

## A TRIBUTE TO BROTHER MARCELLIN FLYNN fms 1931-2004

### *...a man of gentleness, wisdom and scholarship*

*The dedication of this issue of Journal of Religious Education to some perspectives on religious education in Australia is an opportunity to recognise the life and work of Brother Marcellin Flynn. For thirty years Marcellin Flynn engaged in most extensive meticulous longitudinal research on the effectiveness of Catholic schools in New South Wales. His works were a major contribution to the educational mission of the Catholic church and remain as a portrait of Catholic schools during periods of change and transformation.*

*What follows is an article by Tony McArthur who examines the contribution made by the work of Marcellin Flynn to Catholic Education in Australia.*

***Tony McArthur\****

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### **BROTHER MARCELLIN FLYNN CATHOLIC SCHOOLS 1972-2000 A LONGITUDINAL PERSPECTIVE**

Brother Marcellin Flynn's five major works on Catholic schooling were widely circulated in Australian Catholic school systems. They were also of interest to Catholic educators and researchers overseas. The last of these, *Catholic Schools 2000* (Flynn & Mok, 2002) was published by the Catholic Education Commission, NSW. His studies informed the thinking of educators and administrators in Australian Catholic schools, and inspired their work. Br Marcellin was a pioneer investigator of the effectiveness of Catholic schools. The importance of his research was acknowledged both in Australia and internationally. With Marcellin's passing, it is timely that we take stock of his achievement and consider what we may learn from him for Catholic schooling in the 21st Century.

There were four central concerns in Marcellin Flynn's work. The first, a reflection of his spirituality, was his interest in determining the practice of the faith of Catholic school students in terms of Mass and the Sacraments. Brother Marcellin's second point of focus was the impact of Catholic schools on students. This led to the third concern which was to identify the factors determining the effects of Catholic schools on students. Finally Marcellin Flynn explored the quality of school life in Catholic schools. All of these concerns reflect key questions for Catholic

schooling during the times in which Marcellin Flynn's research was conducted.

We need to consider the historical context of Catholic education during the period of the studies to fully appreciate Br Marcellin's work. While numbers of Catholic schools and the numbers of students were increasing throughout the 1950s, the future of Catholic schooling was somewhat insecure until government funding followed the Goulburn school crisis in the early 1960s. More security in funding came in the early 1970s following the setting up of the Commonwealth Schools Commission. While there is no evidence that parents ever doubted the value of Catholic schooling, there was debate in some circles about the extensive financial commitment of Catholics to Catholic schools, and about whether the Catholic community could sustain the system without some government support. The key issue was funding and financial viability, not the philosophy of Catholic schooling – although there were some writers who challenged this on the grounds that the church's mission should not be so committed to a private school system. Br Marcellin was very interested in replying to this criticism, and saw his work concerned with justifying Catholic schooling as an important part of the mission of the church. He sensed that there was a lack of easy access to documents which outlined the purposes of Catholic

schools. His work set out to remedy that deficiency. The books reporting his empirical studies, together with material on the theory of Catholic schooling in following studies in 1985, 1993 and 2002 were essentially follow-ups to his 1975 book.

The published research studies reflect the perspectives of the time and the particular concerns of the Church and Catholic educators:

- 1975: Do we need the schools now?
- 1979: A rationale for the schools.
- 1985: How good are the schools?
- 1993: Culture explains why the schools are so effective.
- 2002: The continuing importance of the schools.

Each successive research study and its follow up book explored both issues arising from the earlier studies and issues which had emerged more recently. These issues often reflected broader concerns within the church at the time. Up until 1972, Catholic schools struggled a little for credibility, even though they were always popular with parents; the real struggle was for adequate funds for maintenance and extension of the schools. At that time the church's credibility was little questioned. Complementing funding for private schools from state governments, the Whitlam federal government, through the Schools Commission, introduced a funding security that helped Catholic schools to survive and prosper beyond a congregational model to the diocesan systems model – their financial viability and their credibility were maintained and enhanced.

The Catholic church over the last thirty years has been going through what will probably be seen to be as momentous a change as it has ever seen. As an organisation, the church is looking much less unassailable than it did in 1970. It is ironic that while the credibility of the church has lessened in recent times, the credibility and popularity of Catholic schools has grown. Catholic schools are now broadly accepted for their contribution to Australian education and culture. Marcellin Flynn's work should be seen within the story of the struggle of the Catholic people Australia to educate their children to live their lives according to the Gospel.

#### **1975: *Some Catholic Schools in Action***

Flynn's first book *Some Catholic Schools in Action* addressed the issues of that time (Flynn, 1975). Brother Marcellin did not shy away from the

intellectual challenges. He sought a sociologically defensible reason for the schools as well as a rationale in terms of the church's aims for education. In the 1960s, as noted above, there were some who questioned the value and sustainability of the schools. While the church had a renewed sense of mission arising from the Second Vatican Council, the schools were struggling to survive. A number of Catholic schools, but not all, suffered in comparison with government schools in terms of facilities, staff qualifications and salary levels.

