

CATHOLIC SCHOOLS AS NURTURING FRAMEWORKS FOR YOUNG PEOPLE'S SPIRITUALITY

This paper explores the concept of Catholic schools as communities of meaning which nurture the spirituality of young people today. It focuses on the contributions made by schools to their communities as perceived by a range of primary and secondary students. In addition, there is some discussion of the challenges that schools face in a contemporary media-charged climate that frequently displays a less-than-friendly attitude towards Christianity. Finally, as an awareness-raising exercise, it will attempt to identify some relevant issues which have some significance for the Catholic community as it journeys into this century.

The reality: Perceptions of students

Traditionally, the Catholic school has been identified in post-Vatican Church documents as an evangelical arm of the church.

It is from its Catholic identity that the school derives its original characteristics and its 'structure' as a genuine instrument of the Church, a place of real and specific pastoral ministry In this way ... 'Catholic schools are at once places of evangelization, of complete formation, of inculturation, of apprenticeship in a lively dialogue between young people of different religions and social backgrounds' (*The Catholic School on the threshold of the third millennium*, 1998, # 11).

Certainly, one assumes that most teachers in Catholic schools are sincere and genuine in their desire to provide a gospel inspired learning environment that will nurture each child's intellectual, physical, social, moral and spiritual development. However, despite many factors that may have a detrimental effect on this objective, such as a crowded curriculum, awkward timetables, limited resources, or even particular government policies, in the perceptions of many students, there are some valuable things happening in Catholic schools.

Over the past several years, various studies have explored the experiences and perceptions of students attending Catholic schools, and they have continued to note that while many students had positive experiences of Catholic schools this did not necessarily increase their interest and involvement in the institutional church (for instance, Angelico, 1997; de Souza, 1999; Flynn &

Mok, 1999). Of these, the most recent study (Flynn & Mok, 1999) was conducted in 1998 and surveyed approximately 8,310 female and male students who attended 70 Catholic schools in NSW and ACT. Its prime aim was to explore students' experience of Catholic schools as they approached the second millennium. One of the items required information about attendance at Sunday Mass and revealed the following: Approximately 20% of students (1662) attended regularly, 12% attended on some Sundays, 8% attended on monthly basis and, of the remaining 60%, there was an even distribution between those who attended only a few times a year or rarely. However, other findings that related to experiences of the Catholic school were more positive. For instance:

- 64% said they had been happy at school;
- 71% said there was a good spirit of community amongst Year 12 students;
- 66% said that the principal encouraged a sense of community and belonging in the school;
- 72% said that their teachers were caring and willing to assist students who need help;
- 67% said that there was a happy atmosphere at the school;
- 66% said they would send their children to a Catholic school; and
- 66% said if they had to do it all over again they would attend a Catholic school.

In an earlier study (de Souza, 1999), conducted in the mid-nineties, 227 students in 11 schools in Victoria responded to a survey that investigated their perceptions of their religious education programs. The findings indicated that less than a quarter of the students were interested in or involved in the institutional church. Of the ten students who participated in follow-up interviews for the study, most agreed that there was a need for a church but one that was significantly different. A common thread running through their responses and observations was that the church needed to be a community church where the community was more involved with the decision-making. This process was seen as an essential ingredient in bringing, 'The Church' closer to the community, thereby raising its potential to be more relevant and meaningful. Implicit in the perceptions of these

students was that the church was 'deaf to their voices, unable or unwilling to develop an empathy with them, therefore, increasing in them a sense of alienation' (de Souza, 2001, p. 83). Indeed, there was a distinct perception of 'them', the hierarchy, making decisions for 'us' the community without any real consultation or understanding of the needs.

It was very clear that the perceptions of these students were based on their experience of the institutional church where they felt little or no sense of belonging. de Souza (1999) also found that senior students' experiences of Catholic schools were positive. It was a place where many experienced

- ❑ learning about their faith tradition and the sharing of faith nurturing experiences;
- ❑ praying together and talking about God;
- ❑ becoming involved in social justice programs;
- ❑ voicing their questions, doubts and opinions in an atmosphere of relative freedom;
- ❑ being listened to and their voices being heard;
- ❑ a sense of belonging and being valued as individuals; and most importantly,
- ❑ freedom to continue their own faith and spiritual journeys.

