

The Need for Catholic Schools Today

La necessità delle scuole cattoliche oggi

A katolikus iskolák szükségessége ma

Fr. Carles Gil i Saguer Sch.P.

Piarist Order / Piarista rend

superior general / rendfőnök

Abstract

This study reflects on the contemporary necessity of Catholic schools in light of *Gravissimum educationis* and recent papal teachings. It argues that the question of necessity is not functional but existential, concerning meaning, identity, and the common good. In a fragmented, pluralistic, and unequal world, Catholic education provides an integral vision of the human person, rooted in wisdom, dialogue, justice, and hope. The article highlights five key dimensions of Catholic schooling today: offering meaning and discernment, sustaining a creative identity open to dialogue, building educational alliances, prioritizing the poor, and cultivating hope. Catholic schools are presented not as relics of the past but as living communities and laboratories of humanity that embody care, communion, and educational mission within a global educational constellation.

Keywords: Catholic education; *Gravissimum educationis*; identity; educational mission; hope; integral human development; educational alliances

Abstract

Il contributo riflette sulla necessità attuale della scuola cattolica alla luce della *Gravissimum educationis* e del recente magistero pontificio. La questione della “necessità” viene interpretata non in senso funzionale, ma esistenziale, come ricerca di significato, identità e bene comune. In un mondo frammentato, plurale e segnato da disuguaglianze, l’educazione cattolica offre una visione integrale della persona, fondata su sapienza, dialogo, giustizia e speranza. L’articolo individua cinque dimensioni fondamentali della missione educativa: offrire senso e discernimento, custodire un’identità aperta e creativa, costruire alleanze educative, privilegiare i poveri e formare alla speranza. La

scuola cattolica emerge così come comunità viva e laboratorio di umanità al servizio di una costellazione educativa globale.

Parole chiave: educazione cattolica; Gravissimum educationis; identità; missione educativa; speranza; sviluppo umano integrale; alleanze educative

Absztrakt

A tanulmány a katolikus iskolák mai szükségességét vizsgálja a *Gravissimum educationis* zsinati dokumentum és a legújabb pápai tanítások fényében. A szerző szerint a „szükségesség” kérdése nem pusztán funkcionális, hanem egzisztenciális: az értelemről, az identitásról és a közjóról szól. Egy fragmentált, pluralista és egyenlőtlenségekkel terhelt világban a katolikus nevelés az ember integrális szemléletét kínálja, amelyben a bölcsesség, a párbeszéd, az igazságosság és a remény alapvető szerepet kap. A tanulmány öt kulcsterületet emel ki: az értelemadás és megkülönböztetés képessége, a nyitott és kreatív identitás, az oktatási szövetségek építése, a szegények melletti elköteleződés és a reményre nevelés. A katolikus iskola így a jövő szolgálatában álló, élő közösségként és az emberség „laboratóriumaként” jelenik meg.

Kulcsszavak: katolikus nevelés; Gravissimum educationis; identitás; nevelési küldetés; remény; integrális emberkép; oktatási szövetségek

Introduction: What does *necessary* mean?

Perhaps, if we are honest, there remains within us a certain *Kierkegaardian fear and trembling* whenever we Christians allow ourselves to be questioned by these short yet unsettling inquiries:

- Does our presence in society still make sense?
- What is our contribution, that is unique and essential, without seeking to be different and independent from other educational actors, but faithful to a meaningful identity?
- Or just: *Is the Catholic school still necessary?*

Why do we continue to ask such questions, generation after generation? What happens to us when we feel compelled to justify the very existence of an institution that has accompanied the Church since its earliest centuries?

To ask whether something is necessary is not a mere matter of efficiency or survival, it is a question of *meaning*. The word *necessary* comes from the Latin *ne-cedere* (‘that which one cannot withdraw from’). What is necessary, then, is that without which life would lose its coherence, its direction, or its soul. For believers, the necessary is what unites truth and love, what gives weight and purpose to our journey.

In this sense, these questions should not disturb us, they are a sign of maturity. They are the way in which faith questions itself in order to remain fruitful. Because there are realities that must always be in *crisis*, under review, in search. Education is one of them. Questioning it is not a symptom of decline, but a condition of vitality.

When we ask ourselves if Catholic schools are still necessary, we are not asking a functional question, but an *existential* one. We are asking ourselves if they are still an indispensable space (irreplaceable, our Founder would say) for the integral growth of individuals and for the common good.

In the framework of *Gravissimum educationis*?

Before advancing further, it is worth situating ourselves within the framework that inspires this reflection. We are not starting from a new idea, but from a living memory: *Gravissimum educationis* the Declaration on Christian Education promulgated by the Second Vatican Council on October 28, 1965. It is a brief text, but luminous and prophetic.

