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**CATHOLIC INTELLECTUAL LIFE AND CATHOLIC TEACHER EDUCATION:
CHALLENGES AND RESPONSES IN AN AGE OF CHANGE**

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Catholic teacher education ideally prepares students to take up roles in schools and other institutions with the aspiration that they bring action which transforms and enhances the lives of those they teach. A recent American publication, presenting current educational experiences in the context of an age of change, offers a striking, indeed moving, portrait of the dedicated work of an English and History teacher in an inner-city Catholic school in Bridgeport, Connecticut (Fernandez and Lutz, 2015, pp. 21-32). The selfless resolution displayed by this teacher throughout her entire career, in the face of many challenges, is an eloquent testimony to the best that Catholic education can offer in terms of enhancing the lives of children and young people. Catholic education should be at the forefront of raising awareness of issues of social justice in confronting systemic inequalities and the ‘birth lottery’ which generally provides much greater life opportunities for those fortunate enough to be born ‘on the right side of the tracks’. As the Congregation for Catholic Education’s 2014 *instrumentum laboris (Educating Today and Tomorrow)* underlined, ‘the real expected result [of education] is not the acquisition of information or knowledge but, rather, personal transformation’ (CCE, 2014). It is an insight which hardly seems up for debate.

Nevertheless, while the goal of promoting justice in the image of the Church’s social teaching (its ‘hidden jewel’) is not something about which the contemporary Catholic teacher can be equivocal, there are benefits to be gained in pausing on occasion to take stock of where the prevailing tide of teacher education discourse more generally is headed. Of course, it would not be fair to try to encapsulate the complex array of issues and debates on educational issues in just a few paragraphs but that is not what is being proposed here. It is sufficient, for the moment, at the outset of what will hopefully be a longer, more detailed scholarly exchange, to take note of some of the voices which, within teacher education, are

proving to be ‘counter-cultural’ in terms of their vision and resonances in the academy. Indeed, it would be odd if, given the pervasiveness of appeals over the decades for ‘counter-cultural’ witness in the interests of authentically proclaiming the Gospel to the modern world, such ‘counter-cultural’ instincts were not also to be encouraged when Catholic teacher educators survey the courses they find themselves delivering (Groome, 1996, p. 116; Sullivan, 2001, pp. 12-14, 17; Grace, 2013).

In recent times, there have been several key texts which have led the way in seeking to provoke critical responses to prevailing tenets in teacher education. Ellen Condliffe Lagemann’s classic monograph (2000) should be required reading for any aspiring researcher as she argues emphatically that educationalists need to be ever sensitive to the historical and environmental contexts which have produced the dominant educational paradigms of any age. As an experienced historian of education, Lagemann was only too aware of the permeating shadows of ahistoricism in educational discourse. The roll call of educational theorists to be found in most general histories of educational thought must not necessarily be presented as representative of a timeless wisdom, ever relevant to each generation, rather than as creations of their own times, to be approached with respectful circumspection (Depaepe, 2012, p. 131; Bjartveit and Panayotidis, 2014). Curtis Hancock certainly appreciated the need for cultivation of such critical distance in the mindset of the Catholic teacher in his incisive introduction to philosophy of education, particularly in a chapter eye-catchingly entitled ‘Confronting the idols of the education tribe’ (Hancock, 2005). Turning the camera, as it were, towards teacher education *per se*, the work of Daniel Liston and Kenneth Zeichner was already in 1991 prompting debate as an educational discourse ‘increasingly muddled’ in its use of terms such as ‘empowerment’, ‘reflection’ and ‘critical’ was robustly urged to recalibrate itself in the interests of better preparing students for effective educational actions in future careers (Liston and Zeichner, 1991, p. 38). A more recent article by Leonardo Franchi

touches on many of the same broad principles and demonstrates that the conversation which seeks to disavow any ‘comfort zone’ relating to the purposes, rationales and content of teacher education still necessarily continues to the present day (Franchi, 2016; Kirschner and Merriënboer, 2013).

