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Future Catholic Schools: Exclusive, Inclusive and Plural Options

Introduction

Among the outcomes of the events of September 11 has been a flurry of new laws to identify suspect individuals, as well as the creation of policies to promote cultural integration. Communities are involved in a determined struggle to shore up their defence capabilities while simultaneously looking for new ways to communicate with each across cultural divides (Fullilove, 2008). This hydra-headed concern for security and for cross-cultural engagement is a characteristic of the contemporary world. Australian Catholic schools inhabit this cultural terrain. It is causing new questions to be asked about the nature and purpose of the schools and to re-assess the imagery that has sustained the schools in this country for almost two centuries.

The ambivalence in the broader community is mirrored among people concerned for the present and future of Australian Catholic schools: some seek to exclude those who are not "us"; others argue enthusiastically for their integration into the life of the Catholic school. Gabriel Moran has said that there is good news and bad news in all this: the good news is that no one knows more than me about how to proceed; the bad news is that no one knows more than me about how to proceed (Moran, 2007). If there is validity in this dictum, prospects for Australian Catholic schools involve greater complexity, more robust debate about future steps and an era of change for all. Some refinement in the guiding assumptions, policies and practices of education in Australian Catholic schools is a near certainty.

The following discussion will focus on the enrolment in Catholic schools of students who are not Catholics. The question of inclusion of staff and others who are not Catholics in Catholic schools has its own complexities but those will not be considered directly here.

Official Catholic Policies on Inclusion: A Documentary Survey

Discussion about the inclusion of students who are not Catholics in Catholic schools was propelled by the Second Vatican Council (1962-5). A general spirit of openness and inclusion was evident at that Council and this spilled over into thinking about all Church agencies. Vatican II opened up consideration of the missionary and pastoral consequences of dialogue with other religions in ways not previously contemplated in official Catholic documents. The Council document on missionary activity, *Ad Gentes,* was among the first to identify the role of Catholic schools in the promotion of the public good in developing countries. This document advised that: "With special care, let them devote themselves to the education of children and young people by means of different kinds of schools, which should be considered not only as the most excellent means of forming and developing Christian youth, but also as a valuable public service, especially in the developing nations, working toward the uplifting of human dignity, and toward better living conditions" (*Ad gentes*, para. 12). This sentiment was echoed in the Council's Declaration on Christian Education (*Gravissimum Educationis*) which argued that Catholic schools should take on different forms in keeping with local circumstances. In this context, the authors reported that, "the Church considers very dear to her heart those Catholic schools, found especially in the areas of the new churches, which are attended also by students who are not Catholic" (*Gravissimum educationis*, para. 9).

Vatican II's openness to students from other religious traditions informed post-conciliar documents on religious education and catechesis. The 1982 document from the Congregation for Catholic Education, *Lay Catholics in Schools: Witnesses to Faith* recognised the existence of students in Catholic schools "who do not profess the Catholic faith, or perhaps are without any religious faith at all". The authors characterised faith as a free response of the human person to God: "Therefore, while Catholic educators will teach doctrine in conformity with their own religious convictions and in accord with the

identity of the school, they must at the same time have the greatest respect for those students who are not Catholics. They should be open at all times to authentic dialogue, convinced that in these circumstances the best testimony that they can give of their own faith is a warm and sincere appreciation for anyone who is honestly seeking God according to his or her own conscience" (SCCE, 1982, para. 42). This document marks a move to wrestle with the practical implications of inclusion. The 1980s saw a number of such principles of inclusion established by Church officials. The openness established at Vatican II was accepted with the addition of certain caveats.

One of those caveats was affirmation of the maintenance of a Catholic identity in the Catholic school. A principle was outlined that sought to balance acceptance of others with the right to proclaim Catholic beliefs and values. The same Congregation for Catholic Education in 1988 published an expanded reflection on the theme of inclusion. They acknowledged that not all students in Catholic schools are members of the Catholic Church, and that in some places a majority of students is not Catholic. The authors directed that:

> The religious freedom and the personal conscience of individual students and their families must be respected, and this freedom is explicitly recognised by the Church. On the other hand, a Catholic school cannot relinquish its own freedom to proclaim the Gospel and to offer a formation based on the values to be found in a Christian education; this is its right and its duty. To proclaim or to offer is not to impose, however; the latter suggests a moral violence which is strictly forbidden, both by the Gospel and by Church law (CCE, 1988, para. 6).

