

CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT AND THE VIRTUOUS LIFE: A POSITION PAPER

Introduction

For the past few years, the Ministry of Education through its Secretariat for Literacy and Numeracy has been promoting a province-wide initiative known as the “Character Development Initiative.” In broad terms, this initiative seeks to integrate within publicly-funded education a more holistic approach to pedagogy which recognizes the importance of morality in the growth of children and teachers. The ministry identifies the following specific goals which it seeks to attain through this initiative: improved academic achievement; improved interpersonal relationships; safe and orderly schools; reduced behavioural problems; improved life preparation; improved employability skills; positive school cultures; and responsible citizenship in classrooms, schools and communities. At this moment, the principal reference document concerning this initiative is entitled “Finding Common Ground,” published in October, 2006.

This initiative echoes similar efforts that find their origins in the United States of America. The rejection of a religion-based approach to moral education in the American public schools of the 1960’s and the failure of the therapy-based “Values Clarification” approach of the 1980’s left a vacuum in the educational world which made it difficult to address pressing issues of the 1990’s: growing violence in schools, alarming rates of teenaged pregnancy, drug addiction and drop-outs, a seeming loss of a common vision of good citizenship.

In the United States, a number of institutions and publishers have embraced the “Character Development” approach over the past decade, developing various theories, programs and resources for use in schools and other educational milieus. In Canada, the Ministry of Education of the province of Alberta, for example, has invested heavily in this approach. Ontario is a relative late-comer to the movement.

The question arises as to how this approach can best be integrated into the life of the publicly-funded Catholic schools of Ontario. At first, some felt this initiative was redundant given the well-established tradition of moral education in Catholic schools. Recently, the consensus has shifted and most feel that we must fully engage this initiative while remaining faithful to our own tradition. The following considerations present a theoretical background as well as principles that Catholic educators should follow as they respond to the Character Development Initiative and seek to enrich it as they integrate it in our own schools.

1. Character and the acquisition of virtues

The Canadian philosopher Christine McKinnon, in her book *Character, Virtue Theories and the Vices*, [Peterborough: Broadview Press, c1999] suggests that the concept of character can be best understood when compared with that of personality. For her, personality is something of a given, the matter from which we must build character. Personality is what I am, not something I choose and not something that can be evaluated ethically.

On the other hand, character is something that is constructed, something I choose more or less deliberately. It is what I make of myself. This can be evaluated ethically. She writes: “A person’s character is a complex of innate dispositions, shaped by environmental influences as well as traits acquired through habituation, reasoned assessments and voluntary choices [p. 66]... To talk about a person’s character is to talk about a complex of virtues and vices and more ethically neutral skills, abilities and dispositions she possesses as well as to talk about the ways she values them and identifies with them and the roles she has constructed for them in her life [p. 71].”

For McKinnon, the acquisition of virtues is one of the fundamental elements in the development of character. Following her lead, we suggest that the concept of “virtue,” a concept central to Catholic moral doctrine, is key in linking the Character Development Initiative to the Catholic school education project.

2. A Short History of the Concept of Virtue

The concept of virtue, though present in Scripture, is not central to the Bible’s reflection on human action. In fact, we rarely find the word “virtue” in the Bible. It really owes its place in Western thought to the ancient Greek philosophers. Plato and Aristotle both developed this concept as they sought to answer the question: “How does one lead a good life?” In Greek, the word we translate by virtue is *arête*, which speaks of strength and excellence. For Plato and Aristotle, virtues were vital strengths that tended towards excellence. Plato distinguished four foundational, or cardinal, virtues: prudence, strength, temperance and justice. These were seen as grounding the possibility of all the other virtues, related as they were to four different aspects of the human being.

In the fourth century, Saint Ambrose and Saint Augustine embraced this philosophical tradition. They both found in neo-platonism a philosophy that resonated with the Christian experience. Augustine reworked the concept of virtue from a solidly biblical perspective in such a way that faith, hope and love become the true foundational virtues, rooted in the encounter of God in Jesus-Christ. These three are known as the theological virtues, for they cannot exist outside a relationship with God. They reorient the traditional cardinal virtues and lead to the consideration of new virtues such as humility and forgiveness.

In the thirteenth century, Saint Thomas Aquinas adopted Augustine's sevenfold structure in the second part of his *Summa theologiae*. There, he defined virtue as a *habitus*, a dynamic way of being and acting that grounds freedom and is necessary for freedom's growth. He developed a theology of morality based on the attraction of truth and goodness, on the desire for happiness, centred on the virtues and turned towards quality and perfection. He did this in harmony with the Holy Scriptures and the existing theological tradition.

