Chapter 6

A theological framework for character formation

Nothing about being is more ‘me’ than my character. Character is the basic aspect of our existence. It is the mode of the foundation of our ‘I’, for it is character that provides the content of that ‘I’.… It is our character that determines the primary orientation and direction which we embody through our beliefs and actions.


This chapter seeks to provide a conceptual framework for character formation that is derived and inspired by an Aristotelian-Thomist understanding of human nature and education. It outlines a system of ideas and beliefs that can be used to plan and discuss an approach to character formation within the context of a Christian anthropology. It is premised on the argument that a distinctive educational philosophy and theology emerges from the application of Aristotelian-Thomist principles. This framework therefore outlines a distinctive educational model and provides a vocabulary by which to examine and refine an approach to Christian character formation.

It offers a particular rationale for Christian character education/formation as well as some of its practicalities by: (1) outlining how character formation is understood, (2) identifying some learning objectives, (3) explaining the core educational activities of teaching and learning and, (4) describing the organisational context in which character formation is structured, implemented and experienced. Christian character education or formation is primarily a guide to faithful Christian living. Formation takes many forms and operates in diverse situations. There is no blueprint, but there are some fundamental considerations. This framework builds on these considerations as expressed in the content of the chapters in this text.

The Aristotelian-Thomist educational approach has distinct philosophical and theological presuppositions, content, goals and methods with normative commitments that are profoundly at odds with modern culture. Fundamentally, the Aristotelian-Thomist tradition affirms epistemological realism: we have knowledge of reality, originating in sense experience and developed into the conceptual realm so that we truly can know real things and understand them according to their nature. This realism contrasts with views that hold that we are only aware of our subjective states, or that all thought is relative to some scheme, or that what we call ‘knowledge’ is really a social construction. This realist framework, together with
an authentic philosophical anthropology, provides the resources to integrate cognitive and emotional elements in a development-oriented approach to character. That approach covers both principles that can guide one towards the right thing to do and the virtues that show what sort of person we ought to be in order to do, and want to do, the right thing. It also leads to the development of a sense of being which involves a concrete way of living well. This philosophical and theological approach is presented here as a distinct option for Christians, offering a tradition-based and pragmatic theoretical framework for conceptualising Christian character formation. It is not intended as a retreat from the world, or a return to the past, but rather as a way of engaging reality as it is and living in the light of a correct understanding of it as that relates to human nature and human fulfilment.

Created in God’s image

We are human beings, with a spiritual and immortal soul, gifted with intelligence and free will and made in the image and likeness of God. If we love God then we must love other humans whom God has created as each is an expression of His nature, an imago dei. Each person bears the dignity of being made in the Image of God, and this dignity is promoted when, aided by grace, we choose to perform good human acts. Thomas taught that we are created with distinctive rational and spiritual powers that mirror the divine nature of God. Every human being has the capacity to know and to love God, but the Christian needs to work with Divine grace to remedy the misuse of the gifts of intelligence and freedom. Properly received, developed and exercised, these enable us to love what is true and good, and in doing so our freedom grows as we are liberated from ignorance and compulsion. If there is no freedom at all, we cannot speak meaningfully about moral responsibility. Our ability to know and love God can be distorted through sin, but can also be restored through grace. God’s gracious nature provides the moral foundations for what is good, and God’s image is seen in our character and in what we are destined ultimately to become. As humans, we are always in a state of God-given potentiality, and the acquisition of virtues transforms us, not simply through gaining philosophical wisdom, but by becoming more Christlike. In considering how to build character, the Christian faces fundamental questions: ‘Who am I?’, ‘What sort of person should I become because I believe in Christ?’, ‘How should I live?’ The formation of character in light of answers to these questions is one of the most important tasks in anyone’s life as a human being.

