



What Catholic Children Should Be Taught

We are experiencing in America today a cultural revolution which has long been in the works. This cultural revolution is occurring on many fronts, primarily focused on race. Words like “white privilege” have replaced older concepts such as equality of opportunity and equality under the law. Noble struggles to end racial segregation have given way to new forms of segregation into racial identity groups, especially seen on college campuses. In nearly every large company, state agency, and educational institution, people are undergoing mandatory racial sensitivity courses. These courses are less about racial sensitivity than about propaganda that “systemic racism” is embodied in U.S. history, culture and institutions, and in being born white.

As the historian Victor Davis Hanson observed recently, “cultural revolutions are insidious and not just because they seek to change the way people think, speak and act. They are also dangerous because they are fueled by self-righteous sanctimoniousness, expressed in seemingly innocuous terms such as ‘social activism,’ ‘equality’ and ‘fairness.’”¹ The current cultural revolution seeks to change fundamental American values and institutions.

Cultural revolutionaries need to be confronted by active citizens who bring their voices to school boards, city councils, university administrators, and state legislators funding the revolutionaries. Corporations and foundations funding this revolution should be called out. Parents must be willing to withdraw their children from schools and teachers trying to indoctrinate their children. This may mean educating their children through charter schools, homeschooling or religious schools.

The cultural left’s grip on educational institutions has resulted in the capture of the minds of many of our youth, yet not all is lost. As Jay Schalin, writing in *American Thinker*, notes, conservatives have countered the left in recent decades with the formation of hundreds of think tanks, pressure groups and citizens’ organizations. At the same time, alternative educational institutions have sprung up. Students attending

charter schools increased nearly sevenfold from 2000 to 2015, from about 400,000 to more than 2.7 million. Homeschooling has increased as well. Many young parents are withdrawing their children from public schools and placing them in Catholic or Christian schools.²

Seeing many of our youth turning to socialism, tearing down statues and expressing unpatriotic attitudes, concerned Americans are calling for the reinstatement of civics and history courses. Simply requiring these courses won’t, however, fully address their content. Teachers having undergone indoctrination themselves will turn mandated civics and history courses into social justice propaganda.

Resisting Counter-Culture

Catholic education presents another challenge. Catholic schools generally offer religion classes, many of which emphasize social justice. As Christians, Catholics believe in the importance of social justice. Jesus taught that God gave us the gift of life and that all humans are equal in the eyes of the Lord. We are our brothers’ and sisters’ keepers. But in the midst of a cultural revolution in which Christianity itself is under attack and Catholics are especially targeted, Catholic schools need to step up the fight.

Religious education must impart more than abstract principles, important as they are. Faith should be reinforced so our children can resist the left-wing popular culture created in the last half century. Our youth in Catholic schools rarely hear of examples of those who stood up to the forces of evil, often at the sacrifice of their own lives. Teaching about martyrs and saints personifies and reinforces faith.

Jesus Christ offered his human life in sacrifice for our salvation. His crucifixion inspired early Christians as well as countless others up to the present. Students in Catholic schools should be taught of the persecution of Christians of old, but also of those who resisted evil more recently. In a popular culture that derides religious heroism and makes all religious ideals relative, our youth today would benefit from examples of those men and women who remained firm in their faith.

Early Christians suffered terrible persecution in the Roman Empire. Across the empire—Egypt, Asia Minor, Gaul, Greece and Rome—thousands of Christians were rounded up, tortured and executed for refusing to recognize the emperor as a god. The calm and dignity of these early Christian martyrs inspired other Christians to remain faithful. As Pope John Paul II in his 1994 encyclical *Tertio Millennio Adveniente* reminded the world, the blood of martyrs is the seed of the church and “This witness must not be forgotten.”³

Yet in the 20th century, the number of martyrs in absolute numbers far surpasses those of any previous century.⁴ Every Catholic student should know, for the sake of deepening and strengthening his faith in these tumultuous times, stories of men and women in the past century who gave witness of their faith when tested. Edith Stein, a Carmelite nun, and Miguel Pro, a Mexican Jesuit who died defending religious liberty, come to mind. There are so many others, such as Maximilian Kolbe, a Polish priest who died at the hands of Nazis, Ignatius Kung, a Chinese bishop who was brutally tortured and died in Communist China, and Venerable Cardinal Mindszenty, whose long ordeal in Hungary is familiar to our readers.

