

CATHOLIC EDUCATION IN SHUNG TAK

by Alex Kwok

A search on the Internet yielded a speech entitled “The Holy See’s Teaching on Catholic Schools”¹ recently delivered by Archbishop Michael Miller CSB, Secretary for the Vatican’s Congregation for Catholic Education. Drawing on conclusions from various crucial Vatican documents since 1977, Archbishop Miller mentioned five components which had to be present if a school was to have a genuinely Catholic identity. These components provide an appropriate framework to evaluate the effectiveness of Catholic education in Shung Tak in the last half of a century. They also help focus the sight of the school administrators to make improvements in the future.

I. Inspired by a supernatural vision

“The specific purpose of a Catholic education is the formation of boys and girls who will be good citizens of this world, enriching society with the leaven of the Gospel, but who will also be citizens of the world to come. Catholic schools have a straightforward goal: to foster the growth of good Catholic human beings who love God and neighbour and thus fulfil their destiny of becoming saints.”

The Education Department induced schools in Hong Kong with computer equipment and financial subsidies to take up School Management Initiatives to improve the management of school resources. When Mrs. Mary Poon, a retired civil servant, succeeded Mr. Malcolm Long at the helm, she systematized the documents required by the government, such as the *Annual School Plan, Program Plans, Implementation Plans* of various departments and committees, *School Self-Evaluations* etc. in three-year cycles. One of the few things that remains unchanged is the School Vision and Mission. Here is the Shung Tak Vision:

*We hope all our graduates, in addition to achieving value-added academic performance, will develop a well-balanced character and value systems compatible with Catholicism.*²

Judge for yourself whether Shung Tak needs to adjust her vision and whether her vision has been too humble and down-to-earth.

II. Founded on a Christian Anthropology

If anthropology sounds intimidating, don’t worry. It simply means how one understands who the human person is. Is the human person a hairless ape, a rational animal, a money-spinning machine or a smart automaton?

A Christian anthropology looks at the human person as the image of God. He is the steward whom God has entrusted the whole Creation (**Genesis 1:26-27**). All stake-holders (students, parents, teachers, staff, school administrators and the sponsoring body) should come to this common understanding. Archbishop Miller continues

¹ A speech delivered at Solidarity Association, Washington D.C. on 14 September 2005.

<http://www.catholiceducation.org/articles/education/ed0269.html>

² <http://www.stc.edu.hk/2005/profile/Vision.shtml>

“The Holy See's documents insist that, to be worthy of its name, a Catholic school must be founded on Jesus Christ the Redeemer who, through his Incarnation, is united with each student. Christ is not an after-thought or an add-on to Catholic educational philosophy but the centre and fulcrum of the entire enterprise, the light enlightening every pupil who comes into our schools (cf. John 1:9).”

Have all the Shung Tak students learned that they are stewards of this world? Are parents willing to endorse such an educational philosophy and actively encourage their children to take part in the religious curriculum and activities provided by the school? Do all teachers try to convey in their subject matters anything relevant to the building up of such an understanding? How much resource have the school administrators allocated, how many parties have they coordinated to promote such an understanding of the human persons?

Shung Tak should be proud of herself for the continued teaching of Religious Studies lessons for HKCEE classes, despite the fact that even some religious schools have long given up offering the subject. There is no better way to help students know the Bible in a short span of time than teaching the examination syllabus. Students are able to apply biblical teachings to personal and social issues, making the Bible relevant to modern life situations. Regrettably to say, the school has conceded more than once to the *perceived* demands from students for more popular subjects at the expense of the once compulsory Religious Studies.

Cardinal Joseph Zen has instructed, through the sponsoring body the Catholic Education Office, Catholic schools in Hong Kong that they should provide at least two periods per cycle of Religious & Moral Education for their students. The Hong Kong Catholic Diocese has also spent more than 2 million dollars to draft an RME curriculum spanning from kindergarten to senior secondary level. Now, it is our turn to flex our muscles and show our resolve to implement this curriculum.

III. Animated by Communion and Community

In order for a school to become a genuine community of faith, Archbishop Miller sees three areas in which a Catholic school should develop: the teamwork or collaboration among all those involved; the interaction of students with teachers and the school's physical environment.

A. Teamwork & collaboration among all those involved

“Those responsible for these schools will, therefore, do everything they can to promote a common spirit of trust and spontaneity.” This means that all involved should develop a real willingness to collaborate among themselves. Teachers, Religious and lay, together with parents and trustees, should work together as a team for the school's common good and their right to be involved in its responsibilities.”

