Article

Re-Presenting Christian Tradition as a Source of Inspiration and Integration for Educators in Catholic Schools—A Proposal

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Abstract: A significant challenge facing leaders of Catholic schools in Ireland today is to ensure an appreciation for, and understanding of, the Catholic identity of the school among members of staff. A first aim of this research project was to create a 'vital idea' to re-present Christian faith to people working in Catholic schools, in a way that might resonate with the real world of teaching and learning and with their own lives. Drawing from *Fratelli Tutti*), we used the phrase 'A Love that impels towards communion' as the 'vital idea'. A second aim was to present it to principals of second-level Catholic schools and garner their responses to it. We did this with twelve principals, using a focus group methodology. We first explained the thinking behind the 'vital idea', and then gathered their responses to it. The reaction of the principals was favourable. It made sense to them personally and chimed with much of what they are doing professionally. However, the word 'communion' was found not to be helpful. A further finding relates to values: while the values in the 'vital idea' were embraced and talked about easily, there was little explicit reference to God, the source of those values.

Keywords: Catholic school; education; ethos; Pope Francis; staff development; faith; culture of encounter; leadership

1. Introduction

A significant challenge facing leaders of Catholic schools in Ireland today is to ensure an appreciation for, and understanding of, the Catholic identity of the school among members of staff (Griffin 2018; Mahon 2017; Dineen 2015). Given the increasing pluralism and decline in religious practice, especially over the past two decades, finding a way to present Catholic identity and ethos in meaningful ways can be challenging.

The aim of this research project was to find a 'vital idea' to re-present Christian faith to people working in Catholic schools, in a way that resonates with the real world of teaching and learning in schools today, makes practical sense of Catholic school ethos, and is a source of energy for them. This 'vital idea' needed to be presented in an accessible language that resonates with their imaginations and with their lives. We also hoped this idea would give their work a focus and provide a means of integrating their work with the mission of the school. In other words, we wanted to propose an idea that was both animating and integrating—a 'vital idea'.

This paper describes the project to present one such 'vital idea' to a group of leaders of Catholic schools and analyse their responses to it. First, we needed to identify an appropriate idea that could both animate and integrate the work done in Catholic schools, and present it in accessible language. A central theme of *Fratelli Tutti* (Pope Francis 2020), is an understanding of God as Love that impels towards communion. This theme seeks to re-present the experience of God as love (1 John 4:8) and the gospel of Jesus Christ in a way that impels towards 'universal communion with the entire human family, as vocation for all' (Pope Francis 2020, #277). The ideas contained in this theme are essential

for Catholic schools in the world today. In his launch of the Global Compact on Education, Pope Francis points out that 'Never before has there been such need to unite our efforts in a broad educational alliance, to form mature individuals capable of overcoming division and antagonism, and to restore the fabric of relationships for the sake of a more fraternal humanity' (Pope Francis 2019). The Congregation for Catholic Education articulates a similar theme, for instance in *Educating to Fraternal Humanism: Building a Civilisation of Love 50 years after Popolorum Progressio* (Congregation for Catholic Education 2017), which suggests a culture of dialogue as a way to build solidarity among all peoples.

Having identified this 'vital idea', we proposed to

(a)   Provide access to these ideas in a way that might make sense to people working in Catholic schools in Ireland today and
(b)   Offer it as a source of inspiration and overall coherence for the day to day life of people working in Catholic schools in Ireland today.

Therefore, we developed a presentation around the phrase 'A Love that impels towards communion',[1] as an animating and integrating idea for school life with a view to presenting it to Catholic second-level school leaders (principals) and analysing their responses to it. In Ireland, second-level (also known as post-primary) schooling usually takes five or six years. At around the age of twelve, students transfer from primary to second-level education. They join the Junior Cycle, which lasts three years, and then continue onto the Senior Cycle, which lasts two or three years (depending on uptake of an optional Transition Year). Schools with a Catholic ethos comprise just short of 50% of schools in the second-level sector (Meehan and Laffan 2021).

This paper outlines the presentation of this 'vital idea' to twelve principals from one Catholic second-level school trust, namely the Catholic Education and Irish Schools Trust (CEIST), their responses to it, and our analysis of their responses.[2] The response of principals was a particular focus; so much of the ethos of a school depends on its leaders (c.f. Lydon 2018). Our presentation was in three parts. First, we explored the theme of division and fragmentation, briefly outlining some of the obvious ways in which communities and relationships are being harmed today. We then offered some reflections on the theme of communion from the three parables presented in Luke 15. Finally, we outlined the need to create a 'culture of encounter' in Catholic schools to refocus our efforts to lessen the divisions in our world. We detail each of these parts later in this paper.

We divided the principals into three groups, with four participants in each one. We met each group once, where we presented the 'vital idea' and gathered the responses of participants. When their responses were thematically analysed, the following themes emerged: appropriateness of language, absence of God talk, how it might work in schools, challenges to the idea, God as love, animating and integrating, and the need for formation.

We begin this paper by articulating the theoretical framework; this takes the form of the six-step presentation we made to the Catholic school principals around the 'vital idea' of 'A Love that impels towards communion'. We use the six steps of the presentation as a structure for the theoretical framework. Next, we explain the methodology, and finally, we analyse the findings, i.e., the responses of participants to the presentation and draw some conclusions/suggestions for next steps.

