



ISSN: 2993-8759

Iris Journal of
Educational Research

DOI: 10.33552/IJER.2025.05.000607

Iris Publishers

Opinion

Copyright © All rights are reserved by Stanislaus Irudayaselvam

Gravissimum Educationis: An Inception of Holistic Education

Stanislaus Irudayaselvam*

Graduate Institute of Educational Leadership and Development, Fu Jen Catholic University, Taiwan

***Corresponding author:** Stanislaus Irudayaselvam, Graduate Institute of Educational Leadership and Development, Fu Jen Catholic University, Taiwan

Received Date: July 09, 2025

Published Date: July 17, 2025

Abstract

Gravissimum Educationis (GE), the Second Vatican Council's Declaration on Christian Education, is a seminal document that influenced all subsequent Catholic documents on education. GE addresses the universal right to education, the Church's educational responsibility, and the role of parents as primary educators. GE advocates a holistic approach to teaching, aiming to help children and youth develop "harmoniously their physical, moral and intellectual endowments," with special emphasis on schools and the responsibilities of teachers in educating future generations. This paper primarily explores GE's background, declaration, reception, and main contents. Then, it explains holistic education and its origin and history. Further, it will explain the epochal shifts GE introduced and outline the key principles of holistic education. It analyses the transition towards an integrated education model focused on comprehensive human development, including intellectual, moral, and spiritual formation. Finally, it evaluates GE's contribution and practical relevance for holistic education.

Keywords: Gravissimum Educationis; Holistic education; Human development; Catholic education; Vatican II education

Introduction

Education is essential, a key to success, and has a central value in human life. Education illuminates a person's mind and thinking, and it helps one to have a promising career and realize dreams. For centuries, governments and religious institutions have been major providers of education. Education and schooling have been one of the Church's main apostolic fields worldwide since the 17th century. The Catholic Church sees education as an essential and fundamental aspect of its mission, and it has been issuing

guidelines and directions for better education. Though the church recognizes her significant role in education, in various contexts over different eras, the Church's role also varies [1]. Initially focused on the religious instruction and moral character, the pre-Vatican Christian education was built on the imperial idea of the church's mission (Christendom and Gallicanism), as the handing on of culture and education to those presumed to have had none. Naturalism and modernization were considered to engender the integrity of Christian teachings and values [2].

¹ Gallicanism is a doctrine that originated in France in the Middle Ages which attempted to regulate the relationship between the Catholic Church and the state. This movement aimed to reduce the influence of religion and make the Church part of the state.

The Second Vatican Council was one of the most significant events in the history of Catholicism and marked a milestone. It opened a process of profound transformation within the Church and its relationship with the modern world. Only after Vatican II did the new thinking about Catholic education crystallize into shape. The most vital changes of Vatican II were a clear shift of the church towards the outside world. The church has opened the windows to foster closer collaboration with other Christians and religions rather than combating the hegemony of Protestantism. The church aimed at evangelizing the modern world and figuring out ways to spread the Good News in the secular world. Thus, the Vatican II's attitude to education empowered the poor, opening Catholic education to non-Catholics and non-Christians so that humanity might witness the Good News.

The Council issued 16 documents, including four Constitutions, nine Decrees, and three Declarations. On October 28, 1965, Vatican Council II issued one of the Declarations on Christian Education, *Gravissimum Educationis* (GE), literally translated as 'The Importance of Education.' This critical text addresses the vitality of Catholic Education. GE's message on education is worthwhile for our age, parents, teachers, Catholics, and non-Catholics. It focuses on the catholic educators' role in forming the students to achieve their full potential. The promulgation of GE changed the landscape of catholic education and religion in general and became a manifesto for Catholic schooling [3,4]. The vision of Catholic education outlined in GE exposes the Church's understanding of humans, faith, and its mission. The perennial concerns of GE claim every aspect of human life [5]. This paper studies the roots and foundation of holistic education found in the declaration and elucidates how it further led to the inception of the same.