Edith Stein/St. Teresa Benedicta

Every student attending Catholic school should learn of Edith Stein, who suffered and died under the Nazis. In 1998 she was canonized as St. Teresa Benedicta of the Cross. Edith Stein’s life and death expressed her commitment to freedom, human dignity and the mysteries of the Cross.⁵ A trained and talented philosopher—a student of the great German philosopher Edmund Husserl—she converted from Judaism to Catholicism, then gave up a career in the academy to become a Carmelite nun. Her life represented the reconciliation of faith and reason. She never disavowed her Jewish ties and she became a victim of the Nazi Holocaust. She came to Christ through reason and the power of the Cross.

Born in 1891 in Poland, Edith Stein came from a religious Jewish family that eventually moved to Germany. After her father died when Edith was two years old, her mother took over running the family’s timber business. Edith, a brilliant student, entered the University of Breslau to study psychology, which she discovered was dominated by quantitative measures and what she considered reductionist thinking. Interested in the study of the *psyche* she turned to philosophy and came across the German philosopher Edmund Husserl’s *Logical Investigations*, which sought to recover the meaning of Spirit through the study of “phenomena” of everyday perception. Husserl founded the school of phenomenology that deeply influenced John Paul II.

Following graduation from the University of Breslau, Stein entered the University of Göttingen to study with Husserl,

called “the Master” by his students. She became his personal assistant and proved essential to organizing the exceptionally disorganized Husserl. While suffering from overwork and depression, Stein discovered St. Teresa of Avila’s *Autobiography*. After a night’s reading she concluded, “That is the truth.”⁶ She undertook the study of the Catholic catechism and missal. In 1922, she converted to Catholicism.

She taught at St. Magdalena’s, a Dominican school in Germany, where she impressed her students with her knowledge and her commitment to prayer. While teaching she became acquainted with the works of St. Thomas Aquinas, the medieval philosopher who synthesized reason and faith. She received invitations to lecture to Catholic institutions across Germany. She proved to be a powerful speaker, not through rhetorical force but in her projection of quiet spirituality.

In 1933 she entered the Carmelite religious order in Cologne, taking the name Sister Teresa Benedicta of the Cross. For the first time in her life, as a middle-aged novice, she had to do physical work from needlepoint to scrubbing floors. She drew closer to God through prayer.

She understood that she stood on the threshold of a horrific manifestation of evil in the rise of Hitler, Nazis and virulent anti-Semitism. Her friends and sister Carmelites believed that Sr. Teresa Benedicta would be safe inside the convent. Sr. Teresa replied, “Oh no, I do not think so. They [the Nazis] will surely get me out of here. In any case I cannot count on being left in peace here.” She added that she could trust only in the will of God.⁷

In 1940 she and her sister, who had also converted to Catholicism, fled to Holland. Even Holland proved unsafe. She was offered a chance to flee to a Carmelite convent in Switzerland, but the convent did not have room for her sister. She and her sister were arrested by the SS in a roundup of more than a thousand Catholics of Jewish background.

On August 9, 1942 Sr. Teresa Benedicta of the Cross died in an Auschwitz gas chamber. Throughout the ordeal leading to her death, she remained calm, offering consolation and confidence to the others. In a note smuggled out to her sisters, she wrote, “from the bottom of my heart, *Ave crux spes unica* [Hail to the Cross, our only hope].”⁸

Fr. Maximilian Kolbe

Also dying at Auschwitz was a priest, Maximilian Kolbe, who likewise became a saint. He was arrested in Poland as a “priest swine.” His background as an evangelist in the Polish church is an impressive story in itself. Holding a doctorate in philosophy from Gregorian University and a doctorate in theology from the Franciscan International College in Rome, he founded the Army of Mary Immaculate, devoted to evangelizing Christ’s message

through the Virgin Mother. His monthly publication *The Knight of the Immaculata* in Poland had a circulation of 800,000 before he was arrested by the Nazi occupiers. About one fifth of all Polish priests died in Nazi concentration camps.⁹

Arrested in 1941, Fr. Kolbe died an especially cruel death. The commandant of the camp established a “Starvation Bunker”, where selected prisoners were thrown into total darkness and left without food or water. Guards came once a day to carry out the dead. Fr. Kolbe, in an extraordinary act of courage, offered to take the place of a Jewish prisoner selected by the camp commandant for the Starvation Bunker. In the bunker, Fr. Kolbe organized prayers, recitation of the rosary, and the singing of hymns. When the guards shouted at them to shut up, the prisoners would be quiet, only to start again.

