

Critical Race Theory Is the Wrong Way to Teach About Race in Catholic Education

by Patrick Reilly

While critical race theory seeks to divide the world into racial categories, faithful Catholic education can bring about healing through a deep encounter with the Divine Physician. Human dignity and justice were topics in Catholic education long before the racial division of 2020. They are especially important today, as students need to understand an accurate history of racism and prejudices, learn Christian anthropology that teaches the dignity of all persons regardless of creed or color or origin, and strive for the communion to which Christ calls all of us.

And teaching these topics will remain central to Catholic education long after “critical race theory” has gone away. But for now, the divisive, political ideology that seems opposed to nearly everything in Western civilization — simply because it is associated with white Europeans — is making headway into public schools. It is difficult to thwart such efforts by activists, politicians, and teacher unions to push false ideologies into public schools, because there is no clear authority or basis for truth in public education — only political power and public opinion.

But Catholic education is different. It is rooted in the truths of our faith, which reveal the foundations of reality, and it embraces classical philosophy and the West’s insights about human society, freedom, conscience, law and more. Therefore, Catholic education and critical race theory are simply incompatible.

There is a “radical disconnect between the Catholic worldview and critical race ideology,” which is why Catholic educators “must remain vigilant and faithful” to avoid allowing falsehood and division from corrupting the classroom, explain Dr. Denise Donohue and Dr. Dan Guernsey of The Cardinal Newman Society in their appeal against the “cancel culture.”

“Critical race theory misapplies personal sin to groups, irredeemably condemns those it labels as oppressors, condemns those who may happen to look like those oppressors, and makes moral demands of those it believes have privilege resulting from historic oppression,” write Donohue and Guernsey. “It also attempts to empower itself by manipulating race-based feelings of guilt and self-loathing in those in any way it connects to these claims. It provides these group-based sinners with a chance to feel righteous and pure in relation to their fellows once they acknowledge their guilt.”

This is “close to the heart of the pharisees whom [Christ] criticizes for their condemning legalism and self-righteousness.” But Catholic education strives to provide students “a clear understanding of sin and human agency and Christ’s expectations of those whom He has forgiven.”

Rather than adopting critical race theory, Catholics should rely on clear instruction provided in Vatican documents, the U.S. bishops’ pastoral letters, and the Catechism of the Catholic Church to address complex topics like justice and human dignity. We have more than 2,000 years of wisdom to draw from!

“Catholic education offers Christ and the Gospel to the world as the ultimate solution to the sufferings and ills of humanity, including areas of social justice,” write Donohue and Guernsey. “The Church does not simply echo programs and agendas inspired by others’ values but brings to the table her own values of faith, forgiveness, mercy, and justice based on the divine revelation she is called to proclaim to all nations.” Another concern is that critical race theory would trade studies in classical literature for contemporary books that are “shallow” and “politically correct.”

“Great literature provides a forum to explore the depths of the human condition,” explain Guernsey and Donohue. “Unfortunately cruelty, oppression and injustice are a perennial part of that condition. Educators wishing to explore these and related concepts will find no shortage of them throughout classical literature,

where students can enter into a grand conversation through the ages with the best thinkers and most artful works humanity has produced.”

Classical literature and Catholic education have withstood the test of time. Critical race theory may have some popularity today, but not for long. In a culture that constantly embraces new and even radical ideologies, Catholic students need to be taught how to find and hold onto truth across every division and through every age. They should be taught truth especially in the most divisive and heated situations. While critical race theory seeks to divide the world into racial categories, faithful Catholic education by promoting charity, community and rational dialogue can bring about healing through a deep encounter with the Divine Physician.

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