

So You're Sending Your Child to a Catholic School

A FRIENDLY GUIDE TO THE CATHOLIC TRADITION



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PREFACE

You may be a Catholic parent who has not had much to do with the Church for some time, or a parent who is an active member of your local parish ... or, you may not have much idea of Catholic tradition at all, or not even be christened yourself.

In any case, if your child is already attending a Catholic school—or you intend to enquire about enrolling your child in such a school—this book has been written to help you appreciate the particular culture in which these schools exist. It has been written as plainly as possible, to give you some idea of important issues and developments within this ancient tradition.

In Australia, there is a little fewer than 750,000 students in Catholic

schools, with around 60 000 teachers and administrators dedicated to maintaining an educational excellence of which we are very proud.

The Catholic tradition discussed in this book has come from a long and colourful history, being influenced by the stories and traditions and religious practices of a huge variety of peoples from around the world. This small book in no way attempts to cover completely the extraordinary richness and depth of Catholic belief; there are libraries of books which have been written about such questions as: Who is Jesus? What is the mystery of the Church? How do we make healthy moral choices today? ... and dozens of other central questions of faith.

Instead, *So You're Sending Your Child to a Catholic School* is designed to be a friendly and gentle introduction to a few of the beliefs and values which make Catholics tick. It is a modest overview for people coming in touch with the Church, perhaps for the first time, or refreshing their acquaintance. For a significant and more in-depth summary of Catholic teachings, see *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* (1994).

Our hope with this book is that it may pique your interest, spark your curiosity, and help you find in this, your Catholic school, a satisfying and enriching environment for your child to learn and grow.

But Catholic is my language;
Catholic is the coat I wear,
Catholic is the house in which I live.
It is a house that needs cleaning,
a house in which savagery and cowardice thrived,
where evil has a room with a view,
where foolishness and greed have prominent places at the table.
But it is also a house where hope lives, and hope is the greatest of mercies,
the most enduring of gifts, the most nutritious of foods.
hope is what we drink from the odd story of the carpenter's odd stepson.
When we eat his body in the ludicrous miracle of the mass,
we hope in him, and with him,
forever and ever,
world without end,
amen, amen, amen.

Brian Doyle: *Leaping, Revelations and Epiphanies*, Loyola Press, Chicago, 2003

INTRODUCTION

Coming in contact with the Catholic Church – for the first time, for some – may be something of a baffling experience.

You may have been raised in the Catholic faith and now wish to share this gift with your own child. Or you may be a parent or carer who is not a Catholic but has chosen a Catholic education for your child. Either way, this book has been written for you.

It has been said that this generation is not simply an era of change, but a significant change of era. These are the words of our present Pope Francis, an Argentinian and the first pope from ‘down under’ – the southern part of the planet. A Jesuit, Jorge Bergoglio has taken his name Francis from his 12th century model – the gentle revolutionary of Assisi. Commentators these days speak about ‘the Francis Effect’ among Catholics, as a way to describe the Pope’s inspired leadership in rejuvenating a Church facing many momentous issues.

In the first decades of this century, the Catholic Church has been facing its own critical issues — such as a reduction of general interest in matters of religion; diminishing numbers in pews on Sunday; lack

of equality of women in important decision-making in Church; and, above all, the scandal and deep scars left by the sexual abuse of children. We are going through a time of serious reflection about the very mission of the Church itself.

Catholic tradition, at its best, contains a challenge found first in the Christian gospels that tell the story of a young teacher from Nazareth and his vision of life. He called it the

‘reign of God’. Each human heart contains a hunger to be genuine, to be truly itself, to be fully alive and free from disabling fear.

Catholics are not very different from anyone else in the community, but we do hold beliefs that affect the way we think about ourselves, about other people, and about the world around us. Those beliefs are expressed in many different ways. Over the vast history of two thousand years, they have arisen out of the faith of people from every race and nation on earth with thousands of stories, a wide range of religious practices, and quite diverse ways of celebrating these beliefs. Catholic tradition embraces all that is life-giving.