Christian anthropology elaborates the meaning and importance of three basic Christian assertions: the human being is an image of God; Christ died for the redemption of humanity; the human being is called to an eternal destiny of communion with God in heaven. First, because every human being is created in the likeness and image of God, they possess a unique dignity deserving of respect. Second, because sin alienates us from God, we cannot reach perfection in this life or even proceed towards it without grace. It is also sin that disrupts our relationships with one another. Third, while sin darkens our sight, unsettles our desires
and weakens our will, sin and its effects can be diminished and ultimately overcome through Jesus who invites us into a relationship with God. Yet although the ability to act virtuously comes principally through grace, it is not without cooperation and effort. While we are still weakened by sin we can be assisted and healed by God’s grace, for God calls everyone to think, discern and to do what is good. The very possibility of being a person of Christian character in mind and spirit only exists because all human beings have been called by God to do some definite service. As St. John Henry Newman describes in the following extract from a prayer he wrote entitled The Mission of My Life:

God has created me
to do some definite service
which he has not committed
to another…
He has not created me for nought
I shall do good
I shall do his work…
I have my mission.

**Becoming what we are**

The notion of Christian character envisaged in this framework transcends the temporal, the material, and the secular and points towards the eternal, the spiritual and the religious. It is not simply about what ought I to do, but also what ought I to be and become. Christians are called by God ‘to be conformed to the image of his Son’ (*Romans* 8:29–30). Christian character is the possession of those qualities which are essentially Godly – and thereby ‘goodly’. Human beings have a natural inclination to follow and pursue the good; in other words, we have a natural capacity to discern between good and evil. Good is done when a person acts in a way that is authentically human, and a good life makes flourishing possible. It follows therefore, that the mind that is illuminated by God’s grace and guided by reason will grow in good character. This transformative process is ongoing and lifelong and requires an openness, willingness and commitment to be so transformed.

The moral virtues of Christian character have an objective reality that does not depend on any individual’s or group of people’s opinions or beliefs. They are not good because we approve of them; rather, we should approve of them because they are good in and of themselves. God’s dealings with humanity provides the framework for understanding the conditions of human life. What God wills for a human being can be known, at least in part, by the observation of these conditions. Christian virtue education is to live the faith by growing in virtue, dispositions animated by love. Virtues are the reason that a person performs good actions more easily, and they are a sign and cause of a person’s goodness.
Christian philosophy of education

If we claim that education prepares human beings for life and forms character, then it follows that we need to have some conception of what the purpose of that life is. The main goal of education is therefore to help human beings fully realise their nature as rational and spiritual beings, premised on a theistic philosophy of education underpinned by the following principles that influence how character is formed:

a God created everything that exists, including human beings, which confers an objective order on reality in which we have the capacity to know and understand. Reality is intelligible and the basic requirements for good character are therefore accessible to human reason.
b All human beings share a common nature which participates in spiritual and material realities, but their character is differentiated, changing over time through various stages of life.
c Every person’s life is an expression of purposeful movement towards a goal, and the moral norms that form character are discernible through reflection on this goal.
d These moral norms are grounded in human nature, and human beings cannot flourish or be genuinely fulfilled if they ignore them.
e Education is the complete formation of a person through the realisation of certain potentialities that lead to a mature character.
f Human flourishing is always the end of individual human action, and the good life depends on reasonable action exercised by good character.
g The human being is a free moral agent and responsible for the actions of their character.
h There is an indelible core of goodness and dignity in each human person.
i While the good life is the purpose of human life in this world, there is also the higher purpose of the Beatific Vision.
j Education aids human beings to experience being in the presence of God.
k Human beings act more humanely when reasoning, but this is always incomplete and imperfect.
l Christian conscience is formed by fundamental virtues, particularly faith, hope and love and is essential to good character.
m The good life consists of intrinsically excellent activities – the virtues that education cultivates and which constitute character.
n The intellectual virtues should aid the study of logic, critical thinking and the scientific method, and education should teach students to understand reality.

Character education prepares human beings for life, and, as stated above, the main goal of education is to help us become full human persons. The educational process behind this formation becomes a practical expression of one’s theological commitments as a Christian and will influence how we believe, think, learn, act and treat
each other. Education aims to foster the highest degree of excellence in those who receive it. The most important agent in the educational process is not the teacher, but the student. The goal of education is a life-long process of learning how to (re) turn to God. Therefore, the primary aim of Christian formation is to assist students to become more faithful followers of Christ. Character virtues are needed to help us act in certain ways as disciples of Christ as the virtues enable us to act well and help us know and desire the good. Christian morality consists of living life with guidance and inspiration from the Christian scriptures, tradition, human reason and experience. Christianity offers its followers guidance for living a moral life through its observances, beliefs and expectations. Being virtuous and of good character are the first steps to the acquisition of ‘Wisdom’ in a theological sense. Theology is the wisdom which explains, defends, judges and guides this process of character education. In this respect, it directs and empowers Christian character formation. Theological wisdom is shared through faith in a Trinitarian God, and it offers an intelligent perspective that is higher than philosophical wisdom.

