

# Using Primary Sources

## Discovering the Truth

Just as a photo can never capture the totality of a person, neither can a textbook offer the full, moving, and breathing life that is the Church's theology, ethos, and history. As much as we may love textbooks, they cannot offer the richness we find in primary sources—firsthand writings such as speeches, essays, letters, sermons, novels, and stories.

A two-dimensional image in a photograph is not a true representation of a person, because to really know someone, we need to interact with that person. It is in interacting with another that we discover both flaws and depth. We appreciate the person's subtlety and find richness.

## The Richness of Tradition

Theology and religious studies are unfathomably rich. Yet it often feels like we only scratch the surface. Students complain that by the time they get into high school, they have heard it all before. Many students have studied and passed religious tests since the early grades. For them the topic has lost its mystery. As educators we yearn for young people's imaginations to be captured by the wonderment of God. We hope that young people's hearts will be enthralled by the depth and richness that lies within the Catholic Tradition. Educators are now discovering that the use of primary sources can recapture the mystery.

## Readiness for the Richness

Teachers often wonder if their students are ready to read primary sources. If we look at how primary sources are used in other disciplines, we see that they enhance learning. Many high school English teachers exclusively teach literature: Chaucer, Hopkins, and Shakespeare are the students' textbooks. Many students enjoy material that is academically rigorous.

Theologically speaking, today's students seem to have questions that are more profound, more mature: Is the Church necessary? Why are there so many religions? How can Christianity claim to be the true religion? What am I going to do with my life? These are ageless questions that the Church's Tradition has grappled with and has grappled with well. The wisdom of our ancestors in faith can speak to students who are ready to grapple.

## Unmediated Passion

To read Saint Perpetua's diary is to be filled with awe at the fervor for Jesus Christ that this saint, who was never baptized with water, possessed. To read the speeches and homilies of Archbishop Oscar Romero is to have one's conscience pierced on matters of justice. To read the letters between Pope Gregory and King Charles is to encounter the passion, indeed the anger, burning in the bellies of these men as they argued over the question of appointing bishops. Primary sources allow students the opportunity to connect with the passions behind historical, or modern-day, issues in an unmediated manner.

"Faith is caught, not taught." An effective teacher communicates the passion of deeply held beliefs in a manner that inspires students to strive for something greater. The Church's great writings contain



similar power. These writings—some ancient, some new—reveal the beliefs that have shaped the Church's history, theology, and ethos. In fact, these writings are still shaping the Church's history, theology, and ethos. Embracing the Catholic worldview and living in the world as a full, conscious, and active member of the Body of Christ is rarely realized simply through a cogent argument; rather, an encounter shapes a life lived in this manner. We hope for students to have an authentic encounter with the Church. Primary source writings can provide such an encounter.

## Timeless Questions

What are the religious and philosophical questions that students have today? People in all eras have wrestled with questions of meaning, and their spiritualities reflect their yearnings. Immersion and dialogue with classic expressions of art, thought, and spirituality can help students frame the kinds of questions people of a given era might have. When students see that their own questions are the same as those of the great Christian writers, they are increasingly inclined to own the legitimacy of their own quest for meaning. Teachers can help students to understand that the questions of each age are answered in a culturally specific way and that in every age the answers to life's most vexing questions are discovered in Christ. By using primary sources, academic content is placed at the service of evangelization for our students.

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