports (but does not definitively prove) a theory" (Firestone, 1993, p. 17). The commentary and conclusions thus provide the next generation of theory that grounds, justifies, and critiques that same practice.

Teachers, rather than students, parents, or administrators, were chosen as research participants because they theoretically occupy the *institutional* role that most directly and frequently witnesses and coordinates the clash between the competing norms and interests of state, Church, pedagogy, and individual students. Given the complexity of educational relationships, teachers' speech is a valid representation of the ways in which they as professionals coordinate the various influences that converge within the institution. Through speech teachers express their interpretations and judgments of the sociopolitical, religious, and educational assumptions and climate in the school. While the question of teachers' responses to controversial issues is indeed a curricular problem to the degree that it concerns the content of study and the methods used to learn it, the problem's scope is also much wider than a purely curricular matter because of its concern with the external influences of homes,

the juridical presence of the Magisterium, and norms of professional practice—including the professional standards of good pedagogy—all of which influence teachers' decision-making. Interviews, therefore, probe teacher judgment of this complex institutional phenomenon in a way that a review of curricular materials and teacher guides cannot. Within the context of this study, *curriculum* is considered in its broadest sense of the whole school experience, including the informal or hidden curriculum (Kohlberg, 1971) and the theorized or desired permeation of the entire curriculum with Catholic belief (CCE, 1998; Toronto Catholic District School Board, n.d.):

Classrooms, like all settings in formal organizations, are places in which the formal and informal systems constantly intertwine. Teaching, as instructional leadership, consists in managing the warp and woof of both dimensions in dealing with children and their engagement with subject matter. To attempt to analyze classroom interaction by observing only the warp threads and ignoring the woof threads is to misrepresent fundamentally the process of pedagogy. (Erickson, 1986, p. 128)

A possible limitation with this approach is that teachers' views are themselves grounded within a self-understanding that descends from the official Church views on education; hence, due to their heavy immersion within the institution's own documented self-reflection, their perceptions of professional reality may be influenced by a set of comprehensive claims that might or might not match the reality of their setting.

## Findings

### *Home Is the Weak Link*

Participants report some general felt resistance or unwillingness on the part of families to take up their share in the home-school-Church partnership. They perceive students to have absented themselves from the Church and some homes to be unsupportive of the Church and school; generally speaking, then, some comments reflect a desire that the home could be involved more in student's religious education. One participant's report frames this desire not simply in terms of building community, as the official documents prescribe, but with the broader aim of expanding and deepening the rigor of students' perspectives on religion:

I wish I could get their parents in the school more. I wish these parents could see what their kids are saying, what they're thinking, how their home experience

has influenced their belief system by age 17. The impact of family life is unbelievable on kids' beliefs and moral growth. Many of them will just follow their parents' beliefs and they won't know why they believe certain things. They can't defend anything. I wish we had the freedom to invite parents in; I wish we had the freedom to talk to parents about what their kids are saying. Many kids say things in class because they trust the class environment: They don't want their families to know what their true beliefs are.

This participant's comments illustrate how the home is a large influence on students' intellectual and spiritual development; moreover, when families are not perceived to be in partnership with the school's expectations for religious education, they can be perceived as resisting the school's efforts. Another participant's comments echo this sentiment with explicit reference to the deterioration or at least non-attainment of a theoretical ideal:

We always talk about the triad of Church, home, and school. I can tell you, just based on governance, the Church has its beliefs, the school has to follow those beliefs, values, and teachings, and obviously there are supervisors to make sure that occurs....But in that triad probably the weakest part is the home. You assume that some of this is being reinforced in the home—it is not.

The practical pedagogical outcome of this statement is reflected in the fact that all participants report, far from engaging in discussions of the advanced academic fine points of Catholic theology, they feel an obligation to the course content, their profession, and the Church to construct their courses so that students have an authentic, if only basic, grasp of Church teachings.

Finally, one participant's comments illustrate an instance where the spiritual burden for Catholic education has been felt to shift exclusively onto the religion teacher, for lack of parental knowledge and clerical support. Parental concern, in this view, seems mostly limited to the instrumental outcomes of their children acquiring credentials and relatively unconcerned with their spiritual development and the growth of the Church:

I wish that parents could become more educated in faith, in moral faith—at least just to have the point of view more understood. I wish they would take more of an interest in the spiritual formation of their kids as they are in their academic formation....Instead of trying to explain to a parent why I gave a kid a certain mark they would have a discussion with me about where they think the theology of their child is; where they think their spirituality is. I would love to have that discussion with parents....I wish there was a more felt partnership with the

Church, the parishes, the priest. In many of our communities and with the parents I would like to see things done synchronistically, all of us, done together, which is never done.

