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Catholic Education in an Age of Unbelief, Optimism and Indifference: The Pastoral Vocation of an Incarnational Educator

Glenn Morrison*

The mission and vocation of Catholic education signifies an incarnational work of the mission of Christ to reveal the nearness of the kingdom of God. This article suggests the pastoral formation and mission of becoming an *incarnational educator* through boldness, meekness (gentleness) and the vigilance of love as a means to respond to the contemporary challenges of unbelief, optimism and indifference. In this way, Catholic education takes up the mission and challenge to be a place of formation to help educators develop a sense of identity, spirituality and otherness in the light of the Gospel and mysteries of the faith. In the life and mission of teaching, there will be transformative moments to inspire an incarnational character upon the heart and soul. These moments orient the Catholic teacher to face a rapidly changing world with patience, ongoing conversion, and openness to the presence of God's Word. The pastoral affectivity of the teacher as an incarnational educator speaks then of mission to become a person-in-Christ, to 'inherit the land' (Ps 37:11; Matt 5:5) and encounter the Word of God in the face of the poor one and stranger.

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The role of Catholic education invites commitment to energise the passion and gifts of teachers with the virtues of faith, hope and love. Commitment to

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nurturing these theological virtues is more than just a mere feeling or fleeting inspiration. Commitment orients a way forward towards responding like Christ to God's calling and word. Commitment invites the educator to be close to the Father's heart like Christ (John 1:18) and discover a sense of spirituality and mission. The question then for Catholic education is how to witness to the incarnational form of Christ, to the beauty, goodness and truth of faith, hope and love. Through the person of Jesus the Christ, we discover beauty in the realm of faith and understanding God's will. With Christ, we learn the goodness of mercy, compassion, and learning to be poor in spirit. In Christ's humility, there lays before us truth in all its hues of hiddenness, suffering, patience and wisdom. Through him, with him and in him, there opens an incarnational (eucharistic) path for the Catholic educator to discover the covenantal reality of being made in the likeness and image of the Trinity, a calling to respond daily to the question, 'Who is Jesus the Christ today?' Another way of asking this question is 'How can the Catholic teacher testify incarnationally, that is to say to make Christ known, through the formation of spirituality and holiness whilst facing the challenges and temptations of unbelief, optimism and indifference?'

To begin responding to this question, I want to suggest that the Catholic teacher will benefit from developing a theological and biblical vocabulary. The mysteries of the faith, the life and mission of Christ, all evoke a theological horizon wherein imagination, wonder and curiosity can mature into a passion for ethics and prayer. In terms of otherness, this underlines a spiritual ideal of holiness animated by encountering God's Word in the other's face. The commitment to good Catholic education parallels appreciating the mysteries of the faith and Christ's proclamation of the Good News. For example, Jesus' Beatitudes, inviting people of faith to encounter the nearness and newness of the kingdom of God (cf. Matt 5:3, 10), are stirring imperatives of mission that animate what Pope Francis calls *parrhesía*, or 'apostolic fervour' (*Gaudete et Exsultate* (GE), n. 129).

The work of the incarnational educator expresses a quality of faith as 'boldness' (GE 129) to respond to unbelief in a world of 'progress' through listening to Christ's call to mission and evangelisation. The work continues through hope, and the perseverance to overcome the ill of optimism with the grace of meekness and the ongoing conversion of encountering the Word of God in the face of the other, the poor one and stranger. Towards facing indifference, the educator will need to form an affectivity of loving from the heart (to be 'close to the Father's heart' like Christ (John 1:18)). This will help guard against the temptation (indifference) to regard the suffering of the other as a mere inconvenience and something to necessary to avoid. In the hope of helping teachers to appreciate the richness of Catholic spirituality and their pastoral vocation, let us now look at the nature of mission in relation to unbelief, the better to move towards a pastoral and spiritual affectivity of an incarnational

educator ‘to pray always and not to lose heart’ (Luke 18:1). The article will then engage the challenges of optimism and indifference.

Facing the Leviathan of Unbelief

In every age, we face the challenge of unbelief if we fail to adhere to Christ’s command, ‘Go into the whole world; proclaim the Good News to every creature’ (Mark 16:15). Pope Francis expressed this in a recent homily, stating, ‘This is the missionary dimension of faith. Either faith has a missionary dimension, or it is not faith. Faith is not something only for myself, so that I may grow with faith: this is a gnostic heresy. Faith always leads you to come out of yourself, to go out’.¹ Where the ego’s desire to reduce the world to its own perceptions, emotions and accretions of knowledge tempts and overwhelms the essence of faith, unbelief begins to assert itself. Unbelief grows through a creeping and growing indifference to the other’s suffering and hopes. It takes shape, to use a metaphor, like a ‘Leviathan’ (Isa 27:1) unleashed to thrash about freely in the waters of self-interest and a world without hope. Perhaps this sea monster, so to speak, is not so afraid to reveal its presence openly through the ages by way of uncertainty, fear, human ‘progress’, or even reason untouched by faith.

