

# Contributions of Catholic Schools in the Spiritual Development of Christian Students

Leonard Chidi Ilechukwu<sup>1</sup>

## **Abstract**

*Catholic education expresses the mission entrusted by Jesus Christ to the church He founded. This research utilized the discursive analysis approach to explore the contributions of Catholic schools in the spiritual development of Christian students. Literature sources included journal articles, grey literature, Catholic school websites, newsletters, and textbooks. Results indicate that Catholic schools nurture each student's growth in faith and spirituality and offer outstanding educational experiences founded on Catholic values. The implication for Christian counselling was briefly discussed. On that note, it is suggested that empirical studies should be conducted to substantiate how Catholic schools are keeping up with their role of fostering students' spiritual growth.*

**Keywords:** *Catholic Schools, Christian counselling; Christian Students, Spiritual Development; Spirituality*

## **I. Introduction**

Catholic schools give students opportunities to self-reflect and gain a deeper understanding of Christian Spirituality<sup>1</sup>. Spirituality is the quality of being spiritual, and that is further defined as that which pertains to the spirit<sup>2</sup>. Spirit is the animating or vital principle in humans that gives life to the physical organism, in contrast to its purely material elements; the breath of life<sup>3</sup>. It is about what is within a person that provides the ability to do more than physically exist. Spirituality is a way of making sense of the world within four key relationships: our relationship with self, with others, with nature, and with God<sup>4</sup>. It is the quality of these relationships that defines us. Spirituality is how we are in the world. Harris describes spirituality as our way of being in the world, our way of doing whatever we do, in the light of being touched, held, delighted by and rooted in the Mystery of Divinity whether that Divinity is called God, Goddess, Holy Wisdom, or the Unnamable<sup>5</sup>. Growing in the spiritual life means becoming more aware of being rooted in God and depending on Him for every breath, thought, and action<sup>6</sup>.

Catholic schools are part of a long tradition of Catholic education that fulfils parents' rights to choose their children's schooling, reflecting their own values, beliefs, and hopes. Catholic schools offer students the opportunity to learn and develop in an atmosphere characterized by care<sup>7</sup>. With that said, Catholic schools aim to form students who can make an active, worthwhile contribution to the world in which they live. The

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<sup>1</sup> Department of Arts Education, University of Nigeria, Nsukka, P.M. 41001, Enugu State, Nigeria

schools celebrate their heritage and faith together with wider parish communities.<sup>8</sup> The Catholic church has developed guidelines over the years to ensure the uniqueness of Catholic schools in order to make the Christian faith "living, conscious and active," and create a sacred atmosphere in each school<sup>1</sup>.

Catholic schools seek to contribute to creating a community that is highly educated, skilled and cultured with an ability to promote and embrace a critical analysis of social issues, the expansion of knowledge and the pursuit of truth. Those who choose a Catholic school for their children do so on the understanding that they respect and agree to support the Catholic identity of the school and acknowledge the importance of religious education for their children<sup>9</sup>. The Catholic school is open to all who are willing to commit to supporting the philosophy, values and aims of Catholic schooling.

The school building and classrooms reflect the Catholic identity through religious art, statues, crucifixes and displays of students' works that illustrate beliefs and practices of Catholic life<sup>10</sup>. In daily religion classes, students learn the basic teachings of Catholicism. They also learn to respect other faith traditions while developing their own spirituality and commitment to their own faith<sup>10</sup>. Inspired by the message and example of Jesus Christ, Catholic schools live out a distinctive educational vision, and supported by the Catholic community of which they are a vital part, they invite students and their families into a faith-filled educational experience<sup>7,8,11</sup>.

As a critical ministry of parishes and the diocese, Catholic schools encourage and support parents in their responsibility for the faith formation of their children<sup>12</sup>. This formation is supported by prayer and opportunities to participate in the broader Catholic community's life, mission, and liturgy. Catholic schools seek to create an atmosphere enlivened by the Gospel spirit of freedom and charity and strive to help students in their spiritual development<sup>13</sup>. It aims to link human culture to the message of salvation so that faith will illumine all knowledge acquired about the world, humanity, and life<sup>6</sup>. Given these expositions, this research aimed to critically discuss the contributions of Catholic schools in the spiritual development of Christian students.

## **II. Theoretical Review**

Spiritual development can be understood as going through various stages. Erik Erikson's famous stages of lifespan development can be used as a map to understand stages of faith and spiritual development<sup>14</sup>. The born again phase aligns with Erickson's infancy stage, which is characterized by trust versus mistrust. This stage involves a strong belief in the integrity of God, or the reverse, which would be a sense of sadness and despair due to the lack of reliability on God's part. Resolution of this first stage would involve feelings of hopefulness in Jesus and enhanced faith in God to follow through in one's life. The final stages of Erikson's model correlated to spiritual growth and would relate to spiritual adulthood. This stage indicates a Christian who has become a spiritual person of wisdom through his or her own growth processes. This person would mentor and guide other Christians through these stages of spiritual development.

