

# A Community Called Catholic School

## INTRODUCTION

In this article I want to explore a paradox or tension that the Catholic School experiences in its relationship to the Church. On the one hand, the Catholic School shares in the evangelising mission of the Church to bring the Good News of Jesus to all in its midst<sup>1</sup>. Yet, on the other hand, the Catholic School, while representing the Church in the educational service of others, is not the Church itself. The experience of this paradox is nowhere more poignantly felt than when the School gathers to celebrate the Eucharist. I would like to invite your reflection on the Catholic School as an community welcoming all.

## AN INCLUSIVE COMMUNITY

In more recent years, and in some countries more so than in others, we have witnessed a significant shift in the religious composition of Catholic Schools. Parents and educators of all persuasions are attracted to Catholic Education because of its caring ethos and its record of excellence. Now, can we welcome families into our school community on a basis of a differentiated membership described by the distinction ‘Catholic’ and non-Catholic’? In the first place, we need to acknowledge positively the identity of each and every member, and then we need to ensure that the community operates in such a way that each and every one has a sense of total belonging.

In order to move towards becoming truly inclusive, a good starting point will be to clarify our understanding of the community we call Catholic School. We need to distinguish it from the Catholic Church to which it is, of course, intimately linked. We can describe the Catholic Church as that community whose members,

*possessing the Spirit of Christ, accept all the means of salvation given to the Church together with her entire organisation, and who - by the bonds constituted by the profession of faith, the sacraments, ecclesiastical government, and communion - are joined in the visible structure of the Church of Christ, who rules her through the Supreme Pontiff and the bishops.*<sup>2</sup>

The Catholic School, by way of contrast, may be seen as a community animated by the same Spirit, but whose organic composition is different. It is a place where the Church and the World meet and interact – a community brought to birth by the Church but going beyond its boundaries. The Catholic School is a presence of the Church in service of the World, and in dialogue with the World. Both Church and School are illumined by the Light of Christ, but, whereas in the former case, all the members will consciously acknowledge this, the members of the latter may not necessarily do so. The School is called Catholic, then, because it is an initiative of the

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<sup>1</sup> See *Fostering Hope*, p 5

<sup>2</sup> Vatican Council II. *Lumen Gentium*, paragraph 14

Church, strives for harmony with its values, and offers this particular strand of Christian tradition as a resource for personal and communal growth.

How, then, do we acknowledge the presence of individuals from different religious traditions, and those from none, in the school community, and so avoid the description 'non-Catholic'? Our description should harmonise the term 'Catholic', which describes a historical entity, with 'catholic', which means universal and open to all. We need to affirm the Methodist, the Hindu, the agnostic in our midst. We also need to acknowledge the contributions that these traditions can make to ensuring that we are indeed Catholic.

## THE SCHOOL EUCHARIST

The Catholic School is a community that invites all to participate, but it faces a dilemma when it comes to worship, especially if such worship takes the form of the Eucharist. For then, at the point of expressing unity in Christ, the community is divided into Church and not-Church. Pope John Paul II's encyclical letter, *The Church and Eucharist*, explains why this is so when it underlines the ecclesial nature of eucharistic communion: "The Eucharist, as the supreme sacramental manifestation of communion in the Church, demands to be celebrated in a context where the outward bonds of communion are also intact."<sup>3</sup>

While this is understood, is there no alternative? How can we include the whole school community in its most meaningful symbolic act? How do we give expression to the voice of Jesus when he says, "Let the children come to me; do not try to stop them; for the Kingdom of Heaven belongs to such as these"?<sup>4</sup> How might we capture our common aspiration to unity? When the same encyclical says that the Eucharist "creates communion and fosters communion"<sup>5</sup>, how might this be applied to the Catholic School's eucharistic practice? In another place, the encyclical provides a clue: "It is not possible to give communion to a person who is not baptised or to one who rejects the full truth of the faith regarding the eucharistic mystery."<sup>6</sup> A positive rendering of this statement indicates what *is* possible. Can the Catholic School not invite all baptised believers to participate in the eucharistic meal?

Good practice, I suggest, would need to hold the tension between ecclesiastical norms and pastoral sensitivity. I would not advocate the open invitation as a matter of course, say at weekly school Masses, but certainly at special occasions decided by the school in consultation with the local bishop, and with his approval. Might we approach the Bishops' Conference to provide some overall direction in this regard for South African Catholic Schools?

We are left to consider the inclusion of members of other faiths. It is true that, according to our policy, "we strive to reach an agreement about participation in ... liturgical worship"<sup>7</sup>. Yet, agreement is not one-sided, its terms not dispassionately imposed. Have we ever elicited from these pupils suggestions as to how they might

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<sup>3</sup> *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, paragraph 38

<sup>4</sup> Matthew 19:14

<sup>5</sup> *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, paragraph 40

<sup>6</sup> *ibid*, paragraph 38

<sup>7</sup> *Fostering Hope*, p 10

feel more included? Are we aware of their experience of the Eucharist? We need to do some work in this area.

## CONCLUSION

In the article, *Time on the Slopes*, in the previous issue of *Catholic Education News*, I argued that we should spend more time in paraliturgical activity, which lends itself more easily to inclusion and to educationally sound innovation than official liturgy does. We could reserve the latter to high points in the school year, and develop liturgical knowledge, skills and attitudes through more contextual acts of communal worship, designed by students with adult guidance. Such activity would, as I suggested, enliven the time spent at the summit, and provide a pool of ideas to achieve greater inclusion there.

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