

## FOCUS SECTION

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# A COMPREHENSIVE APPROACH TO CHARACTER BUILDING IN CATHOLIC SCHOOLS

THOMAS LICKONA

*State University College at Cortland*

*The overall goal of Catholic education is to help students achieve a transformation in Christ. Integral to this transformation is development of the natural moral virtues and spiritual/supernatural virtues. Schools need to implement a comprehensive character-building program which focuses on twelve components, such as caring classroom communities, prayer, and moral discipline.*

Sanctity is not reserved for a few. Jesus, by His Incarnation and death on the Cross, merited the means of salvation and sanctification for all who believe in Him. He did not give the precept "Be you perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect" to a chosen group of persons. . . . He proclaimed it to the multitude who were following Him.

—*Father Gabriel of St. Mary Magdalen*

In Donald DeMarco's *The Heart of Virtue* (1996), the chapter on "Generosity" opens with the story of Jean Valjean, the hero of Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables*. Jean Valjean had spent 19 years in the galleys: 5 for stealing a loaf of bread to feed the starving children of his widowed sister and 14 for attempting to escape four times. On being released, he received a yellow passport, which the law required him to present to employers and which made it highly unlikely anyone would hire him, for it read: "This man is dangerous." A return to crime and imprisonment seemed inevitable.

After his release, Jean journeyed a great distance on foot. He was rudely rejected wherever he sought food or lodging. On the fourth day, as a cold rain chilled his body, a kindly stranger suggested he knock on the door of Bishop

Bienvenu's house. When he did, the good bishop welcomed him with a warm "Monsieur!" that startled him. "This is not my house," the bishop explained. "It is the house of Christ. It does not ask any comer whether he has a name, but whether he has an affliction. You are suffering, you are hungry and thirsting; be welcome—whatever is here is yours. Your name is my brother."

The bishop entertained Valjean, fed him well, and when the meal was over, took him to his quarters. After sleeping soundly for several hours, Valjean awoke in a perturbed state. His thoughts became fixed on the six silver plates that had graced the bishop's supper table and were now in the bishop's sleeping chamber only a few feet away. As solid, old silver, they would bring a handsome price. The temptation overcame him. He slipped into the bishop's room, removed the plates from the cupboard, and fled the house.

The next morning three police appeared at the bishop's door holding Valjean by the collar. They had arrested him, searched his knapsack, and found the plates, which Valjean said the bishop had given him. The bishop, seeing immediately what was at stake, spoke directly to Valjean without even greeting the police: "Ah, there you are, my friend; I am glad to see you! But I gave you the candlesticks, too, which are silver like the rest and would bring you 200 francs. Why didn't you take them along with your plates?"

Valjean was dumbfounded. The police, respecting the bishop's word, released their suspect and went away. Bishop Bienvenu then took the silver candlesticks from his mantle and gave them to Valjean, who was trembling. The bishop said, "Never forget that you have promised me to use this silver to become an honest man. Jean Valjean, my brother, you belong no longer to evil, but to good. It is your soul that I am purchasing for you. I withdraw it from dark thoughts and from the spirit of perdition, and I give it to God."

This was the turning point in Valjean's life. He never sold the candlesticks, which came to symbolize to him not only the bishop's generosity but also his own redemption.

The purpose of the Church and of Catholic education is to turn us into little Christs. It is to continue the process of our transformation in Christ that began in our baptism. We experience this continuing transformation through the sacraments, through prayer, through the many ways we receive God's grace, and through our own efforts to cooperate with that grace. Finally, we may be transformed, if our spirits are open, by our encounter with the Jesus in others, as happened to Jean Valjean through his encounter with the Christ-like bishop.

In all these ways, Catholic schools can help to develop, in both students and staff, the character of Christ. Broadly stated, the challenges of Catholic character education are two: (1) How can we encourage children and adults to develop a personal, prayerful, sacramental relationship with Jesus that will enable him to live more fully in them—to give them his very self, his character? (2) How can the Catholic school become a living incarnation of Christ,

a community that enables all its members to experience—as did Jean Valjean—the transforming power of God’s love through the generous, forgiving, yet demanding love of Christians like Bishop Bienvenu?

## WHAT VIRTUES SHOULD CATHOLIC SCHOOLS FOSTER?

“Character” is the constellation of virtues possessed by a person. Character education can be defined as the deliberate effort to cultivate virtue. What are the particular virtues that Catholic schools should seek to cultivate?

