

Why This Book Now?

Increasingly in the public discourse, school education is being viewed as a commodity, a determining factor in the nation's economic prosperity. Simultaneously, increased enrolment of students who are not Catholics in Catholic schools lends some weight to the contention that diocesan schools provide a comparatively low budget option in private education. Catholic education is deemed a 'good brand'! Added to these trends, there is the growing secularisation of society and the declining influence of religion.

In the face of these forces, there remains the need to constantly re-visit the reasons why the Catholic Church in Australia decided to set up a separate system of school education in the late 19th century and to make the great sacrifices needed to maintain that system for almost eighty years without a cent of government funding. The main reason of course was the ardent conviction that the Catholic school was an integral partner with the Church and parents in the transmission of faith. Another reason was the further conviction that religious faith and spiritual values were integral elements in an education that was highly conducive to good human development.

The changed circumstances of society and of the Church have led to a blurring of these convictions in modern times. Up to the late 1950s at least, most diocesan Catholic schools were sustained in a strong Catholic culture. The schools were staffed almost completely by religious, there was an abundance of clergy and a majority of families had regular affiliation with their local parishes. A wave of significant changes began in the 1960s. Catholic school systems expanded rapidly. Religious vocations diminished and a transition from religious to lay teachers and school leaders was well underway. This trend gathered momentum through the 1970s, greatly assisted by the breakthrough of gaining government funding for Catholic schools.

The 1960s and 1970s were also times of major changes in society. The development and expansion of the social sciences, especially psychology, sociology and cultural anthropology, led to the exaltation of the person and a diminishment of the profile of institutions and authority figures. Reading signs of the times, Saint John XXIII convened the Second Vatican Council which sought to reposition the church in the modern world. Though this 'repositioning' led to unease for many Catholics, it remains one of the greatest challenges that continues to confront the church now and in the years ahead. Pope Francis has certainly shown a strong commitment to bringing the Christian message into dialogue with realities of contemporary society.

In general, Catholic schools have coped reasonably well despite the permanent change of recent decades. The transition from religious to lay has been smooth, bringing cohorts of lay women and men into partnership in the mission of the Church. Clergy and religious played an important role in enabling and supporting the transition. The positive image that Catholic schools now generally have is testimony to the commitment and professionalism of lay leaders and teachers who have sought to honour the heritage bequeathed by earlier generations while keeping pace with contemporary advances in education.

The need is constant however, to give fresh articulation to policies and practices which will enable Catholic schools to be places where the balanced integration of faith, life and culture continues. Such an integration is becoming increasingly counter-cultural in a digital age where school education is commonly viewed as but a lower rung on the ladder of economic and social mobility.

In this context, it is of interest to reflect on observations made recently by an English Catholic professor of education, James Arthur¹, where he argued that Catholic schools in England have succumbed to secularism.

¹ James Arthur, "The de-Catholicising of Curriculum in English Catholic Schools", *International Studies In Catholic Education*, Vol. 5, Issue 1, March 2013, pp. 83 - 89.

Today's typical English Catholic school curriculum is almost indistinguishable from its secular counterpart.

Arthur here raises an issue which might well occupy the attention of Catholic educators in Australia at present. Well-intentioned moves to reform and improve education in Catholic schools are strongly influenced by sources that are purely secular in their perspectives. It is easy for such perspectives to exercise a dominant role in systems and schools. Are we more the objects of trends rather than agents of trends? However, to cite similarity in curriculum as a problem may betray a flawed assumption. After all, the content of the Bible is the common source for Christian living and yet expressions of Christian life cover a vast and differentiated spectrum.

So, it is not so much the curriculum that makes the difference as does the manner of its interpretation and implementation, but most of all, the state of the soul of those at the forefront of implementation. Herein lies one of the greatest challenges confronting Catholic schools today. How can commitment to a faithful and enlightened Catholic world view infuse all aspects of curriculum implementation? How can the creeping dualism of 'religious dimension versus national curriculum compliance' be avoided? There are no easy answers to these questions. It is obvious however that important determining factors will include faithful commitment to the founding vision of Catholic schools, made more likely in the deliberate education and formation of leaders, and of all who work in Catholic education, at system and school levels.

