

## **Building a Morally Sensitive Society: The Role of Catholic Schools**

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### **Abstract**

*The Catholic Church considers morality to be synonymous with life. Evil and death came into the world that was created good when Adam and Eve in disobedience ate the forbidden fruit in the Garden of Eden and their eyes were opened to the realization of good and evil. Morality, especially within the context of Moral Theology in the Catholic Church, is hinged on some basic concepts including freedom, truth, natural law, and conscience. Generally, moral sensitivity or moral awareness is the ability to recognize moral issues when they arise especially in day-to-day living. Largely, the Catholic Church views the holistic formation of people as indispensable for achieving*

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*their potential to live responsibly in their society. Catholic schools were known for being disciplined in all ramifications – punctuality, meeting deadlines, cleanliness, examination integrity, diligence, commitment of staff, responsibility and accountability, mutual respect, decency, orderliness, care of students, high academic achievement, and excellence in all ramifications. The moral atmosphere of Catholic schools will definitely affect the moral atmosphere outside the four walls of the schools. Since education is an essential way of directly and indirectly impacting the society, the holistic formation Catholic Schools are expected to provide their beneficiaries at all levels will incredibly and invariably impact the larger society.*

### **Preamble: A Brief Look at the Catholic Church's Teaching on morality**

Morality in the Catholic Church is synonymous with life. This assertion is underpinned by the declaration from the Author of Life Himself, CHRIST the LORD in John's Gospel Chapter 10, verse 10b, “I came that they may have life and have it abundantly”. In recognition of the veracity of the LORD's declaration, Pope St. Leo the Great cautions against giving in to evil, “Through the sacrament of baptism you have become a temple of the Holy Spirit. Do not drive away so great a guest by evil conduct and become again a slave to the devil, for your liberty was bought by the blood of Christ”. Leo's admonition reminds us of who we are as children of GOD and at what incredibly huge a cost we were adopted as such. It will therefore be inimical to our nature as GOD's children if we do not intentionally follow in the footsteps of CHRIST and His moral principles.

Evil came into the world that was created good when out of disobedience, Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit in the Garden of

Eden and their eyes were opened to the realization of good and evil. Then the LORD God said, “Behold, the man has become like one of Us, knowing good and evil...” (Genesis 3:22a). When we talk about morality especially within the context of Moral Theology in the Catholic Church, there are certain fundamental concepts we must bear in mind. These include freedom, truth, natural law, and conscience <https://beginningcatholic.com/catholic-morality>. The concept of freedom is essentially the fact that we are unequivocally responsible for the choices we make because GOD has given everyone free will to make choices either to act or to abstain from acting.

Next. Truth as a moral principle is objective regardless of the circumstances because it stems from GOD Who is Truth itself, and GOD is eternal for HE is changeless. Also, in considering the concept of natural law as exemplified in the lives of the Gentiles who were not under the Divine Law of GOD guiding the Jews, St. Paul in his letter to the Romans chapter 2 verse 14 and 15 say, “The Gentiles do not have the Law; but whenever they do by instinct what the Law commands, they are their own law, even though they do not have the Law. Their conduct shows that what the Law commands is written in their hearts. Their consciences also show that this is true, since their thoughts sometimes accuse them and sometimes defend them.” St. Paul's assertion simply demonstrates our natural human disposition.

Further, essentially, the formation of a good conscience underpins ethical choices and decision-making. St. Paul says of himself and the importance of the conscience in moral issues, “I am telling the truth in Christ, I am not lying, my conscience testifies with me in the Holy Spirit” (Romans 9:1). The Catechism of the Catholic Church describes conscience as, “a judgment of reason by which the human person recognizes the moral quality of a concrete act” (Catechism of the Catholic Church, no.1796). The formation of a good conscience is a

life-long process. As children of GOD and as Catholics, we are blessed with many mechanisms available in the Church to facilitate the development of a moral conscience, such as active engagement with the Word of GOD, intentional reception of the Sacraments, sincere relationship with GOD especially through dedicated prayer times, the Church's teachings etc. <https://www.usccb.org/beliefs-and-teachings/what-we-believe/morality>. Lastly, the Catholic Church projects the Divine Law as moral laws which are eternal (unchanging), universal (binding on all human beings) and objective (beats laws such as relativism, secularism, etc.) (*Dignitatis Humanae*, 3). That is, sin is sin regardless of the time it is committed, where it is committed, the status, age, cast or creed of the persons who committed it.

