

# Why Choose Catholic Education?

BY SANDY FLAHERTY

# A MERCY SCHOOL

If we are to honor our history,  
Implement our vision,  
and live out our mission,

We must echo the tenderness of Christ Jesus,  
The courage of Catherine McAuley,  
and the dreams of those who have gone before us.

We must gather the young,  
Welcome the stranger,  
and teach as Jesus did.

We must create hallways of compassion,  
Lesson plans of justice,  
and diplomas that impel.

If we are to answer the call put before us,  
We must create a school  
Whose soul is Mercy.

—SANDY FLAHERTY



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## A NOTE TO PARENTS

For parents seeking a quality education for their child, the high school decision is an important one. There are many factors in choosing the right school: academic excellence, varied extracurricular options, athletic and creative opportunities, just to name a few. Beyond these fundamental considerations is the reality that adolescence is a crucial time for a young person. The next four years will be the steepest developmental incline in your child's life, and it is a time of tremendous intellectual, spiritual, social and emotional growth.

In light of the significant changes that take place during adolescence it is important to choose a high school where your child feels at home; a place where they can truly be themselves. When a student is at ease in their school environment they will take risks and challenge themselves in ways that he or she otherwise would not. They will push the edges of his or her own competencies and reach further and wider than in a less supportive environment. When a student is able to find their place, they will fully engage in the

“For me to be my best, a welcoming community is essential. Mercy has gone above and beyond in what it takes for me to feel included. I am absolutely thriving in this sisterhood that I am a part of here at Mercy.”

—MEAGHAN S. '21

classroom, social environment, clubs, leadership opportunities, athletics, and the arts. They will grow in intellect, skill, confidence and purpose.

As Mercy educators it is our privilege to watch students enter as eighth graders and leave as confident young men and women. Guided by a clear mission, a Mercy school provides an academically driven environment.

Students are cherished for who they are and challenged to explore, take risks and reach out in service to others. Under the attentive care of teachers, counselors and coaches students are encouraged to engage their potential and cultivate their gifts. They are given the opportunity to understand who they are, find their unique voice, engage the world, and ask the fundamental human questions. A Mercy education nourishes the mind, heart, soul and spirit of our students and prepares them for the personal and professional challenges ahead.

In seeking a quality education for your child we understand that you have a wide variety of schools to choose from. The purpose of this resource is to help parents understand what makes a Catholic education, and specifically a Mercy education, different. We are proud of our rich history as schools founded by the Sisters of Mercy. We are proud of our Catholic identity. In the following pages you will learn about our Mercy history and the fundamental values of a Catholic education. These values distinguish Catholic education from other learning environments add depth and a richness to our schools and it is a timely educational philosophy in the current culture in which we educate young women and men.



“The mission of Catholic Schools is to inspire  
in students an understanding of all that  
is true, good and beautiful.”

—POPE FRANCIS

# Why Choose Catholic Education?

In an address to educators and religious leaders, St. John Paul II articulated the unique benefit of a Catholic School: “Catholic education aims not only to communicate facts, but also to transmit a coherent, comprehensive vision of life...”<sup>1</sup> In this statement St. John Paul II was referring to the Catholic vision of life which at its core is the belief in the innate dignity of the human person. In response to this vision, Catholic schools develop each student’s potential in a strong community which celebrates every individual’s unique identity. We believe that all students were made in the image of God and possess an innate dignity. In Catholic schools, we educate students to understand the mystery of the human person and to believe in something greater than themselves. In a culture where social media encourages young people to judge their place and worth amid likes and emojis, we encourage them to develop depth of identity based on values in order to be their truest and best selves.

“Far away in the sunshine are my highest aspirations. I may not reach them, but I can look up and see their beauty, believe in them, and try to follow where they lead.”

—LOUISA MAY ALCOTT

Catholic schools are driven by centuries of Catholic Intellectual Tradition where students are challenged by academic rigor and encouraged to question, analyze, and use their critical thinking skills to the utmost. In a world where information is easily accessible, Catholic educators challenge students to develop a strong foundation of values upon which to build knowledge, personal and professional goals.

