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Background on Critical Race Theory and Critical Theory for Catholic Educators

By Dr. Denise Donohue

Catholic education offers a truthful and morally sound framework for considering issues of race, human dignity, and social justice, yet cultural norms, historical developments, commonplace and novel assumptions, and associated passions all have some influence over Catholic education—sometimes for the good, but often distorting and even contradicting sound Catholic teaching. The human condition and social inequities and injustices can and should be addressed in Catholic education, with confidence in the Church’s wisdom and the ability of societies to respectfully unify around racial and cultural differences. In times of heightened concern and emotion, it is necessary that Catholic education inform and guide students’

individuals would become truly human²⁸ and that alienation of the oppressed

long tenure of anti-communist Pope Saint John Paul II, liberation theology waned on the Church scene.

Recently Pope Francis has emphasized themes in Catholic teaching that have been abused by liberation theology, such as the Church's preferential option of the poor, social and economic justice, and an inclusive ministry that serves the marginalized. These themes present an opportunity for educators to clearly distinguish Catholic principles from liberation theology, critical theory, and critical race theory, but Catholic teaching is always at risk of being coopted by forces hostile to the Gospel. For although there may be common identification of the problem (racism and injustice) and common cause to correct it (shared indignation), the means of correction and the philosophies underlying the correction may be at odds. Catholic educators should be wary of proposals advanced by secularists. Despite shared humanity and shared good will, the underlying philosophies and understandings of the human person may be quite different—and if the foundation is not strong, the project can get swept away by emotion or politics, leading to unintended and un hoped for results.

Fraternal Humanism

A recent Vatican emphasis which provides a locus for dialogue on these issues is the Congregation for Catholic Education's *Educating to Fraternal Humanism: Building a 'Civilization of Love' 50 Years after Populorum Progressio* (2017). The document, tied directly to Vatican II's main social encyclical "on the development of peoples," intends to move education beyond the four walls of the school building to effect change in the surrounding culture and promote the "humanization" of mankind. The document states that, in order "to build bridges and... to find answers to the challenges of our time" we must build a culture of dialogue in which ethical principles are linked to social and civic choices. The document encourages educators to "lay the foundations for peaceful dialogue and allow the encounter between differences with the primary objective of building a better world."³⁶

The document's opening paragraphs describe contemporary scenarios with an emphasis on action-based, problem-solving pedagogies. It describes a "humanitarian emergency" of "inequities, poverty, unemployment and exploitation,"³⁸

where “both fraternal hospitality and intolerant, rigid populism... highlights decadent humanism... [and] marginalization and exclusion... leading to both encounters and clashes of civilizations... [and] the paradigm of indifference.”⁴⁰ These economic and political threats to peace and the desire for a “globalization of solidarity” inspire hope for “a new humanism, in which the social person [is] willing to talk and work for the realization of the common good.”⁴¹

This new approach “humanizes” education (a goal of Freirean pedagogy), so that not only “an educational service” is provided, but also an education which “deals with its results in the overall context of the personal, moral and social abilities of those who participate in the educational process.”⁴² Pope Francis sees the method of this humanized education as one “that is sound and open, that pulls down the walls of exclusivity, promoting the richness and diversity of individual talents.” It extends “the classroom to embrace every corner of social space in which education can generate solidarity, sharing and communion.”⁴³ It moves beyond the traditional student-teacher relationship to create social, interpersonal, and “interdependent” connections, in order to create “a framework of relationships that make up a living community... bound to a common destiny.”⁴⁴ This humanized education “does not simply ask the teacher to teach and student to learn, but urges everyone to live, study and act in accordance with the reasons of fraternal humanism,”⁴⁵ which—the reader is told in the same paragraph—the framework of interdependent relationships bound by a common destiny, with the person at the center.

This equitable social relationship which brings everyone to the same common destiny is the hallmark of Fre

As this mutual, leveled collaboration in learning and praxis should exist between the teacher and the student, it should also exist among all those who work in the field of education, where a “preference” should exist for “integrated research groups among teachers, young researchers and students.”⁴⁶

Education to fraternal humanism develops cooperation networks in the various fields of education, especially within academic education. Firstly, it calls for educators to take a

gone awry, inequality and exploitation, and those suffering “a forceful exclusion from the flow of prosperity.”⁵⁵

An education to fraternal humanism intends for education to be the means of creating interdependent networks throughout the world and ~~as~~ of dialogue, hope, and inclusion⁵⁶ whose aim is the integral and transcendent development of the person and of⁵⁷ Society.

Catholic social teaching calls on each Christian to care for victims regardless of personal responsibility for the sins committed, and CRT proposes reparations for past injustices. This complex request must be handled carefully in order to ensure that new injustices are not committed in the process of attempting to right a past wrong. The restoration of a proper order of equality and dignity of persons should not indiscriminately target people based on the power they hold, the wealth they possess, their race, their nationality or place of birth, their religion, their family relationship, or friendship. To distribute resources according to criteria is considered a sin of the “respect of persons,”⁶⁵ according to St. Thomas Aquinas. Distributive justice requires that resources are awarded based upon a person’s merits, ability, personal needs, or needs of the family.⁶⁶

The idea of equality often in the Catholic worldview is that man possesses an inherent dignity as made in the image and likeness of God, not that all men possess an equal amount of material things or talents. Jesus said you will always have the poor with you (John 12:8). How could he say this if, being omniscient and prescient, he could see a time where we would all be “equal” in this world? Each person possesses a diversity of talents and goods by God’s design so that we can learn the virtues of generosity, kindness and magnanimity. God allows some of us to be poor so that others might have the opportunity to give – freely, and thus grow spiritually. To demand an ‘equity’ of outcomes through force puts in place a barrier to God’s design and can cause resentment and frustration.

While critical race theory might appear to be a timely theory that corrects societal wrongs through equity, some of its underlying assumptions are not in harmony with Catholic teaching. The mission of Catholic education is to prepare students to fulfill their calling in this world and to attain the eternal kingdom for which they were created. While students are called to become leaven for society, they are not called to become the political social activists that CRT requires, nor are they to be formed with a philosophy that looks to man, and particularly one’s race, as the lens for all knowing. Catholic educators teaching authentic Catholic moral and social teaching as well as the practice of Christian charity should not need to appropriate elements of CRT, including its pedagogical approach, but instead should confidently retain the core influence of the Gospel in all of their efforts to educate and form young people.

Denise Donohue, Ed.D., is Vice President for Educator Resources at The Cardinal Newman Society.

⁶⁵ See St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 63.

⁶⁶ Dominicans of the Central Province of St. Albert the Great, *Responding to God* (River Forest, IL: Priory Press, 1998) 214-215.