In later centuries, philosophers of the Enlightenment would abandon this approach. They were more interested in the concrete decisions or actions undertaken by human persons than in the human person as a subject. This led them to found morality on the concepts of law and obligation. Their focus was on duty rather than desire. In such an approach, there is little place for the concept of virtue. The thought of Emmanuel Kant is representative of such an approach.

It must be recognized that this approach also influenced Catholic moral theology. The "philosophia perennis" taught in the seminaries of the first half of the twentieth century, shaped as it was by the writings of Thomas Aquinas, still presented virtue as a foundational concept in moral theology. Yet the manuals did not reflect the power of the concept in Thomas's theology. What is more, the attention to individual acts required of confession and typical of many confessors' manuals (particularly in the school of casuistry promoted by the Jesuits) also turned Catholic thought away from a vibrant spirituality of virtue.

The end of the twentieth century saw philosophers in the English-speaking world react to a morality of law and obligation and turn once again to the concept of virtue. Today, we can speak of a real "turn" in moral philosophy, captured by the title "virtue ethics." Among its principle proponents we can find Alasdair MacIntyre, Iris Murdoch, Reinhold Niebuhr, Charles Taylor, Martha Nussbaum, Bernard Williams, John Casey and William Bennet.

The field of psychology also witnessed a resurgence of interest in the concept of virtue. Starting in 1950, the Freudian Erik Erikson elaborated a developmental theory of psychological growth that understood virtue as a potentiality to be realized in life (analogous to the "medicinal virtue" of certain plants.) For Erikson, each stage of life presents a crisis between two extremes, both of which must be integrated in a new virtue if the crisis is to be resolved in a healthy way.

At the beginning of the new millennium, American humanistic psychologists founded a new school of thought called "positive psychology" in which the concept of virtue plays a fundamental role. For example, in their book *Character Strengths and Virtues: A Handbook and Classification* [New York: Oxford University Press, 2004], Christopher Peterson and Martin Seligman postulate that the harmonious development of a human person requires the acquisition of six foundational virtues corresponding to various aspects of his or her personality. For reference, they are: wisdom/knowledge, courage,

humanity, justice, temperance and transcendence. Each of these virtues is in turn fed by various strengths.

Contemporary moral theology has followed this turn to the concept of virtue especially thanks to the work of Stanley Hauerwas at Notre Dame University. Gilbert Meilander has been working with the Augustinian approach to virtue, while Joseph Pieper has been following the Thomistic approach. In France, Jean-Marie Aubert has given over one of the chapters of his seminal work *Vivre en chrétiens au XXe siècle* [Mulhaus: Éditions Salvator, 1976-1977] to the question of virtues, whereas Servais Pinckaers makes abundant use of this concept in his masterful study *Les sources de la morale chrétienne* [Fribourg, Éditions universitaires, 1985].

3. Character Development in the Catholic Educational Tradition

Beginning with Plato and Aristotle, philosophers and educators have asked themselves: how can we help a person attain the noble life which is characterized by the virtues?

In the history of the Church, this question was reformulated: how can we help the baptized integrate their faith in every aspect of their lives? In other words, how can we make sure that the faithful life is not limited to beliefs and sentiments, devotion and rituals? How can we help others grow in the practice of the virtues as understood by Augustine and Thomas? Character formation was understood as part of the catechetical process, an integral dimension of religious education.

In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, particularly in France and in the United States, many manuals were written for Catholic educators to help them answer these questions. An eloquent witness to this era is an educational congress held in Montreal in 1942 that gathered high school teachers around the theme of character formation. (cf. *La formation du caractère. Congrès de l'enseignement religieux*. [Montréal: ?, 1942?])

4. Character Development in the Secular World

An interesting French-language article in the web-based Wikipedia entitled “*caractère (psychologie)*” states that the Third Republic in France integrated character formation as a principle of secular education, in an effort to replace the religious dimension of the educational project of the nations’ schools with a new educational principle. Gabriel Compayré would have been the leader of this pedagogical approach.