2. Presentation on the 'Vital Idea' of 'A Love That Impels towards Communion'

- *(Step 1) Introduction: The terms 'ethos' and 'Catholic'*

We opened the meetings with a brief introduction to ethos and why it matters. The principals we were working with were familiar with the concept of ethos in the context of the Education Act (Irish Government 1998) which governs all publicly financed schools in Ireland, including Catholic voluntary secondary schools. They were also familiar with the concept through the well-developed CEIST Charter (CEIST 2007) and the work on ethos that the CEIST has been doing with its stakeholder bodies since its foundation in 2007, for instance, the *Joining the Dots* programme (Meehan 2012).

For the purposes of this project, we highlighted that a well-defined and well-lived out ethos is strongly associated with positive outcomes for students. Ethos or a shared culture can help to create meaning and inspire commitment and productivity within schools (SCoTENS Compilation Report 2012). However, ethos is not just about the exterior practices or beliefs of the school. Dr Erick Kandel of the Center for Neurobiology and Behavior asserts that in complex contexts, much of our decision making is in fact unconscious, that it takes place at the level of the subconscious. According to Freud, decisions in vital matters come from the unconscious and from without ourselves; after we have explored all the evidence, there comes a 'felt sense' of the right thing to do. The question then emerges as to what informs our subconscious. What are the values and beliefs that shape the hundreds of decisions that principals and all staff members make every day? The German word 'fingerspitzengefühl' captures this dynamic well; it means 'finger tips feeling'. So many decisions are made without lots of pondering and consideration—sometimes, one just knows the right thing to do. This 'fingerspitzengefühl' emerges because of one's deep values and beliefs. In our context, ethos speaks of a shared culture, rooted in Catholic understandings, values and relationships, that informs that 'felt sense of the right thing to do'.

The stated ethos of any school, to be relevant, has to speak to the lived reality of the members of that school community. At the same time, the ethos of Catholic schools should be rooted in the Catholic religious tradition. We then asked the participants to indicate, in only three words, what they associate with the word 'Catholic'. Table 1 below shows their responses, organised into three categories as follows:

Impact: Responses which seem to indicate the impact of Catholicism on life -what it gives or requires in a practical manner. These responses appear to articulate the social significance, values, and/or particular qualities associated with the word 'Catholic'.

Horizon: These responses indicate horizons that shape practice. More connected with sources or a background from which particular values emerge, they seem a step removed from the direct impact on lived reality.

Explicit mention of God or religious practice: These responses were directly connected to God, in an explicitly religious sense. They and pointed to the transcendent dimension of the word 'Catholic' and/or its religious expression and manifestation.

Table 1. Associations with the word 'Catholic'.

Impact	Horizon	Explicit Mention of God or Religious Practice
Family	Grounding	God
Challenge	Tradition	Church
Community (+1)	Conservative	Eucharist
Belonging	Background	
Identity	Spirituality	
Guidance/moral compass (+1)	Universal	
Inclusivity (+1)	Faith (+2)	
Care	Inherent	
Compassion	Values	
Love for all (+2)		
Open to all religions and none		
Responsible		

The most common idea to emerge from this brainstorm was love or expressions of love. This affirmed the field of literature which suggests that the language of values and impacts is more common/makes more sense to practitioners in Catholic schools than

traditionally religious language (Boeve 2019). It also seemed to confirm the selection of the central concept in *Fratelli Tutti* (2020), 'A Love that impels towards communion', as a possible 'vital idea' to put to principals.

- *(Step 2) Introduction of the 'Vital Idea'*

Our aim in Step 2 was to propose 'A Love that impels towards communion' as a 'vital idea' that might help Catholic school communities, and to explore its component parts with participants.

The first part, 'A Love', refers to a God who is love (1 John 4:8). This is 'the least wrong way to think and speak about God' (Himes 1995, p. 10). This naming of God as love shifts the attention away from the popular and often literal image of God as a man (Gaillardetz 2000) and to a dimension of reality that most people have had—the experience of love. For where there is love, there is God. This phrase emerged from over a thousand years ago, when it began to be used as one of the antiphons in the washing of the feet on Holy Thursday: *Ubi caritas et amor, Deus ibi est*—where there is real love, God is present. 'God happens where we love' (Halík 2016, p. 27). Halík says that God is less the object of one's love, rather God is the 'biosphere of all real love' (Halík 2016, p. 27).

The word 'impels' suggests that an outcome of this experience of Love 'impels' one in a certain direction. The experience of Love is not a private experience that one keeps to oneself. In fact, it is not something you *can* keep to yourself, even if you wanted to. Love by its very nature evokes a sense of gratitude and an impetus to share with others. So this idea presupposes that there is a personal and public significance to the experience of Love/God in one's life—it impels one outwards.

