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Truth in Troubled Times: Catholic Education and the Mental Health of Young People in Contemporary Ireland

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INTRODUCTION

The correlation between religious practice, specifically as a result of participation in Catholic Education, and positive mental health amongst young people will be explored in this article. The current state of, and trends in, the mental health of young people internationally and in Ireland will be discussed. The role religious practice plays in contributing towards more positive mental health will next be investigated. Following this, the changing landscape of Ireland in terms of decreased religious practice and increased secularization will be examined. Further, the means through which Catholic Education can contribute positively to mental health will then be explored. The spiritual crisis of western civilisation and its effects on young people will be discussed. Next, there will be an exploration of how Catholic Education can help young people to understand their origins, provide a strong sense of belonging, and offer the truth about the purpose of their lives. Finally, how one's sense of identity can be strengthened by such understandings will be discussed, as well as why having a true sense of identity can prevent young people from ideological pitfalls and from the anxiety that stems from relativism.

THE MENTAL HEALTH OF YOUNG PEOPLE

Historically, researchers have conceptualised mental health as the mere absence of mental illness; however, scholars have recently begun to broaden this definition, moving towards a more holistic

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approach to the definition of mental health.[1] At an international level, the World Health Organization has recently stated that mental health is "a state of well-being in which the individual realizes his or her own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to his or her community".[2] Similarly, Keyes' well-established conceptualisation of mental health involves three main facets: emotional wellbeing, psychological wellbeing and social wellbeing. Emotional wellbeing refers to an individual's overall happiness, as well as their interest in and satisfaction with life. Psychological wellbeing encompasses a number of factors, including self-acceptance, sense of purpose in life and autonomy. Finally, social wellbeing is characterised by an individual's levels of social coherence, acceptance and integration.[3] Additionally, researchers in recent years have included spiritual wellbeing in their conceptualisation of mental health, recognising that a healthy interior spiritual life is necessary for positive overall mental health.[4]Therefore, for the purposes of this article, the term 'mental health' takes into consideration the absence of a mental illness amongst individuals, as well as encompassing their levels of emotional, psychological, social and spiritual wellbeing.

At both an international and a national level, it is apparent that issues with regard to mental health are becoming increasingly more prevalent. It is estimated that one in seven individuals worldwide are currently suffering from a mental health disorder, an increase of 11% between 1990 and 2016.[5]An area of major concern is the significant increase in the number of young people presenting with mental health issues, with increases of over 50% in the prevalence of a number of mental health concerns amongst young people over the past twenty years.[6] In the Irish context, the mental health of young people is an area of grave concern. Research has revealed

1 Y. Joel Wong and Lynn Rew. "A systematic review of recent research on adolescent religiosity/spirituality and mental health." *Issues in Mental Health Nursing*27(February 2006): 161-183.

2 World Health Organisation. *Promoting mental health: concepts, emerging evidence, practice* (Geneva: World Health Organization, 2004).

3 Corey L.M. Keyes. "Mental Health in Adolescence: Is America's Youth Flourishing?" *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry* 76, no. 3 (July 2006): 395-402.

4 Esa Jafari, Gholam Reza Dehshiri, Hosein Eskandari, Mahmoud Najafi, Rasoul Heshmati and Jafar Hoseinifar. "Spiritual well-being and mental health in university students." *Procedia – Social and Behavioral Sciences* 5 (2010): 1477-1481.

5 Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation. *Mental health in the US: Findings from the Global Burden of Disease Study.* (Washington: Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation, 2018).

6 Jean M. Twenge, A. Bell Cooper, Thomas E. Joiner, Mary E. Duffy & Sarah G. Binau. "Age, Period, and Cohort Trends in Mood Disorder Indicators and Suicide-Related Outcomes in a Nationally Representative Dataset, 2005–2017." *Journal of Abnormal Psychology* 128, no. 3 (2019): 185-199.

that 22% of children between the ages of 11 and 15 in Ireland are experiencing at least two symptoms of mental health issues more than once a week. Additionally, Ireland maintains the fourth highest rate of suicide amongst young people in the European Union, as well as an above average rate of teenage suicide by international standards.[7] Among the major reasons for suicide attempts cited by adolescents include loneliness,[8] a sense of hopelessness and a lack of purpose or meaning in their lives.[9]

