THINKING CRITICALLY ABOUT CRITICAL THINKING

IN CATHOLIC SCHOOLS

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Catholic schools, functioning as they do in a larger socio-political context, cannot escape the influence of initiatives aimed to change public education—including those which address teaching students how to think. Critical thinking is considered an essential competency for life, work, and citizenship in the “Information Age.” It is of great necessity for both the production and use of the vast knowledge resources which characterize the 21st century. Across the United States, initiatives designed to promote students’ ability to think have led to the rapid development and dissemination of curricula, instructional materials, and standardized assessments. Because Catholics have a different understanding of what the purpose of critical thinking is and why it is important, methods for how to address it in Catholic schools must be necessarily different from those used in secular ones. Catholic school leaders and educators who want to provide the best education for their students must not only effectively address critical thinking, but do so with a uniquely Catholic approach.

This paper makes a case for developing and using a unique approach for critical thinking instruction in Catholic schools. First, it offers a brief overview of initiatives dealing with thinking instruction in the American public schools to provide background on the present context. Then, it defines critical thinking and distinguishes how the concept is uniquely understood in the Catholic tradition. Next, it explores the threats to educational mission and quality that emerge when Catholic schools fail to address critical thinking with a deliberate, thoughtful approach. It closes by challenging Catholic school leaders to develop a uniquely Catholic approach to critical thinking instruction.
A Brief Overview of Critical Thinking in American Education

The idea that critical thinking is required for life, work, and citizenship in the 21st century has gained broad acceptance in the field of education. The belief undergirding the many different, but coordinated initiatives at present is that 21st century students require more than the mere mastery of academic content knowledge to be enlightened people, engaged citizens, and participants in an “Information Age” workforce. Although knowledge from the academic disciplines is still considered foundational for future learning, it is no longer believed to be a “good” or an “end” in itself. “Best practice” educational efforts must also promote students’ ability to think and develop what are often referred to as “critical thinking” skills (e.g., analyzing, debating, reasoning, etc.). Education, business, and government leaders propose that such proficiency will enable students to more effectively use and apply content knowledge in school and beyond. Efforts to teach students how to think—not just what to think—have become an increasingly significant emphasis of American education over the last century.

Recent efforts to promote American students’ development of critical thinking skills are most apparent in the K-12 curriculum developed for national implementation called the “Common Core Standards” (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010). The creation of the Common Core was sponsored by the National Governor’s Association and Council of Chief State School Officers with major financial support from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. Currently 42 states have adopted the Common Core for implementation in their public schools. This curriculum systematically supports students’ development of thinking skills across all grade levels and subject areas. Critical thinking also features prominently in other recently developed curricula authored by professional associations and grade-level advocacy groups. Some examples include, “The C3 Framework for College, Career, and Civic Life” developed
National Council for the Social Studies (National Council for the Social Studies, 2013), the “NEXT GEN” science standards (NGSS Lead States, 2013), and the Early Childhood Professional Preparation Standards developed by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2008). The impetus for including critical thinking in each of these curricula can be traced to a conceptual model called the “P21 Framework” (2004) proposed by a group called the “Partnership for 21st Century Learning” (P21). P21, a coalition of business, education, and government leaders, developed and disseminated this model to, “position 21st century readiness at the center of US K-12 education and to kick-start a national conversation on the importance of 21st century skills for all students” (P21, 2016).

It is important to examine these many and coordinated efforts to address critical thinking and identify the impetus behind them. Their foci when considered along with the motivations of their financial and political supporters demonstrate an increasing emphasis on education as workforce development. This reveals the controlling principle of the modern educational consensus which approaches learning as a utilitarian enterprise rather than one performed for its own sake. Of course, the present situation is the result of a long, concatenation of movements influencing education and the larger society. In the next section, these are explored in relation to current critical thinking initiatives.

**Historical Influences on Critical Thinking Initiatives**

The goal of teaching students how to think through formal educational experiences is not new. Its traces back to the Classical Era when such instruction was considered necessary for seeking truth and for a person’s good. Today’s initiatives champion much different goals, including the exercise of individual freedom, capacity to achieve personal financial stability through employment, and ability to participate in democratic society. Today’s critical thinking initiatives have been shaped by many different influences over time, including the
Progressive Movement in American education, the development of “Critical Pedagogy,” and the rise of Scientism with its associated rational world view. Exploring these in greater depth illuminates some of the inherent conflicts which exist between the goals of public education (and its critical thinking initiatives) and those of Catholic education.

The Progressive Movement. The seeds of modern critical thinking initiatives were first sown by the scholars, education leaders, politicians, and social activists associated with the Progressive Movement which influenced American education initially between the 1880s and 1920s. Progressive reformers desired to make schools more effective agents of a democratic society. Although the specific views and emphases among Progressives varied, they agreed that, the education of engaged citizens, “involved two essential elements: (1) Respect for diversity, meaning that each individual should be recognized for his or her own abilities, interests, ideas, needs, and cultural identity, and (2) the development of critical, socially engaged intelligence, which enables individuals to understand and participate effectively in the affairs of their community in a collaborative effort to achieve a common good” (John Dewey Project, 2003).