### **Moral Sensitivity**

Generally, moral sensitivity or moral awareness is the ability to recognize moral issues when they arise especially in day-to-day activities. Therefore, both formal and informal character formation is of utmost importance for building a moral society (Scheopner, 2005). When Individuals are morally sensitive, they demonstrate that their capacity to resolve ethical concerns is significant. They are mindful of crucial repercussions in decision making which involves other persons. Narvaez and Rest (1995) considered four components of acting morally. One of these components is moral sensitivity which they perceive as involving “the receptivity of the sensory perceptual system to social situations and the interpretation of the situation in terms of what actions are possible, who and what would be affected by each of the possible actions, and how involved parties might react to possible actions.” Their perception of moral sensitivity is fundamentally action based. However, there are divergent opinions as to what is more important in considering the concept of morality,

Kekes (1984) asserts that “The kind of person one is, is a more fundamental, and thus a more important consideration than how one acts.” He argues with Kant (1953)'s assertion of 70 decades that the key question of morality is hinged on action. Kekes stand is that morality should be essentially concerned about who a person ought to be than their actions because ultimately a good person's action will reflection their true self as they make choices and live in the society. In another development, Castillo (2018) argued for the value of embedding moral and ethical education within the classroom, via the curriculum and instructional practices such that they will complement students' attempt at fighting inequalities within their respective communities. In this regard, teachers are expected to be actively involved in both guiding and exemplifying the moral values they teach. This angle gives credence to the relevance of school in building a morally sensitive society. However, are the teachers equipped for this all-important mission? “*Nemo dat quod non habet*” “No one can give what he does not have”.

As regards the quality of teachers as custodians of morals, it is heartening that Finland provides an incredible support for teachers as they are seen as custodians of ethics within the learning community. In Finland's educational system which ranks as one of the best in the world, teachers are highly respected and are considered as “ethical professionals who can be trusted and who share similar basic values about their work” Tirri (2019). Tirri details these values as dignity, truthfulness, fairness, responsibility, and freedom. Finnish teachers are expected to continue to uphold and advance these values while ensuring the values underpin their relationship with their learners.

Heightened moral sensitivity has been proven to positively impact various areas of life as discovered by: Xie, Liu and Teng (2023) who asserted that the higher moral sensitivity to bullying a student has, the

more likely they are to help the victim or inhibit bullying rather than ignore it; Yu, Zhou and Nussberger (2022) who discovered that persons who are morally sensitive felt less grateful and more uneasy when offered immoral help and also that there was less likelihood for persons to accept the help of immoral persons and strengthen their relationship with them even when they accepted it; and Katsarov et al (2017) who reviewed 20 distinct game mechanisms to assist designers of video games in the choice and application of game tools as they had the capacity to foster moral sensitivity.

Scheopner (2005) revealed that there are two ways of facilitating students' growth in moral sensitivity—formal and informal. Formal moral education is intentionally designed to help children develop and comprehend in practical terms, ethical and moral principles. On the other hand, informal moral education occurs at any given time when the teacher utilizes teachable moments to assist learners grow in their learning, for instance, as they make ethical decisions. Both formal and informal moral instruction are important in the holistic formation of the learner.

### **The Catholic School as a Formal Moral Organism**

For all intents and purposes, the Catholic Church views the holistic formation of persons as crucial in their potential to live responsibly and morally upright in the society. The Vatican's Congregation for Catholic Education defines a school as “a place of integral formation by means of a systematic and critical assimilation of culture” (The Catholic School, 26). The key phrase here is “integral formation”. The Code of Canon Law (CCL) (Can. 795) expresses expectation of Catholic education, as, having the capacity to provide “complete formation” - “Since true education must strive for complete formation of the human person that looks to his or her final end as well as to the

common good of societies, children and youth are to be nurtured in such a way that they are able to develop their physical, moral, and intellectual talents harmoniously, acquire a more perfect sense of responsibility and right use of freedom, and are formed to participate actively in social life” (CCL, Can. 795). In addition, the Catholic Policy on Education reiterates that “anyone who has received formation in Catholic Education should feel, judge, and act always and consistently in accordance with right reason, enlightened by the example and teaching of the Lord Jesus Christ.” Furthermore, The Second Vatican Council's *Gravissimum Educationis* (Declaration on Christian Education) holds that “a true education aims at the formation of the human person in the pursuit of his ultimate end and of the good of the societies of which he as man is a member and in whose obligations as an adult he will share”. How then can Catholic Schools play active roles in the building of a morally sensitive society?

### **The Role of Catholic Schools in Building a Morally Sensitive Society**

The document, *Congregation for Catholic Education: The Catholic School on the Threshold of the Third Millennium* [(CCE), 2000, Parr. 1] acknowledges the fact that there are crisis of values which have impacted human behaviors in diverse ways. Now, education has become more complex both in scope and content making “education and schooling become particularly difficult today” (CCE, Parr 2). Therefore, more than ever before, Catholic schools must lean on centuries of sound educational heritage and boldly embrace renewal to be emboldened and confidently offer salvation to people (CCE, Parr 3). Catholic education is founded on Gospel values and so must courageously offer the world the values it needs to be morally upright knowing that "it is only in the mystery of the Word made flesh that the

mystery of man truly becomes clear" (*Catechism of the Catholic Church* [CCC], 1997, para. 359).