It is precisely because of the on-going discussions on the nature of teacher education that this paper refers to ‘challenges and responses in an age of change’. To be clear: what is presented here is not just a plea for Catholic teacher education to be *responsive* to social and cultural change but, rather, for it to be conceived along lines which will *initiate* change for the social and cultural good in light of Gospel imperatives. The context of continuing scholarly discourse described above should make it abundantly clear that in re-considering current approaches to Catholic teacher education, one is not pleading any special case within the broader, more generic field but, rather, offering a substantial contribution to a multi-faceted debate about teacher educators’ priorities in the field more generally (Forzani, 2014; Ellis and McNicoll, 2015; Zygmunt and Clark, 2016). Nevertheless, there still needs to be a more specifically Catholic dimension to the debate and, in making some suggestions in the area of intellectual development, the present paper aims to move beyond vague notions of ‘change’ to offering a concrete proposal.

Fundamentally, teacher education courses for prospective Catholic teachers must offer opportunities for considered, scholarly encounters with the Catholic Intellectual Tradition (Brady, 2013). Ideally, this should take the form of a dedicated course which functions as a staple feature of a teacher education programme. While one can certainly debate whether the correct nomenclature for the title of such a course should be ‘Catholic philosophy of education’ or ‘philosophy of Catholic education’ (D’Souza, 2003, p. 373; Whittle, 2014), the need for Catholic student teachers to be encouraged to ground their vision and understanding of Catholic education in an immersive survey of Catholic thought drawn from across the

centuries is now vital. Personal experience of faith professed as an individual and faith practised in community can only take the prospective teacher so far. The ability to draw on a range of representatives of the intellectual tradition in which they seek to take their place is not only to be re-connected to the ‘memory banks’ of a *living* tradition but also to be reminded of the purpose of such study as a response to the *tabula rasa* of the future which awaits, unscripted, the decisions and actions of the teacher and his or her students in society. The Redemptorist scholar, Anthony Kelly, alludes to this latter point in his thought-provoking meditation on ‘hopeful intelligence’ where, prompted by the work of Christopher Dawson, he asserts that ‘the horizon, in which the Catholic intellectual tradition operates, unfolds in an openness to the reality of God, the self, history, the world and the universe itself’ (Kelly, 2008, p. 32).

For the aspirant to the role of Catholic teacher, the ‘openness’ referred to by Kelly comes with no ‘opt out’. This is precisely because election to teach in a Catholic school is to choose to become a ‘vessel of grace’ (Pius XI, 1929, paras. 17, 94; Clark, 1974; Kelty, 1999, p. 12; Whittle, 2015, p. 104). It has, perhaps, become unfashionable in scholarly circles to articulate such a thought so directly. But, in considering the *vocation* of Catholic teachers, the reference to a theological construct such as ‘vessel of grace’ is to touch on a very real challenge if Catholic schools in the twenty-first century are to continue to state a claim for their continuing existence in a pluralist age of competing interests. Richard Rymarz (2007) has succinctly summarised this challenge in terms of the experience of Religious Education teachers more specifically but the possibility of the Catholic ethos in a Catholic school being defined essentially by a reality predominantly characterised as an interchange of experiential feelings should be of concern to *all* claiming approval to practise as *Catholic* teachers in the denominational sector (Smith, 2005, pp. 162-163; Heft, 2011, pp. 180-184). As James Heft has stated, ‘teachers who have acquired an articulate grasp of the faith have an extraordinary

opportunity: they can help students develop habits that will bring them great competence in writing and speaking and thinking about the faith' (Heft, 2011, p. 171). Faith, ultimately, has a content which is best presented in the context of a developing, yet constant, appreciation and awareness of the opportunities for grace-filled relationships between teachers and pupils. Ideally, the Catholic teacher is dedicated to 'real-world' social transformation but driven and enthused by a passion whose source is the sustaining presence of the living God.

However, in touching at this juncture on the need to nurture a deeper, theological understanding of the role of grace amongst Catholic teachers with a view to building up 'the kingdom' in Catholic schools, there is a danger of getting ahead of oneself. The 'missing link' – what will ultimately contribute to deeper theological engagement – must be philosophical preparation: hence the argument here that courses in philosophy of education must return to the core of the Catholic teacher education curriculum. It might be argued, of course, that such a step would be regressive, a retreat to a past model, doomed to failure if attempted in the Catholic teacher education institutions of today. One might, for example, be thinking of the writings of Thomas Shields (1917; Elias 2009) or John Redden and Francis Ryan (1942). However, the desire to project past curricular approaches onto modern frameworks is *not* what is being proposed here. What *is* proposed is the development of courses which address the potential *ahistoricity* of understandings of philosophical underpinnings of Catholic education in the twentieth century in particular, providing correctives to the superficial divisions of scholastic/academic (pre-Vatican II) and scriptural/experiential (post-Vatican II) approaches. Ignorance about the past is no basis on which to plant foundations today for the Catholic educators of the future. The complexity of philosophical and theological developments are only made to appear simple as a good teacher's tool in moving students towards the final goal of appreciating the richer reality of intertwined influences and ideologies. As Ulrich Leinsle has noted in referring to modern