While Catholicism's theoretical construction of education affords homes and families a privilege of primary place, these reports confirm and extend Murphy's (2001) and Mulligan's (2005) views that the home, unfortunately, disappoints many Catholic educators for not meeting its primary responsibilities, and, hence, not supporting the school in this particular aspect of education. The next finding, however, when juxtaposed with this one, points in a surprisingly opposite direction.

### ***Pedagogical Deference to the Home***

No matter how strongly the home generally disappoints teachers, the interview findings also support the ironic fact that the school depends upon the home in at least one other religious area beyond basic knowledge and socialization. On the question of how to discuss controversial non-infallible, ordinary teaching with students, responses indicate a strong respect remains for the home *qua* educational partner. In spite of reported deficiencies, teachers even occasionally call upon the home to broaden students' experiences beyond what they feel able to present in the school. One participant presents a particularly strong example. In response to a question on whether she feels any tension between what she is required to teach and what she perceives the learning needs of her students to be, she reports that the non-infallible ordinary teachings under the topic *sex education* are the major point of friction and controversy. In the course of discussing controversial religious topics, she openly encourages students to extend their information gathering and intellectual consideration beyond the classroom and formal curriculum and inquire with their parents and guardians at home to receive perspectives and engage in discussions that might be beyond the limit of what the school can accommodate:

I feel that there are restrictions for me as a teacher. Sometimes I will say to them, "You know, I'm a mother too, I'm not just a teacher. This is what the Catholic Church says and I have to teach you this, and for the most part I agree with most of what they say. But as a mother who has compassion for my children and who would never withdraw my affection for my children for whatever reason, especially if they were in trouble or if their sexuality was an issue for them—that kind of thing—as a mother I'm telling you to go home and talk to your parents

about this. I want you to go home and have a frank discussion with your parents about what we talked about in class because we need your parents' input and I'm not the only person who can inform you on sexuality." So that's sort of how I feel I can cover it. But whether or not they actually do go home and talk to their parents about it, I don't know.

The public exploration of legitimately Catholic alternatives to the prevailing presented view is, however, limited to this appeal and no further formal attention or assessment is given to the development of students' thinking on these topics. Moreover, she reports that she is not certain about the theoretical (theological, ecclesial, philosophical, and so forth) validity of the information received or thinking strategies used in these homes, either. These findings leave open the question of what, if any, other ecclesial *public* space besides the parish church and school are available to students for discussion of these alternatives, and most specifically to examine the epistemic validity and argumentative strength of the information and reasons that are (or would be) the warrants for loyal, faithful disagreement with non-infallible ordinary Catholic teaching.

### Discussion

In spite of this last objection, this technique does present three major benefits to teachers and students. The first is that by suspending the argumentative last word and holding open controversial moral questions it recognizes that the school's curricular obligations and expectations within the classroom carry some practical institutional limitations. Pedagogically speaking, this technique allows that students are aware of moral options outside the formal curriculum, and so allows teachers to meet students' needs both by acknowledging their concerns and respecting their possible desire to be directed to and possibly include information besides and beyond the formal curriculum. If the teacher or school wishes to affirm its commitment to individual religious freedom and communicate both formally and informally that it is not attempting to indoctrinate students, then an encouragement to seek further information accomplishes much toward alleviating that concern.

The second benefit, in concert with the Church's official position, is that it affirms a respect for the family's role and formally acknowledges its place in the triadic partnership of Catholic education. Such actions make a sincere practical gesture of respect for the integrity of that partnership and the autonomy, responsibility, and religious freedom of families within it. If students' dislike for "being told what to believe" is the product of a domestic attitude, then prescriptive attempts by the school to impose moral duties in a manner

that bypasses respect for and even acknowledgment of the family's autonomy would likely strain relations between home and school. Third, this encouragement to seek information outside the school acknowledges students' personal freedom apart from the autonomy their families enjoy. "Encouragement" as such, is not an imposed obligation, and so in the aftermath of these conversations students retain control over if, when, and how they might engage appropriately with their families on these topics, considering their own intellectual, emotional, and spiritual readiness. As such, the school's cooperation with the home does not happen independently and inconsiderate of the student's moral dignity, rights, and autonomy.

