

## What Is Assumed about a Catholic Student's Ecclesial Agency, and Why It Matters to Catholic Schooling

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*This paper shows that a lack of explicit and clearly stated intentions regarding the development of Catholic students' ecclesial agency through their schooling leads to potential problems as they experience and imagine themselves as lay persons in the Church. While the question of "ecclesial agency" applies throughout all Catholic schooling and the whole Church, in practice the usual flashpoint upon which its relevance emerges is in the discussion of issues that are controversial within Catholicism. This paper, therefore, examines the question of ecclesial agency through an analysis of the pedagogical treatment of three controversial intra-Church topics and documents on the Church's understanding of the laity. Its conclusion reveals several important considerations and questions that concern the foundational aims of Catholic schooling and what outcomes are assumed regarding the student's current and future participation as a lay person in the Church.*

Catholic schooling, like any type of religious schooling, faces many criticisms regarding its existence. Halstead (2009) enumerates many of them: Some claim that Catholic schools are socially divisive institutions that stifle the development of citizenship in the modern pluralistic nation-state. Others raise concerns that they erode students' democratic competence or limit their autonomy. Stronger forms of this latter criticism even assert that Catholic schools indoctrinate students. Finally, in places like England, Australia, and parts of Canada, among several others, there is the criticism that they draw unjustly on the public purse. Two threads hold these criticisms together: First, they originate from outside the group that would support the school, and second, they disapprove of Catholic schooling. It can, therefore, be of little surprise that the critiques of this kind would promote common, secular schooling instead of Catholic (or any religious) schooling.

This model of external, disapproving criticism, while well known, is not the exclusive means through which Catholic schools might be critiqued. There are also important critiques that are made from within Catholic schooling and its supporters. These constructive critiques are presented as proposals for the improvement of these schools, and, ultimately, to improve the good that they do

for the students they serve, the Catholic community, and society at large. Support of Catholic schools' mission does not preclude posing serious questions that point to important theoretical problems at Catholic schools' foundational heart. This paper is firmly rooted within this category of constructive criticism. It points to an unrecognized, underappreciated, and unresolved problem in the theory of Catholic education's aims regarding the desired *ecclesial agency* that educated Catholic lay persons are expected to learn from their experiences in Catholic schools.<sup>1</sup> The ecclesial agent implied here refers to the person-as-political-actor in the Church; consequently his or her ecclesial agency includes the kind of franchise exercised in and overall contribution made toward the Church's corporate and communal works. Currently there is no explicit statement made about the desired ecclesial agency a student should possess as the result of Catholic schooling. This paper proposes that if this lacuna in Catholic educational theory receives the benefit of further institutional exposure and critical examination, then students and teachers should benefit from having a more comprehensive, descriptive framework that orients the purpose of their work to this end.

This paper shows that lack of explicit and clearly stated intentions regarding the development of Catholic students' ecclesial agency through their schooling leads to potential problems as they experience and imagine themselves as lay persons in the Church. While it is recognized that Catholic schools do not serve Catholic students exclusively—they also serve non-Catholics and non-Christians—this paper limits its discussion to the experiences of Catholic students in order to focus on how the school responds to intra-Church differences. As the entire Catholic school institution and curriculum is predicated upon forming its Catholic students as persons in society and in the Church, this problem could, in theory, arise anywhere and at any moment in the school. In practice, however, the usual flashpoint upon which it emerges is the discussion of issues that are controversial within Catholicism. This paper, therefore, relies upon examining the pedagogical treatment of these intra-Church topics for the foundation of its argument.

The first section presents three brief scenarios in Catholic schools in which there is disagreement about prevailing Church teachings. The analysis of these

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<sup>1</sup> Catholic *schooling* is a narrower concept than Catholic *education* because it is confined to one institution in the broader range of educative influences like family, community, and (parish) church. This paper focuses on *schooling* because it represents (a) the formalized, public intersection of secular pedagogy with Catholic teaching at a point where (b) students who have multiple religious intentions meet. While the best practical illustrations of the theoretical problems this paper highlights occur in the school, they also remain present within families and parishes, to varying degrees.

scenarios suggests that the content of the illustrated disagreements, while important, is nonetheless secondary to a theoretically prior issue regarding the assumptions made about the Catholic student's place as a lay person within the Church. The Catholic school's response to the disagreement, therefore, consequently cultivates the student in that lay station. The scenarios stand as places that magnify the problematic assumptions made about how Catholic schooling contributes to the development of lay agency in the Church. Any frustration that dissentient students experience at these points in the curriculum is primarily the result of the fact that they are attempting to exercise legislative agency in a place where they have none, regardless of the intellectual competence that Catholic schooling nurtures in them. So what are the assumptions that Catholic educational theory makes about these students?

