

## CATHOLIC EDUCATION: DISTINCTIVE AND INCLUSIVE

Catholic schools claim to offer a distinctive form of education. Too much emphasis on distinctiveness leaves them open to accusations of being exclusive. Yet integral to Catholicism is a claim to inclusiveness. How do distinctiveness and inclusiveness relate to one another in the context of Catholic schooling? The paper briefly addresses some criticisms levelled against an emphasis on distinctiveness in Christian education and then highlights the problematical yet intrinsic relationship between the two parallel claims for Catholic education.

The relationship between distinctiveness and inclusiveness in Catholic education resembles in some respects the polarity between solidarity and subsidiarity in the political arena. Solidarity without subsidiarity leads to totalitarianism; it can be suffocating, imprisoning and narrowing. Subsidiarity without solidarity leads to isolationism; it contributes to fragmentation, is impoverishing and also ends up in narrowness of outlook. When solidarity and subsidiarity are held in creative tension they balance, correct and enrich each other. So, too, in Catholic education, distinctiveness and inclusiveness are correlative terms with a reciprocal relationship: each is implicated in the other, with both polarities reinforcing and qualifying their correlates. Essential to the distinctiveness are the features of universality, openness and inclusiveness; yet the resources and willingness to maintain openness depend and draw upon the 'capital' of something distinctively enduring and 'solid'. Is it possible for Catholic education to maintain its particularity without becoming parochial? Can it avoid being a mirror of secular education without slipping into sectarianism?

In this paper first, I respond to some points that were raised at a conference launching the *Education and Ethos* network. Second, I describe the twin imperatives within Catholic education - to be both distinctive and inclusive. Third, I ask whether these imperatives can be held together. Finally, I suggest that any resolution to this question must come from the practice of the people of God, rather than being promulgated by their leaders.

### **1. Criticisms of Emphasising Distinctiveness**

At the International Symposium on Church Schools (held in Durham, 1996) certain criticisms were

levelled against the emphasis on distinctiveness within Christian education. These include the accusations that such a concern leads to schools being inward-looking, over-concerned with boundaries, reifying Christianity, over-valuing beliefs, idealising theology and being blind to pluralism (Hull, 1996a, 1996b). Hull suggested that there is a danger that the concern for wholeness can slip into a form of totalitarianism. Adrian Thatcher (1996) also warned of the danger of over-emphasising religious differences. He argued that, by their focus on religious difference, Christians might neglect other kinds of difference. "The most serious problem about differentiating between people on religious grounds at all, is that other differences are overlooked or altogether ignored....There are also huge differences between people within the same religion" (Thatcher, 1996, pp. 4, 5). Both Hull and Thatcher rely on a retrieval of emphasis on the Holy Spirit rather than the person of Jesus Christ. This leads them to argue for a degree of openness which puts church schools under some strain and challenges them to display a much greater solidarity with the wider human race, especially those most in need.

While a renewed consciousness of the universal presence of God, the call for greater sensitivity to differences other than religious and the challenge to demonstrate greater solidarity with the whole of humanity are all to be welcomed, none of these necessarily undermines the very *raison d'être* of church schools, although they do place onerous – and appropriate – expectations on them. Two comments are in order here. I accept the positive case put forward by Hull and Thatcher for a more open and inclusive approach by Christians in education, but I reject the negative implications of their argument.

First, Hull's view seems to me to trade on something which depends on the institutional preservation (admittedly plural in form) of Christianity. Unless there exist "identity-sustaining rules of Christian discourse and behaviour" (Lash, 1988, pp. 259, 271, 272), that is, unless there is tradition which is embodied in some way, with a degree of stability and continuity, rooted in texts, practices and institutions which prevail over time, our reconstruction and application of Christian faith to changing circumstances and needs will not be possible. The emphasis on distinctiveness may be carried too far;

Hull's warning here is salutary. But it does not have to be a distraction from fulfilling the Christian mission to live for others. Clarifying distinctiveness can serve instead as a necessary preliminary to and accompaniment of an outward-looking approach, first in order to be clear about the nature of the task and the direction to be taken, second in order to recognise temptations which might lead us astray and to allow for readjustment of direction if wrong routes have been taken.

