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# WHY Choose Catholic Education?

*A Guide for Parents*

SANDY FLAHERTY, MTS, MAPL



## A Catholic School



If we are to honor our history,  
Implement our vision,  
and live out our mission,  
We must echo the tenderness of  
Christ Jesus,  
The courage of the disciples,  
and the dreams of those who have  
gone before us.  
We must gather the young,  
Welcome the stranger,  
and teach as Jesus did.  
We must create hallways of  
compassion,  
Lesson plans of justice,  
and diplomas that impel.  
If we are to answer the call put  
before us,  
We must create a school  
Whose center is Christ.

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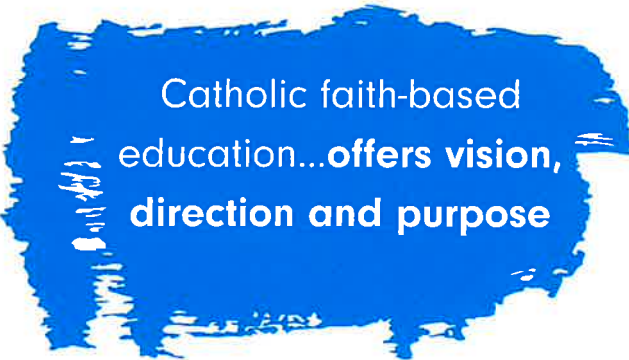
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## Summary

*Why Choose Catholic Education? A Guide for Parents* is a resource for those considering a Catholic education for their children. The purpose of this short narrative is to educate parents on how Catholic education is distinct from other learning environments. It includes a summary of the theological foundation on which Catholic identity and educational principles are built within a Catholic school community. It includes examples of how our Catholic theological framework provides a holistic, student-centered, values based, academically driven education for young people. The booklet is intentionally brief and summative as to efficiently address topics which can be complex in nature. Its purpose is to begin a discussion with parents on Catholic educational philosophy and to illustrate how a Catholic faith-based education offers a good deal more than a diploma; it offers vision, direction and purpose. This resource is best suited to supplement recruitment and admissions materials for Catholic schools.



Catholic faith-based  
education...**offers vision,  
direction and purpose**

## Introduction: A Note to Parents

For parents seeking a quality education for their children, it is challenging to find a setting where their values, love, concern and care for their children are reflected in a school environment. There are many factors that influence school choice such as: academic excellence, varied extracurricular options, and athletic and creative opportunities. Beyond these fundamental considerations is the reality that schools play a vital role in the intellectual, spiritual, social and emotional growth of children and adolescents, so finding the right school is essential.

The formative years of childhood and adolescence are an adventure. During this time young people discover who they are, develop their own innate gifts, and explore the world beyond the family. One way parents can help facilitate this formative time is to choose a school environment in which both parent and child feel at home. The first step in finding such a school is to choose an environment where your child will be accompanied by engaged and supportive teachers, mentors, coaches and counselors who are attentive, nurturing and fully invested in the education of your child. When a child is known, valued, and challenged by high expectations he or she will take risks and push themselves in ways they otherwise would not. A student will press the edges of his or her own competencies and reach further and wider than in a less supportive environment. When

a student is able to find his or her place, they will fully engage in the classroom, social environment, clubs, leadership opportunities, athletics, and the arts. In a supportive environment students will grow in intellect, skill, confidence and purpose. This is the kind of education that Catholic schools provide.

In seeking a quality education for your child we understand that you have a wide variety of schools from which to choose. The purpose of this resource is to help parents understand what makes Catholic schools different. In the following pages you will learn about the fundamental values of Catholicism and how those values are integrated into the day-to-day experience of Catholic education. These values distinguish Catholic education from other learning environments, add depth and richness to the education of young people, and are a timely educational philosophy in the current culture in which we educate students.

