Chapter 38
Profiling and Enhancing Religious Education in Catholic Schools

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Introduction

Two sources inform these reflections on religious education in Catholic schools in Melbourne, Australia. The first source is a post-Conciliar theology of revelation and the second is the Enhancing Catholic School Identity (ECSI) research undertaken over the past decade by the Catholic University of Leuven (Belgium) under the auspices of the Catholic Education Commission of Victoria, Australia. The research question driving this study is: How can religious education in an Australian Catholic school respond to increasing student diversity in ways that are illuminated by a post-conciliar theology of revelation and by findings from the ECSI research? Part One of the study regards the ECSI research instruments through the lens of a Vatican II understanding of revelation. The implications of Part One for religious education are then considered in Part Two of the study. The method used to develop Part One of the chapter was a documentary analysis of relevant magisterial documents and key reports from the ECSI research. Part Two of the chapter was developed from a series of semi-structured interviews of religious educators whose practice exemplified the characteristics presented in Part One.

Part One

The ECSI Research

The ECSI research is promoted by Professor Didier Pollefeyt and carried out by his research team, which is coordinated by Dr. Jan Bouwens. Those who are unfamiliar

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with the research will find it helpful to review the brief video clips which introduce the three core research instruments at www.schoolidentity.net/introduction (see also Pollefeyt & Bouwens, 2010, 2014). In other publications, I reflect on the research from the perspective of hermeneutics (Sharkey, 2013), educational practice (Sharkey, 2015) and key challenges which arise from the research findings (Sharkey, 2017).

The ECSI Scales are grounded in a strong theological and cultural analysis and are instruments with a sophisticated level of statistical validation. To date, 320 schools in the Archdiocese of Melbourne have engaged in the research over the period 2011–2017 with approximately 34,000 adults and 76,000 students completing surveys for analysis. School and system leaders use the ECSI research to inform their strategic thinking in Catholic identity because they believe it is essential that they design programs for the communities they actually have, not the ones they think they have or wished they had. The ECSI research does more than profile school communities on the basis of sociology as a 'normative position' is declared for each scale and a theological rationale is offered for the advice given to schools to support their movement into those normative positions. Given that the research was undertaken by the theology faculty at a Pontifical University, it is not surprising that the normative positions are grounded in a Vatican II theology of revelation.

The ECSI Scales Illuminated by a Theology of Revelation

Concepts such as 'dialogue' and 'encounter' lie at the heart of a Vatican II understanding of revelation and sound as a leitmotif through the ECSI research. The understanding of God encountering and being in dialogue with humanity is found in the Conciliar Constitution on revelation where God 'out of an abundance of love' speaks to humanity as 'friends and lives among them' (Second Vatican Council, 1965a, par. 2). 'Encounter' was placed front and centre in the opening paragraph of Benedict XVI's first encyclical: 'Being Christian is not the result of an ethical choice or a lofty idea, but the encounter with an event, a person, which gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction' (Pope Benedict XVI, 2005, par. 1).

O'Collins (2016) presented the Conciliar position on revelation as being primarily an interpersonal encounter between the believer and God and only secondarily an encounter that gives rise to propositions or truths about God. Whilst the encounter with God is primary in revelation, this encounter always gives rise to knowledge about God. Over the millennia, the content of revelation has been expressed in various elements of tradition such as Scripture, creeds and other doctrinal statements, the liturgy, icons and other works of sacred art and music.

The implications for religious education of the theology of revelation enunciated at Vatican II are profound and have been articulated well from a Rahnerian perspective in Hinsdale (2001). The Vatican II theology of revelation provides a foundation for the ECSI research which is considered below through the focal points of dialogue, encounter and revealed truth.