In the 1960s, in the wake of the Second Vatican Council, the church aimed strategically to have a go at taming the growing beast, as it were, of unbelief, with a sense of pastoral openness to the world. The opening words of *Gaudium et Spes* are memorable: ‘The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the men of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ’ (n. 1). Embracing the hope of *aggiornamento*, of keeping up to date with the modern world, speaks of a missionary vocation of going out to the world with a disposition of boldness, gentleness and hope to nurture a pastoral vision for the church to pass on to future generations. However, after the council, the liberal/progressive (neo-Thomistic) energies and excitement for renewal faced competing conservative (neo-Augustinian) voices of caution, disillusionment, suspicion and revision, or perhaps a ‘re-vision’ towards what seemed to have been lost, that is to say towards tradition. Together, the tension of ‘opposite extremisms’² between the new and the old, of change and tradition, fired the incense of the church’s prayer and direction against the beast of unbelief, today exemplified by Pope Francis’ ecclesiological focus on the poor and vulnerable, of ‘faith in Christ who became poor’ (*Evangelii Gaudium* (EG), n. 186). We may try to name the ‘Leviathan’ of unbelief as apathy, acedia, atheism, secularism,

1. Francis, Homily, ‘Faith Must Be Transmitted, It Must Be Offered, above All by Witness’, Morning Mass, Chapel of the Domus Sanctae Marthae, 25 April 2020, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/cotidie/2020/documents/papa-francesco-cotidie_20200425_testimoniare-lafede-conlavita.html.

2. See Massimo Faggioli, *Vatican II: The Battle for Meaning* (New York: Paulist, 2012), 19–20.

indolence or simply indifference to the suffering of the other. Further, such a monster of unbelief provides an impetus to journey to the depths, however unknown (Eccles 7:24), to make a stance against moral evil.³

Today the church faces another challenge of change that almost appears hyperbolic. For example, the advances in information technology, and now artificial intelligence, can leave one encountering a vertiginous and exponential world of change. Charles-Edouard Bouée has written a fascinating book from the point of view of an artificially intelligent being or robot, Lucy, that has achieved singularity or consciousness. Lucy presents a history of the achievements of humanity that have led to her evolving consciousness and a state of AI existence and subjectivity. In the end, her singularity occurred ‘quite spontaneously, like a spark, thanks to haphazard neural connections that it was probably impossible to reproduce’.⁴ Bouée reflects through his fictional seer and robot, Lucy, that:

Humanity was not changed by the fact that it used electricity or the telephone; artificial intelligence, however, has created a shock wave without precedent in human society. This is not only because it has changed the world, but because the change has affected the very essence of mankind: the way in which people think, reflect, create and communicate.⁵

It is interesting that Bouée has given AI an almost ‘messianic’, if not a pretentious, value to its effect on changing the world. Somehow, I remember a young man from Galilee whose mark on the world has been eventful and programmatic for the future of humanity. At any one time, there are competing metanarratives with Christianity. AI could be one of them. In an age of increasing signs of unbelief (forgetfulness about the value of the sacred), confusion and hyperbolic advances in technology, it could well become a temptation to think that a ‘personal robot’ or ‘humanoid’ may one day save us.⁶

In any age, we need to remember the past as much as the guiding voices of tradition helping to offer wisdom and discernment as we try to make sense of the present facing the future. When we hear the phrases, ‘lest we forget’ and ‘never

3. As a point of literary interest, Jules Verne ends his book, *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea*, with the following expression of hope: ‘May the judge disappear, and the philosopher continue the peaceful exploration of the sea! If his destiny be strange, it is also sublime. Have I not understood it myself? Have I not lived ten months of this unnatural life? And to the question by Ecclesiastes 3000 years ago, “That which is far off and exceeding deep, who can find it out?” two men alone of all now living have the right to give an answer—CAPTAIN NEMO AND MYSELF’. See Jules Verne, *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea* (London: Sampson Low, 1873), 320.

