

Seeing the ‘deeper magic of life’: A Catholic Response to the Forum on Patronage and Pluralism in the Primary Sector

The Forum on Patronage and Pluralism in the Primary Sector report deserves serious attention as it proposes some fundamental changes to the nature of primary education in Ireland today. The reason for the Forum in the first place is the growing and shared recognition among all the different stakeholders in Irish education of the need for a multiplicity of school types in Irish society. Currently, 96 % of schools have denominational patronage and 4% have multi-denominational patronage, leading to the consensus on the need for greater diversity of schools. Divestiture of Catholic schools is one of the ways to provide for a greater diversity. Where there is a recognized need among stakeholders, Catholic schools will be divested to other patrons such as Educate Together or Community National Schools (CNS). An Foras Pátrúnachta, Redeemed Christian Church of God and Lifeways Ireland are also named in the report as potential patrons.

Any change in patronage of an existing school implies a change in that school’s characteristic spirit. What is not clear is how the characteristic spirit of a school will change as a result of new patronage or what exactly will replace a spirit traditionally inspired by Catholic Christianity.

Every school has a characteristic spirit, either by design or by default. There is no such thing as a neutral ethos. A characteristic spirit can be like an iceberg – only a small proportion obvious; the invisible bulk providing the anchor. In this article we attempt to say something about the characteristic spirit of the Catholic school because it impinges directly on the Forum report and raises questions about some of its recommendations, particularly those relating to Stand Alone schools. We try to make visible some ways this spirit vivifies the school and its lived out, everyday, practical dimensions.

Faith based schools, like all schools, have a legal responsibility and a right to uphold a school ethos or characteristic spirit. In Catholic schools, this characteristic spirit is rooted in Catholic Christianity, which gives rise to certain principles or ways of looking at the world. We outline some of the many fundamental principles of Catholic Christianity and how they manifest in Catholic schools so that when discussing the recommendations of the Forum on Stand Alone schools, we are clear about what is at stake.

Meaning and ultimate meaning

The first principle relates to the basic human question: does my life have meaning and if so where does it come from; do I give meaning to my own life or does my life have a meaning outside the one I give it? Meaning refers to the significance or import of something – why something matters. People make meaning in their lives in all sorts of ways, for instance through the experience of love and friendship, of making a contribution, or just doing something they love.

For the Christian, life has meaning. There is more to life than what we see on the surface. The Catholic school therefore is a place which recognizes that part of the human condition is a restlessness which gives rise to a search for meaning. That life has meaning is integral to the ethos of a Catholic school.

Christian belief in God

A natural corollary to the question of meaning now adds the word 'ultimate'. Is there an ultimate meaning to my life and is there an ultimate purpose to existence? How one answers these age old questions will be predicated on one's belief or not in God. If one does not believe in God, there is no ultimate significance to one's sense of meaning, value or purpose. If one believes in God, then one's image of God is very important.

Catholic Christians believe in the God revealed in Jesus Christ. However, sometimes images of God emerge disconnected from the person of Jesus Christ. One such image is that of the Cosmic Computer Player. This is a god who sits on high, makes judgments on his subjects and punishes at will. Like a player sitting at an enormous cosmic computer, this god randomly pushes buttons that can have catastrophic consequences, from the death of a child to tsunami wave destruction. A second anti-Christian image is that of the Therapeutic God whose sole function is to make us feel good about ourselves. The Therapeutic God feeds our hunger for affirmation without ever challenging destructive behaviours or helping us to discern how best to grow into the people we were made to become.

The Christian God came among us as a baby, born in the humblest of circumstances, raised by a loving family and a mother who encouraged and stayed with him until the moment he died, although a sword would pierce her heart. This God taught of a Reign of love and peace and justice for all people and all of creation. This God suffered and died at the hands of a mob and then overcame death in the resurrection. This God lives on in us – we are his hands and feet, his mind, heart and strength – the Body of Christ in the World today.

A Catholic school therefore would be failing this cornerstone belief if it did not introduce children to God through the New Testament especially the Jesus stories of the Gospels; if it did not teach children Christian prayers, especially the prayers to Jesus and his Blessed Mother, if it did not remember the Jesus stories in appropriate ways by following the liturgical year and if it did not embody the values of this God – who is love (1 John 4:8).