The kind of development in Christian approaches to education outlined by Hull, (Hull, 1996a, p. 1) from education for Christendom, to education for Christianity, to education for Christianness, depends upon a supporting structure and an institutional embodiment which facilitates, stimulates and guides the practice of a critical yet faithful reflection on the implications of the Gospel and its relationship to the changing circumstances of our lives. Hull and Thatcher's trenchant criticisms of those who are too concerned with defending distinctiveness and integrity within Christian education run the risk of cutting the ground from under Christian educators. As Christian educators widen the focus of their attention and extend the scope of their efforts, the foundations on which they stand could be neglected.

These two writers helpfully remind us of God's universal salvific concern, the unpredictable and unbounded operation of the Holy Spirit, the tendency among Christians to be both inward-looking and defensive, the neglect of important aspects of difference and the need for Christians to be more open to the presence of God in people of other faiths – and of no explicit religious faith. They also challenge their fellow Christians to be more generous with their talents and resources and to travel more lightly in regard to their tradition. But there is the danger that in so concentrating on widening the scope of for whom we are, we neglect the sources of our faith, and forget where we stand and why we face in this direction and have these priorities.

My first response to Hull and Thatcher's critique of some features of church schools, then, is to draw attention to the need for a living tradition which preserves the 'identity- sustaining rules of Christian discourse and behaviour' mentioned by Lash. If living tradition is critically appreciated and creatively appropriated, Christian education can be distinctively holistic without undermining the autonomy of the disciplines or of pupils; it can also be inclusively open while neither abdicating its responsibility to proclaim truth nor compromising on essentials.

My second and briefer comment is related to this. It is possible to so emphasise taking down boundaries, in order to demonstrate openness, that the substance of our message about salvation gets dissipated. It would be like seeking to keep up performances of a play or a piece of music while being careless about the foundation text on which they draw. In so attending to the needs of the differing audiences we face, (which is commendable in itself), we might forget or distort the original 'score.' (For helpful discussions on the notions of 'score' and 'performance' in the context of preserving both fidelity and creativity, see Rummery, 1975, p. 195; Lash, 1986, chapter three; Cooling, 1994, pp. 154-159, and Cooling, 1996.) The kind of solidarity advocated by Hull and Thatcher could, as Kevin Nichols (Nichols, 1996, p. 5) puts it, "easily result in total assimilation; with church schools surviving only as the smile on the face of the tiger."

## **2. Two Imperatives in Catholic education**

Let me now attend directly to Catholic schooling in particular. Within Catholicism two apparently conflicting imperatives seem to be at work. On the one hand, the mission of the church is to transmit something distinctive, a divinely sanctioned message for life (and eternal life). This imperative has overtones of the prophetic stance, of transcendence, of teaching with authority, of conveying truth in its comprehensiveness and without compromise. It suggests the notions of boundaries to be protected and of 'wine' to be preserved. The value of the 'currency' of Catholic doctrine is to be guarded by vigilant oversight of all 'issues' or pronouncements on behalf of the church. This is to ensure that 'justice' is done to the message to be conveyed. The purity and efficacy of the 'medicine' of salvation available through the church needs to be relied upon by whoever avails themselves of it. Strong border controls and customs stations are to be maintained to prevent contamination from alien ideas which might be corrosive of truth and to assess carefully 'foreign imports' for their likely 'impact' on the 'economy' of the faith and the lives of the faithful.

On the other hand, an equally important imperative for Catholicism is to be fully inclusive, to be open to all types of people and to all sources of truth. The gospel to be offered is not only to be addressed to all people, which might simply require an unwavering and consistent effort to proclaim the message; it is also – and this is crucial – for all people and must take into account their differing situations and experiences, their insights and perplexities, their challenges and needs, their hopes and fears. The salvific power of the message to be conveyed depends not only on its authoritative source, its accurate and comprehensive

transmission, and due respect for its distinctive nature, but also on its capacity to embrace the concerns, to meet the needs and to address the perspectives of all God's people, in a way that is open to and inclusive of the diversity of their circumstances and cultures.