Among the natural moral virtues that all schools should try to foster are the four cardinal virtues advanced by the ancient Greeks: prudence (which enables us to judge what we ought to do), justice (which enables us to give other persons their due), fortitude (which enables us to do what is right in the face of difficulties), and temperance (which enables us to control our desires and avoid abuse of even legitimate pleasures).

In his book *Character Building: A Guide for Parents and Teachers*, British psychologist David Isaacs (1976) offers a more elaborate scheme of 24 moral virtues, grouped according to developmental periods during which the different virtues should be given special emphasis: (1) up to 7 years: obedience (respecting legitimate authority and rules), sincerity (truth-telling with charity and prudence), and orderliness (being organized and using time well); (2) from 8 to 12 years: fortitude, perseverance, industriousness, patience, responsibility, justice, and generosity; (3) from 13 to 15 years: modesty (respect for one’s own privacy and dignity and that of others), moderation (self-control), simplicity (genuineness), sociability (ability to communicate with and get along with others), friendship, respect, patriotism (service to one’s country and affirmation of what is noble in all countries); and (4) from 16 to 18 years: prudence, flexibility, understanding, loyalty, audacity (taking risks for good), humility (self-knowledge), and optimism (confidence).

Besides fostering these natural virtues, Catholic schools must develop the spiritual virtues necessary for our transformation in Christ. These spiritual virtues include:

1. Faith in God and confidence in his omnipotence, omniscience, providence, love, mercy, promise to answer our prayers, call to us as individuals, and will to fill us with his holy life
2. Loving God with all our heart, mind, and soul
3. Obedience to God’s will, in imitation of Jesus, and obedience to the teachings of the Church that Jesus founded
4. Personal prayer
5. Awareness of and sorrow for our sins
6. Frequenting of the sacraments, especially the Eucharist and Confession

7. Worship of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit
8. Hunger for a knowledge of God
9. Dying to self
10. Willingness to pick up our cross and join our sufferings with the Cross of Christ for the salvation of souls
11. A sacrificial love of neighbor
12. A humility that acknowledges our total dependence on God, seeks God's graces in all we do, and is grateful for all of God's blessings
13. A devotion to Mary as the Mother of God, perfect model of surrender to God, and sure path to union with her Son

## A COMPREHENSIVE APPROACH TO CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT

**I**n order to develop Christ-character—both the natural moral virtues and the spiritual and supernatural virtues—Catholic schools need a comprehensive approach, one that seeks to develop character through the total moral and spiritual life of the school. This comprehensive approach can be conceptualized in terms of 12 mutually supportive components. Let me describe and illustrate each of these.

**1. The teacher as caregiver, model, and mentor.** The relationship between the teacher and the student is the foundation of everything else in character education. In their relationships with their students, teachers can exert positive influence on character development in three ways: respecting and loving their students, setting a good example, and serving as moral and spiritual mentors.

Teachers can love their students even before coming into their presence. One third-grade teacher says she tries to find a quiet moment before the teaching day begins to sit with a list of her students and say a brief prayer for each one, such as: "Lord, give me patience with Brian. Help me to see his strengths." On days when she does this, she finds she sees her students in a more positive light and has more grace to deal with the inevitable difficulties.

Similarly, there are countless opportunities for a teacher to foster good character through personal example. One middle school teacher models his faith by leading his students in the following prayer at the start of each class:

O Lord, open my eyes to see what is beautiful  
My mind to know what is true  
And my heart to love what is good,  
For Jesus' sake, amen.

Some teachers teach the importance of prayer by providing silent time in class for personal prayer. Says one teacher, "For many of my students, this

may be the only time they pray in this way.”

Serving as a moral and spiritual mentor includes love and good example but adds explicit guidance—a kind of moral or spiritual coaching. For example, one sixth-grade teacher challenges her students to “make a difference for good.” She shares a personal story about how she and other adults in the parish tried to make this kind of a difference:

Our nearest gas station sold pornography. It wasn't convenient to drive to another, but we got 30 people in the parish to boycott that station. The owner decided it wasn't worth the loss of business and pulled the pornography. I explain to my students that if you're silent and do nothing, you're part of the problem. Students are seldom challenged to stand up for what's right, so I challenge them to take a stand as a class. This particular class decided to write to Doritos, which at the time was running a commercial they felt was very disrespectful toward old people. Doritos wrote back and said they had received a number of critical letters and were going to change the commercial. You have to give kids the experience that they can make a difference.