Brother Marcellin's study provided support for those who were labouring to preserve the schools as viable institutions. He found that Catholic schools were effective witnesses to the Word. In particular, he argued that the social structure of the Catholic school supported the faith dimension though at the same time effective faith transmission needed a supportive Christian community. These findings were both highly significant and supportive to those working in the schools at that time.

#### **1979: *Catholic Schools and the Communication of Faith***

In the 1970s Br Marcellin believed that there were still some misgivings within the church about the desirability of Catholic schools, although others did not see the situation as threateningly as he did. He may have overestimated the extent of the debate; what appeared in some books and articles was not representative of the views of most teachers or parents. He did address this question in his next book, but it was not the driving influence. He was particularly interested in clarifying the relationship between Catholic schooling and the development of personal faith, a question that became very prominent after the work of James Fowler on faith development, and the publication of James Westerhoff's book *Will Our Children Have Faith* (Westerhoff, 1976). Flynn (1979) in his second book, *Catholic Schools and the Communication of Faith* articulated a relationship between faith in God and work of Catholic schools and he provided a rationale and theory for Catholic schools. The significance of this work lies in the circumstances of the time. In 1978, Catholic education was very different from what we know. The religious congregations had founded almost all the schools and continued to provide large numbers of staff, particularly principals. Their traditions and practices shaped their schools in unique ways. For lay teachers who had not had the benefit of formation within a congregation, it was difficult to find a body of theory and practice on Catholic schooling on which to draw. The church had a wealth of documents from the Second Vatican Council and particularly the key manifesto of 1977, *The Catholic School*. Using such documents,

Marcellin Flynn provided an accessible guide for the conduct of Catholic schools. This book filled a real need for teachers in Catholic schools.

### **1985: *The Effectiveness of Catholic Schools***

Marcellin Flynn's third book, *The Effectiveness of Catholic Schools* (1985), was published in 1985. Here he addressed questions as to why and in what ways Catholic schools were effective. The crucial question was what elements contributed to that success. Brother Marcellin was conscious of other issues too. He did not ignore the continuing debate regarding the appropriateness of private schools in democratic Australia. He argued that Catholic schools in order to survive needed to have a clearly distinctive Catholic identity.

The findings stressed that the effectiveness of Catholic schools was a function of a unifying, liberating sense of mission which drew the different organisational components together. Brother Marcellin found that effective Catholic schools had outstanding social climates. Both religious education (RE) and the climate of the schools advanced the religious purposes of Catholic schools. The results also showed how successfully lay teachers were in continuing the work of conducting Catholic schools without significant numbers of religious. Most of all, the study showed that the "informal curriculum" with its stress on relationships seemed to have the most substantial influence on students' academic achievements. Flynn still felt the need for Catholic schools to be able to define their Catholic character; without it they would lose their *raison d'être*.

### **1993: *The Culture of Catholic Schools***

The next work (Flynn, 1993) was the logical follow up to his previous work. It reflected the influence on organisational theory of the anthropological concept, culture, on education. Culture provided an integrative concept which could explain why Catholic schools were effective organisations. The study showed that the partnership between parents and committed Catholic teachers was found to be vital to the effectiveness of Catholic schools.

A strong theme which emerged was the positive impact of the personal relationships which developed between senior students and their teachers. The research also detected for the first time in the longitudinal study, a significant ambivalence among students regarding some church teachings.

### **2002: *Catholic Schools 2000***

Dr Marcellin Flynn and Dr Magdalena Mok were co-workers and authors for his most recent and final study (Flynn & Mok, 2002). This study,

conducted in 1998, used a large sample of students and teachers in Catholic schools. It used a similar methodology to the earlier studies but with a different approach to processing the data. The analysis of data was multilevel with a nested structure. The methodology used two survey instruments for students and one for staff. The study deliberately aimed to follow up on a number of issues which had emerged in the earlier studies thus making the study summative. There were ten research questions which examined:

- the characteristics, home background, life-goals and values of Year 12 students and teachers;
- students' and teachers' expectations of Catholic schools;
- the quality of school life in Catholic schools;
- the level of religious development of Year 12 students;
- students' and teachers' experiences of the quality of school life in Catholic schools;
- students' attitudes towards the educational dimension of Catholic schools;
- students' and teachers' experiences of daily life in the classrooms of Catholic schools;
- students' response to religious education in Catholic schools;
- conclusions and implications that can be drawn from this research.
- recommendations for Catholic schools in the Third Millennium.

These questions arose from the findings of the earlier studies. The study, as a result, was complex because of the number of research questions. The range of questions showed the degree to which the study aims to be summative. It also sought to identify issues that could be explored further by other researchers.