We can recognize a similar phenomenon in American and English-Canadian educational circles since the beginning of the 1970’s. The “values clarification” school of thought had as its goal the acquisition of certain virtues in the secular schools of our countries. Obviously, the word “virtue” was not adopted as it was too directly linked to religious, particularly Catholic, schools. The word “value” was new and neutral. It also had the advantage of not referring to objective beauty, truth or good. “Value is what is important

for me.” The relativism of this approach, coupled with unhealthy therapeutic exercises in the classroom, led to its demise in the early 1980’s.

Ontario’s Ministry of Education has returned to the fray with the Character Development Initiative. Yet, in reading the Ministry’s foundational document on this initiative, one cannot help but feel that we are approaching the same issues with new words. When *Finding Common Ground* speaks of “character attributes” such as “respect, responsibility, justice and empathy,” it can be understood as delving into the tradition of virtues education. The same is true when it quotes the Conference Board of Canada’s list of abilities to be acquired by students: “honesty, integrity, a spirit of initiative, flexibility and a respect for diversity.”

In his book *Educating the Virtues* [London: Routledge, 1991], David Carr explores the links between virtue and the passions (virtue as an expression of deep feelings); between virtue and motivation (virtue as expressing aspiration); and between virtue and reason (virtue as an element in clarifying and resolving problems.) He thus addresses the affective, behavioural and cognitive dimensions of education to virtue. Similarly, the Ministry of Education states that character development must form the student in all his or her dimensions – cognitive, affective and behavioural – and sees in the student a human person who is called to a higher level of self-knowledge, of self-discipline and of understanding.

It would seem, therefore, that the Character Development Initiative proposed by the Ministry of Education is the secular equivalent of education to virtue, itself an essential component of faith education and catechesis in the Catholic tradition.

5: The Character Development Initiative and Education to Virtue: Critical Differences

There are bound to be differences between a secular approach to Character Development and one which is grounded in the Christian faith. Here we highlight three such differences.

i. Character attributes and relativism

The Character Development Initiative calls for the acquisition of character attributes that are universal, transcending factors of race, ethnocultural origin, language, religion, sex, physical and intellectual abilities and other demographic factors. How does one identify these attributes? Through a board-wide consultative process involving a major sampling representative of the diversity in the community. The goal is to identify these attributes by finding points of commonality that schools must inculcate through intentional and systematic methods. In other words, character attributes are to be determined by a community consensus in a democratic process.

Virtues, on the other hand, are determined according to a vision of the human person in relationship with God in Jesus-Christ. The list of virtues arises not from a popular survey but from a specifically Christian anthropology. Of course, the discernment of the specific virtues which need to be fostered in a given setting should involve the whole school community.

2. The utilitarian finality of the Character Development Initiative

In the Catholic tradition, education to virtues is understood as an element in the full flowering of the human person. The Character Development Initiative, on the other hand, sometimes seems to be focused on the full flowering of the school milieu. It aims to ensure academic success, to prepare the student for the workplace, to form a peaceful and harmonious society.

“Finding Common Ground” speaks of creating “safe and healthy school environments where order can be found... in which the teaching staff devotes less time to discipline.” In this perspective, character education is meant to prepare students for an active, productive and responsible role in society, helping them to become concerned, empathetic and engaged citizens. Character development is closely tied to academic achievement.

The finality of the Character Development Initiative is thus oriented to socio-economic considerations rather than to truly personal and interpersonal reality. The Catholic tradition does not neglect these socio-economic considerations: they are important in any consideration of the construction of a more just and equitable society. But such a society is relative to the human person, the ultimate good and end of all educational processes.

3. The immanent focus of the Character Development Initiative

Education to the virtues in the Catholic tradition integrates the experience of God. The foundational virtues of faith, hope and love are directed towards God and inspired in us by God’s Spirit. According to this view, all other virtues are informed by these foundational virtues. The development of character in the Catholic tradition is seen as a synergy between God’s grace and human freedom.

In Ontario’s Character Development Initiative, there is no place for God. The transcendent is ignored in favour of a totally immanent approach to reality. The spiritual dimension of the human experience is not recognized in this approach.

These three considerations alone make it evident that the Character Development Initiative must be adapted if it is to be used in Catholic Schools. While responding to the Ministry’s invitation to engage in this Initiative, we should do so in a way that respects our tradition, identity and purpose.

6. An Invitation to our Partners in Catholic Education

Character development in the Catholic schools must avoid the relativism of character attributes-language. We suggest that the language of “virtues” be re-appropriated by the Catholic educational community as the most adequate way for us to integrate the Character Development Initiative in our schools. In order to do so, we will have to revisit our foundational documents (*Catholic Graduate Expectations* for our English Catholic school community and *Mission de l'école catholique* for our French Catholic school community, for example) to study the relationship between these documents and the approach to the Character Development Initiative suggested herein.