4. Charles-Edouard Bouée, *The Fall of the Human Empire: Memoirs of a Robot* (London: Bloomsbury Business, 2020), 107.

5. Bouée, *Fall of the Human Empire*, xiv.

6. Bouée, *Fall of the Human Empire*, 71–2.

again', we can be struck with a sense of the sacred, that life matters. In other words, to remember is to know there is an incarnational reality of God's presence and word of revelation to be responsible (cf. Num 11:16-17).⁷ Such responsibility is otherness, that is to say, the boldness and gentleness to care for the poor one and stranger.⁸ The French Jewish and Talmudic philosopher, Emmanuel Levinas, writes that God's speech, 'the Father's Word', takes 'the form of an ethical order, an order to love'. Moreover, he writes: 'I'm not saying that the other is God, but that in his or her Face I hear the Word of God. ... It is the face of the Other [*Autre*] that the commandment comes which interrupts the progress of the world'⁹. We can imagine then that the prophetic message and pastoral spirit of Vatican II, imitating the gospel proclamation, lives on to 'interrupt the progress of the world', its 'progress' towards unbelief. The inability to perceive the face of the stranger and poor one like the beaten man in the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37) underlines an effect of unbelief, an indifference to any call or command for help and care. The parable advises us about the danger of progress, and its gnostic or even atheistic sense of elitism and superiority (being a Lord unto oneself). The moral theologian and philosopher Roger Burggraeve unmasks the vulnerability of human existence by stating in his analysis of the parable of the Good Samaritan:

We are limited, or to put it in the form of a witticism: 'We are almighty, until we get up one morning with a headache.' Our existence is a struggle for life, not so much to be the strongest but the smartest, the most adapted and flexible, according to Darwin. We are not heroes. Our existence is given to us, but it is only half-given. It is imperfect, and can even be very imperfect, mediocre and constantly broken so that we have to search for 'healing' and 'salvation' beyond ourselves.¹⁰

The Leviathan of unbelief cannot perceive that in the mystery of meekness there are the disarming qualities of powerlessness, *kenosis*, weakness, suffering and the abiding presence of God's Spirit and Word. The Leviathan is blind and deaf to the work of the Spirit (1 Cor 2:9-10). The 'search for salvation' can seem more like 'Sensuous-emotive excitability ... particularly well rooted in the soil of human instincts' rather than 'the experience of deep stirring emotion'¹¹ like

7. Emmanuel Levinas, 'Philosophy, Justice and Love', in *Entre Nous: Thinking-of-the-Other*, trans. Michael B. Smith and Barbara Harshav (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 110.

8. Francis relates, 'Each individual Christian and every community is called to be an instrument of God for the liberation and promotion of the poor, and for enabling them to be fully a part of society. This demands that we be docile and attentive to the cry of the poor and to come to their aid'. See *Evangelii Gaudium*, n. 187.

9. Levinas, 'Philosophy, Justice and Love', in *Entre Nous*, 110.

10. Roger Burggraeve, 'Gestation of the Other in the Same', in *To Love Otherwise: Essays in Bible Philosophy and Ethics* (Leuven: Peeters, 2020), 275.

11. Karol Wojtyła [Pope St John Paul II], *The Acting Person*, trans. Andrzej Potocki (London: D. Reidel, 1979), 238.

sorrow, rejoicing (2 Cor 6:10) or 'the hunger and thirst for righteousness' (Matt 5:6). Unbelief, animated by the 'explosive sphere' of 'excitement', places freedom and reason in a tidal wave of desires, so to speak. The 'sudden' and 'explosive character' of excitability orients unbelief towards 'blind' and 'irrational' passions.¹² Further, unbelief surges into human consciousness through waves of optimism and indifference as a means to destroy hope and freeze love out of existence.

The journey of faith, to know Christ and become like leaven in the world (Matt 13:33), is incarnational. Pope Francis points out: 'The Christian life is a constant battle. We need strength and courage to withstand the temptations of the devil and to proclaim the Gospel. This battle is sweet, for it allows us to rejoice each time the Lord triumphs in our lives' (GE 158). For the self to become entangled in a world of unbelief speaks of the presence of evil in human existence, which Levinas characterises phenomenologically (based upon the horror of his experiences of Hitlerism and the near extinction of European Jewry) as an anonymous and depersonalised presence of an 'It' or 'thing'.¹³ This anonymous thing or presence haunts and controls as much as it represses any expression of faith and the soul of humanity. The question then for Catholic education today facing unbelief and the rapid pace of 'progress' is how to witness incarnationally to the riches of spirituality, 'The path of holiness' as 'a source of peace and joy, given to us by the Spirit' (GE 164).

In the context of an anonymous and depersonalising horror of unbelief, Catholic education has a pastoral role to form and cultivate a spiritual awareness of faith through developing the qualities of boldness, gentleness and the vigilance of love. This speaks then of ongoing conversion. Catholic education, to appreciate entering into the world of pedagogy and faith, must first seek a grounding within the Catholic theological tradition and imagination, especially towards cultivating spirituality and awareness of the presence of God at work in the world. I would like to suggest here a spirituality of an incarnational educator who first attends to the temptations and dangers of unbelief, optimism and indifference. To this end, Catholic education, cultivating gospel practices such as boldness, meekness and spiritual poverty takes a step towards unveiling a difficult truth about the fragility of faith today in a world of rapid change and growing apathy about the sacred. Such fragility is to reflect how unbelief attracts 'companions', as it were, like optimism and indifference.

