

Catholic Schools and a Catholic Way of Seeing the World

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When I visit schools, I am always struck by how different they are from each other, and not just in their physical appearance. Their aims may be very similar but they display a variety of styles. In part, these styles reflect the often unspoken assumptions that underpin how the school operates. These same assumptions promote a distinctive attitude to life, which will permeate throughout the school, its activities and every decision that is made.¹ In other words, every school will expose their pupils to a particular way of seeing the world. There are underlying assumptions behind the education provided in every school, even those that aspire to offer an education that is free from ideological influences. Every school has a philosophy, a vision of what the school is striving to achieve. Every school has an understanding of how pupils learn and the substance and methods that it considers worthwhile and appropriate. As a result, every school passes on an understanding of the origins, nature and capacity of the human condition and how to make sense of the society, planet and universe that we inhabit.

Catholic schools are no exception. According to the Congregation for Catholic Education, they develop 'a specific concept of the world, of man, and of history'. The Catholic way of seeing the world has distinctive features and is obliged to assert itself against other competing philosophies of life. Indeed, as the late Cardinal Hume argued forcefully, we are 'fighting for the minds and imaginations of the young, offering rival views of human fulfilment and happiness'.²

Clarity in a place of dialogue

Children live in a world where they experience a plurality of life choices. They come across people with attitudes and assumptions that are not the same as their own. However, many children have very little idea of what a Catholic world view might be. Catholic schools endeavour to expose them to what a Catholic way of life has to offer and the implications of belief in a creator God for our understanding of ourselves and other people. Catholic schools are inevitably places where secular world views and a religious world view enter into dialogue with each other. Uniquely among such places of dialogue in society, the Catholic school provides an environment where the Catholic position can expect to be given a respectful hearing.³ The success of such a dialogue will differ from school to school and depend on a complex of factors including the level of Catholic practice of constituent families, the witness of Catholic staff, the availability of clergy and lay chaplains, and the leadership of the headteacher. Bearing witness is of great importance and often it is this witness to the faith that sustains our schools. Effective witness tells its own story. However, there is also a need to articulate that story by making explicit what it means to be a Catholic and what is distinctive about the way that Catholics see the world.

¹ Congregation for Catholic Education, *Catholic Schools* (Rome 1977) n.8 and n.29

² Basil Hume, *The Church's Mission in Education in Partners in Mission* (CES 1997) p.24

³ Lieven Boeve, *The Identity of a Catholic University in Post-Christian European Societies: Four Models* (Louvain Studies 31, 2006) pp.238-258

The 'what' as well as the 'how'

What then does the Catholic school say of itself? My own contact with headteachers over many years leaves me in no doubt about their faith in God and God's providence. They live life in the presence of a real but almost taken for granted God. They talk about the centrality of Jesus Christ in their own lives and that of their school. Christ is the model that they are proposing to their students and trying, however inadequately, to bear witness to in their lives. Relationships are crucial in their understanding of their faith, and developing relationships based on explicit gospel values is a theme that returns regularly in their narratives about their work. Although they do not refer to it as such, they have a clear incarnational understanding that underpins their recognition that Christ is present in and through all members of the school community. They are generally loyal to the institutional Church, despite its perceived weaknesses. Their central focus on Jesus Christ, relationships, encountering God in created things, Christ present among us, and commitment to the Church, underpin their educational endeavours and the vision of reality that they are offering to their pupils.

These perspectives are central to the Catholic tradition but are generally expressed in what one might call anthropological language as it arises from our understanding of the human condition. Their emphasis is on 'how' to be a Christian not on 'what' it means to be a Christian.⁴

Providing a coherent account

Catholic education is traditionally holistic or, as the Congregation for Catholic Education puts it, is concerned with 'integral formation'.⁵ This integral formation is not concerned primarily with empirically verifiable results but is designed to allow its recipients

⁴ Christopher Richardson, *The Theological Disposition of Lay Catholic Headteachers* (unpublished PhD thesis, St Mary's University College Twickenham 2011)

⁵ Congregation for Catholic Education, *Catholic Schools* (Rome 1977) n.26

to contribute to the society in which they live, to promote the common good and to seek the Kingdom both in this life and the next.

Catholic schools are concerned with developing people as people⁶ and not with turning them into units of production in the workplace. The challenge for Catholic schools is to maintain the integrity of their mission⁷ within a system that seems to privilege certain aspects of learning and a narrow way of measuring success. Schools have to avoid the temptation to emphasise those elements of what they offer that are valued more generally in society whilst relegating distinctively Catholic features to the margins or simply becoming a state school conducted in premises provided by the Catholic Church.⁸

Catholic schools must provide a coherent and explicit account of a Catholic way of seeing the world that informs their educational mission. What is a Catholic way of seeing the world? What are the underlying assumptions that inform the life of our schools? There are, no doubt, many ways of expressing these.⁹ What is offered here is a grouping of main themes.

