BEYOND OBEIDENCE
AND
ABANDONMENT

Toward a Theory of Dissent in Catholic Education

GRAHAM P. MCDONOUGH
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I am grateful to my parents, Ken and Edie McDonough, for their ongoing support, and to my late mother, Angela McDonough, who with Dad did not discourage me from facing questions of incongruity between authority and justice. My in-laws have also provided much care and support.

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BEYOND OBEDIENCE AND ABANDONMENT
It is easy to slip into binary views about Catholicism. For example, if a person presents themselves as Catholic, others sometimes assume that they align strictly with the pope or an encyclopaedia definition. If that alignment is off, then they are assumed to be either non- or imperfectly Catholic. Those assumptions are not helpful to the degree that they distort the intellectual, devotional, and cultural breadth within Catholicism; but at the same time, they also raise important questions about how one might describe relationships within a tradition that are not exclusively defined by complete adherence to or rejection of its prevailing views. Not all Catholics agree perfectly with the pope, sometimes for very good reason, but still consider themselves to be faithful. It is not only adults who disagree, either, since many adolescents also present reasonable disagreements with certain teachings. As adolescent disagreement often takes place within Catholic schools, questions emerge as to what educational theory is available to describe an intellectual engagement with those who call themselves Catholic and wish to maintain an attachment to the Church, but disagree with certain Catholic teachings. How can Catholic students who disagree with these teachings be taught to express their dissent in a pedagogically and religiously meaningful way?

The following three cases are examples of problems that students have with controversial Catholic teachings. Each case reveals the tensions within the prevailing view and practice, and is important because it connects curricular issues to the institutional relationships within the Catholic school. Each case also challenges one to think past strict or superficial binary assumptions about Catholic orthodoxy and the aims of Catholic Education. The first case shows some
of the prevailing view’s limitations when responding to the presence of non-heterosexual students:

CASE ONE  A Catholic high school principal forbids a non-heterosexual male student from bringing his boyfriend as a date to the graduation banquet because, although the Catholic Church loves homosexual people, it abhors homosexual acts and cannot condone a dating situation that may potentially lead to immoral sexual acts. The implied message is that the student can “be gay, but not act gay.”

The second case exemplifies a major point of difficulty with respect to gender and sex role differences. Here, the teacher is put into a position where he or she has to acknowledge and respect competing realities within the school, and so provide a student with a respectful response within the context of remaining loyal to the Church:

CASE TWO  A female student in a Catholic school wonders why it promotes sex/gender equity in the secular world – her principal is female, for instance – but does not transpose that stance into a critique of the fact that the Catholic priesthood does not admit women.

These two cases show that there are concerns about justice for non-heterosexual persons and women within the Church. These concerns may be rooted in a desire that the Church ought to adapt to the equity norms that modern secular institutions have. At the same time, to diminish the reasons for such intra-ecclesial tension to merely a sacred-secular tension is to overlook the diversity within Catholicism. The complainants in the above cases might also present reasons for their views that originate within their reading of Catholic history or theology. Since the above two cases are characteristic of issues which have gained greater prominence since the Second Vatican Council (1962–65), and views which support greater ecclesial rights for non-heterosexuals and women are rooted in a particular interpretation of that Council’s meaning, they are here called the “post-conciliar” perspective.

By contrast, the “pre-conciliar” perspective believes that the most authentic Catholicism existed before Vatican II, and concludes that the Council is responsible for Catholicism’s recent decline. When
applied to education, pre-conciliar views suggest that many Catholic institutions have lost their rigour and so require a return to the discipline of strict obedience to the pope, doctrinal norms, and traditional observances. Otherwise, Catholic identity and the salvation of souls are jeopardized. The third case is based upon the tensions this segment of Catholic society experiences with the prevailing view in the school:

**Case Three** At home a student’s parents emphasize the example of the Blessed Virgin Mary’s obedience to God, uphold motherhood as the ultimate vocation for women, and maintain that people must be “good Catholics” to avoid damnation. At school the message is that Mary’s virginity is a narrative symbol of the miracle of Jesus’ birth, parenthood is but one of many choices available to people, and Jesus is your friend, not your judge. However, the student’s questions about the difference between messages receive nothing more than a polite hearing before the teacher moves on with the rest of the lesson.