We can envisage that the mission of Catholic education in a secular age is a liturgy and work responsibility to proclaim the Good News of Christ. In other words, this is to attest to the original Greek meaning of the word, 'liturgy',

12. Wojtyła, *Acting Person*, 237.

13. Levinas calls this the 'there is' or 'il y a' to express the horror of existence, or the being of self-interest. He speaks of the 'there is' as an 'abyss' of emotion, of discovering one's existence without subjectivity, that is to say, to exist without 'becoming someone'; to exist ultimately without ethics and prayer. See Emmanuel Levinas, *Existence and Existents*, trans. Aphonso Lingis (London: Kluwer Academic, 1995), 70–1.

namely to devote oneself to God ‘with no thought of reward, to accept a burden carried out as his own expense’¹⁴ (here we can think of the Good Samaritan who gave the innkeeper two denarii, two days’ wages (Luke 10:35)). The Catholic teacher, imbued by boldness, gentleness and poverty of spirit faces then a ‘difficult condition’ and freedom¹⁵ to recognise the sacramentality of the world, that is to say, how we look at life through the eyes of faith. Here the nature of sacramentality seems so close to the meaning of the Beatitudes. Such sacramentality also unveils a trinitarian and incarnational nature: as Creator, the Father speaks his Word to the world through the Spirit to create room for a spiritual affectivity of mission; the ‘demands that we keep “our lamps lit” (Lk 12:35) and be attentive’ (GE 164). The ‘difficult freedom’ of sacramentality, the life and work of the Beatitudes, is also a ‘difficult adoration’¹⁶ to love and care for the neighbour. Sacramentality in terms of the demands and Beatitudes of the Gospel speaks then of an incarnational and missionary call to take a stance in the world before unbelief and apathy. Kevin Irwin calls this a path of ‘ongoing conversion’.¹⁷ Perhaps here we find a way to ‘retrieve’ the value of sacramentality,¹⁸ and hence discover a little way forward to respond to unbelief today, as Pope Francis suggests: ‘At times, life presents great challenges. Through them, the Lord calls us anew to a conversion that can make his grace more evident in our lives, “in order that we may share his holiness” (Heb 12:10)’ (GE 17). We find here that the call to holiness is a part of the essence of sacramentality and the Beatitudes, ‘a Catholic way of looking at life’ (or ‘a sacramental worldview’).¹⁹ Is not this ‘the world of hope’, namely ‘a trustful and confident movement toward the future’?²⁰

From Optimism to Hope: To Be an Incarnational Educator

Optimism, ‘the implicit confidence that things are going well in the present situation’,²¹ has its limits. I am not talking here about the natural optimism that derives from a person’s character. Natural optimism can be a gift of the Spirit related to joy and youth that elevates the spirit towards hope and the nearness of the kingdom of heaven. Optimism, on the other hand, can have many faces. It

14. Emmanuel Levinas, *Difficult Freedom: Essays on Judaism*, trans. Seán Hand (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1990), xiv.

15. Levinas, ‘Foreword’, in *Difficult Freedom*, xiv.

16. Levinas, ‘Loving the Torah More than God’ and ‘Education and Prayer’ in *Difficult Freedom*, 145, 272.

17. Kevin W. Irwin, ‘A Sacramental World: Sacramentality as the Primary Language for Sacraments’, *Worship* 76, no. 3 (May 2002): 197.

18. Irwin, ‘Sacramental World’, 197. Irwin writes, ‘The key that unlocks and unleashes the depth and value of any liturgy and all sacramental celebration is sacramentality. Liturgy and sacraments presume a sacramental worldview. Yet I would argue that sacramentality is in need of retrieval for the very survival not only of liturgy and sacraments but for Catholic Christianity itself’.

19. Irwin, ‘Sacramental World’, 198.

20. Anthony Kelly, *Eschatology and Hope* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2006), 1.

21. Kelly, *Eschatology and Hope*, 5.

can mean vanity (cf. Eccles 2) and self-interest, and be naïve and unrealistic. Such implicit confidence or happiness about the present situation could fall into vanity and self-interest to manipulate people's thinking that things are still going well despite impending disaster. Optimism is happy with systems, and fails to ignore when such systems are breaking down.²² In this way, optimism becomes naïve, lazy and unrealistic. Through its fatigue with reality, optimism is beholden to a search for enjoyment or amusement, an escape from reality.

Whereas optimism likes to predict the future in terms of its self-interest, hope, in contrast, 'is trustful, for it is relying on something or someone for the help that is needed'.²³ Hope goes beyond optimistic predictabilities for it knows that it cannot force the door to open itself, so to speak. Hope, taking a step back from the false belief of optimism, understands the future remains an extraordinary promise for 'the meek' to 'inherit the earth' (Matt 5:5) (or 'land' (Ps 37:11)). The virtue of meekness or gentleness is rooted in ongoing conversion or 'interior poverty' (GE 74). The meek 'will see God's promises accomplished in their lives', as, in 'every situation', they 'put their hope in the Lord' to 'enjoy the fullness of peace' (GE 74). To be hopeful, further, is to touch upon the lives of the saints, 'who are joyful and full of good humour' (GE 122). Hope thus explores the realm of the unpredictable, and begins where optimism can no longer cope with its idolatries and self-interest.

