

# Integral Human Development in the Educational Vision of Pope Francis: A Theological and Philosophical Inquiry

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## **Abstract**

This article engages the distinctive educational vision of Pope Francis, placing it within the broader theological and philosophical framework of integral human development. By interpreting the complementary scriptural, magisterial, and philosophical strands that inform the pontiff's reflection – especially the central loci of Catholic social doctrine, personalist thought, and recent papal exhortations – the examination reveals that the recent ascendancy of technocratic rationality has noticeably attenuated the authenticity of contemporary educational practice. Consequently, a more comprehensive and intercipient model of human formation is warranted. The resulting pedagogical paradigm is conceived as a praxis that is at once moral and spiritual, which aspires to engender persons endowed with a reflective consciousness of solidarity, a disposition toward the global common good, and a sustained attentiveness to transcendent horizons. By articulating the exigencies that this vision entails, the inquiry further discerns several concrete paths toward worldwide educational renewal. The suggested reform agenda is thereby assigned not merely to the purview of Catholic institutions, but is equally pertinent to secular educational frameworks and to interconfessional collaborative projects that endeavour to cultivate a genuinely human centre of formation.

## **Keywords**

Pope Francis; integral human development; education; integrity; Catholic education; technocratic paradigm; personalism; Global Compact on Education; educational philosophy

## **Introduction**

Across diverse educational contexts worldwide, recent evidence indicates that schooling currently confronts a profound crisis regarding its underlying purpose and sense of direction (Taylor 2007, 715). Although institutions remain adept at delivering the technical competencies associated with formal accreditation, they devote inadequate energy to the formation of character among graduates. The prevailing focus on measurable performance indicators, operational efficiency, and short-term economic yields has gradually crowded out the patient, individualized labor essential to the cultivation of a discerning awareness of truth and goodness, the will to act according to that discernment, and the growth of personal integrity (Francis 2015, §109–10).

This reconfigured educational view has elicited serious apprehension from Pope Francis, who asserts that schooling must be understood not simply as a means to economic ascent, but as a purposeful, transformative journey leading to integral human development (Francis 2019). Although the notion appears in earlier magisterial texts such as *Populorum Progressio* (Paul VI 1967) and *Caritas in Veritate* (Benedict XVI 2009), Francis gives it such urgency and comprehensive dimension that it acquires immediate significance. The Holy Father's vision insists upon holistic human formation, defining the authentic educational enterprise as one that interweaves relational competence (Gilligan 1982; Noddings 2013), eco-responsibility (Francis 2015, §138), and spiritual depth in one inseparable process (De Souza 2016, 267). Papal discourse on education – including the 2019 Global Compact – exhibits a conception of pedagogy predicated on a mutual social obligation rather than a sole commitment of the learner. The Compact summons teachers, families, neighbourhoods, and state apparatuses not merely to advise but to assist concertedly in advancing an integral anthropology, and furthermore so to do within particular communities, thus rendering pedagogical activity relational rather than merely instrumental. The argument foregrounds a concise appraisal of the mutual entanglement – an idea sturdily endorsed by McDonough – between pedagogy and communal life, patent in McDonough's observation about relational authenticity (2014, 122).

### **Theological Foundations of Integral Human Development**

Integral human development represents a conceptual cornerstone of Catholic social teaching, countering predominant reductions that confine the human person to variables of economy or polity (Hittinger 2003, 45–62). The doctrine crystallized with definitive clarity in Paul VI's 1967 encyclical, *Populorum Progressio*, which reconceived development as, in the encyclical's phrase, the progress of “each man and the whole man” (Paul VI 1967, §14, 8–9). On this anthropological horizon, education, productive labor, cultural life, and the formation of the spirit are not secondary additives but constitutive of the authentic human good, a beauty that mirrors the primordial dignity of the person, as expressed in both the scriptural *imago* (Genesis 1:27) and the later magisterial synthesis (Catechism of the Catholic Church 1994, §1702–6).