This second imperative has resonances of pastoral care, of immanence, of learning by listening, of receptiveness and accommodation, of flexibility in the face of historical and cultural change and of vulnerability. (A biblical warrant for accommodating ourselves to all people so as to help them to have a share in the blessings of the gospel is suggested by 1 Corinthians 9:19-23.) This second imperative seeks to avoid a fearful isolation from others and to encourage a full-hearted collaboration with them wherever possible and an involvement in the world rather than a retreat from it. This aspect of Catholicism acknowledges its own shortcomings, mistakes and sinfulness, its pilgrim status of still being 'on the way' and therefore its incompleteness, and, in parallel with this, it seeks to be attentive to the workings of the Holy Spirit beyond its 'borders'. As a result, it embraces liturgical variety, welcomes cultural pluralism, seeks harmony between different perspectives, recognises the spiritual truths and values inherent in other Christians and in other religions and encourages free and constructive dialogue with people of other persuasions. If these goods are to be secured, it might be argued, from this inclusive aspect of Catholicism, that defenders of distinctiveness and guardians of orthodoxy must allow easy access to and for 'outsiders' and should seek neither to inhibit the exchange of ideas and experiences, nor to obstruct joint endeavours between Catholics and others.

These two imperatives do not sit easily together. The differing ways they coexist and interpenetrate one another and are expressed in the precepts and policies of Catholic educators have great significance for Catholics and for others in our society. The degree of success with which they are held in balance will influence the acceptability of Catholic schools in a plural, mainly non-religious society. This balance is not easy to maintain. At times one imperative may appear dominant in Catholic educational thinking and practice, to the detriment of the other.

Where distinctiveness is emphasised, the integrity of faith is at stake. Catholic schools must endeavour to pass on the fullness of the faith. An undue willingness to be inclusive in the sense of accommodating the perspectives and priorities of those who cannot accept the message in its entirety might lead to a distortion of truth and a fateful damaging of the salvation prospects of those pupils

who have been included but misled. Where inclusiveness is stressed, the welcoming nature of faith is at issue. In Catholic schools the particular (and diverse) academic, social, spiritual and other needs of pupils are to be addressed, regardless of their relationship to Catholicism. If too strong a priority is given to defending the distinctiveness of Catholicism, (and following from this, the distinctiveness of Catholic education,) there is a danger of exhibiting undesirable features, such as exclusiveness, rigidity, closed mindedness, intolerance, excessive confidence that truth is already fully possessed, and therefore of displaying an unwillingness to learn from others.

The two imperatives should be seen as complementary rather than in contradiction to one another. Instead of considering inclusiveness as something to be set against distinctiveness within Catholic education, one might claim that two kinds of distinctiveness are to be (simultaneously) of concern. The first is the distinctiveness of the Catholic tradition, which is to be maintained and communicated. The second is the distinctiveness (in the sense of the uniqueness and incommunicability) of each person (pupils, their families and staff) who comes into contact with Catholic schools. This second aspect of distinctiveness, being sensitive to the particularity of each person and being willing to welcome them and learn from them, should receive a high priority in Catholic education, not only because of respect for human dignity, but also because, in terms of their own theology, Catholics acknowledge God's presence in their pupils. This way of considering the two imperatives only relocates the problematical nature of their relationship; it does not dissolve it. I shall therefore continue to refer to the polarity in the terms 'distinctive' and 'inclusive'.

Furthermore, from the point of view of the teaching act, communication and receptivity, like distinctiveness and inclusiveness, are correlative terms: one implies the other. We can distinguish, logically, if not chronologically, two phases in this correlation. First, as a teacher, my communication requires not only clarity about something distinctive and particular on my part, but also a receptivity from others, an openness on the part of my pupils. This is one aspect of their correlation. But, second, if my communication is to be effective, I must be receptive to their situation and perceptions and I must attend to their communication with me. In the context of Catholic education, no awareness of distinctiveness is possible without awareness of difference, and no possibility of inclusiveness remains without there being a distinct body (of people and truth) to which one can belong and by which one can be included.

### 3. Can These Imperatives Be Combined?

Can Catholic education combine distinctiveness with inclusiveness? And, if it can, what qualifications on this combination might be required to ensure, on the one hand, that its distinctiveness does not harden into exclusiveness or an overbearing prescriptiveness, and, on the other hand, that its inclusiveness and openness do not slip into emptiness or dissolution?

