

Article

Benedict XVI on Education and Solidarity

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Abstract: American parents and school leaders are debating whether critical race and gender theories belong in public schools, with many parents turning to home school. Many of these parents will instinctively rely on John Locke's educational theory, since he famously argued for parental control of education. This essay will summarize Locke's educational theory and then survey some educational moments in American history to reveal that political leaders have often wavered between individual rights and communal control of education. The essay then argues that Benedict XVI provides a better educational resource for concerned parents. Benedict's educational perspective flows from his understanding of theology and culture. Benedict argues for parental choice, but within the context of solidarity. For Benedict, teaching children a Christian perspective of human nature within private and home schools becomes an act of communal solidarity, particularly when the community embraces false views of human nature. I conclude by suggesting that although Benedict provides a deeper educational resource than John Locke does, concerned parents should keep Locke's skepticism in mind. Lockean skepticism can protect against naivete.

Keywords: Locke; Benedict XVI; education; solidarity; subsidiarity; Catholic Social Thought; critical race theory; gender; marriage; Christendom



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1. Introduction

Many American parents have been shocked at the virulent debates that have arisen over public school curricula. Christopher Rufo has publicized the implementation of critical race and modern gender theories in many institutions, particularly in public schools. In response, many parents have brought their concerns to school boards, and some states have banned the teaching of critical race theory. The Biden administration's Department of Justice responded by beginning an investigation into supposed threats of violence against school officials (Dunleavy 2021; Evans 2022; Patteson 2022).¹

Many public school officials have argued that critical race theory is taught in law schools, not in the public schools. They have suggested that this is a political movement created by Rufo for partisan purposes (Wallace-Wells 2021). Although public school students are not typically reading the primary sources of the critical race theory, many are being taught principles that reflect it. Lucy Calkins' English Language Arts curriculum, Units of Studies, is an example. Students who use this curriculum do not read primary sources by critical legal theory scholars. However, "works of writers like Kimberlé Crenshaw, bell hooks, Angela Davis, and others directly inform Calkins's Units of Study, which focuses on identity-based power dynamics, victimhood, white supremacy, microaggressions, and the like" (Buck and Furey 2021).

Rather than denying that these theories are taught in public schools, proponents are increasingly acknowledging the legitimate debate at the heart of public school curricula. How should students view the American regime? How should students conceptualize human nature, sexuality, gender, and power dynamics? These educational questions relate to the most fundamental questions of regime legitimacy. This is why critical race theorist Kimberlé Crenshaw largely agrees with Rufo that the political debate over critical race theory is a debate over the "anti-racist" project (Wallace-Wells 2021). Similarly, there is an ongoing debate over the teaching of gender theories in public schools (Rufo 2022a, 2022b).

These educational debates are over the most basic questions of how to conceptualize human nature, how to understand the purpose of government, and how to define civic virtue.

Many American parents became aware of these debates while they were adapting to schools' COVID-19 policies. The COVID-19 policies seem to have given parents the opportunity to radically reconsider their children's education, and as a result, many parents made the choice to homeschool. A total of 11.1 percent of K-12 students in 2021–2022 were homeschooled, in contrast to 3.3 percent of students in the year prior to COVID-19 (McDonald 2021). Interestingly, the rate of homeschooling among black Americans skyrocketed from 3 percent in spring, 2020, to 18 percent in spring, 2021 (Izumi 2022). The reasons for homeschooling are varied. For example, some black parents may desire a more race-conscious education, while others may be motivated by educational outcomes (Reilly 2022; Frey 2022; Ray 2022).

The rising numbers of homeschooled children also introduces questions. Does homeschooling undermine solidarity with the broader community? Are homeschooling parents wrongly prioritizing their children's education over the opportunity for their children to positively impact their local public schools? How should religious and civil leaders approach these educational issues?

While these debates seem new for many parents, they are related to issues that have bedeviled American parents and civic leaders for centuries. As in past years, many parents and advocates will instinctively adapt the educational perspective of John Locke when seeking to answer these questions. As one of the philosophical founders of classical liberalism and an important influence on the American founders, Locke insightfully wrestled with what education could and should do in a classically liberal society. A brief glance at several important educational moments in American history will reveal how this Lockean educational approach can clarify what is at stake in educational conflicts.

