Chapter 1
Moving Beyond Slogan and Piety: The Real Challenge Facing Researchers Developing the Philosophy and Theology of Catholic Education

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Abstract This chapter revisits the concerns about the dangers of using vague slogans when it comes to the theology and/or philosophy of Catholic education. Attention will be given to what is wrong with the use of theologically inspired slogans and metaphors to frame Catholic education. The full force of McLaughlin's concerns are reviewed by scrutinising the problems by asserting that 'Christ is at the centre of Catholic education'. It is argued that much of the current discourse surrounding Catholic education operates with a naïve and often simplistic use and interpretation of the theological metaphors and themes that are used to guide and underpin it. The issues at stake are drawn out through a critical assessment of the inherent problems with applying the theological metaphor of vocation to teaching in or leading a Catholic school. It is concluded that the real challenge facing the philosophy and/or theology of Catholic education is moving beyond slogans and pious theological metaphors to frame Catholic education.

Keywords Philosophy of Catholic education · Catholic *edu-babble* · Christ at the centre · Gospel values · Vocation · Formation

Introduction

In this chapter, I want to revisit the concerns raised previously (Whittle 2014; McLaughlin 1996), about the dangers of the use of vague slogans and theological clichés when it comes to getting more than a fleeting grasp of the theology and/or philosophy of Catholic education. In addition to drawing attention to the ongoing nature of these concerns, the focus of this chapter will shift onto the need for researchers and advocates of Catholic education to recognise the complexity and nuances of theological language and to go beyond the unreflective use of pious theological metaphors. It will be argued that much of the current discourse surrounding

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Catholic education operates with a naïve and often simplistic use and interpretation of the theological metaphors and themes that are used to guide and underpin it. Thus, it will be concluded that the real challenge facing the philosophy and/or theology of Catholic education is moving beyond slogans and pious theological metaphors to frame Catholic education.

What is Wrong with the Use of Theologically Inspired Slogans and Metaphors?

Originally it was Professor Terence McLaughlin (v), who drew attention to the tendency to use phrases such as *Gospel values* as a proxy for a properly developed philosophy or theory of Catholic education. The problem with them is two-fold. First, such theological slogans give the false impression that there is a clearly worked out account of what they actually involve or refer to. Second, they have stifled the task of developing a robust theory of Catholic education because they are repeatedly not recognised for what they actually are. As McLaughlin observes, 'such phrases are primarily useful as spurs to a deeper discussion, not a substitute for it' (p 138). Far too often these, often biblically inspired, slogans or expressions of piety are treated as if they summarise all that needs to be said to frame and justify Catholic education.

It is important to hammer home the force of McLaughlin's argument with reference to some typical examples. Both in school *Mission Statements* and popular works on Catholic education (see, for example, Friel 2017) reference is made to *Gospel values*. The problem is that the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John are packed full of different values which do not always cohere with each other, nor on how they ought to be prioritised. Pinning down the relevant or appropriate *Gospel value(s)* is actually much trickier than it appears. Some *Gospel values* are very general, such as 'love one another', others are deeply entrenched in biblical theology such as the values implicit in the Kingdom of God blessings depicted in the *Beatitudes* or the call to a radical *metanoia* explored in the parables and allegories of Jesus. Moreover, the reversal of typical human values, whether this be a rejection of the rigid piety of the Pharisees or the need for leadership to be lived out in terms of humble and menial service rather than status and power, are emblematic of the disruptive message and value system Jesus sought to bring about. In essence, the problem with the phrase *Gospel values* is that it uncritically lumps together all of the differing values embodied in each of the Gospels. There would appear to be an overly simplistic assumption that each of the differing values in the Gospels can be harmoniously synthesised. What is missing is a hermeneutical key for unlocking which of the *Gospel values* are being used to inform or underpin aspects of Catholic education or the curriculum in Catholic schools. Without this sort of key, the phrase *Gospel values* will inevitably remain at the level of slogan or vague theological metaphor. It is interesting to observe the ways in which Catholic schools founded by religious congregations have frequently used the charism or spirituality of their

respective founders as an interpretive set of filters for unpacking or making sense of the *Gospel values*. There are a plethora of examples, including Ignatian values (Jesuit schools), Benedictine values, Salesian values, FCJ values and Loretto values, to name just a selection. An intriguing question is whether or not this way of filtering and interpreting *Gospel values* helpfully opens them up or merely adds a further layer of complexity and ambiguity.