Theology therefore provides a vision and conception of the good for human beings. Within the Aristotelian-Thomist framework, Christian theology commits the educator to a number of claims including: the existence of God; belief in the afterlife; belief in a telos for humanity; belief in the Holy Spirit and in the Christian claims about Jesus Christ. These all have an impact on the formation of Christian character, and without such claims becoming beliefs there cannot be an authentic Christian character formation. They make a difference to what we believe and to what we teach. However, these claims are not necessarily realised in a merely nominal Christian context: in an institution that calls itself ‘Christian’, through education by teachers who are Christian or education received by students who are Christian. It is possible that (humanist) character education can be provided in a Christian environment without any attempt to integrate faith and learning. This is seen in Christian schools which commit themselves to loose and vague ideas of generalised ‘gospel values’, ‘social justice’ and other egalitarian sentiments that are not explained within a Christian theological framework. Christian character formation is more than simply living harmoniously and helping us socialise.

Vague generalities are a poor substitute for explicitly stated Christian virtues. These lead to a surreptitious secularisation process in which the natural virtues are prioritised and celebrated while the supernatural virtues are given lip service and consequently become unnecessary or are seen as irrelevant. They also lead to a distinct pedagogy in which the student is encouraged to think that there are no objectively right or wrong answers in life, just important experiences in which you decide for yourself what is right for you, and, crucially, in which you are taught to remain at all times ‘non-judgemental’ and ‘open’ to all views. While this may sound caring, it is in fact damaging: it is critically important to distinguish between being open to persons and being open to whatever persons may think or feel, since part of what is at issue in respecting persons is respecting the human need for truth.

By laying out a roadmap, this educational framework is clear on what is expected of all involved. It acts as a guide as opposed to a blueprint, and it must
take the claims of culture and the uniqueness of individuals into account. This framework is not intended to describe an ideal expression of the excellent person. It is not concerned with producing clones. As a framework, it offers a lens through which one may discern different solutions appropriate to different stages, states and conditions along life’s journey.

**Character virtues**

A really successful life consists in living the virtues, that is, in the love of the good and the practice of doing it. Knowledge of the good alone does not lead to commitment to doing the good. There is a wide gap between *knowing* and *doing*. Character is not secured through an intellectual education. Human beings need more than *information* – they need *motivation*, which faith can provide. The living out of moral character consists in the exercise of the moral virtues, and this is ordinarily dependent on understanding and prudence. However, the Christian moral life must always constitute a personal encounter with God – an intimate relationship with the Divine through Christ and the Holy Spirit. This can only be achieved through prayer and spiritual renewal that allow the Spirit to work within us. Consequently, we can gain a special knowledge, a kind of instinctive moral understanding, which is gifted to us by the Holy Spirit who potentially enters into the soul of every human being and transforms their actions and character. Christian wisdom goes beyond acquired knowledge; its capacity extends to the correct application of knowledge so that we can possess good sense and good judgement.

Freedom is both necessary and integral to character education as we need to develop the capacity to act voluntarily, consciously and intentionally. Authentic freedom cannot be reduced to a ‘freedom from’ what limits our personal autonomy, because our choices can go astray. Authentic freedom is a ‘freedom for’ flourishing and good character, a stable orientation to our ultimate good. Freedom for the Christian is not used to satisfy themselves or an end in itself. Christian character formation is not a mechanistic or static process, nor is there an earthly end-point, since the Christian life is always in process – always ‘on the way’. It is about growth and maturation, renewal and inner personal conversion, and it requires that we are aware of the gap between knowing and doing. The Christian seeks help through prayer and counsel and co-operates with the Holy Spirit with intentionality and effort to address the faults and gaps in their character. They seek to choose purposively by evaluating alternatives and considering consequences before they act, and this depends on nurturing and strengthening character virtues.