The final part of the phrase reads 'towards communion'. These words suggest a purposefulness to the Christian tradition. It is towards communion. Our way to God and God's way to us is realized in a communal manner. There is no individualistic relationship with God or Jesus. We are inherently social beings and come to know God through our relationship with the human community in general and the Church in particular. This is a preview or a foretaste of the 'perfect communion to which the whole of humankind is destined in the final kingdom of God' (McBrien 1994, p. 1201). We are not there yet. There is a sense of being on a journey, hence the use of 'towards'. It does not just refer to communion with our friends, colleagues and community but also to enlarge one's own sense of the 'we' or 'us' in one's own life. Communion does not just refer to the here and now. It also means full communion with all of creation and God in the fullness of time. It has both a temporal and spiritual implication.

We wondered if this idea, which is deeply rooted in the Christian tradition, might say something about the ethos of a Catholic school in a language that speaks to the lives of those in the school. Could it animate (bring to life) the meaning and significance of the Christian tradition in the lives of those in the school and/or could it act as an integrating idea which members of the school community could use to plan and evaluate their work? In other words, could it act as a 'vital idea'? Before we explored that question with participants, we explored the context in which schools are working and one response of the Christian tradition to that context. These formed the next steps in our presentation.

- *(Step 3) The Context*

Many of the themes in *Fratelli Tutti* (2020) resonate with the reality of life in Catholic schools. For instance, Pope Francis speaks of the fractured and fragmented nature of the world—the different and harmful ways that people are divided and dividing from one another. For Pope Francis, the recent COVID-19 pandemic is not just about a virus; the virus has also uncovered all sorts of other social and economic ills that impact on the well-being of everyone. It has revealed the impact of poverty on people's everyday lives. Furthermore, 'COVID has unmasked the other pandemic, the virus of indifference' (Pope Francis and Ivereigh 2020, p. 18). He says that this indifference armour-plates the soul, it bulletproofs it and so things do not sink in or get noticed. Such indifference, according to him, becomes the norm, 'silently seeping into our lifestyles and value judgments' (p. 19).

We then pointed out the rise of populism in Europe and the USA. We reminded the participants of the debates and the result of the recent Brexit vote in Great Britain and the assault on Capitol Hill in Washington. These events are expressions of ever-deepening ideological divisions between peoples. Pope Francis points out that 'In some countries, a concept of popular and national unity influenced by various ideologies is creating new forms of selfishness and a loss of the social sense under the guise of defending national interests' (Pope Francis 2020, #11).

Pope Francis warns against 'certain populist political regimes, as well as certain liberal economic approaches, maintain that an influx of migrants is to be prevented at all costs' (Pope Francis 2020, #37). He wants us to open our eyes to the world around us, to the world of the migrant and the refugee and their struggles for a life. He has warned that the Mediterranean has become 'the biggest cemetery in Europe' (Agence France-Presse 2021).

As we were speaking to principals in Catholic secondary schools, we sought to name some issues that impact their schools directly and that was the issue of failing mental health and well-being among young people. We noted the rise of abuse and harm done to young people through their participation on the internet. A recent report on mental health from the Union of Students in Ireland (USI) observed that 38% of students are experiencing severe levels of anxiety and 30% are experiencing severe levels of depression (Price et al. 2019).

Then there is the abuse of power through the practice of racism. Pope Francis references the 'horrendous police killing of George Floyd' and reminds us all that this is something 'we must continue to struggle against' (Pope Francis and Ivereigh 2020, p. 25). Racism is something that pervasively impacts on the quality of our relationships with others. To that end, we also drew attention to the reality of the relationship between the Traveller and settled community in Ireland. There is a long-standing 'them and us' attitude that separates these communities. Finally, we lifted up some of the issues facing schools around sexual identity. We drew attention to the challenge in caring for students who identify as LGBTQ+ and how the conversations around identity politics can be corrosive and divisive, leading to a breakdown in relationship.

Issues such as the COVID-19 pandemic and the 'virus of indifference', populism, mental health, racism and sexual identity hinder relationships. For Jonathan Sacks, much of breakdown and lack of trust has happened because 'the world is divided into people like us and the people not like us, and what is lost is the notion of the common good' (Sacks 2020, p. 18). For him, there is too much emphasis on the individual. We need to recover the sense of 'all-of-us-together' (p. 19). In a similar vein, Yates (2021) refers to a bias that he calls 'People Like Me syndrome' (p. 31). He believes that there are serious consequences for society when people surround themselves with people who are like them. There is reduced 'social mobility, more fragile democracy, higher risks of terrorism and lower economic growth' (p. 32). Like Sacks, Yates believes that ways must be found to foster and deepen our common life, to minimise divisions and build trust. The overreliance on the self is also an important theme in *Fratelli Tutti* (2020).

> Today there is a tendency to claim ever broader individual—I am tempted to say individualistic—rights. Underlying this is a conception of the human person as detached from all social and anthropological contexts, as if the person were a "monad" (monás), increasingly unconcerned with others . . . Unless the rights of each individual are harmoniously ordered to the greater good, those rights will end up being considered limitless and consequently will become a source of conflicts and violence. (#111)

Like Sacks (2020) and Yates (2021), Pope Francis believes that 'To dream of a different future we need to choose fraternity over individualism as our organizing idea. Fraternity, understood as the sense of belonging to each other and to the whole of humanity, is the capacity to come together and work together against a shared horizon of possibility' (Pope Francis and Ivereigh 2020, p. 68). He wants everyone to think of themselves 'more and more as a single family dwelling in a common home' (Pope Francis 2020, #17). However,

he is afraid that this sense is fading and being replaced with a 'cool, comfortable and globalized indifference' (Pope Francis 2020, #30). The way to restore hope and renewal, according to Pope Francis, is through 'closeness; it is the culture of encounter. Isolation, no; closeness, yea. Culture class, no; culture of encounter, yes' (Pope Francis 2020, #30). We speak more of 'culture of encounter' as a way forward in Step 5.