Let's unpack for instance the symbolic importance of the crib at Christmas. The Christmas crib is the visible image of the birth of the Christ child. It can teach the profound implications of the Incarnation to a five year old in the same way that it can strike a chord of remembrance with the adult population of a school community. It teaches that Christmas is not simply about trees and decorations, new clothes and presents. It speaks of those humble beginnings and encourages us to look beyond the manipulation of media advertising to the values that Christmas stands for – values that are surely acceptable to those of any religious tradition and none – that regardless of circumstance, we can always help those who in need, that the love of family is irreplaceable, that something wonderful can emerge even from the most humble of beginnings, that the stranger has much to teach and the lowly have much to tell. If we really want to teach people about inclusion, what better place to start?

In a Catholic school the nativity story cannot be presented as one Christmas story among many. It is *the* Christmas story. It is the story of the Incarnation – a central mystery for Christians. The baby in the manger is often depicted with his arms wide open in welcome; only from this central

and rooted position can we be sure of our responsibility to do the same. This is the real nature of inclusion. Here is the inspiration for welcoming the privileged and the marginalised, the majestic and the ordinary, the familiar and the foreigner from a distant land, from a different religious tradition. When placed in this context, the evidence cited in the Forum report that inter-faith and inter-cultural initiatives work best in schools where the Catholic population is most committed to its own religious practice.

Our education system, in fostering the whole child, needs to explore questions of meaning and ultimate meaning in both what is taught and learned in our schools. Children need access to resources to live and explore these dimensions of what it means to be human. An emerging difference in school identity is concerned with this question of ultimacy. Given their theistic foundation, Catholic schools will naturally allow for this dimension of human life. This is not something that can be confined to the formal teaching of Religious Education. The Catholic school's world view has within it a belief that life is ultimately meaningful, valuable and purposeful. This ought to be a part of the culture of the school, and engage every aspect of school life, both formal and informal. In this context, an approach that only speaks of the phenomenon of religion rather than student's experience of faith and questions of ultimacy is insufficient.

Relationship with Jesus Christ

The belief in God as revealed to us in Jesus Christ is the inspiration, mission and vision of the Catholic school. Further, Christians believe not only in Jesus Christ as the inspiration, but that relationship with him has the power to transform the human condition. We are all imperfect, incomplete. Every one of us is flawed and vulnerable. We are at our best and become our best in positive relationships. And the most important relationship is with God. The Christian God is a Trinitarian God - Father Son and Spirit - or as Augustine describes Lover, Beloved and the Love in between. The word 'God' refers not so much to an individual; rather, it refers to a relationship of self-giving love, between Father, Son and Spirit. Since we are created in the image of God, (not an individual person but a relationship of love), we reflect that image best when we are in loving relationships and fostering those conditions for others.

Therefore, loving relationship is the most important aspect to any Christian community including the Catholic school. And so it places at its centre the invitation to personal relationship with Jesus Christ, the face of God. Children can learn to make sense of early, crucial, relational experiences such as friendship, betrayal, belonging or bullying in relation to Jesus the Son, the friend, the teacher, the refugee, the lost boy in the big city. Here is the God with whom children can relate, who wants to walk the journey with each one of us, who calls us to grow into the persons we were made to be and gives us the strength and wherewithal to do exactly that.

Sacramental Imagination

When C.S. Lewis was asked why he had written *The Chronicles of Narnia*, he replied that he wanted children to experience something of "the deeper magic of life." Through his stories, he wanted children to experience God, to encounter the power and mystery of Christ through the character of Aslan. He hoped *The Chronicles* would engage with the real lives of children - their curiosity and wonder, their disappointments and sense of unfairness, their experiences of friendship and betrayal – and awaken their sense of the sacred. As a Christian, CS Lewis

believed that the presence of God pervades all dimensions of life albeit often hidden from the naked eye.

This is crucial to Catholic education. It is about learning the habit of seeing beneath or behind or within what is obvious and noticing the sacred. Sometimes this can happen out of the blue. We might be caught unaware by something beautiful and experience a profound connection to a life force often referred to as God. For instance, the birth of a child might prompt such an experience. However, rather than the ‘out of the blue’ effect, Catholic Christianity notices the presence of God in the ordinary and everyday moments of our lives. This presupposes that God’s presence is not confined to a church or holy place, or indeed to a 30 minute slot of formal Religious Education.