As there currently is no direct, explicit treatment of this question in the Church's documents on Catholic education, the concept of students' ecclesial agency has to be inferred from the existing documents that encircle but do not specifically point to it. The second section, thus, begins by showing how the current theory of Catholic education is at best nebulous regarding Catholic students' ecclesial agency. In its efforts to establish some clarity, the analysis in this section looks away from the Church's educational documents and across to its teachings on the laity. The analysis of these documents reveals that Catholic schools, whether consciously or not, depend upon an ecclesial model for the formation of lay Catholics, which assumes their subordination to the clergy. Since the teaching methods related to debating and discussing controversial issues in general are based upon a premise that the students discussing them *possess some kind of legislative agency* within the group that houses the controversy, it is hence a non-starter for students, from their lay station and in pursuit of these controversial questions, to be encouraged to act with the kind of legislative agency that might pretend to influence its governance or teachings. Issues can be considered controversial in two respects: (a) between the Church and secular society, or else (b) within the Church itself. Currently, it appears that the only meaningful pedagogical traction possible is in the attitude expressed toward civil society: Catholic social teaching demands such a posture in the civil realm, but students lack the kind of ecclesial agency required to have a significant impact on controversial issues within the Church. For students who disagree with the Church on some of its controversial teachings, the pedagogical purpose of debating and discussing controversial Catholic issues in Catholic schools is thus arguably ambiguous or even moot; at best it is an intellectual exercise that reifies a gap between schooling and real life. Con-

sider by way of contrast that the acts of holding debates during mock election exercises, or discussing controversial issues like drilling for oil in the Gulf of Mexico or the seal hunt in Northern Canada, presume that students could hold a wide variety of views (within reason) and that this variety would be encouraged for the development of “good democratic citizenship.” This section argues that the differences between these two types of controversy and the intended outcomes of their discussion need to be stated explicitly in schools, lest the possibility that inaccurate impressions about one’s ecclesial agency might be silently communicated.

The third section argues that this situation in Catholic ecclesiology, therefore, leads to a disjunction in schools between (a) the best professional practices for teaching and learning, which on the one hand presents students with the impression that they might define their own ecclesial agency just as they do in secular civil society, and (b) official Church teaching, which on the other hand promotes a more restrictive conception of agency. While these methods align with Church teachings that maintain students’ religious and intellectual freedom (Vatican Council II, 1965/1996b, 1965/1996c), the epistemic and institutional structure of the Magisterial Church nonetheless limits the scope of these methods to exclude learning (a) the content of loyal, public, intra-Church critiques of the prevailing authority structure, and (b) the form or process of making the same critiques. This tension places students in a position to experience either a truncated picture of doctrine and canon law or else frustration. Sadly, it also avoids teaching the skills and knowledge that are required for lay persons “to think religiously” about how they might disagree with Church teaching and authority without abandoning the Church: a situation which mirrors the condition and experiences of many Catholic lay persons (Bibby, 1993; Greeley, 2004). The conclusion makes two recommendations: (a) that a reformulation of the aims of Catholic schooling is required in order to clarify and make explicit the aims of Catholic education on these issues; and (b) that teachers ought to inform students explicitly about the pedagogical intent and concurrent ecclesiological implications before embarking on discussions of issues that are controversial within Catholicism. It ends with a note that although Catholic schools might be one of the best *public* places in which Catholicism’s internal intellectual diversity can be recognized and nurtured, in practice, because of the way students’ ecclesial agency is imagined, this is currently and unfortunately not the case.

### A Stark Choice for Catholic Students

Consider the following three scenarios involving controversial Catholic teachings that might likely appear in a Catholic secondary school:

1. A female student notices the inconsistency between the school's promotion of sex equity in the civil workplace and its unwillingness to challenge the fact that only men may be priests and bishops in the Catholic Church (John Paul II, 1994).
2. A non-heterosexual student is barred from bringing his same-sex date to a graduation celebration on the grounds that such allowance would imply that the school approves of same-sex acts (Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, 1975; Hall v. Powers, 2002).
3. A group of students with firm commitments toward free-market ideology and libertarianism become frustrated when they find that their objections to Catholic teachings on solidarity, work, charity, and the environment consistently receive only polite hearings in class before the teacher moves on with the rest of the lesson. Their total experience in the school becomes fraught with tension when their expressed resistance to its frequent social justice projects is merely tolerated, but not genuinely received.