American history shows that conflicts over education are, in fact, nothing new. American political leaders have long wrestled with the political, philosophical, and theological issues discussed by Locke. These issues will be seen in several constitutional and political moments in American history which present differing perspectives on the purpose of children's education.

However, Locke's educational theory is not without its limitations. Locke is notoriously difficult to definitively interpret. Furthermore, Locke's educational approach has weaknesses which hinder its usefulness in the current educational crisis. A better approach would begin with Benedict XVI's thoughts on education.

Pope emeritus Benedict XVI provides an insightful perspective on these contemporary educational questions. Joseph Ratzinger spent a career in the academy prior to becoming pope, and he thought deeply about the goals of Catholic education in a liberal, and increasingly post-liberal, western society. Benedict argued that Catholic education should form students' character and way of thinking, to allow students to pursue truth in solidarity with others.

Relying on his work prior to and after becoming pope, I describe Benedict's concern that western culture was increasingly devolving into what he called a "dictatorship of relativism". As a result of these cultural changes, he believed that the Church would go through a time of winnowing. Nominal Catholics would fall away, leaving a more vibrant but smaller Church. Relatedly, this would drastically affect the structural legacies of the Church. I will argue that an educational policy inspired by Benedict XVI requires prudentially applying educational policies which are appropriate for an apostolic age. This prudential approach is particularly relevant when grappling with fundamental questions about homeschooling and educational solidarity. I conclude by suggesting that, while Benedict XVI crafts a deeper educational theory than does Locke, Locke provides important pragmatic caution which Benedict's educational theory needs.

2. Philosophical and Historical Context

Locke's legendary literary caution has ensured an ongoing debate over how best to interpret his work. Locke argued that atheists did not deserve political toleration, but was this a tactical move intended to hide his own atheism (Numao 2013)? Does the view of human nature seen in the *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* fit with that assumed by the *Two Treatises of Government* (Stoner 2004)? Locke's writings on education, most prominently his *Some Thoughts Concerning Education*, present many of the same interpretive difficulties as do his other works. However, Locke's theories on education are clearly related to his political works. As Tarcov has nicely put it, "But just as it is not possible to have a political doctrine without implications for education- for what kind of men are to be formed- even when that is not its direct object but only its indirect requirement, so we can doubt whether it is possible to have a political doctrine consisting only in a teaching of rights and duties, unaccompanied by some account of the art of governing men" (Tarcov 1984, p. 7).

The traditional interpretation of Locke's educational works argued that his education was intended to habituate individuals for political life in a liberal regime. Students would be habituated for virtue, thereby making a liberal regime possible. More recent scholars have applied a Foucauldian lens to argue that Locke freed students from other authority structures to habituate them according to Locke's own will. In short, Locke freed students to habitually do as Locke desired them to do.

Rita Koganzan has more recently, and to my mind persuasively, argued that Locke wanted students to be habituated for independent thought and self-control (Koganzon 2016).² Koganzan argues that Locke intended to habituate students against the habits which would be provided by nature and custom. By habituating students against their first inclinations, Locke hoped to give them the capacity for self-denial, which could lead to intellectual life. Locke famously argued that education should occur in the family rather than in an institutional setting which might have ill-ordered children. "By keeping him out of school and away from the influence of servants and other adults, however, Locke delays the child's exposure to fashion and custom, supplying him first with a family education that will be a source of dissonance when he does finally enter the broader society" (Koganzon 2021, p. 109).

Locke argues that students should be presented with few theological doctrines or political ideas in their early education, only covering these ideas later after they have intellectually matured. Instead, the focus should be on shaping students to be reluctant when political or cultural authorities demand intellectual obeisance. Locke's limited government allows for a more powerful civil society, but his educational theory is intended to ensure that individuals would be mentally capable to resist the powerful cultural trends flowing from that civil society (Koganzon 2021, chp. 4).

Locke's educational theory presents several tensions. Locke recommended home education to protect children from peer pressure. But what happens when that education for independent thought fundamentally conflicts with the dominant cultural conceptualization of the regime? How should society balance individual skepticism with political virtue? How should one balance toleration with the inculcation of Locke's preferred habits? For that matter, how much toleration should be permitted? American educational history has grappled with similar questions.

