

Leaving alienation behind: journey towards wholeness

Denis McLaughlin



This paper will assert that in contemporary Australia, the institutional Catholic Church has lost its youth. Moreover, there is a sense of alienation of Catholic youth from the institutional Church. I will also argue that this is a challenge for the Catholic school. I believe that those, who have teenage children or teenage grandchildren will not find this assertion terribly revealing.

The challenge for Catholic schools is not so much to bring back the youth to the Church, for I do not believe many want to return, but to let them experience a rich, reflective and critical education conducted by enthusiastic, professional teachers who are decent human beings in a context of the cultivating of values that nurture human growth (Jn10.10). In Catholic circles, these are sometimes called Gospel values.

A crisis of faith

In 1998 the Australian Bishops' Conference labelled the current phenomenon influencing Australian Catholicism as a "crisis of faith" in God. Kevin Treston, in his latest well received book *Visioning a Future Church* mounts a solid argument that for many it is **indeed a crisis of faith, but in the institutional Church**. Indeed, in Australia, it is estimated that only 15% of Catholics worship weekly. Their average age is 52 years, with 25% being retirees. Only 7.2% of the 20–29 age range attend weekly Mass.

Combined Australian research findings conclude that while young people say they are inclined at times to be reflective and spiritually oriented, they also say they are not finding the institutional churches as nurturers of this incipient spirituality. Indeed, research sponsored by the Australian Bishops concluded that young Catholic Australians experienced Sunday Mass as "bland, dull, boring, repetitive and routinised". Like it or not, the Australian Catholic Church would be wise to face the reality that its young people do not see the church as all that relevant.

One of the main aims of any school worth its salt is **to teach its students to think critically**. There is evidence that Catholic schools have done just that and to some extent this can be verified by the obvious social mobility of the Catholic population of Australia over the past 50

years. In such a context, the presentation of Church teaching also involves a critical faculty and not just an invitation to accept them through an act of faith. Indeed, students and their teachers find difficulties in the rationales underpinning many teachings. **Practising Catholics are no less likely than non-practising Catholics to decide personally on what they choose to believe.** I think the following quotation made by Gremillion & Castelli in their American research of practising Catholics is a fairly accurate description of the position of most educated Western Catholics: "If they

agree with the Church on an issue, it is because the Church position makes sense to them and they actively decide to agree. If a Church teaching does not make sense to them, they will refuse to agree, no matter how often or how clearly or how authoritatively the church has spoken on it". I think this is the modus operandi of many modern young Australian Catholics.

Why is this the case? My own very fallible conclusions for why Catholic youth are alienated from the Church include the following.

The first reason is theological and attacks the central myth of Catholic teaching. **The dominant spirituality of the young is creation focused, rather than redemption centred.** They see their world, though imperfect, as positive and the vast majority of people they meet as good. The world is capable of being developed and they are optimistic about their ability to make the best of their lives and indeed improve the world. **They believe they will do a better job than we have.** Consequently, they do not see the institutional church as all that impor

Based on significant research in Australia, Ireland and the US Denis McLaughlin Challenges our Catholic School (and I would think any school whose mission was inspired by the Christian faith) to a more authentic living out of the values it professes.

A substantially abridged version of a keynote address given to the Queensland Secondary Principals' Association Annual Conference Tweed Heads, 2001.

tant or relevant. They do believe in the essence of the Catholic Christian tradition, but do not seem to find ways of putting their beliefs into any form of meaningful practice.

For all practical terms, most do not believe in original sin; they do not accept that at birth they and others are de facto in a state of alienation from God. Consequently, they do not believe that Jesus'

The second reason for the alienation of the young from the institutional Catholic Church has an experiential basis and is summarized succinctly by Diarmuid O'Murchu, the keynote speaker for the 2001 National Catholic Education Conference held in Brisbane:

People in general do not experience community through their churches and consequently increasing numbers look elsewhere for that experience. Only a church deinstitutionalised, delegatised and de-clericalised can hope to recapture this central concept without which its existence is largely a charade.

I believe that once Catholics did experience a strong feeling of community. There were lots of things only Catholics did that helped create community or if not community a feeling of belonging to the tribe. Here are some that I could think of:

7.2% of the 20-29 age group go to Mass each week. 75% of these are fundamentalists.

I feel no call to teach fundamentalists.



prime mission was a sacrifice for their sins and the sins of others. Many are unable to accept that God as a loving father would require crucifixion from his son and only child as reparation for some act of primordial disobedience which caused God to punish the whole human race. God is viewed far more compassionately. This of course has ramifications on their understanding of Baptism and the other sacraments and much of the educational underpinning for religious education in Catholic schools. Is it surprising then that research indicates that only 24% of students believe that religious education is important?