**2. Helping students develop a personal prayer life.** *The Spiritual Hunger of the Modern Child* (Addison, 1985) reports an interfaith conference that addressed a difficult question: “Why do so many young people, even those raised in committed religious families, stop practicing their faith—and even believing in God—once they leave home?”

One answer stood out for me. It was that of a British Catholic priest, Fr. Hugh Thwaites. He said that in his experience, when young persons fall away from the faith, it is because of one or more of three reasons.

The first is sin. Before there is a spiritual falling away, Fr. Thwaites said, there is usually a moral falling away: “Moral disorder and spiritual disorder are linked together, as cause and effect.”

The second reason is that the young person “never personally grasped the meaning of the faith.” Religion was for them a set of external behaviors, not a living relationship with the living God. “If our young people grow up without growing in intimacy with Christ,” Fr. Thwaites says, “what wonder that their religion would come to seem cold and empty?”

The third reason is intimately linked with the second: The young person did not have a personal prayer life. “Not praying,” Fr. Thwaites says, “will not, of itself, kill the spiritual life. Only serious sin does that. But the absence of any prayer life will so weaken the spiritual life that it will be unable to meet the onslaughts of a pagan world.”

Those of us who work in a college environment know the intellectual and moral onslaughts that young people face there, even at ostensibly Catholic institutions. Young people succumb to these attacks and temptations, Fr. Thwaites says, “through sheer lack of spiritual vitality. What food and drink

is to the body, prayer is to the soul.”

Fr. Thwaites concludes: “If young people going through a spiritual crisis give up on prayer, they will come to reject their religion.”

If prayer is essential to sustain the faith and character that Catholic schools work to develop, how can we help students establish a vital personal prayer life? Besides setting a good example and providing time to pray in school, teachers can provide students with short prayers such as, “Good morning, Lord; thank you for this day; help me to serve you today,” to pray upon rising in the morning and before going to bed at night. An aid to prayer for teenage students is the Catholic booklet *Living Faith* (1997) which contains brief meditations based on the Scripture readings for the day’s Mass.

We can teach our children to pray conversationally, talking to Jesus as if he were right there with them (which, of course, he is). We can teach them a pattern of praying, such as beginning with prayers of thanksgiving and then praying prayers of petition. We should help them understand that, as Jesus taught, God always answers our prayers but according to his perfect will. Sometimes the answer is “yes,” sometimes “no,” sometimes “wait.” Like a loving parent, God gives us what is best for us. (My wife Judith has a friend who says that her atheism began at age seven when she prayed very hard for a pony and didn’t get one. “I concluded no one was listening,” she says.)

We should also teach young people to look carefully for the ways God may be acting in their lives. An answer to prayer may take the form of a chance comment someone makes to us. It may take the form of an obstacle God puts in our path to keep us from doing something that would not be good for us.

Finally, in encouraging our students to pray, we should point to the example of Jesus. As Fr. Gabriel’s *Divine Intimacy* (1964) reminds us, Jesus’s long years at Nazareth and 40 days in the desert were consecrated to prayer. Before he chose the 12 apostles, Jesus passed the whole night in prayer to the Father. He prayed before Peter’s confession, before the Transfiguration, at the Last Supper, in Gethsemane, on Calvary. He frequently interrupted His apostolic activity to retire into the desert to pray. “We can imitate the conduct of Jesus,” Fr. Gabriel writes, “by readily interrupting any activity, even apostolic work, in order to focus our attention on God alone” (1964, p. 172).

**3. A caring classroom community.** Children need adults who love them, set a good example, and teach them about good character and the spiritual life; but they also need positive relationships with each other. The peer group can provide an experience of belonging and mutual support, or it can provide an experience of exclusion and cruelty.

Catholic schools, like most schools today, struggle with growing peer cruelty. Says one principal: “We have students who have transferred out because of the persecution they have suffered at the hands of their class-

mates. Because we are a Catholic school committed to teaching God's love, this is our most painful failure."

How can teachers take proactive steps to develop peer-group norms of caring and respect? Four things are helpful: activities (e.g., partner interviews) that enable students to get to know each other; providing students with everyday ways (such as "compliment time") to affirm each other; developing a sense of interdependence (e.g., through cooperative learning) and group solidarity (e.g., through class rituals); and responding swiftly and effectively to peer cruelty whenever it occurs.