Declaration on Christian Education

The Second Vatican Council considered education's paramount importance and influence on human formation and issued the declaration [6]. GE was a comparatively short, crucial, and seminal document for all subsequent documents on Catholic Education. It also opened doors for new publications and journals. Most of this significant Council text became canon law [7]. The declaration was pivotal in Catholic history, aiming for spiritual renewal and dialogue with the modern world [8]. The declaration addresses the importance of education for all and emphasizes its role in shaping the individual society [9]. It also paved the way for the Congregation for Catholic Education, which evolved into the Dicastery for Culture and Education (DCE) [10]. Today, this dicastery issues guidelines for Christian education and educational institutions.

The declaration was a guiding light for educators striving towards an enriched understanding of human dignity and authentic freedom within the diverse cultural landscape [11]. It also outlines the Church's responsibility in education, the rights of parents, and the need for collaboration between families, schools, and the wider community [12]. The very first section speaks of helping children and young people "to develop harmoniously their physical, moral and intellectual endowments so that they may gradually acquire a mature sense of responsibility" [13]. This call for harmonious human development paves the way for holistic education. Its seeds were sown in the declaration.

The background and context of *Gravissimum Educationis*

There were three socio-ecclesial factors behind the creation of the GE: the Role of parents, new developments in psychological theories, and the role of the laity. The Christian Family Movement was born in the 1940s in the United States, and it stressed the role of the parents as primary educators rather than the institutions or the state [14]. So, the council upheld and highlighted the role of the parents. The second element, the new development of psychological theories and the change of old paradigms at the beginning of the 20th century, needed immediate attention. The council gave a reactionary response with the spirit of dialogue and openness. The third element was the renewal of the role of laity in the Church. The church stressed the collaboration with the laity in education. The declaration did not pretend to be the last word on education, but it directed the local churches.

The Reception of *Gravissimum Educationis*

The Church has been giving due importance to education for ages. O'Malley argues, "For all the criticisms that the declaration received, it set out important principles and, in its approach, and style, was congruent with the other documents of the Council [15]. Thus, the topic of education in the Council is worthy of its attention. However, the declaration on education did not receive a favourable reception all over the world. The content and history behind the declaration made it a lesser document in Latin America. Unlike the other Vatican II conciliar documents, the declaration's principles of education are presented in defensive form. The pastoral and missionary approach of the Latin American Church rejected many points and principles of GE [15]. The lack of preparation and historical context led to the declaration's hostile reception in Spain [16].

² A Catholic Classical Educational Journal, *Gravissimum* was founded to after this declaration to provide Catholic teachers with a sounding board of authentic pedagogy and Christian anthropology within the parameters of faith.

Contents of Gravissimum Educationis

The declaration on education stresses the need for its publication and asserts, "Holy Mother Church must be concerned with the whole of man's life, even the secular part of it insofar as it has a bearing on his heavenly calling" [13]. The whole of man's life that includes every part, not excluding education, the declaration outlines the important actors and their varied roles in education.

GE, aligned with the UN Human Rights Declaration, claimed the right of every child and youth to be educated in a formal institution. It also claimed the right of the Church "to establish and to conduct schools of every type and level." This right of the Church "contributes in the highest degree to the protection of freedom of conscience, the rights of parents, as well as the betterment of culture itself" (Vatican Council II, 1965: n.8). Stressing the Church's duty to value the efforts of the civil society, the document gave guiding principles to the role of different actors, such as parents, the schools and the state [13].

Parents have the highest responsibility in the education of their children, and they "have the primary and inalienable right and duty to educate their children [and] must enjoy true liberty in their choice of schools" (Vatican Council II, 1965: n. 6). The declaration emphasized the role of family and stated Family is indeed "the first school of social virtues that every society needs" (Documents of the Second Vatican Council, 1965: GE n.6). It outlined the Church's special care for the poor and the unbelievers that aligned with the spirit of other Vatican documents. It claimed the subsidiarity role for the state. It encouraged the state to provide the necessary help: "Therefore, the state must protect the rights of the children to an adequate school education, check on the ability of teachers and the excellence of their training, look after the health of the pupils and in general promote the whole school project" (Documents of the Second Vatican Council, 1965: GE n.6).