While Locke was influential for the American founding generation, the founding generation had already been thinking through many of the themes which Locke examined. Locke's *A Letter Concerning Toleration* was published in 1689, but Roger Williams' *The Bloudy Tenant of Persecution for Cause of Conscience* was published in 1644.³ Similarly, Locke's *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* was published in 1693, but the American Puritans passed the "Old Deluder Satan Act" in 1647. This very Puritan law established public schools to ensure that all could read the Bible, thereby attacking that old deluder Satan who encouraged illiteracy to keep people from reading the Bible. The Puritans

viewed education as required for the community's spiritual good, for an illiterate society would be more easily deluded by the community's spiritual enemies.

Immigration in the late 19th century led to a political debate over educational funding. Increasing numbers of Catholic immigrants worried Protestant leaders. Congressman James Blaine failed in his attempt to amend the United States' constitution to prohibit government funding of religious/parochial schools. However, many states added these so-called "Blaine" requirements to their state constitutions. Public schools which taught Protestant educational content were obviously not affected. Once again, we see political leaders viewing education as vital for communal health by protecting against Catholic education.

As the Supreme Court sought to apply the 14th amendment against the states during its so-called *Lochner* era, the Court explicitly protected Lockean individual rights. This was famously seen in 1925's *Pierce v. Society of Sisters*. In this case, the Society of Sisters challenged Oregon's requirement that all students attend public schools, regardless of whether the parents desired their children to attend parochial schools. The Court applied Lockean logic in its resolution.

We think it entirely plain that the Act of 1922 unreasonably interferes with the liberty of parents and guardians to direct the upbringing and education of children under their control. As often heretofore pointed out, rights guaranteed by the Constitution may not be abridged by legislation which has no reasonable relation to some purpose within the competency of the state. The fundamental theory of liberty upon which all governments in this Union repose excludes any general power of the state to standardize its children by forcing them to accept instruction from public teachers only. The child is not the mere creature of the state; those who nurture him and direct his destiny have the right, coupled with the high duty, to recognize and prepare him for additional obligations. (*Pierce v. Society of Sisters* 1925)⁴

A more progressive view of the distinctive role that education plays in a liberal society was seen in the famous 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education*. The case is famous for its repudiation of segregated schools.⁵ Often overlooked, however, is its understanding of education.

Today, education is perhaps the most important function of state and local governments. Compulsory school attendance laws and the great expenditures for education both demonstrate our recognition of the importance of education to our democratic society. It is required in the performance of our most basic public responsibilities, even service in the armed forces. It is the very foundation of good citizenship. Today it is a principal instrument in awakening the child to cultural values, in preparing him for later professional training, and in helping him to adjust normally to his environment. In these days, it is doubtful that any child may reasonably be expected to succeed in life if he is denied the opportunity of an education. Such an opportunity, where the state has undertaken to provide it, is a right which must be made available to all on equal terms. (*Brown v. Board of Education* 1954)

The Warren court explicitly argued that education's importance was as a means of transmitting "cultural values, in preparing him for professional training, and in helping him to adjust normally to his environment". In the court's opinion, the transmission of cultural values is important both for the child's equitable chance of success and the community's cultural homogeneity.⁶ This perspective on education is less Lockean than that which was represented in the *Pierce* decision.

More recently, Justice Clarence Thomas has argued that education is at the heart of emancipation and liberty. In the 2002 *Zelman v. Simmons-Harris* case, the Supreme Court ruled that Cleveland's educational voucher program did not violate the First Amendment.

Justice Thomas's concurring opinion argued for the philosophical importance of the issues in the case.