Another widely employed example is the use of the phrase 'Christ at the centre' of Catholic education (Stock 2012), or the Catholic school or even that Christ is at the heart of the curriculum in the Catholic school. On first impressions, it appears to make intuitive sense to depict Christ as being at the very heart of Catholic education, just as following Christ is considered central to baptism and belonging to the Church. This chimes harmoniously with the liturgical ritual, piety and spiritual devotion of Catholic Christianity, in which Christ can be likened to the source and summit of the faith. However, to move from this devotional or faith stance to begin to make more concrete claims about the place of Christ in the curriculum or wider purpose of the school is in effect to make a category mistake. Even a cursory analysis indicates the difficulty of unpacking what it might mean for *Christ to be the centre* of everything in Catholic education, let alone in the day-to-day reality of a Catholic school. In the typical subject-based curriculum, it quickly becomes apparent that it makes little or no sense to describe Christ as the centre of every subject or activity in the school. It involves glossing over or sliding from a devotional or pious stance and morphing into practical or quasi-factual claims about the place of Christ in the whole of Catholic education. In terms of mathematics, geography, modern foreign languages and perhaps even Religious Education, it is hardly possible to tease out how in any theoretical or practical sense that Christ could in a meaningful way be at the *centre* of these subjects. It does not take long to realise that even in Religious Education lessons in a Catholic school Christ is not the answer to every question being posed or central to the educational task being completed. Moreover, in terms of the pastoral curriculum or the leadership and management of the school, it is very difficult to see the senses, beyond those of piety or motivational slogan, with which Christ is or ought to be central to what is going on. It is, of course, possible that the practices of individual teachers (of mathematics or geography) or school leaders are deeply inspired or informed by their faith in Jesus. For these teachers, Christ has a central role in their life, and this faith and devotional stance will be reflected in how they view the work of a Catholic school. Moreover, some teachers might skillfully weave numerous Christian themes into the content of their lessons.[1] However, to go beyond this devotional way of viewing Catholic education in order to maintain other, perhaps more literal senses, in which Christ *is* at the centre of Catholic education needs to be recognised as akin to a significant category mistake. Theological metaphors that are founded in liturgy, piety and Christian spirituality[2] risk the danger of becoming inappropriately conflated or blurred when applied as descriptors for the aims and practices of Catholic education and the Catholic school.

McLaughlin likened the issues here to what he pejoratively refers to as *edu-babble*. These are the phrases and slogans that pepper educational discourse, many of which have ceased to be recognised as striking metaphors or informative slogans. Thus, we

have grown accustomed to referring to the education 'of the whole person', or that teaching and learning needs to be 'child centred', or that we need to be committed to 'inclusive education'. It is important to appreciate that in describing these as examples of *edu-babble* that McLaughlin, as a philosopher of education, is certainly not taking a stance against educational theory. It is rather the over reliance on slogans and vague statements which have polythemic or even systematically ambiguous meanings that he is calling attention to. These instances of *edu-babble* repeatedly arrest attempts to take educational theory seriously enough. The goal is certainly not to dismiss educational theory but rather to point out how instances of *edu-babble* undermine it or keep it at the merely superficial level. They are treated as if they are conclusions rather than the starting points in teasing out and developing sound and coherent educational theory. McLaughlin maintains that 'There is a distinctive Catholic variant of *edu-babble* which is typically forged out of phrases drawn from the various educational documents of the Church. Often the documents are 'mined' for such phrases in a rather eclectic way. Like *edu-babble* in general, such phrases are primarily useful as spurs to a deeper discussion, not a substitute for it' (McLaughlin 1996, p. 138).