- *(Step 4): The Parables of Luke 15 as One Response from the Christian Tradition*

Following the discourse on the context of division and fragmentation, we brought attention to a dimension of the life and teaching of Jesus that might speak to this reality. Here, we employed the reflections of Ronald Rolheiser (Rolheiser 2019) on the three parables in Luke 15: The Lost Sheep, The Lost Coin and The Prodigal Son. In the parable of The Lost Sheep (3–7), Rolheiser points out that the shepherd left 99 sheep in the wilderness in search of the one who was lost and, when it was found, there was great rejoicing. We suggested to the participants that this parable is commonly thought of as a lost and found story and while that is true, there is also another way of understanding it. Rolheiser says that in Hebrew, 100 is a whole number and that the shepherd cannot be happy or rest until he has all the sheep back together again and has restored the number to one hundred. Being found is crucial but so is reuniting all the sheep. There is a call to wholeness, unity and completeness in the parable.

The same theme can be seen in the parable of the Lost Coin (Luke 15:8–19). The woman has ten coins, loses one and searches high and low until she has found it. Additionally, when she finds it, she throws a party to celebrate the return of what was lost. Again, ten is a whole number in Hebrew and the story is drawing attention to the importance of wholeness and unity. Rolheiser illustrates his point by telling a story about Thanksgiving for the American context but we used Christmas in its place. He asks us to imagine a mother of a family of ten children who has had a row with one of them. As a consequence of the argument, this particular child will not come home for Christmas. The empty place around the Christmas dinner table is excruciating for the mother. Christmas day is not the same, someone is missing and she cannot rest or be happy until her child has returned and the family is whole again. Imagine how she would feel, if on Christmas day, she spoke with her child and they made it up and were reconciled. The experience of Christmas for the rest of the day would be so different. Her family is whole again, back together with one another.

For Rolheiser, the same dynamic is at work in the parable of The Prodigal Son (11–31). Here, the relationship between the Father and the older son is very important. In essence, the Father is trying to get both of his sons into the house, which is a symbol for heaven. He is successful with the younger but not so with the older one. Additionally, the Father cannot rest until he has managed to bring both boys home. There is a purpose to this parable, a reason for its telling. For Rolheiser, it points towards an ultimate purpose in life, unity for all with the Father in heaven. 'That they all may be one' (John 17:21).

While each of these parables speaks about being lost and found, they also speak about the experience of God (who is love), as revealed in Jesus, whose mission is to build community and unity, between all people and God. For Rolheiser, the end of the main religious traditions is for union with God and all of creation and this is achieved through the exercise of compassion. Rolheiser's reflections on these parables resonate with the CEIST Charter vision of 'A compassionate and just society inspired by the life and teachings of Jesus Christ' (CEIST 2007).

- *(Step 5) Fratelli Tutti*

Having outlined Rolheiser's interpretation of these parables, we then drew attention to *Fratelli Tutti* (2020). In this document Pope Francis says that it is his desire that, in this our time, by acknowledging the dignity of each human person, we can contribute to the rebirth of a universal aspiration to fraternity. 'Let us dream, then, as a single human family, as fellow travelers sharing the same flesh, as children of the same earth which is our common

home, each of us bringing the richness of his or her beliefs and convictions, each of us with his or her own voice, brothers and sisters all' (Pope Francis 2020, #8).

We pointed out that this desire for a 'universal aspiration to fraternity' is an essential dimension of the Christian tradition. This is something that needs to be at the heart of our Catholic schools—the dream of a single human family, fellow travellers, sharing our common home, each with their own voice. Our attempt here was to use find a way to communicate ideas, rooted in the Christian tradition, in a language that would make sense to the identity of the participants and offer as purpose as educators and leaders in Catholic schools.

Having outlined the context at the beginning, and then pointed to the central theme of unity in the Christian tradition as displayed through the parables of Jesus and the writing of Pope Francis, we then asked what is it that Catholic schools can do to help realise this vision. For this, we again drew on the insights of *Fratelli Tutti* 2020) and what Pope Francis terms a 'culture of encounter'.

- *(Step 6) Culture of Encounter*

The final section of our presentation centred around the 'culture of encounter' as a possible way to respond. Pope Francis says that it is his desire that in this our time, by acknowledging the dignity of each human person, we can contribute to the rebirth of a universal aspiration to fraternity . . . Let us dream, then, as a single human family, as fellow travelers sharing the same flesh, as children of the same earth which is our common home, each of us bringing the richness of his or her beliefs and convictions, each of us with his or her own voice, brothers and sisters all (Pope Francis 2020, #8).

We pointed out that this desire for a 'universal aspiration to fraternity' is an essential dimension of the Christian tradition. This is something that needs to be at the heart of our Catholic schools—the dream of a single human family, fellow travellers, sharing our common home, each with their own voice. Our attempt here was to tie the 'vital idea' to the efforts and experiences of leaders and others working in Catholic schools, and offer the element of 'culture of encounter' as a way forward.