RELIGIOUS PRACTICE AND MENTAL HEALTH

The impact of religious practice on the mental health of young people has been researched both in Ireland and internationally, with the overwhelming majority of studies revealing that practising a religion and holding firm religious beliefs are associated with a range of mental health benefits. In the United States, studies have shown that young people who place a high level of importance on religion and prayer are less likely to engage in risk-taking behaviours, such as smoking, alcohol and drug use.[10] Moreover, research from the United Kingdom has demonstrated that regular church attendance and prayer greatly reduces the likelihood of conduct disorders emerging amongst young people.[11] In the Irish context, significant differences between the personal wellbeing of religious and non-religious adolescents have been observed; in one study, religious adolescents were more likely than their non-religious counterparts to feel that their life had a sense of purpose and was worth living, while non-religious adolescents were more likely than those who were religious to report experiencing feelings of depression and instances of suicide ideation.[12]

7   UNICEF. *Ireland's Teen Suicide Rate 4th Highest in EU/OECD – UNICEF Report Card* (New York: UNICEF, 2017).

8   World Health Organisation. *Adolescent mental health fact sheet* (Geneva: World Health Organisation, 2018).

9   Patricia Casey. *The psycho-social benefits of religious practise.* (Dublin: The Iona Institute, 2009).

10 Y. Joel Wong and Lynn Rew. "A systematic review of recent research on adolescent religiosity/spirituality and mental health." *Issues in Mental Health Nursing* 27 (February 2006): 161-183; Jill W. Sinha, Ram A. Cnaan & Richard J. Gelles. "Adolescent Risk Behaviors and Religion: Findings from a National Study." Journal of Adolescence 30, no. 2 (April 2007): 231-249.

11 Howard Ian Meltzer, Nisha Dogra, Panos Vostanis & Tamsin Jane Ford. "Religiosity and the mental health of adolescents in Great Britain." *Mental Health, Religion and Culture* 14, no. 7 (September 2011): 703-713.

12 Gareth Byrne, Leslie J. Francis, Ursula McKenna and Bernadette Sweetman. "Exploring the personal, social and spiritual worldview of male adolescent atheists within the Republic of Ireland: An empirical enquiry", in Gareth Byrne and Leslie J. Francis (ed.) *Religion and Education: The Voices of Young People in Ireland* (Dublin: Veritas, 2019).

A CHANGING LANDSCAPE

In the last number of years, a change in the religious landscape in Ireland has emerged, with the secularisation of Irish society becoming increasingly more apparent. In the 2016 census, 10% of the population of Ireland indicated that they did not have any religious beliefs;[13]this was a 73.6% increase from the 2011 census.[14] A plethora of international research has revealed that a lack of religious beliefs is associated with a range of negative outcomes for the mental health of young people, with national data suggesting that further decline in religious beliefs and practice amongst adolescents in Ireland may lead to an increase in the prevalence of mental health problems experienced by this group.[15]In Ireland, where suicide rates and the prevalence of mental health issues amongst young people are at an all-time crisis level,[16] it appears vital to consider that this may be an impact of the relative secularisation of Irish society in recent years.

The remainder of this article will put forth the case for Catholic Education to be recognised as a potential remedy for the chaos which pertains to the growing prevalence of mental health issues amongst young people in the Irish context, and will consider how the Catholic faith, as translated through Catholic Education, can impact positively on the mental health of young people in this country.

CATHOLIC EDUCATION

Despite the relative secularisation of society in recent years, Catholic schools retain their status as the dominant presence in current educational provision in Ireland, with 89.69% of primary schools[17] and 47.57% of secondary schools[18]under the patronage

13 Central Statistics Office. *Census 2016 Profile 8 - Irish Travellers, Ethnicity and Religion* (Dublin: Central Statistics Office, 2016).

14 Central Statistics Office. *Census 2011Profile 7 Religion, Ethnicity and Irish Travellers - Ethnic and cultural background in Ireland* (Dublin: Central Statistics Office, 2011).

15 Gareth Byrne, Leslie J. Francis, Ursula McKenna and Bernadette Sweetman. "Exploring the personal, social and spiritual worldview of male adolescent atheists within the Republic of Ireland: An empirical enquiry", in Gareth Byrne and Leslie J. Francis (ed.) *Religion and Education: The Voices of Young People in Ireland* (Dublin: Veritas, 2019).

