

‘We Need to Keep the Door Open’:
A Framework for Better Understanding
the Formation of Younger Teachers
in Catholic Schools

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INTRODUCTION

The quality of education in Australian Catholic schools is dependent on teachers. The formation of teachers is, therefore, a primary consideration in maintaining religiously affiliated schools. Two recent developments have added a particular urgency to this simple observation. Firstly, changing demographics indicate that many teachers—described as Baby Boomers (or those born in the period immediately after WWII)—have begun to leave the profession in very large numbers (Rymarz and Belmonte 2014). Secondly, emerging social contexts place new demands on teachers. A better understanding, therefore, of younger teachers is especially important as they are the ones who will be facing these challenges in the classroom.

There are many ways that religious commitment in contemporary culture can be conceptualized (Singleton 2014). Some clarity is necessary, therefore, in order to establish a framework for discussion. A detailed examination and definition, however, of terms such as religion and

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spirituality are beyond the scope of this chapter. What will be explored here is the concept of negotiated religion as a template for better understanding younger teachers working in Catholic schools.

Religion is often seen as being distinguished by key markers such as participation in community rituals, close adherence to official teaching and strong religious salience in participants' worldview. As a consequence of these factors, those who are highly religious derive strong affective satisfaction from their beliefs and practices. People in this category tend to describe religion as a very important part of their lives and that they cannot ever see themselves as not being an active part of the religious community (Bouma 2006).

It is clear that many today are not religious in the sense described above (Dobbelaere 2002; Baumfield 2005; Mason et al. 2007; Pollefeyt and Bouwens 2010). When religious commitment is negotiated, however, beliefs and behaviours are not seen as binary choices, that is, a person is either religious or not religious and that there is very little common ground between these positions. Indeed, in this view no longer is the only alternative to high commitment no or very limited commitment. Rather, the ground between these two poles seems to be somewhat elastic and dependent on personal circumstances. As a result, beliefs and behaviours may vary over time. This dynamic view has some parallels with the notion of lived religion (McGuire 2008). Simply put, lived religion looks to everyday life to find examples of people seeking out some type of transcendent dimension to life that is beyond a simple positivistic worldview (Ammerman 2013; Mercadante 2014). Importantly, a range of options are now available and multiple associations are possible such as maintaining a historical but somewhat distanced institutional affiliation alongside other more secular allegiances (Lambert 2005; Stoltz et al. 2015). Wuthnow described a similar process where many, in the face of so a multitude of options, 'tinker' with what is available to them and arrive at a personalized system of meaning, which is modified and adapted in accord with changing circumstances (Wuthnow 2007). This allows for some associations to be time dependent and of varying intensity (Usher 2005).

The new reality reflects a much more fractured position where the boundaries that supported religious communities in the past have become much more porous (Hoge et al. 1994). While people may not be strongly committed, they are also able to retain some type of connection with a religious community. The nature of their involvement though is fluid and can be seen as a manifestation of negotiated religion. The exact contours

of this negotiation can be quite complex and idiosyncratic depending on circumstances. The basic features though are quite clear. In a negotiated religiosity, individuals select from a range of behaviours, beliefs and social interactions that best meets their needs. One desired aspect is wanting some type of religious affiliation but this must be neither too onerous nor premised on ongoing, strong affiliation (Dixon 2004; Rymarz 2013).

Catholic schools, and the teachers who work in them, are imbedded in this new cultural context (Rymarz 2012; Franchi and Rymarz 2017). Many younger teachers are shaped by the new forms of religious expression that are evident in the wider culture, the most notable of these being a loosening of association with religious communities (Cook 2000; Belmonte and Cranston 2009; Rymarz and Belmonte 2014). In addition, many of the traditional religious supports, such as a strong network of religiously engaged friends and family, are not a feature of the lives of many younger Catholics (Rymarz and Graham 2006; Smith et al. 2014; Pollefeyt and Bouwens 2014; Dantis 2016).

A critical question then for those involved in Catholic education is how can formation and support of younger teachers working in schools be best facilitated. It can no longer be assumed that younger teachers in schools will arrive with a strong sense of identification with the Catholic community. Schools, therefore, can take on an important role in their formation.

METHODOLOGY

This chapter reports on an empirical study that examined how younger teachers in Catholic schools can be better supported, especially, with regard to their formation as educators who can support and animate the Catholic identity of the school. Younger teachers, defined in this study as teachers less than 30 years of age, were chosen as they, potentially, represent those with the longest careers in Catholic schools still ahead of them. In addition, younger teachers are also the ones who are likely to be influenced by the changing social landscape discussed in the Introduction section.