If one wishes to fully understand Catholic education and the fundamental values on which it was built, one must begin with Catholicism. The following provides a brief summary of our essential beliefs.

# Catholicism

The word Religion is derived from two latin words “re” and “ligare” which together mean “to reconnect”. Religion holds that human destiny is beyond the temporal confines of this world and that we belong to something eternal. The fundamental purpose of religious ideology and ritual is to help us reconnect with the eternal. Religions bind people together to ponder the nature of the universe and to ask questions of ultimate concern. Religions also provide a moral code which govern human affairs and call members to serve their fellow human beings.

In the Catholic tradition, the concept to “reconnect” is expressed in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* which states, “The desire for God is written in the human

## What is the Trinity?

The belief that there is one God in three divine persons, God the Father, God the Son who is Jesus, and God the Holy Spirit

heart, because [we were] created by God; and God never ceases to draw [us] to Himself. Only in God will [we] find the truth and happiness [we] never stop searching for. [Human] dignity rests above all on the fact that [we] are called to communion with God”.<sup>2</sup>

Catholicism is a monotheistic religion, meaning a belief in one God. We embrace the belief that God lives in a community of three that we call the Holy Trinity, consisting of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. We believe that the second person of the Holy Trinity, Jesus, became man through a transformation referenced as the incarnation. Through the incarnation of Jesus, God dwelt among us, divinizing humanity and

partaking in the joys and sorrows of human life. As a result of the incarnation, God can be encountered in and through the created world. Through Jesus we have become the divine sons and daughters of God. As Catholics, we believe that through his teaching, healings, and miracles, Jesus taught the people of first century Palestine about the goodness and mercy of God, and God’s special love for the poor and marginalized. Jesus challenged the religious and political power structures of his day and was eventually put to death on a cross. We believe that Jesus rose from the dead and lives in communion with his Church today. In Catholicism, Jesus is understood as the Son of God, a great teacher, a model for Christian living, and the founder of Christianity.

# Catholic Understanding of the Person

We believe God became man and entered human experience through Jesus. This fundamental belief is essential to how Catholics understand the human person. God has become one of us, hence we have become one with God. In the Catholic understanding all persons possess a divinely given innate dignity and Jesus, through his life and teaching, honored the dignity of the human person like no other. American essayist and poet Ralph Waldo Emerson beautifully described it in this way:

*The unique impression of Jesus upon mankind – whose name is not so much written as ploughed into the history of the world – is proof of the subtle virtue of this infusion.*

*Jesus belonged to the race of prophets.*

*He saw with open eyes the mystery of the soul.*

*One man was true to what is in you and me.*

*He, ... is the only soul in history who has appreciated the worth of a human being.<sup>3</sup>*

Through his teaching, healing, and actions, Jesus honored the true dignity of humanity by acknowledging that all people are children of God. Through the pages of the Christian Scriptures (New Testament) we understand Jesus's ministry as one of human encounter. Time and time again as a popular Rabbi and teacher, Jesus stops, listens to, and touches the hearts and spirits of the wounded and marginalized of his day. Jesus understood, and was attentive to, the mystery and beauty of humanity.



## *Created in the Image of God*

True to the message of Jesus, Catholic schools honor and reflect the dignity, beauty, and potential of the human person by seeing students as created in the image of God. Catholic schools make it a point that students are respected, seen, and cherished as individuals. Teachers, counselors, advisors, coaches, and moderators take the time to get to know the students under their care, and academic and social acumen are monitored closely. Students are encouraged to pursue multiple avenues of growth such as advanced academic courses, leadership positions, athletic teams, visual and performing arts, campus ministry, and service. In a Catholic school, the human desire to be known is met and celebrated.

