

# KIDS TODAY!

## *A Perspective from Students in Australian Catholic Schools*

RICHARD RYMARZ and ANTHONY CLEARY

**I**N MY WORK as a practical theologian I am often asked to address topics at the interface between theology and sociology. Many of these topics begin with very empirical premises about young people today and their religious beliefs and practises. I have always been of the belief that good information or data is of great importance to the theologian. Rather than ending discussion it provides a strong context for future elaboration as empirical data does not usually settle an issue. It provides for a range of interpretations which in turn can inform theoretical perspectives.

In this paper I would like to address several topical issues about young people and religion. The first is the tendency to see young people as an undifferentiated population.<sup>1</sup> There is value in looking at large representative samples but at the same time such studies can tend to obscure important nuances in the information that is gathered. Young people, as with any population cohort, are an amalgam of quite different sub groups and in aggregating samples some of the power of looking at differentiated samples is lost.

One such sub group that is of special interest to the Catholic practical theologian are students who attend Catholic schools. This is by no means a small sub group.<sup>2</sup> Enrolment in Catholic schools across Australia remains strong and approximately one in five school students in the country attends a Catholic school. An examination of the some of the religious beliefs, behaviours and attitudes of students in Catholic schools provide a valuable insight into an important population cohort of younger Australians.

There is also a need for the discussion of young people and religion to be well grounded in data that reflects the local situation. Some of the strongest and well known studies of young people and religion draw on different cultural contexts. The United States in particular has a long history of empirical sociology and many of the US studies are widely discussed and provide a departure point for comparative work.<sup>3</sup> These studies do not, however, reflect completely the Australian situation. It is obvious that the social factors that make the United States and other places be of special interest are not replicated in Australia. For instance, in we are looking at school systems in the United States the number of Catholic schools and the number of students enrolled in them is in prolonged decline.<sup>4</sup> As mentioned previously in Australian both schools and enrolments are growing. For this reason more studies on religion and young people that draw on the local Australian context are needed.

In this paper I will report on data drawn from two large and ongoing Australian studies that examine students in local Catholic schools. The first is a comprehensive study of Catholic schools undertaken by the Catholic University of Leuven at the instigation of the Victorian Catholic Education Offices.<sup>5</sup> This study dates back to the early years of the third millennium and has compiled data on a range of measures clustered around the theme of enchanting Catholic identity. What makes this study particularly interesting is that it has gathered responses from not only students but also teachers, parents and school administrators. In this paper, however, only responses from

students will be given. The second project was undertaken by the Catholic Education Office of the Sydney Archdiocese and looked at responses of students in schools to a range of issues centred on religious attitudes and practices.<sup>6</sup> Both studies have a different rationale and history but both report valuable information about students in Catholic schools. In this paper I will be reporting data from each study which focus on similar demographic indicators. An analysis of the data will be provided which seeks to deepen our understanding of students in Catholic schools today by using a number of important theoretical perspectives.

### *Some Beliefs and Practises*

Mass attendance figures give some insight in the religious lives of students attending Catholic schools. If we compare the figures for Mass attendance of students with national statistics for all Catholics some interesting points emerge. Dixon and his colleagues have



*Professor Richard Rymarz is Head of Religious Education and Director of Research at the Broken Bay Institute*

provided the following figures for Mass attendance in Australia. In 2011 for the Sydney Archdiocese, 16.1 % of Catholics attended weekly Mass. For the Melbourne Archdiocese the weekly Mass attendance figure was 13.4%. For Ballarat the corresponding figure is 11.7% and for the Sale diocese 9.6%. The national figure was 12.2%. There is very significant age stratification in the national average figure. If we look at the age breakdown of these figures, for the 15-24 year old age group the national Mass attendance figure for that group in 2011 was 6.9%.<sup>7</sup>

	Each Sunday (%)	A few Sundays a month or once a month	Only at School	Never
Year 5	22.4	33.3	22.5	1
Year 11	17.7	18.1	28.7	4.5