Pope Francis has intensified the theological impulse toward developmental anthropology by directly engaging the relational ontology of Christian personhood (Francis 2020, §95, 134–5). For the Holy Father, human dignity is inextricably bound to the dynamic of communion – vertical toward the Creator, horizontal among human siblings, and lateral with the created world. His Trinitarian ecclesiology thus distills a relational vision that suffuses his entire magisterial corpus, most concertedly in *Laudato Si'*, where, invoking the Canticle of the Creatures, he affirms that “everything is interconnected” (Francis 2015, §138, 102). Grounded in this ontology, human formation repudiates any paradigm of solitary development and can occur only in symphonic exchanges that mirror the perichoresis of the Trinity, thereby enacting the logic of the family of creation.

Within this theological horizon, vocational catechesis exerts a decisive pedagogical gravitational force in Francis's reflective project. The encyclicals repeatedly assert that persons – not discrete, self-sufficient subjects, but neighbours summoned to mutual gift – embody a vocation of brotherhood that exceeds any lived autonomy (Francis 2020, §95, 134–5). Accordingly, pedagogy ceases to be simple information transfer; it becomes a sacramental escort toward the vocation that the Creator inscribed in the very fabric of the learner's identity. Authentic formation – as in the vision animating the *Ratio Institutionis* of the Society of Jesus – consists in a magisterial and ministerial process wherein educator and learner advance together toward the fulfillment that God conceives for each (International Commission on the Apostolate of Jesuit Education 1993, 11–4). From this perspective, the act of being taught and the act of teaching acquire a ritual quality, deriving ethical and spiritual force from the recognition that every person is *imago Trinitatis* and *invenientis cum necessitate vocationis*. Biblical witnesses offer a compelling foundation for the proposed educational purpose. In the creation narrative, humanity appears not as a surplus observer of divine craftsmanship but as steward, commissioned to cultivate and protect the created order (Gen 2:15; cf. Balthasar 1975, 115–20). Charting the trajectory of instruction across the canon, we observe the formative movement: the transit of Israel is an exercise of pedagogical purification (Deut 8:2-3; Hos 2:14-15), the incarnate Word teaches as Torah made flesh and tending shepherd (Matt 5:1-2; Jn 10:11-16), and the nascent Christian at once practices and addresses the communal imperative of justice and love (Acts 2:42-47; 1 Jn 4:7-21). The narrative thus secures a transmittable epiphany which conclusively intertwines spiritual formation and educational labour (Groome 2011, 134–56). Consequently, the demand for human flourishing as holistic labour is not a speculative opinion, but a faith-concerted praxis that emerges from the disclosure of God's covenant history.

Lastly, Francis inscribes the agenda of integral human development within the wider missionary programme of the Church. The exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* categorically postulates that announcing the Kingdom and enacting human advancement are simply the same revolutionary motion: “An evangelizing community gets involved by word and deed in people's daily lives” (Francis 2013, §24, 20). Therefore, the missionary perspective precludes educational neutrality; rather, the pedagogical effort is conscripted into the Church's imperative, collaboratively witnessing to and embodying a world progressively oriented toward justice, compassion, and fulfillable hope for the human family (Congregation for Catholic Education 2017, 12–8).

### **Critique of the Technocratic Paradigm**

Francis's critique of contemporary education rests upon his detailed explication of what he identifies as the “technocratic paradigm”, a governing intellectual structure that subsumes the entirety of reality under the regimes of quantification, manipulability, and profitability (Francis 2015, §106–14). He contends that, by permeating the economic, political, and now the pedagogic sphere, the paradigm transfigures human beings into mere consumers and operational vectors within the production system (Francis 2015, §109, 78). Within the school,

the paradigm reveals itself most clearly in the cult of standardized assessment, a utilitarian programme of studies that prizes immediate fiscal return over the humanistic and the spiritual, and in the relegation of philosophy, theology, and the arts to the periphery, despite their capability to elicit wisdom over mere technical efficacy (Taylor 2007, 475–504).