Hope that remains beyond the totalising power of systems or methods awakens through holiness to seek a humane and compassionate existence. Through meekness and cultivating conversion in daily life, the virtue of hope animates 'a sacramental worldview' to become like Christ, a gift of self for others. Such a missionary charism speaks of an incarnational spirituality, of learning from the Father's work of redemption through the Spirit: of sending the Son and Word to the world. In this sense, to be made in the image of God (Gen 1:26-27) evokes the challenge to seek to live through the mysteries of the faith.

The 'liturgy' or work of responsibility of an educator is inherently incarnational. An incarnational educator bears the grace of being sent by God as a disciple and follower of Christ willing to enter into a liturgy of service and love—a charism of evoking hope in a tempting and testing world of optimism. The vocation or mission in Catholic education is to work towards instilling an incarnational word of hope about God's mercy: 'The saying is sure and worthy of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the foremost. But for that very reason I received mercy, so that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display the utmost patience, making me an example to those who would come to believe in him for eternal life' (1 Tim 1:15-16). Such words of mercy underline the intelligence of hope: 'inspiring a

22. Kelly, *Eschatology and Hope*, 5.

23. Kelly, *Eschatology and Hope*, 1.

personal sense of calling and destiny' and nourishing 'a feeling of being part of something greater, further, something more human and lasting'.²⁴

The journey and work of a Catholic educator partakes of the identity of Jesus the Christ. This suggests an incarnational quality of 'interior poverty' (Matt 5:3) and ongoing conversion that we can speak of in terms of uncovering the depths of humanity in weakness, humility, gentleness, powerlessness and vulnerability. Such 'kenotic' qualities unveil a willingness to empty oneself of one's own will for God's will, for service and the hope of salvation. The very yearning of Christ for the Father such as at Gethsemane reveals the extent of such thirsting for God. Here, we see the abiding presence of the Spirit of Christ or Holy Spirit. Matthew's Gospel portrays Christ: 'And going a little farther, he threw himself on the ground and prayed, "My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; yet not what I want but what you want"' (Matt 26: 39). In dramatic language Hans Urs von Balthasar explains: 'In the terrible fear of not being able to perform what is demanded, he must be convinced of a Yes. It is a struggle with himself; he has to wring his "your will be done" in the exertion of utmost weakness'.²⁵ As Messiah and Redeemer, yet also one set adrift towards the Cross, Jesus, like his mother during the annunciation proclaiming her Yes and 'fiat' (Luke 1:38) to the angel Gabriel, asserts his Yes.

In a world of unbelief and optimism, of uncertainty and despair, the incarnational disposition of Christ unveils a missionary (and Marian) dimension of conversion and hope: to enter into the mysteries of faith in the meekness of faith; a kenotic openness of love towards the divine will. The drama of Christ's Yes further signifies a 'difficult freedom' and 'difficult adoration'. Hope is therefore no mere self-interest of wishes and desire, but a more defining patience in the humility and powerlessness of faith ('but those who wait for the Lord shall inherit the land' (Ps 37:9)). Hope is otherwise than the totality of power over others often served through optimism in structures (idolatries) of self-aggrandisement and self-adulation.

The character of a Catholic teacher can be seen in this way of gentleness as derived from the 'mind' of Christ. St Paul reflects: 'Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross' (Phil 2:5-8).

Hope, resisting the temptation to control existence, speaks of a new spontaneity: the light of meekness and humility orienting the service of education. The passion and encounter of the soul to be a gift of self for others expresses the mystery of hope by acknowledging the promise of God's Spirit

24. Kelly, *Eschatology and Hope*, 5.

25. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Von Balthasar Reader*, ed. Medard Kehl and Werner Löser, trans. Robert J. Daly and Fred Lawrence (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1982), 147.

and Word in the creativity of good teaching and learning. Genuine hope knows that the transformational character of the educator draws from the inspiration of Christ—a radical commitment and promise of a ‘new world’.²⁶ Pope Francis identifies such ‘newness’ in the heart of those who are ‘poor in spirit’ and pure in heart (GE 68) and describes God as ‘eternal newness’ (GE 135). He explains: ‘He [God] takes us to where humanity is most wounded, where men and women, beneath the appearance of a shallow conformity, continue to seek an answer to the question of life’s meaning. God is not afraid! He is fearless! He is always greater than our plans and schemes. Unafraid of the fringes, he himself became a fringe (cf. *Phil* 2:6-8; *Jn* 1:14)’ (GE 135). The spirituality of teaching, we can suggest, attests to not being afraid to ‘Go out at once into the streets and lanes of the town and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame’ (Luke 14:21).