In spite of these advantages, there are significant problems with leaving the consideration of faithful disagreement with non-infallible ordinary teaching solely in the hands of the home (and other extracurricular influences). Its major deficiency is due to the fact that the validity of extracurricular<sup>7</sup> information and quality of accompanying critical discussion cannot be guaranteed. For example, assuming that the school presents (a) the best intellectual justifications for a controversial Magisterial teaching, one cannot know whether the home will provide (b) the best refutations for (all or only certain parts of) the same, or simply (c) an example of indifferent, uninformed dismissal. Both (b) and (c) are possible scenarios, but even if the school upholds the truth content of (a) it still prefers the intellectual act or method of (b) to that of (c) as an example of critical religious thinking. This technique works under the pretext of respecting the home's autonomy and religious freedom, but also allows the school to divest thoroughly its academic and ecclesial obligations in this area, thus leaving students with very little if any opportunity to receive professional pedagogical supervision as they gather and engage with this material. If the situation in homes is as impoverished as mainstream theory and practice maintain, the implications for student knowledge and moral judgment are quite worrisome and the pedagogical situation in schools quite unfortunately ironic.

A philosophical evaluation of the findings suggests that concerns about this issue are not completely alleviated even if one is to assume that all families *are intellectually sufficient* in this area. Holding that assumption to be true leads one to question the appropriate role of the school and its professional obligation to students who, if school and home were mutually reducible, could presumably receive their Catholic religious instruction on both

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7 In this case *curriculum* is used to mean the limits of programmed course content and methods. Of course, given the theorized "seamless garment" of Catholicism, any course in Catholic religious study so properly concerns the whole of ecclesial life; hence, what is *extracurricular* to the limits of the course nonetheless remains within the scope of Catholic education.

official and disagreeing views exclusively from the home. If students can be expected to find and responsibly learn to think critically about disagreeing views on controversial religious teachings without any pedagogical guidance and within such an apparently impoverished spiritual atmosphere as the home, then the justification for institutionalizing students with the purpose of teaching and learning the more basic official version of Catholic religious curriculum itself is thrown into jeopardy. If home and school were mutually reducible, it could be argued that there is no need for Catholic schools and professionally skilled religion teachers. Surely any supporter of Catholic education would not suggest that the school offers nothing of unique value that differentiates it from the family, or that it arrogates a role that parents could easily perform unsupported. If arrogation were the case it would contradict the principle of subsidiarity. If the school indeed offers something of unique pedagogical and social value, then leaving the critical thinking about and discussion of such curricular issues unsupported and exclusively in the hands of others in fact subverts its own public service, and, furthermore, epistemically and morally isolates students whose pedagogical needs and interests center on these topics.

The most troubling outcome of this act is that by offloading responsibility for alternative Catholic views on controversial issues, the school itself undermines the home-school-Church partnership. By emphasizing the exposition, promotion, and defense of orthodoxy—almost to the point of exclusivity—and divesting the discussion of faithful disagreement to the home, the school situates itself primarily and exclusively as an institution for disseminating doctrine and deemphasizes its role for promoting critical thinking within a religious tradition, thus taking on a job that is better suited to the parish and passing to the home a professional responsibility that its teachers are (or should be) trained to execute. In the current model the student achieves a variety of Catholic experiences but potentially at the expense of their fragmentation between the public, *de jure* views expressed in the school and the private, *de facto* views expressed in the home. To be sure, it is possible that the school's and home's views would match each other from time to time depending on the persons involved, but without an open forum for discussion of faithful disagreement even this situation only introduces epistemic narrowness on controversial issues as a substitute for the fragmentation problem. If both school and home are to share in education, then both should engage with the educationally valuable *process* of teaching how to coordinate competing views rather than setting themselves off each other as representative opposites. Such an approach reduces the purpose of Catholic educational institutions to the communication of a narrow view of Catholic *content* and

so impoverishes and fragments the intellectual *process* of Catholic life. The current model for dealing with controversial, non-infallible ordinary teaching subordinates *how* one learns to *what* one learns.