Frederick Douglass once said that "[e]ducation . . . means emancipation. It means light and liberty. It means the uplifting of the soul of man into the glorious light of truth, the light by which men can only be made free". Today many of our inner-city public schools deny emancipation to urban minority students

While the romanticized ideal of universal public education resonates with the cognoscenti who oppose vouchers, poor urban families just want the best education for their children, who will certainly need it to function in our high-tech and advanced society. As Thomas Sowell noted 30 years ago: "Most black people have faced too many grim, concrete problems to be romantics. They want and need certain tangible results, which can be achieved only by developing certain specific abilities". The same is true today

As Frederick Douglass poignantly noted "no greater benefit can be bestowed upon a long benighted people, than giving to them, as we are here earnestly this day endeavoring to do, the means of an education". ([Zelman v. Simmons-Harris 2002](#))

As these examples show, Americans have long struggled with fundamental educational questions. If education passes along the cultural values necessary for republican self-government, then how should Americans structure education? Do parents have the primary educational responsibility? What if private/home schools teach values that contradict the dominant cultural self-understanding? Which values and whose values should be inculcated?

3. Benedict XVI on Culture and Education

In light of Ratzinger's academic career, it was natural that he would write about education, but his educational writings were deeply grounded in his broader thought. It is simply impossible to separate Ratzinger's educational thoughts from his theological and cultural arguments. Benedict's 2009 encyclical *Caritas in Veritate* (Charity in Truth) is a fine encapsulation of his understanding of Catholic Social Thought. Benedict notes that his predecessor, John Paul II, marked the 20th anniversary of the 1967 *Populorum Progressio* (PP) with his own encyclical. Benedict is following in this tradition, providing a "fresh reading" of the document in light of contemporary times ([Benedict XVI 2009](#), Section 10). The original document used contemporary social science, leading to vigorous disagreements from the left and the right as to what the document actually meant. Robert Royal has noted, "Given the murkiness of the encyclical's language, it is no surprise that the first readers construed the document in contradictory ways ([Royal 1991](#), p. 116)". Benedict's contextualization of PP is intended to show continuity of social thought, while presumably clarifying this ambiguity.

In his encyclical, Benedict reapplies *PP* to the world as Benedict then saw it. *PP* discussed human "development", and Benedict also discusses his concerns with globalization, finance, and labor conditions. Benedict explicitly goes further, however, in arguing that human development extends to the most deeply moral and philosophical issues of our age.

As his encyclical's title suggests, Benedict argues that charity and truth are necessarily interconnected. "Because it is filled with truth, charity can be understood in the abundance of its values, it can be shared and communicated. *Truth*, in fact, is *logos*, which creates *dia-logos* and, hence, communication and communion Truth opens and unites our minds in the *logos* of love" ([Benedict XVI 2009](#), Section 4). The contemporary tendency toward relativizing truth means that individuals must see charity in action to understand that Christian principles are necessary to build a good society.

These interconnections among love, truth, charity, and communion are vital. A societal abjuration of any of these will inevitably affect the others. "Without truth, without trust and love for what is true, there is no social conscience and responsibility, and social action ends up serving private interests and the logic of power, resulting in social fragmentation

(Benedict XVI 2009, Section 5). But this can also be seen in a positive manner. “Fidelity to man requires *fidelity to the truth*, which is the *guarantee of freedom* (cf. Jn 8:32) and of the *possibility of integral human development*” (Benedict XVI 2009, Section 9).

He notes that Pope Paul VI not only wrote PP, but he also wrote *Humanae Vitae*, the famous encyclical continuing the Catholic Church’s thoughts on human sexuality as fundamentally opposed to abortion and contraception.

The Encyclical *Humanae Vitae* emphasizes both the unitive and the procreative meaning of sexuality, thereby locating at the foundation of society the married couple, man and woman, who accept one another mutually, in distinction and in complementarity *Humanae Vitae* indicates the *strong links between life ethics and social ethics*. (Benedict XVI 2009, Section 15)

Some scholars have used PP to understand development solely in economic terms. After Pope Francis’s encyclical *Laudato Si’*, others have interpreted development solely in environmental terms. Benedict believes that both approaches are fundamentally flawed. Given the importance of his argument, an extended quotation is necessary.