The Post-Critical Belief (PCB) Scale is developed on the basis of two dimensions: one representing whether the respondent(s) experience God as a personal presence in their lives and the other representing whether religious faith is experienced and processed literally or symbolically. The four quadrants in the scale are External Critique, Relativism, Literal Belief and Post-Critical Belief. Those in External Critique reject God and therefore the truth revealed by God. Relativists also do not have a sense of God being present to them but they are quite prepared to accept that others may hold religious beliefs since the relativist position is that there is no absolute truth—all we have are human constructions—and so one person's 'truth' is as good as the next person's (provided it does not claim a status beyond being merely an opinion). The Literal Belief quadrant is oriented towards the truths that have been revealed and authoritatively defined in past encounters with God and those at the extreme end of this quadrant believe that revealed truths are fixed and clearly communicable in ways that do not require interpretation.

The 'normative position' in the ECSI research is a low/high position in the Post-Critical Belief quadrant: lower on interpretation and higher on God's presence. This means God is strongly present to the Post-Critical believer and knowable in mediations such as Scripture, prayer, liturgy and life-giving relationships. Post-Critical belief (sometimes known as sacramental realism) encounters the divine presence in and through the mediation. Whilst God is knowable, there is always a degree of interpretation required of what is revealed. The normative position is not placed at the upper end of the symbolic axis in the PCB scale, however, because the researchers want to make it clear that God is positively known in the mediations, rather than being remote and unknowable. The lower position on the symbolic axis represents a positive theological stance, in contrast to an apophatic one. This normative position cannot be reconciled to atheism, relativism or any options which minimise or make remote the dialogue/encounter with God or the knowability of the truths which have been revealed in that dialogue/encounter.

The normative positions in the other two ECSI scales (the Melbourne Scale and the Victoria Scale) are also grounded in a post-conciliar understanding of revelation. The sloping sides of the Melbourne Scale represent the increasing gap between the Christian worldview and the dominant worldview in Western culture. Those in the secularist position of the scale eschew the dialogue/encounter with God as well as the truths that have been revealed in that dialogue. Those who take the Reconfessionalising position emphasise the dialogue with God but minimise the dialogue with context, so there is no sense that an ongoing process of dialogue/encounter is required in order for God's truths to be received and reformulated in the believer's life-world of meaning. Those in the Christian Values Education (CVE) position seek to correlate (link) Christian faith with the believer's culture and when the believer has a strong faith background these correlations work. Increasingly though students do not come with a strong background in areas such as doctrine or liturgy so the correlations fail and the CVE strategy becomes reductionist so that, for example, doctrine is reduced to mainstream cultural values, prayer to a form of mindfulness that does not encounter Christ, liturgy to 'God lite' ritual, social action unnourished

by an encounter with Christ, or even a version of Catholic faith that does not include the resurrection (Rymarz, 2017).

The ECSI normative position is Recontextualisation, which embraces an ongoing dialogue/encounter with God so that God's revelation is actively received and reformulated so that it makes sense in the believer's context and world of meaning. The reformulation needs to be faithful to what has been revealed in the past 'for the deposit of Faith or the truths are one thing and the manner in which they are enunciated, in the same meaning and understanding, is another' (Second Vatican Council, 1965b, par. 62). This position sits well alongside Catholic figures such as Joseph Ratzinger who stated at the time of the Council that revelation does not exist until it has been received in faith by the believer (Ratzinger, 1966) and John Paul II (1982) who noted that a faith that has not been enculturated is a faith that has not been received (Pope John Paul II, 1982). John Paul II's repeated call for a new evangelisation that was new in 'ardour, methods and expression' further reinforces this point which became a hallmark of his pontificate (see for instance Pope John Paul II, 1983). Pope Francis' continuous reflections on dialogue, discernment and encounter (for instance Pope Francis, 2015) significantly amplify these themes as do recent statements from the Congregation for Catholic Education (2013, 2014, 2017).