**Teachers of character – Christ as the ultimate teacher**

Parents are the first educators of their children; other agents and institutions share this duty in a secondary sense. Teaching is a vocation, essentially a calling by God to serve humanity, in the first instance in the persons of their own children, for those who have them, and secondarily in the persons of the children of others. Properly
received and understood, it should be motivated by a love of truth, of God, and of others. It is a distinct Christian vocation since Christian virtues require a robust concept of the moral exemplar as manifested in the Christian teacher who allows the student a way of knowing what the virtues actually look like. The more the teacher conforms to a Christian ideal of character, the more willing the student will be to accept this ideal. There ought to be at least three things in the character of teachers: first, stability, in that the teacher must not stray from the truth; second, clarity, in that they must teach without obscurity; and third, purity of intention, in that they seek God’s glory and not their own. The Christian teacher is an educator who helps form human beings by improving them in knowledge and skills consonant with their true nature, ultimate end and highest good. The teacher’s role is to bring about the synthesis between faith and experience, faith and culture, and faith and life. The teacher guides and encourages students towards eternal realities. Students see good character acted out and come to admire goodness in those significant in their lives – their teachers. The Christian teacher cannot simply fulfil a functional role, but must believe and practise the Christian faith. This is why the teacher must speak the language of virtue and show that good character lives in their actions.

Teaching the whole person

Christian education is a continuing voyage of learning and discovery that ultimately returns human beings to God. Christian education educates the mind to know the truth, and this in turn forms the entire person – because knowledge of the truth leads to living for what is good and appreciation of what is beautiful. The formation of the whole person recognises the innate dignity of the student. It also recognises that growth in character requires the need to be secure in faith and self-identity. Character formation promotes personal vocation and connectedness to Christian tradition, cultivates the heart, forges the will and shapes character in virtue. It is built within communities that exemplify, in word and deed, the Christian virtues. A person of character is someone who unifies and develops the powers of their soul through the help of grace. They seek to know the truth through the exercise of their intellect and memory, and choose the good and act according to it through the use of their intellect and will. Ultimately, the Christian school seeks to help students to become saints.

Schools of character

Christian schools are extensions of the Christian family and are an integral part of the Christian community. The Christian school is at the service of theological motivations and goals as it strives to assist students in the formation of their character based on their relationship with Jesus Christ. This Christ-centred character formation is ultimately at the heart of every member of the school community. A school that has an authentic and forthright Christian ethos has a profound influence on the
development of a student’s character. This ethos is derived from those living and acting in accordance with the Gospel, which provides the background for the school’s more explicit character formation programme. It is an ethos of engaged rationality in which reasons are given and exchanged for why something might be so. Formation in the virtues is not simply about listing certain virtues to be learnt, but requires that they be situated within a concrete social context that provides students with real-life examples of how their actions can affect themselves and others. C. S. Lewis, like Aristotle, writes Meilaender (1978: 212), ‘believes that moral principles are learned indirectly from others around us, who serve as exemplars. And he, like Aristotle, suggests that it will be extremely difficult to develop virtuous individuals apart from a virtuous society’.

Academic excellence is an important goal of a Christian school, but is not sufficient to form a well-rounded character. Schools must join with parents to develop in their students an enduring character – that is, lives formed and fulfilled in accordance with faith. This involves nurturing the knowledge of moral goodness through the virtues, encouraging the desire in students to be a good person by doing the good, and developing a well-formed conscience as part of their character. Students need to understand the reasons why they should be good and experience some of the practical ways in which they can be good. Character education aims to motivate in them the desire to act in the service of goodness – knowing what to do, wanting to do it, and doing it. A virtuous person can never do something wrong or evil in order to bring about good; indeed, they will know that it is better to suffer evil than to do it. The Christian school will teach students to come to know the truth about life, the world and God. This does not happen at random, but rather is intended, planned and implemented. It requires vigorous effort and leadership to embed and embody a theology of character formation in a Christian school.