For Pope Francis, a true 'encounter' is not just with people who think alike, but with those outside our circle (#90), with those who are different (#147) and with the source of love revealed in the triune God (#85). 'The overlapping presence of different cultures is a great resource, as long as the encounter between those different cultures is seen as a source of mutual enrichment' (Pope Francis 2013, Introduction). He wants Catholic schools to foster a 'culture of encounter' that is rooted in the dignity of all people, who share a common humanity with the aim of sharing and building up together a common destiny (#21). The Catholic school needs to draw people out of 'impermeable cultural spheres' so that there is mutual transformation (#28). This is so important for Pope Francis that he says that 'pride of place **must** (emphasis added) be given to the knowledge of different cultures, with attention given to helping the students encounter and compare the various cultures' many different viewpoints' (#66).

This culture of encounter echoes the seminal work of Parks et al. from 1997. In this study, the authors sought to find why people had a commitment to something outside of their own local interest, to a larger cause, to the greater good of others. They found that all the participants interviewed shared some similar formative experiences that helped them care for the welfare of others outside their own group or community. However, of all the characteristics people shared, a "constructive engagements with otherness was the single most critical element undergirding commitment to the common good in the lives we studied" (Parks Daloz et al. 1996, p. 215). All of the participants in their study had engaged with someone outside their own immediate community or tribe and this meeting was transformative in a constructive manner; it enlarged their consciousness and made them rethink previously held beliefs and presuppositions about 'the other'. It shifted consciousness from 'me' and 'you' to more of an 'us' and 'all of us together'.

This capacity transcends the traps of individualism and tribalism and helps to enlarge one's sense of connection and experience of being at home in our common world. Through

these sorts of constructive and transformative encounters with those who are 'other', there emerges a shared capacity for feelings that lie at the core of our essential humanity. In this way, there is less fear of the other and something about our shared humanity is recognized. The authors describe different habits that are significant in the pursuit of the common good, i.e., dialogue, interpersonal perspective-taking, critical, systemic thought, dialectical thought and holistic thought.

At this point, we returned to the original idea, 'A Love that impels towards communion', and whether it might act an animating and integrating idea in their schools. We had hoped that participants would see the link between much of their current practice and the Catholic tradition of their schools. This tradition has union with God and all creation as its ultimate goal. Our hope was that in framing a core aspect of the Christian tradition in terms of union and unity, it might make sense to the principals and be something that might possibly be a source of inspiration for them in their work.

In an effort to ground this presentation in practice, we turned again to the CEIST Charter. The Charter identifies the Catholic school as 'an inclusive community ideally built on love and formed by the interaction and collaboration of its various component: students, parent, teachers, non-teaching staff and members of the board' (CEIST Charter, no. 4). This statement echoes much of our proposal. It speaks of an 'inclusive community', which is ideally 'built on love' with interactions or we could say 'encounters' with a range of people who make up the Catholic school. According to the Charter, part of the role of a school is to build relationships and reduce the barriers between people—in other words, foster a 'culture of encounter' in order to deepen and widen relationships and build a sense of 'all of us together' (Sacks 2020, p. 19).

In summary, our presentation

- Highlighted the context of fragmentation and division.
- Explored the Christian tradition call for action to promote 'all of us together'—to build community and foster unity between all peoples and creation.
- Suggested that Catholic schools might look to foster, in a deliberate and strategic manner, a 'culture of encounter', where the 'I' moves to the 'We'.

- *(Step 7) Response in Practice*

Following the six-step presentation, and before we began the focus group discussion, we allowed time for individual reflection. We invited participants to reflect on the 'vital idea' of 'A Love that impels towards communion' and consider their responses to it, particularly as a possible animating and integrating idea for people working in Catholic schools in Ireland today. Focus group discussions ensued, the findings of which are outlined later in this paper.

3. Methodology

The research set out to discover if the 'vital idea' of 'A Love that impels towards communion' might work as an animating and integrating idea within Catholic schools. We wanted to find a language that was true to the Catholic tradition and at the same time could resonate with lived experience of school staff, in a way that brought the tradition to life.

As this research was primarily concerned with the principals' experience of leading Catholic schools and their views on whether/to what extent our 'vital idea' might be helpful, a qualitative method was appropriate. Qualitative research is best suited to explore a research question from the perspective of the participant (Creswell 2009). Miles and Huberman note that qualitative inquiries into ordinary events that occur in natural settings are most appropriate to generate knowledge about what "real life" is like (Miles and Huberman 1994, p. 10). At the same time, it is important to identify the limitations of the study. First, some researchers argue that qualitative research methods occasionally exclude circumstantial awareness and concentrate more on experiences and opinions (Silverman 2010). By working with school leaders who were familiar with issues of ethos (see Step 1), we hoped to address this limitation. Additionally, using a qualitative approach

often suggests a small sample size, making general applications of the results problematic (Harry and Lipsky 2014; Thomson 2011). This is certainly an issue for our project. With a sample size of just twelve, research results can only be generalised to a larger population in a very limited manner (Flick 2011). However, Darlington and Scott (2002) suggest that generalisation of the whole population is not an issue: 'if one considers the unit of attention as the phenomenon under investigation, rather than the number of individuals, then the sample is often much larger than first appears' (p. 18). Indeed, Labaree (2004) proposes that educational research should not be deemed as generalisable regardless of it being quantitative or qualitative, as there are too many circumstantial variables constructing the findings.