Culture is presented in the ECSI research as being shaped by pluralising, detraditionalising and individualising currents. Believers in a pluralising culture are confronted with a variety of options for interpreting their world and they are very aware that questions of truth and meaning can be resolved from many perspectives. The individualising context means that individuals decide for themselves what to believe, rather than feeling bound to a particular religious or philosophical worldview. In a detraditionalising context religious traditions are not passed on from one generation to the next as easily as they once were.

A comprehensive review of our current cultural context lies beyond the scope of this chapter but it should be noted that the ECSI analysis aligns with the findings of other recognised Australian cultural commentators—for example Hugh Mackay's reflections on the rising phenomenon of people who describe themselves as 'spiritual but not religious' (Mackay, 2016). The individualising and detraditionalising dimensions of our culture are also present in Charles Taylor's 'ethic of authenticity', where the fundamental task for each individual is to realise their humanity by fashioning their own unique way of being human (Taylor, 1991). Further reinforcement of the cultural analysis underpinning ECSI occurs in the research of Philip Hughes, where he found that Australian young people seek to 'put life together themselves' in their own creative way rather than belonging to an already-established system of belief (Hughes, 2007). Hughes (2017) explores these themes further in his review of the post-traditional and multifaith characteristics of Australian culture.

The 2016 ABS Census provided stark confirmation of the rapidly changing operating environment for Catholic Schools in Australia (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2017). While Catholics remain the largest religious group in Australia, they are now exceeded in number by those who are classified as No Religion. Almost a third of Australians are classified as No Religion in the 2016 Census, up by 8% on the previous census in 2011 and an increase of more than 3000% on the 1966 census. The

pluralising context of our Australian religious landscape is starkly apparent in the following observation from Gary Bouma: 'Australia now has more Muslims and more Buddhists than Presbyterians; more Hindus than Baptists or Lutherans; and nearly as many Sikhs as Lutherans' (Bouma, 2017). The changing place of religion in Australia is evident not only demographically but also in media commentary on issues as diverse as same-sex marriage, Islamic extremism and the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse.

Religious education in Australia at this time needs to be viable in a context where students insist on having agency and voice as they construct their belief systems, where the impact of religious traditions is minimal for many and where Catholic faith is but one option among a wide variety of religious and non-religious life stances. Rather than lamenting this cultural context, the ECSI research frames it as an environment that is potentially enriching for Catholic identity provided the appropriate dispositions and strategies are in place. The challenge will be to provide forms of religious education that respond effectively to this religious diversity without compromising Catholic beliefs or alienating students by seeking to impose a version of the Catholic faith on them that they are unable to receive.

The third and final scale in the ECSI research is the Victoria Scale which is developed on two dimensions: the extent to which a school identifies as a Catholic school and the extent to which the school engages with worldviews that differ from a Catholic perspective. Each of the four school types derived from those dimensions are now considered in turn: the Colourless School, the Colourful School, the Monologue School and the Dialogue School. The Colourless School is a secularised environment where one's religious commitment and personal philosophy are positioned as belonging to the private realm rather than being disclosed openly in a public forum such as a school. In contrast, the Colourful School invites students to engage with questions of meaning from any and all perspectives within the pluralising school community but there is no commitment in this school type to a Catholic mission where revelation is intentionally and systematically addressed in the educational process. The Monologue School ensures that the revealed truths of Catholic faith are foregrounded in the life of the community but the expressions of other perspectives, faiths and philosophies are suppressed as they are seen as compromising the school's Catholic identity. The normative position in the Victoria Scale lies with the Dialogue School which takes a 'both/and' approach where each person's philosophical and religious perspectives are included and respected in an ongoing school dialogue which deliberately and systematically engages with Catholic faith. The outcome of the ongoing dialogue is genuinely open in the sense that individuals are not coerced into Catholic faith but they are regularly invited to appreciate its meaning and message by those who witness to its value and richness. Diversity is welcomed, not only because to do otherwise means students switch off and stop listening but more importantly because we see in the Gospels that Jesus deeply encountered people when he engaged with them—consider, for example the Emmaus Story or the Samaritan Woman at the Well.

