



Catholic Social Thought and Education

In 1948 the United Nations adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, including the *right to free basic education* and even equal access to higher education based on merit.¹ In modern Catholic social thought, Pope John XXIII enumerated a number of human rights in 1963 including, “the right to a basic education and to technical and professional training in keeping with the stage of educational development in the country.”² This was affirmed by the Second Vatican Council in 1965 as the “inalienable right to an education.”³

As articulated by Pope Paul VI in 1967, “integral human development” must include basic education in any plan of development since “hunger for education is no less debasing than hunger for food.”⁴ *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* declares that education is necessary for a human being to lead a truly human life—as much a necessity as food, work, water, clothing, and shelter.⁵

Whose Responsibility?

The Council declared that parents “have a most solemn obligation to educate their offspring” and should be “acknowledged as the first and foremost educators of their children.”⁶ While this education begins in the home, “imparting education requires the help of society as a whole.”⁷ This implies certain rights and duties belonging to civil society, including overseeing the duties and rights of parents and other educators, assisting them in their duties, completing the task of education when parental and educator efforts are insufficient, and “building its own schools and institutes, as the common good may demand.”⁸

The Council was emphatic about the importance and beauty of the vocation of schoolteachers—a calling which requires “extraordinary qualities of mind and heart, extremely careful preparation, and a constant readiness to begin anew and to adapt.”⁹ It also underscored the unique role of the Church itself in faith formation, involving traditional catechesis and new forms of social communication.¹⁰

Balancing Interests

Parents, however, “should enjoy true freedom in their choice of schools.”¹¹ This implies that public authorities should fund education in ways that respect that right “so that parents can freely choose to exercise this right without incurring unjust burdens.”¹² At the same time, the

U.S. Bishops have expressed strong support for the public school system in this country. They explained:

There can be no substitute for quality education in public schools, for that is where the large majority of all students, including Catholic students, are educated.¹³

Quality education is especially important in low-income communities where poverty is fundamentally a problem of powerlessness and marginalization and “the importance of education as a means of overcoming it cannot be overemphasized.”¹⁴ Education must be part of creating fair and just economic and social reforms which seriously address the grossly unequal distribution of wealth and resources in so much of the world.

Conclusion

Addressing the United Nations General Assembly in 2015, Pope Francis returned to the crucial role of education in promoting integral human development as a way to enable people worldwide to escape extreme poverty:

This presupposes and requires the right to education—also for girls (excluded in certain places)—which is ensured first and foremost by respecting and reinforcing the primary right of the family to educate its children, as well as the right of churches and social groups to support and assist families in the education of their children.¹⁵

Thus, education is the foundation upon which people can become “dignified agents of their own destiny.”¹⁶

ENDNOTES

- 1 United Nations. (1948). *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, Article 26.
- 2 Pope John XXIII. (1963). *Pacem in Terris (Peace on Earth)*, 13.
- 3 Second Vatican Council. (1965). *Declaration on Christian Education*, 1.
- 4 Pope Paul VI. (1967). *Populorum Progressio (On the Development of Peoples)*, 35.
- 5 Catholic Church. (1993). *Catechism of the Roman Catholic Church*, 1908.
- 6 *Declaration on Christian Education*, 3.
- 7 *Ibid.*
- 8 *Ibid.*
- 9 *Ibid.*, 5.
- 10 *Ibid.*, 3-4.
- 11 *Ibid.*, 6.
- 12 National Conference of Catholic Bishops. (1986). *Economic Justice for All: Pastoral Letter on Catholic Social Teaching and the U.S. Economy*, 343.
- 13 *Ibid.*, 205.
- 14 *Ibid.*, 203.
- 15 Pope Francis. (2015, September 25). *Address to the United Nations General Assembly*.
- 16 *Ibid.*