The authors thought that "evangelisation is not easy - it may not even be possible. We should look to pre-evangelisation: to the development of a religious sense of life" (CCE, 1988, para. 108).

Another Vatican department with a close interest in the conduct of Catholic schools is the Congregation for the Clergy, the department with primary responsibility for catechesis. This Congregation shares the concerns about the implications of diversity:

> When students and their families become associated with Catholic schools because of the quality of education offered in the school,

or for other possible reasons, catechetical activity is necessarily limited and even religious education - when possible - accentuates its cultural character. The contribution of such schools is always "a service of great value to men", as well as an internal element of evangelisation of the Church (CC, 1997, 260).

The *General Directory for Catechesis* (1997, para. 75) suggested that it is possible to divide students in Catholic schools into three categories according to their religious beliefs: believers, searchers and non-believers. This tripartite division provides a frame for considering the variety of religious needs and interests of students in Catholic schools – whether Catholic or not. This description of the student body in a Catholic school allows a more nuanced interpretation of students' religious background. It implies a reality that many report informally: the "believing" students in many Catholic schools belong to religious communities other than Catholic; many Catholic students belong to the searching and non-believing cohorts, as defined by the Congregation for the Clergy.

In 1997, the Congregation for Catholic Education amplified its conviction that Catholic schools were public - not private - institutions and not reserved only for Catholics. They argued that the Catholic school has come into being not as a private initiative, "but as an expression of the reality of the Church, having by its very nature a public character. It fulfils a service of public usefulness and, although clearly and decidedly configured in the perspective of the Catholic faith, is not reserved to Catholics only, but is open to all those who appreciate and share its qualified educational project" (CCE, 1997, para. 16). The precise nature of this "qualified educational project" was not defined and is certainly open to inference and contested claims. Nevertheless, the introduction of this concept into official documents shows an interest in providing delimitations to the policy of undifferentiated, open access and inclusion. A range of potential dilemmas can be discovered in this approach: for example, in a context of competition for enrolment places, what would happen if a student who was not a Catholic was able to demonstrate a greater appreciation and sharing in the school's "qualified educational project" than a Catholic student?

Official Catholic Church statements over the past generation are clear and consistent about the presence of students who are not Catholics in Catholic schools: these students are welcome.

While this welcome is not without conditions – they must share the Catholic school's "qualified educational project" – there is a consistently expressed guidance to Catholic schools to include students who are not Catholics. But, ambivalence exists among Church officials as to what their presence means for Catholic schools. Inferences can be drawn from official documents that Catholic schools ought to provide opportunities for evangelisation of students who are not Catholic. Less developed in the documentary discussions is any consideration of the support Catholic schools might offer these students in developing their religious faith within their own religious tradition (Chambers, Grajczonek & Ryan, 2006).

Three Possible Directions for Inclusion
Official Church documents direct Catholic schools to include students who are not Catholics, but offer scarce practical advice about how to resolve the daily challenges involved in implementing this policy. The following discussion will describe and evaluate three possible pathways for responding to this situation. The three possibilities are based on those first described by Alan Race (1983) and commonly adopted by a number of analysts since: exclusivist, inclusivist, and pluralist. Each will provide a form for understanding and evaluating the practical steps necessary for including students who are not Catholics.

Exclusive Catholic Schools
An exclusive approach to enrolment in a Catholic school focuses attention on students who are Catholic or who may become Catholic. The primary aim of an exclusivist approach is Church maintenance: the school is conceptualised as a place for teaching the Catholic tradition and for preserving and conserving Catholic culture. The future Pope Benedict XVI, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, as head of the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith gave expression to an exclusivist approach in an interview in 1997 when he argued that Catholic schools should focus directly on their role of ecclesial enculturation:

> What is our school system doing at a time when religious instruction is widespread? I think that it was an error not to pass on more content…Here, I think, we ought to be ready for a change, to say that if in this secular world we have religious instruction at all in the schools, we have to assume that we will not be able to convert many in schools to the faith. But the students should find out what Christianity is; they should receive good

information in a sympathetic way so that they are stimulated to ask: Is this perhaps for me? (Ratzinger, 1997, pp. 125-6).

This approach stresses the classroom religion program's role in evangelisation, as a site of conversion to Catholicism, albeit one with an admittedly low success rate. This observation is echoed in the *General Directory for Catechesis* (CC, 1997, p. 75) which stated that "students have the right to learn with truth the religion to which they belong. This right to know Christ, and the salvific message proclaimed by Him cannot be neglected". Both statements strongly infer that enrolment in Catholic schools is for Catholics, or at least Christians, who may need to be strengthened in their Catholic (Christian?) faith by the classroom program.