We have seen in the above summary that the ECSI research promotes the post-critical belief that is nurtured in an ongoing dialogue that is explicitly Catholic

and fully engaged with the diverse contexts and worldviews of all parties to the dialogue. A key finding from the ECSI research is that as students mature from their Primary schooling years into Secondary schooling, they move into options that are less desirable from the perspective of the Catholic school's mission. For example, in the Melbourne Scale, whereas only 10% of students affirm a Secularisation of their school in Year 5/6, this percentage increases more than fourfold by Year 11/12. Reconfessionalisation drops from 19 to 7% and Recontextualisation from 34 to 13% in that same period. Similar trends away from the normative positions occur in the PCB and Victoria Scales.

Part Two

The second part of this study was undertaken by interviewing religious educators whose practice was identified as being responsive to the challenges presented by the ECSI research. One of the hallmarks of such practice is that it opens up the particularity of Catholic faith at the same time as it actively engages the pluralised worlds of the teachers and their students.

The Challenge of Particularity

In a memorable phrase, Lieven Boeve argued that there is 'no such thing as a religious Esperanto into which every religion can be translated' (Boeve, 2014, p. 331). This is so because every religion has its own grammar and vocabulary—its own particularity—and something essential is lost when a religious tradition's narratives, rituals, doctrines or practices are reduced, suppressed or stripped away to make the religious tradition more accessible to a wider audience. To Boeve's metaphor, I would add the metaphor of the love that a mother has for her child or the friendship experienced by two lifetime companions. The richness of the mother's love cannot be reduced to a few dot points about her child and neither can the knowledge and tenderness of friendships that are long and deep. So it is with believers and their faith. In a Catholic context, the experience of Christ truly present in the Eucharist cannot be reduced to a slogan, a theme or a so-called 'Gospel value' and neither can the Word of God active in the Scriptures or the profound beliefs about human life enshrined in the moral and social teachings of the Church.

Here we are taken to the deep challenge that lies at the heart of the ECSI research and is such a focus for the professional reflection of effective religious educators in our time. How can students in a school environment engage with a living and authentic experience of Catholic faith, given the pluralising, detraditionalising and individualising context described above? The following observation from the General Directory for Catechesis is illuminating:

> In the case of students who are believers, religious instruction assists them to understand better the Christian message. … Those students who are searching, or who have religious doubts, can also find in religious instruction the possibility of discovering what exactly faith in Jesus Christ is, what response the Church makes to their questions, and gives them the opportunity to examine their own choice more deeply. In the case of students who are non-believers, religious instruction assumes the character of a missionary proclamation of the Gospel and is ordered to a decision of faith, which catechesis, in its turn, will nurture and mature. (Congregation for the Clergy, 1997, par. 75)

The religious education practice of Mother Teresa Primary School in the northern fringe of the Melbourne metropolitan area is now considered in light of the challenges and opportunities presented in our current cultural context. The Mother Teresa school community is comprised of families that come from a number of Catholic rites including Latin, Chaldean, Melkite, Syro-Malabar and Maronite rites. While the majority of students are Catholics of the Latin rite, there are a growing number of Chaldean Catholics and a small number of other Christian families as well as Buddhist, Hindu and Sikh across the school.

From the moment one walks into the school, it is clear that one is entering a carefully and deliberately structured learning environment with a strong focus on student engagement and a clear commitment to engaging students with Catholic beliefs and practices. When teachers were asked to describe the religious education pedagogies they employed to engage students from diverse backgrounds, they spoke easily and naturally about their use of Scripture, Church teaching, prayer, liturgy and the diocesan religious education text. They referenced educational researchers such as Ritchhart (2017) and Murdoch (2015), who provided an empirically based research foundation for a Culture of Thinking and Inquiry-Based approach for learning across the curriculum, including religious education, literacy and numeracy. The teachers were familiar with the criticisms of inquiry learning as a methodology but argued that these critiques are often based on versions of inquiry learning which imagine students are being left to fend for themselves as they learn. The interviewees said that their approach to inquiry learning was highly structured with teachers in their school being very clear about the processes needed to guide and scaffold students in their learning, foster curiosity, activate their prior knowledge and identify appropriate sources for their inquiry. The teachers had clear expectations for their students and were very positive about their natural curiosity, their capacity to ask questions to find out more and in this sense to engage in their version of theological reflection.