According to Rowland (2003: 70): ‘a Thomist institutional ethos requires not merely the fostering of virtue-requiring and virtue-engendering practices in the Aristotelian sense, but also practices that are sacramental’. The Catholic sacramental imagination gives a coherence to the formational process. Not all reality can be scientifically observed, and yet that which is unseen is real and affects our inner formation. Thomas claims a radical and dynamic relationship between the natural and supernatural realities, between the visible and invisible realms, and he believes that the sacramental is essentially made present in the material world to enable material realities to serve as sources of spiritual well-being. This sacramental realism makes us ever conscious of the supernatural realm and connects the material with the eternal, thereby sanctifying humanity. The Sacraments are instituted as causes of grace with the theological virtues of faith, hope, and love. As Thomas says:

A sacrament properly speaking is that which is ordained to signify our sanctification. In which three things may be considered; viz., the very cause of our sanctification, which is the Passion of Christ; the form of our sanctification, which is grace and the virtues; and the ultimate end of our
sanctification, which is eternal life. And all these are signified by the sacraments.

(ST. III, q. 60 a.3.)

The sacraments are the footsteps towards Christ – real and tangible encounters with Christ and his sanctifying life through grace. This framework therefore incorporates the dynamic exchange of grace between humanity and God. It is about the learner seeing a vision of reality through their education as the place where God dwells. The Christian school is conscious of its role in promoting virtues to all of its members so that they may live faithful to the story of Jesus found in Scripture.

**Christian practical wisdom**

This framework is premised on the cultivation of Christian practical wisdom as an educational ideal and objective. Christianity is a living tradition that affirms the good and pursues educational goals that seek to nurture the good. Practical wisdom is the ability to render a proper assessment of a situation and to act rightly as a result. Aristotle calls it *phronesis*, which involves doing the right thing, at the right time, in the right way and for the right reasons. It is essentially about the exercise of perception, feeling, judgement and action by those who possess good sense. Christian practical wisdom is therefore premised on how what we believe as Christians forms and guides what we choose and how we act. It is concerned with understanding one’s vision of reality and the nature of things and is constitutive of human flourishing. As Thomas would say, it is the right use of reason regarding things to be done, with practical wisdom configuring the ends of the moral virtues. It therefore requires knowledge and experience of Christian life to be able to choose and apply the right means, and the excellence of Christian character to define the right ends.

By the intellect, we can know what is good; by the free will, we can love and do what is good. Without wisdom, understanding and knowledge, no one can exercise the four natural virtues. However, we know that knowledge is more easily procured than understanding. This practical wisdom of the Christian life is gradually formed by enlarging the mind with multiple experiences, reflecting on them, and developing the imagination to creatively respond to those experiences with faith, hope and love. To see with the eyes of God.

Practical wisdom results in faith that is lived out in our actions, not in our abstract ideas. In short, it is about what we do in concrete situations which call on our ability to perceive the situation accurately before us, to have the appropriate feelings about it, to deliberate and discern in these circumstances, and to act. It depends on and requires us to learn and pray for certain Christian excellences: holiness, piety, fellowship, reverence, joy, spirituality, detachment, modesty, and so on. Ultimately, the virtues which are the free gift of God, particularly faith, hope and love, are visible and cultivated in Christian schools when there is trust in God, active belief, worship, prayer, service, working for the common good,
justice, self-giving, forgiveness, humility, mercy and the witness of love. These are the virtues that form and inform the Christian conscience while also aiding the capacity to follow one’s conscience.

**Christian fellowship – a journey with others**

Christian fellowship and common experience in the Christian community are invaluable resources for building character and making moral decisions. The main elements of this Christian formation come from prayer and worship, listening to and reading about scripture and Christian teachings, offering service to others, as well as engaging in teaching and learning. All of these elements inform, instruct and inculcate, and ultimately seek to form our entire being because the self that a human person becomes is largely determined by the free commitments he or she makes. The Christian knows he is a sinner and wholly dependent on God’s grace and mercy; she knows that she needs to begin again (and again). He knows, as Augustine put it, that the foundation of the spiritual life is humility. Simply having these things in place in a school or having expectations of Christian behaviour do not make the Christian. The pastoral education and witness to the *why* behind these elements are paramount. Also paramount is a community that exudes joy – confidence in God – and warmth – affection for each person in that community. Again, here, understanding God’s love and the experience of being loved are part of the motivation for returning to the sacraments to nourish, heal and strengthen us.

