

GROUNDING HOPE IN UNCERTAIN TIMES

Mission and Catholic Schools

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Always be ready to make your defence to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you... (1 Peter 3:15)

Foundational Ideas

Catholics share faith in a Trinitarian God, a God understood as a community of persons. Catholics also believe human beings are made in the image of God, created to be persons-in-community. To be a person-in-community is, however, to be a person-in-culture, since all human communities exist in cultures. It is also to participate in the dialogues which create and sustain cultures.

Created in the image and likeness of God, ideally Catholics seek to be committed to God's mission in the manner taught and witnessed within human history by Jesus. The dynamic of mission is the creation of communities-for-mission, communities which are, at the same time, embedded in culture and maintained through dialogue.

The Catholic Church world-wide is a communion of these communities-in-mission. The emerging vision of what these communities, both individually and linked together, can be in the service of the Kingdom of God, provides a basis for profound hope.

Mission Community and Culture

A Time of Disconnection and Uncertainty

Today's young people are, indisputably, growing into adulthood in uncertain times. If the times are uncertain for young people, they are scarcely less so for those responsible for their education. In the religious domain, for example, the extraordinary advances in Bibli-

cal scholarship in recent decades, whilst potentially very enriching for teachers of the faith and their students, also bring with them the added requirement that teachers access appropriate and ongoing study and formation in order to carry out their ministry of teaching. There may also be the necessity of a sometimes painful 'letting go' of what has been one's previous grasp of the scriptural foundations of faith.

Advances in Biblical scholarship have occurred at the very time when the salience of the Christian story continues to diminish for many people. There is, therefore, much work to be done with the help of these advances, in rebuilding Christianity as a contemporary meta-narrative so that our young people may not only be proud of it as a principal source and shaper of their own personal worldviews, but may contribute to its ongoing enrichment.

God's Mission in a Church 'Becoming'

Beyond the revolution in Biblical scholarship, it is also important to note other ecclesial factors. In terms of historical experience, students attending Catholic schools today do so in a unique ecclesial environment. They are one of the first generations to grow up in a Church which is becoming truly global, no longer a European Church with branch offices in other cultural regions of the world, as had been the case for many centuries. The potential of these communities, networked across the globe, to welcome and help form today's

young people as global citizens and as Christians, is enormous.

A feature of this new ecclesial environment is the emergence at the most official level, of a dramatic change in the understanding of the Church's mission. As an outcome of the work of the Second Vatican Council (1962-65), God's mission is being re-situated at the centre of ecclesial self-understanding. The key insight on mission adopted by the Council is expressed in *Ad Gentes 2*: 'The Church on earth is by its very nature missionary since, according to the plan of the Father, it has its origin in the mission of the Son and the Holy Spirit'. Instead of focussing on the various goals of missionary engagement as had been expected, the Council switched focus onto the nature of the Church itself, and declared it to be fundamentally missional. Over time the implications of this shift in mission understanding are being worked through.

A cluster of associated insights has accompanied the major shift. If the whole Church is missionary by its very nature, then one of the most important corollaries is that each baptised member is called to embrace God's mission in some way. Jesus identified his mission as making present God's dream for humanity, which he called the Kingdom of God. Each one of the baptised is, therefore, similarly called to help God's Kingdom break into the milieus that form the matrix of human life. The issue for educators is: how can young people and their teachers make sense of this?

With this key insight of the Second Vatican Council mission has once again, as in the period prior to the first expansion of Europe into the Americas in the 16th century, taken on a Trinitarian character. The God of Jesus Christ is understood as a Trinity of persons whose essence is community. God's life is shared with others through creation which ushered in the beginning of history. Within history God's mission is carried forward in the making whole of all creation (cf Mark 16:15). The pursuit of this mission across time is carried forward in ways known fully only to God.



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In the years following the Second Vatican Council, the word which quickly became synonymous with the Church's mission was 'evangelization'. It is a broad term covering what the Church does in pursuing its mission. As the Gospels clearly show us, it implies both the speaking of good news (proclamation by word) and the living of good news (proclamation by witness). As the Gospels also show us such proclamation inevitably leads to dialogues as to the meaning of the proclamation. We see this very clearly, for example, in the dialogues which accompany Jesus' own proclamation in John's Gospel. In any era the shape of appropriate witness to the good news will vary with the circumstances impacting on people's lives. In our times, witness obviously must include work for justice, human liberation and reconciliation, and an imperative to care for God's creation.