The belief that God is present in the ordinary and everyday bits and pieces of life has often been lost in time and translation. This appears to be the case with some of the underlying assumptions in the Forum report. The insight of theologian Richard Gaillardetz helps to make this point. In the first illustration (figure 1), the emphasis is on the distance and difference between God and the rest of the world. In this framework, “God is conceived as an individual being who is bigger, better, and more powerful than ourselves, but an individual nonetheless.”¹ The central point is that God is an individual, out there beyond our planet.

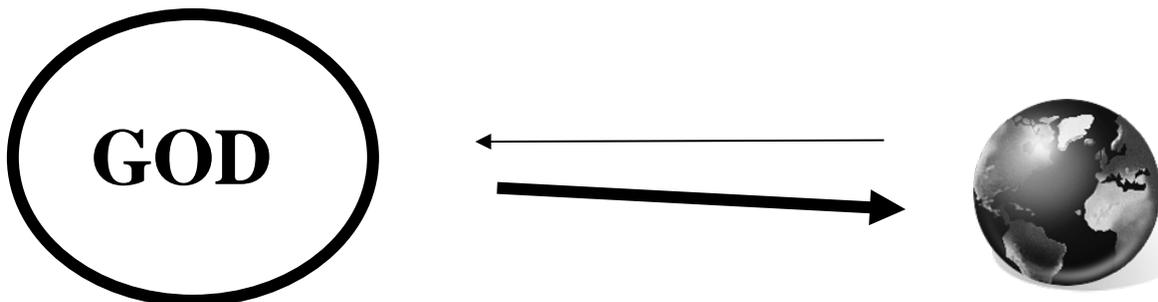


Figure 1²

Gaillardetz believes that this is the way many Christians think about God today. God is outside the world and responds from time to time to our prayers and intercessions. If God is competing for my attention among everything else, then my encounter with God will only happen at particular times, perhaps in response to prayer or going to mass. In this way, life is organized in a dualistic manner between what is sacred and what is secular. So for instance, saying a prayer is sacred while leaning English literature, playing in the school yard or participating in sports is secular.

This understanding and image of God has many serious consequences. One such consequence evident in the report is an understanding of God as an outside agent who can be confined to the visible and empirical, such as formal Religious Education, religious artifacts and celebrations. If

¹ Gaillardetz, *Transforming Our Days: Spirituality, Community, and Liturgy in a Technological Culture*, 47.

² This image is copied from *Ibid.*, 48.

these visible and empirical trappings are removed then God is removed. Thus a once Catholic characteristic spirit is rendered secular and acceptable. Of course this is at best an impoverished notion of Christian theology and the characteristic spirit of the Catholic school.

The second, and more authentically Christian perspective offered by Gaillardetz is radically different. In the second illustration, God is the “loving and creative ground of our existence, the very atmosphere in whom we ‘live and move and have our being’” (Acts 17:28). In this image, the world is *in* God. Within this framework, there is no such thing as a dualistic notion of what is sacred or secular. All is sacred, for all is in God and all can disclose God’s presence. This is illustrated in Figure 2.



Figure 2

In this view, everything in the life of a school such as making friends, reading a poem, winning one day and losing the next can disclose the presence and action of God. When the spirit is attuned, we can notice God any time, any place – in the corridor, classroom, school yard or chapel. Those moments when we notice or experience God in our lives are referred to as sacramental moments. A sacrament reveals the presence of God; it is a moment of encounter with Christ. While we might be familiar with the seven Sacraments of the Catholic Church, we need to remember that everything can disclose God’s presence and so everything can be sacramental. But we need to learn to see beneath or behind the obvious. To use Lewis’ terms, we need to see ‘the deeper magic of life’. The ability to do this is sometimes referred to as the sacramental imagination. While it is a natural capacity, the sacramental imagination needs to be nurtured so that it becomes part of someone’s way of being. Habits such as the ability to pause, to pray, to be present to oneself and to become aware of the presence of others and of God in our lives foster the sacramental imagination. But they need practice. As a hurler completes thousands of drills so that a particular move becomes a natural part of his game, so too with the practice of habits. This is fundamental to the daily rhythm of a Catholic school.

