

The Front Royal Statement
Seven Cardinal Principles of
Catholic Primary and Secondary Education

Front Royal
EDUCATION SUMMIT
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Preamble

One hundred forty-two years ago, the Bishops of the United States, meeting in the Third Plenary Council of Baltimore, resolved to build Catholic schools in every parish. At the time, America's public schools, founded in part to suppress the faith of the waves of Catholic immigrants, were steeped in Protestant culture.

Deeply concerned that their children would be separated from the Church, Catholic bishops, with the assistance of priests, religious and lay faithful responded decisively. Catholic schools grew from roughly 1,400 in 1874 to 2,500 in just under a decade, eventually reaching nearly 13,000 schools by 1960 and educating over five million students.

Today, we face a different but equally grave crisis: soaring rates of disaffiliation among young Catholics, driven by a culture of skepticism and materialism that undermines faith and the Church's moral teachings. Declining enrollment, rising costs, a shortage of well-formed teachers and leaders, the reluctance of some pastors to maintain Catholic schools, and the inability of many families to afford a Catholic education, despite their desire for one, only make the crisis more acute.

For sixty years, our schools have been in steady decline, with an average of 100 schools closing annually. Today, only 6,000 Catholic schools remain, serving fewer than 1.7 million students, despite significant growth in the overall Catholic population. If this trend continues for another sixty years, parochial schools will largely disappear, and Catholic education will survive primarily in homeschools and small co-ops.

Yet Catholic schools remain indispensable. Nowhere else do we have so many hours each week to form a sacramental imagination in young people, present salvation history comprehensively, and help them grasp the immensity of the Incarnation and Redemption of Jesus Christ. Through the study of the natural world, mathematics, and the riches of two thousand years of Catholic thought, history, culture, and arts, students learn to understand themselves and their world in the light of truth while developing the character to live happy, integrated lives in the service of God and others.

We stand at an inflection point, not unlike our predecessors in Baltimore, who recognized that nothing less than the salvation of souls was at stake. The Front Royal Statement takes up this same challenge. By articulating seven fundamental principles of Catholic K-12 education, it answers the crises of our time not by accommodating failed modern pedagogies, but by returning to the Church's own ancient and venerable philosophy of education.

Now is the time to act. Do we have the wisdom to read the signs of the times and the courage to respond? Or will we continue chasing secular models of education, treating only the symptoms while we lose still more schools and more young people?

This is our moment. We must re-examine the curriculum, pedagogy, and culture of our schools. The Front Royal Statement, taking up the task begun in 1884, confronts the fundamental questions of Catholic K-12 educational renewal in our time.

St. Elizabeth Ann Seton

Pray for us.

Live Jesus in our hearts...

Forever!

—Bishop Thomas A. Daly

Introduction

The Catholic Church stands as the great teacher of cultures and civilizations in every epoch, with schools and missions spread to the ends of the earth, “from the banks of the Ganges to the Yellow River and the islands and archipelagos of the Pacific Ocean, from Africa to the Land of Fire and frozen Alaska.”¹ From the catechetical school at Alexandria in ancient Egypt, which saw the first great Christian acquisition of Greek wisdom and the first Christian library, the Church’s educational mission continued through the monasteries and their preservation of classical learning through centuries of upheaval. The study of the liberal arts, although with ancient roots, developed in the medieval universities and matured over the centuries, transforming the way we learn up to our own day. This legacy continues through modern Catholic universities, schools, and educational networks that form minds across every continent.

The pedagogical expertise of Holy Mother Church derives not from her antiquity alone, but from the fact that she is the student *par excellence* of human nature. For two millennia, she has studied the reach of the intellect, the power of the will, the centrality of imagination and memory, and the force of the passions, all of which must be ordered and disciplined in the great work of teaching and learning.

One cannot teach human beings without a profound understanding of their nature and purpose. From the intellectual quest of Augustine to the purification of Boethius in his prison cell, from the writings of the Angelic Doctor, whose synthesis of faith and reason became the foundation of Catholic education, to Newman’s defense of learning as its own end, the Church has continually reminded the world that education is ordered toward the full flourishing of the human being, culminating in the supernatural vision of God.