Jesus' Mission and the Kingdom of God

When, as a metaphor for God's mission, Jesus used the phrase 'the Kingdom of God', he was employing words redolent with mean-

ing for his hearers (Fuellenbach, 1995). Jesus drew on these understandings but also gave them added, and sometimes different significance, particularly in his kingdom parables.

The community of disciples (the Church) is not only at the service of this Kingdom but, ideally, themselves constitute a social space where people can actively experience the Kingdom in the here and now. The invitation to young people to make a positive choice for the Church community must, therefore, be clearly accepted by them as an invitation to join a community whose goal is to create, both within and beyond itself, the Kingdom of God.

Discipleship means accepting the challenge to learn to create and maintain a religious and social space where people actually experience the Kingdom, as well as gain the formation and spiritual strength to increase its scope. This occurs in families, schools, parishes, dioceses, and the many other communities which are influenced by the movement of the Holy Spirit.

Jesus identified his own life and mission with the covenantal requirement of his own people when he gave his own 'mission statement':

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, and to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour (Luke 4:18-19).

Contrast Communities

The Hebrew tradition on which our Christian tradition stands, grows out of an experience of being called by God to be of significance in God's pursuit of wholeness for creation. This was expressed in the covenant as an agreement to be a 'contrast society' that is a society in which relationships with, and action on behalf of, the most marginalised were to mark the essential difference between God's people and surrounding peoples (Fuellenbach, 1995, 30). Through the mediums of narrative, law and liturgy Israel assembled over time an

oral and written tradition whose interpretation was central in establishing its identity as a contrast society.

The Christian tradition focuses on a second deliberate intervention by God in regard to the inauguration of a contrast community through the life and ministry of Jesus. The call to discipleship that lies at the heart of God's mission is a call to be co-creators of contrast communities. Contrast communities live within a culture and, in mission, challenge certain expressions of the culture when these do not align with the values of the Kingdom. The Christian conception of contrast community differs from the earlier Jewish conception of Israel's covenantal responsibilities. Whereas the Hebrew conception defines identity as separation from other societies, the Christian community lives within society, not separate from it.

Rebuilding the Catholic Sub-Culture for Mission

Sub-cultures, particularly major ones such as Australian Catholicism, are multi-dimensional constructs. If we are to rebuild our Australian Catholic sub-culture so as to be effectively missional, then the work needs to proceed at a number of levels.

Whatever model of culture one works from, it is widely recognized that it is the ideational area within culture which must be affected if in-depth change is to occur (c.f. Cote, 1996; Luzbetak, 1988; Tanner, 1997). This area is comprised of the beliefs, values, symbols and ideas which, coupled with the dynamic myths, lie at the heart of a people's culture. Change at this level is difficult to achieve, but once it does occur, it is pervasive in its effects.

Changes in the understanding of mission are undoubtedly among the most significant to occur in the ideational area of Catholicism worldwide in recent centuries. Such changes and their implications lie at the heart of the reconstruction of Australian Catholicism, affecting the way it construes its various ministries, including those to young people in schools.

As with other Catholic churches worldwide, our re-building takes place not only in our unique context, but also within the global context. The factors that impact on all societies and cultures, *viz* globalisation and the increased pluralisation in many facets of human life, are also affecting us. Western societies such as our own are also experiencing advanced secularisation (Rolheiser, 2006).

In dealing with the extreme pluralism within society, the challenge is to put in place processes of dialogue so that the many understandings and expressions of truth, beauty and goodness held among humans may be appropriately evaluated and shared, with the resulting insights brought to bear constructively on human living.

Communities Sustaining Persons for Mission

Insight into God as community of persons with a mission or purpose in regard to the whole of creation is implicit in the Christian scriptures. Coupled with this is the understanding, common to both Hebrew and Christian scriptures, of the human person as made in the image and likeness of God. The human person, then, is created as a person-in-community with a mission to make whole all of creation. It is a mission with personal and communal dimensions, since it is directed at persons, communities and cultures.