16 UNICEF. *Ireland's Teen Suicide Rate 4th Highest in EU/OECD – UNICEF Report Card* (New York: UNICEF, 2017).

17 Daniel O'Connell, Marie Ryan and Maurice Harmon. "Will we have teachers for Catholic primary schools in Ireland?" in Sean Whittle (ed.) *Religious Education in Catholic Schools: Perspectives from Ireland and the UK* (London: Peter Lang, 2018).

18 Department of Education and Skills. *Statistical Bulletin: Enrolments September 2019 – Preliminary Results* (Dublin: Department of Education and Skills, 2019).

of the Catholic Church. In theory, these schools should fulfil their obligations with regard to Catholic Education by offering a holistic educational experience, encompassing a true human, intellectual and spiritual formation.[19] Catechesis is foundational to Catholic Education; it transmits the Gospel, the Good News. The purpose of Catechesis is to bring the child into intimacy and communion with the person of Christ. [20] Thus, the goal of Catholic Education is the passing on of the Catholic faith in its integrity. Whether or not schools in Ireland fulfil their obligation with regard to the provision of Catholic Education is not the purpose of this article; rather, the potentiality for authentic Catholic Education to have a positive influence on students' mental health will be forwarded.

SPIRITUAL CRISIS

Could the primary root of many of the mental health problems in the western world, such as increased levels of anxiety, depression and suicide ideation, be in fact a spiritual crisis?[21] The loss of faith in God, in heaven and in the hope of the resurrection leaves humanity alone, miserable and seeking the escapes of pleasure so as to avoid thinking about the impending doom of nothingness that awaits.[22] On many occasions the deepest cause of suffering in life is the perception of God's absence, for without God there is no absolute goodness, beauty and truth; cut off from God, humanity descends into evil, ugliness and lies, all of which rip apart his soul and leave him in a state of spiritual and mental anguish, sluggishness and despair.[23]This is consolidated by the results of numerous studies internationally, which attest to the fact that spiritual wellbeing is a reliable and significant predictor of an individual's overall mental health.[24]

ORIGINS

Catholic Education teaches the Catholic faith, which offers the truth about our origins. Catholic Education teaches that we are created by God; this is completely opposed to the present popular atheistic view that the universe is merely a brute reality devoid

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19 Robert Cardinal Sarah, *God or Nothing* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2015).
20 *General Directory for Catechesis* (Dublin: Veritas, 1997), 81.
21 Robert Cardinal Sarah, *The Day is Now Far Spent* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2019), 32-33.
22 Ibid, 111-123.
23 Ibid.
24 Esa Jafari, Gholam Reza Dehshiri, Hosein Eskandari, Mahmoud Najafi, Rasoul Heshmati and Jafar Hoseinifar. "Spiritual well-being and mental health in university students." *Procedia – Social and Behavioral Sciences* 5 (2010): 1477-1481.

of any ultimate meaning.[25] The Catholic belief about our origins enables us to build our lives on rock, whereas atheistic or agnostic beliefs lead to an understanding of life built on sand. The objective truth of our beginnings offers children solace and certainty in an age marred by a relativism that has seeped into every crevice of life.[26] Teaching children that they are created out of God's free, loving will, and that they are created with a purpose for life, is certain to have a wonderful effect on their understanding of themselves and the world, thereby positively impacting on their mental health.[27]

At the heart of creation is the understanding that God "first loved us". The beautiful words that begin St. John's Gospel show forth the fact that in the beginning there was logic, truth, meaning and purpose: "In the beginning was the Word". God has created each of us out of love and with a purpose for our lives. What great news for young students! In Genesis, we see that God created the world as good and humans as "very good". This may have a very positive effect on young people who are questioning whether or not they have any value. A framework for our work and liturgical rest is even set up in God's natural creation of the world. In such a hectic society, the Catholic teaching of observing a day of worship and rest on Sunday is highly likely to have a positive impact on a young person's mental health; the results of many studies have attested that individuals who take time away from busy school or work schedules have more positive overall mental health.[28]

BELONGING

Catholic Education teaches students that they belong to the love of Christ. The truth is, as St. Newman teaches us, that our lives are not our own; rather, our lives belong to God.[29] Our lives have been bought and paid for by the blood of Christ on the Cross. St. Paul refers to himself as a slave for Christ. This may initially seem strange to young people who may have been raised with a perverse, contemporary understanding of liberty, but Catholic Education will help them to understand that only by belonging exclusively to Christ, who is the Truth, can they be really free.[30] Only by belonging to Christ can we have life and have it to the full (c.f. Jn 10:10)

