



**“EDUCATING IS NOT A PROFESSION, BUT AN ATTITUDE, A WAY OF
BEING.”**

CONCEPTS OF CATHOLIC PEDAGOGICAL ETHICS IN UNIVERSITY PRACTICE

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Concepts of Catholic pedagogical ethics in university practice

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1. Challenges of university education in the 21st century

Ethical concepts, or rather, a pedagogy that enables children, adolescents as well as young adults in such a way that they can meet the challenges of the world in a resilient way and at the same time help shape the future in a just and sustainable way, are missing or have been forgotten. This also applies to the world of work. Here, too, concepts that promote the flourishing of people and the value-based development of their personalities within professional contexts are largely lacking. However, they are necessary for people to have a learning environment in which they can develop their individual potentials holistically for their own good and for the good of humanity and creation.

Universities as well as other educational institutions thus bear a great responsibility. They are responsible for training the appropriate staff who can act as role models, have wisdom and phronesis and have internalised an empowering attitude to create appropriate learning and working spaces to enable character education and people’s character development. But against the background of which value-based pedagogy or pedagogical ethics must these institutions shape educational processes? Which methods and didactic concepts can and may or must be used in the university? How can it be possible for people to experience an education during their studies or training that, on the one hand, allows them to grow and mature themselves and form virtues so that they can develop into self-responsible professionals with ethical responsibility? On the other hand, how can they use this training to acquire knowledge, methods and tools as well as wisdom and phronesis that will enable them in their subsequent professional practice to support others to flourish without being abusively over-formative and intrusive?

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https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/ccatheduc/documents/rc_con_ccatheduc_doc_20140407_educare-oggi-e-domani_en.html; cf. POPE FRANCIS, Address to the Students of the Jesuit Schools of Italy and Albania (June 7, 2013) [https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2013/june/documents/papa-francesco_20130607_scuole-gesuiti.html].

During the last 25 years I have developed a curriculum that takes all of the above-mentioned necessities into account, so that the curriculum consists of different elements to enable students to develop their personality, become aware of the responsibilities they bear for society and internalise a pedagogical ethos, from which they later act professionally and privately.

In the following, I would like to introduce you to the concept in a first step. I will give you an overview of the curriculum and the learning methods. In the second step I would like to explain, why this way of teaching is a catholic principle and why it offers its great potential that has so far remained unconsidered in many areas of adult education in the German-speaking world.

2. Education at the university - a tangible concept

At the beginning, I have to say something about myself and my profession. After training and working as a bank clerk, I studied theology and chemistry to become a secondary school teacher. Subsequently, I completed my doctorate and habilitation in Church History. Over the years I have also studied learning theories and neurodidactics. Today, I am a professor of Church History at the Catholic Private-University Linz. I also offer teacher trainings, trainings for students and university professors in the field of character education. All of this has inspired my work. Over the years, a concept has grown that has resulted in a study programme and a curriculum. Both have been tried and tested and positively evaluated over the decades. The curriculum is described in a book published in 2021. Accordingly, the following descriptions are based on my practical experience and on the theory I described in my book.²

a) Curriculum and learning methods

The curriculum starts with a course in which students work out their ideas of their dream jobs just as they consider what skills they need to fulfill them professionally. Afterwards, they draw out their own talents as well as their competences which they have already developed. Against this background they design their personal way of studying in order to build the skills they will need for their future profession.

² For the following reflections and theses cf. Weber, Ines, Mensch. Talent. Zukunft. Persönlichkeitsbildung in der Hochschule – mit Basis - Curriculum (Mittelpunkt Mensch, vol. 1), Ostfildern 2021.

This course takes place within the first weeks at the beginning of their studies. Students are trained to find their own, special and individual way of mastering their academic studies according to their future profession and in order to develop their talents and needed competences in the best way. Furthermore, this approach leads to students becoming aware of their motivation, reconsidering their motivation and ultimately starting their studies with intrinsic motivation.

This is the background against which they start their studies. The lectures, seminars and tutorials are designed in such a way that students can train and expand their competences and receive constant feedback. What does this mean?

The whole curriculum is based on a way of teaching that is rarely practised at German-speaking universities. There, students work independently or spend most of their time sitting in lectures listening to the lecturers. On the contrary, in my model, they are highly involved in teaching and learning. Ultimately, they shape their own educational processes independently. What does that mean?