One second-grade teacher fosters a caring community in her classroom through the ritual of a morning prayer circle. At the beginning of each day, students stand with their arms around each other and pray for each other's intentions.

Cooperative learning is a way to ensure that no child is left out of the classroom community. When our son Mark was in sixth grade and a new kid in his school, he told us he felt "absolutely friendless" even after six weeks in his class. When I reported Mark's experience to his sixth-grade teacher, he said (in an act of humility for which I was forever grateful), "I'll take responsibility for that. I usually do cooperative projects, but this year I've let that slide. We'll start them next week." He did, and Mark soon had two friends and was looking forward to going to school. For students at any grade level, friendship is the deepest need. (Many teachers build on that by doing a unit on friendship which has students reflect on what makes for a good friendship.)

Peer cruelty can sometimes be turned around by appealing to the perpetrator's capacity for empathy and responsibility. Haim Ginott, in *Teacher and Child* (1972), tells a story that illustrates this approach. Jay had been the ring-leader of attacks on Andy in their third-grade class. The teacher wrote Jay the following letter:

Dear Jay,

Andy's mother has told me that her son has been made very unhappy this year. Name-calling and ostracizing have left him sad and lonely. I feel concerned about this situation. Your experience as a leader in your class makes you a likely person for me to turn to for advice. I value your ability to sympathize with those who suffer. Please write me your suggestions about how we can help Andy.

Sincerely,  
Mrs. Spaulding

Jay never replied in writing, but his attacks on Andy ceased.

When students' needs for acceptance and belonging are met through a caring classroom community, they are more likely to care about others. When

a teacher is successful in creating this kind of a classroom, students receive respect and care from their peers and practice giving it in return.

**4. Moral discipline.** Discipline, if it is to serve character development, must help students develop moral reasoning, self-discipline, and respect for others. Rules should be established in a way that enables students to see the moral values, such as courtesy and caring, behind the rules. The emphasis should not be on extrinsic rewards and punishment but on following the rules because it's the right thing to do—because it respects the rights and needs of others.

In one Catholic K-8 school, a school pledge is used to foster students' intrinsic motivation to follow the rules. Students recite the pledge daily: "I believe that Jesus is present in each of my classmates and in my teachers, and therefore all my actions will show my respect for Jesus."

Students' moral reasoning and commitment to rules can also be developed by having them help create the rules. ("What rules do we need to help us respect each other and therefore respect Jesus?") When students break a rule, consequences should include moral dialogue that makes explicit reference to the relevant virtues: "Did that behavior show respect? Did it show caring? What can you do to make up for it?" Whenever possible, students should be asked to devise and carry out an appropriate way to make restitution for their offenses. Carrying out a positive action to set things right is an important exercise in taking responsibility for their actions.

**5. Participatory decision making.** We can also build character by involving students in shared decision making that gives them responsibility for making the classroom a good place to be and learn. The chief means of creating this kind of shared responsibility is the class meeting, in a face-to-face circle, emphasizing interactive discussion. Class meetings can deal with problems (cutting in lunch line, put-downs, homework problems) or help to plan upcoming events (the day, a field trip, a cooperative activity, the next unit). Most important, class meetings help students go beyond "saying the right words" to doing the right thing.

For example: A Catholic school second-grade teacher called one of her first class meetings to deal with "chaos in the coat closet." It was January; the snows were deep. "All day long," she said, "we talk about love of God and neighbor, but at 3:00 p.m. it's *Lord of the Flies* at the coat closet." There were angry words and pushing and sometimes tears as children tried to find their boots, mittens, hats, and so on. Some even missed the bus as a result of the confusion and conflict.

At their class meeting, the teacher posed the problem in the collective moral voice: "How can we, working together, solve this problem?" After brainstorming possible solutions, the class decided that everyone should be



assigned a hook; all would put their things under their personal hooks. "How are we going to make sure everyone does this?" the teacher asked. A girl proposed, "If you don't keep your things where they belong, you should have to keep them at your desk during the next day." The teacher and class decided this was a fair consequence.

The teacher then drew up a class agreement, had each of her students sign it, posted it next to the coat closet, and set a time when they would meet again to see how their solution was working. She comments: "Since we adopted this plan, not a single person has missed the bus." Similarly, middle and high school teachers have used the class meeting to convert classroom management challenges (e.g., students talking out of turn, being tardy, not doing homework) into occasions for students to take responsibility for solving real-life problems.