**Table 1: Mass attendance rates (Sydney Catholic Schools)**

	Less than a week ago (%)	Less than two weeks	On a special occasion or on a Christian holy day	Long ago or never
Year 5/6	21.2	11.8	35	15.3
Year 11/12	11.4	4.4	45	25.2

**Table 1a When did you last attend a celebration of the Eucharist in your own time? (Masses at school do not count) (Victorian Catholic Schools)**

	Less than a week ago (%)	Less than a month ago	On a special occasion or on a Christian holy day	Long ago or never
Melbourne	21.4	13.6	38.9	13.7
Ballarat	16.0	13.7	40.7	18.7
Sale	18.2	11.2	35.5	22.4

**Table 1b When did you last attend a celebration of the Eucharist in your own time? (Breakdown of three Victorian Dioceses)**

The questions on Mass attendance in the Sydney and Victorian surveys are not identical but from them we can make comparisons and also comment in light of the national figures. If we compare the national figure for 15-24 years old attending Mass with the figures for senior students in Catholic schools we find far higher rates amongst students attending Catholic schools. This is an important point to note as it highlights that students in Catholic schools are not a typical sample of Catholic youth at least with regard Mass attendance. At the same time, there are significant numbers of students in Catholic schools who never or rarely attend Mass. There is also a marked decline in Mass attendance, especially in Victorian schools as students move from Year 5 to Year 11.

The figures for Sydney and Victorian schools are comparable. If we look at students in Year 11 or 12 in Sydney 17.7%

report weekly Mass attendance. The equivalent figure for Victorian schools if we combine weekly and fortnightly attendance is 15.8%. In both studies a higher number of students have only a fleeting experience of Mass attendance. In the Sydney data is we combine those students who report never going to Mass with those who attend only as school the figure comes to 33.2%. This is of a similar magnitude to those in the Victorian study who report never attending mass or attending long ago, 25.2%

A similar pattern emerges if we look at another key indicator of religious practice, that of frequency of prayer. Again the corresponding questions in each study are not identical and so some difference are more than likely. The Victorian definition of prayer is narrower and explicitly eliminates important categories of communal prayer from their definition.

	Each day %	Regularly	A few times a year	Never
Year 5	53.5	23.4	4.2	1.7
Year 11	28.2	19.8	13	12.1

**Table 2: Frequency of prayer (Sydney Catholic Schools)**

	I pray on a daily basis (%)	I pray regularly	I only pray in times of great happiness or trouble	I have never prayed before
Year 5/6	22.6	23.3	16.2	2.8
Year 11/12	11.1	8	23.8	14.5

**Table 2a How often do you pray to God individually? (Communal prayer at school, at church, *et cetera* does NOT count) (Victorian Catholic Schools)**

	I pray on a daily basis (%)	I pray regularly	I only pray in times of great happiness or trouble	I have never prayed before
Melbourne	22.1	21.4	16	4.5
Ballarat	12.8	16.8	19.3	10
Sale	15.4	15	17.9	11.2

**Table 2b How often do you pray to God individually? (Breakdown of three Victorian Dioceses)**

We see here as well a marked decline over the school years and is in keeping with the view that religious allegiance and sensibility plateau early in life.<sup>8</sup> This way of conceptualizing the religious world of young people is to see this world as characterized by relatively high indicators of religiosity, measured as both belief and behaviour early in life. Over a relatively short space of time there is a gradual decline in these measures, somewhat akin to metaphorically moving off a modest plateau until a stable point is reached in early adult life.