Christian character education encourages students to grow in the faith of their baptism; a faith assimilated and nurtured through contact with people inside a community – the *Church*. This living, conscious and active community of faith urges its members to adopt a Christian way of living and advances the common good. The Christian community enhances and strengthens the virtues of the individual Christian’s character, as well as building a community of virtuous persons. The Christian narrative shapes the character of the Christian by moving them towards maturity so that choices can be rationally and consciously made in the light of faith. Christian education draws upon the successes of the Christian community in the past, learning from artifacts of Christian culture, including music, architecture and visual arts.

**The building blocks of Christian character formation**

Theology presents us with a clear scheme and summary of the virtues that are the building blocks of character. Christian character formation subscribes to the following fundamental and interconnected natural or cardinal virtues. These four cardinal or ‘hinge’ virtues represented the highest ideal of character attainable in the classical world, but were not sufficient for the early Christians who transformed their meaning and supplemented them through revelation and faith. These natural virtues are acquired through human effort, the
theological ones are gifted by God, though whether and how they are received and exercised depends upon our co-operation with God’s work in and for us.

**Natural virtues**

*Prudence* or practical wisdom is the ability to know what to do, how to act and what to say in order to be virtuous in any concrete situation. It is not simply about acquiring intellectual virtues, but relies on the insights into human nature gained through faith.

*Justice* is essentially about a relationship with your neighbour and is the desire to do what is right honestly and fairly. It is about living in harmony and cooperating with others. To respect all and give them what they are due is essentially about how to ensure the well-being of all.

*Fortitude* is consistency in the pursuit of the good and strengthens our resolve to resist temptation therefore helping us to overcome obstacles to a Christian moral life. It gives us strength to carry out the good we desire by acting on our convictions in the face of difficulties.

*Temperance* moderates the attractiveness of pleasure and provides a balance in our use of created goods by regulating our passions. It helps us control our desires for pleasure and helps prevent over indulgence by providing self-discipline.

These acquired virtues are accessible to all people and they are traditionally viewed as natural virtues that have a series or cluster of other sub-virtues attached to them and that flow from them, including: patience, sympathy, forgiveness, selflessness, generosity, and many more. The intellectual, moral and civic virtues are part of these natural virtues and may act as a preparation for a Christian character education. These natural virtues are real, and they lead and prepare for the theological virtues that are the foundation of Christian moral activity. Character formation ideally ought to be first rooted in these natural virtues as they are the preparatory virtues for a Christian character. Thus, we pursue the cardinal virtues because they express what minimally constitutes a virtuous person. They perfect the fundamental anthropological dimensions of being human that are needed for integrated virtuous behaviour. All aspects of virtue knowledge derived from the natural virtues must however be integrated in the light of faith. The theological virtues reinforce and strengthen the natural virtues, which in their natural state are incomplete and insufficient for life here or in the hereafter. Consequently, an education in character that is restricted to these natural virtues fails to be a Christian education. Such an education is limited, and while it may incline the person to some good deeds and even appears to promote the common good, it lacks the ultimate value and orientation provided by the theological virtues. A ‘Christian education’ that only focuses on the natural virtues subordinates the authority of the Christian tradition to human judgement and human relativities. Ultimately, Christ becomes a prophetic moral and religious teacher only and not a divine saviour.
Supernatural virtues

The theological or supernatural virtues are (1 Corinthians 13:13):

*Faith*, the object of which is God; both belief in God and the truths he has revealed. Faith requires action and application to be understood. It is about discovering what God’s will is and acting accordingly.  
*Hope* is about placing trust in God and is the expectation of receiving something we long for. It is about trusting that God is always working for our good.  
*Love* is unconditional love for all and is the core of the Christian moral life. The love of God above all things and love of neighbour and self for the sake of God.