In the study, key members of school leadership were interviewed. It was reasoned that school leaders are in a good position to give an authoritative overview of the formation needs of younger teachers due to their longevity of service and also their role in interacting with a large number of younger teachers. In the future, it is anticipated that this study will be expanded and younger teachers themselves will be interviewed on what they see as their formation needs. In the course of the study, 36 semi-structured

interviews were conducted. All interviewees were from the same regional Australian diocese and were invited to take part by the local Catholic Schools Office. Participants comprised 7 priests, who in the Australian system have oversight over primary schools, 7 principals, 11 Religious Education Coordinators (REC) and 7 principals who also served as RECs were interviewed. In total, over 75 per cent of schools in the diocese had one school leader interviewed as part of the study.

Each participant was interviewed for no more than one hour. Interviews were seen as an effective way of gaining insights from educational leaders on the formation of younger teachers. Interviews are well suited to this task as they are a means to delve into complex issues (Wuthnow 2016). The interviews followed a semi-structured, in-depth pattern (Minichiello et al. 1995). Three general probe areas were established, namely the religious experience and background of younger teachers in schools, with special reference to family, religious beliefs and practices and social networks; what is being done to support younger teachers and how can these strategies be developed; and any particular challenges in the formation of younger teachers. All interviews were recorded. After each interview, participant responses were analysed in detail, using contemporaneous notes as well as the taped record. On the basis of this analysis, thematic response codes were developed (Miles and Huberman 1994). These codes were related to common responses and dominant categories identified. These categories then informed the next interview, and response categories became more and more refined (Taylor and Bogdan 1984). Interviews were conducted during work hours at either the school for principals and RECs or in the presbytery for priests.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

There was a strong consensus amongst those interviewed that younger teachers were highly valued and offered great gifts to Catholic schools. One principal put it in these terms: ‘they [younger teachers] are fantastic, they give a real energy and dynamism to the place, they really are the future’. Many of the participants also commented on the willingness of younger teachers, when asked, to support the Catholic identity of the school. To illustrate this, many participants commented on teachers being involved in sacramental programmes that involved close cooperation with parishes.

In the view of those interviewed, many younger teachers are not well connected to parish communities and, while willing to support the ethos

of the school, find it difficult to spontaneously animate Catholic witness. This finding is to be anticipated if we take the view that teachers in Catholic schools are imbedded in a changed cultural context and not separated from this. Younger teachers in Catholic schools are influenced by the same cultural forces that shape students and their families. The results here support the contention that younger teachers in Catholic schools are not networked to supporting religious structures. One principal summarized this point well when she made the very pertinent observation that there was a time when schools were part of a Catholic culture that was far more cohesive. The well-known analogy of the three-legged stool where family, school and parish all reinforced each other was apt. She commented,

When I was growing up we all went to church and then we saw all our friends again at school on Monday morning. It’s not like that today, where do our teachers get their support when the door [of the school] closes.

More porous religious boundaries mean that what happens at school is of great significance in the formation of the teacher as an effective witness and educator.

From this study, there emerged a number of fascinating and informative vignettes about younger teachers in Catholic schools. These invite further work in this area. For example, one principal/REC described a younger teacher on her staff in the following terms:

she’s found her place, went to a Catholic school, goes to Mass at Christmas and Easter or when one of her brothers is receiving a sacrament, it’s just not a priority for her.

In a similar vein, another REC commented that many younger teachers in her experience in Catholic primary schools teach Religious Education in a ‘positive’ fashion. She went on,

RE is part of the job they do it well but I’m not sure how much of it is enthusiastically embraced in their own lives...I suppose they’re in a bit of a bind really.

Many of those interviewed spoke of the need to assist teachers with content material in Religious Education as there was a gap here that was exacerbated by a lack of connection with parish communities.

These findings point to a religious mentality amongst younger teachers that is not static but rather can take on new contours in response to particular circumstances. This is well illustrated if we consider major school-based liturgical events. There is a sense that many younger teachers, in the terms of one principal, will ‘fill the breach’ on these occasions. As one REC commented,

we have great class Masses once a term, the teachers all take part, take a leadership role but they don’t follow up on this. Next Sunday they are not at Mass, bit like the parents really.

The final phrase here makes the telling point about the similarity between parents and teachers. This is not necessarily a complete correlation. Teachers are more likely to have higher level of involvement in parish communities than other Catholics of a similar age but it is a higher point on a continuum. As one priest remarked,

the Mass is something that most [younger teachers] closely associate with school, I think you would find the same thing with prayer and reading the scriptures.

When teachers work in Catholic schools they are accepting an emphasis on religious identity and seem to be willing to support this, especially when it comes to major celebrations. The participants in this study strongly made the point that when new, younger teachers are interviewed for positions. The Catholic identity of the school is clearly enunciated. One principal put it in these terms:

we spend a bit of time with them during the interview explaining what we do and the first point that I make is that we are a Catholic school and they need to be on board with this.