The seven principles of education contained in this statement articulate and condense this great tradition of Catholic educational philosophy and practice and attempt to capture the essence of the renewal of Catholic education now sweeping the Church in the United States. These principles, the fruit of sustained reflection on her perennial teaching on education, seek to carry forward that rich tradition while addressing the urgent needs of Catholic primary and secondary schools today.

The statement proposes a well-rounded vision for authentic reform and renewal by integrating essential philosophical and theological foundations with the practical realities (ecclesiological, canonical, spiritual, liturgical, cultural, and institutional) that shape Catholic school life. While attentive to immediate concerns, it deliberately emphasizes the speculative and foundational, acknowledging the fact that lasting educational renewal depends upon deep and coherent intellectual roots.

Every educational enterprise is ultimately rooted in a particular vision of the human person, an anthropology, and much of contemporary educational thought and pedagogy has been shaped by pragmatic, utilitarian, and secular influences. Catholic education, however, must remain distinct and draw deeply from its intellectual tradition, the Church's rich understanding of the human person, truth, virtue, and man's eternal destiny.

The fruit of the Front Royal Education Summit, this statement emerged from two days of intense discussions at Christendom College among bishops, superintendents, scholars from numerous colleges and universities, educational leaders, and strategic partners. We pray that these seven principles will provide a shared foundation to unify the various streams of educational renewal now underway in Catholic schools and to inspire a supernatural vision that guides the true integral formation of the whole child.

—Bishop James D. Conley

1. The Supernatural End of Education

True Christian education is ordered to God and concerned with the supernatural formation of the whole child. It takes up all the aspects of human life, “physical and spiritual, intellectual and moral, individual, domestic and social...to elevate, regulate, and perfect” and not reduce them.² Education therefore begins by respecting and nurturing the natural gifts and inclinations of the human person, for grace builds upon nature and brings it to its fullest perfection.

Through a process of “awakening,” education constitutes a deep encounter with and conversion to reality, especially with the mystery of redemption. Augustine notes that spiritual growth is both upward and outward: ascending to God, expanding toward Truth to Charity and Unity. Thus, students are conformed to the very life of Christ, often through discipline and struggle.

Education, then, as a journey characterized by this interior development, is medicinal. It is a *restauratio*, healing the wounds of sin to reorder the soul in an ascent from dispersion to unity. The intellect is cultivated to overcome ignorance, and discipline is developed to strengthen the will for the purpose of shaping students who think, judge and act in accordance with right reason and the “mystery of salvation.”³ True education forms desire by training a person to recognize, love, and pursue what is truly good, both at the natural and supernatural levels.

Ultimately, the end of education is the Beatific Vision, man's final destiny in the Kingdom of God: direct knowledge and love of God and fellowship with the angels and saints. All genuine learning tends toward this fulfillment and seeks to order the human person to God in charity and service. The fruits are true worship, holiness, and full participation in the Church's liturgical and sacramental life, culminating in wisdom and contemplation.

2. The Nature and Dignity of the Human Person

God creates the human person out of love and in His image and likeness, and the educator is called not merely to care for children, but to recognize the image of God in each child. We are endowed with reason and freedom, capable of knowing truth and loving God with all our heart, soul, strength, and mind. This reflects the full reality of our human nature: bodily, emotional, intellectual, volitional, and spiritual. In Christ, the Word (Logos) made flesh, we encounter the perfect revelation of both God and humanity.

Christ reveals that personhood is not individualistic or isolated, but fundamentally relational: it is ordered toward communion with God and with one another in family and community. Accordingly, every human life possesses inalienable dignity because each person bears the image of God. This dignity calls us to love others as ourselves regardless of origin, age, ability, or rank, especially the vulnerable and even those who wrong us.