Since all communities exist within a broader culture, to be a person-in-community is to be a person in a culture. Christian communities carry a responsibility to be aware of the extent to which the seeds of the Word are present in their local culture and where the culture actually constrains the freedom to love as God wills, indicating an absence of the Word. As contrast communities members of Christian communities are also concerned with how the public culture impacts on the lives of other groups besides themselves. Contrast communities need to look outwards as well as inwards when it comes to building God's Kingdom. Their mission is to address local reali-

ties in terms that make sense within the parameters of the local culture.

Renewing the Sense of Mission

A renewed sense of mission is more likely to take life in our Catholic sub-culture if the community is involved in dialogical processes which engage the community's members. This dialogue needs to be carried on at three levels and involves asking very fundamental questions:

At the level of mission

- Is our school community's life an end in itself, or does it exist for a purpose beyond itself. If so, what?

At the level of culture

- In what ways does our Australian culture both liberate and constrain our freedom in understanding and pursuing the mission of our school community?

At the level of community life

- To what extent does our school community proclaim and witness to Jesus and his mission, in our particular context?

Because not everyone views community life and mission from the same perspective, dialogue is absolutely essential, even among those ostensibly committed to participation in mission. Dialogue is carried on not only in words, or formal processes, but also in the acts of living, acting, and reflecting. It is a dialogue embedded in the praxis of the community. Christian identity emerges from the sense of belonging which results from active engagement in this praxis.

Orientations within a Living Tradition

A Biblical Model for Dialogue

Walter Brueggemann, a highly respected Biblical scholar and commentator particularly on the Old Testament, explores the orientations which the Old Testament faith communities brought to bear on their religious experience, and which took shape in the canon of their Scriptures. His classic work, *The Creative Word* (1982), has exceptional relevance for

contemporary educators. Brueggemann's thesis is that the process of differentiation within the canon of the Hebrew Bible into Torah, Prophets and Writings is not a matter of chance but presents us with a model of dialogue which is fundamental to Israel's identity and to its living out of that identity as a contrast society.

In the Old Testament, the Torah combines both the central narrative of Israel and the Law which gives the community life and direction. It is the most sacred and fundamental part of the Jewish tradition, but not the final word on the whole of the tradition.

Within Israel's social structure, the Torah orientation characterised the leadership, whose responsibility it was to ensure that God's covenant with the people was honoured. It was a responsibility shared between the priests and the king. As history attests, the kings found it difficult to lead Israel as a 'contrast society', not surprisingly since there were few models to follow. The tendency was always to move towards cultural accommodation with surrounding peoples, with the result that the Torah orientation was often co-opted to serve the king's ends.

Moving the analysis onto a Biblical canvas encompassing both Old and New Testaments, we can say that people within the faith community with a 'Torah' orientation are those who see it as their essential responsibility to preserve the essence of God's disclosure to God's people. This is because such disclosure is fundamental to the faith of the community. It provides the ethos which underpins both identity and mission.

All faith communities, irrespective of the cultures in which they exist, need members who have a 'Torah' orientation, a sense of what is fundamental and non-negotiable in defining the identity and mission of the group. Obviously, difficulties arise when such people impose their own views of what is fundamental and non-negotiable in place of what God has disclosed, thus introducing distortion with consequent division, and the pursuit of self-interest.

In the life of Israel, the corrective to this form of distortion was the prophets. As Brueggemann expresses it, the perspective of the prophet was shaped by the gap identified between what God had promised and what the religious leaders and the king were delivering.

The ministry of the prophets proceeded on the twin bases of love of the tradition and critique of current practice. They spoke strongly against lack of justice for and exploitation of the most vulnerable members, incompetence and poor judgment of rulers, lack of vision including incapacity to frame an alternative vision to present practice, and liturgy which in consequence was problematic and dishonoured God. Prophets also denounced cultural accommodations that undermined Israel's covenantal relationship and subverted it as a contrast society.