One real value of a sacramental imagination is the understanding of the world as sacred. Everything and every person in it is capable of revealing God, and is worthy of justice and respect. This goes to the heart of what it means to be Catholic and is part of the culture in any Catholic school as evidenced by the emphasis on service to others and educating children for justice. In a 2008 Department of Education survey, Catholic schools were deemed the most inclusive school type at primary level and more likely to enrol children from non-Irish backgrounds, from the Traveller community and with special needs. It is therefore of little

wonder that the Minister for Education and Skills noted that one the strengths of the (predominantly Catholic) primary system has been that the local primary school has been very inclusive of all children within its community.

The problem

The problem with the Forum report is that it appears predicated on the former, dualistic understanding of God. This is particularly apparent in its recommendations regarding Stand Alone schools, for instance, the recommendation that Rule 68 should be deleted. Rule 68, operating from the more authentic Christian understanding (figure 2) allows that ‘a religious spirit should inform and vivify the whole work of the school’. Whereas a religious spirit may not apply to multi or non denominational schools, it is part and parcel of denominational education. Simple deletion of a rule will not change that. Recommendation 7.2 which recommends that provision for religious education/faith formation as a ‘discrete subject’ reinforces this limited understanding.

A characteristic spirit vivifies a school. That is why it is so important that it is a spirit of design rather than default, that it is clear on what informs and inspires it, on its view of life, of the world, of the human person and the end to which we are made. The Forum obviously appreciates the importance of a school characteristic spirit. It points out the responsibility for maintaining this spirit lies with the Board of Management. Indeed this is central to the Education Act 1998. It seems contradictory to recommend the deletion rather than amendment of Rule 68.

In their recommendations on Stand Alone schools the effect of the Forum report is to privilege the minority. The majority too has rights and denominational education is clearly treasured by many. That over 17,000 volunteers sit on Boards of Management of Catholic primary schools without pay or recompense of any nature is surely testimony to this. The Forum acknowledges that it does not know the extent of this minority. Nor does it produce any evidence of how the ethos of a school actually impacts negatively on the lives of pupils. There is no question that there ought to be more choice in the system. But the radical recommendations that would undermine the ethos of 1,700 Catholic Stand Alone schools, to validate the rights of a minority (extent unknown) and undermine the rights of a majority (extent also unknown) seem poorly thought through and without proper analysis or evidence.

Implications

There are at least two implications we can draw from this discussion. First, the Forum report makes a valuable contribution to the issue of patronage in the primary sector. It is balanced and well researched in many respects. However, the Forum seems to have worked from a limited, even misguided understanding of Catholic education. This has profound implications, particularly when it comes to Stand Alone schools and renders the ensuing recommendations unrealistic if not impossible.

Given that the terms of reference were exclusively on divestiture, we wonder if the Forum slipped its moorings when dealing with Stand Alone schools. In its recommendations it has moved far from divestiture into the waters of dilution or eradication. Further, the deeper consequences of this move have not been addressed: if one characteristic spirit is diluted to the

point of eradication, with what will it be replaced? What will be the characteristic spirit of a school ostensibly under Catholic patronage but diluted of all it stands for? The Education Minister has also addressed this anomaly. Speaking in the Seanad, Mr Quinn said ‘It is unreasonable for people-myself included – to want the Catholic Church to voluntarily and in an orderly manner divest itself of churches [sic] which it owns, albeit paid for in many cases by the taxpayer and located on Church or religious grounds, so that we can accommodate other demands . . . and at the same time to tell it, in respect of its stand alone schools, that its hands must be tied behind its back’.

A further implication is a matter for Catholic schools themselves. Given the importance of the question of ultimate meaning, of an understanding of the personal relationship with Jesus Christ and of the sacramental imagination (among other equally important pillars of Catholic theology), is it now time for ongoing, reflective, life giving Continual Professional Development for Boards of Management, parents and staff in order to foster an authentic appreciation of the characteristic spirit of the Catholic school.

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