

Salt and Sunshine

Ethos & Catholic School Identity

I have come that you may life and have it to the full.
John 10.10

INTRODUCTION

Talking about the ethos of the Catholic School can seem so far away from everyday concerns. It can even seem irrelevant in the face of some dire circumstance that may be threatening the very life of the school. But all the more reason, I should think, for coming to understand just what this ethos is – an environment, an atmosphere, that springs from a lived experience of commitment to the Kingdom. And, if we are living it, we can count on the effective presence of a faithful, understanding and all-possible God. The relevance of the Catholic School lies in its special character, but this character has to be lived if it is to inspire those within it and those beyond its boundaries.

In this article I shall explore two everyday symbols, and, in answer to the questions they raise, give an eightfold description of Catholic ethos. I shall say a little concerning the question of identity, which is closely allied to ethos, before concluding with a way of seeing the challenge that lies ahead of us.

PLINY & JESUS

Pliny the Elder, a Roman writer and contemporary of Jesus and the early Church (23-79), writes in his *Natural History* (31.102): "Nothing is more useful than salt or sunshine." An over-statement? An exaggeration? Let's consider for a moment what these two everyday commodities do for us.

Salt, as a seasoning, brings out the flavour in food. We cook with it, and add it to foods already prepared. Salt also preserves food, and was indispensable in all cultures for this purpose before the introduction of refrigeration. How precious it was (and still is) comes down to us in the word 'salary'. The word means, literally, that people were paid in salt. The British in India certainly knew its value, and it was the issue of the salt tax that Mahatma Gandhi chose to mobilise the Indian people for liberation. On the cellular level in the human body, salt is indispensable for life, since it holds water, without which cells would dehydrate and die.

Salt in the biblical context has, in addition, a symbolic meaning. God's covenant with David was a covenant of salt. To eat the salt of another signified a pact of friendship and fidelity. [Num 18:19; 2Chr 13:5] We are not to be surprised then, considering the role that salt plays in our lives, to hear Jesus say to his would-be followers, "You are the salt of the earth." [Matthew 5:13]

What about sunshine? The light of the sun makes vision possible. It brings out colour and demonstrates the beauty and diversity of life in all its detail. Life without light is impossible. Life lived in an inferior light is dull and lethargic. Because light reveals, it is a biblical symbol of revelation – the removal of the veil of darkness, and the clear shining forth of truth. [Is 51:4] Again, Jesus says, "You are the light of the world." [Matthew 5:14]

CATHOLIC SCHOOL ETHOS

The Catholic School, too, is called to be salt of the earth, and light of the world, a city on a hill top, an organisation which breathes life, stands out and provides direction.

In what ways does the Catholic School add flavour to life? In what ways does it preserve all that is good? In what ways does the Catholic School take a stand for truth, rejoicing in difference and variety, enabling its members to see clearly, and to walk the journey of life without stumbling? There are many ways to describe what we mean by the ethos of the Catholic School, or its special character.

Thomas Groome¹, a leading Irish-American scholar in the field of Catholic Education, says that what makes a school Catholic is not the incidental or peripheral things, but the deep structures or characteristics that have endured throughout the Church's history, sometimes visibly, and at other times in hidden, but no less powerful ways. He outlines five distinguishing features in the unique configuration of Catholicism. Because the Catholic School is an educational enterprise springing from the concern of Catholic Christianity, and sharing in the mission of the Church, these same five features will, ideally, be evident there. The descriptions which follow rely significantly on Groome's own turn of phrase.

1. **We are made in God's own image and likeness:** Catholicism has a positive view of the human person that blends realism with optimism. While people are capable of sin, they are essentially good. So, the Catholic School affirms the basic goodness of all its members, promotes their dignity, honours their fundamental rights, and develops their gifts to the fullest. It educates people to live responsibly as partners of God, and to live as if their lives are worthwhile and have historical significance.
2. **We see God in all things:** Catholicism has a sense of sacramentality, or the conviction that God's life and love - God's grace - comes to us, and that we go to God, through the created order and the everyday things of life. So, the Catholic School encourages its members to respect, appreciate and conserve God's creation. It teaches them, regardless of what they are studying, to employ the critical and creative powers of their minds to look at life so intensely that they begin to look through it to the heart of its mystery.
3. **We are made for each other:** Catholicism has a communal and relational emphasis regarding human and Christian existence. So the Catholic School is both a public community, educating its members in social responsibility, informing and forming them to contribute to the common good, and an ecclesial community, sharing in the Church's vision and mission. Enlivened by the gospel spirit it aims to create an environment of freedom and love.
4. **We share a common story and vision:** Catholicism has a deep commitment to tradition and history, sensing its reality and importance in the formation of a people, together with its religious truths, religious experience, and gathered wisdom. The Catholic School is not satisfied with learning about religion. It encourages all to learn as well from religion, and even, with ecumenical and inter-religious sensitivity, and respecting personal backgrounds, to be personally influenced and enriched by Catholic faith, which is the treasure it has to share.

¹ 'What Makes a School Catholic?' in McLaughlin, O'Keefe & O'Keefe. 1996. *The Contemporary Catholic School*. London: Falmer Press, p 107-125

5. **We seek to understand our belief:** Catholicism is committed to rationality, to the place of reason in life and in faith. Throughout Catholic history there has been a drive toward penetrating, defending, and explaining, insofar as possible, the divine mystery manifest in tradition and sacramental presence. So, the Catholic School does not tell people what to think, but prepares and practises them to think for themselves. It teaches them to trust their own discernment and decision-making, though not as isolated individuals, but in dialogue with others.