Let us imagine then the time of being a teacher today, sharing in the vocation and mission of Christ, is a journey. An educator that draws from humility and meekness can therefore find ways to journey in hope. In other words, this is to be open and imaginative, and to seek God’s goodness and completeness within all one’s gifts, hopes, limits and failings. Opening to the incarnational presence of ‘Christ the Educator’ helps to initiate a sense of the new: of growth and conversion to God’s kingdom. To begin to act in hope allows meekness and humility to orient a horizon of incarnational love, and dwell in a paschal horizon of faith in the Father’s kingdom that is otherwise than any cold indifference.

From Indifference to the Vigilance of Love: Keep Listening and Looking!

Like optimism, indifference arises through a lack of empathy and compassion for others. It may develop further into an alienating self-security (self-idolisation) as a response to tragedy, hardship, loneliness and horror of life. Cold indifference, powered by the energies of its own will, is the opposite of ‘spiritual poverty’ or of what St Ignatius speaks of as ‘holy indifference’, where we ‘we do not set our hearts on good health rather than bad, riches rather than poverty, honour rather than dishonour, a long life rather than a short one, and so in all the rest’ (GE 69). In contrast to the Ignatian sense of ‘holy indifference’, indifference makes its presence felt via a lack of ‘fraternal concern for others’ (GE 154). Robert Doud explains, ‘We do not usually think of indifference as a good thing. We accuse others of indifference when they seem not to care about something that they should care about. Indifference usually implies lack of feeling, lack of caring or apathy’.²⁷

In a secular and even post-Christian world, indifference forms new and unique expressions. Through unbelief and a prevailing optimism, people may

26. Walter Kasper, *Jesus the Christ*, new ed. (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 1977), 76.

27. Robert Doud, ‘Ignatian Indifference and Today’s Spirituality’, *The Way* 52, no. 4 (October 2013): 94.

possess no apparent need to think about the significance of religious faith. There may be the question evolving in the subconscious, ‘Who are these bizarre people who express interest and devotion in something unseen, blank and frivolous?’ Indifference, gathering other negative emotions together, forms a psychological ‘complex’ that may prevent any feeling or attempt to journey on the path of forgiveness.²⁸ Any image of the face of the other’s suffering may be repressed and reduced to an objective rationalisation like ‘I am busy and have not time to care’. Burggraeve describes such an attitude as ‘the strict heteronomy of the “inconvenient” appearance of the other’.²⁹

Indifference also breeds anonymity and mockery. The other can feel the insult of having one’s dignity and uniqueness overshadowed by impersonal expressions of life through discourtesy, satire, sarcasm, sardonic humour, or people being obtuse, aloof and prejudiced. Indifference has very little to do with the world of grace, mercy and thanksgiving. It can also be subtle and concealed. People could also appear to be gregarious, even intimate and caring, yet behind this hypocrisy and façade lies a cold heart at home in a frozen atmosphere of emotions; a safer place for the ego to retreat from the cries of human suffering and want. This could help to explain the ‘urge to bypass shame’ and justice—at once a ‘pervasive conviction that it is normatively respectable in most cases not to attend to or even notice the other’s suffering or need’.³⁰ This also helps explain why Levinas suggests that responsibility for the other is prior to any reciprocity, that is to say anarchic³¹ (without origin) and immemorial (like going back to the first day of Creation, ‘In the beginning’ (Gen 1:1) or the sense that ‘The Good is before being’).³² Levinas writes that ‘The interhuman, properly speaking, lies in a non-indifference of one to another, in a responsibility of one for another, but before the reciprocity of this responsibility’.³³ The attitude of indifference, therefore, does not do anything to help relieve ‘the evil of suffering—extreme passivity, helplessness, abandonment and solitude’, and nor can it touch upon ‘the original call for aid, for curative help ... whose exteriority promises salvation’.³⁴ In terms of the evil encountered in the twentieth century, ‘that in thirty years has known two world wars, the totalitarianisms of right and left, Hitlerism and Stalinism, the Gulag, and the genocides of Auschwitz and

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28. John Monbourquette, *How to Forgive: A Step-by-Step Process* (Ottawa: Novalis, 2000), 116. Monbourquette points out, ‘Emotions are made up of positive human energies that need to be recognized, controlled and put to good use. When feared or repressed by the subconscious, they form groups of emotions and images called “complexes” that then take on a life of their own’.
29. Burggraeve, ‘Gestation of the Other’, 273.
30. Steve Larocco, ‘The Other, Shame, and Politics: Levinas, Justice, and Feeling Responsible’, *Religions* 9 (23 November 2018): 381, doi:10.3390/rel9120381.
31. Emmanuel Levinas, ‘Substitution’, in *Basic Philosophical Writings*, ed. Adrian T. Peperzak, Simon Critchley and Robert Bernasconi (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1996), 82.
32. Emmanuel Levinas, ‘Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence’, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1998), 122.
33. Levinas, ‘Useless Suffering’, in *Entre Nous*, 100.
34. Levinas, ‘Useless Suffering’, in *Entre Nous*, 93.