This small book will in no way attempt to cover the entire profusion of those beliefs. There are libraries of

In the word ‘question’ there
is the beautiful word ‘quest’.
I love that word.
We are all partners in the quest.
The essential questions
have no answers.
You are my question
and I am yours –
and then there is dialogue.
The moment we have answers,
there is no dialogue.
Questions unite people.
Answers divide them.

Elie Wiesel



INTRODUCTION

books written about such questions as: Who is Jesus? What is the Church? How do we make healthy and moral choices today? In 1994 the Church published a significant summary of Catholic teachings in *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* which precisely attempts such an overview.

So You're Sending Your Child to a Catholic School is

designed rather to be a friendly and accessible summary for those coming in contact with the Catholic Church, perhaps for the first time, or possibly after a sustained absence

I offer the following pages as an introduction to those seeking to understand more about the Catholic Church, and the rewards of sending your child to a Catholic school.



‘Young people are not meant to become discouraged; they are meant to dream great things, to seek vast horizons, to aim higher, to take on the world, to accept challenges and to offer the best of themselves to the building of something better.’

Pope Francis, Christus Vivit (Christ is Alive), 2019

THE REWARDS OF SENDING YOUR CHILD TO A CATHOLIC SCHOOL

A sense of belonging

I have always loved and felt really comfortable with being in a Catholic school and have always felt a sense of belonging: being *in community*. I value the tradition, scripture, religious education, celebration and sacrament that are part of being in a Catholic School. To be involved in the mission of teaching the knowledge component of our faith, as well as being part of students'—and their families'—faith formation in today's social climate is very rewarding.



When I was six years old, my teacher was a very young woman in her first year of teaching. I believe she was about nineteen years old. She was clever, creative, kind, inspirational and pretty; and far more interesting to me than the nuns that were still dressed in quite traditional habits. I adored her and decided at age six I wanted to be a teacher just like her. I never changed my mind. Over the years I often ran into her: she was classroom teaching and I had become a principal. I made sure that she knew that her positive influence was the reason I was there.

Being a principal is exciting in one sense because it's almost a whole career change. You go from teaching in the classroom to becoming a financial manager; an expert on building, repairs and maintenance; a family law consultant; counsellor; technology guru; careers advisor and WH&S officer; religious/pastoral leader; etc... I would most liken it to becoming a parent for the first time: a great responsibility where the buck stops with you and the decisions you make can impact on a whole community and its growth/success. But there is also the delight of great hopes, dreams, aspirations and a vision for learning and creating a community that's almost like family.

The children remain a great joy: seeing them learn and grow and then leaving us for high school and being really proud of a job well done!

Of course, there are difficulties; on any given day a whole range of issues arise and need to be resolved. Dealing with parents/families and all the relational issues impact heavily on your time when, ideally, you would like to be spending that time on educational and learning-focussed issues. Compliance requirements can become problematic. Technology has also had an impact on both maintenance and everyone's expectations of immediate response and action to problems.

I think prioritising and managing time—as well taking responsibility for children, staff and families—can sometimes become a real circus juggling act; it's up to me to keep all the balls in the air while staying sane and smiling all the while!

Gera Guilhaus: Catholic School Principal

Why a Catholic School?

We made the choice (and the financial sacrifice) to send our children to Catholic schools. Why? Upon reflection, I have come up with three reasons: inertia, spirituality and community.

I must admit, it was a confusing time when we were new parents. Deciding on something as momentous as where to send your child to school is difficult for many reasons, not the least of which is how hard it is to decipher the marketing hyperbole and how hard it is to know your child's learning style—and even personality—when he is a baby or toddler! So we narrowed the field by falling back on our family's tradition of Catholic schooling: inertia. Catholic schooling, we felt, instilled in us a love of learning, but it also equipped us to handle life's many curve balls.

Well, that's why we chose Catholic schooling for our children in the first place, but the more interesting question, I think, is: why did we stick with it?

There is so much talk today about educating the 'whole child' and we felt that this was impossible to do without including his spiritual side. Our school beautifully integrates spirituality into their everyday life, and it does so in subtle ways across all areas of the curriculum: on the sporting fields, in the disciplinary policies, in the social justice programs, in school liturgies, and in daily prayers and meditation time. Children are given time and space to reflect on what Christ's message means to them. This Catholicism in school reinforces our family values: compassion, respect, love, humility and forgiveness ... among many others.