Yet humanity is marked by original sin, which wounds the harmony of intellect, will and desire, and disrupts our relationships with God, neighbor, and creation. We must grow in virtue and holiness in order to become righteous in God's eyes, though this growth is itself hindered by the effects of original sin. Though baptism pardons original sin, its effects remain, inclining us toward personal sin. Although sin never diminishes God's love, it can obscure and wound our dignity.

Through Christ's sacrifice, nature is perfected by grace. He gives us the Church and sacraments to heal and restore us to communion with God and one another. By cooperating with grace and remaining faithful to the Church's teachings and traditions, we cultivate not only the natural virtues of prudence, justice, fortitude, and temperance which perfect our faculties, but also rightly ordered love.

3. What Children Deserve, the Rights of Parents, and the Duties of the State

The education of a child is characterized not merely by the transmission of information or the cultivation of economic utility, but by *flourishing*, the full development of the human person in wisdom and communion with God and others ordered to "the learning of virtues."⁴ Every child inherently deserves this holistic formation governed by the pursuit of truth and the fullness of life.

Because this holistic formation is so fundamental to the good of the child and the stability of society itself, Holy Mother Church has long taught that the primary responsibility for education belongs not to the state, nor to any institution, but to the family. Parents, by virtue of the natural bonds of love, sacrifice, and origin, are the primary educators of their children and possess a duty that is both sacred and irreplaceable.

Thus, it is the right of parents to direct the education of their children in accord with their deeply held religious and moral convictions. As the Second Vatican Council declared in *Gravissimum Educationis*, parents must enjoy "true liberty in their choice of schools."⁵ Such liberty cannot exist in name only. A freedom constrained by financial impossibility is not genuine freedom, but privilege reserved for the few.

Accordingly, the state fulfills its proper role in service of the common good when it protects and advances the educational freedom of the family. As an incomplete society, the family requires the support of the Church and other mediating institutions to achieve its noble purpose: to educate children so they may participate fruitfully in both civil and ecclesiastical life. The state must therefore ensure that parents are truly able to choose schools consistent with their conscience and convictions.

This obligation includes the creation of public policies and financial mechanisms that make such choices realistically accessible to all families, not merely to those of substantial means. Public support for educational choice, therefore, is not an act of governmental generosity, but a recognition of a prior and fundamental right rooted in the dignity of the human person, the integrity of the family, and the rightful liberty of conscience.

4. The Ecclesial Responsibility of Bishops and Priests

Bishops and priests, as fathers and shepherds of the school community, bear grave responsibility for the formation and education of the faithful, especially through catechesis and Catholic schools (cf. canons 773 and 776 *CIC*). They are to ensure that the faithful receive an authentically Catholic education, one that forms a living and active faith (cf. canon 794 §2 *CIC*). The Church entrusts bishops with the establishment, oversight, and Catholic identity of schools, calling them to safeguard their doctrinal, moral, and spiritual integrity (cf. canons 804–806 *CIC*). Bishops are likewise entrusted with fostering and coordinating catechetical and educational efforts throughout the diocese (cf. canons 775 §1 and 806 §1 *CIC*).

Rooted in their ordination as Christ the Teacher, priests share in His teaching office as educators, a responsibility modeled by holy priests such as Jean-Baptiste de la Salle, Thomas Aquinas, and John Bosco. Priests are thus called to foster the vocation of parents as the primary educators of their children and to ensure that the sacraments are accompanied by serious and ongoing formation in the faith (cf. canon 774 §2 *CIC*). For this reason, the promotion of adult catechesis is central to their oversight so that well-formed parents can faithfully educate their own children.⁶ Those who teach must demonstrate sound doctrine and integrity of life. To carry out these duties effectively, priests should receive proper formation, both in seminary and through ongoing education, in canon law, magisterial teaching, and the theology of Catholic education.

Likewise, priests must take care not to reduce Catholic education to a separate concern labeled “Catholic identity” in the schools. The cultivation of intellectual virtue, the ordering of the mind toward truth, and the formation of right reason lie at the very heart of the academic program in a truly Catholic school. This integrated vision means that the oversight of bishops and priests extends to the entirety of education, not merely to explicitly religious elements.