Under the direction of such thought, educational institutions cede their original purpose to the mandate of economic instrumentation and become, instead, facilitating agencies of market success rather than sites wherein wisdom, ethical character, and self-critical understanding may mature (Francis 2015, §110, 79). Accordingly, “the fragmentation of knowledge proves incapable of producing meaning in the lives of young people” (Francis 2015, §110, 79). These institutions may therefore – by perpetual training in narrowly defined skill sets – generate competent operators yet deprive the subject of comprehensive wisdom, ethical deliberation, and the contemplative richness that constitute true human fulfilment (Guardini 1998, 70–7; Lonergan 1990, 231–44).

The anthropological consequences of technocratic education elevate concern for Francis. Reduction to technological or economic metrics yields a diminished reading of the human. Catholic tradition – from medieval scholasticism through to contemporary personalism – attests to the inadequacy of such readings (Maritain 1943, 34–52; Mounier 1952, 67–89). Where intelligent exercise shrinks to efficiency calculus and human value is subjected to market sovereigns, persons are objects, not subjects, whose inherent dignity and an intended, transcendent telos languish unregarded (Francis 2015, §112, 81).

The technocratic model, moreover, brackets those contemplative and relational inclusions constitutive of a genuinely educative process: silence, wonder and interior development, persistent metaphysical pedagogy (De Souza 2016, 270–5). The prevailing rationality prizes measurement and absolves silent, erosive instrumentalized educational controls of significant moral and personal import. The result is a process instrumental in its outcome while narrative, dialogical, and sacramental in its vocation is foreclosed. Francis does not incite abandonment of scientific or technical advance; rather, he invites a re-humanization through enrollment of such advance in the kinetic service of persons, not institutions (Francis 2015, §112, 81)

### **Educational Vision Rooted in Integral Human Development**

Francis’s expansive conception of education receives its fullest elucidation in the 2019 *Global Compact on Education*, where he delineates a learning process designed to nurture “universal solidarity and a more welcoming society” (Francis 2019). Donato Pignotti has rightly remarked that through this compact the pontiff relocates the Catholic intellectual tradition beyond strictly instrumentalist logics toward “an education...of the person, for the person, and by the person” (Pignotti 2023, 60). Under this orientation, schooling emerges not merely as a conveyor of information, but as a “school of meaning” directed to the realization of authentic human dignity and the building of fraternal unity. Education is thus reconstituted as a relational and ethical praxis in which formation supplants the transmission of factual data and quantified competencies.

Francis's pedagogical anthropology presupposes that spiritual formation is not an auxiliary addition to curriculum and pedagogy, but a constitutive dimension. Catholic schooling is summoned to foster "interior life" and attunement to the transcendent, in striking contrast to prevailing paradigms that reduce learning to benchmarks of productivity and performance (Francis 2015, §47, 35–6). The insistence upon interiority reveals a wider way of viewing education as the holistic development of the person in mutual, dynamic, and sacramental relations with the divine, fellow human beings, and the cosmos.

Francis's vision of education exemplifies a distinctive extension of Ignatian pedagogy, its defining traits of discernment, reflection, and action interwoven into a continuous, transformational itinerary directed toward both societal responsibility and personal metanoia (International Commission on the Apostolate of Jesuit Education 1993, 14–22). Educators exercising this model regard themselves, therefore, not simply as teachers, but as deliberate companions capable of guiding learners from the margins of critical inquiry into the heart of a compassionate and courageous engagement with the pressing injustices of the present moment. This practice of *acompañamiento* echoes the methods characteristic of Francis's pastoral leadership, and is manifest in a commitment to encounter, gradual formation, and the cultivation of mercy as an alternative to imposed, perfunctory obedience.

Consequently, the present educational urgency is not to catalogue prescribed content, but to furnish a radically transformative, incisive riposte to the "throwaway culture" (Francis 2020, §30, 28–9) and acute social fragmentation pervasive within the current global horizon. Fratelli Tutti's call to a deliberate "culture of encounter" assigns a foundational place to pedagogy that, far from merely recognizing fault lines, actively deconstructs them so that genuine dialogue and co-inquiry may emerge across difference. Within this educational vision, the act of learning itself thus becomes a continuous exercise in openness, a cultivated practice of civic convergence that recognizes each person as a sibling whose intrinsic human dignity and common future are irrevocably intertwined across borders both natural and historical.