In order to protect nature, it is not enough to intervene with economic incentives or deterrents; not even an apposite education is sufficient. These are important steps, but *the decisive issue is the overall moral tenor of society*. If there is a lack of respect for the right to life and to a natural death, if human conception, gestation, and birth are made artificial, if human embryos are sacrificed to research, the conscience of society ends up losing the concept of human ecology and, along with it, that of environmental ecology. It is contradictory to insist that future generations respect the natural environment when our educational systems and laws do not help them to respect themselves. The book of nature . . . takes in not only the environment but also life, sexuality, marriage, the family, social relations: in a word, *integral human development*”. (Benedict XVI 2009, Section 51)

The contemporary danger facing western society is that of secularism. “Human rights risk being ignored either because they are robbed of their transcendent foundation or because personal freedom is not acknowledged.” However, secularism creates an even more dangerous theoretical problem. “Secularism and fundamentalism exclude the possibility of fruitful dialogue and effective cooperation between reason and religious faith. *Reason always stands in need of being purified by faith*: this also holds true for political reason For its part, *religion always needs to be purified by reason* in order to show its authentically human face” (Benedict XVI 2009, Section 56).

Benedict’s perspective on education flows from these foundational thoughts on charity, truth, love, and communication. In light of his arguments regarding dialogue, it would have been surprising if he had not discussed education. “Education—from the Latin *educere*—means leading young people to move beyond themselves and introducing them to reality, toward a fullness that leads to growth” (Benedict XVI 2013, p. 99). Benedict followed in the papal tradition of describing education in terms of formation. As Benedict put it, the “central aim of education” is “the formation of a person to enable him or her to live to the full and to make his or her own contribution to the common good” (Benedict XVI 2013, p. 154).

Benedict believes that education can form individuals in truth, which shapes individuals for authentic freedom, that is, a freedom that accepts natural duties. “And you are rightly asking yourselves which human being, which image of man, does the university intend to serve: an individual withdrawn into the defense of his own interests, a single perspective of interests, a materialist perspective, or a person who is open to solidarity with others in the search for the true meaning of existence, which must be a common meaning that transcends the individual” (Benedict XVI 2013, p. 280). Benedict repeatedly comes back to this theme. “With confidence, Christian educators can liberate the young from the limits of positivism In this way you will also help to form their conscience When nothing beyond the individual is recognized as definitive, the ultimate criterion of judgment becomes the self and the satisfaction of the individual’s immediate wishes”

(Benedict XVI 2013, p. 58). Benedict explicitly argued that this narcissism is exemplified by those who teach about sexuality in terms of risk management, rather than describing the natural truth of conjugal love.

Benedict's discussion of solidarity is at the heart of his understanding of education and differentiates his view of education from Locke's view of education. American Catholics often split along partisan lines when describing solidarity and subsidiarity, with progressive Catholics discussing the former and conservative Catholics discussing the latter. In contrast, Benedict believes that neither can be understood when isolated from the other. Benedict has described the interaction between solidarity and subsidiarity as follows: "*Solidarity* refers to the virtue enabling the human family to share fully the treasure of material and spiritual goods, and *subsidiarity* is the coordination of society's activities in a way that supports the internal life of the local communities" (Benedict XVI 2008). Both subsidiarity and solidarity are necessary.

As described above, Benedict's *Caritas in Veritate* was explicitly written in honor of Paul VI's discussion of integral human development in *Populorum Progressio*. As Benedict famously wrote, "I express my conviction that *Populorum Progressio* deserves to be considered 'the *Rerum Novarum* of the present age', shedding light upon humanity's journey toward unity" (Benedict XVI 2008, Section 8). This statement is truly remarkable, for *Populorum Progressio* is greatly beloved by progressives for its description of integral humanism and human development. Since *Rerum Novarum* is generally viewed as the first important modern encyclical on Catholic Social Thought, then Benedict is praising PP to a remarkable extent and confirming his commitment to solidarity as well as subsidiarity.

Benedict assumes the principles of both subsidiarity and solidarity in his discussion of education. He reflects subsidiarity by stressing parental choice of educational structure, but he also stresses solidarity in education. In his address to the participants of the Pontifical Academy of Social Scientists, Benedict argued that expanding the opportunities for education is one of the imperatives currently facing mankind. Similarly, a Catholic education should form individuals to see our common humanity. As Benedict put it in *Caritas*, "The term 'education' refers not only to classroom teaching and vocational training—both of which are important factors in development—but to the complete formation of the person. In this regard, there is a problem that should be highlighted: in order to educate, it is necessary to know the nature of the human person, to know who he or she is" (Benedict XVI 2009, Section 61). Given the fundamental importance of parental examples for developing a Catholic understanding of marriage, sexuality, and gender, it is not surprising that Benedict stresses the right of parents to choose the education of their children.