Exclusivists argue that in order for this ecclesial conservation to be effective, those who are not already involved in, or are not seeking, a Catholic religious formation ought to be excluded from the Catholic school. A common tool for enforcing this exclusion is the imposition of enrolment caps on students who are not Catholics. If they are included, the presence of students who are not Catholics is either acknowledged weakly, without regard for their particular religious needs and interests, or they are seen as potential converts to Catholicism. For example, George Pell, Cardinal archbishop of Sydney, embodies this exclusivist aim in his question to a conference of Catholic educators: "What strategies might be adopted to strengthen the Christian faith and perhaps make converts among the 23% of non-Catholic students in our schools?" (Pell, 2006, p. 8).

The main contribution of an exclusivist approach to the practice of Catholic schools is Church enculturation. The Catholic school is one of the major ways Catholic communities have employed to ensure the continuation of their Catholic identity. For the exclusivists, the focus of the classroom religion program is an exposition of Catholic teachings designed to stimulate Catholic faith or further inquiry. The religious dimension of the whole school is weighted towards Catholic symbols, rituals, beliefs and practices. Little or no attention is given to members of other religious communities present in the school. Compulsory attendance is required of all students "in activities and ceremonies which suppose a shared faith in the participants" (Rummery, 2001, p. 2). An exclusivist approach obliges school leaders to turn a blind eye to the growing religious diversity

among students, or effectively to ignore it by the use of slogans, such as: "They knew what they were in for when they enrolled in the school".

A strictly exclusivist approach to schooling risks increasing some undesirable, unintended consequences in the schooling of Catholic students, namely: *triumphalism* ("we are better than you"); *parochialism* ("we only associate with our own people") or *sectarianism* ("our way is the right way"). The exclusivist maintains a focus on the intramural language and concerns of the group despite the evidence that these concerns are daily decreasing in the face of the complex and diverse communities in which Catholic schools are located. Students and others can judge these ideological shortcomings as irrelevant, even harmful, for the ways they desire to live in the world. Thomas Groome (1998) has pointed to the fine line religious people must walk when honouring the particularity of *sectarian expression* while avoiding the intolerance of *sectarianism*. Groome (1998, p. 42) claims that "every religious community and tradition needs to claim its identity but is surely bound - in heaven's name - not to encourage sectarianism. This is an imperative for Christians if they are to honor their doctrine of universality of God's love".

This invisibility or denial of religious diversity is a stumbling block to implementing an exclusivist approach in a contemporary Catholic school. For most contemporary Catholic school classrooms, such simple choices no longer present themselves. An exclusive interest in enrolling Catholics risks engagement with a constantly declining public. Nevertheless, the exclusivist concern for tradition needs to be heeded for its concern for cultural particularity and continuity.

Inclusive Catholic Schools
Those who pursue inclusivist policies and approaches in Catholic schools realise that the world has changed and something needs to be done to respond to the fracturing of the religious landscape. An inclusivist approach accepts the existence of religious diversity in the global and local community and seeks actively to include this diversity within the context of the school. Those who embrace inclusivity in school enrolments point to the realignment of religious and educational interests among increasing numbers of Catholics. For example, Kieran and Hession (2005) report the rapid growth in Ireland of the *Educate Together* movement. This development suggests "parents and teachers are looking for what they perceive to be a more democratic, multi-dimensional, transparent and inclusive school system" (Kieran & Hession, 2005, p. 287). Kieran and Hession contend that this trend is a direct challenge to the exclusivist interests of Irish Catholic school authorities.

Efforts at inclusion can take many forms within contemporary Catholic education. One example of the impact of an inclusivist approach in Catholic schools is the focus of the classroom religion program on "world religions" or a descriptive-comparative approach to presenting the world's religions in a dispassionate and tolerant manner. Attempts to teach the world's religions in an "objective" manner are admirable in their intention, but can flounder under the weight of the teacher's inability to master and teach the vast range of material required - and students' incapacity to comprehend it even at a surface level.