Indeed, drawing on these experiences, it is clear that many students' experiences of Catholic schools were that of a community in faith, and these perceptions encouraged them to consider the school community as 'church'.

Supporting this theme, Flynn and Mok (1999), when they visited the schools involved in their study, found it to be a 'privileged and graced experience'. They said:

We were regularly confronted by tangible expressions of the presence of the Holy Spirit in the lives of youth today. We sensed their genuine goodness, honesty and integrity. We felt the depths of their searching regarding life and God as they reflected on their experience of Catholic schools and the place of God in their lives. We were constantly reminded of those telling words of Vatican II's document, *The Constitution on the Church in the Modern World* (# 38):

Christ is now at work in the hearts of (people) through the energy of his spirit. He arouses not only a desire for the age to

come, but ... He animates, purifies and strengthens those noble longings by which the human family strives to make its life more human. (Flynn & Mok, 1999)

Many teachers in Catholic schools will be able to empathise with Flynn and Mok's experience and recognition of this deeply spiritual dimension in the lives of the young people with whom they interact on a daily basis. Indeed, while many young people appear distrustful of and distanced from the institutional church (in terms of hierarchical structures and local parish levels) they often display a deep sense of connectedness that binds them to 'the Other' in community (the 'Social Other'), in Creation (the 'Physical Other') and in the Cosmos (the 'Transcendent Other'). The depth of this relational aspect amongst the young may be passionately demonstrated through action for the rights of the marginalised and disadvantaged people in their communities, and for the protection of this planet (Eckersley, 1997; Hay & Nye, 1998; McKay, 2000, 2001).

It is possible that, for some students, their spirituality has been influenced by the teachings and practices of their faith tradition. However, quite a number of young Catholics, as they pass through adolescence, have had little association with their local church or church communities other than through their schools. It could be argued, then, that the religious education program has the potential to be an influential agent in their religious and spiritual development. However, research findings suggest that this is not the experience of many senior secondary students. de Souza (1999) found that 52% of the Year 12 students who participated in the study agreed that religion was important in their lives, 22% were undecided and 26% disagreed. In response to the item about their spiritual development, 49% of students agreed that the religious education program had promoted their spiritual development. However, 34% were undecided and 17% did not agree. Flynn and Mok (1999) also included a number of items related to the religious education program in their study. They found that 41% of students enjoyed their RE classes during that year while 19% expressed some uncertainty and 40% responded negatively and a similar pattern emerged in the responses to an item that asked if the RE classes had been interesting. One development Flynn and Mok reported was the responses to the Year 12 retreat as an important religious experience. They found that 38% of students said that the retreat had been an important religious experience, 29% were uncertain and 33% disagreed. In contrast, de Souza's study from a few years earlier found that 79% of the students were positive about their retreat experience, 12% were not certain and 9% were negative. Perhaps the

language, 'religious', used in this item was an effective barrier to the process of communication. If students had just been asked if the retreat had been a positive experience, different responses may have been offered. As long as retreat organisers are aware of and continue to address the changing needs of contemporary youth, there is potential for this to be a positive experience for most students.

While the above findings suggest a mixed response from senior students regarding the schools' influence on their religiosity and spirituality, there are more positive results from a recent study that investigated the perceptions of middle school students in Catholic schools of their religiosity and spirituality (Engbretson, de Souza & Salpietro, 2001). The research sample here included 240 Grade 6 students and 338 Year 9 students as these year levels were seen as representative of the upper and lower levels of the Middle Years. Of these students, 94% of the Grade 6 students were positive about the importance of religion in their lives. These ranged from 'very important' (34%), 'fairly important' (43%) and 'of some importance' (17%). There were 73% of Year 9 students who were positive with 21% indicating that religion was 'very important', 25% indicating it was 'fairly important' and 27% indicating it was 'of some importance'. Of the Grade 6 students, 6% responded negatively and of the Year 9 students 26% were negative.