Fr. Kolbe showed kindness toward his fellow inmates. He lasted two weeks without light or food and with little water. Finally the guards entered and injected carbolic acid into his arm. Without interrupting his prayer, Fr. Kolbe offered his arm to the executioner. Even the hardened guards could not help but admire the priest. After the injection, the guards found Fr. Kolbe dead, but one who carried him out noted that his “face had an unusual radiance about it. The eyes were wide open and focused on some definite point. His person seemed to have been in a state of ecstasy. I will never forget that scene as long as I live.”¹⁰

Martyrs in Mexico

The courageous death of Fr. Miguel Pro, who died fighting for religious freedom in Mexico in the 1920s, is closer to home and should be of special interest to Hispanic students. Like Edith Stein and Fr. Kolbe, he died in witness to his faith and resisting an authoritarian state. Unlike Stein or Fr. Kolbe, he joined an armed insurgency against the Mexican government’s campaign to stamp out Catholicism in that country. Article 3 of the 1913 Mexican constitution mandated that the state have a monopoly on education and that all Catholic schools be disbanded. Other articles prohibited public religious processions. Priests were required to register and to be assigned to parishes by the government.

This crusade against the church had a single goal: to create a secular socialist society. For the revolutionaries who came to power, there could not be two spheres of power—the state and the church. Although government propaganda branded the Mexican church as a tool of reaction, the Mexican church had become an institution of genuine social reform, reinforced by Pope Leo XIII’s encyclical letter issued in 1891, *Rerum Novarum*. The letter called for the application of Christian principles to address the social ills of the world. It

opposed socialism while condemning exploitation of labor, which damaged the dignity of individuals and the family. The Mexican church had taken up Pope Leo’s call for reform by creating elementary schools for workers, medical facilities in rural areas, and Catholic worker guilds. This call for reform and true social justice inspired Fr. Miguel Pro.

The government campaign to suppress the church was enforced unevenly. Much depended on the revolutionary fervor of state governors. In the state of Tabasco, the governor Tomás Garrido Canabal, who named his children Lenin, Lucifer and Satan, began expelling priests who would not marry. In the mid-1920s, the federal government under a series of presidents intensified the campaign against the church. These presidents proclaimed that in order for the socialist revolution to be successfully completed, the government needed to crush the church. Federal troops were ordered to destroy churches and execute priests who resisted the creation of a revolutionary socialist state. All foreign priests were to be expelled from the country. When bishops protested, they too were expelled.

A Vicious Anti-Catholic Campaign

Pleas from the Vatican did little good. Pleas from Mexico’s bishops fell on deaf ears. Under pressure from the Knights of Columbus, the U.S. government implored the Mexican government to stop this violent campaign. The official U.S. position was to counsel peaceful persuasion and patience. The Vatican sought accommodation with the revolutionary government as well.

Even under Vatican and U.S. pressure, the Mexican government took a hard-line position: The church must be crushed at all costs. Federal troops were sent in to break up national meetings of the National League for the Defense of Religious Liberty with its 300,000 members just in Mexico City. As the anti-Catholic campaign turned more violent, many bishops, priests and leading Catholic figures continued to urge patience.

Others within the church, especially parish priests, peasants and the young, were not so sanguine about reaching a peaceful accord with the government. They had witnessed priests being executed in their churches, federal troops ransacking churches, and mass arrests. In response, armed resistance to the government broke out, especially in the northern states close to the U.S. border. A movement emerged known as the Cristeros Rebellion. The rebels cried “Viva Cristo Rey” (Long Live Christ Our King) as they entered battle.¹¹

One of the priests who joined the Cristeros cause was a young Jesuit, Miguel Agustín Pro. He was captured and executed in 1927 by a government firing squad. The government invited

news cameras to watch the execution. They hoped that the spectacle of a priest pleading for mercy would make good propaganda. Instead, Fr. Pro stood before the firing squad with his arms extended in a traditional Mexican position of showing the cross and in a steady voice declared, “Viva Cristo Rey.”