**6. Teaching virtues through the curriculum.** Mining the academic curriculum for its character-building potential requires teachers to look at their grade-level subject matter and ask, "What are the natural intersections between the curriculum I have to cover and the virtues I wish to foster?"

A science teacher can design a lesson on the need for precise and truthful reporting of data and how scientific fraud undermines the scientific enterprise. A social studies teacher can examine questions of social justice, actual moral dilemmas faced by historical figures, and current opportunities for civic action to better one's community or country. A literature teacher can have students analyze the moral decisions and moral strengths and weaknesses of characters in novels, plays, and short stories.

Academic instruction should be guided by the idea that the highest purpose of the curriculum is moral and spiritual. As Ed Wynne and Kevin Ryan (1993) maintain in their article "Curriculum as a Moral Educator," the curriculum should engage students in thinking about the most fundamental human questions: How should I live my life? What qualities in human beings are admirable and worth emulating? What goals are worth pursuing? What leads to fulfillment in life, and what does not?

Biographies of the saints offer a wonderful way to explore questions such as these. Students can read about the lives of the saints, write about them, report on them, tell stories about the saints to younger children, and choose a saint to pray to and to seek to emulate more closely. Some teachers put a quote from a saint on the board as the "thought for the day." An excellent source of thought-provoking spiritual wisdom is the pocket-sized *Thoughts of the Cure D'Ars* (1967), a compilation of quotes from the writings of St. John Vianney.

When one of our sons was a freshman at a well-known Catholic university, his theology instructor, who did not believe in the Resurrection, had her students read only the writings of demythologizers. Our son said it was

focusing on the saints that brought him through the crisis of faith precipitated by this course. "The saints," my wife observes, "have their eyes on God. God is very real in their lives." For that reason, they can help God become real in the lives of our students.

For students to benefit as much as they should from studying the lives of the saints, we must help them embrace a very large idea: We are all called to be saints. This does not mean that we are all called to the same degree and kind of sanctity. The "great saints" had a special mission to accomplish and therefore received singular gifts of nature and grace. "Sanctity," Fr. Gabriel explains in *Divine Intimacy*, "does not consist in the greatness of the works accomplished or of the gifts received, but in the degree of sanctifying grace and charity to which the soul has attained by faithful correspondence with God's invitations" (1964, p. 10). By his death on the cross, Jesus merited grace for us not in a limited measure but superabundantly. That is why we all can become saints.

**7. The conscience of craft.** Our personal character often affects the lives of others through the quality of the work we do. When we do our work well, other people benefit; when we do it poorly, others suffer. One of the most important "voices" of conscience, therefore, is the conscience of craft, the voice that says: "Do a good job." It is a mark of people's character, Syracuse University professor Thomas Green (1985) observes, when they take care to perform their jobs and other tasks well.

A student's schoolwork affords the opportunity to develop this conscience of craft and the work-related qualities of character: (a) self-discipline, including the ability to delay gratification to pursue future goals; (b) persistence in the face of discouragement; (c) dependability, including a public sense of work as affecting the lives of others; (d) diligence; and (e) responsibility, including making the most of one's education.

The Summit Country Day School in Cincinnati, as part of its long-range character education plan, devoted a full year to discussing ways to develop students' work ethic, defined as "doing one's personal best." At all levels of this preK-12 school, staff agreed on the need to provide students with more opportunities to do in-depth work and to reflect on the quality of their work. In the school's "Character Happenings," a quarterly newsletter, faculty shared what they did to help students thoughtfully assess the quality of their efforts. One middle school teacher wrote: "I had students find two items of work from the first semester: one that was of high quality and another that was not. They then wrote about why they thought the items fell into these categories and how they could avoid poor work in the future."

**8. Self-awareness and moral reasoning.** Especially important here is teaching students what the virtues are, how their habitual practice will lead

to a more fulfilling life, and how each of us must take responsibility for developing our own character. For example, the Catholic psychologist Patricia Cronin (1995) has designed a junior-high curriculum centered on helping students increase their awareness of their own behavior. Students are encouraged to set small daily goals for improvement in their practice of a particular virtue such as respect, cooperation, or generosity (e.g., to give help before it's asked or to defend someone against negative gossip). At the end of the day, they self-assess and, if they choose, record their progress in a personal journal. This daily goal-setting is considered important for self-awareness and good habit formation.