Many of the priests made a similar point. From the school’s perspective, its identity is clearly set out and it can be assumed that when teachers join the school they are acknowledging that they can work within this framework.

If we accept teachers are prepared to support the religious ethos of the school, this needs to be seen in the sense of people accepting an invitation. Some principals expressed a view that they were, on occasion, frustrated. Others seemed to question why their staff were not more connected with

the worshipping community. One principal captured this sentiment well when he commented on the difficulty that he has in attracting applicants for positions at his school who display a strong and readily professed Catholic identity. He noted,

It’s not like we are turning them away. It’s just hard to make these appointments when we do not have those people applying. Our only option is to work creatively with what we have.

This again is consistent with a cultural template that sees religion as something that can be negotiated. Even if teachers arrive at the school without strong religious commitment this can alter as their circumstances change. And a prominent example of this is when younger teachers start working in a Catholic school. One principal related the comment of one of her younger staff. This teacher had mentioned to her that when she started working at the school, ‘the game changed, I had to take religion a bit more seriously’.

In a negotiated schema, religion is seen as part of the atmosphere that seeks to cultivate dialogue. A picture of younger teachers did emerge from comments made by priests, principals and RECs which is in accord with the basic tenants of negotiated religion. One of the most important of these is that there is no overt hostility to religion but rather a weakness in affiliation. Just as many parents see religion as part of the mix of Catholic schools, so too many teachers also seem to share a similar mentality. One principal remarked that her teachers were open to religion but it seemed to her a ‘hard sell’. She added a very pertinent comment when she observed that the approach taken with younger teachers is not of a different nature to that taken with students in her school, ‘We need to encourage them to enter into dialogue’.

How then to best engage and assist younger teachers, in particular, in their vital role in Catholic schools? It is important to consider this question in light of the reported openness of teachers to further involvement. As one principal remarked, ‘we have to keep the door open’. Two dominant responses to this question emerged from the research. Firstly, it was clearly stated that many teachers have a poor cognitive grasp of what was could be called the Catholic vision and worldview. This was not so much a matter of isolated pieces of information but rather a cogent sense of how teaching, practices and beliefs are connected and integrated. One priest described this as a substantial deficit in how all these things, ‘hang together’. An

example of this that was mentioned was understanding of scripture. The difficulty for many younger teachers lay in being able to hold together a critical reading which took into account the best of modern scholarship with a sense that the scriptures were the revealed Word of God and not just an interesting collection of myths and fables. Linked to this was the observation that many teachers are not having their religious questions and issues addressed in a fashion that they find comprehensible. One REC made the following point, 'it's not about engaging in another degree but being able to get into things that are troubling them straight away'.

This REC went on to observe that it seems that, for too many of the younger teachers that she works with, 'we have something to hide'. In light of this, there is a need to look more closely at providing concise, focused and sequential programmes that address the Catholic worldview in an engaging fashion. In such programmes, a very high priority should be given to engaging with questions at a very early stage in the process. Although younger teachers may not have strong, coherent content knowledge, they do not approach the Catholic worldview with a *tabula rasa*. They do have existing ideas and beliefs and while these may not be accurate they do offer a valuable departure point for discussion and engagement. One REC made the point quite bluntly, 'we have to address the "it's all rubbish argument"'.

Another suggestion that was made in regard to the type of professional development and support that could be offered was to focus programmes around key themes in the RE curriculum. A number of principals and RECs suggested that by addressing key themes in the curriculum and beginning with a practical focus, a platform for higher learning could be established. One example that was given makes this point well. Developmental programmes on the sacraments could begin with session on 'how to do a Mass'. The departure point here would be the practical steps involved in preparing a class or year level Mass. This would also establish an opportunity for more directed teaching about the Mass and other sacraments. This was seen as a way of heightening teacher interest and also giving them access to good contextual theology. Another example of this approach that was suggested was to give formation on scripture by addressing where it appears in the RE curriculum. As one REC put it, 'why not teach about scripture by starting with how to teach about parables in the classroom?'. Another advantage of this approach is that it could easily be extended to include the school context with RECs working in schools providing ongoing support in the selected topic areas.

A second proposed way of engaging and assisting younger teachers was to make better use of what can be broadly defined as the affective religious dimension. In simple terms one REC commented, 'It's just not about the head, we need to touch their hearts as well'. For many of the participants in this study a very successful and established way of doing this is to make more use of the retreat as a vehicle for formation of younger teachers. There is very strong evidence that one of the most effective pastoral strategies in Catholic education is the school-based retreat (Rossiter 2016). Catholic schools on the whole do an excellent job of providing students with memorable and engaging retreat experiences. This has been a long-standing finding. As most of the teachers working in Catholic schools today have also attended Catholic schools as students, they may well have a recent, positive memory of these retreats. This seems to be fertile ground for using well-conducted retreats as a way of assisting teachers better understand the mission of Catholic education.

