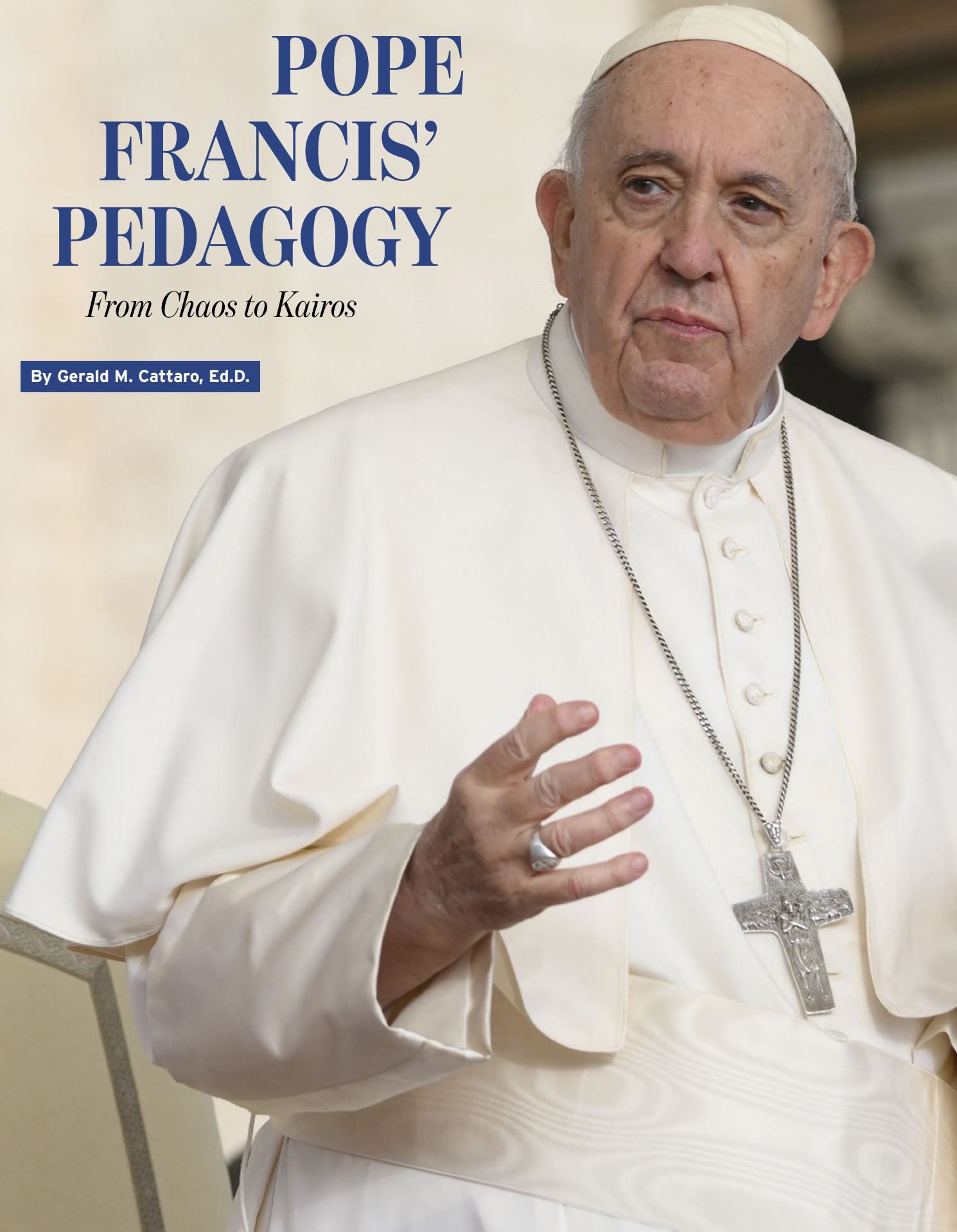


# POPE FRANCIS' PEDAGOGY

*From Chaos to Kairos*

By Gerald M. Cattaro, Ed.D.





As we welcome Pope Leo, we recall the enduring legacy of Pope Francis, who never forgot his roots as a Catholic educator. The connection between these two religious leaders is striking: Pope Francis began his religious life as a high school teacher at a Jesuit school in Buenos Aires. Pope Leo, too, started in the classroom—as a substitute teacher at St. Rita’s in Chicago. Both men entered their ministry having first shaped young minds in Catholic schools.