Before delving into practical examples of the Roles of the Catholic Schools in building a morally sensitive society, it is pertinent to hear Pope Francis view on Catholic education. In offering hope to the members of the *Gravissimum Educationis* Foundation and by extension to all educators, Pope Francis said, "Catholic education gives soul to our globalized world and radiates the promise of Christian salvation." Also, in taking cognizance of global challenges confronting the human family, the Pope claimed, "Catholic education recognizes that humankind's moral responsibility today does not just extend through space, but also through time, and that present choices have repercussions for future generations." <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/pope/news/2018-06/pope-francis-gravissimum-educationis-foundation.html>

It is assumed that every Catholic school, indeed every educational establishment has its vision, mission, and core values. The vision is the goal the school hopes to achieve, the mission is how the goal will be achieved, while the core values are the ethical principles that drive every activity geared towards achieving the goal. The role of teachers in building a morally sensitive society cannot be over-emphasized. The document, *Divini Illius Magistri* (1954) buttresses the indispensability of teachers in this all-important mission, "But let teachers recognize that the Catholic school depends upon them almost entirely for the accomplishment of its goals and programs", which invariably are underpinned by moral values. I agree with Castillo (2018) that moral values/core values/ethical principles must be woven into the curriculum and instructional practices of schools to facilitate holistic formation of the learner. Smith (2006) revealed that he taught English in a Catholic school in Thailand for more than six years where moral



values were embedded into all their lessons. More interestingly, “ten percent of each student's grade was based on how well they practiced moral values inside and outside of the classroom.”  
<https://www.edutopia.org/how-approach-moral-issues-classroom>

From his personal experience of working in a school where the students were offered such an enabling environment which empowered them to be morally sensitive, Smith (2006) offered seven practical suggestions that Catholic schools could employ in helping to train their learning communities to build up a morally sensitive society. I will share four of them. First, schools ought to, “acknowledge that young people encounter difficult moral questions every day, and they want guidance”. For instance, students could be encouraged to critically appraise actions and inactions of leaders and the consequences on the society. They could examine parallels in their own lives and proffer solutions. Second, schools must “recognize that no subject is morally neutral”. Different topics in different subjects will always surface moral issues. In recent times we have seen the inclusion of immoral items in school curriculum and textbooks. Thank GOD for various groups who spoke up and coerced the government into withdrawing such anti-educational and morally destructive materials. Smith suggests encouraging students to reflect on and discuss general themes such as, “compassion, indifference, resistance, propaganda” etc. Third, trust must be built in the classroom. Smith suggests starting by establishing basic rules such that elicit respect and the teacher must model them. Further, practice of listening to students, challenging ideas not persons, mutually developing a language for moral questioning; acknowledge the difference between being safe and been comfortable – students must feel safe. However, Smith believes discomfort will help them learn and grow. And four, have faith in your students. Generally, young people want to belong. They need to be encouraged to grow, make a difference, show themselves not just others that they are capable of high achievement.

Globally, school curriculum is divided into four types, the Scholar Academic Curriculum – which is the commonest (basically formulated to prepare students to write standardized tests or examinations such as is generally operated in Nigeria; Social Efficiency Curriculum – which is driven by hands-on experiences such as we have in technical and technological education – sewing, catering, mechanical apprenticeship, hairdressing, Computer training all requiring a lot of practice where learners' assessment is reported as either pass or fail, no in-between assessment; Learner-Centred Curriculum which is customized according to learner's abilities, interest, learning style, and teacher's capacity to offer an appropriate and enabling environment for the learner while constantly providing a detailed and well written assessment of the learner's growth without subjecting them to any form of standardized testing, the assessment is more of formative (that is ongoing guidance where the chef tastes the food while cooking rather than summative which comes up at the end like guests tasting the food in which case, possible and helpful amelioration has been delayed; and the Social Reconstruction Curriculum in which students are trained to make their world a better place by acquiring skills to solve real life challenges, which more often than not have ethical concerns. A fundamental assumption of the Social Reconstruction Curriculum, therefore, is that educators must have a balanced sense of judgment underpinned by ethical principles, which will facilitate their efforts at stimulating their students' moral sensitivity as they encounter both easy and difficult ethical issues every day. Whichever curriculum theory we adopt in our schools, it is expected that as Catholic schools, moral values are intentionally woven into every sound, letter, word, phrase, sentence, and activities we engage in or refrain from, in all our classrooms and schoolwide interactions.

