

A Model for Understanding the Identity and Mission of a Catholic School

This template for understanding and promoting the religious charism of a school comes from an address to the Conference of the Union of Superiors General given at Rome in 1987 by Fr Claude Maréchal AA. He presented it as a way of speaking more concretely about the charism of Religious congregations. It has been taken up and adapted for facilitating discussion about the religious identity of any community or institution, including schools.

Maréchal's model has been used widely in Jesuit schools as a way of looking at issues of identity and mission. It has been well received as a very intelligible and practical way of looking at elusive concepts of school "ethos", "character", "vision" and "identity".

Maréchal's model has six components:

- 1 a story to enter**
- 2 a language to speak**
- 3 a group to which to belong**
- 4 a work to do**
- 5 a way of proceeding**
- 6 a face of God to see**

In its 35th General Congregation, the Society of Jesus proposed a way of looking at and articulating Jesuit community and work:

- **identity**
- **mission**
- **community**

The model developed in Jesuit schools combines the GC35 triptych with the Maréchal template. The result has been a powerful tool for understanding, articulating and evaluating the distinctive character of Jesuit schools. It is a model which may easily be adapted to other traditions.

Identity

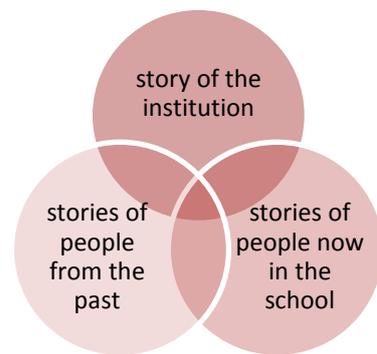
Discussion of **identity** revolves around questions of **meaning**.

a story to enter

Schools with a strong identity tend to have strong narratives which are known and shared and serve as points of reference for change and development. The narratives tell the story of how the school began, how it came to be like it is, who the key players were, and its triumphs and adversities.

To work well as a support for a school, the narrative has to be crafted. The story needs to be researched and articulated (both verbally and visually). Decisions need to be made about which episodes to select: which are both a true account but also underscore what it is the school is about.

The identity of a school comes, in part, from its story. This story is made up of the story of people from the past who shaped the school directly (eg. teachers, pupils, former pupils) or indirectly (religious founders and, ultimately, Jesus Christ). But those in the school today bring their own stories which should interact with identity of the school and change it.



Points for Reflection

Telling the story of the school is more important than presenting data about the school.

How is the story of the school articulated and told?

Are there traditions, occasions and events in the life of the school which tell its story?

Does the story include times of consolation and times of desolation? (the Examen)

Does the story tell of times of transition and transformation? (closer faithfulness to its vocation)

Is it clear how people in the school today contribute to, and shape, the story of the school? And how this is articulated (verbally and visually) and linked to the developing story of the school?

a language to speak

Schools with a strong identity tend to have a language of their own to speak about the school. This language will work at different levels from special names for buildings and places, to ways of describing routines and activities, to, more importantly, phrases which are shorthand for the key values of the school.

If the core values of the school are not articulated in phrases that everyone knows and recognises, it is difficult to create a shared vision for the school. The special language says, 'This is who we are'. The special language initiates new pupils, teachers, families, into the school community as it presents these values to them and, over time, invites them to make the values their own, so the special language is absorbed into and used as their own language.

Using special language also ensures that important nuances are not effaced and that the challenges of the Christian gospel are kept alive and raw.

Points for Reflection

What words, phrases, or names are unique or peculiar to your school?

Do any of these words or phrases articulate the values which you consider fundamental to the school's identity?

Are these phrases used frequently, confidently and universally, so that they are woven into the fabric of dialogue and speech in the school?

Do these phrases contain the challenge of the gospel of Jesus Christ?

Has the school articulated how it would describe a successful school leaver?

Does the language used in the school include the 'cadences of prayer'? ie. are the phrases memorable and distinct and likely to occur to former pupils in later life?

