



EVERYONE IS CONNECTED

Theological Reflections on COVID, Schools and Children's Well-Being

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The ground seems to be shifting under our feet. As of spring 2021, three vaccines for COVID-19 have been approved for emergency use. Teachers, other Kindergarten-12 education professionals and some students became eligible to receive the vaccines. We have better research data about the transmission of the virus in schools and about serious illness among very young people and adolescents. At the same time, infections continue and variant strains of the virus present new challenges. Public health restrictions are being eased in some states even as we hear cautionary tales from other countries facing renewed lockdowns.

Pope Francis, in speaking about the glory of the natural world and human responsibility for our common home, has proclaimed, "Everything is connected." It is a powerful challenge to the disconnected and compartmentalized way many of us live. The moral imperative to see connections with all of creation and to honor ecological interdependence is also a call to appreciate the stunning complexity of our social lives. Human relationships and social institutions are deeply connected, and personal flourishing is impacted by social determinants. Among the social relationships and structures that deserve much-needed attention are those that sustain and advance the well-being of children.

A PRECARIOUS WEB OF SUPPORT

What has become starkly evident during the pandemic are the many and often hidden roles

that families and schools play in our common life. Thriving schools and families make many things possible: children who participate in society and dream for their future; parents who can work and build the common good; social relationships among peers and across generations; young people ready to take their place in the world, and elders able to pass on needed insight and values. In many communities, schools also provide a social safety net for children that includes nourishing meals, access to nursing care, counseling and other resources that support learning.

While there are broadly adoptable public health measures to prevent the spread of the virus, once we are on the ground in a particular set of circumstances, there is no one-size-fits-all approach. Decisions about closing and opening schools require the skill of a master Jenga player: Some schools and families have the resources to

adapt to remote learning and the suspension of other kinds of activities. For families and communities whose resources are strapped, pulling schools from the Jenga tower has had serious consequences and ripple effects.

Among the many concerning consequences are delays in children's academic progress and social development, with the most serious consequences for students with learning disabilities. High rates of unemployment, economic instability, and food and housing insecurity jeopardize family and child well-being. There is increased physical and emotional strain on families who are isolated for long periods of time while several members attempt to work and learn in the same space. It is a heavy burden for any family but heavier still for families in close quarters.

These ripple effects are exacerbated by racism, sexism and poverty. Women are leaving the workforce at increasing rates to accommodate the education and care of their children. This will have long-term ramifications, especially for women who are Black, indigenous, people of color (BIPOC), low-income women, and women-headed households. We are reaping the insidious consequences of white supremacy and gender inequality in our schools, neighborhoods, places of employment and health care systems. It's a dilemma: on the one hand, in the rush to open the economy, BIPOC children and teachers could be placed at increased risk of infection, serious illness and death; on the other, BIPOC students in communities hardest hit with the virus could be denied access to the in-person education and services beneficial to their well-being and the flourishing of their families. We must ask whether the concern for the well-being of BIPOC children and children living in poverty is being exploited by the demand for their parents' low-wage labor, no matter the risk. Trenchant injustices and inequalities play out in these seemingly impossible choices.

Everything and everyone is connected. The pandemic has revealed the ways in which U.S. culture has failed to honor this reality. Enduring patterns of exploitation and injustice have been laid bare. What, then, are the theological resources in the Catholic moral tradition that we might call on when navigating these challenges? There are insights at the intersections of Catholic social teaching, health care ethics and family ethics that can help us keep our footing. Among these are: the dignity of the person as profoundly social and

interdependent; the need for all people to participate in the common good in spirit of solidarity; the dignity of work and the rights of workers; social and structural relationships that are guided by subsidiarity; and a preferential option for people who are vulnerable and suffering from enduring patterns of injustice.

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When looked at through the lens of Catholic social teaching, supported with anti-racist and feminist vision, we uncover the root causes of injustice more clearly: a society that undervalues care work, especially the care of children and other vulnerable people; a gender gap in which care work is done primarily by women of color for low wages; care work that is valorized as self-sacrificial in ways that erode social support and undermine the dignity and well-being of women; a culture that prizes competition over cooperation in the goals of education, encouraging parents to seek and gain advantage over other people's children; underfunded schools in BIPOC neighborhoods; a corporatized, private industry model of education that cannot secure equity; and many families under considerable strain financially and emotionally relying on open schools as a key to survival and socioeconomic mobility.

FAMILIES, SCHOOLS AND INTERGENERATIONAL SOLIDARITY

Early in the pandemic, the evening news featured stories of teachers going the extra mile for their students, waving banners of support from parading cars. Many people were brought to tears by this witness to mercy and compassion for children. But as the pandemic wore on and children remained at home, pressure mounted to reopen schools. Teachers rightly demanded adequate personal protective equipment, social distancing measures, access to regular testing and vaccination before returning to classrooms. Parents weighed in on both sides: some demanding that schools return to classroom learning for the bene-



fit of their children and families, others reasonably fearful about the potential risks to public health and the racial disparities in health outcomes.