GE was an open declaration to be continued and developed in any context: "certain fundamental principles of Christian education, especially in schools. These principles must be developed at greater length by a special post-conciliar commission and applied by episcopal conferences" (Vatican Council II, 1965: Introduction). The Church imparts values by providing education. "Christian formation of the world by which natural values, viewed in the full perspective of humanity as redeemed by Christ, may contribute to the good of society as a whole." [13].

The declaration demonstrates both continuity and progress from earlier church teachings. It presupposed a fundamental continuity with a long series of papal affirmations of the church's commitment to the religious education of the youth. It reflects a more optimistic anthropology and a positive evaluation of emerging technology that marks the council's reflection [9]. The declaration emphasized holistic education that helps Christians "take an increasingly active part in the life of society, especially in economic and political matters." It hoped to reach out to the people of other religions by promoting justice.

Holistic Education

Holistic education, focusing on wholeness, encompasses many philosophical ideas and pedagogical practices. It avoids excluding any aspect of human experience and seeks to integrate various aspects of a person's life, promoting wellbeing and a comprehensive understanding of the world [17]. It also seeks to engage students on physical, cognitive, emotional, aesthetic, social, and spiritual levels. It promotes an integrated learning experience that prepares them for earthly responsibilities and transcendent aspirations. It acknowledges the interconnectedness between individuals and their communities, accentuating personal responsibility for communal well-being [18].

Holistic education extends beyond traditional pedagogical approaches by integrating emotional, social, and ethical dimensions of learning, challenging the conventional education focusing on standards and testing. This approach acknowledges the interdependence and interconnectedness of everything, positioning reality as a system where every element is linked [19]. Holistic education nurtures every aspect of a person's being and fosters a sense of interconnectedness and responsibility towards the wider world, including environmental awareness and social justice. It promotes interactions and relationships between the individual and other people, the individual and the natural environment, the inner self of the students, the external world, emotion and reason, different disciplines of knowledge, and different forms of knowing.

The roots of holistic education can be traced back to indigenous and ancient cultures. The ancient philosophies, both Greek and Asian, support the education of the whole person, engaging body, mind, and spirit, and nurturing the human life [20]. Ron Miller, founder of Holistic Education Press, traces its origin to the 1970s, but in 1988, two publications signalled the emergence of the holistic education movement: the Holistic Education Review and the Holistic Curriculum [19,21]. After the 1990s, all the educational institutions turned to inculcate holistic education as a multidimensional process encompassing all facets of human life, which is a complete and balanced human development.

Holistic education promotes a more balanced development of different aspects, like intellectual, physical, spiritual, emotional, social, and aesthetic, and the relationship between the individual and others [22]. Holistic education is not defined as basic skills but is concerned with life experience. We can describe holistic education as having the following characteristics: 1) it nurtures the development of the whole person, 2) it revolves around relationships (egalitarian, open, mutual, and democratic relationships), 3) it is concerned with life experiences and not basic skills, 4) it recognizes that cultures are constantly (re)created and changed by people, and 5) it is founded upon a deep reverence for life and the unknown source of life [17].

Gravissimum Educationis and Holistic Education

GE serves as the fundamental source for understanding Christian perspectives of education and lays the foundation for

holistic education by emphasizing the development of the whole person, encompassing the intellectual, moral, religious, social, and civil dimensions of education. It stressed the importance of education to foster holistic education. It emphasized holistic education that helps Christians “take an increasingly active part in the life of society, especially in economic and political matters.” The very first article of GE reads:

“All men of every race, condition and age, since they enjoy the dignity of a human being, have an inalienable right to an education that is in keeping with their ultimate goal, their ability, their sex, and the culture and tradition of their country, and also in harmony with their fraternal association with other peoples in the fostering of true unity and peace on earth. For a true education aims at the formation of the human person in the pursuit of his ultimate end and of the good of the societies of which, as man, he is a member, and in whose obligations, as an adult, he will share” Documents of the Second Vatican Council, 1965: GE n.1).