### Guiding Assumptions

Before proceeding further, it is important to note some relevant guiding assumptions that demarcate the scope of this essay, and hence where it is possible to talk about agency. The teachings these three scenarios above refer to are all classified as non-infallible ordinary teachings (including the homosexual *desire* in scenario 2, but excluding any *acts*). These kinds of teachings are relatively less certain as truth claims, which “the church proposes as true,” although they are “not defined as infallible and [so are] not necessarily unchangeable” (Pilarczyk, 1986, p. 175). There are two other categories of teachings that are beyond the scope of this paper. The next level of certainty is the category of teachings that have been “proposed definitively, even if they have not been taught to be divinely revealed” (*definitive tendenda*), and infallible teachings (*definitive credenda*) are those that are absolutely certain (Boyle, 2000, p. 360). The teachings on the prohibition on taking human life (*definitive tendenda*) and nature of Jesus (*definitive credenda*), for example, are therefore excluded. The teachings represented in the scenarios above, while they require one's informed consider-

ation and respect (*obsequium*), are not proposed as certainly true. Since they are possibly changeable they therefore do not require the assent of truth. Talk of expressing one's agency on controversies within the Church is thus assumed to be within the limits of what is possibly changeable in theory, even though the current climate within the Church suggests that these non-infallible ordinary teachings are not about to be changed.

The responsibility of the school with respect to students' agency also requires some brief treatment. It is not assumed or prescribed throughout this essay that the Catholic school can or should have exclusive responsibility for the formation of a student's ecclesial agency. The student's home, parish, community, and other relevant Catholic experiences also have their responsibilities in this regard, and so the success or failure of "agents" in the Church, however conceptualized, should not be attributed exclusively to the school. The school, however, is remarkable in that its academic character and role in gathering students from throughout the community make it potentially the most promising public space in the Church for the explicit consideration, analysis, and evaluation of conceptions of the ecclesial agency of lay persons. To this end, any conceptualization of agency includes the abilities (a) to transcend uncritical responses to the Magisterium, whether in agreement or not, and (b) to be able to respond to the variety of intellectual positions in the Church, including agreements and disagreements that may be critical or uncritical.

### **Pedagogical Responses**

What are appropriate responses students might have to these scenarios, given the current ecclesiology? Church teachings on these issues are regarded as clear and firmly in contrast to the prevailing trends in secular liberal society. So as the concurrent teaching on religious freedom allows that students in Catholic schools, like all persons, are able to take or leave Catholicism at their critical pleasure (Vatican Council II, 1965/1996b, 1965/1996c), the construction of their choice in this fashion appears quickly to have defaulted to the stark presentation of the prevailing Catholicism and liberal-secular ideologies as two polar entities with competing truth claims. At first blush it appears that if a student wishes to consider Catholicism as a reasonable option, the apparent choice is between the autonomous submission of one's will to the complete set of Magisterial views on faith and morals, or else the outright rejection of such

a position in favor of the prevailing liberal-secular view.<sup>2</sup> Consequently, this construction limits one's apparent autonomous choice as a Catholic person to the horns of an ideological binary that excludes varying degrees of agreement with the Magisterium on the one hand, or contrasting secular norms on the other. As this choice cashes out educationally for the public face of Catholic schools and the curricular options for the Catholic students in them, it appears that this binary encapsulates the *only* choices available for how these students understand what their faith and Church is. Equally important, this is apparently how they will be taught to understand their role vis-à-vis its institutional structures, should they choose to remain Catholic or leave the Church because of their response to issues like these.

If this austere picture of students' ecclesial agency in Catholic schools has any merit, it follows that there are problems in pedagogical theory for teaching Catholic students who disagree with the Church only at discrete points, like the non-infallible ordinary teachings mentioned above. Catholic school pedagogical theory and practice does not offer the kinds of academic experiences that lead to meaningful participation in some of the moral and ecclesial aspects of Church life, especially those that are important to students whose own experiences, intentions, and agency tend away from perfect accord with the practices of Catholicism one observes in those who emphasize strict adherence to the Magisterium. If these students are in the school and present concerns that would not reject the Church but would like to see certain of its doctrines reformed, then theoretical questions arise with respect to how the school meets these needs pedagogically, and, prior to that, how it imagines students as ecclesial agents both before and after their needs are met. How does ecclesiology influence the construction of educational aims that would nurture students' agency as lay persons in the Church?