I know what I am saying is dynamite. I am aware

"If they agree with the Church on an issue, it is because the Church position makes sense to them and they actively decide to agree. If a Church teaching does not make sense to them, they will refuse to agree, no matter how often or how clearly or how authoritatively the church has spoken on it".

that this is officially a heretical view. Again, I may be coming to a false conclusion but that is what I honestly believe the research is concluding about young people's spirituality. But I am fallible.

I ask readers to reflect on their experience of Australian Catholic children and see if this conclusion is too wide off the mark. **Do the Australian kids they know really believe in an atonement focused Christology?** They have been exposed to it, but do they really believe it?

- often born in a Catholic hospital; baptised soon after birth with "Catholic" names such as Brendan, Michael, Veronica, and Majella not Amber, Dane, Troy or Jade;

- educated in a Catholic school and taught not by "ordinary" people, but mostly by religious dressed in special Catholic clothes, and called Sister and Brother;

- joined the YCS, YCW, Newman Society at University, Holy Name Society, Dominic Savio Club, Majella clubs for mums, Crusaders of the Blessed Sacrament, Blue Army, Children of Mary, Catholic cubs and scouts, Catholic Workers' Clubs

(throughout Sydney), Catholic Lawn Tennis Association, Catholic Bush Walkers' Clubs or (Past Christian) Brothers Football Clubs;

- wore the miraculous medal, the St Christopher medal, 1st 2nd & 3rd class relics, brown, red or green scapulars;

- voted for the Labor Party (Paul Keating said his first Party meetings commenced with the "Hail Mary");

- became Knights & "Knightsies" of the Southern Cross (Catholic masons);
- read Catholic newspapers, magazines and even Catholic comics;
- prayed silently Sunday Mass which was muttered inaudibly in "Catholic" Latin;
- experienced the fear of sin especially sex where "there is no light matter".

Other Catholic customs of yesterday include:

- Saturday Confession
- monthly first Friday school confession
- Benediction "Tantum ergo"
- Litanies "We fly to thy patronage"
- Exposition of the Blessed Sacrament
- Holy Hours
- May and October altars to Our Lady
- nightly family Rosary: Fr Peyton "the family who prays together stays together"
- visiting Fatima statue
- meatless Fridays
- fasting in lent
- 9 First Fridays
- 7 First Saturdays
- Novenas
- Indulgences
- St Patrick's day celebrations
- All Souls Day Plenary Indulgence for the Souls in Purgatory
- Corpus Christi Procession: "That magnificent demonstration of Faith"
- marriage preparation by a Catholic priest
- married in a Catholic church
- Extreme Unction and last confession soon before death
- buried in a Catholic cemetery or Catholic section of public cemetery.

While many of these old structures did promote community as well as offer meaning, relevance, expressions for spiritual growth, they are for the most part meaningless for Australian youth. An identifiable Catholic culture has largely evaporated, and any distinct Catholic identity has been for the most part absorbed into mainstream Australia. **What does the Church do now to offer community?**

Ironically, the evidence is that Catholic kids do find some community, not in parishes but in Catholic schools. Indeed, the face of Christ in the Catholic school may well be the only face of Christ they will encounter, or at least, the only encounter with Christ that seems to make any sense to them. The reality is that the thriving Catholic education systems have in general taken the place of the parish. Parishes are closing and amalgamating. Their numbers are declining as are practicing Catholics. The school numbers, in contrast are healthy. Paradoxically, Catholic schools are now financially "subsidizing" parishes.

If this is happening and I believe it is, then there is an added challenge thrust upon Principals of Catholic secondary schools. Principals cannot afford to be complacent about this added responsibility. Paul Collins thinks at least some Catholic secondary schools are failing. He baldly states: "**Catholic secondary schools have absorbed an ethos which is pragmatic, competitive, consumerist and materialist**".

You have to ask yourselves is Collins merely a whinger? Or are elements of the above quotation thriving in our secondary schools? Maybe the kids want them or the old boys or girls or even the parents. The question that demands consideration is: Should a Catholic school reflect the parents' values only or deliberately be counter cultural and risk getting up the noses of some of its vocal and influential constituents?