Other findings that continued the more positive trend from primary students related to the influence of religious practice on the students' spirituality. These are presented here according to the faith tradition with which the student identified. There were 79% positive responses from the Catholic primary students compared to 59% secondary students; 90% of Orthodox primary students compared with 63% of secondary students; 80% of other Christian primary students as compared to 44% of secondary students, and finally, 67% of non-Christian primary students as compared to 38% of secondary students.

One other item that has relevance to this discussion required information on whether students perceived the school as nurturing their spirituality. Once again the primary students provided more positive responses: 87% Catholic; 90% Orthodox; 80% other Christian; and 78% non-Christian. The secondary student responses for this item were: 52% Catholic; 64% Orthodox; 52% other Christian; and 62% non-Christian. An interesting result here was that all eleven primary students who professed to have no religion indicated that the school had nurtured their spirituality but five of the twenty-four secondary students who fell into this category were positive. Thus, these findings

suggest that many students, particularly at primary level, had experienced a spiritually nurturing environment in their Catholic school. They also imply that secondary schools may need to explore different and, perhaps, more creative ways in which to address this need.

In an overview of the research programs discussed here, there was a distinct decline in students' perceptions of the nurturing environment of the Catholic school as they moved into more senior years. This is not surprising given their stage of development where they display characteristics of the 'Identity versus Role Confusion' (Erikson, 1968) stage. It is a time when adolescents extend the boundaries of their social world and they struggle with their sense of identity as they attempt to find their own place. One symptom of this stage can be their rejection of traditional structures and authority figures.

Overall, while school communities can be affirmed in their efforts to address the spiritual needs of their students, particularly at primary level, they must remain ever vigilant so that they are constantly attuned to the nuances and dynamics of their classrooms as the needs of their students change. Indeed, school communities may need to raise their own awareness of their unique position to explore new, creative ways in which to provide a variety of opportunities for students, particularly at secondary level, to find and give expression to their spirituality.

The potential: How schools can create nurturing environments for young people's spirituality in the contemporary climate

Educators in Catholic schools today would be remiss if they did not continue to raise their awareness of the implications of contemporary culture for their work. Some of these are the focus for this section of the article.

Implications of media and telecommunication

The remarkable advances in media and communication technology at the end of the twentieth century have given rise to a society plagued by characteristics that intimate that all is not well, particularly for many of our young people. While the world has shrunk, the wealth, power and influence of a small minority has grown alongside the increasing number of those who have become marginalised. Through television and the Internet, vast amounts of information have been made readily accessible in an indiscriminate way to many children and young people. The media has also removed the human face from suffering by promoting terms like 'queue jumpers', 'illegals', 'dole bludgers/cruisers' and, thereby, has diluted our capacity to feel compassion. In addition, it has

infiltrated the imaginative and creative play/games of our very young.

Faced with such an array of influences through television and the world-wide-web, many people, including adolescents and young adults, no longer find solace or meaning within traditional frameworks, be they political, religious or communal. Instead they engage in a serious search for meaning and purpose in their lives along alternative avenues. Some evidence of this is found in their interest and involvement in the New Age Movement, or in their perusal of self-help books and books for personal growth. Often, teachers find themselves challenged by their students who bring these influences and ideas into their classrooms and they know that there are no easy solutions. However, schools could revisit their structures and programs to discover their effectiveness in promoting a sense of connectedness and hope for students who are beginning to feel distanced or alienated. With the knowledge we have today about the role of emotional intelligence on intellectual learning, old and new strategies which use imagination, wisdom and discernment can be explored to promote students' levels of thinking, questioning and resilience.