For students to disagree with the official view on controversial issues means to be caught between holding a personal, private belief that conflicts with the official, public faith, hence exacerbating a disjunction between what is lived in the community and what is taught. If the pedagogical meaning of this

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<sup>2</sup> Students may choose other religions as well. Saskatoon Catholic Schools (2005) articulates how "evangelization" in the school is not restricted to the formation in faith of Catholic students, but also aims at "a conversion of the heart where Christians, Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus and sisters and brothers of other faith traditions become better Christians, Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus and members of other faith traditions" (p. 1). That said, the curriculum and culture of the school will not nurture closely these traditions in the same way that it nurtures Catholicism. So long as the Catholic school is at the same time a secular school (Pilarczyk, 1998) it is argued that for the most part Catholicism and secularism are the dominant ideological forces within the institution. However, see Groome (1998) for a description of a Catholic school in Pakistan that stands outside this description.

disagreement is reframed in a way that would attempt to bypass this disjunction and search for greater real-life application, ecclesiologically it would run asunder because these students who disagree are not constructed as ecclesial agents to the degree and direction that they might contribute to the Church by offering a more refined and rigorous version of their disagreement in public. Students *who do agree* arguably have their agency affirmed and would find that the public life of the Church eagerly endorses and offers them ample opportunities to express their views, like students who attend pro-life rallies during school time and with the school's support ("Anti-abortion activists," 2010). Should a student even learn how to disagree with the same or greater academic rigor as the student who does agree, he or she would have no public forum for expressing it. This conclusion is notably made notwithstanding theologian Margaret O'Gara's (1998) observation of prominent views that plainly disprove of dissent being expressed in the Church.

The resulting effect is that students who do not think in deferential accord with the Magisterium find themselves distanced from the Church and school by their own Catholic education. The only picture of an ecclesial student-agent left standing is one who affirms official doctrine. Ultimately, as Catholic schools educate lay students, this situation points to the question of what role the laity might have in governing its own Church. The limited voice that lay adults have in their own parishes mirrors the barriers that their children experience in the school. Theologian Jon Nilson (2000) observes that in Church governance, canon 129 states that only "the ordained are able (*habiles*) to exercise power, while the laity may only cooperate in the exercise of power in the Church (*cooperari possunt in exercitio potestatis*)" (p. 405). The consequence is that "[a]t a diocesan synod, the bishop is the only legislator...[and a] parish council must be headed by an ordained pastor and can make no binding decision of itself; the final decision rests with him" (p. 405). For some (or even many) parents, this experience transposes as follows into the domestic realm: When their children at home question the Church's teaching, parents can find it difficult to support the authoritative approach of the Church; hence, the theorized partnership of a church-school-home partnership falls flat. The educational residue that descends from this "lay governance question" is thus what purpose Catholic schooling has in developing or "forming" future Church members, and so a look into the official documents of the Church is required in response to this question.



### The Ecclesiology of the (Educated) Laity

The Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) is the authoritative touchstone that shapes Catholicism's modern era, and so the foundational document for this educational question would seem to be the council's *Declaration on Christian Education*. It is notable, though, that despite the great updating that occurred throughout the council, the *Declaration on Christian Education* has largely been regarded as uninspiring and unhelpful (Carter, 1966). In terms of the questions in this paper, that criticism remains accurate. The *Declaration on Christian Education* is remarkably short on any description of the educated lay person's ecclesial role and instead focuses chiefly on the characteristics of a Catholic school and its role in relation to families, society, and parish church. It surprisingly does not reflect educational aims and pedagogical prescriptions in the depth that arguably precipitate from the statements in the council's other documents, most notably the implications from its *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church*, *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*, and *Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity*. That the *Declaration on Christian Education* does not keep pace with its documentary brethren in this regard suggests that further updating of Catholic educational thought is still required before the full implications of Vatican II on education and schooling can be appreciated.

*Declaration on Christian Education's* shortcoming does not mean that the whole of Vatican II is unhelpful for theorizing on the post-conciliar educational aims for lay persons. A glance across these three other documents reveals a promising point of beginning. The *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church* is well known for the fact that the bishops at Vatican II placed its chapter on the Church as "The People of God" before the chapter on the Church's hierarchical structure, thus emphasizing the common bonds of baptism, confirmation, and Eucharist as the ecclesiological foundation that precedes rank or office (Nilson, 2000). Because *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church* (Vatican Council II, 1965/1996d) is the core, normative document with which others maintain consistency, consequently one recognizes a tight relationship between it and the *Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity* (Vatican Council II, 1965/1996a). *Decree* describes the laity's ecclesial role in functional terms as an arm of the ordained Church, working attentively in doctrinal concert with the hierarchy for bringing about a renewal of the temporal order (Vatican Council II, 1965/1996a; cf. Vatican Council II, 1965/1996c, 1964/1996e). This work, while entrusted to the laity because of its competence (Vatican Council II, 1964/1996e) to infuse the Holy Spirit into the world, is nonetheless to remain consistent with pastoral