First of all, Students come to class prepared. One week before the lecture, the students receive historical source material to read for 4 hours as preparation. This material is provided with questions for indexing. In the lesson itself, the students receive specialist input from me on the epoch or topic being discussed (I said that I am a Church Historian and my profession at university is to teach Church History). Afterwards, the students work in small groups on a meta-question or meta-task about the sources they have worked on at home. With methodological guidance, they then present their results. Afterwards, open questions or ambiguities are discussed, and the subject content is intensively debated. The methods students use to apprehend the historical sources in the lesson are very diverse. They range from different visualisation tasks to role plays, posed discussions or writing discussions.

What is the effect?

With appropriate teaching materials, they have already acquired essential subject content before the lesson. Besides, reading and understanding texts and pictures they for example widen their analytical skills as well as their joined-up thinking or their systematical and structural competences. They also train their abilities to change perspective or their

empathic capacity. These are just a few examples of competence acquisition. There are many more!

In class, they expand, deepen, and reinforce all these and train their skills even further. With their prior knowledge, individual work, group work and plenary, discussions during class go into much more depth and breadth and are much more effective and interesting. This is one of the biggest advantages of this method: students can interact with their knowledge and competences in the lesson. They ask many more critical questions, and they independently relate them to their future professional work. They really internalise all that.

In other words: With this form of university teaching perspective was changed from a teacher-centred way of teaching to a student-centred way of teaching, and from instructing students what they have to know to independent development of the contents by the students themselves including different dialogues and discussions between teacher and students. No longer are there lectures during which teachers give 90-minute presentations without any place for students for asking and discussing. In this way, students continuously enlarge their skills and strengths in subject teaching because students participate competently in lessons.

b) Neurobiological basics

One reason for this way of teaching is rooted in the functioning and performance of our brain, in the human constitution and thus in the holistic human being as such. Despite all individuality, appropriation processes follow certain regularities. Reform pedagogy, the beginnings of which go back to the 17th century, has already taken these into account in its educational approach. For decades, school and university didactics, pedagogy, and educational research have been referring to them, and neurodidactics also drew attention to them a few years ago.

All disciplines emphasise equally that about 95 percent of all people educate themselves by dealing with the contents or with the specialist knowledge as well as with the skills and competences themselves. They have to do that independently, literally by working through them. They have to read content, explain it to others, think it through in conversations with others, prepare presentations, visualise the content, discuss it or write it down. They have to argue, criticise, discuss, engage in dialogue, and they have to listen actively. In other words, people can only acquire content and competences themselves, independently grasping,

understanding, thinking through, trying them out and applying them. Only when this happens content and skills can be permanently anchored in the brain so that they can be reactivated and recalled when needed.

Besides, learning is much more successful when people know what they are learning for, to the point that learning results even increase exponentially, when they understand in which contexts they will retrieve the corresponding knowledge and competences, which problems they will solve with them, which challenges they will overcome with them or in which fields of practice they can move successfully with them. This closes the circle to the course mentioned at the beginning, in which students vision their dream jobs.

Furthermore, learning requires a certain basic disposition on the part of the learners as well as a corresponding learning atmosphere. The best learning results are achieved when people enjoy what they are doing. The more enthusiastic the learners are about their choice of subject and the more the teaching staff care about their subjects, their methods or their implementation and the teaching-learning processes taking place, the higher the learning success as a rule. This aspect closes the circle to the course mentioned at the beginning, in which students vision their dream jobs, too.

Finally, knowledge is always action knowledge, so that it should be acquired in the subject matter and rehearsed now in view of the challenges in later professional life.

All these conditions are fulfilled by the form of teaching at university that I described.

c) Building up virtues by studying Church History

However, the fact that students are personally educated is not only due to the didactics. It also has a lot to do with my method of carrying out Church History. For doing Church History I use the academic method of Cultural Science, which provides fitting tools for character education. What does this mean?

I am interested in answering the question why Christians in former times act in certain ways. What motivated them? What was in their mind to take their steps? Why did they decide to act in this way? What were the moral and ethical principles in the background?

Examining the historical sources in this way students are able to change the perspectives permanently. They are able to understand why people act in a specific way and as consequence they learn methods or are competent to understand their opposite in contexts

nowadays, too. They outline human interaction, conflict lines and build up their capacity to empathise. And they increase their awareness of cultures unknown to them. These are only a few important skills among many other cognitive, communicative, social, personal, spiritual and emotional ones. To name them all here would simply go too far.

d) The role of the lecturer

However, this kind of university teaching is only possible if lecturers initiate it. They are the ones who initiate and steer the teaching-learning processes. No matter how intrinsically motivated students may be. If there is no space for them to develop, their motivation will dissipate.