Changing perceptions and understandings of individualisation

Another feature that identifies many senior adolescents and young adults is the understanding they have of being an individual within a communal context. The adolescents of the sixties began a path which focused on individuality which, perhaps, was not a new thing. It is more than probable that most young people in earlier generations also went through similar stages. However, the greater prosperity that Australian society, in general, experienced after World War II created a generation that enjoyed higher levels of employment, social mobility and affluence than those who came before them. In addition, the educational policies introduced by the Whitlam Government meant that they were a generation who had better access to tertiary education. The greater independence they experienced as a result of such a concentration of material and educational benefits could be one reason why this generation, unlike earlier ones, continued to distance itself from more traditional authorities and institutions (including religious ones) as it matured into adulthood. For many, their need to be treated as individuals, the 'Me-first' syndrome, continued to be given priority and, in general, they passed this need on to their children.

Nonetheless, what has emerged in recent studies (Eckersley, 1996; Mackay, 2000; Youth Forum,

2000) is that, with the breakdown of family and traditional community structures, many young people are searching for new and viable community frameworks. It could be argued, though, that their understanding of community is different. Many appear to have an understanding that allows them to retain their individuality within a communal context. Hence, one can belong and be an accepted member of the group but at the same time one can be individual and different from the group. It is important for educators to try and understand this concept and address it, rather than project their own understanding of individualisation on to their students. They should be aware that responses to the Christian Story and Vision could be both individual and communal. Accordingly, they should remain consistent and non-judgemental in their approach to their students.

Significance of gender

Many features of contemporary Australian society reflect a culture wherein the women's movement of the late 20th century had a significant impact. For instance, many of today's young adults entered their schooling phase at a time when school leadership teams were implementing procedures and strategies that were a direct result of educational policies from the late eighties which addressed girls' education. Thus, both male and female students have perceptions and experiences of gender equality that are very different to that of previous generations, and which are likely to be reflected in their behaviour and attitudes, relationships, career expectations and so on.

One result from the focus on educational programs that aimed to promote improved access and opportunities for girls has been a noticeable decline in the performance of many boys in school leadership and educational achievement. Attention is being directed to addressing this through various strategies in learning situations. However, one avenue that has not been explored sufficiently is the role of the arts as a valid means to access and express one's inner life. In the patriarchal culture (O'Murchu, 2000) that characterises contemporary society, sporting achievement is given almost regal status – for instance, an organisation like the Australian Institute of Sport does not have an appropriate equivalent which provides opportunities, training and support for young people who are involved in the arts. In particular, questions that need to be asked are: How do schools address the needs of young men who are artistic, sensitive, gentle and creative? What structures do schools put in place to nurture and give expression to the artistic soul?

This is an issue that has particular significance for Catholic schools, given their role in the wider

church community, when the institutional church has had difficulty addressing issues related to gender and contemporary youth. Among the statements contained in *The Catholic School on the Threshold of the Third Millennium* (1998) is a recognition that:

the future of the world and of the Church belongs to the *younger generation*, to those who, born in this century, will reach maturity in the next ... (# 8).

Such a statement, indeed, inspires hope for young people and those who work with young people. It is also a hopeful sign when the document appears to make a genuine effort to be contemporary and insightful as it addresses issues of relevance for today. For instance it contains many references to the "human person" and "men and women". At one point it states:

The person of each individual human being, in his or her material and spiritual needs, is at the heart of Christ's teaching: this is why the promotion of the human person is the goal of the Catholic school' (# 9).

However, the value and wisdom contained in this statement is somewhat diminished when it is followed immediately by several references to "man", in particular, "man's" vital relationship with Christ (# 9). In conclusion it notes that, "the Holy Father has pointed out in a meaningful expression how 'man is the primary and fundamental way for the Church, the way traced out by Christ himself' (# 21).

Such sexist language becomes significant if young people, particularly females, perceive the hierarchical church to be dominated by thinking that reflects male, generational views, and if their experience of the institutional church is of a place that segregates women and/or youth, it is not surprising that many are not interested in learning more about their faith tradition, or in becoming involved in the faith community. Therein lie long-term implications for the church, and for the identity and culture of the Catholic school.