Gabriel Moran says that we can seek uniqueness either through a process of exclusion or of inclusion. Each has its limitations, for "no being can have no notes in common with all others; no being ... can have all notes in common with the others." Seeking uniqueness through an ever greater effort at being inclusive, in striving for communion leads to a much richer understanding of uniqueness. For Moran part of the very distinctiveness or uniqueness of human beings is their openness to other natures (Moran, 1996, pp. 165-166). In similar fashion, I believe that the essential principles underlying a Catholic philosophy of education constitute a mode of distinctiveness with the power to be inclusive.

To emphasise the distinctiveness of Catholic education does not therefore entail picking out elements that are not shared by other Christian traditions. I share Newman's view as shown in his statement "these things are in Christianity, therefore they are not heathen," as opposed to Milman's opinion as expressed in the statement, "these things are in heathenism, therefore they are not Christian." (quoted in Dulles, 1985, p. 61). Much that Catholics hold as of central importance in education is accepted by others. (See Catholic Bishops of England and Wales, 1996). The distinctiveness of Catholic schools rests not so much upon special building blocks, each of which is peculiar to Catholicism, as upon a particular configuration of characteristics, which mesh and interlock with one another. I believe that the same assertion could defensibly be made for other forms of faith-based education, indeed for all consistently thought-through forms of education, since all attempts to educate in any systematic way imply a view of human nature, a reading of the world and a perspective on what is of central importance and true worth within – and possibly beyond – it.

Perhaps a helpful analogy is to hear these elements as notes in a symphony rather than as bricks in a building (Hager, 1996, pp. 164-165). The analogy highlights the fact that the ultimate constituents of a symphony are both the notes and their relations. In a piece of music sounds are not heard in isolation from one another; rather we 'co-hear' them in the auditory atmosphere of their mutual interrelationships and reciprocal resonance. What

must be identified are those beliefs and concepts which are architectonic and integrative, which unify what might otherwise be disparate elements, those which provide direction, order and purpose for Catholic education, those which give to teachers a sense of its point and its importance.

A cavalier attitude to such pivotal beliefs by the Catholic community would lead to loss of identity. A community that lacks a strong sense of self-awareness, of shared values and of common goals will not have the resources or the motivation with which to be inclusive. But if it seeks too energetically to be distinctive, it can slip into appearing exclusive, either in membership or in tone, thus preventing many pupils from 'receiving' the gospel.

What are these central 'notes' within the symphony? Analysis of the series of Roman documents on education issued since the Second Vatican Council suggests that they include the following: (a) the insistence on treating the secular and sacred in the curriculum as intimately and mutually implicated; (b) the creative tension to be maintained between the integral development of persons, the autonomy of the disciplines and the synthesis between faith, life and culture; (c) the centrality of Christ, both as teacher of salvific truth and as model for human development, leading to a view of education which forms, informs and transforms learners; and (d) the priority given to a particular interpretation of interconnectedness between all elements in education, (message, community, worship and service). Underpinning these features a distinctive worldview can be identified, the 'economy' of which combines elements of an anthropology, a theology of creation, a Christology and an ecclesiology. In marking out some of the contours of this worldview we would have to discuss the bearing on education of a Catholic understanding of conscience, conversion and character, of sin, salvation and the soul, of being made in God's image and of the implications of a personal vocation.

To emphasise distinctiveness thus 'goes against the grain' of many taken-for-granted views, for example, those relating to human nature and development, morality, rationality and freedom. It represents a 'thick' view of the good that is contestable in the wider society. It seems to rely on the assumption that this view is fixed within and receives unanimous support from the Catholic community, whereas in practice it is open to further development, fresh interpretations and alternative accounts from within that faith community. It could be criticised for paying too little attention to the ecumenical imperative within Christianity and

for being insufficiently trusting of the influence of individual Christians formed by scripture and prayer. It gives priority to religious concerns to a degree that threatens to undermine secular considerations, and this despite Catholic teaching about nature and grace. It constitutes an interconnectedness which, while pointing towards separate schooling as a desirable educational environment, is also vulnerable to the criticism that it paves the way for an all-embracing ethos which some might experience as suffocating or totalitarian.