Catholic life is a purposeful life

Life is purposeful and education is not just an aimless meander through an unknown landscape 'full of sound and fury and

⁶ See Conroy J.C., *The Long Johns and Catholic Education in Catholic Education Inside-Out and Outside-In* (Dublin 1999) p.47

⁷ Grace G., *Catholic Schools: Mission, Markets and Morality* (London 2002) pp.178, 235 and 237

⁸ Treston K., *Ethos and identity: Foundational concerns for Catholic schools* in Keane R. & Riley D. (eds) *Quality Catholic Schools* (Brisbane 1997) p.17

⁹ For the distinctively Catholic see McBrien R., *Catholicism* (3rd Edition London 1994) pp.8-16. For a Catholic way of seeing the world see Groome T., *What Makes A Catholic School* in McLaughlin T. et al (eds) *The Contemporary Catholic School: Context, Identity and Diversity* (Falmer Press 1996) pp.117-18. For essentials of Catholic education see Konstant D. et al, *Signposts and Homecomings* (London 1981) pp.119-121. For underlying assumptions behind Catholic schooling see Jacobs R.M., *The Grammar of Catholic Schooling* (Washington DC 1997)

signifying nothing'¹⁰ but has a particular destination in mind. Life's goal is union with God. The Christian anthropology that drives this sense of purpose recognises that we are created by God, redeemed by Christ and destined for eternal life. We are not authors of our own history as contemporary society seems to believe. We are dependant creatures, who grow to fulfilment by the grace (or love) of God.

Understanding this colours our approach to education in many ways, not least in our recognition that ends are more important than means and that if means are confused with ends the resulting education is deficient. Yes, gaining skills and qualifications is important but those attributes are only means to further ends. The person the child is becoming is more important than what he or she knows. This makes education a moral endeavour because it is not just concerned with helping people acquire skills and knowledge but also with providing a moral compass with which to analyse and use them.

Catholic life is a life of faith: a life where we embrace mystery. There are things that we know by faith that cannot be reconciled with secular knowledge. Or, at least, the scientific method and the language of contemporary thought are inadequate for speaking of these things. We can and do try to give expression to them using language that has currency in the modern world but there is always a danger that the language we use will retain its original meaning for our hearers, giving them the impression that we are only making secular claims. Catholic schools must help pupils learn 'what' it means to be a Catholic as well as 'how' to live the Christian life. Pupils need knowledge as well as experience. To understand the life of faith one must enter into it. Catholic schools offer their students an opportunity to enter into this life of faith but must take care that what is offered is not a sanitised experience, devoid of mystery.

¹⁰ Shakespeare, *Macbeth* Act V Scene 5

There is no compulsion on students to accept the life of faith but their choices will be coloured by experience. Crucial to their experience of the life of faith will be the witness of their teachers, who walk with them and share their faith and faithfulness.

Catholic life is underpinned by a sacramental imagination

Catholics believe that everything that God created is good. We see the influence of the creator present in the world. We encounter the creator in created things. In particular we recognise that the people in our schools are all made in the image of God and are unique and of infinite value. Catholic schools are concerned with helping each person, child and adult, recognise his or her own worth and the worth of others.

This has implications for how our schools are led and managed. Catholics accept that Jesus Christ is the greatest sign of the encounter between the divine and the human. As a consequence, Jesus must be at the heart of a Catholic school. He is 'the way, the truth and the life'¹¹ and by coming to know him better we come to know more about ourselves.

Catholic life is communal

Catholic schools are not simply communities of individuals who co-operate for mutual advantage or emotional support. It is in their understanding of community as a relationship between people and God that their greatest strength is to be found. Catholics know that community is necessary for human flourishing. Taking the Trinity as a model of reconciled difference, Catholic communities are catholic, embracing everyone and especially the troubled and troublesome.

There is recognition that relationships are important. If we are to have an authentic relationship with the Lord then we must learn to develop relationships with other members of the community. These relationships should

¹¹ John 14:6

be characterised by mutual respect and co-operation. Catholic schools are also communities, where members are encouraged to make Christ present for each other. Not only does our understanding of the importance of community influence the way that we see the world but it also provides us with a significant resource, with the schools generally enjoying support from within and without the extended Catholic community of the school.

Catholic life is ecclesial

Catholic schools are effectively agencies of the Catholic Church. They contribute to the Church's work of salvation. It is in and through the Church that Catholics can live the life of faith most fully. Here they can experience community as communion. Here they can share their experience of the living Lord with others and in the light of the Church's understanding accumulated over the years. Here the grace of God is made most powerfully available to them.

Catholic schools offer an experience of Church and must be authentic witnesses to what the Church is and what it has to offer. Catholic schools must remain faithful to the *Magisterium*¹² of the Church under whose auspices they function.

Catholic life is missionary

At the end of Mass each Sunday, we are sent out to bear witness to Christ in the world. Catholic schools model this in the way that they co-operate with other local schools in pursuit of the common good. Here, in the public arena, where teachers meet together or schools compete with each other, they have an opportunity to bring something distinctive to the educational enterprise. The missionary life is also a life of service. Excellence is pursued but so that its fruits can be shared. Solidarity with the poor and disadvantaged is expressed in action not just words. Confidence is balanced with humility

¹² *Magisterium* = the teaching role of the Church

and a willingness to share what we value with others, whilst benefitting from what they can share with us.

In conclusion

These insights into the Catholic life and how they influence Catholic schools are personal and reflect my own theological disposition. Other people would legitimately stress other aspects of the Catholic life. The reflection involved in arriving at these is what is important.

If Catholic schools are to promote a distinctive attitude to life it is important that those who lead them can clearly articulate what that distinctive attitude is. If it can only speak of itself in terms of values that any local school would also claim to promote, and is unable to express a distinctively Catholic understanding of the human condition that underpins its work and influences how it operates, then its capacity to offer a rival concept of human existence, fulfilment and happiness will be diminished.


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