In conclusion, Francis's approach to education is not confined to impersonal technical instruction; rather, it is an enactment of theological and moral intention. Formative instruction is understood as a crucible producing persons who reason, discern, and choose in the interests of both self and the wider community, thereby cultivating virtuous citizenry and leadership bound to the continual construction of societies that are, in full depth, human, just, and integrally humane.

### **Philosophical Resonances and Dialogue**

Francis's vision of education reveals a rich philosophical framework, drawing from Christian personalism and from critical pedagogies attentive to human worth, mutual relatedness, and practices of significant learning. Maritain, Mounier, and Wojtyła portray the person as intrinsically social, cued to the exercise of free will and drawn beyond the immanent – even the ethical ground of free coexistence and the transcendence that personalism so vigorously juxtaposes is a ground that animates Francis's understanding of integral human development, a vision that accords the human person no other horizon than the realm of vocation and

commitment. These figures press the Catholic humanism that provides the papal education of Francis with a doctrinal horizon that refracts curricular and methodological choices through the dual lens of epistemic hospitality and the expectation of moral fulfilment (Maritain 1943, 45–67; Mounier 1952, 78–95; Wojtyła 1979, 123–45).

Commenting explicitly, Graham McDonough asserts that within Francis’s horizon dialogue ceases to be a technical heuristic. (McDonough 2014, 122). This interpretive layer re-anchors dialogue in the Catholic social tradition, re-reading that tradition so that it now re-empowers communities of learning instead of merely sanctifying them. Terence McLaughlin further indicates that the twin notion of fraternity as the pedagogical habit of reciprocal advance and the quasi-epistemic habit of dialogue now jointly respond to fragmentation and anxious individuation that have historically and sociologically labelled later-modern education (McLaughlin 2018, 154).

At the heart of the intertext that this essay opens is the ethics of care as articulated by both Carol Gilligan and Nel Noddings, whose work has revolutionized understandings of moral education by, in Noddings’s phrase, “defining the moral domain in the terms of what is in the context of the caring relation” (2013, 2–15). Anthropology-oriented surveys of care echo the conceptual contours of Francis of Rome’s educational vision – notably the stress put upon situated responsiveness, the pivotal work of human dispositions in conversation, and the steady, cultivated gesture of empathy that grounds cultivated teaching and learning (Gilligan 1982, 17–23). The partnership between ethics of care and capabilities frameworks is thereby deepened, for the former furnishes instrumentally defined, exemplified pedagogical practices that enact the intersubjective horizons of growth to which Francis directs the instructor and learner alike. Noddings’s designation of “natural caring” as an ineluctably moral attention, delineated as a “longing for goodness that arises out of the experience or memory of being cared for” (2013, 11–8), finds cohesive indices in Francis’s repeated appeals for accompaniment and for a scholarly, moral, and spiritual formation that grows in reciprocity. Moreover, Francis’s moral thought exhibits a convincing, phenomenologically coherent kinship with Martha Nussbaum’s capabilities approach, particularly in the cognate demands of emotional nurturing, the developmental exercise of empathy, and the product of civic, ecologically attentive responsibility (Nussbaum 2011, 25–31; Walker and McLean 2013, 67–82). Within each educational discourse, it becomes clear that learning must move beyond the mere acquisition of technical skills. Education should foster the development of humane and socially responsible individuals who act with an awareness of their connection to others and the environment. Its ultimate aim is to form people capable of generosity, guided by loyalty to both human and ecological well-being, and committed to building just and flourishing communities for all.

Paulo Freire’s liberation pedagogy participated as an orienting force within Jorge Mario Bergoglio’s educational development, attaining particular salience during his episcopal tenure in Latin America, where Freirean models helped animate neo-Catechetical and pastoral initiatives. Freire’s characterization of education as *conscientização* and dialogical praxis

(2000, 72–86) resonates with Bergoglio’s treatment of the learner as an engaged moral subject who, through critical reflection, becomes an operative force for anthropological and social novelty, in contrast to the inert transmission of data. A mutual presupposition that learning must engage the existential whole of the subject structures both thinkers’ output.