This ecclesial oversight is lived out through teachers and leaders who are formed to serve in union with their shepherds, so the school remains a genuine extension of the Church’s educational mission rather

than a detached, independent entity. Teachers and leaders offer due obedience to their pastor as head of the school community. Independent Catholic schools should take great care to maintain a close relationship with their bishops and pastors to preserve communion and the integrity of their mission.

5. The Formation and Responsibilities of Teachers and Leaders

Catholic teachers and leaders play a vital role in the Church's mission by forming students in the sacraments, prayer, moral doctrine, and the Catholic intellectual tradition, while bearing witness to a life centered on Christ. This calls for the intentional recruitment and formation of educators who recognize that the goals of Catholic education, above all the salvation of souls, go far beyond those of secular education, and that true academic excellence is fully compatible with doctrinal fidelity and spiritual vitality. Thus, effective teacher formation has three interconnected dimensions: intellectual, spiritual, and pedagogical.

The intellectual dimension is grounded in Catholic doctrine and the liberal arts, enabling teachers to transmit the truth with clarity and ensure that the Church's enduring contributions to civilization, including history, science, literature, art, mathematics, music, philosophy, and theology, are woven into an integrated curriculum. Above all, teachers must love learning and joyfully communicate that love to students.

The spiritual dimension roots teachers in a life of prayer and participation in the sacramental life of the Church. Teachers must love their faith, seek to cultivate a genuine interior life, and joyfully radiate it to students, colleagues, administrators, and parents.

Catholic pedagogy, rightly understood and applied, employs both inductive (mimetic) approaches, in which students first encounter and absorb true and beautiful examples before generalizing, and deductive (dialectic) approaches, which train them to analyze, question, and draw logical conclusions. Direct instruction is also used when appropriate, providing clear explanation and demonstration to transmit knowledge.

Catholic school leaders must themselves model these three dimensions of formation while also possessing strong administrative competence and the courage to insist upon both doctrinal fidelity and pedagogical effectiveness in their teachers. For this reason, teacher and leader formation must be intentionally designed to support the intellectual, spiritual, and pedagogical dimensions and should never be subordinated to purely secular licensure, certification, or accreditation frameworks. Such frameworks, shaped by the instrumental aims of public schooling and a secular anthropology, are often fundamentally incompatible with a Catholic philosophy of education.

6. The Integrity and Order of the Curriculum

The word "curriculum" comes from the Latin for "a course" or "a path." It is the ordered plan of study by which students journey in pursuit of truth.

- At its core are the liberal arts, especially grammar, logic, and rhetoric, which cultivate the powers of the intellect and conform the student's mind to reality itself.
- Mathematics trains the intellect in precision, logic, and order, while revealing the beauty and intelligible design of God's creation.
- History is a great teacher of human nature, revealing both its nobility and weakness, while awakening wonder in God's providential plan at work in the rise and fall of empires and nations. "The times of all kings and kingdoms are ordained by the judgment and power of the true God," writes St. Augustine.⁷
- Science pursues truth and cultivates wonder through the contemplation of the order and beauty of God's creation, with faith and reason working together in harmony.
- Literature and philosophy refine the moral imagination, train the intellect to contemplate the true and the good, and order all knowledge toward wisdom and God as the Highest Good.
- The most formative and enduring texts of the Western tradition, such as those by Homer, Plato, Augustine, Dante, Shakespeare, and Aquinas, shape how we understand reality as well as the nobility and weakness of human nature.
- The great works of classical music and fine art, such as compositions by Bach and Beethoven, Gregorian Chant, along with works with Raphael, Michelangelo, and Bernini, raise the soul to higher things and suggest the order, and transcendence, of created reality.
- Finally, theology, as the queen of the sciences, serves as the integrating discipline that orders all other studies toward their ultimate source and end in God.