historical research relating to scholastic theology: ‘it sees [scholastic theology’s] advantages and disadvantages, its expressions that reflect former times, but also what it has to offer by way of methods and inquiries that should be taken seriously’ (Leinsle, 2010, p. 360). In other words, there must be thoughtful, scholarly consideration of past philosophical and theological expressions of the principles of Catholic education, without any automatic presumption of superiority on the part of the student from the vantage point of twenty-first century hindsight (McCluskey, 2017).

Catholic teacher education, then, has an urgent need to be grounded in a philosophical world-view which is informed by an appreciation of ‘Catholic thought’ forged over centuries, rather than decades (Cadegan, 2016). While, for some commentators, there may be an apologetical dimension to such study (Roccasalvo, 2016), it might equally be asserted that it is simply a matter of *natural justice* that students be provided with a bridge to scholarly and reflective study of the Catholic Intellectual Tradition in preparation for their vocation as Catholic teachers. Ideally, the approach to such courses should carry all the hallmarks of scholarship – wide reading, critical and analytical – while inspiring curiosity about what materials might be available beyond the parameters of the mentored syllabus (Convery, Franchi and McCluskey, 2014, pp. 38-39). Indeed, these scholarly traits should be characteristic of *all* graduates of *Catholic* teacher education programmes. The challenge for Catholic teacher educators, therefore, will be to find engaging and, at times, innovative ways to deliver Catholic philosophy of education content across the wide range of the student body. Students having elected to prepare for teaching in Catholic schools, there is an assumption that their teacher educators will generally find a good deal of latent, potential interest in philosophical approaches but such interest can never be taken for granted and it is inevitable that many students will initially be more enthusiastic from the outset than others (Coll, 2007).

Nevertheless, if advocates of Catholic education are to continue to be able to speak in terms of ‘distinctiveness’, then the challenge of preparing Catholic teachers *philosophically* is no longer one that can be ignored. Taking a cue in more recent times from the Congregation for Catholic Education’s seminal *The Religious Dimension of Education in a Catholic School* (CCE, 1988), *distinctiveness* has become a predominant theme in the claims made on behalf of Catholic education, to such a degree that some scholars have rightly urged greater forethought and clarity in articulating what is actually meant by the term (Sullivan, 2001, p. 125; McKinney, 2008). Mirroring this more forensic analysis of claims and building on particularly fecund previous research in the field (D’Souza, 2013), Mario D’Souza addresses from the very outset of his magisterial monograph the issue of what constitutes such *distinctiveness*, forcing the reader to consider whether this is something to be found only in the *religious identity* of the Catholic school or whether it can be identified as permeating the entire school day and across the curriculum (D’Souza, 2016, p. 10).

There have certainly been attempts at establishing means by which a prevalent distinctiveness permeates the life of a Catholic school, not least by D’Souza himself. What would seem to be required is a conscientious development of Catholic student teachers’ understanding of the *distinctive* nature of Catholic education in the face of the justified inquisitiveness of fellow professionals beyond the denominational sector (D’Souza, 2016, pp. 13-14). As the present writer has argued elsewhere, it is not exactly a feature of most schools – Catholic or otherwise – that they would seek to make the lives of their pupils worse (Convery, Franchi and McCluskey, 2014, p. 39). One means of responding to the need to be *distinctive* must, therefore, lie in the philosophical soil which the Catholic Intellectual Tradition offers. Familiarity with its main thinkers and artists can only enhance a sense of deep Catholic roots, inspiring confidence in the future precisely because the shoots for further growth are so strong and deep. That, at least, would be the ideal. This is not, let it be