The establishment of pre- and post-conciliar categories of thought comes with recognizing that Catholic thought and practice is complex and diverse; nonetheless, considering them as general rubrics under which a continuum of Catholic thought passes is a helpful means of describing Catholicism’s intellectual range.

All three cases represent one family of problems that Catholic educators might encounter in their experiences with learners. Currently, the typical responses to cases like these amplify dissidents’ moral frustration with the Church and/or School, because educators and institutions lack a theoretically rigorous approach to the issues that govern the clash of internal ideologies. This problem reflects the fact that there is a general lack of theoretical vocabulary with which to (1) begin a less frustrating and more intellectually rewarding examination of controversial issues within Catholicism, and (2) consider how those issues sit within the larger pan-Catholic problem of understanding, expressing, and receiving dissent. It also reveals that (3) the current theoretical grounding for Catholic Education is inadequate to the task of accommodating dissent and reforming its treatment of dissenters, ostensibly for fear of undermining the Church’s or School’s Catholic identity and organizational stability. The lack of a theoretical vocabulary and framework with which to understand salient
internal differences thus finally points to the fact that there is a paucity of research in support of Catholic Education.

The expansion of Catholic Educational theory of course requires relevant topics and questions. The first purpose of this book is to respond to the pedagogical problems of student dissent on controversial Catholic teachings. The frustration students experience in the above cases is the result of being presented with an apparent false choice between complete adherence to the prevailing Catholicism, complete abandonment of it, or, as in Case Three, existence uneasily at odds with prevailing norms. While it is oftentimes very helpful to make distinctions and observe binary tensions for descriptive purposes, this volume is ultimately concerned with overcoming restrictive dichotomies by exploring and mapping the theoretical territory between polarized views. The second governing purpose of this book is therefore to direct that development into a pedagogical theory which would inform and reform current practice, including: the development of curricular objectives, content, teaching methods, and assessment; administrative decisions at all levels; and the ways in which students and parents respond to the teaching and learning experiences that the school presents.

How widespread is dissent throughout Catholicism? Sociological data shows that, since the late 1960s, significant numbers of Canadian and American Catholics disagree with several Church teachings. In Canada, Reginald Bibby provides data for adolescents in Catholic schools specifically and then again for adolescent Catholics generally, which recognizes that not all Catholics attend Catholic schools, nor do Catholic schools exclusively serve Catholics. For students in Catholic schools he finds that the “accept and approve” ratings for premarital sex, homosexual relations, and same-sex marriage are 69%, 45%, and 45% respectively. This set mirrors nearly perfectly the national data, including students of all (or no) religions in all schools, which are 72%, 44%, and 47%.

None of these approvals accord with Catholic teachings; the Church disapproves of homosexual acts and considers homosexual desire disordered, but does not disapprove of persons with homosexual desires.

Bibby observes that these figures are lower for Canadian Catholic adolescents outside Quebec who attend Mass monthly or more often. A majority generally approves of premarital sex if the two partners love each other (59%), while a significant minority of respondents approve of homosexual relations (33%) and same-sex
marriage (36%). Quebec’s Catholic adolescents show nearly the same profile at 61%, 32%, and 31% respectively. The approval figures are almost all higher for those who attend Mass less than monthly (83%, 46%, and 48% outside Quebec, and 92%, 28%, and 51% within).7

The rates of participation also fall after adolescence. Data on Mass attendance for the year 2000 on eighteen- to thirty-four-year-olds shows a drop from 21% in adolescence to 12% nationally: from 31% to 18% outside Quebec, and from 7% to 5% within.8 Overall, Bibby finds that weekly attendance for Catholics outside Quebec is 32%, and 20% inside. The majority attend yearly: 41% of non-Quebecers and 66% within Quebec.9 Overall these figures suggest a trough-shaped pattern of decline that begins during adolescence and reaches its nadir in early to mid-adulthood. A resurgence of attendance in later adulthood10 and the attendance of families with pre-adolescent children possibly account for the difference between the adolescent and early adulthood figures and the overall attendance rate.