The Progressives endeavored to reform the dominant modes of schooling at the time—namely Church schools and public or “Common Schools.” They took particular issue with the instructional methods (i.e. didactic approaches) and materials (i.e. McGuffey Readers) used in these schools—describing the education they delivered as passive learning, training, and indoctrination. According to Progressive reformers, education could be improved if its role was limited to two primary goals: 1) provision of the tools needed for democratic participation and 2) preparation for future occupation. The thrust of educational experiences in Progressive schools then, was to teach students to think independently and solve problems because this was crucial to both of these goals.
Between the 1930s -1970s, the views and values held by leaders of the Progressive Movement gradually moved from the fringe to the mainstream of American education. The ideas of thought-leaders such as John Dewey were widely disseminated, read, and embraced. Dewey’s students and followers assumed faculty roles in the colleges and universities where they wrote texts, prepared like-minded school personnel, and shaped education practice. The success of Progressive schools and school districts became widely known and emulated. But most influential in the “mainstreaming” of progressive ideals was the participation of progressive-minded reformers in the large government-funded educational initiatives which stemmed from national programs such as the “War on Poverty.” Substantial funding and a national sphere of influence enabled the work of scholars to achieve broad, powerful, and long-standing impacts (Silver & Silver, 1991). Hilda Taba, a student of Dewey, was a leading scholar recognized for her pioneering work in support of students’ development of thinking skills. She expressed views that typify those of Progressives on critical thinking instruction saying:

One scarcely needs to emphasize the importance of critical thinking as a desirable ingredient in human beings in a democratic society. No matter what views people hold of the chief function of education, they at least agree that people need to learn to think. In a society in which changes come fast, individuals cannot rely on routinized behavior or tradition in making decisions...[T]here is a natural concern that individuals be capable of intelligent and independent thought (Taba 1962, p. 49).

Critical Pedagogy. “Critical Pedagogy” has also been an important influence in contemporary movements to promote critical thinking. Critical Pedagogy is a teaching approach inspired by Marxist critical theory and other radical philosophies. It aims to
“emancipate students” by teaching them to question and challenge posited "domination," (by authorities, systems, groups) and to undermine the beliefs and practices that are alleged to dominate. Brazilian social philosopher Paolo Freire is considered the father of this field. He proposed that education could not only improve society but free individuals from oppression. Freire was highly critical of what he considered to be “banking” approaches to education – those that viewed students as empty vessels to be filled with knowledge. He believed that students should be the co-creators of knowledge (Freire, 1970). Freire and other thought-leaders in the field aimed to empower students to scrutinize the medium and messages of their own education in an effort to “develop consciousness of freedom, recognize authoritarian tendencies, and connect knowledge to power and the ability to take constructive action” (Giroux, 2010).

Critical Pedagogy is highly influential in American education today. Like that of Progressive Ideals, it affects schools through the views of administrators, teachers, and other graduates of university teacher licensure programs. It also touches K-12 education through curricula and curriculum materials. Not surprisingly, it was also an important influence in the development of the Common Core. Standards such as this one from Grade 6 Language Arts: “compare and contrast one author’s presentation of events with that of another (e.g., a memoir written by and a biography on the same person)” illustrate that it is not only important to recognize that different viewpoints exist—it is also important to learn to question and analyze them. Critical thinking is critical in Critical Pedagogy.

**The Rise of Scientism.** Although the Progressive Movement and Critical Pedagogy have contributed to the development and emphases of contemporary critical thinking initiatives, a particularly pervasive and powerful influence is the rise of “Scientism” (excessive belief in the power of scientific knowledge and techniques). Fueled by the increasing power of
science/technology and its resultant progress, this set of assumptions has become more and more dominant in the popular culture over the last century. This anthropology privileges ways of knowing that are positivist (tending only to acknowledge what can be proven or disproven) and rational (embracing an epistemology that accepts sensory observations, material experience, scientific processes, and human intellect as the only legitimate ways of gaining knowledge of reality). Reductionism, is an important tool for expanding knowledge in this anthropology. It seeks to know objects, people, concepts, and disciplines by reducing them into only their rational and measurable parts. This anthropology is relatively new when considered across human history. It directly challenges and undermines older anthropologies which recognized the integrated, relational, intuitive, imaginative, non-material and non-rational. Of course, critical thinking is the exclusive means for gaining knowledge in this anthropology. The cognitive behaviors practiced in critical thinking makes it possible to quantify what is real and “truth” through material evidence. It is no wonder why the ability to think critically is increasingly believed to be necessary in an age where Scientism is becoming a dominant anthropology.