norms (Vatican Council II, 1965/1996a) **and in cooperation with the hierarchy** (Vatican Council II, 1964/1996e). The *Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity* precisely emphasizes that the laity must act in union with those who have been appointed to rule the Church, which maintains the status quo so far as governance is concerned. The laity and hierarchy may be united in the sacraments of baptism, Eucharist, and confirmation, but a separation of classes by sacramental nature (Holy Orders) as ordained rulers and lay followers remains apparent. The preconciliar ecclesial class structure that Pope Pius X (1906) illustrates plainly resounds here:

[T]he Church is essentially an unequal society, that is, a society comprising two categories of persons, the Pastors and the flock, those who occupy a rank in the different degrees of the hierarchy and the multitude of the faithful. So distinct are these categories that with the pastoral body only rests the necessary right and authority for promoting the end of the society and directing all its members towards that end; the one duty of the multitude is to allow themselves to be led, and, like a docile flock, to follow the Pastors. (§8)

Given the sparse information that can be found in the Vatican II documents regarding students' ecclesial agency, it is possible only to make very limited ecclesiological inferences from them. For instance, if one cannot conclude fairly from them whether the aims of Catholic education should tend more toward either the consolidation or reform of the current hierarchical ecclesiology, then one must search for further sources of information in order to acquire a more comprehensive and perhaps clearer explanation of how Catholic education regards the proper role of the laity. For this reason a look into some of the major post-conciliar documents on the laity and education offers a stronger and more explicit vision of lay-ordained relations.

Published some 20 years following the close of the council, Pope John Paul II's (1988) apostolic exhortation *Vocation and the Mission of the Lay Faithful in the Church and in the World* reinforces this relationship of dependence in Church governance. He describes the ordained ministries as having a primary place in the Church that distinguishes them from lay vocations "not simply in degree but in essence, from the participation given to all the lay faithful through Baptism and Confirmation" (§66). Additionally, he asserts that the laity must recognize that the ordained ministry "is totally necessary for their participation in the Church" (§22), for only ordination makes one a pastor of

the lay faithful. While Nilson (2000) remarks that “though the word itself is not used [in the Church], lay submission to the ordained is the ideal and norm” (p. 406; cf. Vatican Council II, 1964/1996e). One finds at least a single reference to it in John Paul II’s (1998) assertion that “no charism [gift] dispenses a person from reference and submission to the pastors of the Church” (§24). Although *Vocation and the Mission of the Lay Faithful* is not an educational document per se, it is nonetheless an ecclesial document whose panoramic institutional breadth carries theoretical force over Catholic schools. So to this point *Vocation and the Mission of the Lay Faithful*’s assertions raise again the question of whether a lay person’s education might have any bearing on improving his or her ecclesial station. Apparently, because of their nature or essence, both educated and non-educated lay Catholics must present the same submission to their ordained superiors.

The post-conciliar documents from the Vatican’s Congregation for Catholic Education (CCE) offer a seemingly stronger vision of the school’s ecclesiology than does *Declaration on Christian Education*. The CCE’s (2007) document *Educating Together in Catholic Schools* offers a good illustration of framing broadly conceived educational goods into a more specific vision of the student as an obedient ecclesial citizen. The school is theorized to be a community in which persons are directed toward the full development of self in relation to others. The CCE names “formation for the person and of persons... in the integral unity of [their] being” (§13) in concert with an imperative that this community, “because of its identity and ecclesial roots...must aspire to become a Christian community, that is, a community of faith” (§14). An earlier CCE (1998) document, *The Catholic School on the Threshold of the Third Millennium*, anticipates that ecclesiological assertion by naming the school “a genuine instrument of the Church” that “penetrates and informs every moment of its educational activity” (§11), and asserts in addition that “the Catholic school is a place of ecclesial experience, which is molded in the Christian community” (§11). The school is not a parish (Groome, 1998), but is nonetheless imagined as a gathering of persons in which the Church’s truths are taught, learned, and so lived. “Educating together” speaks to the method of this education as a “transmission” based upon “mastery of the knowledge of the truths of the faith and principles of spiritual life” that, when correctly embodied in the person of the teacher, have enabled his or her “greater conformity with Christ” (CCE, 2007, n.26). Notably, such “transmission” language is strikingly incongruent with the “discovery” methods and less stable epistemologies of transactional and transformational student-centered pedagogical theories that prefigure

the debate and discussion of controversial issues; moreover, where “conformity with Christ” depends upon adherence to the bishops (Vatican Council II, 1964/1996e), the establishment of any aims or methods that compete with such “transmission” seems alien to the prevailing ecclesiology.