In so many ways, Jesus' message of love is lived out at Catholic schools.

An unexpected side effect of choosing a Catholic school for our children is that I have had the opportunity to reconsider where I am on my spiritual journey. Through the school I have heard talks, panel discussions, sermons, prayers, and have had discussions with my children and other parents that have called into question my old-fashioned religious notions. For the first time in

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my adult life, I have actively engaged in developing and deepening my own spiritual side. Like my children, I have grown in this spirit of love.

Finally, the community that we have found through our school has dramatically enriched our lives. Teachers, administrators, parents and students drawn to Catholic schools share a special bond and commitment. Each member of our family has experienced love and support from our school community. I think that, again, this is our shared belief in the teachings of Jesus that connects us in a profound way to each other. Not everyone in our community is Catholic, in fact our community includes non-Catholic Christians, Jewish families, Muslim families, and Atheists; but the universal message of Christ's love binds us to each other.

Jeanne Bridgers: Catholic School Parent

The decision

Mike and I wanted a Christian education for our children. We wanted the added support it would offer us in passing on our faith, and the continuity it would provide in the practice of our faith: that what was instilled in the kids at home would be reinforced by the schools.

We were hopeful that the Christian values—especially respect for elders and others—would be deeply embedded in the teachings and in the Catholic system as a whole.

We also felt that Catholic schools had a high general quality of teachers and more effective methods. There was also the care and support of the Church, and the sense of belonging to the Catholic community.

My memory of the experience

I felt proud that I was supported by Mike and about the financial sacrifice we undertook in order to give our children what we saw was a better education.

Looking back now, I feel that there could have been a deeper quality of education in the faith and the rituals. From my perception, I believe that Religious education was not on par with the other subjects and was of lesser importance.

There were distinct differences between our two boys and our two girls, who were some ten years younger. The boys seemed to have been led towards a stronger sense of faith.

My memory of my own Catholic school

Having gone to numerous Catholic schools in the Philippines, the students were heavily involved in various rituals and teachings, such as weekly Masses,

family Masses, monthly confessions, annual retreats, and various other prayers and gatherings during the liturgical seasons, even doing catechism classes alongside public school students and the poor.

Faith education was on top of the list of any Catholic schooling. Attendance was compulsory.

The faith was so instilled in all of us that I guess it was easier then: the majority of the population was Catholic (some 90%). Attending Church services and following its teachings were a part of growing up.



The difference between being a student and a parent

Student: Obedience and respect ... we did not dare question! We followed and did what we were told to do. We still have the faith. It was a different generation. That faith has grown into a more mature faith, and a deeper sense of God.

Parent: You hope to see the children accept the faith handed down from generation to generation within the family. You hope for the children to have a deeper understanding, a sense and presence of God's love in their lives, and to head towards a more adult faith. You hope for the children to experience and witness the faith that we witnessed through our parents and grandparents

Mari Palomares: Former Catholic School Parent

'The first thing we need to discern and discover is this: Jesus wants to be a friend to every young person.'

Pope Francis, Christus Vivit (Christ is Alive), 2019

WHAT DO CATHOLICS BELIEVE?

What Catholics believe is summed up in a series of short formal statements called creeds, taken from the Latin word *credere* meaning 'to believe'.

There are a number of these statements dating back to the earliest centuries of Christianity when they were used as statements of faith by those being initiated into the Church. When an infant is baptised, his or her godparents and all those gathered, recite the Creed (called the 'Apostles Creed') as a sign of accepting the beliefs of this particular community of faith on the infant's behalf.

The Apostle's Creed

I believe in God,
the Father almighty,
Creator of heaven and earth,
and in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord,
who was conceived by the Holy Spirit,
born of the Virgin Mary,
suffered under Pontius Pilate,
was crucified, died and was buried;
he descended into hell;
on the third day he rose again
from the dead;
he ascended into heaven,
and is seated at the right hand of God
the Father almighty;
from there he will come to judge
the living and the dead.
I believe in the Holy Spirit,
the holy Catholic Church,
the communion of saints,
the forgiveness of sins,
the resurrection of the body,
and life everlasting.

Amen.