An awareness of this history and the three primary influences on contemporary critical thinking initiatives is important. It illustrates the different views, values, anthropologies and epistemologies which are “built into” initiatives designed for secular education settings. In doing so, it enables greater appreciation of the ways that Catholic schools will be influenced by critical thinking initiatives aimed for secular ones if these influences go unrecognized and the effects go unmitigated.

**Defining Critical Thinking**

Before considering how critical thinking might be uniquely understood in the Catholic tradition, it is helpful to consider how the concept is defined and understood within the
context of American education. Doing this however, is not an easy task because the meaning of an idea expressed with language is determined by many factors, including context, morphology and etymology. The phrase “critical thinking” as it is used within the field of education is difficult to define. This occurs because the field is made up of many communities who understand the same term in ways that are unique to details of their specific context. For example, science educators have a slightly different understanding of the term than English educators because they have different epistemologies, values, and practices. It is also difficult to define the term because of its morphology. The term’s compound structure adds complexity. One might understand what is meant by the word “critical” and the word “thinking” but need an explanation to comprehend the use of the terms together as “critical thinking.” Finally, understanding critical thinking is difficult because of its etymology and the long history of its use over time. The way the term is used today is in fact different than the individual terms and their combination were used even ten years ago. All of these make understanding what is meant when the term is used more difficult.

Although the contextual uses, morphology, and etymology of the term “critical thinking” make arriving at a singular definition impossible. It is possible and worthwhile to develop a common definition using a purposive sample of the definitions one encounters in educational texts, documents, and internet websites. In the section that follows, the reader is offered a sampling of such definitions to promote a greater appreciation for the varied interpretation of the term. Then a “common definition” is synthesized from an analysis of these definitions.

**Definition #1:** Critical Thinking is a term used to refer to those kinds of mental activity that are clear, precise, and purposeful. It is typically associated with solving complex real world problems, generating multiple (or creative) solutions to a problem, drawing inferences, synthesizing and integrating
information, distinguishing between fact and opinion, or estimating potential outcomes, but it can also refer to the process of evaluating the quality of one's own thinking (metacognition).

*Source: Large state university center for teaching glossary*

**Definition #2:** Critical thinking is a persistent effort to examine evidence that supports any belief, solution, or conclusion prior to its acceptance. The ability to think clearly, to analyze, and to reason logically.

*Source: K-12 school district gifted education curriculum*

**Definition #3:** The purpose of critical thinking is, therefore, to achieve understanding, evaluate viewpoints, and solve problems. Since all three areas involve the asking of questions, we can say that critical thinking is the questioning or inquiry we engage in when we seek to understand, evaluate, or resolve.

*Source: Textbook for a graduate curriculum course*

**Definition #4:** Critical thinking is the use of those cognitive skills or strategies that increase the probability of a desirable outcome. It is used to describe thinking that is purposeful, reasoned and goal directed - the kind of thinking involved in solving problems, formulating inferences, calculating likelihoods, and making decisions when the thinker is using skills that are thoughtful and effective for the particular context and type of thinking task. Critical thinking also involves evaluating the thinking process - the reasoning that went into the conclusion we've arrived at the kinds of factors considered in making a
decision. Critical thinking is sometimes called directed thinking because it focuses on a desired outcome.

Source: Psychology trade book

Using these definitions as a starting place, it is possible to distinguish between those attributes which are generally agreed upon and those which are not. Table 1.1 shares attributes of agreement, attributes of disagreement, and some “associated assumptions” which are held about critical thinking in the field of education.

Table 1.1: A Common Definition of Critical Thinking

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<th>Areas of agreement related to critical thinking</th>
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<tr>
<td>Critical thinking:</td>
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<tr>
<td>• is a disciplined, intentional cognitive activity,</td>
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<tr>
<td>• is a goal-directed or practiced to achieve an intended purpose,</td>
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<td>• involves the practice of a variety of complex, cognitive processes (sometimes called “skills” or “sub-skills”). These include but are not limited to the following, reasoning, inferencing, problem-solving, questioning, synthesis, analysis, evaluating, arguing, (it must be noted that the definition of each of these terms is context-based),</td>
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<tr>
<td>• often requires the simultaneous practice and integration of numerous cognitive processes, and</td>
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<tr>
<td>• often involves the use of knowledge resources or other information to successfully perform cognitive processes.</td>
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<th>Areas of disagreement related to critical thinking</th>
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<tr>
<td>There is disagreement about whether critical thinking:</td>
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<tr>
<td>• is only convergent thinking patterns,</td>
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<tr>
<td>• encompasses metacognition – indicating both an awareness of one’s own thinking as well as an analysis, and appraisal of one’s own thinking, (Note: There is some debate about whether metacognitive thinking is its own, unique classification of thinking)</td>
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<td>• includes creative thinking – often referred to as the generation of novel, practical ideas, and</td>
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<tr>
<td>• can be practiced in superficial settings (schools) or whether it must occur in real-world situations.</td>
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Establishing this common understanding or definition is helpful in a number of ways. From a practical standpoint, it enables more effective communication as this paper progresses. The reader will find it easier to understand what is meant when the term is used from here on out. It also makes it easier to understand how the Catholic understanding of critical thinking differs from that of the secular society in general and American public education in particular. It moves the discussion toward a more productive identification of the areas where Catholic understandings of critical thinking overlap and where there is an essential difference.

