III. Five Essential Marks
Of Catholic Schools

Papal interventions and Roman documents repeatedly emphasize that certain characteristics must be present for a school to be considered authentically Catholic. Like the marks of the Church proclaimed in the Creed – one, holy, catholic, and apostolic – so, too, does the Holy See identify the principal features of a school as Catholic: a Catholic school should be inspired by a supernatural vision, founded on Christian anthropology, animated by communion and community, imbued with a Catholic worldview throughout its curriculum, and sustained by gospel witness. These benchmarks help to answer the critical question: Is this a Catholic school according to the mind of the Church?
The Holy See's Teaching on Catholic Schools

1. INSPIRED BY A SUPERNATURAL VISION

The Church sees education as a process that, in light of man's transcendent destiny, forms the whole child and seeks to fix his or her eyes on heaven. 27 The specific purpose of a Catholic education is the formation of boys and girls who will be good citizens of this world, loving God and neighbor and enriching society with the leaven of the gospel, and who will also be citizens of the world to come, thus fulfilling their destiny to become saints. 28

In a speech addressed to American Catholic educators in New Orleans, Pope John II presented them with the pressing challenge of clearly identifying the aims of Catholic education, and applying proper methods in Catholic elementary and secondary education . . . . It is the challenge of fully understanding the educational enterprise, of properly evaluating its content, and of transmitting the full truth concerning the human person, created in God’s image and called to life in Christ through the Holy Spirit. 29

An emphasis on the inalienable dignity of the human person – above all on his or her spiritual dimension – is especially necessary today. Unfortunately, far too many in government, business, the media, and even the educational establishment perceive education to be merely an instrument for the acquisition of information that will improve the chances of worldly success and a more comfortable standard of living. Such an impoverished vision of education is not Catholic.

If Catholic educators, parents, and others who dedicate themselves to this apostolate fail to keep in mind a high supernatural vision, all their talk about Catholic schools will be no more than “a gong booming or a cymbal clashing” (1 Cor. 13:1).

The Holy See’s Teaching on Catholic Schools

2. FOUNDED ON A CHISTIAN ANTHROPOLOGY

Emphasis on the supernatural destiny of students brings with it a profound appreciation of the need to perfect children in all their dimensions as images of God (cf. Gen. 1:26-27). Catholic theology teaches that grace builds on nature. Because of this complementarity of the natural and the supernatural, Catholic educators should have a sound understanding of the human person that addresses the requirements of both the natural and the supernatural perfection of the children entrusted to their care.\textsuperscript{30}

Repeatedly the Holy See’s documents emphasise the need for an educational philosophy built on a correct understanding of who the human person is. How do they describe such an anthropological vision?

In \textit{Lay Catholics in Schools: Witnesses to Faith}, the Vatican proposes a response.

Five Essential Marks of Catholic Schools

In today’s pluralistic world, the Catholic educator must consciously inspire his or her activity with the Christian concept of the person, in communion with the Magisterium of the Church. It is a concept which includes a defense of human rights, but also attributes to the human person the dignity of a child of God . . . . It calls for the fullest development of all that is human, because we have been made masters of the world by its Creator. Finally, it proposes Christ, Incarnate Son of God and perfect Man, as both model and means; to imitate him is, for all men and women, the inexhaustible source of personal and communal perfection.\textsuperscript{31}
3. ANIMATED BY COMMUNION AND COMMUNITY

A third mark of catholicity is the emphasis on the school as a community – a community of persons and, even more to the point, “a genuine community of faith.” Such an emphasis proposes an alternative model for Catholic schools to that of an individualistic society. This communal dimension is rooted both in the social nature of the human person and in the reality of the Church as “the home and the school of communion.” That the Catholic school is an educational community “is one of the most enriching developments for the contemporary school.” The Congregation’s Religious Dimension of Education in a Catholic School sums up this new emphasis:

The declaration Gravissimum Educationis notes an important advance in the way a Catholic school is thought of: the transition from the school as an institution to the school as a community. This community dimension is, perhaps, one result of the new awareness of the Church’s nature as developed by the Council. In the Council texts, the community dimension is primarily a theological concept rather than a sociological category.

The Holy See describes the school as a community in four areas; the teamwork among all those involved; the co-operation between educators and bishops; the interaction of students with teachers; and the school’s physical environment.
The Holy See’s Teaching on Catholic Schools

4. IMBUED WITH A CATHOLIC WORLDVIEW THROUGHOUT ITS CURRICULUM

A fourth distinctive characteristic of Catholic schools is that the “spirit of Catholicism” should permeate the entire curriculum.

Catholic education is “intentionally directed to the growth of the whole person.” An integral education aims to develop gradually every capability of every student: his or her intellectual, physical, psychological, moral, and religious capacities. Vatican documents speak of an education that responds to all the needs of the human person:

The integral formation of the human person, which is the purpose of education, includes the development of all the human faculties of the students, together with preparation for professional life, formation of ethical and social awareness, becoming aware of the transcendental, and religious education. Every school, and every educator in the school, ought to be striving “to form strong and responsible individuals, who are capable of making free and correct choices,” thus preparing young people “to open themselves more and more to reality, and to form in themselves a clear idea of the meaning of life” (*The Catholic School*, 31).

To be integral or complete, Catholic schooling must be constantly inspired and guided by the gospel. As we have seen, the Catholic school would betray its purpose if it failed to found itself on the person of Christ and his teaching: “It derives all the energy necessary for its educational work from him.”

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5. SUSTAINED BY GOSPEL WITNESS

A final indicator of a school’s authentic catholicity is the vital witness of its teachers and administrators. With them lies the primary responsibility for creating a Christian school climate, as individuals and as a community.\textsuperscript{84} Indeed, “it depends chiefly on them whether the Catholic school achieves its purpose.”\textsuperscript{85} Consequently the Holy See’s documents pay a great deal of attention to the vocation of teachers and their participation in the Church’s evangelizing mission. Theirs is a supernatural calling and not simply the exercise of a profession.\textsuperscript{86} “The nobility of the task to which teachers are called demands that, in imitation of Christ, the only Teacher, they reveal the Christian message not only by word but also by every gesture of their behavior.”\textsuperscript{87}