25 Simon Oliver, Creation: *A Guide for the Perplexed* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), 1.
26 Sarah, *The Day is Now Far Spent,* 251.
27 Simon Oliver, *Creation: A Guide for the Perplexed* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), 1.
28 Susan Roxburgh. "'There Just Aren't Enough Hours in the Day': The Mental Health Consequences of Time Pressure." *Journal of Health and Social Behaviour* 45, no. 2 (June 2004): 115-131.
29 Alduous Huxley, *Brave new world* (London: Vintage, 2014), 205.
30 Robert Cardinal Sarah, *The Day is Now Far Spent* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2019), 233.

Through Catholic Education, young people are taught that they belong to the body of Christ here on earth; the Catholic Church is the body of Christ.[31] This sense of belonging fully to the body of Christ, in all its diversity of races and ethnicities, builds a true sense of fraternity in students.[32] The Eucharist makes us brothers and sisters through Christ's blood, where we become one people, the people of God, the family of God.[33] This sense of belonging is sorely needed by our young people in what is becoming an increasingly fractured society, and may provide them with a greater level of social wellbeing and, consequently, more positive overall mental health.

As mentioned previously, whilst discussing our origins, the Catholic faith teaches that each person, whether Catholic or non-Catholic, is created by God with an inherent and infinite value, respect and dignity.[34] We love others, not because they are Catholics, but because we are. Therefore, a belonging and welcome is manifested to all in an inclusive manner. The inclusivity of a Catholic school is highly likely to contribute to more positive mental health amongst students, as numerous studies have demonstrated that young people who feel that they belong and are connected to their school community report greater levels of social support and, therefore, higher levels of overall social wellbeing.[35]

PURPOSE

Catholic Education teaches young people the purpose of life. We have good desires and bad desires and we need a *telos* (purpose) to differentiate between them.[36] Students need to be taught what our end is in life, as this will enable them to differentiate between good and bad desires. The good desires shall bring them closer to their ultimate purpose: to come to know, love and serve God better in this world, and happiness with God forever in the next.[37] Research has attested that teaching young people about their purpose in life may help to curb the risky, dangerous behaviour that they may otherwise engage in, which would be harmful to their mental

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31 *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Dublin: Veritas, 1994), 790-795.
32 Robert Cardinal Sarah, *God or Nothing* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2015), 32.
33 Sarah, *God or Nothing*, 32.
34 *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Dublin: Veritas, 1994), 1700.
35 Maryam Kia-Keating and B. Heidi Ellis. "Belonging and Connection to School in Resettlement: Young Refugees, School Belonging, and Psychosocial Adjustment." *Clinical Child Psychology and Psychiatry* 12, no. 1 (January 2007): 29-43.
36 William T. Cauvanagh, *Being Consumed: Economics and Christian Desire* (Cambridge: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co, 2008), x.
37 *The Penny Catechism* (Charlotte, North Carolina: TAN, 2012), 1.

and spiritual health[38]. What is required in order to keep ourselves correctly oriented toward God's goodness, truth and beauty is a cultivation of the interior life with Christ in prayer.[39] In a world which seems to be becoming increasingly more complex and busy, it is easy to postpone the necessary time needed for proper reflection on what life is all about.[40] The Brave New World that is full of the pleasures of life, but in which no one thinks even remotely about the purpose of life, is a very real prospect for many of our young people in this secular culture.[41] The strong and steady hand of Mother Church is needed in Catholic Education in order to keep our children on the narrow road toward salvation; this task is difficult, but ever so necessary.

IDENTITY

Catholic schools, having instilled their understanding of our origin, belonging and purpose, will have fostered a true identity for their pupils. This is an identity based on the truth about who we are as children of God.[42] Catholic Education offers this deepest understanding of our identity in relationship to our Creator, but it also teaches that this relationship with God then informs our identity in relationship to others and to the world.[43]

Christian anthropology has an immensely profound and hope-filled message for young people. It is based on the truth of humankind being made good, whilst also recognising that we are fallen creatures.[44] This true anthropology can heal the confusion of young minds searching for identity and for an explanation as to why they are suffering, why they are inclined towards evil and why they do not ever feel completely happy in this world. The objective truth of the Christian anthropological message can bring solace to those who accept it and who begin to understand their human nature, and their mental health, in light of it. In a similar and even more profound manner, comprehending ourselves in the light of God's saving grace shapes how we relate to God, ourselves, others and creation.[45] Knowing who we truly are, which we can only discern in relation to our origins, belonging and purpose, is the first step towards positive mental health.