The Declaration begins with a striking affirmation that still retains its power:

“All men of every race, condition, and age have a right to education... open to fraternal communion with other peoples to foster true unity and peace on earth.” (GE 1)

“The Church has the mission of proclaiming the way of salvation to all men and women and of communicating to them the life of Christ... The Catholic school is a unique witness to the pastoral charity of the Church.” (GE Preface)

Sixty years later, Pope Leo XIV, in his Apostolic letter *Designing New Maps of Hope* (2025), revisits that same spirit with words of renewed urgency:

“The Declaration Gravissimum Educationis has not lost its strength. From its reception emerged a constellation of works and charisms that still guide our path today: schools and universities (...)” (Pope Leo XIV, *Designing New Maps of Hope*, 2025)

That is why we speak of a *framework*: because this conciliar text remains a horizon of meaning for understanding the Church’s educational mission.

If education shapes the future of humanity, *Catholic* education must contribute to shaping a future in which faith and reason, freedom and fraternity, truth and compassion coexist.

Why Catholic education is still necessary

In a fragmented world, we need meaning and wisdom.

We are experiencing a profound crisis of meaning, belonging, and truth.

Gravissimum educationis reminds us that education must aim at the development of *the human person in order to achieve their ultimate end and the good of society* (GE1).

The Catholic School, therefore, offers a comprehensive anthropology: one in which intelligence, affectivity, and spirituality are intertwined. It teaches us to look at life not as an accident, but as a vocation.

We are saturated with information and yet often orphaned in discernment. Education today must therefore form students not only in critical and ethical thinking, that is, they must have the ability to discern and the also in the *humus* from which discernment arises: that humanistic and evangelical soil where reflection takes root and grows. Reflection detached from that ground risks becoming mechanical, fragmented, and soulless.

As the adage reminds us, *Sciat ut servas*: without wisdom, knowledge can turn into power; with wisdom, knowledge becomes service.

1. In a plural and secular world, we need identity.

We live in a pluralistic, global, and often polarized society. Biology tells us that, when faced with threat, animals tend to react in three ways: *flee, fight, or freeze*.

Sometimes, communities or institutions react in the same way.

- Some *flee*, retreating into culturally safe spaces, building parallel worlds for their own kind.
- Others *fight*, turning the Christian presence into a cultural or ideological war, a dialectic of sides that only deepens division.
- Others *freeze*, *hiding* as silent and resigned spectators, withdrawing from public life until they become irrelevant.

Yet none of these three reactions is evangelical. Authentic Catholic identity is not opposed to openness; **it is its source**.

- It neither hides nor imposes, it proposes.
- It does not exclude, but enlightens.
- It is not defensive, but creative.

The Church embodies *fourth way*, that of confident and dialoguing presence, which does not react out of fear, but acts out of love.

In Catholic schools, identity and mission are inseparable: identity nourishes mission, and mission reveals identity.

2. In an interdependent world, we need alliances.

Pope Francis, in the *Global Compact on Education* (2019), reminded us that no educational actor can do it alone because *educating means weaving networks of relationships*, and he gave us a word: **alliance**.

This insight was taken up forcefully by Pope Leo XIV in his apostolic letter *Designing New Maps of Hope*, which gives us another word: **constellation**, which he develops in

point 8, entitled *educational constellation*, and in point 10, which speaks of the *North Star of the educational pact*.

Gravissimum educationis also emphasized that the task of education requires the collaboration of parents, teachers, and society (GE 3–5).

Today, that call is expanding and becoming more global.

We live in a time that needs broad, complementary, and fruitful alliances: between local and international institutions, within the educational sector itself with better networks, with the health sector, universities, social organizations, the public and business sectors, and the professional and working world.

The Catholic school is thus called to form part of a great global educational community, a genuine ecosystem of communion in which every charism and institution becomes a light within a wider constellation.

As Pope Leo XIV writes, *The educational pact forms part of a broader global educational constellation: charisms and institutions, though diverse, compose a unified and luminous design that guides our steps through the darkness of the present time.* (*New Maps of Hope*, 10.2).

The Catholic school contributes the **value of communion**. When it works in networks, it multiplies its impact and becomes a sign of unity within a world of fragmentation.

3. In a world marked by poverty and exclusion, we need justice.

Number 9 of *Gravissimum educationis* is one of the most daring in the Declaration:

“The Holy Council earnestly exhorts the pastors of the Church and all the faithful to help, without sparing any sacrifice, Catholic schools in the better and progressive fulfillment of their mission and, above all, in attending to the needs of the poor, those who are deprived of the help and affection of the family, or who do not share in the gift of faith.” (GE 9)

From this we can conclude that if Catholic schools are directed primarily toward the more privileged sectors of society, they risk reinforcing a socially unjust order.

The true beneficiaries of Catholic schools are the poor. As Pope Francis warned:

“Do not go to the poor out of charity... It is from the peripheries that we learn to see reality anew, from a perspective often unknown to those at the center.” (*Address to the World Congress of Catholic Education, November 21, 2015*)

For many children, the Catholic school is the only point of contact with the Church, the first place where they experience dignity, care, and community.