Our approach to character development should be informed by an explicitly Augustinian/Thomistic perspective, renewed in language and scope by contemporary research. Specifically, the theological virtues of faith, hope and love must be understood as grounding and orienting the character development of our students.

While recognizing the benefits of such an initiative for school, society and economy, we must ensure that it is the student's own being as a person that is central to this project, not only as the active subject of the process but as its ultimate value. What we hope to achieve through this initiative is the full flowering of the children and young people who have been entrusted to us.

7. One further comment: on virtues and values

The use of virtue-language sometimes encounters resistance. Some people find it old-fashioned, passé, redolent of an era that was preoccupied with socially enforcing mores typical of the Victorian era. Some will suggest that values-language is more appropriate, positive in tone, contemporary in usage.

It is true that by the middle of the twentieth century, the concept of virtue as articulated in the Catholic Church was not very inspiring. It had lost the breadth of Augustine's and Thomas's understanding. It was often focused on issues of sexual morality, narrowed down to a struggle against “vices” which were seen as more typical of human conduct.

We need to rediscover the roots of our tradition by returning to the insights of these great saints. Inspired by Plato and Aristotle, they understood virtue as a mark of excellence and strength in the human person. For them, virtues were the manifestation of a depth of being transformed, nourished and sustained by God's Spirit. The virtuous person, in this perspective, is the human person fully alive, free to respond to the challenges of life in a creative, mature and deeply human way.

Why not values-language? The use of this language in educational milieux is inevitably linked to the “Values Clarification Movement” of the late 70's and early '80's. This movement tried to import into the classroom therapeutic elements of the various psychological initiatives of the time. As such, they occasionally became intrusive and

overwhelming for students, placing the teacher in a role for which she or he was not trained nor qualified.

Semantically, value is not equivalent to virtue. Value has a very broad range of meanings, from the mercantile (“This house has more value than that one...”) to the political (“I’m for family values...”) to the philosophical (“The ultimate value is freedom...”). Virtue, on the other hand, is quite specific in its range of meaning: it concerns the moral orientation of a human person.

The concept of value tends to be focused on the ideal world, rather than the real world, in the sense that a value is something towards which I tend, rather than something I have actually incorporated into my life. In this regard, virtue can be seen as a value that is actually active in my life.

Finally, the concept of value is not rooted in the Catholic tradition. Though in itself this consideration does not exclude its use in the Catholic school milieu, it does beg the question: why not use an approach that is more typical of our tradition, has been enriched by the reflections of the greatest thinkers of our history, and is now being rediscovered and held in great esteem by contemporary philosophy and psychology?

Virtues-language is clear, concrete and Catholic. It is both ancient and cutting-edge. On the other hand, it is not obvious: therein lies the challenge for the Catholic school community. We are called to rediscover our tradition in this area, help our teachers and partners understand and value this tradition, and inspire our students to live up to it in their everyday lives.

Conclusion

The Character Development Initiative presents us with an opportunity: to reflect on an important aspect of the Catholic school educational project, namely to foster the full flowering of our students as mature, believing subjects and actors in the world. It invites us to identify and better articulate what it is we have always been trying to do. It gives us a framework in which to better focus our energies and evaluate our ability to attain our goals. The Character Development Initiative is thus a gift for our Catholic school system.

On the other hand, we must seek to integrate this Initiative in a way that is faithful to our own tradition and identity. The use of virtues-language is a first step in this process. It helps us re-acquire a valuable concept in our tradition, compels us to recognize God’s role in the character development of our students, and helps us focus on specific habits that foster and protect the freedom to which we are all called.

The members of the Education Commission of the Ontario Conference of Catholic Bishops hope that all our partners will embrace this approach and collaborate in developing reference material, pedagogical approaches and formation programs that will help integrate the Character Development Initiative in all our schools and classrooms.

For further reading on virtues from a Catholic perspective:

Cessario, Romanus, o.p. *The Virtues, or the Examined Life*. [New York: Continuum, 2002]

Häring, Bernard, c.ss.r. *The virtues of an authentic life: a celebration of spiritual maturity*. [Liguori: Liguori, c.1997]

Keenan, James, s.j. *Virtues for Ordinary Christians*. [Toronto: Rowman & Littlefield, 1996]

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