## Why Choose Catholic Education?

In an address to educators and religious leaders, Saint Pope John Paul II articulated the unique benefit of a Catholic school: "Catholic education aims not only to communicate facts, but also to transmit a coherent, comprehensive vision of life ..." (Saint Pope John Paul II 1998) In this statement Saint Pope John Paul II was referring to the Catholic vision of life, which at its core is the belief in the innate dignity of the

human person. In response to this vision, Catholic schools develop each student's potential in a strong community which celebrates every individual's unique identity. We believe that all students were made in the image of God and possess an innate dignity. In Catholic schools, we educate students to understand the mystery of the human person and to believe in something greater than them. In a culture where social media encourages young people to judge their place and worth amid likes and emojis, we encourage them to develop depth of identity based on values to be their truest and best selves.

Catholic schools are driven by centuries of Catholic intellectual tradition where students are challenged by academic rigor and encouraged to question, analyze, and use their critical thinking skills to the utmost. In a world where information is easily accessible, Catholic educators challenge students to develop a strong foundation of values upon which to build knowledge, personal, and professional goals.

If one wishes to fully understand Catholic education and the fundamental values on which it was built, one must begin with Catholicism. The following provides a brief summary of our essential beliefs and how they influence how we educate students.

## Catholicism

The word religion is derived from two Latin words "re" and "ligare" which together mean "to reconnect." Religion holds that human destiny

is beyond the temporal confines of this world and that we belong to something eternal. The fundamental purpose of religious ideology and ritual is to help us reconnect with the eternal. Religions bind people together to ponder the nature of the universe and to ask questions of ultimate concern. Religions also provide a moral code which govern human affairs and call members to serve their fellow human beings.

In the Catholic tradition, the concept to "reconnect" is expressed in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* which states, "The desire for God is written in the human heart, because [we were] created by God; and God never ceases to draw [us] to Himself. Only in God will [we] find the truth and happiness [we] never stop searching for. [Human] dignity rests above all on the fact that [we] are called to communion with God". (Catechism 27)

Catholicism is a monotheistic religion, meaning a belief in one God. We embrace the belief that God lives in a community of three that we call the Holy Trinity, consisting of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. We believe that the second person of the Holy Trinity, Jesus, became man through a transformation referenced as the incarnation. Through the incarnation of Jesus, God dwelt among us, divinizing humanity and partaking in the joys and sorrows of human life. As a result of the incarnation, God can be encountered in and through the created world. Through Jesus we have become the divine sons and daughters of God. As Catholics, we believe that through his

## In Catholicism, Jesus is understood as the Son of God

teaching, healings, and miracles, Jesus taught the people of first century Palestine about the goodness and mercy of God, and God's special love for the poor and marginalized. Jesus challenged the religious and political power structures of his day and was eventually put to death on a cross. We believe that Jesus rose from the dead and lives in communion with his Church today. In Catholicism, Jesus is understood as the Son of God, a great teacher, a model for Christian living, and the founder of Christianity.

### Catholic Understanding of the Person

We believe God became man and entered human experience through Jesus. This fundamental belief is essential to how Catholics understand the human person. God has become one of us; hence we have become one with God. In the Catholic understanding all persons possess a divinely given dignity and Jesus, through his life and teaching, honored the dignity of the human person like no other. American essayist and poet Ralph Waldo Emerson beautifully described it in this way:

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*The unique impression of Jesus upon mankind – whose name is not so much written as ploughed into the history of the world – is proof of the subtle virtue of this infusion. Jesus belonged to the race of prophets. He saw with open eyes the mystery of the soul. One man was true to what is in you and me. He, ... is the only soul in history who has appreciated the worth of a human being.*

*(Emerson 1838)*

Through his teaching, healing, and actions, Jesus honored the true dignity of humanity by acknowledging that all people are children of God. Through the pages of the Christian Scriptures (New Testament) we understand Jesus' ministry as one of human encounter. Time and time again as a popular rabbi and teacher, Jesus stopped, listened to, and touched the hearts and spirits of the wounded and marginalized of his day. Jesus understood, and was attentive to, the mystery and beauty of humanity.

### *Created in the Image of God*

True to the message of Jesus, Catholic schools honor and reflect the dignity, beauty, and potential of the human person by seeing students as created in the image of God. Catholic schools make it a point that students are respected, seen, and cherished as individuals. Teachers, counselors, advisors, coaches, and moderators take the time to get to know the students under their care, and academic and social acumen are monitored closely. Students are encouraged to pursue multiple avenues of

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growth such as advanced academic courses, leadership positions, athletic teams, visual and performing arts, campus ministry, and service. In a Catholic school, the human desire to be known is met and celebrated.