Permit me to allude to the four focal points on which schools run by my Congregation are built. They are Faith formation, morality, academic

excellence and altruism – charity (e.g. Bridge of Care). These for us will ensure our students receive holistic formation. We hope that this type of education will sharpen their moral sensibilities such that by the time they graduate from our schools and step into the world, they are well-equipped to make right choices and positively impact their society.

Catholic schools *were* known for being disciplined in all ramifications – punctuality, meeting deadlines, cleanliness, examination integrity, diligence, commitment of staff, responsibility and accountability, mutual respect, decency, orderliness, care of students, high academic achievement, excellence in all ramifications. Catholic schools *had* a high degree of moral intensity, that is, the consequences of moral choices, moral sensitivity and moral judgement were always heightened resulting in school wide practices devoid of immoral behaviour. When schools are aware that going against their core values will violate some moral principles, they will be proactive in how they interact with all stake holders – students, parents, staff, local community, etc. The Church documents and some of the research works that have been referenced in the early part of this paper undoubtedly demonstrate that Catholic schools have moral roles to play in facilitating the development of a morally sensitive society through the daily engagement of all stakeholders who are members of the society. All these interactions have a way of overtly or covertly sending signals of light or darkness to the society. Let us look at a few areas where morality could be a school wide concern by asking, “In my school, what is the quality of our...”

1. School policies – (Is it comprehensive, clear and accessible enough for all stakeholders?)
2. School climate – (What do organisation, team work, inclusion, owning decisions, staff/selfdevelopment, relationships among

all stake holders, commitment, conflict resolution, exam practices, communication skills, safety strategies, staff expertise look like?)

3. School curriculum especially – (Do we operate the five curricular concurrently and are we all aware of them and actively engaged with them?)
4. School examination policy – (How seriously and proactively are issues of examination misdemeanor handled?)
5. School administration and administrators – (Do we have qualified and experienced administrators; what does the day-to-day running of the school look like?)
6. School succession plan – (How do we view the need for this at all levels?)
7. School mentoring program – (How important is the issue of mentoring?)

The moral atmosphere of our school will definitely affect the moral atmosphere outside the four walls of our schools. Remember, “*Nemo dat quod non habet*” “No one can give what he does not have”. If we ourselves are confused and are not getting it right, how do we hope to be involved in activating the conscience of the society with which we interact on a daily basis? In Europe and America, Catholic Schools are still the most highly sort after because of the enviable moral track record of Catholic Education. How can we ensure this is upheld and fostered in our schools here in the Catholic Archdiocese of Ibadan? Our schools in lesser or greater degrees are a reflection of our society and vice versa.

**The Catholic Diocese of “Kenz” Cairns Queensland, Australia boasts of providing Catholic Education that is:**

- Faith and values-based learning environment.
- A provider of holistic education – academic, spiritual, social, emotional and physical development.
- Welcoming, inclusive and family-oriented environment of high standards of behaviour and respect for self and others.
- A safe and caring environment offering a sense of belonging and community.
- Nurturing and develops individuals and their abilities.
- A provider of quality learning and teaching known for strong academic reputation.
- A giver of broad curriculum and co-curricular options, providing academic, vocational and employment pathways.
- Providing well-resourced and equipped classrooms with full ICT integration.
- A developer of life-long skills and a love of learning, strongly linked with parents and community.
- Committed to social justice, preparing learners for a life of worth, not simply a life of work.

*<https://www.cns.catholic.edu.au/about/the-catholic-school-difference/>*

If the Diocese of “Kenz” Cairns truly engages in all the above-mentioned practices, we can imagine what the society in which they interact will look like because a significant percentage of their graduates, parents, and all those with whom they share life will become more morally sensitive. I strongly believe that the success of Catholic Schools in building a morally sensitive society will largely depend on

their capacity to know, understand and accurately interpret moral issues in the society. Our schools will mirror our society and vice versa. We have the power to create morally sensitive learning communities. If it is working elsewhere, it can work here also.

In conclusion, it is no gainsaying that since education is an essential way of directly and indirectly impacting the society, the holistic formation Catholic Schools are expected to provide their beneficiaries at all levels will incredibly and invariably impact the society in which they live. Therefore, if we realize that our school communities are not living up to the moral expectation of Catholic Education, we may need to intentionally and urgently investigate and amend areas of moral lapses in order to continue to be relevant instruments of justice and morality, and to ensure that as Pope Francis stated, the type of Catholic education we offer “gives soul to our globalized world and radiates the promise of Christian salvation”.

Thank you and GOD bless us all.

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