Building on McLaughlin's lead, I have argued elsewhere (Whittle 2014), that such *Catholic edu-babble* is a serious issue for two main reasons. First, it clouds and makes ambiguous the meaning of statements about Catholic education. It tends to appear as theologically loaded slogans and clichés that are used in the descriptions of the central features of Catholic education. However, these polythemic theological phrases are not unpacked or explained even in minimal terms. Second, is the widespread prevalence of *Catholic edu-babble*. Indeed many advocates and researchers in Catholic education appear unable to recognise the ubiquitous presence of it. Too often there is a failure to appreciate just how deeply embedded it has become,[3] and as such, it is now almost impossible to spot-the-wood-for-the-trees when it comes to identifying the unreflective reliance on *Catholic edu-babble*.

An obvious but illustrative example is to be found on the web pages for the *Catholic Education Service for England and Wales* (CES). In the section on 'Why is Religious Education in Catholic schools important' it is declared that 'Religious Education is the "core of the core curriculum" in a Catholic school' (2020). Indeed the paragraph continues, 'Placing RE at the core of the curriculum in Catholic schools helps the school to fulfil its mission to educate the whole person in discerning the meaning of their existence, since "Religious Education is concerned not only with intellectual knowledge, but also includes emotional and affective learning" (CES 2020). Leaving aside the overly complex nature of the second sentence, it is evident that the instance of *Catholic edu-babble* in the former sentence is just not regarded as even remotely problematic or in need of any further explanation or clarification, let alone any justification. Yet the statement that 'Religious Education in a Catholic school is the core of the core curriculum' is a striking claim that conflates educational arguments about there being both a core *and* a common curriculum, and that it is Religious Education that *is* the most central, and thus most important subject within the entire curriculum. To assert that Religious Education plays this central and foundational role in the whole curriculum is one that is deeply difficult to both

explain and to even remotely justify. Any attempt to make one particular subject, whether it be English, mathematics, science or even Religious Education, the core of a core curriculum is fraught with difficult and complex issues within curriculum design and with contested debates in the philosophy of education about the aims of education and the way knowledge is organised in the curriculum. The metaphor about there being a 'core curriculum' is made even more problematic because it is simply asserted that in a Catholic school Religious Education just is the core or central subject. Presumably, the implicit argument is that Religious Education in a Catholic school is in some sense broadly synonymous with Catholic theology, and in Catholic theology, God-revealed-in-Christ is the central belief. Thus, within a Catholic worldview, this implicitly gives Religious Education a trumping ability within the entire curriculum. This argument is not even presented, let alone remotely defended. Ultimately, what is deeply intriguing about the CES statement is that there is no recognition that it is using and relying on instances of *Catholic edu-babble* to underpin the place it gives to Religious Education.

Having restated the case about the ongoing presence and danger of *Catholic edu-babble*, I want to draw attention to other facets of the inter-relationship between theological language and large swathes of the current discourse about Catholic education.

Theology and Educational Discourse About Catholic Education

As research has grown in Catholic Educational Studies (Whittle 2018), the use of theological themes and metaphors has mushroomed, particularly in the discourse surrounding leadership in Catholic schools. Alongside the use of theologically rich concepts such as 'vocation', 'charism' and 'spiritual capital', increasing use has been made of 'discipleship' and even 'formation'. However, bringing theological reflection to bear on educational theory about Catholic education requires being attentive to the intrinsic complexity and nuances of theological language. It is important to recall that there is a long tradition of reflection and divided opinion when it comes to theological language. It is not simply that there is a 'logical oddness' (Ramsey 1957), to theological language, but rather the profound difficulty of speaking (theologising) about God. Given God's 'otherness', as summed up in the traditional listing of divine attributes (from omnipotence to omnibenevolence), language about God cannot be used univocally, without avoiding the very serious dangers of anthropomorphism or profound equivocation.