It is important to note that any definition, even a comprehensive one, is still limited by the extent to which it expresses how critical thinking is understood by a particular group—such as by the Catholics we are concerned with here. Critical thinking is a complex activity to comprehend, by virtue of the fact that it is a concept and because all concepts represent an inherently complex and nuanced type of knowledge. Different from simpler knowledge types (facts and procedures) concepts requires special treatment to fully appreciate what should be understood about them. Although the definition established here is satisfactory in expressing what critical thinking is and what the process of critical thinking involves, it leaves out essential details that are needed to truly comprehend its meaning in certain contexts or to certain groups (i.e. Catholics).

As we move forward, it should be noted that in the Catholic tradition, the secular concept of critical thinking as it is popularly understood, has no direct equivalent. The capacity Catholics refer to as reason would be most analogous to it. It is essential to clarify that critical thinking represents only an incomplete facsimile of the Catholic concept of reason that is addressed by the Church fathers. For the sake of simplicity and easier digestion of the material that follows, the two concepts are artificially equated with each other. However, the reader is cautioned to remember that the capacity of reason, as it is accurately
understood by Catholics, expands well beyond the cognitive activity focused upon in critical thinking.

When it comes to the practice of critical thinking, Catholics would not disagree with the definition previously presented, and would use a nearly identical process when engaging in it. However because they hold unique beliefs about the origins and purpose for its practice, they understand it quite differently. To get a fuller picture of what Catholics understand about critical thinking, one must delve more deeply into the Catholic anthropology and explore the underlying assumptions and “associated understandings” which arise from Church teachings on its origin and purposes. One is also helped by an awareness of the “attributes” which distinguish a Catholic understanding of this concept from that held by other groups.

These are identified and explored in the next section. This awareness enables the reader to understand how the process of critical thinking must be used by Catholics to fulfil their life’s purpose. It also illuminates the problems inherent in applying methods and materials developed in accordance to a secular understanding of critical thinking within Catholic schools.

**Catholic Critical Thinking**

Catholics possess a unique anthropology including their own beliefs about the purpose of life. The Catholic tradition espouses a special epistemology which encompasses important assumptions about what it means to know, understand, and exercise human intellect. As a result, it makes sense that their understanding of how critical thinking functions within these would also be unique. The attributes of the Catholic understanding of critical thinking include that it: a) is a gift from God for the good of man, b) is a means for knowing God, c) is a divinely designed tool, d) is integrative, e) aids man’s earthly and spiritual progress, and, f)
is a means for understanding Church teaching. These attributes are expanded in the sections that follow.

**Critical thinking is a gift from God for man’s good.** The Catholic concept of critical thinking can only be fully understood only when it is framed within a correct understanding of its origins and teachings about its purpose. Like all human faculties, Catholics consider the ability to practice critical thinking to be a gift from God. Like all divine gifts, this one is intended to be used for a person’s “good.” An understanding of this good gives one greater ability to understand God’s purpose for critical thinking. Although it is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss details about Catholic beliefs regarding “good,” we can safely assume that a “good” is that which allows a person to achieve his or her intended purpose. What then, is the purpose of man? The Catechism tells Catholics it is to know God and to love and serve him. The ability to think critically then enables a person to understand, love, and serve God more fully. One conclusion that could be made is this – the more fully one practices critical thinking, the better equipped one might be to fulfill this purpose. Although this might seem true, it is only true to the extent that a person exercises critical thinking in a way consistent with the Catholic understanding of critical thinking. Those practicing a secular form of critical thinking might have great difficulty fulfilling their divine purpose.

**Critical thinking is a means for knowing God.** Critical thinking helps man know God in two ways. First, it helps man experience and understand the works of God. The Catechism tells us, “by natural reason man can know God on the basis of His works” (p. 19). Along with divine revelation then, reason makes it possible to come into deeper knowledge and awe of God. Using reason to experience and make sense of nature, others, and even man’s own glory enables better knowledge of God. The second way critical thinking helps man know God is by enabling man to experience a glimpse of God’s image. Because
Catholics believe that “God created man in his own image,” (p. 14) then it is reasonable to claim that the practice of reason might be one way of knowing something about God’s capabilities. Although other facets of man might also reflect God (e.g., imaginative/creative capability, love/compassion) there is evidence that God is a reasoning being. Logical thinking is another way of describing critical thinking. The root of this term, the word “logic,” is linked through its etymology to the Latin word “logos.” This is important because “logos” refers to the “Divine Word,” “the 2nd Person in the Trinity” or the “eternal mind of God.” Philosopher Peter Kreeft points out that in John’s Gospel, the “Word” is the “pre-incarnate Christ.” Kreeft likens logical thinking to holy thinking. Being able to reason well becomes increasingly important when one realizes it influences the extent to which a person can know and love God (Kreeft, 2009).