A point that can also be made about students in Catholic schools is that there may be important differences between students in regional areas and those in major cities. This

is evident if we examine more closely the figures from the Victorian dioceses. This reinforces the point that when discussing the religiosity of young people some account needs to be taken of local conditions. Religious practice as measured by Mass attendance and frequency of prayer tend to be at lower levels in a regional diocese such as Ballarat when compared to large cities like Melbourne or Sydney. This warrants closer examination but a key factor here could be the lower rates of immigrants to Australia settling in regional areas. A range of studies have shown that levels of religious practises tend to be far higher amongst immigrant Catholics than those who have been in Australia for some generations.<sup>9</sup>

The results here are generally supportive of the polarization thesis proposed by the Canadian sociologist Reginald Bibby. Using Canadian figures he notes that for teenagers in 2008, 47% never attend religious services of any kind. This compares to 28% in 1984.<sup>10</sup> At the same time, however, Bibby draws attention to a polarizing trend. This is manifested by a contrast between those with little or no religious affiliation, those with weak affiliation, and those who remain strongly committed. An indication of this is in the stability of figures for those who are connected with religious communities. The figure for teenagers, for instance, who attend church services at least once a week, has changed little in the survey period: 23% in 1984 and 21% in 2008. These figures are boosted by high numbers of immigrants in the survey. It seems unlikely that religious belief and practice, at least as these terms

have been traditionally understood, will disappear. What is apparent is that the numbers of those identifying with no or weak religious affiliation will continue to grow. This has significant implications for Catholic schools as it is likely that this polarization will be reflected in enrolment patterns in Catholic schools.

There is an extensive and ever expanding literature on the impact of secularization in post industrial Western nations such as Australia.<sup>11</sup> Much of this literature focusses on the applicability of the secularization thesis to various cultural contexts. One aspect of secularization which does have wide support is the idea that while religion may have some impact on a personal levels the influence of organized Churches both on public discourse and personal belief and behaviour is waning. In the Sydney and Victorian studies there is support for this notion.

	Year 5	Year 7	Year 9	Year 11
Most important (1) or 2nd most important	31.3	29.1	19.5	14.2
Least important (6) or 5th most important	21.3	30.6	46.9	55.3

**Table 3: Consider how each of the following influences your religion: Church (Sydney Catholic Schools)**

	Year 5/6	Year 7/8	Year 9/10	Year 11/12
The Catholic faith deserves my full support (%)	42.1	24.6	18	11.7
I think the Catholic faith is OK, but I remain critical of some parts of it	38.7	42.6	40.4	44.1
I have neither positive nor negative feelings about the Catholic faith	12.4	23.6	30	30.2
I dislike the Catholic faith	1.6	3.5	5.5	7.6

**Table 3a what is your attitude to the Catholic faith (Victorian Catholic Schools)**

	Melbourne	Ballarat	Sale
The Catholic faith deserves my full support (%)	32.9	23	25.3
I think the Catholic faith is OK, but I remain critical of some parts of it	47.9	50.1	42.9
I have neither positive nor negative feelings about the Catholic faith	13.9	20.3	19
I dislike the Catholic faith	1.7	3.2	5.9

**Table 3b What is your attitude to the Catholic faith (Breakdown of three Victorian Dioceses)**

The question of the importance of the Church in the Sydney data asks respondents to rank the most important influences in their lives. By Year 11 for most students in Catholic schools the Church is the least most important influence. At Year 5 level there is stronger support but this is not a majority view. In the Victorian study the demographic probe which best approximates this question on Church influences has a broader scope. It asks students about the level of support for the Catholic faith. It is interesting to note that the response with the highest frequency across all age groups is the one which describes the Catholic faith as 'OK'. By the senior end of school in the Victorian study a little over ten percent of students are fully supporting the Catholic faith. The ratio between those in full support to those who think that it is OK is about 1:4. This suggests that many students in the schools are not completely disaffiliating but are adapting a more guarded posture in relation to the Church. This is in keeping with the view that a manifestation of secularization need not be a total rejection of religious affiliation. Rather it is more likely to be described as a decreased personal involvement in the community of faith on the individual. The English sociologist of religion, Grace Davie, sees this process as a manifestation of the vicarious nature of religion in contemporary culture.<sup>12</sup>

### *Conclusion*

Students in Catholic schools are a significant sub group of the wider population. They also offer a very interesting snapshot of a particular expression of religiosity in contemporary Australian culture. Three aspects of this expression stand out from the data presented here. Firstly, students in Catholic schools seem to be more religious by conventional measures than samples of similarly aged Catholics in the wider community. In spite of this levels of religiosity amongst students in Catholic schools tend to peak in the early years of school and decline noticeably when measured again at the end of secondary school. Secondly, students also display a polarization of views where a minority express relatively strong religiosity but a growing number have very little connection to the religious community. Finally, students in Catholic schools do seem to support the view that many in Australian culture are content to maintain some religious connection. This connection is, however, quite tenuous and in keeping with a vicarious involvement.