At the same time, students must be seen as learning personalities with individual competences and specific assets. They are the starting point of any educational or didactic consideration. In this perspective, essential requirements must be taken into account to enable the individual to freely develop their personality.

In consequence, professors at university have to become companions, mentors, educators, i.e., people who support their educational and developmental process and introduce them to the relevant specialist knowledge and value system. So, teachers must not only be competent subject facilitators, but also excellent leaders with the duty to accompany. Along with this, students no longer are consumers but producers of knowledge and competences. Academic studies are no longer an end in themselves (seen from the old content-related perspective) but change themselves to create the context of the self-development of students.

3. What is Catholic at all about this?

The concept described previously is based on a holistic approach that focuses on the whole person as a unique individual, endowed with many talents and gifts, who should develop their gifts and talents in order to form a personality and feed these abilities into society. This is a concept that is rather present from the beginning of Christian history and has been adapted according to cultural context. That means: Every human being was in the beginning created by God. God has equipped every human being with certain gifts, and we are presented with a life-changing message of transformation. Everyone is encouraged to use their gifts. And everyone is able to do so. So, the concept is based on an extremely positive

image of man. Man has intellect, reason, and free will, so that it is possible for him to recognise the good and strive towards it, not least because goodness is a divine act of grace, a gift from God, which is inherent in human beings.

At the same time, God's mandate for man does not end with the mission of self-education. It reaches far beyond that. On the one hand, people are obliged to contribute their gifts and talents to the community and thus to society for the benefit of all. We are called to build a humane, peaceful, just, democratic world. God calls us to live life abundantly as individuals made in his image and likeness and to serve one another in community – living and flourishing together.

And thirdly, we are obliged by God's command to support and accompany other people in their development. This applies to every human being: the boss towards their employees, the parents towards the children, the coach towards their athletes and vice versa. This mission of accompaniment is not limited to teachers and lecturers.

In so far, the pedagogy and its inherent ethics, i.e. the pedagogical ethos of the professors, I described, originate from the Christian image of man and the Catholic understanding of education. On the one hand, students are fellow Christians, images of God, who must be treated as equals. On the other hand, the students themselves are responsible for their education. Moreover, every Christian is obliged to develop his or her talents, to contribute them to society for the benefit of all and to support others in their development.

4. What students learn for the future profession

Studying at university like this, the joint learning and research – combining neurodidactic principles with the hermeneutics of Church History against the backdrop of the ideal of Catholic education – finally leads to the fact that students acquire various cognitive, communicative, social and personal, emotional and spiritual skills. The crucial point is students develop virtues and increase their own talents. They have formed their personality, formed virtues and strengthened their characters.

With all this, students have internalised that they are the main actors, who shape educational processes and first and foremost, that they are responsible for their successful educational process. Moreover, they have internalised the pedagogical and anthropological groundings in the form of a Catholic pedagogy and have changed their image of man and

their idea of role models. They know that an image of God appears in them and in the other person. And they are enabled to see their Christian responsibility for the challenging tasks in the world. Consequently, they are able to cope with uncertainties and to answer the challenges of the age of “vuca” as well as they are focused on helping communities flourish. All in all, a comprehensive change of attitude has taken place.

Equipped with a broad competence profile and internalised virtues, they naturally apply this way of learning and working in their everyday professional life after finishing their studies. Hence, they start their professional practice with this mindset and organise their everyday work against this background. The reason is that they have personally experienced how much they have gained in knowledge and competences via this method, how much fun this is and how much it encourages themselves and others. They have repeatedly experienced how learning and working can be done when it is done cooperatively, collaboratively, and self-determined. Consequently, they treat their students, their employees and their bosses with respect and care and create a learning and working space that enables personality formation and virtue formation. With their way of acting and thinking, with their way of being, they are role models for others, so that the system is perpetuated.

But it is not only studying, teaching, and researching Church History that holds this potential. It is similar in all other subjects. Acquisition of virtues is possible in any subject. If university learning and research were organised in this way in all subjects, character education could take place across the board, and we could work together to create a humane society.

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