**Critical thinking is a divinely designed tool.** Secular definitions of critical thinking consistently express that critical thinking is a tool that facilitates the ordering of human thoughts and ideas. Although the Catholic concept of critical thinking would not contradict this, it would find this idea woefully inadequate and incomplete. Catholics recognize the value of critical thinking as being so much more! Kreeft expresses the Catholic Christian concept of critical thinking by describing it as, “a divinely designed tool for ordering our thoughts, our actions, our world, and our task of being working organs in Christ’s Body” (Kreeft, 2009, p. 17). Embedded within this description is the belief that critical thinking is a tool with multiple functions. Kreeft also conveys that although each of these functions is important and critical thinking enables them to be performed fully it has one supreme function which puts in place and perspective all the others. This supreme function is that it enables the correct ordering of a Catholic’s understanding of their life’s purpose. This allows man to comprehend the means for achieving salvation and provides him the ability to achieve it. Critical thinking enables man to interrogate the accepted “reality” of his age (whenever in
time that might be) and recognize its temporal nature. It allows him to see, interpret, and appreciate Truth, Beauty and Goodness. It enables man to recognize the influences working for good and evil in his struggles. It enables him to reference his conscience and make decisions for his best end. To be sure, critical thinking is valuable in how it facilitates the ordering of man’s thoughts, actions, and world. But its greatest value is in helping man recognize that he is created for God so he can order his life and behave in ways that increase his chances for fully sharing in God’s own abundant life and achieve salvation.

**Critical thinking is integrative.** In the New Testament, Jesus instructed the people that they must, love God and their neighbors not just with their “heart, strength and soul, but also with their minds” (Luke 10:27). This teaching illustrates another essential distinction of the Catholic conceptual understanding of critical thinking—its nature as an integrated dimension of man. In this scriptural passage, Jesus communicates that the mind is only one of multiple human faculties which must be put into the service of loving and serving God and others. If the nature of a thing determines its use, then we must acknowledge that critical thinking is only fully practiced when it is integrated with other human faculties. For Catholics then, critical thinking is practiced simultaneously with other ways of knowing (e.g., intuitive and creative thinking), divine revelation, and accompanied by virtue. This integrated, rich activity blends both the rational and non-rational. It is beautifully complete when practiced as a rich, dimensional, and dynamic activity rather than just a flat, exclusively cognitive one. It goes beyond the “if-then” logic expressed by computers using “artificial intelligence.” Instead, it reflects the integrated nature of God—which exists incomprehensibly as “three in one,”—the Trinity of God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit. This particular attribute of the Catholic concept of critical thinking has been expressed across the many centuries of Catholic faith. St. Thomas Aquinas, St. Augustine, St. Ignatius and many others
recognized the important interplay between faith and reason. They offer additional validation for this claim.

**Critical thinking aids man’s earthly and spiritual progress.** So far, it has been established that critical thinking is a divinely designed, integrative tool useful to Catholics as they work to know, love, and serve God. But a more complete understanding of the Catholic concept of critical thinking can be gained when one acknowledges how this gift aids people in both their human (temporal) and spiritual (eternal) progress. According to their beliefs, Catholics are both physical and non-physical beings. As such, they struggle in both their earthly and spiritual life. As man negotiates his temporal existence in an earthly dimension, he benefits from the use of critical thinking skills as he relates to others, takes part in society, and provides for his material needs. But because he is also spiritual being, during his earthly life he must simultaneously endeavor to progress spiritually as he makes moral choices and follows the teachings of his Church. Critical thinking, then, is an essential tool for followers of Christ who have a real experience in this world but know that it is not their ultimate destiny. It aids them as they endeavor to fulfill the, “desire for God written on the human heart” (Catholic Church, p. 1). It also sustains them as they work to be “in the world, but not of the world.” Critical thinking is an essential tool for success in this life, but it is also defines this success and offers a means for achieving salvation in the “afterlife.”