All of these trends have implications for the future of Catholic schools and are evidence that schools are very much part of the wider culture. The shifts that are evident in relation to religion and society are also present in Catholic schools. Educational leader cannot

make easy assumptions about the student body enrolled in schools. Simple classifications of 'kids today' as anti religious or strongly connected or searching for answers

bellies such categorization. The best answer to what students in Catholic schools today are like is to respond, 'Well it depends on which students you are talking about!'

#### NOTES

1. A critically important study of Australian young people and religion is Michael Mason, Andrew Singleton and Ruth Webber, *The Spirit of Generation Y: Young People's Spirituality in a Changing Australia*. Melbourne: John Garrett Publishing, 2007.
2. In 2012 there were 735,403 students enrolled in Australian Catholic schools, *Australian Catholic Schools 2012*. Sydney: National Catholic Education Commission, 2013.
3. See for instance, William D'Antonio, James Davidson, Dean Hoge and Mary Gautier, *American Catholics Today: New Realities of Their Faith and Their Church*. New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2007. Christian Smith and Melinda Lindquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers*. New York, Oxford University Press, 2005. William D'Antonio, Michelle Dillon and Mary Gautier, *American Catholics in Transition*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2013. Christian Smith, Kyle Longest, K., Hill, J and Christoffersen, K. (2014). *Young Catholic America: Emerging Adults In, Out Of, and Gone From the Church*. New York: Oxford University Press.
4. From a peak enrolment of 5.2 million in the mid-1960s, current enrolment (2014) has declined to 1.9 million. And this trend, too, seems to be escalating. Between 2004 and 2014, the number of students in Catholic schools in the USA declined by 578,699 or 23%. See National Catholic Education Association, <https://www.ncea.org/data-information/catholic-school-data>.
5. Dieter Pollefeyt and Jan Bouwens, *Identity in Dialogue: Assessing and Enhancing Catholic School Identity. Research Methodology and Research Results in Catholic Schools in Victoria, Australia*. Berlin: Lit Verlag, 2014.
6. Catholic Archdiocese of Sydney, 2014 *Survey of Religious Attitudes and Practices*. Sydney: Catholic Education Office.
7. Robert Dixon, Stephen Reid and Marilyn Chee, M. *Mass Attendance in Australia: A Critical Moment*. Melbourne: Pastoral Research Moment, ACBC, 2013.
8. Richard Rymarz, Reaching the plateau: A follow up study on active adolescent Catholics. *Journal of Youth and Theology*, 2007, 6(2), 9-23.
9. For example see, Phillip Connor, *Immigrant Faith: Patterns of Immigrant Religion in the United States, Canada and Western Europe*. New York: New York University Press, 2014.
10. By way of comparison Bibby quotes the figure for all Canadians in 2010 who never attended church services as 42%. In addition 30% attended yearly. Reginald Bibby, *A New Day: The Resilience & Restructuring of Religion in Canada*. Toronto: Novalis, 2012, 9.
11. For example see, Callum Brown, *The Death of Christian Britain: Understanding Secularization 1800-2000*. London: Routledge, 2001. Karel Dobbelaere, *Secularization: An Analysis at Three Levels*. Brussels: Peter Lang, 2002.
12. Grace Davie, *The Sociology of Religion: A Critical Agenda*, London: Sage, 2013.

***This article is based upon the research data provided by Anthony Cleary.***

---

*Being a Catholic now is much more satisfying to one's spirit. There is less emphasis on head—formulas of doctrine, etc—and more emphasis on heart—responding to God and God's love.*