The declaration further unfolds the following key aspects of holistic education:

Comprehensive human development

GE emphasizes that proper education aims to form the human person. It specifically calls for children and young people to develop harmoniously their physical, moral, and intellectual endowments

to acquire future responsibilities.

Integration of spiritual and secular

The declaration advocates for education that addresses the whole of human life. It reflects a holistic view where the spiritual formation is not separated from academic and social development.

Balanced formation

GE does not stress only academic excellence, but it also upholds physical, moral, and intellectual formation. This trinity of development represents the core of the document’s holistic approach.

Social responsibility

The document emphasizes that education should prepare students to participate in social life. They need to be adequately instructed in the necessary and opportune skills so that they may become actively involved in the social organizations.

Values-based education

GE highlights that students have a right to be motivated and to appraise moral values. They need to form a correct conscience and knowledge that does not exclude the love of God and their neighbour. The following table presents the concrete GE references that relate to holistic education.

Table 1:

GE Number and topic	Gravissimum Educationis references	Holistic Education	Concrete Application
1 Foundation of holistic education	For a true education aims at the formation of the human person in the pursuit of his ultimate end and of the good of the societies of which, as man, he is a member, and in whose obligations, as an adult, he will share.	Formation of the whole human person fulfilling all their needs. This rejects the educational model that focus solely on academic achievement or skill training	Human person as the central focus. It integrates individual development with social responsibility. It connects temporal education with ultimate human purpose.
1 Tri-dimensional approach to education	It calls “to develop harmoniously their physical, moral and intellectual endowments so that they may gradually acquire a mature sense of responsibility.”	The multidimensional human formation leads to the person to maturity. The three-dimensional development model leads to harmonious development.	The multi-facet education guides a child for a balanced growth.
1 Social responsibility and service	Students should be “trained to take their part in social life that properly instructed in the necessary and opportune skills they can become actively involved in various community organizations.”	Holistic learning comprises of service learning, civic engagement social justice and leadership formation.	Students are prepared for future to serve the society and take different responsibilities.
2 Integration of faith and learning	The Christian education “does not merely strive for the maturing of a human person as just now described but has as its principal purpose this goal: that the baptized, while they are gradually introduced the knowledge of the mystery of salvation, ... they develop into perfect manhood, to the mature measure of the fullness of Christ.”	Holistic education integrates spiritual and faith aspects in human formation. It explores how faith and learning complement each other.	The necessity of integrating faith and spiritual formation in education.