Therefore, their presence among the poorest is not optional: it is their deepest truth. Wherever a Catholic school opens its doors to the least among us, the Gospel becomes visible.

4. In a wounded world, we need hope.

Number 2 of *Gravissimum educationis* offers one of the most beautiful and forward-looking descriptions of the educational vocation of the Church *that aware of their calling, they learn not only how to bear witness to the hope that is in them but also how to help in the Christian formation of the world that takes place when natural powers viewed in the full consideration of man redeemed by Christ contribute to the good of the whole society.*

Hope is not merely one value among others; it is the theological virtue through which we view the world.

To educate today is to practice active hope, to believe in the possibility of transformation even amid uncertainty, and to trust that goodness is still stronger than cynicism, violence, or indifference.

Catholic schools are called to form artisans of hope, young people who do not give up, who heal wounds and rebuild bonds.

Education, at its best, is a sowing of hope in uncertain soil. To teach is always an act of confidence in humanity. Hope, then, is not only what sustains education; it is what education itself creates.

IV. The Catholic school as a living laboratory of humanity

Gravissimum educationis does not describe the Catholic school as a closed institution, but as a living community where the essentials of human life are learned.

1. Witness before words

The credibility of Catholic education does not rest only on the quality of its academic discourse but on the authenticity of its daily life.

The Christian educator does not apply formulas: he or she creates paths. The trained teacher applies what he knows; the true educator **creates from what he has learned.**

The innovation to which the Catholic school is called is therefore not only pedagogical, but also social and spiritual.

- **Pedagogical**, cultivating intelligence, affectivity, and conscience, seeking not only for the student *to know more*, but to learn how to learn, to develop their own judgment enlightened by goodness and truth.
- **Mystagogical**, because educating from the perspective of faith also means introducing students to mystery, teaching them to read life in the light of the Gospel, opening the intelligence of the heart, and forming people who discover a vocation in their existence.

- **Ptochogógica**, a word with Greek roots (*ptōchos*, *poor*), because a truly evangelical school educates from the poor and for the poor. Its pedagogy is born from encountering fragility, and its horizon is justice and inclusion.

Such a school is an *going forth* school, not self-referential, open to the **Other** (with a capital letter) and to the **other** (with a lowercase letter), especially the most vulnerable. It is aware that the project of salvation is always communal and that it can only be realized when no one is excluded from the educational process.

We live in paradoxical times: young people admire their teachers, yet few wish to become one. However, teaching remains the profession that makes all others possible. And yet, despite everything, it continues to be the least recognized.

2. *Cura personalis and cura communitatis.*

Students spend a good part of their childhood and adolescence at school, which is why school cannot be just a place of learning, but also a **place of belonging**, where a sense of family and community is cultivated.

Care, *cura personalis et cura communitatis*, expresses the very heart of the Christian educational mission: care for each person and care for the community. To care is not an addition to the tasks of teachers, or a specific role in the educational community; it is a concrete way of educating.

In this sense, the *safeguarding of minors and vulnerable persons* is not only an institutional obligation, but a profound expression of this **culture of care**.

Anthropologists and paleontologists remind us that the first **social contract** was a **fact of care**, when a group chose to act like the **Good Samaritan**, not abandoning those who were wounded or sick, but caring for them. There, humanity began.

3. The family, the first educational space

As *Gravissimum educationis* (GE 3) states, *parents are the primary and principal educators (of their children)*. The family is the original nucleus of the educational process, where the basic affective, cognitive, and social skills that sustain all later learning are acquired. Therefore, the family cannot be understood as an external actor in the school process, but as its first and most stable educational agent.

The Catholic school does not replace the family. Its mission is to accompany, listen to, and strengthen the educational task that parents begin, providing a structured context where family values can mature in dialogue with culture and knowledge.

When families and schools recognize each other as allies and establish a relationship

based on trust and shared responsibility, education takes on a genuinely communal dimension. This alliance becomes a space of educational communion, where families, teachers, and institutions share the same goal, the integral formation of the person.

Conclusion: The promise of the future

Since we are among educators, allow me a small didactic trick, a summary at the end of the lesson, although without a final grade ;) After all this reflection, we might say that everything we've discussed comes down to five words, a concise way to remember what truly matters: **meaning, identity, alliances, justice, and hope.**

Sixty years later, *Gravissimum educationis* continues to call on the Church to *make God's love present in schools* (GE 8). Catholic schools are not a luxury, nor, as some might think, a vestige of the past: they are a **spiritual public good**, at the service of society as a whole. As Pope Francis reminds us: *Educating is always an act of hope.* (Message for the launch of the Global Compact on Education, September 12, 2019)

May our Catholic schools continue to be places where young people discover not only what they can do, but **who they are**: beloved children of God, called to build a more humane world.