One of the reasons why I refer to this approach in this study is that it opened up spaces for the students to engage richly with the Catholic faith in its particularity and in the context of what mattered most in the students' lives. A key feature of the pedagogy is around the 'big question' that drives the inquiry and it is important that the question is chosen well so that there is clarity around the learning intention and a clear relevance and interest in it for the students, as well as being faithful to something foundational in the Catholic faith. As the students mature, the teachers offer greater independence to students in their learning. Although the weekly whole school liturgy happens outside the religious education classroom, the liturgy and the Scripture within it are deliberately unpacked in the learning spaces over the course of

the following week because it is recognised that many families do not participate in the liturgy in their parish on a Sunday. The Scripture is framed as a 'provocation' and students are led into an inquiry to deepen their understanding of its significance for their lives. The teachers were also clear that if they are going to structure meaningful learning experiences for their students in relation to the Scripture, they themselves needed to have done their own inner-work beforehand. Time was allocated in the staff meetings after school each week to reflect on the Scripture passages and engage in the same learning processes as the students. Biblical commentaries are also studied so that the process is informed by scholarship.

The Inquiry-Based Approach aligns well with the issue-oriented approach to religious education advocated by Graham Rossiter and Marissa Crawford, who argue that students quickly switch off when they sense that they are being corralled into a Catholic belief by pedagogies which do not give them the freedom to raise issues or questions that matter to them (Crawford and Rossiter, 2006). Pollefeyt (2008) described the 'shutter phenomenon' where students pull down the shutters when they see that their teacher continually re-frames what is said in the classroom in contrived ways to confect a Catholic correlation. Pollefeyt (2013) proposed a pedagogy which challenged teachers to be more explicit about their integration of Catholic faith but to do so in ways that respected the plurality of the students they were teaching. Rather than squeezing student experience into Catholic forms, the task is to genuinely confront students with difference: difference between their perspectives and other possible perspectives with a special care always being taken to engage students with the claims made by the Catholic faith. There is a debate about the various types of inquiry approaches and the outcomes they realise for students and it is right and proper that Religious Educators engage in these debates to ensure that their approaches are fully grounded in a Catholic mission and in the best educational research and evidence available.

The St. Mary of the Cross MacKillop (SMCM) Catholic Parish Primary School community is also located in the northern edge of the Melbourne metropolitan area with a similar enrolment profile to the school that has just been discussed. Although the interview with teachers at SMCM addressed their pedagogical approach, my focus here is with the sacramental program which loomed large in our conversation about religious education. The teachers spoke about the role played by liturgy and school prayer in their ongoing formation as Catholic educators. One teacher mentioned the question that was asked of staff at the last staff meeting: 'So where has God been for you this morning?' Another teacher referred to the practice at lunchtime where the older students do not start eating until every person is gathered because of the sense of meaning attributed to the meal. The Religious Education Leader spoke about a prayer box that the students developed with prayer activities for the families to use at home and showed me emails from the families who had responded well to this initiative. Another of the teachers admitted that in her first year at the school she was wishing people a Merry Christmas and was told that because they were still in Advent, the practice at the school was to leave it right until the end of the year before moving into a celebration of Christmas. She had the same experience at Easter where the Easter eggs were distributed after the Term break, rather than distorting

the students' experience of Lent. Of course, on one level it does not matter when Easter eggs are distributed but what does matter is whether teachers and students are being invited into formative experiences of the sacred time of the Church's liturgical year. Religious education needs to engage with Catholic faith as a living faith in all its particularity.