In Mercy schools, emphasis is placed on who a student is as a person. We are interested in faith and character formation as a critical foundation to prepare students for college and career success. In adolescence the “sense of self” is not yet fully developed, and so attention to the personhood of our students is vital. We guide students in developing self-understanding, provide them with opportunities to explore their gifts, and challenge them to take risks. A person who knows who he/she is, upholds personal integrity, and sees the value of working with - and for - the betterment of others will find personal and professional success. By forming responsible, self-confident, engaged citizens of substance, we develop successful, career-minded adults.



### *Our Transcendent Nature*

As a Catholic Christian community we believe in a Trinitarian God who sent His son Jesus to walk and live among us. Through this incarnation, God has become one with humanity, and humanity has been gifted with the *Divine Spark* which resides within each of us. Every human life reflects the Divine and hints at something greater than the confines of our finite world. In response to the *Divine Spark* within we intuitively seek the Holy. In Catholic understanding the restlessness of the human spirit can only be quelled by union with God. In the words of St. Augustine, “Thou hast made us for Thyself and our hearts are restless until they rest in Thee.”<sup>4</sup> In a Catholic School we believe we are called to

honor our own innate dignity and the dignity of all people. We are called to seek truth, goodness, and justice in all things. Firmly rooted in day-to-day living, we believe there is something more. We believe in, and belong to, something greater than ourselves. There is an inexpressible mystery beyond the confines of this world, beyond our understanding, which we celebrate as Catholics.

## *Spiritual Wisdom*

As a Catholic community we lean on two thousand years of spiritual wisdom from the Judeo-Christian tradition. We understand spiritual wisdom as knowledge, experience or understanding related to God, Jesus, spirituality or the human condition. We provide students with a firm foundation in biblical studies and challenge them with values firmly rooted in the message of Jesus. We seek the truth in all things and encourage students to explore that which is within and beyond them through liturgical celebrations and quiet reflection during monthly chapel visits. Our liturgical life nourishes students' relationship with God and affirms their participation in our community of faith.

During the school year rituals add a beauty and depth to our Catholic liturgical seasons, significant moments and rites of passage. These celebrations highlight our belief that God is present with us in the everyday and significant moments of our lives.

## *A Purpose-Driven Education*

Cognizant of our transcendent nature, we challenge students to contemplate these mysteries. Students are afforded the space and time to reflect on such questions as, *'Who is God?', 'Why am I here?', 'What is my purpose?', 'What is the meaning of my one precious life?', 'What is my connection to, and responsibility for, the human family?'* Such questions are a timely engagement for adolescents who are naturally entering a process of personal exploration during these highly formative years. Reflection on such fundamental questions provides students with an image of who they hope to become in the future. This image of the hoped-for future-self prompts such questions as, *'If this is who I hope to be, then what is required of me now?',* and *'How can my decisions and actions today put me on the path of who I hope to become?'*

Such purpose-driven reflection encourages students to understand the ramifications of their own choices and actions. In Mercy Schools we educate students to be citizens of substance, who know who they are and where they are going. In preparation for graduation we pose this question to our seniors, *"As you prepare to graduate how will you use your education to serve your community?"*

## *In Service to Others*

In Catholicism, service to others is a primary tenant of the faith. Since the inception of Catholic education, students have been required to serve. The purpose of service in a Catholic School is character formation. We believe that through personal encounters with those in need, students' worldviews are expanded and the needs of our civic community take on a human face. Engagement with others who are struggling often instills a sense of gratitude for what one has and an awareness of what others lack. Such interactions awaken a sense of compassion and challenge students to respond to others in need.

Such encounters also encourage greater self awareness and confidence as students realize that their presence and interaction can make a difference in the life of someone who is struggling. These compelling encounters motivate students to step into society as compassionate, responsive citizens who are ready, willing, and able to serve their neighbor. We are proud that service to others is a hallmark of a Mercy Education.