During the Middle Ages, a considerable theological debate was conducted by those who insisted that the via *negative* or the apophatic way of characterising theological discourse could be the only coherent and appropriate way of speaking about God and matters of theology. It was Aquinas' insight that recognised how theological language must, in its most technical senses, *always* be understood as fundamentally

'analogical', rather than relying on negation and ultimate silence. In the twentieth century, fresh ideas were added to the via *analogia* from the insights of both the later-Wittgenstein about *language games* and Tillich about the place of symbolism in religious or theological language. These ideas focus on how the context and setting across a wider web of meaning must inevitably guide and inform how theological language is to be used and how it needs to be interpreted. Thus, theological themes and metaphors, such as 'vocation' or 'formation' or 'charism', do not exist in a free-floating form that can be easily uncoupled from the theological norms which govern their meaning and use. For example, drawing upon the theological theme of vocation and applying this to the leaders of a Catholic school or even to all who teach Religious Education in a Catholic school, is actually far more complex than first impressions might suggest. This is because at the fundamental level these are analogical utterances rather than univocal ones. Moreover, there is a wider *language game*, which is the living faith and practice of Catholic Christianity, against which the meanings need to be worked out. It is important to appreciate that the range of meanings might not always be positive, because there may well be shadow sides or negative connotations built into theological metaphors.

The Example of 'Vocation' and Catholic Education

To draw out the issues here, it is helpful to take 'vocation' as an illustrative example that is frequently applied to various discourses within Catholic education research (for example see Lydon 2011; Jamison 2013a). At the positive end 'vocation' is a deeply inspiring theological metaphor which helps to give a sense of purpose and direction to life. Moreover, in our everyday common usage, talk of vocation has a broad non-theological set of meanings about a job or career which involves sustained service that is not primarily about financial reward or not necessarily regarded as a high status occupation. Jobs which require considerable commitment and serve the needs of others are often described as vocational, where the desire to be of practical help takes priority over levels of pay or physical reward. Thus, nursing and caring professions are often described as vocational. When applied to the aspects of Catholic education, the metaphor of vocation draws more formally on the theological meanings and usage. Within theological reflection, a vocation is intimately linked with a divine calling and mission. According to Vatican II's *Lumen Gentium,* there is a universal vocation, the Call to Holiness, as well as callings from God to other sets of relationships and ministries (such as to marriage, religious life, or holy orders) within the Church. Moreover, there is within the theology of vocation both a broader stance, more akin to common usage, and a more specific or personal calling from God to perform or live out certain roles within the Church and for the common good of society. There has been a very strong tendency to equate 'vocation' with the more specific sense of those who elect to enter religious congregations or seek ordination. Thus, Sisters, Nuns, Monks, Brothers and Priests are regarded as having a vocation

and they are routinely regarded as providing Catholic education with the paradigm examples of what it involves. However, a strong case has been made by Jamison (2013b), that there are competing theologies of vocation and that currently there is no shared language of vocation amongst Catholic Christians.

It is at this point that applying the theological metaphor of vocation to the aspects of Catholic education becomes more complicated. At one level, it is clear that for educators working in Catholic schools to see themselves as having a vocation in which what they are doing is part of God's plan is highly affirming—and it can certainly foster resilience when situations get tough. It can allow you to integrate your working life with your faith. However, there are some very clear senses in which the layperson as a teacher or senior leader in a school does not have a vocation in the more specific sense of having a personal calling from God, akin to those who join a religious congregation or seek ordination. Any attempt to push a comparison between the call to religious life or ordained ministry and the training and appointment of someone into the teaching profession will quickly become problematic. Whilst many entrants to the teaching profession will have been motivated by a deep sense of conviction, the reality is that typically the reason why people become teachers is wrapped up with finding gainful employment rather than responding to a personal calling (from God). If opportunities allow, people can subsequently secure senior leadership positions in Catholic schools, however, the sense in which this is a personal God-given vocation is not at all obvious. Moving from a sense of wellbeing about how things have worked out in your career, to maintaining or describing that your success at appointments and promotions in a Catholic school is down to God's specific calling is a challenging idea.