The first task in Catholic social teaching is to ask, “What is going on?” This phase of moral deliberation is done without judgment and with mercy. It requires attentive listening and looking in a situation marked by suffering. We share our particular experiences of a situation and open ourselves to the experiences of others. We challenge ourselves to be present to those whose experiences are different from ours. We look at the data to explore patterns of experience, advantage and injustice. Shared narratives begin to emerge from anecdotal and deeply personal experiences.

We analyze the data to map out the most immediate and urgent needs, but also to uncover the root causes of injustice and disparity. We identify gender inequality and patriarchy, racism and white supremacy. We admit the enduring low status of children in spite of the romanticized rhetoric about how we love and cherish them. We look for connections among the roots that anchor and fuel what is visible. We ready ourselves for uprooting, pulling up entrenched perspectives to make room for new growth nourished by the good news of the gospel.

The impacts of COVID-19 and its aftermath on children ask us to reflect in a focused way on the church’s teaching about family life and education. The pandemic has exposed many of the challenges of raising and educating young children, caring for elders and the need for wide and multi-valent layers of support in order to accomplish these tasks. The church’s theological, spiritual and pastoral traditions listed below can play a crucial role.

The family is the first cell of civil society, and the church itself is a family of families. It is a building block for the rest of the social order. Families are not merely private havens from the wider world. It is where children come to learn how to care for and about others. Family responsibility to the common good encourages us to resist a competitive approach to well-being that continues to disadvantage children living in conditions of material poverty and children in communities of color. As a parent, this can be extremely difficult to resist, but the responsibility we carry for the well-being of our own children cannot be exer-

cised at the expense of the well-being of other children.

Parents are the first and primary educators of their children. This insight is crucial if we understand that its corollary is the additional need for social supports for families. The thrust of this teaching, however, has been in protecting parents from interference, particularly by government, in deciding what education best serves their children, especially as it relates to sex education. The emphasis has not been on what parents can demand from the government in terms of support for educational equity. This has been a missed opportunity. Caring for and educating children is essential work that begins in the family, extends beyond the family and should be honored with just wages and working conditions. Children themselves participate in the common good and deserve safe and secure places to learn and play at home and in the community.

The church’s teaching on family life is grounded in a call to intergenerational solidarity. It serves neither children, nor teachers, nor elders in the community for these groups to be in competition with one another for resources and protection. For many parents and grandparents, participation in the life of children and school is a major form of civic participation. Relationships between young people and elders are mutually beneficial; no one

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is merely a burden, no matter how vulnerable. It is vital that solidarity extends across generations and beyond school district lines.

Evidence from the pandemic suggests several areas that need development within the church’s teachings on children, family and education. First, we must challenge the highly gendered view of marriage, parenting and other roles in society as well as the low status of care work involving young children and elders. We must balance the inevitable sacrifices this work requires with a commitment to justice for all who make those sacrifices, including teachers. The gendered nature of this work has rendered it less valued, and the self-sacrifice of teachers is too often praised in

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ways that erode commitment to just wages, safe teaching conditions, security and advancement.

Second, the church should offer more robust support for public education. We need more attention to the many roles that schools play in the lives of children as places of education, formation for participation in civic life and social safety nets. Public schools are required to provide education for all children in ways that Catholic schools are not. We need stronger advocacy for teachers. We see also that schools are a linchpin of the overall economy. The ability for adults to work to earn their livelihood and to live a vocation outside the home relies on functioning and flourishing schools.

PARADES, PROTESTS AND RECOMMITMENT TO CHILD HEALTH

Child health and well-being are impacted by many social factors. The common good tradition according to Catholic social teaching strives to create conditions that allow people and communities to prosper in so many ways, including good health. The pandemic in the U.S has disrupted this vital network on a massive scale. Access to adequate and equitable primary education is a key social determinant for the long-term health and well-being of young people. We need parades to honor this essential work and protests to demand justice for all children, parents and teachers. The COVID-19 pandemic is not likely to be an isolated incident in a world where everyone and everything is connected. If those connections are marked by intergenerational solidarity for the common good that cross every kind of border and boundary, we can meet future challenges, mitigate their most devastating effects, and ensure the health and well-being of future generations.

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QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

Author Mary Roche, PhD, describes how the pandemic laid bare enduring patterns of injustice, how society undervalues care providers and the importance of thriving families and schools to overall health.

1. Is there an aspect of Catholic social teaching she highlights in this article that has particular resonance for you as you think back on recent months? How did it help to shape your views on the pandemic or on a needed societal reform?
2. The pandemic brought sudden shifts in how we experience work, home and educational life. Did these changes lead you to new thinking on how families, workplaces and schools affect health? As you reflect on these changes, do you see ways that we can build more responsive societal systems for greater flexibility in work-life balance? What does that look like for your colleagues who care for young children, elderly parents or other family members?
3. Had you previously viewed schools as so integral to health? In what ways does your organization currently partner with schools in the community? Do you think a greater understanding that schools provide some safety net services for children and their families might lead to new relationships between health care systems and schools? What might these look like?
4. Sometimes parents want what's best for their children, and don't always extend that thought out to wanting what's best for all children. Roche makes the point that by downplaying competition, we can seek the well-being of all children. Do you see new ways to be more supportive of families and children? How so?

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