American sociologist Andrew Greeley reports a similar pattern. He refers to 1998 data from the International Social Survey Program, which surveyed the attitudes of Catholics in twenty-two countries on premarital sex, homosexual sex, and abortion. The data was mainly drawn from Europe but includes also Australia, Brazil, Canada, Chile, the Philippines, and the United States. A short extraction shows similar patterns across these countries, with the Philippines being a notable outlier on all three questions, and Brazil and Chile on the last two (see Table 1). While the results vary by country, it is immediately apparent that in many places, those who disagree with the Church on these questions are either the majority or part of significant dissenting minorities. Dissent is not limited to these areas either. Greeley’s own research from 1998 finds, generally speaking, that there is widespread support for a pope who would allow priests to marry (ostensibly for the Latin rite), ordain women to the priesthood, and be more open to change (see Table 2).

American data from the past decade shows continued disagreements with Catholic teachings. The Pew Forum’s 2008 “Religious Landscape Survey” finds that only 45% of American Catholics believed that “abortion should be illegal in all or most cases,” and 30% that “homosexuality is a way of life [that] should be discouraged by society.”11 Pew data from 2010 show that 46% of American Catholics were in favour of same-sex marriage, and 42% were opposed.12 Similarly, the Public Religion Research Institute finds that
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Table 1
Sexual attitudes of Catholics (adapted from ISSP, 1998) showing percentages answering in the affirmative

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Premarital sex always wrong</th>
<th>Homosexual sex always wrong</th>
<th>Abortion always wrong, even for the poor</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Australia</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brazil</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Canada</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chile</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ireland</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Italy</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Philippines</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poland</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United States</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1 Printed in Greeley 2004, 92.

Table 2
Attitudes toward role of next pope showing percentages answering in the affirmative

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Allow married priests</th>
<th>Ordain women to priesthood</th>
<th>Be more open to change</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Germany</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spain</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ireland</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United States</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Italy</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poland</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Philippines</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1 Adapted and condensed from Greeley 2004, 96. This survey was taken during John Paul II’s reign, before the ascent of Benedict XVI in 2005.

In 2011 “[n]early three-quarters of Catholics favor either allowing gay and lesbian people to marry (43%) or allowing them to form civil unions (31%). Only 22% of Catholics say there should be no legal recognition of a gay couple’s relationship.” Concurrently, over half of respondents stated that they did not consider sexual relations between two adults of the same sex to be sinful. On the question
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of contraception, Jones and Dreweke find that 98% of American Catholic women who have had sex use(d) contraceptive methods other than natural family planning.\textsuperscript{15}

Dissent in the Catholic Church is not limited to these questions, however. In addition to calls that teachings on sexuality and ordination change, there are also Catholics requesting a return to pre-conciliar traditions. Some groups, like Catholics United for the Faith, recognize the Second Vatican Council and the current Church hierarchy, but call for a return to more traditional practices. These groups’ views on subjects such as salvation inform their disapproval of the orthodox religious education programs in Catholic schools.\textsuperscript{16} Other pre-conciliar groups, such as the Society for St Pius X (SSPX), maintain strained relations with the pope and the Church hierarchy. The SSPX website states: “Founded as a refuge from the torrent of errors propagated by liberals at the Second Vatican Council, the Society is one of the few havens left for those seeking the Catholic Faith in all its integrity.”\textsuperscript{17} Its history with the Vatican has included the 1988 excommunication and 2009 rehabilitation of its bishops. There are also sedevacantist (the pope’s “chair is vacant”) groups, such as the Society of St Pius V (SSPV), who do not recognize the legitimacy of any pope after Pius XII (r.1939–58),\textsuperscript{18} nor the 1983 \textit{Code of Canon Law},\textsuperscript{19} and evaluate some of the sacraments in the post-conciliar era as “doubtful and invalid.”\textsuperscript{20} Some groups even go further than sedevacantism and recognize their own candidate as pope. (Michael Cuneo’s book \textit{The Smoke of Satan} provides a well-detailed synopsis of the “conservative and traditionalist” phenomenon in the Church.)

Dissent of many kinds is widespread.\textsuperscript{21} Since this short survey reveals (and upcoming chapters demonstrate) that dissent is a feature of adult Catholicism, it cannot be attributed to being merely a phase of adolescence. So if dissent on certain teachings is such a prominent feature of Catholic life, what are the consequences of not treating it explicitly and in depth in Catholic Education-Schooling?