In national comparisons (see, for example, *The American Freshman*, 1990), Catholic college students are only marginally different from their non-Catholic counterparts in their attitudes toward moral issues such as legal abortion and premarital sex. American culture is clearly a powerful shaper of the values of Catholic youth. Catholic schools, if they are to produce disciples of Jesus who follow the countercultural values of the Gospel, must do more to develop their students' moral reasoning about crucial moral issues.

Regarding abortion, the goal should be to help students not only avoid the personal sin of abortion but also to be effective witnesses for life. Students should, for example, be able to respond with cogent arguments to the common assertions in the abortion debate: "*But it isn't a life.*" (From the very beginning of its development, the baby is a separate genetic structure, a separate immune system, a separate life. By 18 days, its heart is beating. Abortion is wrong because it violates the baby's right to live.) "*But the fetus isn't a person.*" (The same could be said of the newborn baby. Both the pre-born baby and newborn baby are totally dependent on someone else for survival.) "*It's the woman's right to choose.*" (Ethics tells us we have a right to exercise choice *only* when that exercise does not violate the rights of another. We don't say the rapist should have a "choice" to rape, or the child abuser a "choice" to abuse children.) "*It's wrong to bring unwanted babies into the world.*" (Studies find that most battered children were *planned* pregnancies. The life-affirming solution to an unwanted pregnancy is not abortion but adoption.) "*Outlawing abortion will harm women.*" (Women suffer harm under legalized abortion. If a woman has had an abortion, her chances of having a miscarriage during a future pregnancy are much greater. Many women also suffer "post abortion syndrome"—symptoms such as depression, guilt, and nightmares about the aborted baby.) "*What about rape and incest?*" (It isn't fair to punish the unborn child for the crime of the father. What helps women to be healed of the trauma of rape is love and support, not adding another trauma by abortion. With incest, adoption is the most positive solution.)

At the secondary level, students should study and discuss Pope John Paul II's eloquent encyclical, *The Gospel of Life* (1995), and its challenge to

all persons of good will to defend life in the face of the growing culture of death. In today's society, there is no greater opportunity for young people to develop moral courage, and to follow Jesus' call to be "persecuted for the sake of righteousness," than to fight the dark tide of abortion and euthanasia. Catholic high school students will also benefit from studying Professor Janet Smith's carefully reasoned pamphlet, *The Connection Between Contraception and Abortion* (n.d.).

Regarding sex, Catholic young people should know what the Church teaches: that, in the Pope's words, "sex is the beautiful gift of a good God," but it is meant for marriage and marriage only. Outside the marriage commitment, it is a mortal sin that jeopardizes their eternal souls. They should know the Scriptural basis of this teaching, such as Jesus's naming fornication, along with "murder, theft, adultery, greed, and maliciousness," as "an evil that comes from within. (Mk 7:21-23)" But young people also need help in understanding *why* God forbids sex outside the marriage commitment.

This means understanding that there is a natural moral law, built into human nature, just as there is a law governing physical nature. When we follow the natural moral law, we live in harmony with ourselves and each other. When we act in ways that go against the natural law, we create problems for ourselves and others.

In the natural moral order, what are the natural consequences of having sex? Bonding and babies. This is sometimes expressed as God's "two-in-one" plan for sex: deepening love and making new life. If you have sex with someone you aren't married to, you may very well create or deepen an attachment that ends up being broken. And, even if you are trying to avoid it, you may create a life you aren't ready to assume responsibility for.

Once, when I was sitting in on an ethics class in a Catholic high school, a young woman asked me what I thought about premarital sex. I said, "To answer that question, it helps to ask, what is the intrinsic meaning of sexual intercourse? When you have sex with someone, you're being as physically intimate as it is possible to be with another human being. You can't get any closer than that.

"When you're married, sexual intercourse symbolizes and strengthens a bigger union: your total commitment to each other. You join your bodies because you've joined your lives. In body language, sex says to the other person, 'I give myself to you completely.' When you're married, that's really true. But if you have sex before you've committed yourself to the other person in marriage, you're really lying with your body. It's like saying, 'I give myself to you completely, but not really.'"

After the class, this young woman said to me, "I never heard anyone talk about sex like that. Now I know what I think." (Lickona & Lickona, 1994). (An orthodox Catholic K-8 curriculum that does a good job of teaching chastity is *The New Corinthians Curriculum*, 1996, Judy Harris, Editor.)