Many principals commented that, in their view, the retreats that are offered for teachers now are very effective and they would like to see the range and scope of these expanded. Some participants identified difficulties in finding suitable people to run retreats and a desire to 'mix it up a bit'. This refers to retreats needing to offer some variety in approach and direction and also to identify new groups or people to provide leadership. It should be noted, however, that the retreat is not a counterpoint to a more cognitive professional development programme but rather that both approaches complement each other. For instance, an informative, sequential and focussed professional development programme that addresses key aspects of the Catholic worldview is a very good segue into a retreat that explores similar themes but in a manner that makes much more use of prayer, reflection and liturgy. One priest commented on this general point when he said, 'we are at our best when we engage all the human faculties'.

CONCLUSION

The participants in this study saw a clear distinction amongst younger teachers working in Catholic schools. They were prepared to support the school in a broad sense while still maintaining some distance from the worshipping community and not identifying as a person of strong religious commitment. It was often commented that younger teachers will become involved in the religious activities of the school as this is part of

their employment. They are very happy to work in Catholic schools and do not begrudge this involvement. At the same time this religious connection does not extend to their lives outside the school in a strong and tangible way. The negotiation here is that the religion can play a more prominent part in professional life but is muted outside of this sphere. As with many parents, this mentality is quite stable but does not preclude the possibility of greater involvement given certain conditions.

In keeping with the findings of this study, one helpful way of considering the Catholic school is to see it as being a common meeting place or narthex where many people without strong connections can come together and be invited into a greater engagement with the faith tradition. The idea of accompanying people is a seminal theme in the writings of Pope Francis and is also well supported in the research literature. Pope Francis notes,

A special place of encounter is offered by new Areopagi such as the Court of the Gentiles, where ‘believers and non-believers are able to engage in dialogue about fundamental issues of ethics, art and science, and about the search for transcendence’. (*Evangelii Gaudium* 2013, p. 257)

One way of realizing this is to utilize the notion of Pope Benedict XVI about the need to replicate in Church structures, broadly understood, the old Jewish idea of a Court of the Gentiles (Fischella 2012; Franchi 2014). Another rendering of a similar idea is that of Catholic schools serving as a type of narthex, again facilitating the interaction of people from a range of backgrounds (Roebben 2013). Both analogies maintain a strong religious connection. The Court of the Gentiles and the narthex are associated with religious institutions. This is very clear in the Court of the Gentiles but also in the case of the narthex as it is the entry point to the church and in this space the religious aspects of dialogue can be expected to be brought into the discussion. This is how Benedict XVI explained the idea of the Court of the Gentiles and its religious significance to a group of young people gathered outside Notre Dame in Paris on March 26, 2011:

This image refers to the vast open space near the Temple of Jerusalem where all those who did not share the faith of Israel could approach the Temple and ask questions about religion. There they could meet the scribes, speak of faith and even pray to the unknown God. The Court was then an area of separation, since Gentiles did not have the right to enter the consecrated area, yet Jesus Christ came to ‘break down the dividing wall’ between Jews

and Gentiles, and to ‘reconcile both to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility in himself’. In the words of Saint Paul, ‘He came and proclaimed peace ...’ (cf. Eph 2:14–17). (Zenit Staff 2011)

The idea of the school as a meeting place can also be used in a modified sense when we examine how to better support younger teacher in schools. Teachers have a formal commitment to the school and more can be expected of them as they have entered into a professional agreement about working in Catholic education. It is still important, however, to view this commitment in invitational terms, as a more coercive approach is likely to lead to deeper alienation. As this chapter has argued, what is needed is further assistance for younger teachers, helping them to open up their horizons and to consider new questions and possibilities. The expectations on teachers are clear but at the same time they are can be invited into a deeper sense of their own religious identity as they are now working in a place where religious questions can be engaged with. If we continue with the analogy of a meeting place these questions can establish a firm basis for ongoing dialogue.

This study has identified a number of avenues worth exploring as means of better engaging younger teachers working in Catholic schools. Catholic educational leaders could look at further developing short, engaging and content-rich courses for younger teachers which address their questions and issues. Courses for younger teachers could be developed that would focus on both practical and conceptual dimensions of key themes in the RE curriculum and in school identity. Along similar lines a strong focus on retreats could be pursued as a way of supporting and engaging younger teachers. Both the content-rich courses and retreats for younger teachers should be seen as complementary programmes.

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