Benedict was here building on John Paul II's work on education. Educational advocates rightly point out John Paul II's comments regarding parental rights to educate their children as they see fit; parents are their children's first teachers (John Paul II 1983). As Makosa has accurately noted, John Paul II connected parents' role in education with parish schools (Makosa 2020, p. 228).

Similarly, Benedict argued that one of children's most precious treasures is the presence of their parents. The importance of the parents explicitly extends to education. Parents should choose their children's educational structures (Benedict XVI 2013, pp. 99, 100). But what does solidarity in education mean when the broader culture is opposed to both divine and natural truth? Does withdrawing one's children from the public schools violate solidarity? Benedict provides an answer.

Benedict was deeply worried about the western educational crisis. The Church should be "extracting the society in which we live from the educational crisis that afflicts it, clamping down on distrust and on that strange 'self-hatred' that seems to have become a hallmark of our civilization" (Benedict XVI 2013, p. 155). This western self-hatred flows from a specific way of thought.

In his last homily before becoming pope, Benedict famously critiqued contemporary western culture as imposing what he called a "dictatorship of relativism" (Allen 2010).⁷ Benedict argued that the west increasingly followed Francis Bacon's new religion

of progress. Unfortunately for the west, technology cannot give ultimate guidance. “Paul VI had already warned against the technological ideology so prevalent today, fully aware of the great danger of entrusting the entire process of development to technology Technology, viewed in itself, is ambivalent” (Benedict XVI 2009, Section 14). Technology should be guided by moral standards that are outside technology. Benedict argued that the western conversation between reason and revelation was necessary to ensure that technology served humanity instead of humanity serving technology. Refusing to interact with Christian concepts leaves western culture more exposed to tyranny, technological and otherwise. As then Cardinal Ratzinger noted, “The refusal to refer to God in the [European Union’s] Constitution is not the expression of a tolerance that wishes to protect the nontheistic religions and the dignity of atheists and agnostics; rather, it is the expression of a consciousness that would like to see God eradicated once and for all from the public life of humanity and shut up in the subjective sphere of cultural residues from the past” (Ratzinger 2005, pp. 44, 45).

This replacement of traditional reason with scientific rationality results in a western culture that views its historical roots as intolerant and alien. This materialistic, scientific rationality inevitably changes cultural assumptions and goals. “A confused ideology of liberty leads to a dogmatism that is proving ever more hostile to real liberty” (Ratzinger 2005, p. 36).

“In the name of tolerance, tolerance is being abolished The danger is that reason—so-called western reason—claims that it has now really recognized what is right and thus makes a claim to totality that is inimical to freedom” (Benedict XVI 2010, p. 53). An example of this intolerance can be seen in the cultural demands that the Church change her position on homosexuality and the ordination of women. These demands represent “an intolerant claim of a new religion, which pretends to be generally valid because it is reasonable, indeed, because it is reason itself” (Benedict XVI 2010, p. 52).

This western intolerance increasingly has little room in it for a traditional Christian understanding of human nature. Benedict has noted that questioning homosexual marriage now leads to being excommunicated by society (Vondracek 2020). This trend has become even more pronounced over the past decade. This new perspective on sexuality and gender is now seen in the debate over sex transition for minors. Catholics throughout the west recognize that sexual and gender legislation and regulation threatens Catholic educational content and institutions (Allen 2021). But what does solidarity look like if the broader culture is opposed to both natural and divine truth?

Benedict’s description of solidarity given above resolves this question. “Solidarity refers to the virtue enabling the human family to share fully the treasure of material and spiritual goods” Solidarity refers to things held in common, but solidarity does not mean anything held in common. Solidarity, as Benedict understands it, is committed to sharing the treasure of both material and spiritual goods. From this perspective, a family pulling children from a public school to pass along spiritual goods which are opposed by the broader culture is an act of solidarity. The family’s commitment to giving the broader community a living example of natural and spiritual virtues is rooted in both solidarity and subsidiarity. This does not imply that the broader community will appreciate these spiritual goods.