3 Multiple educators in holistic formation	"Parents are the primary and principal educators." "The family is the first school of the social virtue." "The duty of educating belongs to the Church." "Their whole life can be imbued with the spirit of Christ and at the same time do all she can to promote all peoples the complete perfection of the human person, the good of earthly society and the building of a world that is more human."	Holistic education is not limited to the classrooms and teachers. The multi-stakeholder educational ecosystem is comprehensive support structure.	Family foundation, community engagement, society and the spiritual formation led to a collaborative approach. They play different roles in educating the children
4 Use of multiple resources	"Other aids which belong to general heritage of man...such as media of communication, various groups for mental and physical development, youth associations, and in particular schools."	Different organizations, personal, and tools play an integral role in implementing holistic education.	Different aids of personal and tools are integrated
5 Schools as moral communities	School "is designed not only to develop with special care the intellectual faculties but also to form the ability to judge rightly, to hand on the cultural legacy of previous generations, to foster a sense of values, to prepare for professional life."	The broader view of schools, not just a place of academic learning, but a place of special importance, of mutual and person learning.	Schools must address intellectual, moral, cultural and practical dimensions of human development simultaneously. The schools create a value-centered learning environment.
8 The Catholic School Model	"No less than other schools do the Catholic school pursue cultural goals and the human formation of youth." Schools must "create for the school community a special atmosphere animated by the Gospel spirit of freedom and charity, to help youth grow according to the new creatures... so that the knowledge the students gradually acquire of the world, life and man is illumined by faith."	Schools must help for human formation and more than that, as a Catholic school, they must carry the Gospel values.	Holistic education integrates academic learning with character formation, spiritual development and cultural engagement. The unified knowledge framework that integrates faith and reason will lead the students to have a unified worldview.
9 Differentiated holistic approaches	Catholic Schools should "take on different forms in keeping with local circumstances" and include various types of "professional and technical schools, centers for educating adults and promoting social welfare."	Holistic education must adapt to different contexts while maintaining the comprehensive approach to human development. It encourages cultural sensitivity, diverse methodologies, inclusive approach and innovative ideas.	Apart from regular schools, the document calls for different professional and technical schools. The document proposes a contextual adaptation framework.
10 Higher education and holistic formation	In Catholic universities, "there may be a deeper realization of the harmony of faith and science." So that the students be "molded into men truly outstanding in their training, ready to undertake weighty responsibilities in the society."	A continuation of holistic education is encouraged in the universities. It covers academic excellence, character formation, research integration and leadership preparation.	It must integrate academic excellence with social responsibility.
12 Assessment and continuous improvement	The document states, "from greater coordination and cooperative endeavor greater fruits will be derived."	It suggests collaborative learning, institutional cooperation, international exchange and continues improvement.	It promotes regular assessment and constant improvement at every stage.

Practical relevance for holistic education

The document is still relevant today as it presents education as not merely intellectual training but a comprehensive formation

of the whole person intellectually, spiritually, morally, and socially. It highlights the importance of developing individual potential and social responsibility that aligns with contemporary holistic educational approaches. The declaration highlights the primordial

role of parents in their children's education. There are concrete guidelines for implementing holistic education. Here are a few points that demonstrate the importance of exploring holistic education that continues throughout life and across all educational levels:

Multi-dimensional Development

GE 1 and 2 provide the framework for simultaneously addressing intellectual, moral, physical, and spiritual dimensions. This multifaceted human development and the necessity for overall education prefigured the holistic education in the document.

Community Partnership

GE 3 establishes the need for family-school-community collaboration. Calling the different actors and persons in education 'the authors of education', the document stresses the unity and togetherness of different agents to work together to inculcate holistic education [23].

Values Integration

GE 5 and 8 show how values and character formation must be integrated into all aspects of learning. The document broadens the role of schools as nurseries of values, and everyone who engages with them is seen as people with a vocation [24].

Contextual Adaptation

GE 9 provides flexibility for implementing holistic approaches in different cultural and educational contexts. It extends the value of education to non-Catholics and non-Christians. It urges the schools to consider contextual and contemporary conditions in education. The document promotes the option for low-income people and those in need.

Lifelong Formation

GE 9 and 10 demonstrate that the holistic education continues throughout life and across the educational levels [3]. Lifelong learning that continues in universities will prepare the youth to undertake weighty societal responsibilities. The document highlights the spiritual formation at all levels.

Coordination and Collaboration

GE12 calls for cooperation at the local, national, and international levels. Cooperation and collaboration should aim at the good of all humankind. The document encourages coordination and cooperation among the academic institutes, professors, and students, as well as exchanges, international gatherings, and conferences, sharing scientific inquiries, and communicating their discoveries with one another [6].

Conclusion

GE introduced general educational principles that are to be adopted to the circumstances. They aim for the harmonious development of the whole person. These principles are seeds of holistic education and promote the development of the complete human person. GE's systemic approach transforms education from

a fragmented collection of subjects into a unified process of human formation. Developing their full potential across all dimensions of human existence prepares students for meaningful lives and responsible citizenship. In essence, GE provides a foundation for holistic education within a Catholic context, emphasizing the interconnectedness of different aspects of human development and the collaborative approach to education.

