

Developing, maintaining and nurturing a sense of Catholic identity in a school: an overview in the current climate of change.

The more we change, the more we stay the same.

French Proverb

From early Christian times, education belonged mainly to the Church. The word 'clerical' still means pertaining to the clergy, as well as to work carried out by clerks or scribes – a relic of the time up to the Renaissance when ministers of religion held a near-monopoly on literacy and stained glass windows served a didactic, as well as an aesthetic purpose. By the nineteenth century the Catholic bishops of Australia were telling the people that the Catholic Church establishes schools so that 'children might be instructed in the knowledge of God and divine things, and brought up in fear, love and discipline of the Lord' (Fogarty 1959, p.1). The leaders of the Protestant Churches were making similar claims. We are once again at a fork in the road. While our problems now are different from the problems then, they are still real. Take for example, the 50% of Catholic children who do not attend Catholic schools or the decreasing links between Catholic school communities and parish communities. How do we respond to the increasing secularisation of society? In what ways do we nurture the specifically 'Catholic' identity of our schools and assist all staff to own this identity?

During the first forty years of education in Australia, most of the traditional practices of the European mother countries were replicated in this country. However, with the development of state school systems, the right to ecclesiastical control of education was challenged. Some felt that the state had always possessed and exercised the right to educate, and that the Church was simply usurping its authority. Others believed that the Church, in providing education for many centuries, had failed to meet the requirements of the time. It was out of this debate that today's Australian system of Catholic education was established.

The first permanent Australian Catholic school opened at Parramatta, in the west of Sydney in 1820. Catholic schools gradually became established in all parts of the developing colonies, 'usually under the guidance of lay Catholics, most often women, who had rudimentary preparation and background in school curriculum and teaching methods' (Ryan, Brennan & Willmet 1996, p.34). The

schools were maintained by the financial contributions of parishioners and colonial governments.

During the 1870s and 1880s the colonial governments withdrew all financial support from Catholic schools and, at the same time, made schooling compulsory for all Australian children into their early teenage years. The Catholic community decided to increase the number of its schools to provide an alternative to secular education. Diocesan bishops recruited members of religious congregations from Europe to take over the operation of the schools. Meeting in 1885, the Bishops decided that if it came to a choice between building a school or a church, Catholic communities should first construct a school building which could be used for liturgical gatherings at other times. By the beginning of the twentieth century, the number of priests, brothers and sisters exceeded the number of lay staff. Catholic secondary schools started to become more common in response to the needs of students to enter universities and the professions. While the schools were relatively autonomous, a priest inspector would often visit the school to ensure the students had an adequate knowledge of their catechism. This continued right up until the 1960s.

Since the second Vatican Council, held between 1962 and 1965, the role of the Catholic school is seen not only as a 'genuine and proper instrument of the Church' but also as 'a presence of the Church in society' a place where 'faith, culture and life are brought into harmony' (The Congregation for Catholic Education 1988, Nos. 33 & 34). Lay teachers have once again become predominant. Students and staff from other religious traditions are welcomed. With the increase in government funding, the diocesan education offices have expanded. Today the umbrella of Catholic schools includes parish schools, regional colleges and schools administered by religious congregations.

The Federal Minister for Education, Science and Training wrote recently 'Apart from parents, it is into the hands of teachers that the future of Australia is most entrusted' (Nelson 2003, p.7). A similarly pivotal role exists for Catholic teachers both in forming young people and in contributing to the future of our Church, of which Catholic schools form an essential arm. Given this context, I would propose there are five directions we should take as Australian Catholic educators.

1. Sociologists Beck and Beck-Gersheim tell us that identity is being increasingly detached from tradition (Kane 2003, p.1). It is important this does not happen to us. Scripture scholars continue to teach us how to

interpret biblical texts and apply our learnings to today's world. In the same way we can study the foundational experiences of Catholic educators, which were often built on adversity, and interpret these for today's world.

2. Today many people are seeking self-definition. Our identity in Catholic education, however, is a communal one. We rely on each other to achieve our goals. We seek a communal and a personal God, not just a personal God. We offer pastoral support to families and to each other as members of a faith community. Good liturgies give us excellent opportunities to nurture our faith together.
3. Our staff rooms can provide locations for sound theological reflection. Despite the pressures of daily school life, our quality as Catholic educators is enhanced by sharing the fruits of our theological reflection and our prayer. Many staff are currently studying theology or have recently completed theological degrees. The learnings from these studies can assist us in the process of charting a prophetic future which implies change and analysing how such change can be effected (Brueggemann 1978).
4. During the 1960s, when space exploration was expanding, we believed almost anything was possible. Today we are more realistic, recognising the limitation of the world's resources, the struggle to solve health problems and the large numbers of children still not receiving a formal education. We are called to make choices in accordance with our identity and within our means.
5. With the evolution of the role of Religious Congregations in Catholic education, educational offices of these Congregations are seeking to forge greater links with Catholic education authorities to assist in the planning of new and courageous developments in Catholic schooling.

These are achievable goals, but we need the Spirit to be with us in the same way as the Spirit guided Mary and the disciples after Jesus' resurrection as together we continue the great mission of Catholic education.

References

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