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It would be a pity if James Arthur's criticism of English Catholic schools were to apply to Catholic schools in Australia. In his essay he further contends that:

Increasingly, those who teach in, and attend, Catholic schools have no particular commitment to the official vision of Catholic education.

As a symptom of his perceived malaise he asserts:

The overwhelming majority of staff and pupils do not attend Mass in their parishes.

Systems and schools have it in their power to influence students and staff in their 'commitment to the official vision of Catholic education' and it is fair to say in this regard that attitudes and practices in Australian Catholic schools generally are not as bleak as in the scenario outlined by Arthur for English Catholic schools. Although Catholic schools in Australia could always be more proactive in encouraging regular Mass attendance by students and staff, there are important influences operating here that are beyond the school's control. Some such important influences are the faith life in families along with peer influence. Another strong factor is the quality of inclusive and meaningful offerings and practices of parishes, especially for the young.

Promotion of active membership in a parish faith community by students and staff who are Catholics, must remain an important goal for all Catholic schools. However, another important goal is that, through their experience of Catholic school education, all students will have their lives somehow transformed in the light of the Gospel. The hope too is that a majority will leave Catholic schools with an understanding of, and a respect for, what is best in Catholic culture and traditions.

The slightly provocative title chosen for this book - *Will Catholic Schools be Catholic in 2030?* - is but a ploy to invite stakeholders, and all who may be interested to reflect on what it may mean to be Catholic in 2030. An associated challenge is for a fresh focus on present and emerging implications to ensure that the schools remain faithful to the mission of Jesus within the Catholic tradition.

This book makes no pretence to be a scholarly exposition. The various reflections, articles and prayers are contributed by people with many years of practical experience working in and with Catholic schools. All share a deep appreciation of the story of Catholic school education in Australia, and of

its continuing potential to enrich the lives of generations of students and staff to the benefit of church and society. Positions taken have no official status. They merely represent the opinions of the writers.

On being questioned as to how he discovered the Theory of Relativity, Albert Einstein is reported to have said: *It came to me after several conversations with my colleagues.*

Be that as it may, there is little doubt that serious dialogue and conversation about matters of faith and spirituality are powerful means for individual inner growth and for a strengthening of minds and hearts towards collective effort.

The main purpose of this book is to act as a resource and focus for such dialogue and conversation. Many of the articles and exercises lend themselves to reflection and discussion by leadership teams in diocesan education offices and in schools. Likewise, some contents could well be a focus for reflection and response in staff formation initiatives such as reflection days, optional after-school Spirituality in the Staffroom sessions, and the like.

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The intent is but to stimulate shared 'grassroots theologising' in the hope that outcomes will include review and renewal as deemed necessary in issues arising. It is likely that some assertions in the following pages may cause dissonance or unease in the reader. It would be disappointing if it were otherwise as such feelings have the potential to evoke a personal articulation of perspectives which can be shown to be more accurate, more authentic.

Such feelings may also be a challenge to review personal or collective views and practices that are in need of review. Throughout the pages to follow, some bits will be seen as repetitive. Kindly regard them as recurring themes in an underlying narrative. An overall desired outcome is that the book may make a positive contribution towards elevating common discourse on elements of the Catholic culture of the school among all staff, to levels usually occupied by conversations about literacy, numeracy, technology, and a range of compliances.

The reflections and prayers in the final section of the book are offered as a supplement to similar resources already in schools. The contents of this section are intended for staff. It is realised that in the busy life of school it may be helpful at times to have easy access to ready-made prayer forms to incorporate into retreat programs and to use in meetings and other gatherings which invite integration of a religious/spiritual dimension. Whatever the future may hold, the Catholic school with an embedded spirit of regular and meaningful staff reflection and prayer, will remain authentically Catholic.

As appropriate, quotations of sayings by Pope Francis are liberally interspersed throughout in an effort to align content with some of the inspirational exhortations of the Pope and to broaden the access to the new winds blowing in the Vatican.

The Internet has been a great blessing in its capacity for rapid dissemination of what the Pope says. It is realised however, that because of his refreshing spontaneity and warm humanity, some of his statements may lack traditional Vatican polish and style.

Nevertheless, they carry the 'smell of the sheep' and convey a pastoral image of church. The hope is that this book may make some small contribution towards the strengthening of such an image of church within Catholic school communities, while supporting the Pope's dream for a fresh and transforming impulse of Church within the world.