## Catholic Community

A sense of community is at the heart of Catholic education. Our Catholic faith was founded by a community of disciples who followed Jesus, and the experience of community has a richness beyond the confines of this world. We

believe that the spirit and energy of the Saints and the Sisters of Mercy who have gone before us are an integral part of our school community life. Their energy moves us forward. In Mercy Schools, vibrant community is not simply a pleasant by product of the school; it is seen as an essential ingredient of faith and education.

Each student is an essential part of who we are as a school community; her unique contribution is valued, his gifts are explored and contributions celebrated. Students are not left at the margins to fend for themselves. There is a concerted effort to bring all members of the school into communion and friendship.

Students' families become members of the Mercy family when they arrive to the *New Student/Parent Orientation Meeting in the Spring*. Once a family enters the Mercy community, they are offered full engagement in a variety of educational, spiritual, athletic and social activities. Membership in our school community creates a relationship with not only current school families, but also with alumnae and the Sisters of Mercy. Membership affords families a commitment that the Mercy Community shares their joys as well as their sorrows. As a Catholic community we pray with you and your family as you take this important journey.

### *A Welcoming Community*

Families of other religious traditions or those who have had little or no exposure to faith topics often wonder if their child will feel comfortable in a Mercy school. Our shared biblical history with Judaism engenders in us a sensitivity and an appreciation for the value of other faith traditions. As Mercy educators we actively welcome students who have been raised in other faith traditions. We find that differing religious beliefs and traditions enliven our conversations in the classroom and give our students a broader world-view which leads to a greater understanding of other people. Engagement with other faith traditions also deepens students understanding and appreciation of their own religious faith.

In Mercy schools students who have had little exposure to topics of religion or faith do quite well. Faith discussions in the classroom often pique student interest on topics such as the origins of the universe, the purpose and meaning of life, the nature of truth, our responsibility for the human family, the nature of human fulfillment and happiness. Students are often drawn into class discussions due to the essential human questions that Religion classes address. In Catholic schools we believe that a deep understanding of faith traditions is imperative to a comprehensive education as religion continues to be a global force today in politics, cultural understanding, global engagement, and navigating moral issues.

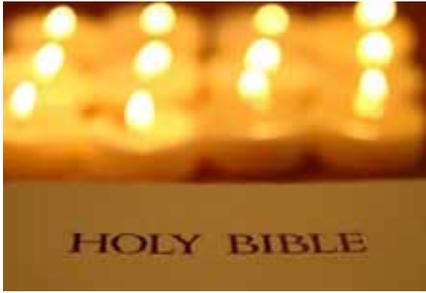
# The Catholic Intellectual Tradition

A love for knowledge and learning is deeply woven into the very fabric of Catholic Church history. As early as 600 c.e., Catholic monks in European monasteries copied biblical texts and other books on a variety of subjects, these collections eventually became libraries. Monasteries developed Cathedral schools as centers of learning the Liberal Arts, and then between 1000-1300 c.e., Cathedral schools evolved into what would later become Western European Universities. This deeply held desire for knowledge and truth is rooted in the belief that God can be encountered in all creation and through all human activity, especially in the search for truth. The essential dance between the life of faith and the pursuit of truth were so beautifully imagined by St. John Paul II when he wrote, "Faith and Reason are like two wings on which the human spirit rises to the contemplation of the truth." <sup>5</sup>

The Catholic Intellectual Tradition is a 2000 year old conversation between faith and science, literature, history, philosophy, art, music, current cultural expressions, and the wisdom of the ancients. "The desire for truth that lies at the heart of the tradition demands that assertions of the truth, meaning, and purpose be tested by the best evidence against them - evidence that can be presented by anyone, of any or no religious tradition, who is engaged in serious inquiry." The search for truth expands our intellect and hence enlivens our understanding of God and the universe. <sup>6</sup>

St. Thomas Aquinas, 13th century philosopher and theologian, modeled this robust search for the truth as he was fearless in considering ideas and arguments in his own theological and philosophical explorations. A Catholic intellectual giant, Aquinas engaged Greek philosophy, Jewish theology and Muslim philosophy in his own search for the truth and construction of Catholic theology. The importance of using both faith and reason in understanding the great mysteries of the universe is at the very heart of Catholic education.