emphasised, a sociological or demographical argument, grounded in statistics relating to faltering attendances in the churches of the so-called ‘first world’ of ‘the West’, particularly in Catholicism’s traditional heartlands in Europe. It is, rather, a cultural argument, not in a pejorative or triumphalist sense, but understood in terms of a belief that ideas themselves have power to inspire and transform lives. Christianity is a religion defined by its missionary, evangelical dimension and it has been a combination of philosophical and theological *ideas* – the life of the mind – in conjunction with individual and community *prayer* – the life of the soul – which has provided the fertile context out of which Catholic schools have emerged in the past, particularly in recent centuries. As the twenty-first century continues its progress – by any reckoning, an age of substantial change – there can no longer be ambivalence about the role of philosophy as an essential preparation for the Catholic teacher.

What might such a Catholic philosophy of education course look like? Let it be stated straightaway that there is no single, authoritative response to this question. There is an extended literature on the Catholic Intellectual Tradition, mainly originating in the United States, and new contributions to the field emerge with every passing year (see, for example, Janosik, 2014). There have also certainly been previous scholarly reflections on how best to present the Catholic Intellectual Tradition to students in terms of integrating fundamental goals and principles across disciplines (DeVecchio , 2015; Galligan-Stierle, 2015). However, it still needs to be stated with vigour and clarity that prospective Catholic teachers should be encouraged to read widely while developing skills of criticality and analysis. This needs to be a manageable goal, particularly in terms of time allocation where student teachers spend anything up to half of their course actually in schools gaining experience in the classroom. It is precisely because of such a need for focus and momentum in progressing in appreciation of the Catholic Intellectual Tradition that a collection of texts such as is to be found in Ryan Topping’s recent compendium is to be warmly welcomed (Topping, 2015). Topping’s

volume includes Plato, Aristotle and Quintilian, hardly Catholic authors, but so important in beginning to grasp the origins of major philosophical themes throughout the Christian centuries of the late antique world and beyond. With ‘Review and Discussion Questions’ at the end of each extended excerpt, it has to be noted that Topping has already produced a volume which provide the core reference points for new and even well-established introductions to a philosophy of Catholic Education. Once again, the emphasis must be made that students should be encouraged to *discuss*. There is no place for apologetic or enforced confessional conformity. This would run counter to the role of the university as a *cultivator* of the intellect. When Blessed John Henry Newman advocated greater lay engagement amongst Catholic students and scholars with the issues of the day, he stated that he did not seek them to be ‘disputatious, contentious, loquacious, presumptuous . . . but gravely and solidly educated in Catholic knowledge, intelligent, acute, versed in religion, sensitive of its beauty and majesty, alive to the arguments in its behalf and aware both of its difficulties and of the mode of treating them’ (Newman, 1873, p. 486). While it would be quite wrong to ignore Newman’s historical context in making this appeal, the desire to encourage *breadth* of knowledge, *appreciation* of artistic merit and *skill* in informed dialogue with the contemporary world is remarkably ‘contemporary’ in its resonances for the early twenty-first century. The world in which Catholic education exists *is* changing at a rate of knots and the ability to engage in meaningful dialogue with all shades of opinion is in danger of being lost if a scholarly, critical embrace of a philosophy of Catholic Education, against the broader light of the Catholic Intellectual Tradition, does not become a ‘nailed-on’ feature of our Catholic teacher education programmes. Otherwise, the alternative is a retreat to an intellectually ring-fenced world of a Catholic minority talking internally to itself, saying only the things one wants to hear. This would be a betrayal of the tradition of Augustine, Aquinas, De La Salle, and Montessori. Each generation has to live in full recognition of the signs and

movements of its time. This was what the great thinkers of the past did – indeed, it defined their greatness – and the Catholic educators of the twenty-first century must face the challenges of their own times with energy, innovation and a deep concern for the physical, intellectual and spiritual improvement of humanity in the light of the Good News of Jesus Christ. A thorough, systematic study of the Catholic Intellectual Tradition in Catholic teacher education programmes will go a long way towards facing the new challenges which await in an unknown future. In short, with so much at stake – perhaps the very future of *Catholic* education – why would managers of Catholic teacher education choose to delay in making Philosophy of Catholic Education courses the beating heart of their programmes? *Carpe diem!* Seize the day!

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