In this aspect, Shung Tak is commendable. Despite the heavy workload of working parents, many of them volunteer to help out activities in the school, such as the annual Operation Santa Claus, or to chaperon students to Speech Festival Competitions.

Among departments and committees, there have been a number of collaborative initiatives, especially sped up by the educational reforms introduced by NSS. In

recent years, several academic departments had worked together to organize study/cultural tours to different parts of the globe, e.g. England, Italy, mainland China, Taiwan, New Zealand etc. The school also entertains foreign students in their return visits. Our teachers, parents and students have benefitted a lot. The educational reforms have definitely contributed to the building up of teamwork and collaboration among teachers and parents.

B. The interaction of students with teachers

“A personal relationship is always a dialogue rather than a monologue, and the teacher must be convinced that the enrichment in the relationship is mutual.”

In any school, students and teachers interact nearly anywhere, anytime. However, many schools regard the staff rooms as an inviolable sanctuary for teachers where their privacy is highly guarded, where student admittance/entrance is strictly forbidden. Such is **NOT** the case in Shung Tak. Students are free to see their teachers in the staff rooms without the need of prior appointments or announcements. Teachers young and old are spontaneous in involving themselves in track events at the annual Sports Day; in playing against each other in football & dodge-ball friendly matches, in appearances as mysterious guests during Singing Contests; in playing a role on stage in Drama Contests etc. Recently, the new principal Ms. Lucia Lau, challenged students in hula-hooping for more than 25 minutes in Operation Santa Claus 2008, thus raising more than a thousand dollars. In years ahead, when the average age of teachers in Shung Tak is dropping steadily, their interaction with students will naturally be getting closer, thus enriching both.

C. School’s physical environment

“If Catholic schools are to be true to their identity, they should try to suffuse their environment with this delight in the sacramental. Therefore they should express physically and visibly the external signs of Catholic culture through images, signs, symbols, icons and other objects of traditional devotion. A chapel, classroom crucifixes and statues, signage, celebrations and other sacramental reminders of Catholic ecclesial life, including good art which is not explicitly religious in its subject matter, should be evident.”

Before moving to the present site in 1991, the old Shung Tak was adjacent to the Ss. Peter and Paul parish in Yuen Long. The present site in Hung Shui Kiu is far away from distractions such as shopping malls, game centres and 24-hour convenient stores etc. It is ideal for school discipline. However, it is also too far removed from any parish in the region. She has literally become an orphan. She no longer enjoys the advantages of having priests and nuns next door. Nowadays, parish priests from St. Jerome parish in Tin Shui Wai can only address the morning assemblies twice a month and officiate at the school opening/closing and Christmas bible services.

Despite these setbacks, the school manages to have students subscribed in pairs the weekly Catholic magazine *Kung Kau Pao* 【公教報】 which the Chinese teachers sometimes make use of for newspaper cutting assignments. Teachers and students use the same prayer book for secondary students 【詠讚】 compiled by the Catholic Diocesan School Committee in morning assemblies and before lessons. Starting from 2008 in collaboration with the music department, the

morning assemblies and music lessons are enriched with the introduction of an English Catholic hymnal compiled by the Diocesan Sacred Music Commission, the *CANTICUM NOVUM*. Classroom crucifixes and Catholic calendars are hung. Messrs. Alice Man & Natalie Chong, the previous and current art teachers have been very supportive. They decorate many of the walls on the school campus with mosaic, coloured glass and paintings of religious themes. A group of old students generously donated more than \$10,000 to the school for the construction of a Marian Shrine. The old school chapel used to be located next to the school library and the Multi-Media Learning Centre. The noise pollution would be totally unacceptable for any form of prayer meetings held in it. With the extension of the new wing, the school chapel is relocated in a more tranquil surrounding, more appropriate for meditation.

Every opportunity is made to remind students of their call to be saints. Our students are grouped into four different houses: **Blue**, **Green**, **Red** and **Yellow**. Each house has a patron saint: John (blue), Patrick (green), James (Red) and Peter (yellow). Since 2003, the classes are named J, L, M, P and S instead of the usual ABC's. Each alphabet stands for a saint. They are Joan of Arc, Luke, Matthew, Priscilla and Silas. The lives of these saints can be found in the *Student Handbook*. They provide life models for our students to imitate.