**Critical thinking is a means for understanding Church teaching.** Although divinely animated, the Catholic Church is comprised of humans who are created in the image and likeness of God. As a result, it must be true that the Church, in some way, reflects God. Her beauty most certainly reflects God but we believe her reason does as well. What better evidence than her intelligent doctrine and her logical teachings. The Catholic Catechism displays a perfect intermingling of the best of reason and faith. Facility with critical thinking allows Catholics a greater understanding of her teaching and enables a more powerful
appreciation for the ways the Church resembles God and brings man to God. The Church in turn helps make God more real and more awesome. This greater appreciation for God and greater understanding of Church teaching lead one to an even greater appreciation for critical thinking because offers assistance toward all of these ends. To fully practice one’s faith one must fully know it. The ability to perform critical thinking opens up understanding through one powerful way of knowing and expands a person’s ability to understand the Church. This builds a respect for the “thinking of the Church” or the deliberative development of her doctrine. As individuals invest time and effort in the endeavor of thinking critically, they gain an appreciation for the collective critical thinking practiced by the Church throughout her history. Developing an appreciation for critical thinking, has the potential to aid a person’s appreciation for and adherence to the positions of the Church on theological, philosophical, social, and moral issues.

**Critical Thinking and Catholic Education**

Any consideration of how to address the concept of critical thinking in Catholic schools must be ordered to the ultimate purpose of this Catholic education. The papal declaration on Christian education, *Gravissimum Educationis* (1965), expresses this saying it, “aims at the formation of the human person in the pursuit of his ultimate end and the good of the societies of which, as man, he is a member, and in whose obligations, as an adult, he will share.” If one recognizes the influence of critical thinking on the ultimate end of man and the good of society, then it is difficult to understate the importance of critical thinking in Catholic education. But merely recognizing the importance of critical thinking is insufficient. Catholic schools at all levels must also know and be able to implement methods which effectively promote students’ practice of critical thinking with fidelity to the Catholic understanding of this concept. Some of the most important differences in the driving assumptions held about critical thinking in secular and Catholic schools are highlighted. This is done to clarify key
differences and prepare the reader to focus on the ways these differences potentially threaten the mission of Catholic education.

**Analyzing Assumptions about Critical Thinking**

Recognition of the ways the Catholic understanding of critical thinking deviates from the secular is of great importance when comprehending why and determining how to address critical thinking in Catholic schools. The table provided below attempts to capture some important distinctions between assumptions held about critical thinking.

**Table 1.2: A Comparison of Assumptions Related to Critical Thinking in Secular and Catholic Schools**

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<th>Catholic Schools</th>
<th>Secular Schools</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Progenitor</strong>- The belief about the origins of critical thinking</td>
<td>Critical thinking is a gift from God which must be cultivated and developed.</td>
<td>Critical thinking is an innate human capability with which people are born. One works to hone this capability.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Purpose</strong>- The reason for addressing the students’ development of critical thinking through formal education</td>
<td>Students require critical thinking to become good, holy people who fulfill their life’s divine purpose. They also require it for employment, citizenship, and life in the “Information Age.”</td>
<td>Students require critical thinking for employment, citizenship, and life in the “Information Age.” The more proficiency a person develops the more success he will experience in life.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Practice</strong>- Beliefs about how critical thinking aids humans.</td>
<td>Critical thinking aids students in ordering their thoughts, words, and world. But most importantly it helps them order these in relation to their belief about their life’s divine purpose. This enables them to live a good life, strive for holiness, and achieve salvation.</td>
<td>Critical thinking aids students in ordering their thoughts. People benefit when they learn to do this because it helps them in different parts of their life.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Perspective</strong>- The belief expressing the extent of the relationship between critical thinking and other human faculties</td>
<td>Critical thinking is only one of many human faculties that are only rightly practiced when they are used in an integrated way and in concert with one another. Understanding and practicing critical thinking as a singular way of knowing provides insufficient understanding and is detrimental to a person. Other faculties which</td>
<td>Critical thinking is developed and practiced as an isolated skill.</td>
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should be exercised along with critical thinking include different types of thinking (e.g., imaginative, intuitive) as well as the virtues (e.g. faith, charity, prudence).

**Process - How students learn about and develop proficiency with critical thinking**

In coordination with the students’ parents the school supports the growth of the whole child in developing an awareness of critical thinking’s origins, purpose, and practice. Students learn about their life’s divine purpose and gain an understanding of how God’s gift of critical thinking is to be used in fulfilling this purpose. A student’s conscience is formed and he develops an appreciation for how critical thinking and his conscience work together with other faculties to assist him in their spiritual and earthly challenges. Students develop proficiency with critical thinking as it is embedded within the academic disciplines. They learn to apply it in situations that are purely academic and those which require an integration of their various faculties.

Students learn what critical thinking is and how it is useful in life, work, and citizenship. They see their teachers model critical thinking and attempt to emulate this. They develop and practice critical thinking skills which are embedded in the academic disciplines. Students learn to exercise critical thinking skills when applying content knowledge during specially designed activities.

