

## Character Education in Catholic Schools: The Power of Our Story

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The challenge to provide character education in our Catholic schools is an invitation to tell and re-tell our story. Our response to this invitation may indeed determine whether publicly funded Catholic schools survive in Ontario.

I would like to begin my remarks with an example of how a people's *story* has kept their identity alive in trying times:

In the rainforests of Ecuador, there lives a tribe of people called the Waoraní. Over the last 30 years, the ancient trees of their forests have fallen to the slash and burn of unscrupulous logging, and the fish in their rivers have begun to succumb to pollutants being dumped into their waterways. Unwelcome oil and mineral exploration has further scarred and reduced their territories. The Waoraní have responded in two ways: they have retreated deeper into jungle, where food and game are still available; but perhaps more importantly, they have continued to rely on the power of their story to keep them alive.

Each night, as Waoraní villagers lay back in their hammocks under thatched roofs, their story is re-told. A member of one household begins the narrative that recounts their beginnings as a people. Another household picks up where the first leaves off, and continues on. A third household joins in, then a fourth, and so on, until the story has been fully told. The villagers do not sleep until the story is complete.

The Waoraní have also begun to share their story with outsiders. Important film documentaries and websites advocating preservation of their way of life have begun to appear. As their children are educated in the language of outside world, they too are telling their people's story, and it is being heard in places both near and far away. Those educated in larger centres are also telling the Waorani people's story to the outside world. The Waoraní's story is keeping them alive as a people. As long as their story continues to be told, they will survive.

Here in Canada, we see something similar happening among our own indigenous peoples. First Nations children in our schools are re-learning the languages and traditions of their elders. They are returning to their own story – a story that was almost extinguished through the purposeful destruction of their culture. Like the

Waoraní, they are re-discovering their unity, identity and dignity as a people by telling and re-telling their story.

What lessons can we take from the Waoraní and our First Nations people as we address the challenge of character education? As Catholic educators living in an increasingly secularized society, the key to our own survival also lies in *our* story. This is not something new. Indeed, we know that the Word of God was circulated in story form as oral tradition long before it was ever written down. The Hebrews knew who they were because their story was constantly being told and re-told from the days of Abraham and Sarah and into the time of exile in Babylon.

When the Chosen People wandered from the Covenant, prophets were raised up to call them back to their story. The prophets reminded them that idolatry and injustice toward the poor, widows, orphans and strangers were *not* part of their story. *Their* story was one of *right relationship*. To use the words of the prophet Micah, it was a story about *acting justly, loving tenderly and walking humbly with their God*. (Micah 6, 8).

It was during the exile that the Hebrew scribes began to write down their people's story so that it would be preserved for future generations. After 50 years of captivity, the Chosen People were finally freed. A remnant returned the promised land and began to rebuild. When Jerusalem's Temple and city walls were complete, they assembled to hear Ezra the priest and scribe proclaim their story (Neh 8, 1-12). As the books of the law were read aloud, many of them wept openly. They recognized how they had strayed from their true identity that resided in the words and statutes of their story. They re-committed themselves to walk together in the covenant relationship with their God and neighbour that lay at the heart of their story. As they embraced, told and re-told their story, they again began to thrive as God's holy people.

As Christians, we recognize the Word, spoken from all eternity, as the Origin of our story. Taking on our common humanity and sharing our flesh, Jesus fully reveals the story of God's saving love for humanity. He invites his first followers to "come and see," and they in turn, recounting his words and deeds, call others to "come and see." In his death, resurrection and sending of the Spirit, God's love story for humankind in Christ is made complete. In the power of the Spirit, the story is proclaimed to all nations, and many embrace it as their own.

Those joined to Christ through Baptism have continued to recount the story, educating and handing on the faith in cultures, languages and places throughout the

earth. However, we too, like the pre and post-exile Hebrews are beset by forces which seek to undermine our ability to remember and tell our story to one another and to our children. Our young people are exposed on a daily basis to a barrage of confusing voices calling out to them with stories that seem intent on destroying what little root *our* Christian story has in their lives. We find these voices present in the media, the internet, music, fashion and war industries, and we are called to respond.

This is what Catholic education has done in Canada for over 160 years. Catholic schools have delivered a curriculum within a worldview that is “shaped by the Catholic conversation about life’s meaning and purpose” –to borrow a phrase from *Educating the Soul*. (*Educating the Soul*. P. 12) This “conversation” reaches back to the very beginnings of our faith – to the preaching of Jesus that was remembered, re-told and lived in the first Christian communities before it was written down in the Gospels. It reaches back through the living Tradition of teaching and preaching guided by the Holy Spirit, beginning with the Apostles and kept alive in the teaching and preaching of their successors, and in the labours of all who share in their call to teach the Catholic faith in the home, school, parish and community. The language of this “Catholic conversation about life’s meaning and purpose” is the language of our story – a story rooted in Scripture and the living Tradition of our faith.

This story has given us the Beatitudes, the Gifts of the Spirit, the Fruits of the Spirit, the theological virtues of faith, hope and charity. Our story has given us the four cardinal virtues: prudence, justice, temperance (moderation), and fortitude (courage), upon which hinge all other virtues. Like the messages of Deuteronomy and the prophets, our story teaches us about justice through our Catholic Social Teaching and reminds us that we are a people who uphold: the dignity of the human Person, preserving the common good, responsible stewardship for creation, the right to meaningful work and a just wage, and the universal destination of the earth’s goods.

The language of our story infuses our Catholic school curriculum and raises it up, like yeast in a baker’s dough. We who have been commissioned by Christ and the believing community – the Church – to share Christ’s story through Catholic education are called to salt our teaching with the language of our story, and to hand on knowledge in such a way that it shines with the light of the Gospel.

The guarantee of minority right education for Catholic ratepayers has been instrumental in the formation of this great country of Canada. In a real sense, then,

our story is an integral part of Canada's story. However, we cannot rely on the investments of our predecessors to sustain us in the current secular climate. We must heed the prophetic voices of persons such as Sr. Claire Fitzgerald, Fr. James Mulligan and Msgr. Dennis Murphy, who point to the experience of Newfoundland and Quebec, and tell us that our very survival lies in remembering, telling and re-telling our *story* in our Catholic school staff rooms, classrooms, schoolyards, hallways and offices. If we refuse this responsibility, we too will find ourselves sharing the same fate as our counterparts in Quebec and Newfoundland.

Now, more than ever, we must, like the Waoraní, recognize that our very identity and survival are tied up in telling and re-telling our story. We must, like the returning exiles, come together regularly as members of the believing community, to hear our story proclaimed and commit ourselves to living it out. We must, once again, like the first followers of Jesus moving in the power of the Spirit, proclaim our identity boldly with our lives and words, using the language of our story. We must take every means necessary to ensure that the distinctive language of our story is spoken in every classroom and school yard activity, every subject area, every staff meeting, every board gathering, every newsletter and media communication piece. This will require commitment; it will require money and time. It will require greater collaboration with our parishes and members of our school communities.

You are here today because you believe in the power of our story, and its importance for Catholic education in this province. The character education initiatives you have undertaken thus far in your Catholic school boards are an important first step in putting our distinctive story back on the lips of so many of our students and young staff who, for whatever reason, are unable to identify with its riches. We need to continue telling and re-telling our story, and we need committed persons to assume leadership for seeing that this happens in every Catholic school. Past accomplishments in Catholic education will not carry us forward into the future.

Let us pray for the wisdom and courage to continue telling our story through our character education initiatives. Let us redouble our efforts so that no member of our Catholic school communities ever falls asleep on any night without first having heard our story - their story – and in so doing has been reminded of who they truly are.