IV. Imbued with a Catholic Worldview

A Catholic school is Catholic because

*“... it undertakes to educate **the whole person**, addressing the requirements of his or her natural and supernatural perfection. It is **integral** and Catholic because it provides an education in the intellectual and moral virtues, because it prepares for a fully human life at the service of others and for the life of the world to come. Thus, instruction should be authentically Catholic in content and methodology across the entire program of studies.”*

Shung Tak strives to provide an integral education for her students. On top of the five traditional dimensions in education: moral, intellectual, physical, social and aesthetical, the school has not ignored the need of spiritual formation of the students. Mrs. Mary Poon, our ex-principal applied for funding from the Diocese to hire a Pastoral Assistant with the view of sharing the workload of RS teachers and enhancing the religious atmosphere of the school.

It is futile for Shung Tak to work hard, if we fail to make our students delight in self-learning. Our ex-principals were well aware of this and implemented new arrangements to achieve this. Mrs. Poon changed the once rigid time-table so that two extra periods were set aside for Reading-to-Learn. Dr. Francis Wong introduced project-learning in the junior secondary curriculum. All these initiatives aim at making our students independent self-learners.

Of course, Shung Tak will constantly evaluate the effectiveness of these implementations and continue to improve. We have seen quite a lot of collaboration and teamwork with the languages and humanities departments. In the future, we hope to take the next logical step to extend beyond the religious, language and humanity programs and to permeate the entire curriculum with Catholicism. But this depends on the last component of a Catholic school.

V. Sustained by the Witness of Teaching

... those involved in Catholic schools, with very few exceptions, should be practising Catholics committed to the Church and living her sacramental life ...The careful hiring of men and women who enthusiastically endorse a Catholic ethos is, I would maintain, the primary way to foster a school's catholicity. The reason for such concern about teachers is straightforward. Catholic education is strengthened by its "martyrs".

At the time of writing, not counting the Principal, there are ten Catholic teachers, making up one sixth of the teaching staff. Regrettable to admit, not all of them are practising. What is more challenging is that there are at least as many, if not more, teachers professing Protestantism. Of course, being martyrs, i.e. bearing witnesses to Lord Jesus, is not the monopoly of Catholics. But hasn't Shung Tak been too ecumenical? What is more worrying is that 8 of these Catholic teachers work for the English department. Then, how can Shung Tak permeate Catholicism in the entire curriculum when there is not even one practising Catholic teacher in the science, mathematics and other subjects?

Mr. John Wong succeeded Mr. Fung Keung as one of the two vice-principals of Shung Tak in September 2003. For the first time in the history of Shung Tak, we have a Catholic in the VP post. Consciously but imperceptibly Mr. John Wong has made the school aglow with a Shungtakian spirit. Not only did he run about gathering financial resources to enhance the religious atmosphere of the school, his insistence had made students who would have dropped the RS subject casually rethink, made them take the subject more seriously. Truly, a single hand does not clap. A single Catholic principal cannot make a school Catholic. He needs a compatible helping hand (**Genesis 2:18**).

In the future, Shung Tak should leave at least one of the VP posts to a Catholic. She should hire more practising Catholic teachers to teach various subjects. Protestant schools in Hong Kong are able to hire teachers belonging to their denominations. Their Protestant character is very conspicuous. There is no reason why Shung Tak cannot do the same.

Conclusion

With God's grace, Shung Tak has travelled far in the journey of providing quality English education for young people in Yuen Long for fifty years. Shung Tak cannot remain complacent with her glowing past. There is still room for improvement, especially in making herself more conspicuously Catholic.

*and going into the house they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshiped him. Then, opening their treasures, they offered him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh (**Matthew 2:11**).*

Feast of Epiphany, 2009

About the author

Mr. Alex Kwok spent the first 20 years of his teaching career in a religious boy school in Kowloon. The year he left that school, 49% of the students there were Catholics. In addition to a Catholic Society, that school had five Legion of Mary praesidia; a mass choir which sang folk hymns in the first-Friday mass each month. Every year, five annual retreats were organized for each form. S6 students were organizers. These senior students also perpetuated the legacy of students from previous years in organizing the annual Caritas Bazaar in Wah Yan College. Mr. Kwok had become contented and complacent.

When he came to Shung Tak a dozen of years ago, he was dismayed to see that there were only a handful of Catholic teachers and about forty Catholic students in this diocesan school. He had to wake up from his slumber. Shung Tak was religiously less friendly.

*I know how to be abased, and I know how to abound; in any and all circumstances
I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and want.
(Philippians 4:12)*