The two examples that have just been provided come from Catholic Primary Schools. Space does not permit a detailed review of the other schools and initiatives which were researched in this study but one example from a Secondary context is, however, worth mentioning to offer an approach that is informed by a post-conciliar theology of revelation. A teacher of Texts and Traditions (the biblical studies course in Year 12) indicated that one of his students came to class at the end of the year and said: 'You have absolutely no idea what change that class brought in me. I will be forever grateful for the way you have made me think about things'. The teacher attributed this outcome to the text being studied (Luke's Gospel) rather than to his pedagogy as a teacher. It is, however, clear from descriptions such as the following: that the teacher's strong pedagogy, theological knowledge and witnessing was an important component of achieving rich learning outcomes for students:

> When teaching Texts, it is a craft and you need patience. You very patiently chip away. You go straight in, introduce them to the big ideas, the big history, the context, the literary forms, all of that. For example, I spend a long time showing how in Luke faith in God and a relationship with God does not go according to how we think of things as human beings so it introduces a whole other way of understanding their existence and human existence through text. I use the text as a vehicle. When I am teaching the text, I am rediscovering it as well and it is really sinking home to me how alternative this view of life is from the conventional view we normally have. I constantly recapitulate the material and eventually students will say 'I get it, I can see. This Lucan text is actually really radical. It was radical in his time and it is radical today.'

Learning Consultants in Catholic Education Melbourne are working with religious education leaders to develop pedagogies which are authentically Catholic at the same time as they genuinely respect the students in all their diversity and engage effectively with them in the pluralising, individualising and detraditionalising cultural context in which our schools operate. Given this cultural context, it is counterproductive to seek to impose a Catholic identity on the students or manipulate them into Catholic beliefs. A more detailed description of one pedagogical approach which we believe provides an effective response to the needs of our students is available elsewhere (Madden, 2017) but some of the key features of the approach can be mentioned here. A key challenge is to welcome the diverse responses students have to the topic and at the same time create spaces which explicitly engage Catholic revelation, not only in terms of its content and truth claims but as an experience of a meaningful and life-giving encounter opened up by teachers who witness to Catholic faith as a living reality in their own lives and in the life of the school. Diversity is seen as an enriching phenomenon in this pedagogy as, for example students from an Islamic background can model respect for sacred texts and students from a Buddhist background respect for ritual or right relationships. Diversity does not just express itself in a range of different faiths as indifference to religious meaning and practice or even suspicion

and hostility towards religion are also elements of the diversity encountered in our schools. Students are asked in this pedagogical approach to consider where they are in relation to their own religious commitment and spirituality and they do so in a dialogue that deliberately and explicitly draws in Catholic perspectives. In order to be able to lead these processes, the teachers have to prepare by asking themselves the same questions of meaning and commitment that they ask of the students and this requires formation and preparation.

Conclusion

A Catholic understanding of revelation embraces both the truths revealed in the Catholic faith as well as the interpersonal encounter with the revealing God. Religious education is no more able to manufacture an encounter with God than any other ministry within the Church. Religious education can, however, be oriented to both the encounter and the truth which is only revealed when it is received. Debates can and should unfold about the best methods to use in religious education but a touchstone for the assessment of any method will be the theology of revelation reviewed here. Does the method lead to an appreciation of the truth revealed in the past as well as the living Catholic faith that continues to be received and appropriated by believers today? Does the method truly honour the particularity of each student's own world of meaning so that diversity is seen as enriching, rather than threatening Catholic faith? Enrichment rather than dilution occurs when teachers are able to respect diversity at the same time as they give a worthy account of the Catholic faith they are witnessing to. It is only when students are brought into a genuine dialogue that both witnesses to Catholic faith and respects diversity that God's truth can be received and appreciated.

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