Developing respect for God's gifts of life and sex will, however, be an uphill battle as long as Catholic youth lack a larger spiritual vision, including an understanding of God's plan of salvation. How many Catholics of any age can accurately state what the Church teaches about how to get to heaven and avoid hell? Boston College philosopher Peter Kreeft points out that it is Jesus, in the New Testament, who repeatedly talks about hell and who warns that eternal separation from God is the consequence of unrepented sin. If we care about the souls of our students and want to teach as Jesus did, we will not hide this truth from them. There are three big ideas about salvation that we should teach students from an early age:

1. Salvation is God's free gift to us, because Jesus died for our sins on the cross.
2. We can, however, throw this gift away by serious sins for which we do not seek God's forgiveness.
3. Our salvation therefore requires faith in Jesus, obedience to God's commandments, and repentance of our sins.

**9. Frequenting the Eucharist and Confession.** For Catholic schools, the sacraments—in which we encounter Jesus and receive transforming graces—must be at the center of any effort to develop the character of Christ in our children or ourselves. For this reason, it is a tragedy of the greatest order that, according to any number of polls, most Catholics say they do not believe in the Real Presence of Jesus in the Eucharist but think it is only a symbol. Belief is lowest of all among the youngest Catholics.

When my wife and I taught CCD in our home to a group of eighth-graders, we tried to strengthen their faith in the Real Presence by giving each one a copy of the story of *The Eucharistic Miracle at Lanciano*. Around the year 700, a Basilian monk in Lanciano begged God to remove his doubts that at the consecration the bread and wine became the Body and Blood of Christ. One day, as he said the words of the consecration, the bread literally changed into Flesh and the wine into Blood, which coagulated into five globules. Overwhelmed by what he saw, he called the faithful to come to the altar to witness the miracle.

The changed substances were not consumed but placed into a precious ivory container. In 1713, they were enshrined in a silver monstrance in which they are preserved and may be seen to this day at the Church of St. Francis in Lanciano. In 1970, the Church asked a team of medical experts, chaired by the skeptical Dr. Odoardo Linoli, Distinguished Professor in Anatomy and Pathological Histology, to determine the true nature of the elements. On March 4, 1971, the team submitted its findings: "The Flesh is human flesh, the tissue of the human heart, and the Blood is human blood" (*The Eucharistic Miracle at Lanciano*, n.d.).

God gives us miracles to strengthen our faith. Our eighth-grade students

said their faith in Jesus' Real Presence in the Eucharist was strengthened by the pamphlet about the Eucharist Miracle at Lanciano.

How does Confession contribute to character development? Jesus established the Sacrament of Penance—his first act when he appeared to his disciples on the day of his Resurrection—for two reasons: the forgiveness of our sins and our growth in holiness.

If we don't go to Confession, we won't have cause to examine our conscience. If we don't examine our conscience, we're not likely to be aware of our sins. It shouldn't surprise us that Catholic teens who have not gone to Confession since their First Reconciliation—as is increasingly the case—have little or no sense of sin.

With young children, Confession helps them to form a conscience—to learn what sin means in terms of their everyday moral experience. This requires helping children learn to identify concrete acts of commission (have I disobeyed or been disrespectful toward my parents or teachers? told a lie? teased my brothers or sisters or been mean to kids at school?) and acts of omission (have I not helped when help was needed? failed to be a good friend? neglected to say my prayers?).

Going to Confession on a regular basis will help children develop a number of habits that are good for their moral and spiritual growth: self-examination; taking the perspective of others and considering how our behavior affects them; learning to say "I'm sorry" to God and to those we've offended; and asking Jesus humbly and prayerfully for the grace to avoid our sins in the future.

Unfortunately, as a sense of sin has faded from our culture and our moral consciousness as Catholics, we feel little need to frequent the Sacrament of Reconciliation. If our children are to be drawn to this sacrament, we must return as adults to seeing Confession and awareness of our sins as essential to our sanctification. Indeed, in his classic *Transformation in Christ* (1948), the great Catholic philosopher Dietrich von Hildebrand asserts that a deep contrition for our sins is an indispensable precondition for our transformation in Christ.

**10. Caring beyond the classroom.** As students develop greater personal sanctity, as they draw closer to God through prayer and the sacraments, they will be able to be channels of God's love to others.