These descriptions, as can be seen, while helpful, nonetheless do not make specific, explicit statements regarding what kind of student ecclesial agency is desired, or, most importantly, how Catholic schooling or education is imagined to affect and, it is hoped, improve students’ ecclesial competency. These aims are ostensibly left to be inferred. So when the CCE’s statements on personhood and community are analyzed for meaning with respect to students’ ecclesial agency, further questions arise as to the nature of governance in these Christian communities, pointing to the ironic possibility that, despite its laudable warnings and lamentations about the reduction of persons to their “purely technical and practical aspects” in the narrow service of economic utility and so fragmenting educational relationships from “a definite concept of [humanity] and life” that would nurture the whole person (CCE, 1998, §10), the prevailing conception of Catholic schooling and education itself might be structured to push students into certain over-determined ecclesial roles that have nothing to do with contributing to the governance of their own Church.

Archbishop Daniel Pilarczyk (1998), who is an influential writer on doctrinal issues of institutional relevance within the Church, is even more explicit than the CCE in his assertion that students in Catholic schools are supposed to learn the doctrine that the Church teaches, and “not opinion, speculation, not the teacher’s private insights or preferences, but all and only that which is guaranteed by the church to be sound doctrine” (p. 407). Pilarczyk also clearly reinforces a subordination of the school to the bishop as the “main teacher of the local Church” who “has the right to determine” (p. 408) religion curriculum and pedagogical standards for its teachers. Note that although in this formulation the school’s role as an arm or agent of the Magisterial Church is made clear, it too makes no explicit or even further mention of how the student’s ecclesial agency is constructed within that institution. Without further explicit statements one is left to infer that the prevailing ecclesial theory simply assumes that students’ Catholic schooling and education is plotted toward forming and reinforcing a conception of their station and agency that sits within tacitly agreed-upon norms of a hierarchy in relation to teachers and principal, who themselves act only on the epistemic and ecclesial authority of the bishop.

The tension between prevailing ecclesial and pedagogical theories and

practices manifests in this fashion. Governance in the Church currently rests upon ordination to the priesthood and then consecration as a bishop. At the same time, though, it could be reasonable to expect that a Catholic school could at least aim to develop a learned student who, ordination and consecration notwithstanding, might otherwise be competent at the same task. Moreover, should such a student result from Catholic schooling, it raises the question of what he—as currently only males may be ordained—should be expected to do with his skills until the moment of installation arises. In the case of a female student who acquires the same competence this question doubles in size; namely, her Catholic education could in fact prepare her for a role from which she is twice removed as a lay female. Besides the obvious problematic of sexual selection in the formulation of an ideally educated Catholic person, Doohan (1984) observes that it is clear how “power in the Church is linked to office, not competence, and even non-sacramental jurisdiction is granted only to the cleric” (p. 30).

### Teaching Intra-Church Controversy: A Test of Aims

Of the many experiences available in Catholic schools the study of controversial ecclesial issues constitutes a legitimate and meaningful test with respect to the Church’s and school’s assumptions about students’ ecclesial agency, and most certainly stands as a reflection of their general aims regarding the purposes of Catholic schooling and education. The introduction and pedagogical use of controversial issues within the Church as curriculum makes this problem become quite apparent because it raises the question of whether entertaining any kind of reasonable intra-Church disagreement with the Magisterial views on them is existentially proper, ethically sound, and politically prudent given the ecclesial end toward which the whole institution of Catholic schooling aims. If what is done in practice reflects that which is agreed upon in theory, if only tacitly or even unconsciously, then this ambiguity regarding ecclesial aims reveals something about the kind of educated lay person Catholic education presumes.