Is the language visual as well as verbal?

How do you respond to the language of these phrases?

For the greater glory of God.

Men and women for others.

Forming people of competence, conscience and compassion.

Think globally, act locally.

Live simply.

Love one another.

How often? Seventy times seven.

Then go, sell all you have, and come follow me.

Mission

Discussion of **mission** revolves around questions of **purpose**.

a work to do

Much work is laid on schools to do: by the government, by the inspectorate, by parental expectation, by market forces, by school governors and the leadership team, and by teachers on pupils. There is a danger that the business and busy-ness of all this work can displace that to which Christ calls us solely and exclusively: “Martha, Martha, you worry and fret about so many things and yet few are needed, indeed only one.” (Luke 10:41)

Ignatius sums up the one thing as ‘saving one’s soul’. This is highly theological language which might helpfully be interpreted as ‘being successful in the project which is living one’s life well’. And this means ridding oneself of the fruitless distractions and demands to become truly free to live the life God calls me to. A good education, career, family, may all be ways of achieving that freedom. But the point is to be clear what constitutes the ‘end’ and what constitutes the many and varied, sometimes helpful, sometimes deceptive, means to achieving that end of ‘saving my soul’.

So, a Christian school is, above all else, about bringing its pupils (and indeed the adults in the school community) face to face with the person of Jesus Christ who is “the way, the truth, and the life.” Everything else, while important, is secondary. ‘The way, the truth, and the life’ is a pretty good way of describing what education is.

Points for Reflection

Make a list of all the things that have kept you busy this week in school. How much of the time was about bringing your pupils face to face with the person of Jesus Christ?

In what concrete ways is the school an ‘apostolic instrument’?

In what ways could the school re-orient some of its activity to be less busy, less driven and more open to the presence and working of the Holy Spirit?

Who sets the agendas and priorities which drive your school? Is this what gets you out of bed in the morning? Does the vision of a Christian school offer a better alternative?

“Never study in order to appear more wise and learned; study rather to overcome your besetting sins; for this will profit you more.”

St Thomas a Kempis (1380 – 1471)

a face of God to see

The ultimate purpose of a Christian school is to present a face of God for all to see.

Thought needs to be given to what face that is. Those responsible for the school community need themselves to have a deep understanding of the God and Father of Jesus Christ, and a living relationship with him. Their own words and actions need to proclaim unequivocally the good news of Jesus Christ.

The face of God the pupils will see is the face of the adult who today inspired them, increased their confidence, forgave them, challenged them, offered an alternative model of behaviour and attitude (a Christian one), who loved them. Or it might be the teacher who shouted at them, ignored them, belittled them, didn't have time for them, or simply didn't know them.

All the staff of a Christian school need to recognize the awesome calling they have to be the face of God for their pupils today.

Points for Reflection

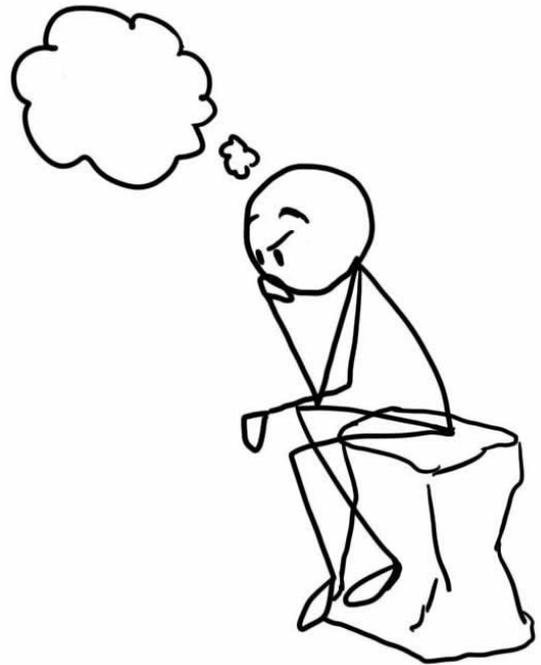
What face of God have you shown to your pupils this week?