As Pope Leo begins his ministry on the foundation of *Regnum Rerum*, his early experience in Catholic education will help shape his vision for the Church. Like his predecessor, Pope Leo experienced Catholic education not merely as an academic

the ecclesiology of Vatican II and inspired by Ignatian discernment, critical thinking and the Church’s social teaching. In an era of separation and throw-away culture, he called for a transition “from chaos to *kairos*—from breakdown to breakthrough, from crisis to encounter” (Francis, 2013a).

### Forming Agents of Change

Essential to Francis’ philosophy of education was the idea that students should become agents of positive change. The ministry of Catholic education is one of accompaniment, he stressed. Not only are teachers to form students’ minds, but also to nourish consciences and tender hearts. “Educators who fully live their vocation... will never do so without this explicit announcement of

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endeavor, but as a vital mission to cultivate dignity, justice and spiritual depth in the next generation. His educational priorities may well reflect the legacy of Pope Francis—and seek to build upon it with renewed purpose and relevance.

For Pope Francis, the classroom was never just a setting for academic instruction—it was a sacred space for forming conscience, character and compassion. Amid an increasingly fragmented, polarized and dehumanizing culture of waste, he challenged Catholic school educators with a radical new vision: that education should be about more than content delivery and instead focus on the holistic formation of the person—head, heart and hands. In a talk last fall, I explained how his method—rooted in his Latin-American culture, Jesuit spirituality and immigrant family history—was at once pastoral and prophetic, meditative and activist. It was grounded in

faith. You should never underestimate the power of an example, that is why they are a precious resource for the evangelization of culture” (Francis, 2013a, §134).

Education becomes a mission: the synergy of knowledge and faith must serve the common good and help establish a civilization of love (Congregation for Catholic Education, 2017).

### The Syncing of Mind, Heart and Hands

When he spoke with Jesuit students in 2013, Pope Francis distilled his educational philosophy: “Educating is not a profession; it is a commitment and a way of life. You teach with the head, the heart and the hands. The three languages need to be together — what you think, what you feel, what you want, what you do” (Francis, 2013b).

This “praxis” forms the foundation of Catholic education. With the mind, we seek

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truth through reasoning and reflection; with the heart, we promote compassion and solidarity, especially with the most vulnerable; and with the hands, we act with justice and care for creation and community. This tri-fold approach is taught and lived in Catholic schools, envisioned as “sanctuaries.”

### Encounter as the Foundation

For Francis, education begins with encounter—particularly with those on the margins. The existential peripheries, he said, are “where the Church must go” (Francis, 2018, §135). This concept mirrors the Jesuit value of *cura personalis*—care for the whole person—and calls for educators to accompany students as they wrestle with their questions, experiences and vulnerabilities. A pedagogy of encounter thus demands that schools be rooted in listening, presence and love. Education must inform minds and form relationships—with God, with self and with others.

### Integral Ecology and the Global Compact

Inspired by *Laudato Si'*, Pope Francis' Global Compact on Education sets forth seven commitments for 21st-century Catholic education:

1. Place the human person at the center of all efforts.
2. Listen to the voices of children and young people.
3. Promote the dignity and leadership of women.

4. Support families as the primary educators.
5. Welcome the vulnerable and marginalized.
6. Reimagine systems through the lens of justice.
7. Care for our common home through sustainable living (Francis, 2019).

These principles challenge educators to form students who lead with ethics, ecological awareness and justice—not domination or power.

### Beyond Academics: Toward Liberation

Catholic education must transcend academics to awaken a sense of moral responsibility. Teachers should guide students in exploring life's essential questions—of meaning, belonging and purpose. Canon law affirms: “Education is to be directed toward the full development of the human person” (Code of Canon Law, 1983, Canon 795). Pope Francis' pedagogy holds eternal destiny and social justice in creative tension, urging Catholic schools to be transformative spaces where students learn to act justly, love tenderly and walk humbly with God (Micah 6:8).

### From Chaos to Kairos

Pope Francis was not blind to the turbulence of our times. He acknowledged the chaos—climate change, cultural division and existential uncertainty—but also recognized

kairos, a grace-filled moment ready for transformation and renewal (Francis, 2015).

Catholic schools are uniquely positioned to respond. With a pedagogy grounded in compassion, encounter and action—embodied in the integration of mind, heart and hands—we can prepare students not just for achievement but for service, not only for leadership but for witness.

From chaos to kairos, let us educate in the spirit of Christ and the dream of Pope Francis—a time rich with grace and meaning, renewing our call to be a light for the mind, a fire for the heart and a force for the hands.

As Ignatius of Loyola often concluded his letters to Jesuits embarking on mission: *Ite, inflamate omnia*—“Go, set the world on fire.”



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