In Catholic education, emphasis is placed on who a student is as a person. We are interested in faith and character formation as a critical foundation to prepare students for personal, high school, college and career success. In childhood and adolescence the "sense of self" is not yet fully developed, and so attention to the personhood of our students is vital. We guide students in developing self-understanding, provide them with opportunities to explore their gifts, and challenge them to take risks. A young person who knows who he or she is, upholds personal integrity, and sees the value of working with - and for - the betterment of others, will find personal and professional success. By forming responsible, self-confident, engaged young people of substance, we develop successful, career-minded adults.

### ***Our Transcendent Nature***

As a Catholic Christian community we believe in a Trinitarian God who sent His son Jesus to walk and live among us. Through this incarnation, God has become one with humanity, and humanity has been gifted with the *Divine Spark* which resides within each of us. Every human life reflects the Divine and hints at something greater than the confines of our finite world. In response to the *Divine Spark* within we intuitively

ively seek the Holy. In Catholic understanding the restlessness of the human spirit can only be quelled by union with God. In the words of Saint. Augustine, "Thou hast made us for Thyself and our hearts are restless until they rest in Thee." (Chadwick 1.i.1)

In a Catholic school we believe we are called to honor our personal dignity and the dignity of all people. We are called to seek truth, goodness, and justice in all things. Firmly rooted in day-to-day living, we believe there is something more. We believe in, and belong to, something greater than ourselves. There is an inexpressible mystery beyond the confines of this world, beyond our understanding, which we celebrate as Catholics.

### ***Spiritual Wisdom***

As a Catholic community we lean on two thousand years of spiritual wisdom from the Judeo-Christian tradition. We understand spiritual wisdom as knowledge, experience or understanding related to God, Jesus, spirituality or the human condition. We provide students with a firm foundation in religious education and challenge them with values firmly rooted in the message of Jesus. We seek the truth in all things and encourage students to explore that which is within and beyond them through liturgical celebrations and quiet reflection. Our liturgical life nourishes a student's relationship with God and affirms his or her participation in our community of faith.



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During the school year, Catholic rituals add a beauty and depth to liturgical seasons, significant moments and rites of passage. Such events as the family welcome Mass, first communion and confirmation rituals, installation of student officers, graduation Mass, are all significant rites of passage which are ritualized and celebrated. These celebrations highlight our belief that God is present with us in the everyday and significant moments of our lives. Such rituals also serve to strengthen our sense of community with one another.

## A Purpose Driven Education

Cognizant of our transcendent nature, we challenge students to contemplate these mysteries. Students are afforded the space and time to reflect on such questions as, *'Who am I?'*, *'Who is God?'*, *'Why am I here?'*, *'What is my purpose?'*, *'What is the meaning of my one precious life?'*, *'What is my connection to, and responsibility for, the human family?'* Such questions are a timely engagement for junior high students and adolescents who are naturally entering a process of personal exploration during these highly formative years. Reflection on such fundamental questions provides students with an image of who they hope to become in the future. This image of the hoped-for future-self prompts such questions as, *'If this is who I hope to be, then what is required of me now?'* and *'How can my decisions and actions today put me on the path of whom I hope to become?'*

Such purpose driven reflection encourages young people to understand the ramifications of their own choices and actions. Catholic schools educate students to be young men and women of substance, who know who they are, and where they are going. In preparation for graduation we pose this question to our graduates, *"As you prepare to graduate, how will you use your education to serve your community?"*

## In Service to Others

In Catholicism service to others is a primary tenet of the faith. Since the inception of Catholic education, students have been required to serve. A purpose of service in a Catholic school is character formation. We believe that through personal encounters with those in need, students' worldviews are expanded and the needs of our civic community take on a human face. Engagement with others who are struggling often instills a sense of gratitude for what one has and an awareness of what others lack. Such interactions awaken a sense of compassion and challenge students to respond to others in need.

Such encounters also encourage greater self-awareness and confidence as students realize that their presence and interactions can make a difference in the lives of those who are struggling. These compelling encounters motivate students to step into society as compassionate responsive citizens who are ready, willing, and able to serve their neighbors. We are proud that service to others is a hallmark of Catholic education.