Photos of his execution were placed in homes and churches by devout Catholics. The photo of the execution of a priest became international news. It added pressure for the government to reach an accommodation with the Vatican and the U.S. government.

In 1928 a shocking atrocity occurred when a 14-year-old boy was gruesomely tortured and executed by Mexican officials for refusing to renounce his Catholic faith. St. José Luis Sánchez del Río, who shouted “Viva Cristo Rey” before his execution, was canonized by Pope Francis in 2016.

In 1929, the Mexican government agreed to stop its violent attacks on the priests and churches. In return the Vatican recognized the legitimacy of the revolutionary government and all support of the Cristero movement was withdrawn. The domestic church was given control of its internal affairs.

Without official church support, the Cristero movement collapsed. Cristero soldiers—nearly 14,000—began laying down their arms. During the war nearly 90,000 soldiers and civilians had been killed. Many wanted an end to violence. The fragility of the peace agreement became evident in the following years. Violence continued against priests and laity who defended the faith. Leaders of the Cristero movement continued to be assassinated into 1940. Only in 1938 did official attacks on the church end. In December 1940, General Manuel Avila Camacho, the recently elected president of Mexico, made headlines by declaring, “I am a believer.”¹²

These stories of martyrs who died for their Catholic faith should be taught to every Catholic student. Such heroic examples of faith in action give substance to faith. At the same time, the complexity of history is conveyed through

these actual figures. Stein, Kolbe and Pro were not perfect. The beatification of Stein and Kolbe created controversy at the time. Questions as to whether Fr. Pro was correct in taking up arms to protect religious freedom are worthy of discussion. Students can discuss these controversies, even while being inspired by these martyrs who sacrificed their lives for their faith.

Progressives want to rewrite history. They relish revealing the contradictions and imperfections of American Founders and religious figures of the past. Progressives enter the study of history with the intent of defacing Western civilization, Christendom and the United States. In this way, they seek to undermine the moral foundations and ideals of our society.

Our duty as Christians is to defend our values. This can be done in part through religious schools. Surely, Catholic parochial schools should be at the forefront of defending traditional values, both religious and civic. History is best taught through examples of those who were willing to shed their blood and fortunes to make the world a better place. Christ sacrificed His life on the cross for our salvation. He inspired later martyrs and these martyrs offer inspiration to us, our children and our grandchildren.

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- 1 Victor Davis Hanson, “Will 2021 Be 1984?” *American Greatness*, July 19, 2020.
 - 2 https://www.americanthinker.com/articles/2020/08/conservative_institutionbuilding_threatened_if_dems_win.html.
 - 3 Quoted in Robert Royal, *The Catholic Martyrs of the Twentieth Century: A Comprehensive World History* (2000).
 - 4 *Ibid.*
 - 5 There are a number of biographies of Edith Stein. An excellent summary of her canonization is found in Paul Hanebrink, “An Anti-Totalitarian Saint: The Canonization of Edith Stein,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* (July 2018). Robert Royal’s chapter on Edith Stein in *The Catholic Martyrs of the Twentieth Century* offers a fuller account of Edith Stein’s intellectual and religious life.
 - 6 Quoted in Royal, *supra*, p. 176.
 - 7 Royal, *supra*, p. 182.
 - 8 *Ibid.*, p. 191.
 - 9 *Ibid.*, p. 193.
 - 10 *Ibid.*, p. 197.
 - 11 Little has been written on the Cristeros movement. The best scholarly book is David C. Bailey, *Viva Cristo Rey!: The Cristero Rebellion and the Church-State Conflict in Mexico* (1974). Also useful is Jean A. Meyer, *The Cristero Rebellion: The Mexican People Between Church and State 1926-1929* (1976). Meyer is more critical of the church hierarchy. See also the outstanding film *For Greater Glory* (2012).
 - 12 Bailey, *supra*, p. 297.
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