However, the aim of Catholic education is not merely to communicate facts but reality itself, and at the heart of this entire curriculum stands Christ, the eternal Logos—the Way, the Truth, and the Life—the divine Wisdom and ordering principle, through Whom all things were made and “is before all things, and in Him all things hold together” (Colossians 1:17). He draws all things to Himself through His Divine Pedagogy. In everything true, good, and beautiful, He gently beckons the human person toward union with Him, filling the task of learning with wonder and joy.

With this Christ-centered curriculum, the imagination is filled as a storehouse with images of the true, the good, and the beautiful drawn from observing, remembering, and imitating. These images in turn nourish inquiring, contemplating, and beholding, and supply the means by which the soul rises to praying and loving.

From this well-formed imagination true discovery emerges, beginning in the senses, provoking questions, and rising from facts to understanding and finally to wisdom. As the young grow in knowledge of meaning, purpose, and the relationships embedded within the physical and moral order, they come to know and love the Author of Creation and His works.

This formation, which begins most easily in childhood but continues throughout one's education, values both faith and reason. It springs from a sacramental imagination, a faith which enables one to perceive

how physical reality reveals the transcendent, spiritual reality lying beyond it, while remaining firmly grounded in a robust realism which affirms the intelligibility, goodness, and intrinsic value of created reality. Thus, any guiding curricular philosophy or ideology that undermines this faith, such as scientific materialism, historicism, relativism, or any false “neutrality” in the disciplines must be rejected.

7. The Transmission of a Living Catholic Culture

Culture is the living bond that unites a people, the sum of practices, symbols, habits, and institutions that together create a shared environment. It is not static, but a vital social inheritance, received and handed on through education, family, religious practice, institutions, and communal memory.

It is not without reason that the term itself evokes an organic analogy: culture develops so gradually that it seems almost to grow of its own accord. It is not fabricated by committee, but must be received, cultivated, and sustained. It is our home, our place of being, the living environment that sustains human life and formation, an interconnected reality in which persons and communities flourish like trees planted by living waters.

The proper culture of the human person is found, in its fullness, in the new Garden: the Church. Every human reality finds its true meaning when it is ordered and cultivated for life within this beginning of the new Paradise. Such cultivation is the task of education. A truly Catholic school, therefore, strives to be a place where the practices, symbols, habits, and institutions of an integrally Catholic way of life are formed and sustained.

Culture provides the spiritual and contemplative foundation of civilization by means of education, which shapes persons in truth, virtue, and belonging while bridging our natural flourishing with our higher capacities. Schools are therefore essential civilizational institutions, as they embody and transmit living culture.

The Church, however, does not limit the field of culture only to “fundamental culture,” but also calls Catholics to attain “the full development of their culture.”⁸ Culture in this humanistic sense includes those classics which across times and cultures have proven themselves well-suited to disclose the real, which includes studying “the best that has been thought and said.”⁹

At the heart of this culture stands the Church’s worship, her *cultus*. It is, as it were, the native environment of the human soul: the reality of Christ, who comes to us within the living tradition of the Church. Within this environment, the human person learns to flourish, to order life rightly, and to place first things first and second things second. A truly Catholic education is an enculturation into the mind of the Church, whose inner vitality and symbolism are found above all in her liturgy, where Christ the Bridegroom meets his people.

¹ Pope Pius XI, *Divini Illius Magistri*, December 31, 1929, no. 26.

² *Divini Illius Magistri*, no. 95.

³ Second Vatican Council, *Gravissimum Educationis*, October 28, 1965, introduction.

⁴ Pope Leo XIV, *Drawing New Maps of Hope*, October 27, 2025, no. 5.1.

⁵ *Gravissimum Educationis*, no. 6.

⁶ Congregation for the Clergy, *General Directory for Catechesis*, 1997, no. 59.

⁷ St. Augustine, *The City of God*, Book IV, Chapter 33

⁸ Second Vatican Council, *Gaudium et Spes*, December 7, 1965, no. 60.

⁹ Matthew Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy*, 1869, Preface.

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