The prophets recognised the power of symbolic action in communicating their message, and were adept at marshalling the symbols of their culture to enhance the impact of their message. Such action often generated a dialogue which shaped Israel's identity. Despite this, their role was not always appreciated. In addition, leaders sometimes recruited false prophets to justify courses of action, or to provide religious legitimisation to various forms of cultural accommodation which were inconsistent with God's covenant and with Israel's commitment to be a contrast society.

Whilst the dialogue which resulted from prophecy helped establish Israel's identity and mission, another 'voice' also participated in the shaping of this identity and mission, viz 'the Writings'. This sector of the Old Testament includes the Psalms and the Wisdom literature. It continued to shape Israel's narrative into the Hellenistic period.

By comparison with the two previous authoritative forms of knowing and their allied orientations held within the faith community, the Writings represent a more muted voice in the dialogue of identity. Within the Psalms and the Wisdom literature, the concern is not what God has done for Israel in the past, nor how

secular and religious leaders are delivering God's promise, but rather how God's presence is discovered and celebrated in ordinary human experience. How is God's presence experienced in the prayer life of our community? How does the wisdom of Israel compare with that of other communities? What has been learned about living as a contrast society? How do these understandings bear on day to day decisions? The concern in the Writings is less with God's disclosure in regard to mission and identity (Torah), or with critique (Prophets), but with what needs to be done in the here and now to keep community life purposeful and on an even keel. The Wisdom orientation is pragmatic, focussed on what works for the community within its cultural context.

Pluralism as a Strength in Community Life

Brueggemann's contention is that a healthy religious community recognises and encourages the development of all three 'voices' among its members. The Torah voice focuses on what is central and always essential. The Prophetic voice challenges in terms of the vision and performance, that is, it identifies the gap between the promise which follows God's disclosure and the experience of people in the here and now. The Wisdom voice is concerned with making sense of things in the present and effectively using the resources of culture to their full potential, including in worship. All three voices share a common love of the tradition and narrative of the community, albeit appreciated from different perspectives (See also Malcolm, 2002, 24-30).

In working to create genuine hope for young people, it is essential that the education offered is not indulging a particular, perhaps unwitting, preference for one orientation to the neglect of the others. Not only do young people have the right to a thorough grounding in the whole Tradition, but it is essential that they see and experience the interconnectedness between the three orientations. They need to learn that dialogue-in-community is a conse-

quence of being a person-in-community, a person made in the image of God. As in Israel, none of us has the right to alter the Tradition in the sense of providing a less-than-wholistic or distorted introduction to the whole. The substance of our religious task lies in the whole. How competent are our teachers to deliver in this regard? Do such considerations feature in discussing the mission of the school?

Grounding Hope—Educational Challenges

It is not difficult to transfer consideration from Brueggemann's canvas, the Old Testament, to include the Christian Scriptures and the experience of the past two thousand years in which communities have attempted to engage in faithful living. Nor is it surprising that, independently of Brueggemann's work, Gonzales (1999), and Bevans and Shroeder (2004) have found quite similar orientations in Christian theology, as they have worked on issues of mission and identity. These scholars argue for the recognition and value of the pluralism inherent in our tradition. They also argue the need for dialogue within Christian communities as a way forward in re-configuring Catholic culture, and developing a new sense of belonging consistent with this reconfiguration. This is important in any work of evangelisation.

There are many implications for school leaders which emanate from the above discussion. The following represent some obvious examples. Teachers and leaders have a grave obligation to educate in the tradition *in its entirety*. In uncertain times, when we have to work particularly diligently at recognising the points of continuity and discontinuity in the way we relate to the heart of our faith tradition, the tendency to be inappropriately selective must be avoided. The surest foundation of the hope which will sustain young people and teachers alike is genuine and imaginative leadership in accessing God's disclosure to us as given in the canon of Scripture, and in our Catholic faith tradition, lived and offered within an ecclesial community-in-mission.

Students grow up in a particular youth sub-culture (Crawford & Rossiter, 2006). It is important to understand and have some empathy with its aspirations while being able to recognise both its limitations and potential as a vehicle to advance God's Kingdom. There is much that is intuitively prophetic in youth culture.