A related concern is the future of the workforce in Catholic schools. At the NCEC conference in Brisbane (2001), Peter Tannock spoke about the future of Catholic schools in this country. One of the questions he raised was:

How can we maintain and renew and grow a Catholic school teaching profession which can meet the fundamental challenges of Catholic education?

Among the answers he provided was that a Catholic school must be:

A place and a process which makes knowledge of and commitment to the Gospels attractive to its students and community; where families enrol because the school is Catholic, and because it reinforces membership of the Church and induction into the Catholic culture.

The latter part of this claim could bear some scrutiny. To begin with, the teaching profession has tended to be female dominated. In recent years many men have been concerned about possible interpretations of their actions and behaviour with children given the media hype and the accompanying spin-offs that have resulted from reported incidents of paedophilia. It could be argued that such concerns may have deterred some males from entering into the teaching profession, particularly at primary school level and that a possible flow-on could be the likelihood that the future composition of the teaching workforce will continue to be predominantly female. If we add this factor to the one above, about the social and educational experiences of this generation of females, it raises an important question:

- ❖ How can young women who have grown up with the expanding horizons, created by contemporary culture, be inspired to commit to an institutional church that continues to have an exclusive framework?

Indeed, it can also be asked:

- ❖ How will young men who have grown up alongside these young women in the fairly liberal educational climate of the 90s perceive and react to such exclusivity?

A final question is:

- ❖ What experiences do young people have of church as that of a community that welcomes and values them, gives them a voice and provides them with a sense of ownership?

These are issues that need to be reflected on and addressed.

A climate of choice and change

Most young people today have been faced with decision-making within an exciting, yet frightening, array of choices and options. This latter aspect may sometimes be completely overlooked and so it is not addressed. Many have

managed a pace of change that has the potential to be, at once, exhilarating, stimulating, bewildering, threatening and destroying. For instance, the rapid changes in our lives via the work place; our family structures; our food sources; the rise and fall of our leaders and role models; the fleeting images on our screens before we fully have time to absorb them; or our diaries overflowing with dates to be kept are a continual bombardment of our mental faculties and our physical senses. It creates an unbearable tension that we don't find time to resolve because we're already moving on to the next thing. It is almost as if the world, as we know it, is poised on the brink of a massive nervous breakdown, continually in flight from one thing to the next and unable to focus on anything. *And this is the only context that most of our young people know.* While most of us present a different face to each group with whom we interact and, in general, we are comfortable with this, it has enormous implications for our young people. Their exposure to so many different images, influences and lifestyles can lead them to presenting too many different 'faces'. This can result in a confusion of identity – and they may lose touch with who they really are. This can have serious consequences for their emotional and spiritual well-being.

Another factor is that many of our youth live with the knowledge that their futures are filled with uncertainties. Many live with the knowledge that someone they know has overdosed or might yet do so. A sense of impermanency permeates their lives which is possibly a result of their experiences of changing structures in familial, political, environmental and economical contexts. This may be reflected in a certain restlessness, a continual search for an adrenalin rush, and their inability to make long term commitments either in relationship, careers and so on. Many attribute this situation to the greed and self-interest of current leaders which heightens their disenchantment with the traditional structures of religion, politics and the rest. Consequently, they continue to distance themselves from many of the traditional structures and institutions that previously offered guidance and spiritual direction and, tragically, many have not found appropriate replacements.

Schools should explore various responses to these factors. One way would be to allow time for silence, reflection and solitude in the weekly schedule, and perhaps by providing sacred space/s to which students and staff can retreat according to their needs, for instance, a small landscaped, aesthetically pleasing area in the school grounds.

The need for inclusiveness

The word multicultural has been with us for a long time and some questions we could ask ourselves

are: What does it really mean? How does it affect the way I think and behave?