Examples of inclusion also exist in school organisation. Some Catholic authorities have opted to combine their resources with other Christian communities to create "ecumenical" schools which share governance structures, financing, curriculum development and all other aspects of the school's life with representatives from a range of Christian communities (McQuillan & Hutton, 2007). Ecumenical schools usually come into being as a result of local community initiative fostered in an atmosphere of mutual respect and financial constraint. These kinds of initiatives draw criticism from those who claim that Catholic identity is dissolved in the midst of a generalised Christian environment. The charge is made that attempts to be all-inclusive inevitability result in a loss of a particular, communal character. Harsher critics point to the relativism that could be fostered when everything seems to be accorded equal time and status. Relativism is the belief that judgments of value vary according to the circumstances of time and place. The fear of critics of inclusive enrolment policies is that students learn of Catholicism as merely one option among a range of equally viable truth claims.

Researchers have paid attention to the impact of inclusive enrolment policies on the Catholic identity of Catholic students. The guiding normative assumption is that Catholic identity in a Catholic school is dependent upon the strong Catholicity of the student population: an increase in the percentage of students who are not Catholics is perceived to be a direct threat to the Catholic identity of the school and an impediment to

strengthening the Catholic commitment of Catholic students. Francis and Gibson (2001) from their examination of Scottish Catholic schools questioned whether "the presence of non-Catholic pupils may have a deleterious impact on the overall school ethos as reflected in the attitude towards Christianity of the student body as a whole" (2001, p. 49). This perspective has been challenged by researchers who point to the concept of Catholic identity as complex, multilayered and multifaceted. The student body includes a spectrum of so-called "churched" and "unchurched" young people in addition to a spectrum of young people with varying commitments to a range of other religious communities (Cummings, 1996; Clark, 2005; Donlevy, 2006; McCarthy, 2007). Donlevy (2006) argued that "inclusion heightens and intensifies the reflectivity of Catholic students *vis-a-vis* both the commonality amongst the many Christian and non-Christian faiths in the experiential affective realm and the acceptance of fundamental humanistic values" (2006, p. 13). Discussion of inclusion and Catholic identity requires a more nuanced treatment than mere reliance on largely untested assumptions that Catholic identity is challenged at nominal percentage levels of student enrolments (Non-Catholic cap, 2005).

Plurality in Catholic Schools
The third possible response to the inclusion in Catholic schools of students who are not Catholics is to adopt a pluralist approach. A pluralist approach attempts to find the appropriate balance between exclusivist and inclusivist aims. Plurality recognises and celebrates the existence of a variety of religious claims, but does not seek a grounded relation between a familiar tradition and other traditions. It observes the growing plurality *within* particular religious groups where members "hold very different views and follow different preferences in life, even in relation to religion" (Schweitzer, 2007, p. 3). Pluralists seek to find the correct balance - in any and every situation - between exclusivist demands for particularity, concreteness and cultural continuity, and inclusivist claims for openness, commonality and diversity. Plurality requires a "grounding in the particular that opens to the universal" (Groome, 1998, p. 396). Plurality requires a disciplined commitment to tolerant understanding of the other. This kind of tolerance is not a matter of merely being nice to each other. It respects differences of beliefs and requires of each person that a "very difficult and I suspect painful turn in thinking has to be achieved" (Crotty, 2006, p. 69). Gabriel Moran has described how an expanded meaning of

tolerance:

> accepts the fact that religious beliefs exist and are important to people. The task of education is to try to understand what these beliefs mean rather than to bypass them or eliminate them. A strong religious belief is not an obstacle to being tolerant; on the contrary, it can be the precondition of a tolerance that respects the other person, including what the other person believes. In this case, conflicts do not go away; they are openly acknowledged, and the task is to find acceptable compromises so that all parties can co-exist (Moran, 2006, p. 25).

One way to illustrate this form of respect for difference in a Catholic school context can be seen in the experience of Gerard Rummery, an Australian de la Salle brother, who recalls how he and a colleague encountered an airline pilot in Cairo airport in 1989. In the course of the conversation, the pilot revealed that he had been a student of the de la Salle brothers at St. Mark's school in Alexandria, Egypt. The pilot spoke with great affection for the brothers and their work. Before leaving, he said to them:

> Brothers, before you go, I wish to say something to you. Today I am flying a Jumbo jet and when I am at the end of the runway waiting to fly, the last thing I always say to myself is "Let us remember that we are in the holy presence of Allah" - and that is something that you taught me (Rummery, 2002, p. 66).