This is because within the theology of vocation there are a number of difficulties (Watkins 2018), most significantly the 'Lay/Religious Tension' (p. 162). This relates to an ongoing debate between the 'lay' state and being part of a 'religious congregation' or in ordained ministry. There has been a long held assumption that the latter is a higher or more ideal way of following Jesus. This is, of course, a distortion of the theology of vocation expressed in Vatican II's universal call to holiness (*Lumen Gentium* 1964). It is interesting to speculate on the causes of this distortion in the theology of vocation. Perhaps the historical roots of it lie in the emergence of the priesthood in the early church and the effects of the Peace of Constantine a few centuries later. This would have helped to fuel the disturbing idea that when there are no longer any persecutions, there is a higher or more serious way of following Jesus and belonging to the Church. In the fifth and sixth centuries, monasticism flowered as the ideal pattern for Christian life and this began to influence ideas about ordained members of the Church. There emerged a widely held conviction that some men have been specifically called to the ordained priesthood. Even today, those seeking ordination couch their decision in terms of a personal vocation or calling. We are accustomed to candidates for ordination using the theological metaphor of 'vocation' to express and perhaps justify their deeply held desire and longing to be a priest. Of course, for the overwhelming majority of priests, this desire or a deep need to be a priest is rooted in many noble reasons. Unfortunately, the idea of a divine personal

calling to ordained ministry fuels, tacitly and explicitly,the sort of elitism or arrogance that is symptomatic of the disease of clericalism. This is an issue which Pope Francis has repeatedly called to.[4]

Thus, on closer examination, there are some negative connotations within the theology of vocation, whether this be applied to either those seeking ordination or teachers and school leaders working in Catholic schools. Recently, Watkins (2018), has drawn attention to some of the more negative interpretations when the theological metaphor of vocation is routinely used within Catholic education. The qualitative interview data in Dr. Watkin's research reveals that the language of 'vocation' is used to justify extreme working practices, where leaders in Catholic schools routinely work excessively long hours and undertake additional duties without any remuneration. These deeply unjust practices tend to be frequently excused as part-and-parcel of the vocation of teaching in, and leading a Catholic school. Moreover, it becomes difficult to raise concerns or object to these practices precisely because they get quickly wrapped up with what God is calling to be done as part of the vocation of teaching in, or leading a Catholic school. It is one thing to complain about this to a chair of Governors, but quite another to complain about the demands of a God-given vocation to teaching or leading a Catholic school. Watkins is suggesting there is a more negative sense in which seeing teaching or leading a Catholic school as a vocation could be regarded as harmful—because it leaves an individual at serious risk of exploitation.

It is also worth dwelling on just how disconcerting it would be to seriously maintain that someone has become the headteacher of a particular Catholic school because it is their personal vocation from God. A person who sees their role at school in these terms could easily develop a warped sense of their own importance. No doubt this is an aspect of what Pope Francis calls the disease of clericalism. For those who believe that they have been personally called by God to specific roles, there is an inherent susceptibility to this disease. Just because someone has not been ordained does not mean that they are immune from the disease of clericalism. Pope Francis has explained that clericalism is a Church-wide disease that all leaders, including those who work in Catholic schools, are susceptical to.