Cambodia', Levinas will ask, 'does not human experience in history attest to a wickedness and an ill will?'³⁵ Indifference in the end is not interested in 'the pain of the other';³⁶ it is the opposite of love and empathy. We can also think of the little goodness as the opposite of indifference. The Jewish Ukrainian author, Vasily Grossman, writes in his novel, *Life and Fate* (about the tragedies of Stalinist Russia): 'Human history is not the battle of good struggling to overcome evil. It is a battle fought by a great evil struggling to crush a small kernel of human kindness. But if what is human in human being has not been destroyed even now, then evil will never conquer'.³⁷

Acting and thinking otherwise than indifference, an incarnational and biblical life embodies an immemorial gift of faith and the little goodness to proclaim to God, 'Here I am; send me!' (Isa 6:8). To partake of God's creative and generative light, and to learn how to stir and jolt the faces of those lost in 'the deep' (Gen 1:2) and abyss of indifference points to the work of redemption. For the mission and vocation of the Catholic teacher, to 'keep listening' and to 'keep looking' signifies a journey of faith to encounter the risen Christ in the face of the other. To be therefore gentle, bold, attentive and vigilant, to 'keep listening' and 'keep looking' evokes a prayerful statement about how to love 'from your heart' (Matt 18:35). Accordingly, St Paul expresses in incarnational language, 'I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God' (Eph 3:18-19).

To be an incarnational educator bearing the mysteries of the faith is to confess that Jesus is the Christ (Messiah). In theological terms, this means to embody a pastoral and spiritual sense of faith, hope and love, and hence to become a person-in-Christ. The soul of pedagogy (and andragogy) awakes to the Infinite, of God's Word-in-the-finite (God's presence through Christ in the world). To take on the charism of good Catholic teaching and learning testifies to a vision of freedom, responsibility and the witness of faith in an age of unbelief, optimism and indifference. Catholic education therefore faces the mission and vocation to respond with a pastoral and spiritual heart, or a 'thinking heart',³⁸ as Etty (Esther) Hillesum, a Dutch Jewess from Amsterdam who died at Auschwitz at the age of twenty-nine in 1943, would suggest. In her prayer to God from her diary she left behind before her death, she relates a way out of

35. Levinas, 'Useless Suffering', in *Entre Nous*, 95, 97.

36. Levinas, 'Useless Suffering', in *Entre Nous*, 98.

37. Vasily Grossman, *Life and Fate*, trans. Robert Chandler (London: Vintage, 2006), 394.

38. Etty Hillesum uses the metaphor of a 'thinking heart' amidst her incarceration at Westerbork Transit Camp before being transported to Auschwitz. She writes, 'The thinking heart of the barracks', to summarise her search for 'the great redeeming formula' that 'sums up everything within' her of the 'overflowing and rich sense of life'. In sum, to possess a thinking heart is to be close to the heart of a poet reflecting on the mysteries of God and the challenge to be humane. See Etty Hillesum, *An Interrupted Life: The Diaries, 1941-1943; and Letters from Westerbork* (New York: Henry Holt, 1996), 199.

theodicy, of dealing with impenetrable evil and suffering, and how God can exist. She writes, ‘And talking to You, God. Is that all right? With the passing of people, I feel a growing need to speak to You alone. I love people so terribly, because in every human being I love something of You. And I seek You everywhere in them and often do find something of You’.³⁹

Imagine a gentle heart like Etty’s beating away to proclaim and witness to the nearness and newness of the kingdom of God in spite of her suffering and encounter with persecution. The call to be meek, humble, hopeful, loving and, indeed, bold and resilient, in Catholic education underlines the courage, confidence and patience to take a stance against the horror of indifference. The work of an incarnational educator is a life of goodness and truth, to know the Gospel and encounter the Word of God in the face of the other, the poor one and stranger. From here, we can move forward to suggest a biblical, spiritual and pastoral theological perspective for Catholic education.