The Catholic Church is currently suffering from a credibility problem which causes disenchantment, disengagement, and even the complete withdrawal of some of its members. If its poor response to the sexual abuse scandals of recent decades has been the primary contributor to this problem, disagreements with its teachings on reproductive ethics, sexuality, and ordination have only made matters worse for many people. At the same time, the Church is also troubled by the polarization of its members who adhere to pre-conciliar
ideologies. How do Catholics respond to a Church that they love but cannot change? And how do they respond to those who disagree with them? If dissidents of all sorts perceive that the Church cannot receive disagreement, and that the institutions of Catholic Education are unable to assist them academically in working out their disagreements, then further frustration, polarization, or abandonment of the Church is inevitable.

If the decline in participation that Bibby observes from adolescence to early adulthood can be attributed to this credibility crisis and perceived lack of receptivity, then it signals the need for a more rigorous means from within Catholicism by which lay persons can respond to controversial and divisive religious issues. I hypothesize that when the current system of receiving dissent, which either de-emphasizes, marginalizes, or restricts its expression away from a public audience, does not satisfy their needs, then many people, not knowing where to go next, simply resign themselves to abandoning Catholicism before they have an opportunity to work out their disagreements in greater depth. Catholic Education-Schooling cannot singlehandedly improve the Church’s credibility, but it can, given the theory I propose here, provide currently disaffected, alienated, and disenchanted Catholics with a means of staying in their Church. If they do leave it, and some still may, they should at least have done so having been given the greatest intellectual resources with which to make a choice for staying. The result should be a more adult faith.

INVESTIGATING A MULTI-DIMENSIONAL QUESTION

The method of moving toward a prescriptive educational treatment of intellectual diversity within Catholicism is complex. Catholic Education and Catholic Schools are worldwide phenomena that in each incarnation achieve some balance between the norms of the whole Church and their particular local contexts. Because of this dynamic tension, there emerges the problem in method of what to focus upon. To what degree are the dictates of the global Church valid descriptors of and applicable to the teaching-learning experiences in any one school, and, conversely, to what degree are local phenomena representative of and generalizable to the global norms? The risks are therefore alienating context by speaking too globally, or losing global validity and theoretical transferability by speaking exclusively within a particular context. Nonetheless, in a volume that proposes a general
theory for intellectual religious disagreement, it is difficult to speak of relevant tensions in Catholic Education without reference to how particular schools interpret their existence within a larger theoretical framework. Catholic schools are not merely documentary phenomena; they exist as concrete institutions. The dilemmas in Cases One, Two, and Three above could conceivably appear in any Catholic school. The problem is to choose a set of schools that provides a strongly plausible instance in which they might appear.

This book’s investigative method balances the local-global tension by offering a picture of publicly funded Canadian Catholic schools in the province of Ontario next to the general theological, pedagogical, and philosophical norms for Catholic Education. The selection of Ontario’s Catholic schools as they understand themselves to be an authentic representation of the global Church’s norms accomplishes two tasks. First, it provides the context of a regional history where Catholics have been shown to be loyal dissenters from mainstream society. An interpretation of their history shows that dissent is a normal and authentically Catholic behaviour, thus establishing it as an ironic instance where civil society offers a Catholic minority external protection, but the minorities within Catholicism are restricted by the faith’s own prevailing hegemony. Second, while all Catholic schools offer the general public a service by educating its citizens, Ontario’s publicly funded Catholic schools present this service in high relief because government money, over and above the state’s passive sanction, enables their existence. The problems that teachers in these public schools face regarding controversial issues are similar in theory to those in private schools, because private schools also negotiate with varying student intentions and parental interests; but the fact of the state’s direct investment in Ontario’s schools makes them a particularly relevant context for proposing reforms. Ontario offers a special picture of publicly funded Catholic Schooling, but the implications of its schools’ examination has greater than regional import because they follow the same ecclesial, philosophical, and pedagogical norms as other Catholic institutions. If they did not look to the global Church in this way, they would arguably not be normatively Catholic.

While there are possibly some limitations to using the experiences of one province to inform a more general prescriptive proposal, it remains true that the issues in educational theory which Ontario teachers experience are concurrent with, and inherently generalizable