Catholic schools have a long tradition of fostering character through service. Service begins in the school—older students serving as reading buddies to younger ones, for example—and then extends outward to the Church and to the whole human family. In order to have an effect on students' personal character, service ideally should involve students in face-to-face helping relationships so they can experience the fulfillment of touching another's life. At the Stuart Country Day School in Princeton, New Jersey, principal Sr. Joan

Magnetti (as cited in Lickona, 1991) describes the opportunities for that kind of service:

Our students read to the blind, work with kids in inner-city neighborhood houses, help in soup kitchens, rebuild houses, and spend two weeks in Appalachia. Many have also interviewed their congressional representatives regarding social issues. Since we believe this kind of education should ideally have an international dimension, we've also sent many students to Bogota. Our goal is to prepare our students for leadership by exposing them to the moral imperatives in the world today.

**11. Creating a schoolwide moral community.** A Catholic school must embody the character of Christ. It must be a moral and spiritual community in which all members support and care for each other.

St. Rita's Catholic School in Dayton, Ohio, offers an imaginative way to foster this kind of community among students. At St. Rita, children are grouped in "families" of nine, consisting of one child from each grade, K-8. A seventh- and eighth-grade boy and girl serve as the "parents" and are actually called mom and dad by the younger children.

At the start of the school year, these family groups spend much of the first three days together in games and other activities that build bonds. During the rest of the year, the family groups come together for regular events, such as Mass, and for special occasions such as Feast Days and Holy Days. During Lent, they pray the Stations of the Cross together. At Mass, they sit together in their family pew. If a younger child needs to go to the bathroom, an older one will take him or her. "It used to be hard to get our older students to sing at Mass," says principal Maryann Eismann. "Now they sing out because they feel a responsibility to be good models for the little ones."

"In general," says principal Eismann, "the older members of a family group look out for the younger ones. They help the little ones solve problems. They're glad to see them in the hall and on the playground. There is no craziness in our school, just a very peaceful and loving atmosphere. We think much of that is due to our family groupings."

**12. A devotion to Mary.** In *The Splendor of Truth* (1993), Pope John Paul II writes: "...Christian morality consists, in the simplicity of the Gospel, in following Jesus Christ, in abandoning oneself to him, in letting oneself be transformed by his grace and renewed by his mercy..." (p. 176).

The model for abandoning ourselves to Jesus is Mary. Her fiat—"Be it done unto me"—made our salvation possible. She shows us how to receive Jesus so that we can offer him to the world. She exemplifies all the virtues. Catholic schools that hope to develop Christ-like character in their students should help them develop a devotion to his Blessed Mother and a Marian

spirituality. We should teach our children to turn to Mary, as their Mother, in all situations. "If the winds of temptation arise," writes St. Bernard, "call upon Mary. In danger, sorrow, or perplexity, think of Mary, call upon Mary."

We should teach our children faithfully to pray the Rosary, with confidence in the Blessed Mother's intercession for all our needs and our growth in holiness. She is the model for our interior life. "From the very first moment of her life," writes Fr. Gabriel, "Mary was entirely God's and lived only for Him." She will lead us to her Son.

The Pope, who has dedicated his papacy to Mary, writes (1994): "I entrust the whole Church to the maternal intercession of Mary. . . . She, the Mother of Fairest Love, will be for Christians on the way to the Third Millennium the Star which safely guides their steps to the Lord." The Pope closes *The Gospel of Life* (1995) with a prayer to Mary, whom he calls "the incomparable model of how life should be welcomed and cared for" (p. 183). It is a prayer, I think, that describes very well the kind of character that Catholic education should strive to develop in God's children:

O Mary, bright dawn of the new world, Mother of the living, to you do we entrust the *cause of life*. Look down, O Mother, upon the vast numbers of babies not allowed to be born, of the poor whose lives are made difficult, of men and women who are victims of brutal violence, of the elderly and the sick killed by indifference or out of misguided mercy. Grant that all who believe in your Son may *proclaim the Gospel of life* with honesty and love to the people of our time. Obtain for them the grace to *accept that Gospel* as a gift ever new, the joy of *celebrating* it with gratitude throughout their lives, and the courage to *bear witness to it* resolutely, in order to build, together with all people of good will, the civilization of truth and love. . . (p. 188)

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*Thomas Lickona, a developmental psychologist and educator, is an internationally respected authority on moral development and values education. His extensive writing on moral development has included the well-received books, Educating for Character, Moral Development and Behavior, and Raising Good Children. Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Thomas Lickona, Education Department, State University College at Cortland, P.O. Box 2000, Cortland, NY 13045-0900.*

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