A pluralist approach requires refinement in the ways in which religion and education are spoken about in the Catholic school. This refined language is dependent upon a number of distinctions in discussions about the religious and educational goals of the school. The requirement is to distinguish the particular (exclusive) religious goals from the broadly educational (inclusive) ones (Rummery, 2001, p. 13). For example, all students can study a classroom curriculum that focuses on Catholic tradition but remains open to a consideration of the relations between Catholicism and other religious groups, especially as these have arisen within the local region as well as beyond it. In this way, the existence of students in the classroom who are not Catholics is an educational resource. All students can learn the skills of engagement in inter-religious dialogue, and practise these skills in their classrooms. Classroom teaching and learning activities can be selected and

implemented that promote this open dialogue. The students can appreciate and practise a disciplined language that causes no offence to others.

Another necessary distinction exists between the classroom and the religious dimension of the school as a whole. The classroom religion program can propose a Catholic program of studies, albeit one open to the religious ways of others. The classroom religion program does not seek to impose a Catholic (or any other religious way) on students. At times, this distinction can mean that the classroom religion program stands in tension with the Catholic school in which it is located. The religious dimension of the school as a whole offers numerous opportunities (artistic, service, liturgical, dramatic, architectural…) for students to engage with the Catholic tradition. Sometimes these opportunities will provide a direct invitation for a direct response in faith; other experiences will involve an indirect, even subconscious, engagement with the life of faith.

In a pluralist Catholic school, opportunities are provided for students who are not Catholics to practise and observe their own religious forms. For example, times and places for prayer are established in the school to allow for students to observe their own prayer rituals. Students who are not Catholics are affirmed in their own religious ways. Any attempts to proselytise are explicitly and implicitly ruled out. The school retains it authority to propose a Catholic way of life, but this is not imposed on any students, Catholic or other. The obverse is also true: those students from other religious traditions do not seek to proselytise their fellow students. The classroom religion program is founded on educational principles, not principles derived from Church pastoral ministry. The classroom religion program is weighted towards Christian material, but connections and links to other religious ways are actively pursued. The classroom religion program does not adopt a phenomenological, comparative approach which examines all religions with dispassionate fairness.

A pluralist approach seeks an open, tolerant understanding of the religious ways of others, founded on a thorough consideration of a familiar religious way. As Georgetown University theologian Peter Phan (2007, pp. 20-1) has argued, "for the Catholic Church religious diversity is not a curse but a blessing". Phan considers that the Church does not regard religious differences as a "clash of civilizations", nor as a "threat to its identity nor does it limit itself to polite tolerance,

which at bottom is disguised intolerance. Rather, the Church views other religious faiths with respect and admiration and enters into dialogue with them in order to be enriched by them". In this perspective, universal meaning is embodied, not in one religious (Christian) community, but potentially in many. Catholics do not need to fear the presence of the other in their midst. On the contrary, a fuller, more profound self-understanding of Catholicism and Catholic culture requires an informed dialogue and interaction with those who do not share the same religious culture. A Catholic school with a religiously diverse enrolment offers privileged access to this kind of respectful dialogue (Hollenbach, 1996).

Exactly how this respectful dialogue and search for universal meaning might be conducted in Catholic schools must be considered to be a work in progress. Some preliminary steps are available within the Church's pastoral repertoire. For example, official guidance on ecumenical relations with Christian communities encourages Catholic school authorities to allow "clergy of other Communities" to use Catholic school and parish facilities "including the church or chapel" to provide "spiritual and sacramental ministration of their own faithful" for Christian students in Catholic schools (Pontifical Council, 1993, para. 141). This document, while conscious of the increasing encounters with members of other religions, does not extend the same invitation to those members of other religions enrolled in Catholic schools. Nevertheless, a helpful precedent may have been set that encourages Catholic schools to provide "spiritual ministration" to students from other religions.

Conclusion
All Church schools who confront the consequences of religious plurality will grapple with a series of new questions: "Depending on one's theological perspective, denominationally diverse Catholic schools may present a wonderful opportunity for Christian dialogue or be a serious dilution of religious character" (Greene & O'Keefe, 2001, p. 176). In any case, the issue may be forced upon Australian Catholic schools whether they welcome it or not, especially given the realities of public funding and as a result of their engaged presence in a shifting cultural landscape.

Finding ways for religions and cultures to engage with each other in a mutually supportive manner is the pressing task of the rising generation. It begins with recognition that religious people, in the world

that is emerging, will configure their own religious ways - to some extent - in relation to the religious ways of others. This requires fruitful encounters with "the other" in educationally advantageous contexts constructed for the mutual benefit of all concerned. Catholic schools are privileged places for this pressing educational task to be lived out during the childhood and adolescent years.

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