

INTERVIEW WITH THOMAS BURNFORD, VICE PRESIDENT, CATHOLIC VIRTUAL

*Interview conducted by Quentin Wodon
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EXCERPTS:

- “A teacher ... is still the best way to lead the student from information to understanding and to action. Digitization of learning is not about replacing teachers; it is about refining what a teacher does and can do best, and refining what technology can do and does best.”
- “What excites me the most is how we can form students in faith in an online environment, watching online teachers pray with students during live sessions and support them personally as they learn asynchronously.”

You currently work for Catholic Virtual. Could you please describe your organization and your own role?

I work with Catholic Virtual, a US company that partners with Catholic schools around the world to help them utilize the power of online education as part of their traditional programming. More specifically, I train our online teachers in how best to provide truly Catholic online education, and I also work on business development in the US, Europe, and Latin America.

You were President of NCEA for many years, so you know a lot about opportunities and challenges for Catholic schools in the US. How well are the schools doing to harness the power of digitalization?

Not so well. There is still a huge reliance on the in-person teacher covering all aspects of the student's education, and as a result I think schools can miss out on opportunities for technology to assist in some specific and appropriate ways. We know that the delivery of information to students can be enhanced through the usage of a quality online curriculum and learning management systems; a teacher, however, is still the best way to lead the student from information to understanding and to action.

Box 1: Interview Series

What is the mission of the Global Catholic Education website? The site informs and connects Catholic educators globally. It provides them with data, analysis, opportunities to learn, and other resources to help them fulfill their mission with a focus on the preferential option for the poor.

Why a series of interviews? Interviews are a great way to share experiences in an accessible and personal way. This series will feature interviews with practitioners as well as researchers working in Catholic education, whether in a classroom, at a university, or with other organizations aiming to strengthen Catholic schools and universities.

What is the focus of this interview? In this interview, Thomas Burnford, Vice President with Catholic Virtual, discusses some of his experiences with digitalization in education. The interview is part of a series on that topic.

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Digitization of learning is not about replacing teachers; it is about refining what a teacher does and can do best, and refining what technology can do and does best. Oh, and to be clear, the faith formation of students, which is the critical mission of Catholic schools, is something that requires to some degree the lived witness of a teacher.

In addition, in the US over the past seventy years the number of school staff has grown at almost four times the rate of student enrollment, and staffing accounts for over 70% of a school's operating budget. In Catholic schools the total dependence on in-person teachers for all aspects of learning is not financially viable. Rethinking how education is delivered is a must.

Today, a few years and a pandemic later, do you see any major changes?

Absolutely. We learned clearly that just zooming a teacher from the classroom into the home all day doesn't work, and crushes everyone's will to live! We also lost many teachers and now have a critical shortage. And finally, we learned that a hybrid model that combines quality online learning with in-person instruction DOES work. We've seen the adaptation of online learning in higher education flow down through the pandemic to high schools and elementary schools. Put another way, the pandemic forced a huge leap forward in re-thinking how education is delivered. It has been a very hard few years, but independent schools have shown how quickly adaptation can happen. The trick now is to keep innovating!

The other change we have seen is that in many places in the US K-8 enrollment has rebounded (after the initial drop) because Catholic schools re-opened first during the pandemic and stayed open, responding to what was best for students and families. Many families came to Catholic schools from government schools during the pandemic and have stayed. In my mind, this demonstrates the value of private school education, that when parents experience it, they stay.

What are some of the most promising initiatives in digitalization for K12 education?

What excites me the most is how we can form students in faith in an online environment, watching online teachers pray with students during live sessions and support them personally as they learn asynchronously. This is like St. Francis Xavier going to Japan and having to figure out a completely new way of proclaiming the Gospel – today we are seeing, particularly at Catholic Virtual, a new frontier of Catholic education in which we actively learn how to do Catholic education online, not just quality academics, but academics with faith infused through the learning experience.

On a very practical level, there have been countless situations in which a school has had an unexpected teacher gap and filled that gap with an online course. After seeing the success of the course and the student growth and satisfaction, the school had chosen to keep that course online the next year and not seek a classroom teacher. The schools are not going online for all courses, just maybe one or two, focusing on those subjects where they can't find local teachers or electives that only appeal to a small number of students. This is promising because it gives the school flexibility in their programming and staffing. It's like having an extra tool in the tool belt when it comes to planning out the course catalogue and faculty levels.

Are there specific programs that you find particularly interesting, and do we know whether they are working?

I am a big fan of dual diploma programs, when a student outside the US has the chance to get a US diploma through an online program. This gives students overseas the opportunity to learn English from a native speaker, to encounter and learn in a different culture, and to earn a respected diploma. It is more than the diploma however: these programs give students an experience of learning globally, of mastering a second language, and getting to understand a foreign culture. It is also worth noting that an online dual diploma program is much less expensive than studying abroad, and therefore is accessible to more young people. We know this is working because more students are graduating from dual diploma programs in the past few years as an alternative to programs in which overseas students come to the US for high school.

The other program I like is where Catholic dioceses have started their own online Catholic school for a small number of students who don't have access to a brick and mortar Catholic school. These may be families from remote areas, families with health challenges, or just families who want their students to learn from home. Through a diocesan online school, the Church can extend the reach of Catholic school education beyond the geographies of established schools. Enrollments are not high in these diocesan online schools, but they are serving families one student at a time.

Are there risks for students from digitalization?

Yes, in Catholic schools there has always been a risk of separating academic learning from faith formation. Catholic schools have been effective specifically because they educate the whole person, spirit, mind and body, and integrate faith into academics. In an online environment there is risk that the student might not experience the faith witness of a teacher, or just use secular curricula that either don't include faith or are even opposed to faith.

Therefore, it is important to do online education well, and in a way that fully aligns with the mission of the school.

Online security of students is also a critical requirement for any digital endeavor. Fortunately, the advances in learning management system technology allow for increased online security for students, but it's something we must pay close attention to.

Finally, it can be easy to think that one digital resource or service will work for all students in the same way. This is not the case – we know that there are as many learning styles as there are children! Digitization of learning must respect the individuality of each student. On the one hand technologies such as differentiated learning resulting from adaptive assessments allow every student to learn at their own pace without the risk of not being able to keep up or being bored. On the other hand, it is imperative that a teacher be involved in overseeing each student's learning so as to ensure that each student's learning experience is appropriate and effective.

How can schools mitigate these risks?

I think it is important for a school's leadership to really own any digitization of learning. You can't just hand off a class, or student, to an online system without understanding what is happening and the student's expected experience. This includes assessing the entire student experience and regularly evaluating it against the school's objectives. Let's face it, digitization of learning is somewhat new, it is different, and many traditional educators and leaders have much to learn. As education changes, it is important that school leaders do due diligence on the changes they are proposing.

What was your journey? How did you end up working on Catholic schools?

I started out working in parish religious education programs, but then moved to oversight of Catholic schools, particularly working with Catholic identity, teacher training, and developing good policy to support individual schools. I have always loved learning and schools, since they change lives, and it is a wonderful privilege to be able to work with passionate educators. And yes, "journey" is right – one of the most enjoyable parts of my work has been visiting schools in different states and countries, noting the local differences and global similarities.

Finally, could you share a personal anecdote about yourself, what you are passionate about?

I am passionate about any form of two wheeled transportation! But on a more serious note, I love teachers – they are the ones who work so hard day in and day out with love and care for our students. My job is to figure out

how best to support them with quality and innovative resources.



Photos: Tom enjoying two wheeled transportation.