From the perspective of the secular social science of education, controversial issues are a means of presenting problems in the subject matter to students so to encourage and ostensibly teach them *to think* in ways appropriate to higher-order tasks that are greater than rote memorization and unreflective application. If the learning and affective appreciation of meaning are optimized, this method has great promise for translating into student action outside the school and post-graduation in their capacity as citizens of civil-secular

society. On a controversial civil issue, like the questions of drilling for oil in the Gulf of Mexico or the Northern Canadian seal hunt, the intent is to develop a more informed and intellectually rigorous response than one had *before*, and that this learning, no matter what the outcome in content or opinion, is relevant toward one's participation in civil society—assuming that there are limits in classroom discourse that do not tolerate racism or sexism, among other things. A Catholic person's response in either the affirmative or negative to this question would, therefore, have little to no effect on the fact of his or her Catholic faith or juridical standing in the Church. On controversial religious topics, though, something very different occurs because these interactions are based upon an ostensibly different set of pedagogical and ecclesial aims that do not train a critically Catholic perspective on the Church-as-institution. Unfortunately, a split between "civil" and "religious" appears to have taken hold here. While one's ability to act as an autonomous secular agent and competent representative of the Catholic Church in the realm of secular civil society is greatly improved through Catholic schooling, the concurrent question that arises is whether that same experience offers one any benefit within the governing structures of the Church as an ecclesial society. One might wonder how Catholic education and schooling even matter regarding a lay person's ecclesial agency beyond simply being an extension of the clergy's intentions, since knowledge, thinking skills, and the content of one's opinions seem to have little to no further effect upon his or her station in the Church.

Students (and some teachers) thus experience (or at least work within) an environment that features a disjunction between pedagogical and ecclesial realities. The methods of discussing controversial issues imply theories of knowledge and egalitarian politics that at bottom are incompatible with the Church's authoritarian epistemology and ecclesiology. Students who disagree with the hierarchy might be able to air their opinions in the classroom, but the intellectual support required to develop these views so that they would withstand public scrutiny and gain recognition in the public life of the Church outside the classroom is not present. This disjunction between what teaching methods might ultimately accomplish in response to a student's legitimate critical concern, and what ecclesial-political opportunities are currently available in the official Church thus leaves these students who disagree with the Magisterial views on controversial issues in a state of frustration. This kind of thinking is at least implicitly and most certainly exclusively tied to one kind of lay ecclesial agency and station: that which reifies clerical primacy. Students who agree with the hierarchy and submit to the Church's authoritarian status

quo are well served in the development of their critical religious thinking, but all others are not.<sup>3</sup>

The role of the laity has especially relevant theoretical application to Catholic educational theory on the subject of how and with what purpose teachers are to treat controversial issues within the Church. A theoretical undertone in this discussion is the very ecclesiological question of “what is Church?” A helpful starting place to see the educational relevance of this question is to outline the ecclesial scope in which certain issues may be said to be controversial. There seem to be two options: (a) One might observe that some issues are genuinely controversial within the Church: where *Church* is conceived of in its constitutional nature as the whole People of God (Vatican Council II, 1964/1996e), and where there are meaningful moral and epistemic views within this body that are at the root of these disagreements. (b) If, however, one maintains a narrower conception of Church that reduces it to the clergy or even the Magisterium, these issues are non-controversial by definition because this ecclesial conception is predicated upon a normatively determined universal agreement, meaning that those who do not agree with the Magisterium would necessarily separate themselves to some degree from (at least) the (official) Church. The differences between these two views of Church are meaningful to the way in which these and other topics are framed within the pedagogical aims and institutional scope of the school. If one sees the school as an institution that is an instrument of the magisterial Church designed primarily and exclusively for the transmission, reflection, and promotion of its official views, then the narrower ecclesial conception (b) precludes any educational aims that would allow students an opportunity (or even present the aroma of an impression) that they might think and act in the same fashion as those who are sanctioned to teach and legislate.<sup>4</sup> Student’s ecclesial agency in this case is limited by parameters set and enforced by the bishop.

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<sup>3</sup> This observation is limited in scope to the kind of quality of service that the school as institution extends to students; hence, it is conceivable that students could resist or refuse to participate in the critical discourse of even the best service, depending on their intentions (cf. Olson, 2003).

<sup>4</sup> The illustration of ecclesial possibilities (a) and (b) is not meant to imply that the current practices of Catholic education and schooling are so heavily polarized. Not all incarnations of (a), for instance, would allow and promote unmitigated dissent from the Church; similarly, conclusions about (b) like those drawn above could be mitigated likewise so that the Church’s official view is made known, but students are enabled to express their own views so that through discussion and debate they might reasonably and conscientiously discern between prevailing Catholic and “secular” choices.