Mercy educators are called to nurture and inspire a sense of wonder, awe, and a love of learning. Science and Religion are dialogue partners in expanding our understanding of a God who is present and active in creation. In the Catholic imagination scientific discoveries related to the universe heighten our understanding of God's activity and majestic creation. Courses in literature and the arts give expression to our deepest human questions and desires.



## *Biblical Interpretation*

In their coursework, students explore biblical texts - the Hebrew Scriptures (Old Testament), which we share with Judaism and Islam as People of the Book, and the Christian Scriptures (New Testament), which teach the life and message of Jesus and the formation of the early

Christian Church. When it comes to Biblical interpretation, not all Christians think alike. Many are familiar with the fundamentalist approach that promotes a literal interpretation wherein the Bible is the actual word of God and was literally dictated word for word to human authors who wrote it down. The Catholic approach to the Bible is very different.

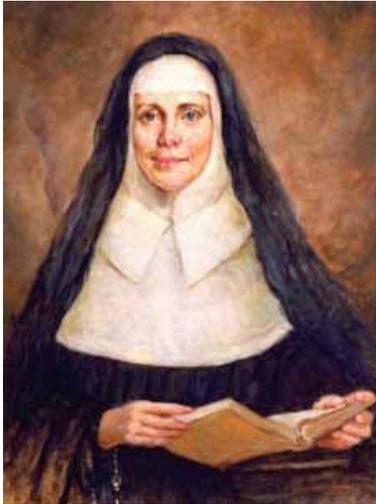
## *Catholic Biblical Interpretation*

All Christians believe that the Bible is the word of God, that God inspired human authors to write the sacred stories of salvation. Differences in opinion among Christians stem from interpretation of the word inspire. In Greek, the word inspire literally means, '*God breathed into*' - God breathed the words of scripture into the human authors who, in turn with reverence, wrote them down. In the Catholic view, God did not dictate the words of scripture. Rather, God partnered with human authors in the creation of the biblical texts. During the writing process, the human authors used their creativity, literary skills, ideas, and other talents to write the pages of scripture. "Through this sacred partnership, God breathed God's spirit into the human authors, and the words became the living word of God." <sup>7</sup>

In the Catholic view, we approach the Bible as a library, or collection, of 73 different books rather than one single book. The Bible contains a variety of different types of literary genres, forms, and devices. To unearth the meaning of biblical texts, Catholic Biblical Scholars employ the *Historical Biblical Method* in which scholars study the texts in their original languages of ancient Hebrew and Greek, the cultural context of ancient Israel, archeological discoveries such as the Dead Sea Scrolls, literary criticism, biblical translations, and transcriptions. Through this process, Biblical Scholars attempt to discover what God and the human author intended to communicate through the original text. These findings are then compared to the overall continuity of the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures (Old and New Testaments).

# Mercy Education in the Catholic Tradition

It is from the heart of the Christian faith that we derive our name, Mercy. Mercy is not just the name on our letterhead; it is the heart of all that we do. Our name and our mission are steeped in the teachings and ministry of Jesus and our rich Mercy history.



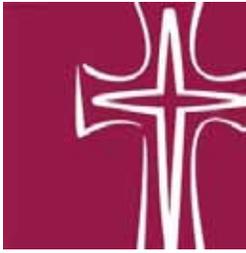
## Sisters of Mercy

In 1827, Catherine McAuley, foundress of the Sisters of Mercy, opened the first House of Mercy in Dublin, Ireland. Catherine was moved by the poverty of women and children of her day and responded by offering temporary housing, education, healthcare, food, and comfort. Her works attracted other like-minded women, and eventually a Catholic Religious Order of women was founded in 1831 appropriately called the Sisters of Mercy.