Another danger with using the language of vocation in relation to Catholic education is that it could potentially lead research on Catholic education down some blind alleys or unhelpful distractions. Much of this is because of the difficulties of untangling the language of vocation from its associations with vocations to Religious Congregations or to ordained ministry. If this is taken as the paradigm example of vocation, rather than the universal call to holiness, then it becomes relatively easy to gloss over and glide onto other theological metaphors that share a family resemblance with the discourse about vocation. Thus, if teaching in, or leading a Catholic school is depicted in terms of the theology of vocation, it becomes an appealing move to speculate about the need for the formation of these teachers or school leaders. It is important to note that it is understood as 'formation' rather than 'Continuing Professional Development' or additional training in management or leadership skills. This is because the preparation for ordained ministry is routinely described as a process of

formation. Typically, up to five years are spent in seminaries by those seeking ordination. They are not simply following courses in wide-ranging aspects of theology but are said to be in a process of formation in which spiritual development and character training are central. Similarly, those who join a Religious Congregation spend an extended period of years as a postulate or in temporary vows before finally committing to the rule of the order, society or congregation. This is described as a period of discernment and formation. Against this custom of practice, it can appear as an intuitive step to ask about how those with the vocation of teaching in, and/or leading a Catholic school are to be adequately formed, and thus guided and aided in the pursuit of their (God-given) vocation.

However, perhaps this ought to be seen as a questionable step, based on a distorted understanding of vocation. The gloss or glide from the interconnections between priestly vocation and their need for formation with preparing someone for leadership in a Catholic school might be flawed in a number of respects. First, drawing any serious comparison between the two is a gross oversimplification. Second, given the negative aspects inherent within the theology of vocation there is a real need to be cautious about going on to apply the theological metaphor of formation to teaching or leadership preparation in Catholic schools. Moreover, there are actually inherent dangers associated when it comes to the formation of those who seek ordination. Questions about the appropriateness of formation programmes can be coupled with the very significant declines in the numbers of those exercising ordained ministry throughout the Catholic Church over the past six decades. It is possible to speculate about the adequacy of the seminary model and more general attempts at formation for ordained ministry. The current approach to formation of ordinands has not mitigated the steep decline. If there is something flawed or questionable about the current formation process of those seeking ordained ministry, then there might well be very little value in framing research around 'formation programmes' for teachers and leaders in Catholic schools. This might ultimately be a blind alley for researchers in Catholic education.

Conclusion: The Implications for Researchers in Catholic Education

Bringing theological reflection to bear on the educational theory of Catholic education requires that researchers be attentive to the complexity and nuances of theological language. Church documents such as *Gravissimus Educationis* (1965) or the *Religious Dimension of Education in a Catholic school* (1988) or biblical texts cannot be simply mined for appropriate slogans or theological metaphors. Apart from the danger of stifling the development of the philosophy and/or theology of Catholic education, there is a failure to engage with the richer theological contexts. To tease out the issue here, it might be useful to draw on two ideas within *Ordinary*

Language Philosophy, namely 'speech-acts' and *language games*. Thus, the discussion of teaching as a vocation or the need for school leader formation should be analysed in terms of being a theologically rich speech-act, one embodying a range of relationships. Alternatively, the meaning of these theological metaphors might need to be understood as part-and-parcel of the *language game* surrounding discourse on the theology of vocation. Both of these overlapping ways of analysing these theological metaphors would indicate that they are best understood as expressions of piety and devotion within the living faith of Catholic Christianity. In many respects, they share in the genre of a reflective and motivating homily. As such, researchers in Catholic education need to be able to recognise them for what they are, and thus not be misguided into keeping the relationship with theological language and theological themes at a merely superficial level or inadvertently slipping into category mistakes that lead them down potentially blind alleys.

Notes

1. Cooling (2010) and Smith (1999) have repeatedly demonstrated how this is both possible and highly desirable.
2. Such as the concluding doxology in the Eucharistic Prayer or the Pauline injunction of 'doing all things in Christ' Philippians 4:13.
3. Currently one of the few researchers in Catholic education who appreciates its significance is Professor Graham McDonough (see for example 2019).
4. Pope Francis has repeatedly named clericalism as a serious disease afflicting the entire Catholic church. For example see: Francis 1, bishop of Rome (2016). Homily in Casa Santa Marta. Vatican website, and Francis 1, bishop of Rome (2017). Meeting with executive committee of CELAM during apostolic journey to Colombia. Vatican website.

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