I hypothesize that Collins is not just talking about the number of OP1's* annually gained or the triumphs of first elevens, thirteens or fifteens or about school formals and fashion parades. It is something deeper. **Some of the values I think the Australian Catholic schools have subtly institutionalised encourage individual success at the expense of someone else's failure.** Remember in the real world "winners are grinners". Who came second to Cathy Freeman or Suzi O'Neill at the 2000 Olympics?

Some other values Catholic schools may well nurture include:

- achievement as the single measure of effort
- singular acquisition of material gain
- sanctification of status
- suffocation of alternative voices
- institutionalisation which tries to minimise individual needs
- placation of investors (parents, past students, governments) while aborting principles valuing the common good, a supposed defining feature of the Catholic school.

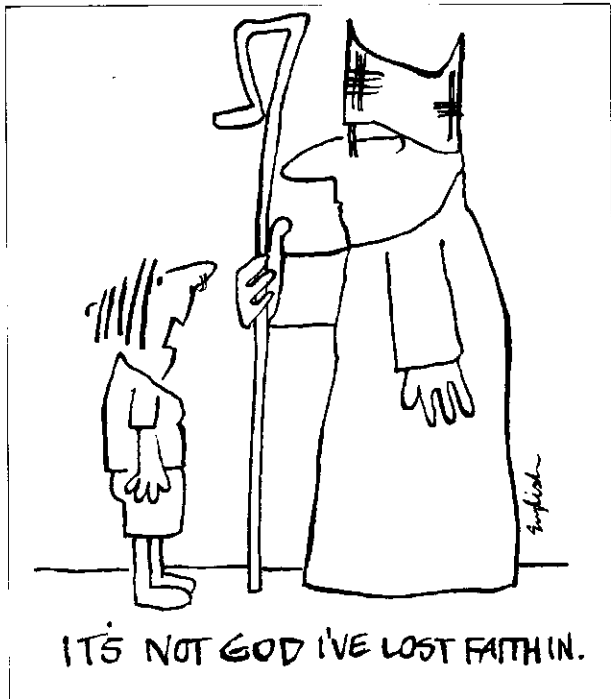
Indeed, talk of the common good degenerates into the tasteless joke category. Some Catholic school may well generate a citizenry characterised by materialism, acquisitiveness, impatience with lack of success, selfishness bred from intolerance of failure, and a lack of concern for the non-productive members of school. I believe that this is more likely to occur in wealthy "elite" Order owned Catholic secondary schools. **Some appear to focus on themselves as ends in themselves and not essentially means to help children become more authentically human,** as the Vatican's Catholic School on the threshold of the Third Millennium unambiguously asserts.

The point I am strongly making is that **Catholic schools have to challenge the educational nationalist aspirations of Governments, parents, current and past students** as well as foundation entrepreneurs and not just be seduced and profit by

* Highest Academic Level in Queensland

them. Barry Dwyer focuses squarely on what is the essential priority of the Catholic secondary school:

The great contribution that Catholic educators can make to the national conversation on schooling is to seek to balance the growing utilitarian emphasis with constant reminders of the potential of schooling



to enhance the growth of the individual, to ennoble the human spirit, to build a compassionate community and to revitalise the culture.

The third reason for youth's alienation from institutional Church is cognitive. The official leadership of the institutional Church is seen as lacking credibility. They are seen as not listening or not authentic. Empirical data gleaned by award winning investigative Catholic journalist Jason Berry in *Lead us not into temptation* provides the evidence. I will not offer a catalogue of the hundreds of Australian instances of clergy pedophilia convictions. These can be scrutinized on the WEB. I believe the clergy-child sex abuse issue is representative of a broader malaise related to the abuse of power and transparent accountability indicating dysfunction in ecclesial structures and leadership to which the kids are not blind. Tom Keneally encapsulates it this way: *"And in the Church's response to the scandal it has exposed its most dismaying side: a propensity for arrogance and cover up"*.

Indeed, it is the leadership's apparent lethargy and inadequacy in coming clean at the beginning of the abuses. Instead we see leaders being legally compelled to admit to the full truth, forced to act authentically, and being shamed into demonstrating minimal compassion for the victims. Fr Cappo, the Bishops' then national spokesperson in this area, said it succinctly:

At times it seems to be that the real goal of systems is to maintain and protect themselves; to preserve structure and order and to survive; to accumulate power and to display stability. To play it safe! Perhaps one of the great cancers of the institutional Church of the present era.

Tom Keneally says the same thing: *"The crisis (of faith) came from my realization that, behind the compelling mystery of Catholicism lay a cold and largely self interested corporate institution"*. The challenge for leadership is to refute this accusation by alternative actions.