As this table illustrates, the Catholic understanding of critical thinking presents it in its fullness, richness, and complexity. The Catholic understanding, as theologian Christopher Baglow expresses:

- offers to critical thinking a new, transcendent horizon to explore and within which to situate, to relate, and also to distinguish all other topics which critical thinking engages.
- This horizon is what God has revealed about His purposes for humanity, and challenges not the methods of other disciplines, nor any of the fruits of critical thinking, but unspoken and
unquestioned assumptions that often reduce and fragment one’s vision of reality. Within this transcendent horizon, all paths and methods of understanding retain their autonomy, and critical thinking in all disciplines retains its integrity (2016).

By comparison, the secular understanding of critical thinking is flat and incomplete. It limits the potential for its use and diminishes understanding in and of the other disciplines because it does not acknowledge the transcendent horizon.

Catholic schools do not exist in a vacuum. They are subject to influences from the world outside. The extent to which these affect individual Catholic schools varies considerably. However the majority of Catholic schools—specifically those which are parish and diocese affiliated—are strongly influenced by curricula, instructional materials, standardized assessments, and accreditation processes designed primarily for secular schools. They are also influenced by government regulations and the impact of teachers who are professionally licensed through teacher preparation programs (most of which have oversight by both government and professional associations). The differences made visible in this table are important because they enable greater appreciation of the ways that secular assumptions about critical thinking may affect Catholic schools and their students.

It is of the utmost importance that advocates for Catholic education act with an awareness of this reality. As secular influences shift to accommodate critical thinking initiatives, secular assumptions are likely to become even more influential in Catholic schools. They will enter in through textbooks, the “agendas” of individual teachers, standardized testing, and embedded accreditation processes. Unless acknowledged and mitigated by Catholic school leaders and teachers, this will challenge a Catholic school’s
mission, culture, and practice by undermining and/or supplanting more appropriate efforts to address critical thinking.

Mitigating the Influence of Secular Initiatives to Promote Critical Thinking

Clearly there are high stakes involved in effectively addressing critical thinking in Catholic schools. If one agrees that doing so is important, then Catholic school leaders must figure out how best to do it. Any such efforts must be systematic and strategic—involving school leaders, teachers, and parents in developing a uniquely Catholic approach to addressing the problem. Within this larger approach it is essential that it acknowledge and attenuate the secular influences which make their way into Catholic schools. If artfully conceived, it might even be possible to avoid some negative effects and also achieve additional benefits.

One method which has successfully enabled Catholic schools to mitigate secular influences is referred to as “opting out.” The expression “getting off the grid” is also used to describe this approach. In these cases, Catholic schools organize policies, programs and people in ways which shield the influence of government regulations, curricula, and curriculum materials deemed harmful. They exercise exceptional care in hiring educators (often choosing those who have chosen alternative pathways to teaching), circumvent the use of published textbooks (by creating their own), and develop unique policies and practices. Given the increase in the number of schools using this method there must be great merit. But for the large majority of Catholic schools, this is not a viable option.

Another option, one that might be more practical for the majority of Catholic schools, would be to consciously permit these influences to enter the school but implement plans and procedures that limit and control their impact. Secular influences are already entrenched in Catholic schools. What would be different with this approach is that these influences would be widely and consciously recognized—enabling plans, procedures and practices to be put
into place for managing them. If carried out effectively, this option might result in additional benefits.

One such approach would involve intentionally teaching students in a Catholic school to critically analyze secular texts and other materials using strategies developed by proponents of Critical Pedagogy. In this way, Catholic school students would develop skills and have formative experiences which would help them negotiate their earthly and spiritual lives—5, 10 and 20 years into the future. After completing a reading in their Social Studies textbook for example, they would then be taught to identify its bias and explore its content’s relationship to the motivations of the publisher (who wants to sell as many copies of the book as possible), the editor (who is concerned about his reputation and getting tenure), the professional editorial reviewers (who are concerned with the transmission of their professional community’s current interpretation of history), and the educator editorial reviewers (who are concerned with its accuracy, practicality, and the developmental appropriateness of the text). This analysis would help students understand why their History text did not address the life of Jesus as being connected to the terms “B.C.” and “A.D.” but spent several pages discussing Mohammed. Students might be led in a discussion that challenged them to consider the use of the term “Common Era” in internet materials related to this unit of study when they write a report. These approaches would extend to other subjects as well. When reading about “peer pressure” and the “decision making process” recommended by their Health textbook, students would be challenged to interrogate the values of the textbook authors and overlay a Catholic understanding of virtue on this content. Further, their teacher might lead them in the consideration of how decision-making in a Catholic context is different from that they are encouraged to practice by the text. These occasions would contain many “teachable moments” by allowing unplanned, real experiences
to facilitate the development of powerful insight and cultivation of thinking skills with life-
long value.