We employed focus groups to gather data as they are inherently flexible (Barbour 2005) and do not so much rely on the question and answer approach as on the 'interaction within the group' (Mertens 2020, p. 405). The focus group is a good way to obtain common impressions, quickly and reliably. We believed that the interaction between the participants would elicit more information around the suitability and potential of our idea for Catholic schools. Through listening to the perspectives of one another, additional ideas and points of view can emerge within the group. The use of focus groups allowed us to 'try out' the explanation behind the idea and see if we could communicate our idea effectively to others in Catholic schools.

The research was completed in 2021 and involved focus group interviews with twelve principals of Catholic schools under the trusteeship of CEIST. With 107 schools, CEIST is the biggest trust for Catholic second-level schools; the vision and mission of the Trust is clearly articulated in the CEIST Charter. The CEO of CEIST emailed the principals in the Trust. She explained the project to them and invited their participation in an online, focus group meeting. We accepted the first twelve responses, of whom ten identified as women and two as men. The schools of which they were principals were dispersed over seven counties of the Republic of Ireland.

We divided the participants into three groups, with four participants in each. We held one online meeting with each group. Each meeting followed the same format, i.e., a six-step presentation on the 'vital idea' followed by semi-structured group discussion. With the permission of the participants, the focus groups were all recorded. Thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006) was used to organise and analyse the qualitative data sourced from the focus groups. We looked for patterns across the responses from the different days and the various participants. In this way, we were able to offer an organised and cogent response to the idea outlined to the participants.

Ethical approval for this work was granted through Mary Immaculate College. The participants all received information about their involvement in this project and signed consent forms. They have all been made anonymous in this report using the designation Participant One (P1) through Participant Twelve (P12).

4. Findings

Seven themes emerged from participant responses. We begin this section with a word on the overall response and then discuss each of the seven themes as follows: (a) language, (b) God talk, (c) work this 'vital idea' work in schools, (d) challenges to the idea, (e) God as love, (f) animating and integrating, and (g) formation.

The overall reaction to the idea was very positive among the principals. It resonated with them both personally and professionally. 'I don't think I've heard summed up how I approach the job . . . as well as what you've done there now' (P5). This principal found the emphasis on community very affirming, believing that creating community is the most important aspect of the CEIST charter. This derives from the teaching of Jesus Christ, where leadership is understood as service. Other principals said similar things. 'If I just give you my gut reaction to that idea—talk about your gut, your feeling, your deep downness for want of a better term, I just find it deeply moving as an idea, as a concept, as feeling—because to me, that's what it's all about' (P2). For this principal, there was a deep resonance

between their own inner identity and the ideas articulated in the input. Another said 'Yeah, absolutely. I agree wholeheartedly with what has been said. I loved it actually. I just get wound up, like in such a good way, where we're talking about this because this is who we are and what we do and what we want our schools to be and what we want our community to be' (P8). Again, the input resonated with the experience of this principal, it animated them, and was a source of energy for them. According to P7, part of the reason for this was that the input made something of the tradition accessible to them, and it used a language that made sense. 'I think it's fantastic what you've done because for all of us, that ethos, mission, that we live out every day, sometimes it's very difficult to kind of have that conversation with staff but finding the language that's accessible to everybody, including staff, can be very tricky. So I really like the approach that you took' (P7). The idea spoke to their lived experience and articulated some values deeply cared about as part of their work and their own personal beliefs.

(a)   Appropriateness of language

While there was strong approval for the overall idea, one-quarter of the participants found that the word 'communion' did not work. One felt that, for young people, the word would be too associated with 'receiving the host at Mass' (P6), although she felt that staff would know what the word meant. However, another participant doubted this. 'I do agree with P6, I think the communion, yeah, maybe even for staff, I think some staff might have a difficulty with that' (P7). Another participant agreed 'And I certainly would agree with the word communion as being something that we associate with, you know, the white dress and the veil' (P11). Further, the word 'communion' did not evoke an explicit sense of relationship with God, revealed in Jesus Christ and present—personally and purposefully—in the world today. It did not appear to evoke a sense of the sacred or transcendent. For these participants, 'communion' was too associated with 'holy communion' and not so much with a communion of persons, creation and God—as was the intention in the idea as outlined in the presentation. None of them were objecting to the idea of togetherness and building relationships—it was the expression of this idea through the word 'communion' that was problematic.

Interestingly, when asked what word might work best in its place, one of the participants suggested unity. She made the point that a school is not just one community, it is made up of many different communities.

So whilst we do use that word a lot [community], I think the idea of unity is the piece. And it is more important, because we all do see yourselves as belonging to different communities. Whereas when you talk about unity, and again, I know it's a word that's bandied around a bit, but to me anyway, that gives the image of maybe united many things, many communities. So it might not quite be the logical word that communion is but I think that word unity, would inspire that idea of bringing lots of people on lots of different levels, people, lots of different communities together more so. (P6)

Through the use of the word 'unity', this participant is attempting to hold to a universalism and a particularity: we need to notice and appreciate our commonalities and our differences at the same time.