If you asked your pupils what God was like, what would they say? Where have they got these ideas from? How different are these ideas from the God and Father of Jesus Christ? Why?

Do the rules and routines of the school reflect the face of God? Or some other set of values or necessities?

The curriculum can be described as stated, taught and experienced. Is the face of God to be found in schemes of work, in what actually goes on in the classroom, and in the real experience of the pupils?

Ignatius teaches that God may be found in all things? Is that true in your school?



Community

Discussion of **community** revolves around questions of **the way we are with each other.**

a group to which to belong

Schools usually assume that new pupils quickly feel that they belong to the school. This is often mistaken. The school can be a bewildering cacophony of demands and activity that makes no overall sense and certainly does not communicate a clear meaning.

A school with a strong identity has thought about this aspect of its community. It will have built smaller communities within the larger school community to which children and young people can really feel a sense of identity and belonging. The school will have articulated very clearly the benefits and expectations of belonging.

A school that is intentional about community will have considered how to deal with those (staff and pupils alike) who feel disenfranchised, disenchanting, excluded or under-valued. It will start by knowing who they are and seek to give them a voice.

A Christian school will have 'a path back'- robust and evident ways of reconciliation and forgiveness for those whose behaviour has caused hurt and damage to the community.

The school will work with its staff to instil in them an emotional register and skills of interpersonal relations which is thoroughly Christian.

Points for Reflection

What exactly do you feel you 'belong to' in your school?

Think of some of your pupils by name. What do you think they feel they 'belong to'?

And what about your colleagues?

Do the words, lives, stories, behaviour, activities of your former pupils say anything about their experience of your school as a community?

Can you articulate in a few sentences what you want your school community to be like?

"The success of Jesuit education is measured not in terms of academic performance of students or professional competence of teachers, but rather in terms of quality of life."

Characteristics of Jesuit Education n.37

a way of proceeding

'A way of proceeding' is a phrase repeatedly used by Ignatius in the *Constitutions* and in his letters. It conveys that there is a characteristic way for Jesuits and Jesuit schools to go about their business. It is 'the way we do things around here'. And our way of proceeding will help create the sort of community we seek if it is done in a way that is faithful to the Christian and Ignatian tradition; and it will undermine it if springs from other values and agendas.

The Ignatian tradition offers four particularly important ways of doing things:

Ignatius begins everything with **gratitude** and ends everything with **generosity**. He encourages us always and everywhere to note what we have to be grateful for; to give up the fruitless and frustrating sense of entitlement we tend to adopt and, instead, to see everything as gift. To do so radically changes our outlook on life and the quality of our engagement with it. And once we do this, he notes that generosity becomes our characteristic way of dealing with others.

The Presupposition of the Spiritual Exercises encourages us to receive anything anyone says or does in the best possible light (known as 'putting a good construction on it'). In theological terms, this is to 'save' the person who says or does it – it is part of the salvific work of Jesus Christ. It is a fundamental attitude to adopt. It does not mean that, if a good construction simply cannot be put on it, it is not appropriate to challenge and correct, but always with love.

The art of **discernment** is key to Ignatian spirituality. Those responsible for the school need to acquire the art of discernment so that decisions are truly made with the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Recognising when a choice requires a straightforward decision and when it requires discernment is part of this art.

In the Ignatian tradition, **accompaniment** is an important way of proceeding. The retreat guide accompanies the person encountering God in the retreat. The teacher accompanies his or her pupils in the search for truth and the growth of their personalities. The relationship of accompaniment suggests very different ways of doing things than a relationship of power, or control or provision.