During the mid 1800's two dynamic Sisters, Frances Warde and Mary Baptist Russell, brought the Mercy vision and good works to the United States. In 1843 Frances arrived in Pittsburgh along with six Mercy companions. They immediately began visiting the sick and prisoners, opened schools and gathered young and old alike for religious education. Frances opened Mercy Hospital in 1847 which still operates today as part of the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center. During her lifetime Frances Warde founded more than one hundred Mercy convents, schools, and hospitals throughout Ireland and the United States.

In 1854 at the age of twenty-five, Mary Baptist Russell led seven Sisters of Mercy to California and arrived during the Gold Rush era in San Francisco. The Sisters founded a House of Mercy for the indigent poor, an orphanage, a house of refuge for women and children, visited prisons, and founded St. Mary's Hospital on Rincon Hill in 1857. In 1906, the hospital was destroyed by the fire that ravaged the city following the San Francisco earthquake. In response Mary Baptist Russell and the Sisters set up a tent-hospital in Golden Gate park. St. Mary's Hospital reopened in 1911 where it proudly stands to this day.

Drawing from a rich and dynamic history the Sisters of Mercy are currently an international Catholic religious order of women, whose response to need is immediate and practical. The Sisters currently serve in healthcare, education, spiritual ministries, low-income housing, prison ministry, social services, social justice, advocacy work and more.



## Mercy Education System of the Americas

Mercy Education System of the Americas is a ministry of the Sisters of Mercy; an educational network of schools that includes 40 high schools, 20 elementary schools, and 17 Universities and Colleges. The governing structure of this group is called Mercy Education System of the Americas (MESA). Most recently the Sisters have asked their ministries to provide education and outreach programs in five areas they have called the Critical Concerns. Through the Critical Concerns Mercy ministries focus on issues concerning women, non violence, racism, immigration and the earth.

### *Service Learning and Social Analysis*

Deeply rooted in Catherine McAuley's vision, students engage the needs of their communities. Service is a hallmark of Mercy education. We believe when students engage the community beyond the classroom and encounter the marginalized, they grow in empathy and begin to understand the complexity of issues such as poverty, homelessness, and the challenges that the elderly, and those with disabilities, face. The one-on-one interaction challenges students' preconceived notions of those who are considered "different". These moments of solidarity are what most deeply connects us to the message of Jesus and the educational mission of the Sisters of Mercy.



Beyond direct service we believe it is imperative that students engage in social analysis and understand the societal factors that contribute to the marginalization of communities. Students are exposed to Catholic Social Teaching, which promotes the fundamental rights of human dignity and community, as well as the human need for participation, viable work, housing, and personal responsibility.

In Mercy schools, students are exposed to service learning through a three-pronged educational evolution: charity, empathy, and social analysis. They are encouraged to participate in charitable giving, grow in empathy through personal contact, and to study and analyze factors that create issues such as poverty and homelessness.

Mercy education is student-centered, service-orientated, forward-looking, and steeped in a rich history. Guided by our Mercy tradition and the message of Jesus, we educate our students to be the hands and heart of Jesus in the world.

## An Invitation to Join Us

As Catholic educators in the Mercy tradition, we understand the challenge of finding the ideal school for your son or daughter. We share your dreams for an excellent academic education, where your child is cherished and their gifts are explored and nurtured; a safe place, rooted in a strong community where lifelong friendships begin and dreams are actualized. This is the kind of education that Mercy education offers.

Deeply rooted in the fundamental values of our Catholic faith, we honor the dignity of each student in a serious academic environment where both teachers and students are held to high expectations. Such a learning environment builds confidence and students are primed to meet the challenges ahead. Our teachers and administrators share a common mission for the education of your child and so expectations and goals are clear. As Mercy educators we see parents as the primary educators of their children and we value our partnership with them. We invite you to explore our schools more closely and come and see all that we have to offer. We hope you will take this sacred journey with us, as your hopes and dreams for your child will find a home in Mercy education.

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## Notes

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