To Pray Always and Not to Lose Heart

Let us consider the parable of the widow and the unjust judge in Luke 18:1-8, for it is compelling about the language of mission. In verse 1, Luke advises us of his intention, building on the themes of the coming of the kingdom of God. He states, ‘Then Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart’. Tannehill points out that ‘The verb translated “lose heart” (*enkakeo*) can also be translated “despair”. Its opposite is persistence, but also boldness or courage’.⁴⁰

In the parable, Jesus states, ‘In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor had respect for people’ (v. 2). This is a story about a widow besting a judge with a hardened heart. The widow no doubt was equally hardened due to her vigilant cry for justice against her opponent (v. 4). The affectivity of the widow’s ‘bothering’ him (v. 5) oriented the judge to seek his own self-interest of peace of mind. In effect, the judge felt the widow was stressing him out. Her vigilance for justice provoked a response. The woman knew how to stand up for her dignity, and not to take initial rejection as the last word. Churning inside is a sense of moral indignation; she is upset and angry. ‘Anger releases a sort of counterforce, namely the strength to combat the de-personalised power of the system’.⁴¹ Her anger produces a cry for justice that evokes a sense of the Beatitude, ‘Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled’ (Matt 5:6). The passions of hungering and thirsting speak also of the presence of the Holy Spirit animating a stance for justice.

39. Hillesum, *Interrupted Life*, 198.

40. Robert C. Tannehill, *Luke*, Abingdon New Testament Commentaries (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1996), 263.

41. Linus Vanlaere, Roger Burggraeve and Laetus O.K. Lategan, *Vulnerable Responsibility: Small Vice for Caregivers* (Bloemfontein, South Africa: Sun, 2019), 98.

Emotions can be ‘put to good use’.⁴² Emotions help to orient an affectivity for mission. Jesus tells us ‘to pray always and not to lose heart’ (Luke 18:1). Pope Francis speaks of ‘boldness, enthusiasm’ and ‘apostolic fervour’, key affective characteristics of what I would see as being an incarnational educator. He writes:

Holiness is also *parrhesía*: it is boldness, an impulse to evangelize and to leave a mark in this world. To allow us to do this, Jesus himself comes and tells us once more, serenely yet firmly: “Do not be afraid” (*Mk* 6:50). “I am with you always, to the end of the world” (*Mt* 28:20). These words enable us to go forth and serve with the same courage that the Holy Spirit stirred up in the Apostles, impelling them to proclaim Jesus Christ. Boldness, enthusiasm, the freedom to speak out, apostolic fervour, all these are included in the word *parrhesía*. The Bible also uses this word to describe the freedom of a life open to God and to others (cf. *Acts* 4:29, 9:28, 28:31; *2 Cor* 3:12; *Eph* 3:12; *Heb* 3:6, 10:19).
(GE 129)

A pastoral and spiritual challenge of Catholic education is to hear and respond to Christ’s question, ‘when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?’ (Luke 18:8), with an affectivity of ‘apostolic fervour’. This is at the heart of the mission of good teaching. The spirit of being an incarnational educator rests in taking up the vocation to bestow the church’s missionary spirit upon Catholic education. Such work unfolds through responding to unbelief, optimism and indifference, and appreciating the Beatitudes of ‘interior poverty’ (conversion) and meekness (gentleness) as much as ‘pursuit of justice for the poor and the weak’ (boldness) (GE 79). If St Paul speaks of gentleness as a fruit of the Spirit (Gal 5:23) (GE 73), the hungering and thirsting for justice signifies an intense experience of the Spirit (GE 77) and vigilance of love. The mission of Catholic education rests then in listening to Jesus’ words, ‘to pray always and not to lose heart’.

The nature and challenge of mission is like a parable or riddle ‘not to lose heart’. Developing a sense of mission evokes the grace of ‘a sacramental worldview’, to keep listening, looking and learning. By looking, listening and learning through time, through encountering the mysteries of the faith and God’s presence in the face of the poor one and stranger, one may hear Jesus’ words, ‘to pray always and not to lose heart’. Here, there is a liturgy of responsibility and love: a difficult freedom and adoration, yet also joy and graced moments of meekness and hungering and thirsting for justice amidst the challenges of unbelief, optimism and indifference today. Such graced moments help to unveil

42. Monbourquette, *How to Forgive*, 116.

a little of the hidden character of the kingdom of God (Matt 13:33). In the turbulent or silent moments of grace, of ‘an impulse to evangelize and to leave a mark in this world’ (GE 129), there remains the ever gentle vigilance of Christ, ‘to pray always and not to lose heart’. These words define in essence the life and mission of an incarnational educator. Through praying from the heart, we come closer to understanding a little bit more about ourselves, that we live in mystery and love. In the abiding presence of God’s mystery, we may then feel the stirrings of the Spirit inviting us to ponder on the incarnational character of mission, identity and education. Here as we encounter Christ ‘in care for other’,⁴³ we may hear his questions, ‘What or Whom are you looking for?’ (John 1:38; 20:15) and ‘Who is my neighbour?’ (Luke 10:29). In a final word, spiritual and formation in Catholic education ‘demands a radical *generosity*’ and ‘incarnated responsibility’, a ‘down-to-earth’⁴⁴ patience, humility, meekness and boldness to love one another ‘from your heart’ (Matt 18:35).

43. Burggraeve, ‘Gestation of the Other’, 275.

44. Burggraeve, ‘Gestation of the Other’, 283–5.