Communities that are not strongly and clearly mission-oriented are likely to be problematic in our post-modern context, and will struggle with the issue of identity. This is obvious in the case of school practices. Strategic planning, for example, even though rightly attractive to the Wisdom orientation within our tradition, does not in itself demonstrate that a school is mission-oriented, even if it gives lip service to what is fundamental in terms of a Torah orientation. Only if strategic planning is used as a servant of the whole Tradition, and is embedded in the Tradition as the foundation and model of the educational process, can the extent of the present attention and level of resourcing being given to it within Catholic Education be justified.

To encourage young people along the path of prophetic engagement is a core part of the educational enterprise, and one particularly suited to the sensibilities and generosity of the young. However, without capacity to discern the dysfunctionalities in our society so as to provide for human betterment, even the best efforts of generous people can be quickly dissipated. Similarly, without a firm adherence to the core of God's disclosure as given in Christ and lived in community, the prophetic voice tends to grow shrill or off-key, and finally becomes muted.

In Brueggemann's analysis the educational challenge is the same as that inherent in the living of the Tradition. *It is a challenge to see and live the connectedness of the elements.* We see the importance of this only too readily when we recognise that our sacramental life often seems to bear little connection with our struggle for justice, or our acceptance of the Holy Spirit seems not to seriously guide the sense we must make of living in a very com-

plex and seriously fragmented world.

Prayer and the willingness to pray are essential ingredients in all three orientations. There is thus no single orientation to prayer either for individuals or for the school community which alone does justice to our faith Tradition. People will come to value prayer through the experience of all three orientations. It is important to keep this in mind in preparing prayer opportunities and liturgies.

Fundamental to all three orientations within one Tradition, and to the sustaining of hope, is life in community. This is a great strength of most Catholic schools and provides a very sound basis on which to build in securing identity and mission.

God's mission exists beyond the scope of the Church's mission. Jesus' teaching on the Kingdom of God is a crucial element in taking forward God's mission in our work. Over many years we have had cause to be seriously concerned at the lack of even a basic grasp of Jesus' teaching on the Kingdom amongst Catholic school personnel with whom we have been involved in study programs. Given that such understanding is fundamental to grasping both Jesus' mission and that of His Church, this constitutes a substantial challenge.

Building the culture of the school on the basis that the dignity of each individual lies in being a person-in-community has serious implications for school practices. These implications pertain to what the school promotes, what it asks of its teachers, and how it relates to the local Catholic communities such as family, parish and diocese. They bear directly on the hope students have of a better world and their place in it.

Since community cannot be separated from the culture in which it exists amongst teachers and leaders, more serious attention needs to be given to what is empowering and disempowering for people who live in Christian communities in Australia. Where is the culture inimical to the Gospel and where does it carry the seeds of the Word? What are the implications of the answer to this question for

the entire curriculum? A contrast community needs to know what it aligns with, and what it stands in contrast from, if it is to be an effective witness to the Gospel.

Conclusion

The theme of this paper has been the grounding of hope in uncertain times. We live in a post-modern era, a time of becoming, when it is difficult to discern what the shape of societal and cultural change will be, even in the immediate term. This has forced some fundamental re-evaluation of what it means to be Church and in consequence, what it means to be Catholic. The dynamics at work are complex. It seems impossible to retreat to the security of a traditional community and at the same time engage people with the message of Jesus 'to the ends of the earth'.

The dynamics of change point to the importance of ongoing discernment of God's mission and the responsibility of discipleship carried out by persons-in-community. There are a number of ways of framing responses that will be reached through dialogue, each

with its own legitimacy. Mission therefore needs to be formulated in a way that respects the 'dignity of difference' (Sacks, 2002) found in all authentic Catholic communities now and across time. Such an approach provides a basis for hope and unity within diversity.

A time of 'becoming' is also a time for choosing. This paper has endeavoured to explore some of the parameters of choice opened up by the developing theology of mission which has emerged as a result of the Second Vatican Council. Catholic identity is in the process of being redefined under pressure of changes occurring globally. If the mission challenges are grasped, the result will be a richer rather than a diminished understanding of what it means to be Catholic and a member of the Church. The outcome rests not only with Catholic leaders but with God's Spirit. In this context wise leaders recognise that young people deserve to be grounded in their tradition in all its richness. They also recognise that young people have their own role to play in the enrichment of that Tradition, as shapers and not merely inheritors.

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