The Australian Government moved from a pre-seventies policy of assimilation to one of multiculturalism in the seventies, and to one of integration in the eighties. This meant that various strategies were put in place over a period of years to promote aspects of each particular policy during the course of its life. Consequently, by the end of the twentieth century, a contemporary Australian identity had emerged which was clearly different from that of previous generations which had been dominated by an Anglo-Saxon/Anglo-Celtic heritage. Within this broader picture, several of the mainstream religious groups have also incurred some changes. The 1996 Census (Australian Bureau of Statistics) indicated that of the mainstream Christian religions, Catholicism was the only one that had increased its numbers by 4.2% (4,606.7 million in 1991 and 4,799 million in 1996). It is possible that some of this increase is due to the Catholics arriving from non-Anglo/Eurocentric backgrounds who now contribute to the composition of schools and parish communities, and who may have brought with them different religious practices. While these factors have led to a changing face of Australian Catholics, this change is not always reflected at different levels, particularly at the level of leadership. The attendance list at the 2001 NCEC conference, which is usually a gathering of Catholic educational leadership, was just one instance that clearly mirrored this situation. Perhaps, Catholics who grew up in this country through earlier years experienced some marginalisation themselves so that they strengthened the bonds that drew them together, thereby unifying them into a tightly-knit community. This gave them a feeling of kinship, a sense of purpose and a stronger voice. Also, as a result of the assimilation policy in earlier years, Catholics from other backgrounds, for instance, Italians, were expected to conform to the mainstream practices so that their particular cultural practices were not made prominent. It is possible that a certain insularity that can be found within some levels of Catholic communities today is a lingering reminder of those earlier times and experiences.

However, young people have grown up in a multicultural and multi-faith society which has promoted an awareness and, often, a celebration of diversity in culture and faith – note the response to the recent visit of the Dalai Lama. This is the Australia that young people know today. Some educators and clergy from earlier generations need to have a raised awareness that there may be limitations in their knowledge and, particularly,

their experience of true multiculturalism so that they avoid resorting to rhetoric. Instead they need to adopt a truly integrated approach that values, authenticates and recognises 'the other' in Catholics from many non-Anglo/Eurocentric backgrounds.

Another aspect that concerns many of us is the attitude of the institutional church to homosexuality. The fact that we don't have enough knowledge and understanding of people with same sex orientations has not deterred our church leaders from pronouncing harsh judgements of these people. Some correspondence from a postgraduate student recently came my way. It asked:

If by spirituality you are referring to a sense of connectedness or ability to connect, then I'd say ... GLBT young people are feeling disconnected from their peers in Catholic schools. A large part of this is due to the theology via RE classes and such that they encounter there. How might or do GLBT young people enrolled in Catholic schools develop some sense of the spiritual when that is linked within Catholic schools to a religious tradition that positions them as disordered? And how might they develop real connections with people when often they feel marginalised within Catholic schools and traditions that position them in negative ways?

If we are to be faithful to our Christian vision, should not inclusiveness be the hallmark of Christian communities?

In attempting to make school communities more inclusive attempts should be made to address the relational dimension in students' lives by providing them with networks of support and stability and helping them to become aware of and respond to a Divine Presence in their lives. In order to do this, educators need to become aware of and respond to this dimension in their own lives so that they can reclaim the vision and the connectedness that remain at the core of their being.

The growth of a tertiary educated Catholic laity

At this time in the history of Australian Catholics, there is a significant number of tertiary educated laity. This is another factor that has given rise to the changing nature of Catholic communities. In the past we were "brainwashed into a relational mode of co-dependency, whereby we expect(ed) answers from on high, thus depriving us of the use of the creative imagination to figure things out for ourselves" (Ó Murchu, 2000). Today, when many Catholic people ask questions knowledgeably they expect informed and intelligible answers in return.