As early as 1970, Ratzinger examined the past to understand the challenges the Church would face in the future. “Today, likewise, the future of the Church can and will issue from those whose roots are deep It will not issue from those who accommodate themselves merely to the passing moment or from those who merely criticize others To put this more positively, the future of the Church . . . will be reshaped by saints” (Ratzinger 2009, p. 114). This will have an incredible impact on the institutions of the Church. “From the crisis of today, the Church of tomorrow will emerge—a church that has lost much. She will become small and will have to start afresh more or less from the beginning” (Ratzinger 2009, p. 116).

Monsignor Shea has developed prudential strategies which are particularly helpful for those who find Benedict's critique of western culture to be persuasive. Shea distinguishes between pastoral strategies that are appropriate in two different ages. Fulton Sheen in 1974 argued that Christendom, understood as economic, political, and social life inspired by Christian principles, was ending. Shea builds upon Sheen's argument by suggesting that institutions in a Christendom age strive for maintenance and are tempted by hypocrisy. If the general culture appreciates Christian principles, leaders can focus on institutional maintenance. The primary sin in this age is hypocrisy, for leaders can find it useful to claim Christian beliefs that they do not personally hold.

In contradistinction to a Christendom age, Shea argues that an "apostolic" age involves a society that is not influenced by Christian principles. The primary sin in this age is cowardice or a refusal to share the gospel. Since the culture no longer appreciates Christian principles, Christians will be incentivized to avoid taking any principled stands.

Shea's argument is particularly important in light of Benedict's expectation of a smaller church. Benedict describes a church "that has become small", but how should leaders and parents make decisions during that process of becoming small? Shea implies that the temptation will be to maintain existing structures, rather than build the institutional structures needed for those who are starting "more or less from the beginning". Successfully staving off institutional bankruptcy may not be enough if the goal is institutional reformation for an evangelistic age. Prudential compromises that are appropriate in a Christendom age may be a cowardly refusal to make the hard choices necessary for an apostolic age.

Shea notes that there are more challenges in an apostolic age than in a Christendom age, particularly for those rearing children (Shea 2020, p. 27) "The rapid change from a Christendom ruling vision to a modern progressive utopian one has radically altered the strategic situation Institutional and ecclesiastical strategies that are suited to Christendom do not work well in an apostolic setting" (Shea 2020, p. 31). Shea specifically applies this to how one raises one's children. Parents "will need to raise their children differently from how they themselves were raised, not necessarily because their parents did a bad job, but because the surrounding environment has so radically changed Raising a Christian family has always been a serious task; in an apostolic age, it is a missionary adventure" (Shea 2020, p. 45).

In a Christendom age, parents could expect institutional schools to support their Christian principles. In an apostolic age, parents must closely examine educational institutions to ensure that Christian principles are not being undermined. Institutional self-preservation could lead to cultural surrender rather than religious commitment. Parents cannot simply assume that their parish or parochial school is committed to Christian education. Financially committing to a parochial education, giving up a salary to homeschool, and supporting truly faithful Christian educational institutions are but a few of the decisions which an apostolic age might require.

Catholic institutional administrators are always tempted to view education in terms that appeal to the broader culture. In today's world, they may be tempted to define educational purpose in light of ecological development. These schools will also be tempted to ignore Catholic teaching on human nature, for who wants to offend with traditional beliefs on sex and gender? Benedict would see this decision as mistakenly applying educational strategies that are appropriate for a Christendom age, not ones that are appropriate in an apostolic age.

Benedict instead argues that Catholic education should form consciences by passing on Catholic values. Indeed, education is always about teaching fundamental cultural values. "Moreover, in the face of the profound changes that are taking place, it is ever more urgently necessary to refer to the fundamental values that must be passed on as an indispensable patrimony to the young generations" (Benedict XVI 2009, p. 296). As the society grows more technological, people will become more atomized. "Men in a totally planned world will find themselves unspeakably lonely Then they will discover the little flock of

believers as something wholly new. They will discover it as a hope that is meant for them, an answer for which they have always been searching in secret” (Ratzinger 2009, p. 118).

