

The Traditioning Process and Catholic Schools

We come to our Catholic schools inheriting a tradition built by those who preceded us. Upon receiving it we contribute to it and then we pass it forward. Tradition is not just about perpetuating the past; it also involves meeting the needs of the present.

James P. Keane



I was born into a family of 11 kids, and when it came to Christmas we followed a very specific timetable and schedule. Each part of Christmas had to follow pre-established guidelines. In our house, Christmas “began” once the tree was on site. Only then would boxes, smelling of summer heat, come down from the attic. A manger scene was set up on the second floor landing and electric candles with white bulbs were placed in each front window of our large colonial house. A floodlight was placed on the front lawn to illuminate our house and signal throughout our neighborhood that here, on Tudor Road, we took Christmas seriously.

The tree itself usually came into the house on a Sunday, and then we would open the boxes that held preserved memories of past Christmases. Each box seemed like a time capsule with art and craft creations of our respective kindergarten classes and old, fragile department-store ornaments with no real value except that they had been part of our Christmas ensemble for so very long.

Every Christmas Eve we went Christmas caroling with our neighborhood and a party followed afterwards at our house. As we grew older, the traditions revolving around Christmas were changed to fit new realities. As my brothers and sisters got older, beer and wine were served

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in addition to hot chocolate. With the arrival of grandchildren, a “Yankee swap” game and a visit from Santa were added. And now, my own children, like me, cherish Christmas like no other holiday.

Why all this talk about Christmas? There is a parallel worth exploring that relates to Catholic schools and the process by which we receive, contribute to and pass on to the next generation the traditions that we were born into. For those among us who work in Catholic schools, it is vitally important to understand that when we first came to our respective schools we each received the traditions of the school. Over time we have contributed to those traditions and, wittingly or not, have passed them on to the next generation of teachers, students and parents.

Each of us is part of the *traditioning* processes of our schools—a responsibility that has become all the more serious in light of diminishing numbers of vowed religious in Catholic education. For instance, my lay colleagues and I work in a Christian Brothers school, a school conducted in the tradition of the Congregation of Christian Brothers. In this regard, we have to be cognizant that the future of our institution and the legacy of its past rests in the hands of the laity working in the school today.

Part of the traditioning process is about perpetuating and cultivating the routines, customs and habits that we employ to add meaning and texture to the special, privileged, poignant moments of our lives. In the context of Catholic schools we do this at orientation, graduation, awards nights, assemblies, school liturgies, in faculty meetings and during sporting events.

But it’s even deeper than this.

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We pass the baton to the next generation of administrators, teachers, parents and students, and if we fail to get a good hold upon what we receive, or if we stumble or drop the baton, then that which was given to us will be lost...and the school we entered that was “in the tradition of the Christian Brothers, the Franciscans, the Jesuits or the Mercy sisters” no longer will be in that tradition. The transmission of tradition is contingent upon our ability to grasp fully the traditions of our school and then to pass them forward firmly and deliberately.

I work in a Christian Brothers school but some day there will be no Christian Brothers in my school. So, in the future, what will characterize my school as a “Christian Brothers school”?

A good part of that answer will depend upon what I understand a Christian Brothers school to be. And that is dependent upon how I was oriented into the school. It is dependent upon whether or not there was a mentoring program that helped me understand not just where the copy machine was and how the rotation schedule works but also the history of the school, its ethos and philosophy. It is dependent upon our formal and informal curriculum and our formal and informal Catholicity. It is dependent upon administrators who see the school as part of a larger mission and upon members of the board of directors who perceive themselves as stewards of a tradition incarnate within a community of faith and

learning. Lastly, it is dependent upon the manner in which we inculcate within the minds and hearts of our students an appreciation for our Catholic tradition.

Defining Characteristics

The tradition we pass on in our schools is not just the flavor of the priests or religious who established our schools. That “flavor,” in its proper theological context, is part of the larger mission of the church to evangelize youth.

This is important.

For instance, Blessed Edmund Ignatius Rice, who founded the Congregation of Christian Brothers, did not do so because he wanted to create institutional monuments to himself or to his followers. We have to remember this. Our desire to pass on the traditions of the religious orders and diocesan efforts that called our respective institutions into being cannot be rooted in some kind of soft sentimentalism. To be frank about it, we endeavor to perpetuate these traditions because the institutions themselves are effective vehicles for bringing young people to the saving knowledge of Jesus. (Don’t let the religious and political right rob those words of their theological potency!)

