



OUR SOCIAL MISSION

BY CARITAS SINGAPORE COMMUNITY COUNCIL

Values, virtues and the Catholic school of life

As Singapore educators seek ways to focus on values and character development, we look at how Catholic schools have worked at providing a rounded education centred on children.

EARLIER this month, Mr Steven Ooi wrote to The Straits Times Forum Page about two of his former teachers in St Michael's School in the 1980s, Mr Tan Wee Lee and Mr Joseph Wee.

"I do not remember what they taught me about values, but I do remember that they were gentlemen: kind, nurturing, firm but fair, and with a sense of humour," Mr Ooi wrote.

His letter recalls Jesus' words in Scripture about practising what one preaches, because often, what students remember best is not what a teacher says but how a teacher is.

Singapore's new Education Minister, Mr Heng Swee Keat, wants schools to focus on values and character development. Personal and moral values, he said recently, are important qualities that enable children to become socially responsible adults.

He also spoke about the importance of citizenship values; as Singapore is "a young nation with a short history of independence, we must have informed, rugged and resilient citizens who can stay united to overcome crisis and adversities which we must expect to happen from time to time".

Catholic schools, educators and parents naturally, have an interest in this issue. Indeed, one could say the nurturing of good persons is the reason why Catholic schools exist, and what they have strived to do for centuries.

Catholic education is based on a fundamental principle of the Church's social teachings – the dignity of every human person.

A Catholic education seeks to form the whole human person, to enable him or her to flourish and to be a force for the good of society.

A Catholic education also regards educating the human person as an end in himself or herself, not as a means to another end.

So education cannot have as its focus the needs of an economy or even a nation. It must be centred on the person, and his or her ultimate good.

Perhaps that is what Singapore's Education Minister meant when he said he wanted his ministry to sharpen its focus on "student-centric and holistic education".

Few would quarrel with the idea that personal and moral values are an important part of education. The challenge has always been how best to nurture these values in the young.

Back in the 1970s, Dr Goh Keng Swee, who served as Education Minister from 1979 to 1984, expressed disquiet at "the preoccupation in Singapore with examination results", which he said "is unnatural and unhealthy".

He observed that "an education that lays too much stress on the academic as against the physical and moral side of life is unbalanced and lopsided".

He called for "training in moral values" to be extended to all public schools as "we want people who have a sense of social responsibility, who are able to overcome their innate instincts of greed, personal vanity and other human weaknesses in the interest of the common good".

Over the years, various moral and citizenship education programmes have been used in primary and secondary schools, with varying levels of success. Religious Knowledge was taught as a compulsory subject in secondary schools between 1982 and 1989. That made way to Civics and Moral Education in 1992. In turn, this was integrated into the National Education programme in 1997 with its focus on nation building.

One complication that arises from any



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VALUES OR VIRTUES?

“The Church teaches that there are three theological virtues: faith, hope and charity. The focus of these virtues is God. The Church also identifies four cardinal virtues which relate to human relations: prudence, justice, fortitude, and temperance. The Church understands these cardinal virtues to be universal, and shared by all cultural, racial and religious traditions. Virtues-based education begins at home at an early age. The Church's social doctrine maintains that parents are the first educators of their children. It also maintains that parents have the right to establish and support educational institutions which best enable them to carry out their duties as educators.”

discussion on values is how they can differ across different cultures and interest groups.

Some people prize family values, others speak of Singaporean values. Yet others draw a contrast between Asian and Western values.

In fact, there are as many different sets of values as there are groups of people.

The language of values is subjective and based upon individual preference or group consensus, writes Mr Iain T Benson, a barrister on the advisory board of Canada's Catholic Educator's Resource Centre, in an essay, Values and Virtues: A Moral Confusion.

He contrasts values with virtues, a concept that has existed in Christian tradition for millennia and can be traced back to the ancient Greeks and Romans. Virtues enable "self-mastery and joy in leading a morally good life". They guide human actions and passions in people's relationship with others.

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In a document on education, Gravissimum Educationis, issued by the Second Vatican Council, the Church teaches that parents "must create a family atmosphere animated by love and respect for God and man, in which the well-rounded personal and social education of children is fostered". The "family is the first school of the social virtues that every

society needs", it adds.

Ms Jane Lau enrolled her three children in Cherrybrook Kindergarten, a private, non-profit education provider founded by Catholic parents because of "their strong Catholic ethos which focuses on developing character and fostering virtues".

At Cherrybrook, she says, parents and teachers partner each other, with teachers delivering lessons in class and parents reinforcing these lessons at home.

"Teachers give parents regular feedback on what sorts of challenges their children are facing in learning virtuous habits like truthfulness or industriousness; as parents, we then take steps to address this at home," she says.

Catholic schools also seek to provide a rounded or holistic education. After all, the Church makes clear in its teaching that children should be helped to develop in physical, moral and intellectual ways.

The aim is for children to "gradually acquire a mature sense of responsibility [and] take their part in social life...to promote the common good", says Gravissimum Educationis.

Catholic schools, each in its own way, have sought to do this.

Ms Chua Lee Beng, head of department for Sports, Arts and Co-Curricular Activities at St Anthony's Canossian Primary School, says the school has constantly given equal priority to "nurturing both the head and the heart of students – where possible, this is integrated throughout the curriculum".

The Catholic contribution to public discussion on this issue raises thought-provoking questions on the teaching of values versus virtues and the role of parents in education.

Given the vested interests that the Education Ministry and parents have in educating children, it is imperative that both parties directly engage each other in open dialogue before taking the next step forward.