The ecclesial dimension, expressed through the inquiry “what is Church?” exists concurrently with the pedagogical dimension of the purpose one has in teaching. When these dimensions are analyzed for their purpose in teaching about controversial issues in Catholic schooling and education five possibilities emerge: Are they being taught (1) simply to show the fact of controversy; (2) to allow students to observe that the prevailing Catholicism stands in contrast to secular liberal society on some issues; (3) to prompt students *to discern* between observed sacred and secular differences; (4) to prompt students to develop generic thinking skills through the abstracted academic exercise of discussion and debate on these issues; or (5) to prepare students to act as conscientious, competent, and autonomous ecclesial agents who, from time to time, may thoughtfully, rigorously, and loyally disagree with the Church.

Many outcomes are available given the handful of choices above, and certainly they are not mutually exclusive. In the current prevailing practice both ecclesial conceptions from above (a—Church as whole People of God) and (b—Church restricted to Magisterium) are congruent with the pedagogical purposes 1 to 4 just presented. Possibly they may be congruent with some conceptions of pedagogical purpose 5, even in (b) so long as the distinction between the student’s private views in the academic realm and the Magisterium’s authoritative franchise as the public voice of the official Church is maintained. Few complaints might even be had about purpose 5 admitting some kind of challenge to the prevailing ecclesial authority structure so long as procedural classroom fairness and (even tacit) agreement on who ultimately speaks authoritatively and publicly for the official Church remains. This practical possibility, however, does not erase the theoretical concern that, by implication, if students in Catholic schools are presented with academic problems about the Church that have little practical relationship with their lived experiences in it, then the Catholic school runs the risk of reifying and exacerbating a divide between the ecclesial theory and pedagogical practice of religious education. The residue from this situation is the possibility that some reasonable but dissident student contributions to the Church are made moot by its ecclesiological assumptions about the laity. The Catholic school theoretically sets some students up for an ecclesial agency that they will never be able to exercise. The construction of lay agency is currently limited to “competent submission,” no matter how well educated the person.



### Conclusion

When instructional methods of debate and discussion are used to explore controversial issues outside the Church, the implication is that *the content* of what one thinks—excluding that which would harm others—matters less than the fact of a formal aim that students are being prepared to think as autonomous, enfranchised members of civil society. This kind of civil station and competence, it is presumed, has direct and desirable implications regarding citizenship and civic contributions in our society. However, if students are not made aware that these same methods, when used to explore controversial intra-religious issues, have a meaning in ecclesial society that currently is very different from that which they have in civil society, then frustration is bound to ensue for those who value being Catholic, disagree with the Church on some controversial issues, and, regardless of their competence, find their views relegated to the ecclesial margins as private opinions. This fact precludes the possibility that these students might find a promising means of contributing positively to the Church—such as developing rigorously tested defenses of female ordination, the legitimacy of same-sex marriages, or conscientious commitments to some kind of free market or libertarian standpoint. The concluding lines in *Declaration on Christian Education* articulate a hope that the students of Catholic education will be able to “promote the internal renewal of the Church” (Vatican Council II, 1965/1996d, §12). A dim view of today’s Catholic schools might hold, in the context of receiving the arguments above, that this statement is possibly a wishful parting statement from the Council with little ecclesial backing or pedagogical norms to substantiate it. A brighter view is possible, although for the current lack of any further theoretical essays into this territory it is best expressed with three questions: (1) What is meant by “internal renewal”; (2) What role might the laity have within this renewal; and (3) What are the requirements in form and content that dissident students need to know for “thinking ecclesially” and “with the Church”?

Here one returns to the question of how the aims of Catholic education coincide with the claims of magisterial authority and the proper role of the laity in terms of ecclesial subjectivity and contribution. Teachers may follow a student-centered method, but ultimately find it disingenuous because its admission of student experience defaults to bad pedagogical faith. Students who agree with the Magisterium, critically or not, will remain well served. Those students who do not agree with the prevailing Church teachings on controversial issues will continue to find little or no meaning in raising their objections,

unless that is they are prepared for (a) a conversion of thought and/or practice toward the prevailing view; (b) to be drawn into dialogue under the pretense that their opinion matters in the public ecclesial space, when it ostensibly does not; (c) undertaking an exercise in theory or thought that is divorced from real life; or (d) to be frustrated and alienated from the Church. For lack of any better theoretical perspective upon which to imagine a lay person's ecclesial agency, Catholic schools and educators remain facing the fact of intra-Church controversies with little more to guide them than their own varied interpretations of the same documents this paper reviews, and the prevailing practices in their schools that either encourage or mitigate these interpretations. Of all the Church's institutions, Catholic schools are the best situated public space—although certainly not the exclusive forum—for the entertainment and nurturing of disagreements that loyal lay Catholics have with the Magisterium. The fact that their capabilities in this area are underappreciated points to the need for further research on how they might understand and teach toward a conception of loyal dissent.

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