



# Claiming Our Catholic Schools

EDEL MURPHY, O.P.

IN August 2016 I returned to full-time teaching in a Catholic school in Dublin. During a summer course a teacher from a Muslim school told me how she had come to value the need for an ethos in a school. While she herself was not of the Islamic tradition she appreciated the faith and the integration of the Islamic beliefs throughout the school day. I often recall her comment as denominational schools have suffered some bashing.

The truth is that the school in which, at present, I am associated, like the Catholic schools I have visited, welcome all traditions and integrate the beauty of each into the daily life of the class and school – yes, within the context of a Catholic ethos. Catholic schools bring valuable elements of our lives into harmony in school life, giving a rhythm, and a sense that all are loved. Experience has shown me that it is deeper than the surface of simply being ‘together’ in a school.

In my First Communion class, two years ago, there were 33 children. Six children were of the Hindu tradition, one child belonged to an evangelical church, three children were from families where parents had no faith in any creator or transcendent being. And, indeed, not all of those of the Catholic tradition were weekly church attenders. All are welcome in our Catholic school. On my first day with this class I stood in front of these amazing children and said, ‘Right, children, let us begin with a prayer to God.’ A hand was raised

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and I was asked, 'Now which god would you be talking about?' I responded by saying, 'I don't understand your question'. To which my student, all of seven years, sat up, crossed his legs, stretched his hand out with an air of explanation and continued, saying, 'Well you see, Sister Edel, there are Roman gods, Greek gods, oh, and my favourite one is ...' When I interrupted the young man and said, 'the One True God, we will say a prayer to the One True God', his response was, 'Oh, I haven't heard of that one yet!' And we proceeded, but with a new shift for me. Great, I had thinkers, children full of curiosity, and with no fear of asking for clarification, children bringing into the mixture their God-given creativity and imagination and wonder.

#### PARENTS

The involvement of the parents was vital and their engagement in aspects of all faith traditions and family traditions was a dialogue that was challenging in a good and honest way for all of us. Their interaction was a gift. I didn't claim to have all the answers but I shared my faith and was amazed at the parents who had no faith in God and how they thanked the school for allowing the conversation. We were genuinely building church.

For a few Fridays, parents came in to give instruction on the Hindu tradition, I taught the Catholic lessons and the Home School Teacher did Friends Forever with those of family traditions. This required careful planning and agreement with the principal. We were all in the one room, divided into three groups for 30 minutes. Every other day we interacted with one another during the RE lessons which included story, song, prayer, gestures, art, talking about human values, Scripture texts, the saints, who we celebrate – each time asking what message would they have for us living as we are today and how to live it with each other.

No parent asked for their child to be removed but two did come and talk for a further explanation on elements of our faith. One par-

ent who had no faith in God himself, shared with me that he felt he had no right to deny his child being exposed to the spiritual aspect of his being. And so the conversation continued. Through the encouragement of our principal we were participating in a genuine understanding of Catholic education, none of us having full answers but all of us seeking truth. We were active in empowering one another in living Church, a Church of Vatican II that I was nourished in from home and in the Congregation of which I am a member.

During the Christmas prayer service those of other faiths, dressed in their traditional clothes, took lanterns and accompanied Mary and Joseph on their journey, walking around the hall, as a symbol of all of us being on a journey towards the Sacred. The following year a father of two of our students in the school gave testimony of how he and his family fled from persecution by ISIS in Syria. They were of the Islamic faith. He told their story side by side with the story of Mary and Joseph. For Mary and Joseph were forced also to flee with their new-born Son because of persecution.

### ENGAGEMENT

This is where we are called to respond to one another. We in the school wanted engagement, not just tolerance. Listening to the children themselves talk at the tables with such freedom and honesty was insightful, and at times hilarious! We were not just sitting together, we wanted the chat, the conversation, the questioning, the engagement of the spiritual aspect of our lives which makes sense when done in community and in opening each other to opportunities to experience God in our lives. This, then, would bring us to respond to the needs of others as we, following the school prayer service, carried our boxes of gifts to the local shelter in the town for those who are homeless.

Our faith is not an after-school club as it is a part of who we are and its nourishment is needed to reach our potential. We have phys-

ical, emotional, moral, intellectual and spiritual needs, each aspect deserving attention. The religious sisters I live with, come from promoting the deeper aspect of education, drawing out all the good that is within. For example, when teaching art – yes, we teach techniques but we also provide experiences, not once off, but many where the child might tap into the artist within. In music, theory is taught and again experiences to access the musician within. And so on with science, history and the other subjects. In the experiences we go into the ‘well’ of the spiritual part of the child so as to connect to God, that all who see the beauty brought forth are directed to God. It is for this that we, in our present-day Catholic schools desire for our children, to become who God has called them, and is calling them, to be.