The results of the final study are more complex than those of the earlier work. The results showed a range of students' attitudes on different aspects of their lives at the end of the twentieth century. The results, describing students' self-report of attitudes, showed an increase in the proportion of students who considered religion to be "very important" but there was a decline in their reported Mass

attendance rates. While there was a decline in measures of student morale, discipline was not a major issue. The data suggested that relationships between student and staff appeared to be quite good. It was unclear what gave rise to the decline in student morale. This is an example of an issue which needs to be examined further by researchers. Regarding the students' greatest concerns, it was not unexpected that they should revolve around the future in terms of matriculation results and careers. It was evident that measures of the religious expectations of students were substantially lower in importance than for other dimensions. On reflection, this result should not be a cause of anxiety. It showed that the work schools do in stressing the importance of Years 11 and 12 has been successful. Students were taking their studies seriously.

The study showed that teachers' in Catholic schools expected the schools to provide an atmosphere of Christian community where people are concerned for one another. While developing Christian values in students' lives and fostering academic development, teachers considered a balance of all dimensions of human and religious development as the best preparation for students' later lives. These findings were in a sense, the most crucial and most pleasing in the study, reflecting a fine balance of expectation; one could not reasonably wish more of teachers than this. These findings highlight one of the key outcomes of the longitudinal study: the enduring high quality of teachers, lay and religious, in Catholic schools.

Quality of school life was always one of Marcellin Flynn's key concerns. The quality of school life was a focus for the study, not only because it is important in its own right, but also because research suggests that there are significant associations between students' quality of school life and their academic achievement. This final study showed the quality of school life to be impressive. Staff valued the sense of community. Though student alienation is not a cause of concern, the sources of stress for teachers were workloads, student discipline issues and secularisation. The study suggested that students' quality of school life is partly determined by home background. Apart from the need to monitor teacher stress, there are few issues for concern here.

The final study had much to say about students' faith and religious practice that might appear contradictory at first glance. Mass attendance was reported as less regular and consistent than in earlier times and the sacrament of Penance was little used. While personal prayer was less regular, belief in God was reported as high. Positive scores on items asking about "Christ's reality in student's lives" increased but christological doctrinal

positions were reported as less accepted. Students were very negative about compulsory RE in Year 12 and retreats were becoming less popular than indicated in earlier studies. The picture of faith and practice presented here is broadly consistent with the data from the Church Life Surveys conducted periodically in Australian parishes on behalf of the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference. It would appear that Year 12 mass attendance, as reported in Br Marcellin's work, is higher than that of most of their parents' age groups as reported in the Church Life Surveys. Belief in God and the notion of the reality of Christ in students' lives were reported as high. Theological formulations describing Christ did not have apparent cogency for students. Similarly, students were not persuaded by expectations of church authorities regarding sacramental practice.

Students attitudes to compulsory RE which emerged in the study remain a cause for concern. This research and a weight of anecdotal comment raised questions about the effectiveness of mandating the study of RE in Year 12. It is probably worth asking whether greater emphasis should be placed upon culture of the school as the prime means of promoting the religious purposes of the Catholic school for Year 12 students. The issue of compulsory RE in Year 12 is neither simple nor a matter of conservatism on the part of church authorities. There is much value in serious study of RE for older students. It is a powerful statement about the faith being a subject of lifelong study and reflection. On the other hand, teachers struggle particularly with students who refuse to engage with school-based courses as opposed to courses which can contribute to matriculation.

### **Change Over Time**

There is both continuity and change in Catholic schools over the 30 years of the study. Confidence in and acceptance of the legitimacy of the Catholic schools endure strongly. Students consistently value Catholic schools and their satisfaction with school is sound and little changed. Student attitudes towards discipline were reported as more positive in the 2002 book than they were earlier. It is equally clear that church authority has relatively weakened as an influence on students. Student mass attendance has declined, as has student personal prayer. Parents and peers increasingly influence students' religious development. This is cause for hope. The church can only flourish within the nurturing atmosphere of the family, supported by sympathetic peers. This provides a focus for evangelisation in schools.

### **Looking Ahead**

With the death of Marcellin Flynn it is important to reflect on how we might be able to continue to gain

insights into Catholic schools in the future. Every opportunity should be made to take advantage of the sound foundation provided by Br Marcellin's work by exploring new methodologies and theoretical underpinnings. In this fashion, we will continue to broaden our understanding of how Catholic schools function and what support they need to continue the work. Br Marcellin's work has also provided us with a further valuable insight. The studies provide us with some challenges:

- how do we make sense of where the Holy Spirit has been taking the church in Australia for the past 30 years?
- decline or transformation: which way should we see the Church in Australia? There are arguments for both but some are more persuasive than others;
- has there been an increase in people's sense of personal faith as opposed to a faith based in the institution of the church?
- as people's sense of affiliation with parish weakens, how can the schools fill the need as primary centres for evangelisation?

In another sense, the research of Brother Marcellin Flynn provides us with a challenge. A considerable aspect of the power and value of his work arises from its nature as a longitudinal study. For a variety of reasons, such studies are rare and to a degree, their value is often appreciated more in hindsight. The issue remains for Catholic schools to pursue the key questions about the schools now and in the future.

I believe that Marcellin Flynn would have seen his research as a statement about

*Catholic Schools, moving towards the future, with hope.*

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