Points for Reflection

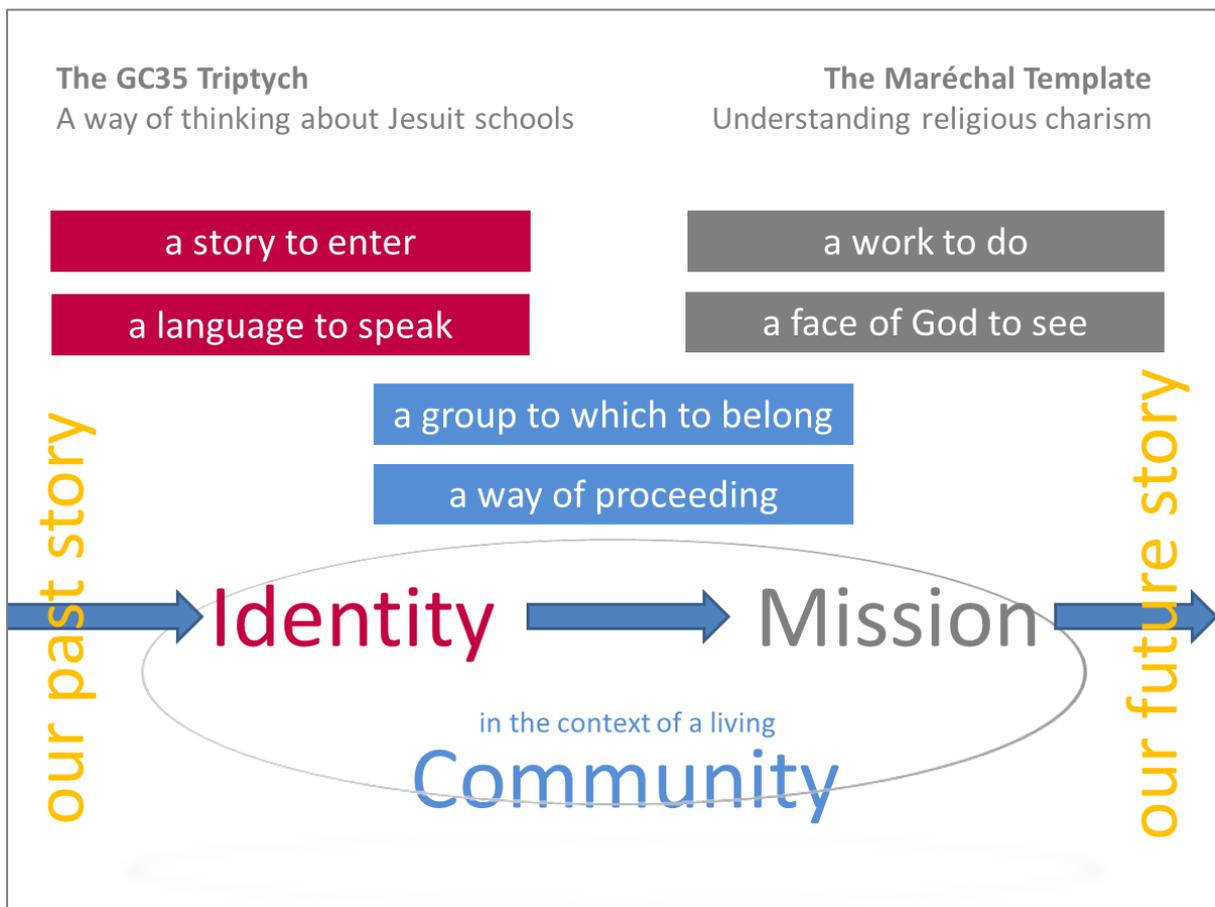
What have you to be grateful for today?

Would you say that generosity is a hallmark of your dealings with others? Why / why not?

Do you tend to judge the words and actions of others or to save them?

How are key decisions made in your school? Does discernment play any part?

How would you characterise the relationships between staff and pupils in your school? What does the notion of 'accompaniment' add? Is it a better model for relationships in a Christian school?



A model for understanding the identity and mission of a Catholic school

Jesuit Institute London
 June 2013
jesuitinstitute.org