### **III. Method**

This research utilized the discursive analysis approach to explore the contributions of Catholic schools in Christian students' spiritual development. Literature sources included journal articles, grey literature, Catholic school websites, newsletters, and textbooks. Two external reviewers helped to synthesize information from materials gathered for the research. A third reviewer assisted in reconciling any disparity in the evidence from the literature. All material sources were analyzed for content relevance and in-depth coverage of the scope of the discussion.

### **IV. Results and Discussion**

#### **Contributions of Churches in Spiritual Development of Christian Students**

Catholic schools contribute to nurturing each student's growth in faith and unique potential, offer outstanding educational experiences founded on Catholic values; fosters a partnership between parents and staff in the education of their children; create communities of respect for each other, the wider society and the earth; and encourage active engagement in social justice issues, the service of others and the promotion of peace<sup>7</sup>.

Catholic schools educate to develop the whole child. The educational process is an opportunity to cultivate the entire person by engaging the human need for physical, mental, social, and spiritual nourishment<sup>8</sup>. Catholic schools understand the multi-faceted nature of child development and are heavily invested in the wellbeing of their students. Students in Catholic schools benefit from a learning experience that develops all of the physical, emotional, social and spiritual qualities integral to human health and happiness.

The emphasis Catholic Schools place on service and faith formation produces more civically engaged students, tolerant of diverse views, committed to service as adults than their public school peers. In other words, students in Catholic Schools are not only called to be high academic achievers but they are also called to be loving disciples of Jesus Christ. Sweeney's article<sup>15</sup> summarized the purpose of Catholic school education as thus;

*"The Catholic school's proper function is to create for the school community a special atmosphere animated by the Gospel spirit of freedom and charity, to help youth grow according to the new creatures they were made through baptism as they develop their own personalities, and finally to order the whole of human culture to the news of salvation so that the knowledge the students gradually acquire of the world, life and man is illumined by faith."*

Catholic schools afford the fullest and best opportunity to realize the fourfold purpose of Christian education, that is, to provide an atmosphere in which the Gospel message is proclaimed, community in Christ is experienced, service to our sisters and brothers is the norm, and thanksgiving and worship of our God are cultivated<sup>16</sup>. Catholic schools also empower students and their families by proclaiming the faith, celebrating

values and ministering to the spiritual needs of diverse communities<sup>11</sup>. Whether in the classroom, on the athletic field or in the chapel, Catholic students learn to think and act according to the mind and heart of Jesus Christ.

Catholic schools provide a second home for students where morals and values are supported by educators who also serve as role models in faith. Catholic schools educate students wholly, in mind, body and spirit<sup>11</sup>. Catholic schools offer students solid academics, after-school activities and opportunities to worship and practice the faith. Catholic education gives students a firm foundation as members of society and the Catholic community. Through Catholic school teaching, the church seeks to prepare its members to proclaim the Good News and to translate this proclamation into action<sup>17</sup>. In choosing a Catholic school, parents choose an education for their children in which the message of Jesus Christ is available and young people are educated for participation in today's Church and world communities. Catholic schools foster a Christian environment that permeates all aspects of school life; bear witness to the love of God for all people; draw on students' life experiences to provide a meaningful context for faith development; provide opportunities for the spiritual growth and development of each member of the school community; and work in partnership with parents and the community<sup>18</sup>.

The distinguishing feature of every Catholic school is its emphasis on faith formation. Through prayer, worship, community, and service, students are educated as disciples of Jesus Christ and His Church. Catholic virtues are infused throughout the curriculum to provide students with a worldview that sees the other as brother and sister in the Lord and to develop them as student leaders today and world leaders tomorrow<sup>19</sup>. Catholic schools proclaim the Gospel message within an academic environment of excellence that challenges students to be creative and critical thinkers who integrate faith, moral leadership and compassionate service in order to create a more just and humane world<sup>20</sup>. Catholic school students explore and understand their faith through academic classes that focus on the scriptures, sacraments, morality, church, history and traditions<sup>10</sup>.

## **V. Implications for Christian counselling**

The spiritual formation of students has implications for Christian counselling. The goal of Christian counselling should be to help clients reach spiritual adulthood. Spiritual counselling identifies barriers in working through the many challenges of faith development and overcoming obstacles such as mistrust, shame/doubt, self-condemnation, feelings of insecurity, and isolation<sup>14</sup>. A Christian counsellor can diagnose which stage of faith development a student-client is in and help the student-client achieve positive spiritual growth through trust, ability to exert Christ's power to resist the evil one, defining Christian purpose, learning tools to pursue God, and accomplishing work for the Lord because of a compelling love for Christ. When Christian counselling and spiritual direction meet, God works spiritual growth in tangible ways. Empathetic understanding of issues and increased awareness of the Lord's work are the primary benefits of Christian counselling.

## VI. Conclusion

Catholic education expresses the mission entrusted by Jesus to the church He founded. In this research utilizing a discursive analysis approach, the researcher demonstrated that Catholic schools play a pivotal role in the spiritual development of Christian students. Catholic schools contribute meaningfully in nurturing each student's growth in faith and spirituality. Catholic schools integrate faith and values into every part of the educational experience. Overall, Catholic school students are challenged to achieve their full potential. Empirical studies are required to substantiate how Catholic schools are keeping up with their roles in Christian students' spiritual development.

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