### Conclusion

This pedagogical issue is also a controversial political issue of academic and ecclesial responsibility for which a removal of obligation to the home seems, under current conditions, the best possible compromise. The home does not have nearly the same public responsibilities to the Church and community that the school does, and so, in theory, can adapt with greater ease to the problem of addressing controversial questions. Since the prevailing view regards dissent as a private matter between individuals and the Church (Pilarczyk, 1986; Ratzinger, 1984), and so downplays or marginalizes its public expressions in the media and academia, under these conditions the private domestic sphere more easily exercises freedom to do as it pleases with these questions. Although the home's response might be less philosophically and theologically stringent than any view that the school and Church could tolerate as a public stance, without a sufficient guiding pedagogical theory with which to address this matter more thoroughly and without scandal in the community or reprimand from the Church, the epistemic and political tranquility that the school obtains through divestment (notwithstanding the private frustrations that some students and their parents retain) seems well worth that intellectual price.

Teachers who defer to the home are not to be faulted for professional incompetence; their use of this technique in fact (a) represents one of the best means of serving students within the current norms of practice in Catholic schools, and (b) attests to a conclusion that there is little pedagogical theory available that can support them further. The advantage for teachers who use this technique is that they can claim all at once to support the Magisterium's teaching, the family's autonomy, and the student's inquisitiveness. By not disagreeing publicly with the Church or encouraging students to disagree publicly on controversial issues, teachers themselves do not risk ostracism, reprimand, or dismissal. While one might argue that the conclusion in (a) is too heavily weighted in favor of a practical over a professional responsibility that teachers have, and that a higher standard of duty is required, if the practical environment in the school is either perceived to be or is (possibly also) in fact skeptical of or resistant toward altering the practical *status quo*, any talk of raising the pedagogical standard is moot because without institutional or theoretical supports for reform, teachers risk reprimand, ostracism, or their jobs. It is at this point that the conclusion in (b) is most important,



for it would provide reform-minded teachers with a normative justification for departure. Without any satisfactory theory upon which to base further discussion of controversial non-infallible ordinary teaching, however, the institutions of Catholic education remain dependent upon the home's limited supplementary voice, or else, in a few exceptional cases, a teacher's creativity and charisma to deal explicitly with this problem.

In the final analysis deferring to the home is a flawed and at best *limited* pedagogical strategy. Families and homes are important partners in education and must be included to the fullest, most appropriate extent possible, but to use them as the exclusive backdrop against which all disagreement with official Church teaching risks lifting all disagreement with the Magisterium from public view and privatizing it in the home. Under this cloak of privacy, not all families can guarantee the same range of opinion that the school offers, and so this stance basically reinforces the functional reproduction of family privilege, ignorance, and existential "bad faith" between generations because students do not benefit from hearing other points of view in the ecclesial and academic public space of Catholicism. Basically, deference to families on controversial religious issues undermines the school's role because it puts the questions that require skilled pedagogical responses in well-meaning but potentially unskilled hands, while retaining for itself the job of reviewing more basic teachings that today are readily available content to be read in libraries and online. If the teaching of critical thinking is one important and essential value-added dimension that professional educators can offer in schools, then in cases like this something more in theory is required to support religion teachers' practice. Otherwise, the risk is passively to encourage students to seek out surreptitious means of disagreeing with the Church. If students' experiences of Catholicism are already fragmented by their disagreement with non-infallible ordinary teaching, then encouraging them to appear one way in public and do quite another thing in private would only seem to exacerbate this problem.

In the end, the limitations of this technique also suggest that the theorized home-school-Church triad is not really the kind of partnership that the official Church imagines. It is perhaps better characterized as independently operating units that have occasional contact and the common feature that some students move between them, but on the level of educational objectives and supports in the service of students there are few, if any, well-coordinated objectives that would characterize an institutional "partnership." Overall, more work is required in theory in order to justify the opening of practice to pedagogical techniques that can overcome the philosophical drawbacks of deferring to the home.

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*Graham P. McDonough is an assistant professor in the Department of Curriculum and Instruction and associate fellow in the Centre for the Study of Religion and Society at the University of Victoria, British Columbia. Correspondence concerning this article should be sent to Dr. Graham P. McDonough, University of Victoria, P.O. Box 3010 STN CSC, Victoria, British Columbia, V8W 3N4, Canada. E-mail: gpmcd@uvic.ca*