(b)   Absence of God talk

For most participants, the word 'communion' seemed to refer only to relationships among and between people. They did not seem to have the sense of communion as a word that suggested a relationship among all peoples and God, in the fullness of time. The religious or theological sense of communion, as the realization of the reign of God, was not apparent. Communion as a concept that holds both the human and divine encounter, here and now and into the future, was not present in the discussion. This point was not made explicit in the presentation; this meaning of communion was not articulated explicitly to participants. That said, there was little 'God talk' or 'faith talk' in any of the responses to

the presentation. No one referred to their own relationship with God or Jesus or that their work in school is an expression of God's dream for the world.

Earlier in the focus group meeting, when the respondents gave their three words associated with Catholicism, of the 36 words, there was one mention of God, one of Church and one of Eucharist. There was no mention of Jesus or the Holy Spirit. Catholicism was associated with their lived experience of this world, i.e., their families, community, compassion and love for all. It provided a horizon or framework that influenced their lives, i.e., tradition, grounding, background and spirituality.

A similar pattern appears in the focus group discussions. Jesus is mentioned once, and that was in reference to the teaching of Jesus as that of service. One participant spoke about 'creating a love, that . . . is a response to something, if that makes sense, whether that's the response to the fact that we're a Catholic school, and we open the doors every day, and this is what we have to do' (P6). The use of the phrase 'creating a love . . . in a response to something' might refer to an experience of something more in one's life, perhaps God. Therefore, creating love in their school emerges as a response to the experience of God. This is similar to the meaning of the idea offered to the participants 'A Love that impels towards communion' and it was suggested that as a consequence of this Love, one is impelled to work towards communion. It sought to bring attention to the experience of God, who is love (1 John 4:8), and this can then show itself in the effort to build bridges, to reach out, to widen one's sense of 'us'. In this way, the knowledge of God in one's life is woven into one's sense of mission or purpose in the world. We did not ask explicitly about faith or God but just their response to the idea, which had been explained through the presentation, where there was mention of God as love and the mission of Jesus to foster unity and communion. This is not to imply that the participants do not believe in or have a relationship with God or that faith is not an important part of their personal and professional lives. The point is that this dimension did not surface in the focus group discussions, perhaps as a result of the secularization that is taking place in our country, where matters of faith are expected to be corralled into one's personal and private life.

(c)   Will this 'vital idea' work in schools?

There were mixed views as to whether this idea, 'A Love that impels towards communion', would make sense to staff in their schools. One principal believed that the communitarian nature of the idea would resonate with staff. 'I think actually for most of the staff I have here, in fact, nearly for all of the staff I have here now, that's actually what they would identify as being the core idea of how we as a school go about our business in here' (P5). Another participant was not so sure, saying 'I'd say half my staff would just switch off from the language, but then other people would embrace that language' (P10). However, this principal believed that while the particular language may not speak to all staff, the idea behind it is what the school is actually about:

I don't think we're ever going to find a perfect way to articulate that, but I think, creating a community of love or creating a loving community, isn't that what probably would be hoping that every teacher and every member of our school community would be striving for so that in all our interactions, in all our policies, in all of our decision making, that it's informed by that sense that we're trying to bring that togetherness in a loving way, and show forgiveness and tolerance and mercy and all of those things (P10).

(d)   Challenges to the idea

All of the participants demonstrated a deep and profound care for the well-being of everyone in their schools. They were involved in fostering community in the everyday give and take of school life, convinced that it is through belonging to one another that ones' potential is realised. Therefore, while all liked the idea and the thinking behind it, many were concerned for about how to truly include all young people.

How can you call yourself inclusive and when you, your, your traditions, your, your dogma, your whatever, actually exclude certain groups of your very community . . . it's literally just the children in the school. And specifically around I

suppose RSE, sex ed, and you know, that type of thing can be, it's hugely challenging, and to, to honour the Catholic faith and be true to the Catholic faith in the school, and yet, at the same time, know, that you are hurting the very people you purport to love, within the scope, under the ethos of the Catholic that, you know, so that that's a massive challenge, personally and professionally. (P2)

This view was echoed by many of the participants. There was a real point of tension for them. They sought to create loving environments for all the young people in their care but 'Sometimes the official lines and depending on where they come from, what are people's interpretations of the official line can jar with what I believe the central message of the gospel is' (P10). The principals demonstrated great care for the young people who were navigating issues surrounding sexual identity, while cognisant of the tradition in which their schools are situated.

(e)   God as Love

Two of the principals referred to the understanding of God as Love, as outlined in the presentation with the capital 'L'. One said

I love it. Because it's all encompassing, it is what it is meant to be, and even your earlier remark about God, you know, God is love. And yet somehow or other we've, we've, we've, we've given him an identity and a gender even I hear myself say him, but God is love, it's a feeling it's not, it's a lot. I think that that is something that people can relate to. And that people can get behind as an idea. (P2)

However, another principal did not feel that this was the case. He said, 'I'm not sure that the capital letter Love will have the meaning we would like it to have for our students and possibly even for our staff. We may get it and some of them may get it but I'm not sure it's almost explicit enough, in terms of what you are hoping to achieve' (P11).