Acknowledgment

None.

Conflict of Interest

No conflict of interest.

References

1. Kaha KA, Viktorahadi RFB (2024) Post-and pre-Vatican II Council Perspectives on Church Education. *Hanifiya: Jurnal Studi Agama-Agama* 7(1): 153-160.
2. Bruno-Jofre Rosa, Zaldivar JI (2017) Catholic Education in the Wake of Vatican II. *Unoversity of Toronto Press* 48(6): 861-863.
3. Bayldon M (1996) "Gravissimum Educationist" 30 Years on. *New Blackfriars* 77(902): 131-136.
4. Whittle Sean (2018) Vatican II and new thinking about Catholic education: the impact and legacy of bravissimo education is. *Routledge*.
5. Garvey J (2015) 'Gravissimum Educationis': Does the Declaration on Education Retain Its Relevance? | *National Catholic Register*. University of America.
6. Wilson MPJ (2016) Mother Catherine McAuley: Forerunner to the Declaration on Christian Education "Gravissimum Educationis" of the Second Vatican Council. *New Blackfriars* 97(1069): 358-371.
7. Mirus J (2010) *Vatican II on Christian Education*. Catholic Culture.
8. Teng P (2022) *Vatican II's Declaration on Christian Education - Archdiocese Commission for Catholic Schools*. Archdiocese Commission for Catholic Schools.
9. Briel DJ (2008) The Declaration on Christian Education, *Gravissimum Educationist*. In M. L. Lamb & M. Levering (Eds.), 383-396.
10. Catholic Education Service (2025) *Sixty years of Gravissimum Educationis – colloquium and call for papers*. Catholic Education Service.
11. Nicolson S (2022) Theology of Education in the Second Vatican Council's *Gravissimum Educationis*. *Theology and Philosophy of Education* 1(1): 32-39.
12. Van Gestel T, van Iersel F, de GrootK (2020) The Function of Speech Acts in a Vatican II Declaration: *Gravissimum Educationis*. *Journal of Empirical Theology*, 33(2): 280-304.
13. Documents of the Second Vatican Council (1965).
14. Leckey DR (2006) The laity and Christian education: apostolic am acetoacetate, bravissimo education is: Leckey, Dolores R: Free Download, Borrow, and Streaming: Internet Archive. In *Paulist Press*. Paulist Press.
15. Madero C (2018) 50 years of the declaration on Christian education bravissimo education is: A review of its reception in Latin America. *International Journal of Christianity and Education* 22(1) 55-63.
16. Zaldivar JI (2019) "Gravissimum Educationis" and the Jesuit Theologians of Loyola Province, Spain. *Espacio, Tiempo y Educación* 6(1): 101-115.
17. Mahmoudi S, Jafari E, Nasr Abadi HA, Lightbar MJ (2012a) Holistic education: An Approach for 21 Century. *International Education Studies* 5(3): 178-186.

18. Samples B, Hammond B (1985) Holistic Learning. *The Science Teacher* 52(8): 40-43.
19. Miller R (1992) Introducing Holistic Education: The Historical and Pedagogical Context of the 1990 Chicago Statement.
20. Miller J (2006) Review essay: Ancient roots of holistic education. *Encounter: Education for Meaning and Social Justice*, 19(1): 55-59.
21. Miller JP (2018) Holistic Education: A Brief History. *International Handbook of Holistic Education* 5-16.
22. Mahmoudi S, Jaafari E, Nasirabad HA, Liaghatdar MJ (2012b) Holistic education : An Approach for 21 Century. *International Education Studies* 5(3): 178-86.
23. Okoye CJ (2016) Spirit a Horizons Bravissimo Educationist. *Golden Opportunities in American Catholic Education 50 Years After Vatican II. Spirit an Horizons* 11(11): 1-10.
24. Tarnowski J (2020) Return to sources in Christian education according to Vaticanum II. *Studia Theologica Varsaviensia*, 541–551.