38 Y. Joel Wong and Lynn Rew. "A systematic review of recent research on adolescent religiosity/spirituality and mental health." *Issues in Mental Health Nursing* 27 (February 2006): 161-183.

39 Robert Cardinal Sarah, *God or Nothing* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2015), 70.

40 Richard Gaillardetz, *Transforming Our Days* (Missouri: Liguori, 2007), 5-12.

41 Alduous Huxley, *Brave new world* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1970), 200-212.

42 *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Dublin: Veritas, 1994), 1700-1709.

43 Ibid, 355-370, 402-406.

44 Ibid.

45 Ibid.

Identity is also rooted in our family and in our country's culture. The family is recognised as the fundamental societal unit in the Catholic faith, and Pope Francis promotes it as a place for the faith to flourish.[46] Our relationship to our country also helps to ground us in our culture and history.[47] This triad of faith, family and nation provides young people with firm roots to truly understand their identity in a climate of relativistic chaos.[48] Having achieved this true sense of self, one is less likely to be lured by the present popular ideology of identity politics, which proposes that our main identity and meaning is to be found in our race, gender or sexuality.[49]

In an age where anxiety is more keenly felt, most especially amongst young people, we must ask: what is the cause of this? Could it be that children are suffering from an identity crisis in a culture that offers only the anthropology of social media to children? Anxiety increases in direct ratio and proportion as humanity departs from God.[50] The answer to the need for identity for our restless hearts and for our society's tired, searching, and even manic, eyes is to cultivate a desire for the Eternal God.[51] This deep understanding of our true identity in relation to Christ, which is cultivated and nourished by Catholic Education, can help to alleviate the anxiety that is so common in our culture; as communicated so aptly by St Augustine: "Thou hast made us for thyself and restless is our heart until it comes to rest in thee".[52]

CONCLUSION

To conclude, it appears vital to consider the potential contribution of Catholic Education to the mental health of young people in Ireland. The increase in secularisation of Irish society and the spiritual collapse of the western world has had significant repercussions for young people's mental health. Both internationally, and in the Irish context, the state of mental health amongst young people is currently an area of grave concern; however, it has been widely demonstrated that religious practice can positively influence young people's mental health. Authentic Catholic Education, then, may indeed serve as an effective means of improving the mental health of young people in contemporary Ireland by encouraging them to practise the Catholic faith, whilst also offering them the truth about

46 Pope Francis, *Amoris Laetitia* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2016), 16.
47 Robert Cardinal Sarah, *The Day is Now Far Spent* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2019), 206-207.
48 Ibid.
49 John Waters, *Give Us Back The Bad Roads* (Dublin: Currach Press, 2018), 240-257.
50 Fulton J. Sheen, *Peace of soul* (London: Burns and Oates, 1949), 18.
51 Sarah, *The Day is Now Far Spent,* 310-328.
52 St. Augustine, *The Confessions of St. Augustine* (New York: Dover, 2002), 1.

their origins, a strong sense of identity and belonging, and their true purpose in life. The understanding of oneself, in light of an education imbued with Christian anthropology, will enable each young person to appreciate the fact that the very origin of their being is rooted in God's love. Recognising God as their Creator, Redeemer and Sanctifier will enable children to grasp the correct understanding of their relationships to God, themselves, others and creation. Finally, one's purpose, one's direction in life and one's last end shapes who one is and how one lives. The Catholic message regarding one's meaning in life, which should be at the heart of Catholic Education, is filled with hope, purpose and truth. This message can, if understood as foundational to one's identity, inspire a new generation of not only mentally and spiritually healthy young people, but even a new generation of saints.

Church and Peace: Field Hospital for a Wounded World. The major difference between the Western and the Vatican's perception of the world (and the Vatican's international activity) is in relation to the Middle East, the Arab world, and Africa. Francis's "geopolitics of mercy" pays particular attention to the forgotten areas of the world, where violence is systematic and endemic. The geopolitical vision of Francis is deeply spiritual: "the contemplation of God's face leads to thinking of reconciliation in the world as a realistic objective".

– Massimo Faggioli, *The Liminal Papacy of Pope Francis* (New York: Orbis Books) p.168.