How do the acquired moral virtues fit in the overall scheme of the Christian life? While the three theological virtues put us directly in contact with the goal or end of our life, the four moral virtues have to do with the means that must be used to attain that end. These theological virtues transcend the natural virtues because, for example, without love no one can totally overcome selfishness. They inform and give life to the natural virtues by elevating them to a supernatural level. They are also ‘meta-virtues’ because they are virtues that bring with them many other virtues and also the fruits of the Holy Spirit (Galatians 5:22–23) – love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. The gifts of the Holy Spirit (Isaiah 11: 1–2) help facilitate the exercise of the virtues. They are:

*Wisdom*, which helps us recognise the importance of others and the importance of keeping God central in our lives. It is knowledge of ‘divine things’ and the capacity to judge human affairs according to divine truth.  
*Understanding*, that is, the ability to comprehend the meaning of God’s message and comprehend the truths that are necessary for our salvation.  
*Knowledge*, which is the ability to think about and explore God’s revelation, and also to recognise there are mysteries of faith beyond us. It is the ability to judge correctly about matters of faith and right action.  
*Counsel*, the ability to see the best way to follow God’s plan when we have choices that relate to him. It allows us to be directed by God on all matters necessary for our salvation.  
*Fortitude*, the courage and confidence to do what one knows is right and avoid evil.  
*Piety*, which helps us pray to God in true devotion and in accordance with Scripture. It also involves due duty to all on account of their relationship with God.  
*Fear of the Lord*, that is, understanding God is all-present and whose friendship we do not want to lose. Essentially, it refers to us revering God and avoiding being separated from Him as opposed to ‘servile’ fear whereby we fear punishment.

These gifts of the Holy Spirit dispose a person to be moved, not by their own reason, but by God. The fruits of the Spirit essentially manifest personal character traits. These Christian virtues help forge character and give facility to the practice of
the good. A popular metaphor which describes a person being moved by God is likened to being a ship moved by the wind, with the gift acting as sails. Alternatively, the gifts are like the wings of an eagle that are swept up in a strong wind. In both metaphors, the Holy Spirit is the guiding wind and the intended message is simply that the action of the Holy Spirit in bestowing grace moves a person to right action. Growth in Christian character also requires progress in holiness and spiritual awareness as well as theological understanding, and this formation and transformation must be accompanied by some theological content. The Holy Spirit works in Christian lives and changes those lives gradually, he sanctifies them – that is, he makes them holy in their character through the theological virtues. The telos is to direct human beings through God’s grace to the highest happiness and ultimate end, which is union with God. These natural and supernatural virtues are interwoven with the teachings in the Sermon on the Mount together with the Ten Commandments as a guide to live the Christian life. In virtue, Christian character education seeks to form the students who receive it and is ultimately concerned with students receiving the moral teachings and other traditions of the Church, appropriating them and responding to them.

**Christian learning objectives for character formation**

The formation of Christian character is about conversion and transformation, which require not passive learners, but active, engaged and reflective students. It is not simply about what we know or can do, but rather about how we are changing and what we are becoming. The understanding that underpins learning objectives, however, is generally drawn from secular models of learning that are premised upon specifying, in advance, learning outcomes in terms of observable changes in human action. These formational teaching strategies do not depend on a knowledge of God. Their focus is on the *what* and *how* of teaching, but rarely on the *why*. This ignores the Christian idea of being and becoming. It ignores the divine–human encounter as the source of character formation. The framework outlined here endorses critical rationality as one of the key goals of forming Christian character, which relies on literacy skills in reading and writing, as well as verbal reasoning, the ability to analyse arguments, critique opposing hypotheses, explanations and models to problem solve and make decisions. All of this complicated educational process takes place within a rich learning environment that honours, respects and grows student autonomy and freedom to bear Christian witness to their immediate culture.

The following objectives are a description of what it means to provide an account of character formation for students in a Christian school that follows the principles in this framework. Students require a broad and comprehensive approach to character formation that considers the environment, buildings, space, ethos, curriculum, teaching methods, together with teaching by example and providing realistic opportunities for practice. Each of these is incorporated into the approach, so that:
• they come to view the human person and their character as created in God’s ‘image and likeness’ and destined for eternal life; they are enriched by a Christ-centred education that reflects and understands God’s purpose for their unique life and character;
• they come to view God as present and active in the world, particularly through relationships with family, friends and teachers, that impacts on their character;
• they are given a theological foundation for their thoughts and actions of character that enables them to make an intelligent and informed choice for themselves throughout life and before death;
• they develop spiritually by being instilled with a love for the Word of God, for Jesus Christ, God the Father, and his Holy Spirit, and a personal sense of responsibility to be all that God wants them to be;
• they develop at different stages from first external motivation (caught and taught character) to internal motivation (self-sought character);
• they experience the school as providing not simply information, but direction within an ethos in which they grow, understand, develop and integrate the natural and supernatural/theological virtues that build character;
• they are prepared not only to make a living, but also to live wisely by being encouraged to think clearly, logically and independently.