Benedict resolves the Lockean educational quandary by invoking solidarity. As western society grows more technocratic and atomistic, Catholic commitment to the fullness of human nature as seen in both reason and revelation becomes even more vital. A commitment to human development may require smaller Catholic institutions dedicated to shaping fewer Catholic students. Similarly, parents who exercise their right to guide their children’s education can be working toward the common good, particularly when the community is opposed to the natural and divine truth communicated by that education. This evangelistic educational approach for an apostolic age would be a vital act of solidarity.

4. Conclusions

Parents and religious leaders who are considering private school options will find both Locke’s and Benedict’s commitments to parental educational choice appealing. Unlike Locke’s educational theory, however, Benedict explicitly refuses to isolate education from the greater good. In fact, a commitment to solidarity should lead parents to give their kids a Catholic education, so that they can pass along their religious worldview to their children’s generation. Benedict is not, however, a relativist. Parents should have educational choice, but this does not imply that all educational choices are equal. In fact, a Catholic education should protect against an atomistic and materialistic way of thinking. By helping students understand and live out natural truths, teachers should help their students to mature into flourishing men and women.

Traditionally orthodox Christians can find this educational perspective particularly powerful, given contemporary educational conflicts. Parents who are struggling between commitment to their children’s spiritual flourishing and commitment to the common good can find Benedict’s educational understanding of solidarity to be liberating. Committing to one’s children becomes an act of solidarity, particularly if the broader community is opposed to that spiritual education. That openness to dialogue should continually remind students of their place in a larger story.

School boards are currently debating whether critical race and gender theories should be included or applied in the curricula. Many activists believe that they should be included as an expression of solidarity with oppressed groups. An actual dialogue on this topic will require moderate and conservative parents to give their understanding of human nature, along with a fair representation of western history. Catholic education should encourage greater dialogue on these important topics, not be used as a way of avoiding them. Benedict can show parents how to combine educational integrity with institutional flexibility.

However, parents should also take into consideration Locke’s more skeptical educational theory. In many ways, Locke has a more negative, or perhaps introverted, view of education. Whereas Benedict wants students to pursue truth in and for communion with others, Locke desires students to be able to pursue truth, disregarding the broader culture. Locke simply has greater skepticism regarding both peers and those in authority. Current political arguments regarding “misinformation” should remind parents of Locke’s saliency on this issue. Government regulation of “misinformation” is often just self-interested political censorship. Those in authority will always be tempted to define truth in a self-interested fashion and use education to preserve power. Naïve optimism is inherently dangerous, and this also applies in education. Benedict provides an outstanding way forward for concerned parents, but parents should preserve some Lockean skepticism.

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Notes

- ¹ This investigation was triggered by a letter from the National School Boards Association, after the Biden administration's Secretary of Education allegedly requested the letter.
- ² Koganzan explicitly makes her argument in contradistinction to these other two interpretive traditions.
- ³ Roger Williams' interest in religious toleration was part of a broader interest. Also published in 1643–44 were William Walwyn's (1644) *The Compassionate Samaritan*, Henry Robinson's (1643) *Liberty of Conscience*, and John Milton's (1644) *Areopagitica*.
- ⁴ In a remarkable moment, Pope Pius XI specifically praised this court decision in Section 37 his encyclical "On Christian Education." Pius XI specifically quotes the opinion's claim that "the child is not the mere creature of the state" (Pius XI 1929, p. 37).
- ⁵ However, the Warren Court did not rely upon Harlan's dissenting opinion in *Plessy v. Ferguson*.
- ⁶ Reflecting Locke's skepticism regarding this view of education, J.S. Mill made the following argument in chapter 5 of *On Liberty*: "A general State education is a mere contrivance for moulding people to be exactly like one another; and as the mould in which it casts them is that which pleases the predominant power in the government, whether this be a monarch, a priesthood, an aristocracy, or the majority of the existing generation, in proportion as it is efficient and successful, it establishes a despotism over the mind, leading by natural tendency to one over the body" (Mill 1859, chp. 5).
- ⁷ The phrase "dictatorship of relativism" has often been used to summarize Benedict's view of the challenges facing the church.

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