The fabric of personal and institutional credibility is authenticity, and according to surveys recently reported in the National Catholic Reporter, authenticity to the gospel values of justice and compassion has been rarely demonstrated by the official Church leadership concerning the American sexual abuse scandals. Readers can make their own judgments about the Australian context.

How should catholic schools respond?

I will suggest some practical responses that principals might institutionalize as authentic ways to nurture the spirituality of their students. I think if you wished to explore practically the authenticity of a Catholic school the following ought to be included along with others as some type of criteria. They are:

- the aspiration for excellence in the provision of a holistic, balanced education;
- institutionalised structures aspiring to promote authentic community;
- opportunities for private and meaningful communal prayer and worship - students should not associate prayer with boredom. It is better to have an engaging paraliturgy than to have students endure routinized, boring Eucharists;

The real impact of Catholicism on kids' lives will be as it always has been when good professional teachers regularly share their own compassion and humanity with their students. In modern day Catholic-speak this is labelled evangelisation by witness.

- collaboratively planned retreats or reflective experiences aimed at nurturing the spirituality of students and staff members (and their spouses);
- a curriculum and resultant structures that reflect a Catholic anthropology and teaching,

especially where the common good is honoured at the expense of individual interest;

- extra curricula resources and activities which focus primarily on the welfare of all students;
- an organised and professionally resourced pastoral care program;
- the systematic exposure of students to Catholic social justice teachings especially through well prepared, conducted and debriefed immersion programs that challenge students values;
- a privileging of Catholic social teaching expressed in enrolment, termination, discipline, financial, resource, social and celebratory policies, practices and traditions;
- substantial outreach initiatives for the needy, poor and "new poor" and marginalised - the "new poor" are those financially well off but are so self absorbed, blatantly selfish, and devoid of compassion for others that their humanity is substantially impoverished;
- a leadership that is practised as stewardship and is characterised by service devoid of self interest, rank without privilege, justice, collaboration, transparency and accountability;
- honest reviews conducted by ethical person/s of structures that maybe pragmatic, competitive, consumerist and materialist, and
- an understanding that employment in a Catholic school entails with it a sense of vocation for all and for some an acceptance of a ministry.

The real impact of Catholicism on kids' lives will be as it always has been when good professional teachers regularly share their own compassion and humanity with their students. In modern day Catholic-speak this is labelled evangelisation by witness.

For the Catholic school, evangelisation by witness means that students, parents and staff experience first and foremost the common decency, fairness, care, graciousness and compassion of a very human Christ, in its daily conduct.

This is the essential lynchpin for a Catholic school's authenticity and the primary challenge for leadership in schools and Catholic Education Offices, as well as for parish clergy and the episcopacy.

"By their fruits you will know them. Do people pick grapes from thorn bushes, or figs from thistles?" (Mt 7,16).

I think that in the third millennium, the Catholic school will have as its dominant purpose, the provision of an authentic educational environment, where the value of the human person is affirmed, where knowledge is integrated for the sake of ultimate truths, and **where the relationship of the**

human person with God is experienced, as well as taught. Such a response in my opinion is not only legitimately Catholic but it is fundamentally realistic.

Recommended reading

Angelico, T (1997) *Taking stock: Revisioning the Church in higher education* Canberra: National Catholic Education Commission.

Clifford, J. (2000), *Religion in the life of the young adult at University College Cork: An investigation.* Unpublished doctoral thesis, Hull: University of Hull.

Fulton, J. et al (2001). *Young Catholics and the new millennium: the religion and morality of young Catholics in western countries.* Dublin: University College Dublin Press.

Hodge, D. Dinges, W. Johnson, M & Gonzales, J (2001) *Young Adult Catholics: Religion in the culture of choice*, South Bend: University of Notre Dame Press.

McLaughlin, D (1999) The beliefs, values and practices of student teachers at the Australian Catholic University. Paper presented at international conference, 'Religiously Affiliated Schools, Colleges and Universities in a Multicultural Society: Challenges and Objections' (Katholieke Universiteit Nijmegen: Netherlands) January 28th - 30th 1999.

Rochford, D. (2001) The faith of young Australians. *The Australasian Catholic Record*, 78(3), pp300-08

Tuohy, D. & Cairns, P. (2000). *Youth 2K: Threat or promise to a religious culture.* Dublin: Marino Institute of Education.

**Only a church
deinstitutionalised,
delegalised and
de-clericalised can
hope to recapture
this central
concept without
which its existence
is largely a
charade.**