(f)   Animating and integrating?

Regarding the possible animating and integrating function of this idea, there appears to be some evidence that it might act as an animating idea. The respondents liked the ideas contained in the idea not just at an intellectual level but also at a visceral one. There was congruence between the aspiration at work in the idea and their own personal identity and sense of purpose. Participants responded that it was 'deeply moving', 'absolutely lovely', 'I think that overarching, simple but poignant piece is huge', 'I loved it', and 'I think it's fantastic what you've done'. These expressions suggest that the ideas contained in the idea made sense to them, to their experience and to their own values and beliefs. Therefore, it appears that there is potential in the idea as a source of animation.

However, it is unclear how it might function as a source of integration. In our development of this idea, we had in mind the need for schools to plan—in light of the pressing need to build a sense of 'all of us together' (Sacks 2020, p. 19)—for ways that strategically and practically foster the habits and dispositions among all in the school to deeply appreciate that we are 'a single human family' (Pope Francis 2020, #8). Such plans then could be evaluated at the end of the year and so the schools become deliberate in its actions. They do not simply rely on individual members of staff who care about these things to carry them out. Rather, it becomes a corporate responsibility, part of the fabric and culture of the school. Towards this end, a couple of participants were struck by the call to foster a culture of encounter. 'I was just really taken with the [idea of culture of encounter] that you were describing about those encounters that have such transformative effect . . . so I think that image, or that idea, which is critical to all schools is something worth kind of exploring a bit further, if that makes sense' (P7). This was echoed by another participant, 'I liked the [idea of culture of encounter] as well, as teachers, we're getting the opportunity to transform lives every day, and it's probably that most important job' (P11). They appreciated the importance of these sorts of transformative encounters. However, more research is required to further explore the degree to which this animating idea

might also provide an integrating force and the way in which this force might in turn be strategically planned for and managed.

(g)　The need for formation

This takes us to the final aspect of the conversation—that of formation. 'So how do you communicate this?' asked one participant. She answered her own question by saying 'That takes a whole, you know, re-education, a reimaging of God' (P4). For her, this 're-education' needs to take place with school leaders and the future school leaders. It begins with new principals and deputy principals: 'teacher formation and induction building capacity. And this is a whole new language, the ability to be able to articulate identity and religion and Catholic and having the space to do that. It's actually rare . . . And how do we as school leaders create that space and time within our schools, where do you get that time to have those conversations with staff? That's a huge challenge' (P4). This participant suggested looking outside of Ireland to models of good practice elsewhere. She spoke very enthusiastically of work being done in Presentation schools in Australia.[3] Another principal suggested the need to keep 'drip feeding' staff in schools around these sorts of issues so that 'it just doesn't happen as a staff day or as a chat with the newly appointed teacher. It's to permeate everything we do. And I think there's the challenge for us' (P10). There followed some suggestions around involving present and past students in these conversations, reworking mission statements and organising speakers in a systematic way across the Trust.

5. Conclusions

There was a clear resonance between the communitarian aspect of this idea and the life and work of the participants. They all valued the importance of building relationships and community in their schools, with particular concern for the vulnerable. This was something that was at the heart of their lives. The recognition that this was also essential to the Christian tradition was a source of inspiration for them. There was congruence between their own personal and deeply held beliefs and the Christian tradition in which their schools were located.

While the idea made sense to the participants, there was concern that it might not land well with all of their staff. The word 'communion' needs to be changed, as it does not convey the message intended. The notion of God as Love was received well by some, while a others thought it a little vague. This raises an important question at the heart of the idea. In it, the experience of God is central and it is out of this experience that energy and direction emerge towards communion. However, in the wide-ranging conversations with the participants, there was little talk of this dimension in their lives and how it shapes their professional work as school leaders. It suggests a need to find ways for school leaders to articulate this dimension of their lives and its significance for their work. In this process, we, the researchers, were unsuccessful in doing this. At the heart of this enterprise is the person of Jesus Christ, the revelation of God, present in the world today. While we were successful in making a link between the participants' care for community and the purpose of the Christian tradition, we were less successful in helping the participants to name their own faith and belief in God and explore its place and significance in their leadership roles within Catholic education today.

Finally, if this or another 'vital idea' is made available to staff in Catholic schools in the future, the aspect of one's experience of God, whatever that might be, needs to be an important part of it. Personal experience runs to the source of why we do what we do, to the raison d'etre for Catholic schools in the first place. There is a transcendent horizon to Catholic education that needs attention at a time when talk of God or faith is being pushed into the private sphere of life.

Notes

1   This phase was slightly amended from one used by Fr. Amado L. Picardal, CSsR, in a talk he gave entitled: *Fratelli Tutti, On Fraternity and Social Friendship, An Overview and Commentary*, 20 October 2020 at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mEtpKPxF5Og (accessed on 3 September 2021).

2   While we piloted this idea with twelve principals from CEIST schools, it may have merit for Catholic schools in general, both secondary and primary.

3   For examples of research among principals and school ethos conducted in Australia, see (Belmonte and Cranston 2009; Sultmann and Brown 2016; Neidhart and Lamb 2016).

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