## Catholic Community

A sense of community is at the heart of Catholic education. Our Catholic faith was founded by a community of disciples who followed Jesus, and the experience of community has richness beyond the confines of this world. Visitors to Catholic schools will find pictures of saints hanging in classrooms and hallways. These men and women are models for us of holy Christian living. We believe that the spirit and energy of the saints and those who have gone before us participate in our school community life. Their energy moves us forward. In Catholicism this is known as the Communion of Saints. We believe the saints walk the journey of faith with us and their courageous life stories inspire us toward greatness. In a Catholic school, vibrant community is not simply a pleasant byproduct of the school; it is seen as an essential ingredient of faith and education.

In a Catholic school each student is an essential part of who we are as a school community. Each student's unique contribution is valued, individual gifts are explored, and contributions are celebrated. In Catholic education, students are not left at the margins. There is a concerted effort to bring all members of the school into communion and friendship.

Students' families become members of the school family when they arrive in the fall. Once a family enters the community, they are offered full engagement in a variety of educational, spiritual, athletic, and social activities.

Membership in the school community creates a relationship with not only current school families, but also with alumni. Membership affords families a commitment that the Catholic school community shares their joys as well as their sorrows. As a Catholic community we pray with you and your child as he/she takes this important journey.

## A Welcoming Community

Families of other religious traditions or those who have had little or no exposure to faith topics often wonder if their children will feel comfortable in the Catholic school environment. Our shared biblical history with Judaism engenders in us sensitivity and an appreciation for the value of other faith traditions. In Catholic schools we actively welcome students who have been raised in other faith traditions. We find that differing religious beliefs and traditions enliven our conversations in the classroom and give our students a broader world-view which leads to a greater understanding of other people. Engagement with other faith traditions also deepens students' understanding and appreciation of their own religious faith.

Students who have had little exposure to topics of religion or faith often do quite well. Faith discussions in the classroom often pique their interest on topics such as the origins of the universe, the purpose and meaning of life, the nature of truth, our responsibility for the human family, the nature of human fulfillment, love and

happiness. Students are often drawn into class discussions due to the essential human questions that religion classes address.

In Catholic schools we believe that a deep understanding of faith traditions is imperative to a comprehensive education as religion continues to be a global force today in politics, cultural understanding, global engagement, and navigating moral issues.

## The Catholic Intellectual Tradition

A love for knowledge and learning is deeply woven into the very fabric of Catholic Church history. As early as 600 C.E., Catholic monks in European monasteries copied biblical texts and other books on a variety of subjects, these collections eventually became libraries. Monasteries developed cathedral schools as centers of learning the liberal arts, and then between 1000-1300 C.E., cathedral schools evolved into what would later become Western European Universities. This deeply held desire for knowledge and truth is rooted in the belief that God can be encountered in all creation and through all human activity, especially in the search for truth. The essential dance between the life of faith and the pursuit of truth was so beautifully imagined by Saint Pope John Paul II in *Fides et Ratio* when he wrote, "Faith and Reason are like two wings on which the human spirit rises to the contemplation of the truth." (*Saint Pope John Paul II 1998*)

The Catholic Intellectual Tradition is a 2000-year-old conversation between faith and science, literature, history, philosophy, art, music, current cultural expressions, and the wisdom of the ancients. "The desire for truth that lies at the heart of the tradition demands that assertions of the truth, meaning, and purpose be tested by the best evidence against them – evidence that can be presented by anyone, of any or no religious tradition, who is engaged in serious inquiry." The search for truth expands our intellect and hence enlivens our understanding of God and the universe.

("The Catholic Intellectual Tradition: A Conversation at Boston College," <http://www.bc.edu/content/dam/files/top/church21/pdf/cit.pdf>, July 2010. Accessed 2 April 2018.)

Saint Thomas Aquinas, 13th century philosopher and theologian, modeled this robust search for the truth as he was fearless in considering ideas and arguments in his own theological and philosophical explorations. A Catholic intellectual giant, Aquinas engaged Greek philosophy, Jewish theology and Muslim philosophy in his own search for the truth and construction of Catholic theology. The importance of using both faith and reason in understanding the great mysteries of the universe is at the very heart of Catholic education.