It is upsetting to read harsh claims in the media that Catholic schools are only about indoctrination. Such writing is upsetting because, as one of the few professed religious in full-time education in primary schools in Ireland, I know that indoctrination is not what I do or what our school does. The approach in the programme used for Religious education in primary schools in Ireland, called Grow in Love, embraces the values of looking, learning and living so as to follow the example of Jesus who walked among the people, listened to them, challenged them and dialogued with them.

In our Catholic schools the words ‘collaboration’, ‘engagement’, ‘dialogue’ (as opposed to simply tolerating) tell more of the reality of who we are. Our Catholic schools nourish the capacity for spirituality. This involves the ability to converse, to experience, to question and to grow. Without conversation we cannot hear, we cannot respect, we cannot grow into the potential of being truly human, made in the image and likeness of God.

#### NEGATIVITY

There is, in many quarters in the public arena, a sad negativity about Catholics schools. This is visible in the State deciding to manage

pressure for school places by restricting the admissions rights of Catholic primary schools, and Catholic schools only – this instead of providing the extra school places that are needed. Further, in regard to the religious education curriculum, politicians are promoting only learning ‘about’ religions. In relationship and sexuality education, the lack of recognition of the parental role is questionable.

Religious education in Catholic schools is not about indoctrination, nor is it about increasing Mass attendance, or changing personal faith. It’s not even about the relevance of the Catholic Church.

The Catholic school is not an exclusively ecclesiastical institution like a ‘mini-seminary’ and this needs to be reflected in the articulation of its Catholic and its educational identity. Disproportionate attention to either a Catholic ecclesiastical view of the school or to its state-funded school status can be problematic. Unrealistic ecclesiastical expectations tend to see religious education too exclusively in terms of a church recruitment process and for increasing pupils’ mass attendance rates. By contrast, over-emphasising the state school status could compromise the important place of religious education in the school curriculum.<sup>1</sup>

In December 2018 I asked a group of children in fifth class if Jesus walked among us today where did they think he would come. A child from the travelling community very matter of a fact answered straight away,

‘He’d come back to be among the poor again. We always know that we need him. The well-off don’t think they need him. The poor always need him. The rich don’t know that they do’.

A child from third class said to me that heaven is where you ex-

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1. Graham Rossiter, *The Changing Landscape of Contemporary Spirituality: Implications for Catholic School Religious Education*, p.3

perience the most love. Or a child who asks ‘why can’t women be priests?’, I don’t know but keep asking. A ten year old boy teaches me that Lent is about ‘making room for God’. An eight-year-old thinking of his First Communion wonders if Jesus would like to be a part of him like he will be a part of Jesus. This they can do due to the ethos of their school and the teachers who uphold it. Sadly, in many a situation home fails to nourish this aspect of a child’s life.

Daily, I appreciate how my mother didn’t deny us being nourished in the gift of faith. In our Catholic schools we hope to teach the children the love of God for them in their lives and how we are to show love likewise for others. For God’s love is what we are certain of. And when we speak of sin to them it is to do so in how we are in communion with others and all of life and to damage an element of that relationship is to damage the web of life-webs which through the religious education programme they are invited to design, placing God at the centre.

Conversation at many a table in relation to the faith formation of our children is not always pleasant. I am often reminded of Dennis O’Driscoll’s poem, ‘Missing God’. But when I meet many teachers in our Catholic schools who aspire to promote the children’s God-given talents so that they may use them for the good of all, I am inspired and spiritually nourished. How freeing it is to be able to say that we don’t have all the answers, but let’s talk, let us hear each other, be present to each other, allow the sacred emerge. Let us listen to God’s voice. Let us search for truth in a spirit of love.

### THE EMPTY TOMB

At this time of year I reflect on the empty tomb. The tomb has been unlocked and the boulder has been rolled away. I recall in my life the faith of my mother. I recall her faith which she graciously nurtured and dutifully passed on. I recall how she stood in her own conviction with dignity, claiming her place in the Church and freeing her spirit

which led others to seek all that is good.

I believe it is right to leave the boulder aside and to avoid filling the tomb with remnants of attacks on each other, or to hang around lazily on the sideline, waiting for others to provide a remedy while we throw stones into the tomb, blocking it again. Leave the tomb empty, move to spaces outside that allow conversation and the Spirit to move freely to bring healing and life to all. Passing on the faith essentially takes place in the family with the family claiming its place and being included in parish life.

At the same time, programmes of religious education continue to play an indispensable role in creating a culture of faith and a sense of missionary discipleship, as voiced by Pope Francis during his visit to Ireland last August. Let us take delight in freeing our spirit, in leaving the empty tomb and let us be in conversation with each other, building the kingdom of God among us.