These five might be called theological characteristics in that they are grounded in a Catholic understanding of God and of human existence. But Groome also outlines three fundamental commitments that Catholicism makes, and which are particularly relevant for Catholic Education.

6. **We are committed to personhood:** Catholic Education aims not only to influence what people know and can do but also the kind of persons they will become.
7. **We are committed to basic justice:** Catholic Education raises the awareness of its members “through a critical analysis of society and involvement of its people in actions for justice. A just school can assist the dismantling of those structures in society which produce poverty. The school as a just place will respond to a wide range of activities in the curriculum such as the handling of conflict, cultural pluralism, communications, ecological awareness, use of resources, sporting and academic policies, budgeting priorities.”²
8. **We are committed to inclusivity:** Here I quote Groome extensively. "In *Finnegan's Wake* James Joyce writes: 'Catholic means here comes everybody.' Etymologically, 'catholic' has its roots in *kata holou*, meaning 'embracing the whole', or better still 'including everything and everyone'. This suggests that the best synonym for 'catholic' is 'inclusive' rather than the often used 'universal'. The latter can mean one aspect dominating everything else and excluding or destroying all that is 'other'. Both Nazism and Communism had ambitions of universality, but in a dominating way. 'Catholic', on the other hand, means to include and welcome all, to embrace diverse 'others', in a participative and bonded community."³

I have named the above eight features in the first person plural to signify that what unites us is a common vision of Catholic Education.

Are these characteristics to be found only in the Catholic School? We would be foolish to think so. But perhaps what identifies the Catholic school is its public commitment to these characteristics. Just as many people teach, but not all claim to be professional teachers, just so many schools teach and live out gospel values, but it is the Catholic School that professes belief in and commitment to the Kingdom of God. In this it shares in the evangelising mission of the Church to bring good news to all without exception.

Another way of regarding the uniqueness of the Catholic School is by considering the following analogy. Every human face has eyes, ears, nose and mouth, but every face puts these features together in a unique way. In the same way, the eight features we have discussed, are not exclusive to Catholic Education, but are found there in a unique configuration. It is this which gives the Catholic School its relevance for the world.

² Kevin Treston. *Transforming Catholic Schools*

³ Thomas Groome, op cit, p 123

CATHOLIC SCHOOL IDENTITY

Closely related to the question of ethos is that of identity. Just what is the Catholic School, and how does it relate to the Catholic Church? I noted right at the beginning of this paper the connection between ethos and mission. The Catholic School's environment is, ideally, the consequence of living out its mission to the full. This mission of evangelisation, of bringing Good News in the Spirit of Jesus, is shared with the Church. In fact, the Catholic School receives its mandate from the Church. But it cannot be identified with the Church. This is a point of confusion to many. However, Church documents themselves spell out clearly why Catholic Church and Catholic School cannot be regarded as identical.

It (the Catholic school) has not come into being as a private initiative, but as an expression of the reality of the Church, having by its very nature a public character. It fulfils a service of public usefulness and, although clearly and decidedly configured in the perspective of the Catholic faith, is not reserved to Catholics only, but is open to all those who appreciate and share its qualified educational project.⁴

While the Catholic School strives to be a community of faith, and to share with its members the Catholic tradition, it is not exclusively a school for Catholics, nor is it intended as a catechetical enterprise, or a place of initiation into the Catholic Church. The Catholic School is, according to Denis McLaughlin, essentially about the Kingdom.

The mission of the Catholic school might be to proclaim the Kingdom through an authentic educational enterprise, by developing within it an ethos and structures that aim to reflect the values that Jesus lived. In practical terms this means the aspiring towards right relationships critiqued by justice, charity, peace and liberty. For many, hopefully this will be through the growth of a personal, sacramental and communal relationship with Christ. However, the evidence suggests that for the majority this is currently not a reality. Nor is it likely to be in the foreseeable future. But if the Catholic school is essentially about the Kingdom and if Kingdom values are deliberately honoured and experienced in the Catholic school, then the Catholic school is fulfilling its primary mandate.⁵

OUR CHALLENGE

Let's look at ourselves for a moment. Are we worth our salt? Does our light assure and attract? How does our ethos measure up to the eight features we have considered? We might have a clear appreciation of the ideal ethos of the Catholic School, and yet be far from living it. Because it demands a basic attitude of faith, our ethos quickly comes into conflict with the World. Used here in the biblical sense, World and Kingdom are in conflict. The former operates out of a set of short-sighted values – the blind leading the blind, intent on immediate visible gain. Those who choose the latter acknowledge their blindness, but allow themselves to be guided by the far-sighted values of one who reflects the eternal light.

Living the ethos of the Catholic School is an act of faith, depending on a wise and caring God as we journey to places we have never been before. Living the ethos of the Catholic School is an act of hope that looks forward to the coming of the Kingdom. Living the ethos of the Catholic School is an act of love that is concerned with persons for who they are, inviting all, especially the ones the World rejects, to the banquet table. Living the ethos of the Catholic School requires an openness to the Spirit of God, and the sevenfold gifts of wisdom, understanding, knowledge, counsel, courage, piety and reverence for God, without which we

⁴ The Catholic School on the Threshold of the Third Millennium, par 16

⁵ Denis McLaughlin. The Catholic School: Paradoxes and Challenges

are rendered helpless. Rather, may we, empowered by the Spirit, echo in every facet of our educational endeavour the words of Jesus, " I have come that you may life and have it to the full."

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