The purpose of the Catholic school I work at is not to perpetuate itself or to keep alive a past that no longer exists—and if any of us find ourselves in that situation then, really, it’s time to sell the property, pay the debts and all go home. Our purpose makes sense only in relation to the church. The church is what called our institutions into being and our labors are always on behalf of the church.

Still, the traditioning process is not about robotically passing on that which was handed to us, because

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slavish adherence to the past will result in our institutions becoming irrelevant. We must ask ourselves continually: How, in light of the new challenges of today, are we to realize our particular mission within our school?

The traditions that we have received include our shared Catholic values and beliefs. So, how we nurture our students and how we teach them will dictate not only our future but also the vitality and viability of Catholic schools, parishes and families for generations to come.

Twenty-five years ago, when I was a student at the school I now work in, there were more than 25 Christian Brothers living on campus. The brothers were everywhere as administrators, teachers and coaches. Still, when I graduated I had little understanding of the mission of the congregation or knowledge of the founder. I had not memorized our school pledge or fight song. I was a product of a Catholic culture, but the tangibles of that culture were not fully in my possession because much of it was taken for granted. Indeed, growing up in Boston 25 years ago, my classmates identified themselves not by their respective towns or neighborhoods but by the parishes they attended.

Today, Catholics in Boston (like elsewhere) are a community in *diaspora*: a community without the cultural reinforcement of the past. Today we do not and cannot take a Catholic culture for granted.

Student orientation at our school now includes teaching students the rally song and our theology classes incorporate units on religious life and our founder as well as teaching students in grades 7, 8 and 9 how to say the “Hail Mary” and the “Our Father,” how to bless themselves and how to approach the Eucharist (none

of which can be taken for granted any more).

In September we will have four Christian Brothers in the school. None will be in administration. Still, our faculty and staff discuss mission regularly and as a school we celebrate the Eucharist once a month. We have taken deliberate steps to showcase religious artwork and to place our mission statement in our “Parent/Student Handbook” and in the programs at academic awards night and athletic awards night. Additionally, our mission statement is used to guide long-term strategic and programming decisions. Each of these things describes the careful deliberateness with which we transmit our values and traditions to our students.

Other Ways of Traditioning

Like most Catholic schools we have a curriculum that is dynamic and that does a fine job preparing students for some of the best schools on the planet. But there is a hidden curriculum as well that also expresses our values as a school and culture, and it is important that the articulated curriculum aligns with the hidden curriculum.

Some students in our building are with us because if they were in a different school environment they would get torn apart. Some students in our building are dealing with serious depression or trauma from a horrific past and some from broken homes who can only think about getting through the day let alone doing homework. These are some of the students in all of our Catholic schools, wealthy or not. In Catholic schools we reach out to these students because we see it as part of our mission. At my school, we reach out to these students in particular because we regard it as in sync with what the Christian Brothers who founded our school would have wanted.

Our principal, a layman who has been at our school for 30 years, says

repeatedly: “We take chances on kids.” He holds that it is “always easy to teach the easy kids,” but maybe we are also called to reach out to the ones not so easy.

In a mission statement such language sounds terrific but in the actual day-to-day operation of a school, being faithful to such language can be difficult. Taking chances on kids can make us seem inconsistent and it can send the wrong signal to our wider community and hurt our position as an institution in a competitive marketing environment. And yet, our principal believes deeply that this is part of our mission as a Christian Brothers school because these are the “poor” among us. Helping problem students is not “easy.” It often involves risk and sometimes when a school takes chances on kids the school “gets burned.”

Looking to the Future

Can my school remain a Christian Brothers school even without Christian Brothers? The answer is a qualified “yes.” It will require careful, considered planning as we shoulder the legacy of the past for the church of tomorrow. We come to our Catholic schools inheriting a tradition built by those who preceded us. Upon receiving it we contribute to it and then we pass it forward. Tradition is not just about perpetuating the past; it also involves meeting the needs of the present.

My school is more consciously Catholic than it was 30 years ago because the culture has changed and thus we must be even more deliberate in the manner in which we pass on our traditions. We need to align our curriculum (hidden and explicit) to meet the changing dynamics of our respective missions so that we can continue to be faithful to the traditions of our past so that they will continue to define and shape our future. ■