When quality answers are not forthcoming, they provoke more unanswerable questions thereby leading to the ring of tension, frustration and concern that encircles many contemporary Catholic communities. In the past the knowledge and wisdom found in church leadership was gleaned from a study of our Christian heritage leading to reflection and discourse. Much of this has been communicated in language that is non-user friendly and, therefore, often inaccessible to many others in the community. Ó Murchu (2000) describes this as a feature of a patriarchal society where language has been used to control. Certainly, many church leaders appear to have limited knowledge and wisdom that can only come through community engagement at societal and familial levels – but learning from their congregations has not been a habit widely cultivated by the church hierarchy:

Catholicism can overemphasize the seven liturgical sacraments – what takes place in the church – to the point of downplaying the sacramentality of life. The Catholic church, too, can at times give the impression that it functions more as a controller than a mediator of God's grace – deciding who does and does not receive it, exaggerating the importance of the church as institution. (Groome, 1998, p. 135)

With a growing educated Catholic laity today, particularly amongst those who have studied theology, philosophy, religious education and so on, there is a greater chance that the knowledge and wisdom of the two groups can actually come together to reclaim the "heart and core of the Jesus vision ... variously translated as the *Kingdom of God*" (Ó Murchu, 2000, p. 121). Thus, we can work together to inspire in our Catholic communities:

an abiding sense of the goodness of the world and that everything can be a 'channel' of God's grace (which) encourages in people a healthy embrace of the world and a joyfulness about life. Its (Catholic Christianity) sacramental sentiments reflect the conviction that the sensual mediates the spiritual; celebrating this sacramentality – epitomized in its church liturgy but encouraged, too, in the 'liturgy of life' – fosters an incarnational and holistic faith, a faith that engages the whole person, body and soul, mind and senses. Its sacramentality can also nurture an experienced sense of wonder and awe at the sacred in the midst, a feeling of the nearness of God in the everyday (Groome, 1998, p. 135).

However, we must learn from our history that the downside of being educated can create fatal flaws in our relationship and our ability to communicate with the wider community. Consider the performance of the Australian Labor Party (ALP) at the last Federal elections. In general, the leadership of the ALP today is composed of Australians who come from a second generation of affluence in this country. It is apparent that their vision no longer resembles the vision of their forebears, they appear to have lost the language to communicate with their members and, in the perceptions of their electorate, their policies are hardly distinguishable from that of their opponents. This is a lesson for our educated Catholic laity who must constantly strive to reclaim and communicate the 'Christian Story and Vision' so that it remains relevant and meaningful in the contemporary context.

Conclusions

Drawing on the issues discussed in this paper, some factors Catholic schools may like to consider in their quest to provide a spiritually nurturing environment for their students are presented here. Schools can:

- reclaim and communicate Jesus' vision in new and illuminating ways so that students are provided with a sense of meaning and purpose;
- encourage students to become aware of and respond to a Divine presence in their lives;
- be aware that responses to the Christian vision are both individual and communal, and act accordingly;
- recognise that the relational aspect of students' lives is a vital ingredient in their spiritual, emotional and, therefore, their intellectual well-being;
- develop inclusive communities that are open to dialogue and that welcome and celebrate diversity in a real and meaningful way thereby promoting opportunities for students to discover 'the other' within themselves;
- include time for silence, solitude and contemplation in the curriculum and sacred space in the school which are prayerful, aesthetic and accessible to all;
- offer opportunities that nurture human experiences of joy, awe and wonder, and develop creative vision and imagination;
- explore alternative ways, particularly using the arts, to promote knowledge

by recognising the role of the emotions in the learning process;

- encourage students to accept responsibility and commit to action for the common good;
- create an atmosphere of trust and partnership through different structures both within and outside the classroom whereby students can feel free to articulate questions that concern them; and
- provide learning environments that develop empathy, compassion and listening skills.

In the perceptions of many students, Catholic schools provide a nurturing and spiritually enriching framework for their student. Educators need to continue to be consistent and non-judgemental in the care they extend to their students and value the multicultural and multi-faith dimension which can enhance the learning environment. In addition, they must be constantly alert to societal changes which require responsive action. Ultimately, educators need to nurture themselves in their own spiritual journeys so that their own experiences enable them to enrich and inspire their students as they travel along their individual paths.

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