I have highlighted here, in a rather one-sided manner, the 'uncomfortable' aspects of distinctiveness in order to bring out the challenges it presents in the educational context. A separate paper would be required to show that, built into the key educational principles which are normative for Catholic schools and deeply integral to the worldview which underpins them, there is a capacity for, indeed, an imperative towards, inclusiveness (Sullivan, 1998). Here my intention has been only to indicate some aspects of the problematical relationship between distinctiveness and inclusiveness that will call for sensitivity and restraint on the part of Catholic educators.

There are proper constraints on the expression of distinctiveness, which arise partly from the compulsory nature of school, which, especially for older pupils, reduces the scope for worship and service, neither of which can be imposed without undermining their integrity. Although both are possible in the school context, for their fullest expression they require other contexts, for example, the family, the community and the church. Another constraint arises from the fact that Catholic schools receive public support, in return for which they must attend to legitimate non-religious educational purposes, priorities and standards as part of the common good (Williams, 1998, pp. 26-39). To the extent that these aims are pursued there may be less scope for the fullest expression of the distinctive Catholic worldview in Catholic schools.

There are also several features of inclusiveness that we should expect Catholic schools to exhibit. Firstly, the educational needs of pupils who are not Catholics but who find themselves, for a variety of reasons, in Catholic schools will be met satisfactorily. Secondly, members of staff who are not Catholics will be able to contribute both positively and with integrity in such schools. Thirdly, there will be sustained dialogue with external perspectives. Fourthly, the plurality of views within Catholicism itself will be given room for expression. (Examples of the plurality of views within Catholicism include (a) the practice of

contraception, (b) the merits of intercommunion, (c) the standing of the divorced in relation to reception of sacraments, (d) the scope of church authority in relation to theological expression, (e) the relative emphasis to be given to social justice or to spirituality in the life of the church, and (f) the respective weight to be given to local, national and to Roman decisions, for example, in episcopal appointments. Some of these impinge directly on schools and require sensitive handling.)

Fifthly, a spirit of tolerance of, and respect for, people with differing views will be fostered. Sixthly, there will be a promotion, wherever feasible, of the capacity to enter into cooperation, joint action and ecumenical endeavour with people of a variety of stances (ones that are not inimical to the school's values). Seventhly, the critical faculties of pupils will not be neglected or suppressed in an attempt to enforce orthodoxy, but instead they will be nurtured and strengthened by an open, sympathetic yet rigorous treatment of doubts, difficulties and objections which might be raised either by believers or by unbelievers.

#### **4. Resolution Has To Come from 'Below'**

Catholic education needs to resolve the inbuilt tension between the claims to distinctiveness and inclusiveness. Perhaps this is a task that faces each generation, for with any fresh interpretation of her distinctive identity, the church needs a corresponding re-evaluation of what inclusiveness entails. In arriving at this sense of distinctive identity the church has to review, not only her own constituent 'elements' and principles, but also how these differ from and relate to alternative perspectives on offer 'from outside' her own ranks. Therefore, an understanding of inclusiveness is inevitably affected by any modified sense of distinctiveness.

Like other close relationships, the connections between distinctiveness and inclusiveness in Catholic education cannot be precisely predicted, definitely determined, comprehensively charted or finally fixed. Their 'cohabitation arrangements' are always subject to revision, modification and adjustment in the light of fresh understandings, new challenges, experiences of achievement, the availability of resources and the stresses arising from shortcomings (or excesses) on both sides. And just as no authority can legislate for relationships or prescribe in advance the way they must inevitably develop - for this will depend upon the day-to-day interpretations and actions, the flexibility of the partners and their mutual sensitivity and responsiveness - so too the ongoing (and constantly provisional) working out of the relationship between distinctiveness and inclusiveness within Catholic education will

depend, in large part, on the day-to-day interactions and interpretations of teachers and pupils, rather than on edicts from the hierarchy of the church, or from any other source.

Until now the emphasis in 'official', normative statements on Catholic education has been on promulgation of church teaching: the assertion, reiteration, clarification and defence of its distinctive nature. In future much more attention will have to be given, within Catholic educational circles, to reception of church teaching: to attending to and learning from the experience and perspectives of those 'on the ground', trying to put the principles into practice. If that happens, then it will become clearer that distinctiveness and inclusiveness are integrally related, mutually qualifying and reciprocally interactive features of Catholic education.

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