Catholic educators are called to nurture and inspire a sense of wonder, awe and a love of learning. Science and religion are dialogue partners in expanding our understanding of a

God who is present and active in creation. In the Catholic imagination scientific discoveries related to the universe heighten our understanding of God's activity and majestic creation. Courses in literature and the arts give expression to our deepest human questions and desires.

## Biblical Interpretation

Included in the curriculum for students in Catholic schools are biblical studies. Students explore the Hebrew Scriptures (Old Testament), which we share with Judaism and Islam as *People of the Book*, and the Christian Scriptures (New Testament), which teach the life and message of Jesus and the formation of the early Christian Church. When it comes to biblical interpretation, not all Christians think alike. Many are familiar with the fundamentalist approach that promotes a literal interpretation wherein the bible is the actual word of God and was literally dictated word for word to human authors who wrote it down. The Catholic approach to the bible is very different.

### Catholic Biblical Interpretation

All Christians believe that the bible is the word of God, that God inspired human authors to write the sacred stories of salvation. Differences in opinion among Christians stem from interpretation of the word *inspire*. In Greek, the word *inspire* literally means, God breathed into – God breathed the words of scripture into the human authors who, in turn with reverence,

wrote them down. In the Catholic view, God did not dictate the words of scripture. Rather, God partnered with human authors in the creation of the biblical texts. During the writing process, the human authors used their creativity, literary skills, ideas, and other talents to write the pages of scripture. "Through this sacred partnership, God breathed God's spirit into the human authors, and the words became the living word of God." (Hahn, Scott, "How a Catholic Starts to Read the Bible," <https://stpaulcenter.com/genesis-to-jesus-lesson-1-2>, 2004, Accessed 2 April 2018.)

In the Catholic view, we approach the Bible as a library, or collection, of 73 different books rather than one single book. The Bible contains a variety of different types of literary genres, forms, and devices. To unearth the meaning of biblical texts, Catholic biblical scholars employ the *Historical Biblical Method* in which scholars study the texts in their original languages of ancient Hebrew and Greek, the cultural context of ancient Israel, archeological discoveries such as the Dead Sea Scrolls, literary criticism, biblical translations, and transcriptions. Through this process, biblical scholars attempt

God did not  
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of scripture.

to discover what God and the human author intended to communicate through the original text. These findings are then compared to the overall continuity of the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures (Old and New Testaments).

## An Invitation to Join Us

As Catholic educators, we understand the challenge of finding the ideal school for your child. We share your dreams for an excellent academic education, where your child is cherished and his or her gifts are explored and nurtured; a safe place, rooted in a strong community where lifelong friendships begin and dreams are actualized. This is the kind of education that Catholic schools ensure. Deeply rooted in the fundamental values of our Catholic faith, we honor the dignity of each child in a serious academic environment where both teachers and students are held to high expectations. Such a learning environment builds confidence and students are primed to meet the challenges ahead. Our teachers and administrators share a common mission for the education of your child and so expectations and goals are clear. In Catholic education we see parents as the primary educators of their children and we value our partnership with them. We invite you to explore Catholic education more closely and come and see all that we have to offer you and your child. We hope you will take this sacred journey with us, as your hopes and dreams for your child will find a home in Catholic education.

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## About the Author



Sandy Flaherty, MTS, MAPL, has been a Catholic school educator for thirty years. She has two master's degrees in theology, one in theological studies from the Franciscan School of Theology in Berkeley, CA and the second in pastoral leadership from Chaminade University in Honolulu, HI. She has published works in the areas of spirituality, *Woman, Why do you Weep* (Paulist Press, 1992) and ritual, *A Reflection of Mercy: Prayer Services, Liturgies and Resources for Mercy School Communities* (MESA, 2001). Sandy is the director of Catholic identity at Mercy High School in Burlingame, CA, where she also teaches religious studies and works in campus ministry. She was previously the director of mission integration for ten years at Mercy. Sandy is a gifted liturgist and is seen as a dynamic and engaging classroom teacher by her students.