**An Illustrative Scenario**

Imagine the well-intentioned Catholic school teacher—a bright, accomplished, graduate from a quality teacher education program and also a faithful Catholic—championing critical thinking in her 6th grade classroom. She teaches her students how to compare and contrast ideas, reason inductively, and use problem-solving strategies. She develops their ability to generate independent questions and learn through inquiry. She keeps up-to-date on “best practice” approaches for teaching critical thinking by attending workshops delivered by her professional association that further hone her skills. She uses published materials which get “5 stars” on Amazon—she even critically analyzes the reviews before making a purchase. And when her students in her class receive good grades and “above average” standardized test scores she is thrilled with her success because getting a class of 35 6th graders to think is a very difficult thing to do!

But this teacher’s efforts do not stop here. She also supports her students in their faith development. She creates a warm, caring, and inclusive community that is a safe place for her students to grow. Students learn about Jesus, the saints, and pray every day. She takes her class on a special retreat so they can have a personal encounter with God and involves them in service activities so they will develop a concern for social justice and the common good. Her students learn Church teachings and even use their knowledge to instruct younger students. Her efforts extend even to standards for behavior and although her students are not always kind to each other, they at least know that they should be. Her students attend weekly mass and she prepares them to participate in sacramental life. Working with parents she helps the young souls under her care develop a conscience so they can grow into good people.
But what she does not do—because she has never been taught to do it—nor realized it was even needed—is work systematically to create strong connections between her students’ development as Catholics and their development as critical thinkers. She does not acknowledge the difficulties of functioning as a Catholic critical thinker in a society with a different mindset and a different reality. After all, the “world” she inhabits, the environment where she works and worships, shares her Catholic anthropology and is absent many of the challenges found in the broader world beyond. She does not experience the same world and dilemmas her students will someday face. And because of this she does not acknowledge what students see as inconsistencies between what the Church teaches and the mores of popular culture. She does not challenge her students to question the messages they hear from the media and its portrayal of their faith. She does not help students grapple with the integration of faith and reason and the apparent contradiction between these two. And she does not help them develop habits and recognize resources which may aid them as they come to an adult understanding of their life’s purpose and how critical thinking can help them fulfill it.

She knows little of the impact these shortcomings will have on her students later in life. Although she sometimes bumps into former students at the grocery store and stays connected with a few favorites on social media, she is not privy to the trials her students experience when they are making adult decisions. She has no clue about their process as they make choices about college majors, accepting a job, voting in elections, purchasing a house, choosing a spouse, planning a family, raising their children, and their parent’s end of life care. Deficiencies in their thinking ability tested by these real-world trials do not appear on her students’ standardized test results and are never deliberated over in a faculty meeting. The feedback loop is too long and too ambiguous for her to ever get the pointers she needs to improve. This is a tragedy. So much good has been done. So much effort has been expended.
But for the right awareness, knowledge, skills, and support things might have been so
different for so many—not just for now but for eternity.

There is much required to fulfill the mission of a Catholic school—that of working
with parents to provide students with the faith and academic formation they need for
negotiating this life and gaining salvation in the next. This scenario illustrates what can
happen when schools do many things right but operate without a proactive, strategic plan for
addressing critical thinking. It illustrates how a teacher’s good intentions are insufficient
without a cohesive, school-based plan. Also, it reveals the many and varied ways that secular
assumptions about critical thinking encroach in Catholic schools through teacher formation,
curriculum materials, instructional practices, and the like.

There are many excellent Catholic schools with supports already in place to attenuate
for other secular influences. Even with these, a failure to address critical thinking in a
strategic way puts students in great jeopardy. If students do not learn to practice critical
thinking effectively, they will lose opportunities and success in their journey through life. If
they learn to think effectively but do not learn to think rightly in the Catholic sense, they will
lose the means for their salvation. Acquisition of the very same skills that will lead Catholic
school students to be more fully human and more able to fulfill their life’s purpose can also
diminish them as people and tear them from their faith. Facility with critical thinking, if it is
not developed in accordance with the unique conceptual understanding held by Catholics,
will surely do students more harm than good. The scenario presented here is intended to warn
and inspire Catholic school leaders to mobilize in an effort to address these concerns.

Conclusion

There is much that would be required to achieve the type of critically-focused
Catholic education proposed here, but we must be reminded that “with God, all things are
possible.” The idea that materials and methods, policies, procedures, and practices could be developed and implemented in ways that would address the influence of secular critical thinking initiatives is admittedly ambitious. There are many challenges which would need to be overcome. For one, Catholic schools and educators would need to work more collaboratively and pool their considerable gifts and expertise to move forward together. They would need to develop quality instructional plans and materials for use with students while also involving parents and their communities. They would need to engage professional consultants, scholars, and Catholic education advocates to support their many different needs moving forward. If this were easy, it would already be common practice. But even if it is not easy, the required resources exist to make it possible. It is sure to be worth the effort involved.
Works Cited

Baglow, C. (personal correspondence October, 26, 2016)