Modeling the voice of implicit interlocutor, Bergoglio resists the epoch’s internal sceptics – writers such as Charles Taylor and Ivan Illich – whose diagnosis of hyper-rational and controlling structures wished to restore anthropological depth to the social imaginary (Taylor 2007, 715; Illich 1971, 7–11). Bergoglio rephrases their indictment within educational particulars, asserting that when curricula and methods subordinate themselves to narrowly instrumental calculation, the historical and inalienable educational function of transmitting the common inheritance and shaping the full human *capacité* – biological, cognitive, moral, and anagogical – dissipates, and all dimensions of personhood are left implicit, perfunctorily fulfilled at best.

Thus, the ontological and ethical core of Bergoglio’s educational proposal situates itself within the anthropological personalism of Emmanuel Mounier; liberatory and critical curricular principles; the ethical literature of an attentive care; and the capabilities perspectives of Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum. The cumulative yield of these strands offers a coherent articulation of dignity as the threshold beyond which human formation becomes essential, rather than peripheral, to educational purpose, and a principled threshold against reigning technocratic reconceptualizations of the moral and the pedagogical.

### **Applications and Future Challenges**

The enactment of Francis’s educational vision within existing academic systems evokes both considerable possibilities and formidable structural impediments. The Pontiff invites Catholic educational bodies to transcend the goal of academic excellence and to pursue the “integral development of the human person,” a development that unfolds in the spiritual, moral, social, and ecological dimensions (Hellwig 2016, 174). Such vision compels a profound remodelling of the entire somatic enterprise—fundamental alterations to the curriculum itself, profound reorientation of pedagogic strategies, and a systemic mutation of communal life—rather than the application of programme clichés that mask continuity.

Hellwig’s commentary makes salient that the contemporary educator is to abandon the role of solitary dispenser of information and to assume the graced posture of “co-journeyer in a moral and spiritual quest” (Hellwig 2016, 174). Teachers and academic leaders are entrusted with the task of walk alongside learners in disclosing personal vocation, cultivating moral deliberation, and cultivating a revolutionary bond with the global polity, all animated by the twin impulses of mercy and justice. The difficulty of rendering these ideals actionable lies in the ossified architectonics and intractable ideological apparatus of many contemporary educational systems.

The Pontiff insists that Catholic educational institutions are summoned to withstand, with courage, the pervasive gravitational pull of societal homogenisation, and to embrace a prophetic identity that is, in effect, the charter of authentic “human becoming” (Francis 2019).

The prophetic imperative exacts a disciplined commitment to countercultural practices that prize human formation – affectionate, intellectual, and ethical – above the calculus of economic efficiencies, and that value relational development in lieu of the entropy of competition.

Educational practitioners are summoned, in the papal magisterium, to view themselves as ornately-present companions who walk with students toward personal maturity and ethical formation (Francis 2013, §169, 92–3). Such a companionship model necessarily requires the intentional cultivation of spaces devoted to dialogue, personal and communal reflection, and spiritual discernment – capacities deemed non-negotiable for building a citizenship suffused with Christian love and sensitively aware of the globe. Yet educational contexts that are heavily shaped by prescribed examinations, procedural bureaucracy, and evolving political ideologies operate upon layered infrastructures so stifling that the movement toward a holistic educational ethos is often curtailed or diluted.

Concurrently, the papal exhortation to establish a culture of encounter and to give premium attention to environmental sustainability raises the further expectation that curricula and institutional practices will weave together intercultural dialogue, peace education, and eco-responsibility (Francis 2019). Such a synthesis promises to reinforce central magisterial teaching, yet may, in particular contexts, encounter durable resistance from educational systems driven solely by external markets or by profit maximization.

Notwithstanding these obstacles, Pope Francis demands that ecclesiastical educational systems remain intransigently committed to serving as foci of both intellectual formation and spiritual awakening. This directive should not be understood as a call for literal imitation of established formulas, but rather as a process of adaptive reinterpretation, one that remains faithful to the Gospel while responding to the shifting currents of culture. Its purpose is to ensure that formation remains relevant and directed toward the integral and authentic growth of the human person.

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