Character formation as a pathway to union with God

The essential aim of Christian character education is to educate a person to be a real person in a real and complete sense, not just to make a person a certain kind of professional person. The practice of all the virtues, natural and supernatural, is the essence of character, and having these virtues entails knowing when and how to exercise them. The natural virtues can be developed and function in a person’s life independently of the grace-given virtues. A shared humanity includes a shared ability to reason, which means that all human beings can agree on what might constitute the common good. The Aristotelian-Thomist framework affirms the existence of moral goods that Christians and non-Christians may virtuously seek to realise. However, the Christian sees these moral goods in a world created by God and their motivation to realise these goods differs from the non-Christian, even when pursuing the same goods. The Christian acts from love of God and because both reason and religious faith inform their perspective about the good. There will be times when the Christian disagrees with the non-Christian.

Another way to understand this natural and supernatural approach to the virtues is to consider the purposes of a Christian school from virtue-rich horizontal and vertical axes. The horizontal axis represents the natural virtues (emanating from the cardinal virtues) of compassion, courage, reasoning, gratitude, generosity, and so on, that any Christian school will attempt to inculcate in their students in forming their characters. However, this horizontal axis does
not make the Christian school religious or distinctive, as other schools can claim the same natural virtues without any religious affiliation. The Christian school requires a vertical axis of the supernatural or theological virtues of faith, hope and love. The belief in God and the practice of these theological virtues through prayer and worship are intended to work with the horizontal natural virtues to strengthen, reinforce and enhance them. Christian living, learning and prayer are interwoven, and in this Christian context there exist infused versions of the cardinal virtues which help us to live the Christian life. This process reveals the deeper purpose of character formation – we flourish best when our likeness is closest to the image of God. This is why the image of God becomes visible in the virtuous person (see Sullivan, 2021: 525).

Our actions are changed by changing our beliefs and thoughts about them. The Christian life is telic in the sense that it looks upwards to heaven to discern, through faith, purposeful growth. Ultimately, it involves love of God and love of neighbour as yourself, but it requires Christ’s presence in us, which becomes the guide to moral decision-making. Living in a Christian community is not about making a series of difficult decisions each time one faces a dilemma. The living of Christian virtues in community can make decision-making less of a priority. These grace-given vertical virtues do not invalidate the horizontal virtues, but rather build upon and extend their scope. The two kinds of virtues must be continuous with each other, with the natural virtues being the foundation for the supernatural virtues. Pope (2014: 411) sees this process as a pilgrimage rooted in an image of human life as a journey to God:

The virtues are dispositions of heart and mind that help us negotiate this journey. Faith gives a deep sense of where we come from and where we are going. Charity provides the fuel of love for the journey and hope gives the courage to stay the course in the face of dangers, loss and disappointment.

The Christian also prays for help to grow in virtue, and this is evident throughout Scripture. We need the fortitude of Christ; we pray to increase our faith, and we need to listen to the Holy Spirit to grow in wisdom. The Holy Spirit penetrates and touches our very depths, transforming our actions, bringing them under its guidance rather than wholly relying on our own initiative (Cessario, 2001: 207). To live the Christian life the Christian needs to say with confidence: ‘It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me’ (Galatians, 2.20). Through education in character we need to nurture the ‘habitual readiness to flourish’ (Sullivan, 2021: 522).

Questions
What are the implications of the fact that we are all made in God’s image?
What does it look like for teachers to be ‘moral exemplars’ for their students?
What is the role of the Catholic school within the wider Church?
What is the relationship, and what are the differences, between natural virtues and character virtues?
Consider the learning objectives listed above. How can these be incorporated into a school’s vision for education? How will you know if the school is successful in meeting these objectives?