

## **What the Catholic School Has to Offer**

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Even Marge Simpson believes that Catholic schools have something special to offer. When Bart is blamed for a silly prank and expelled from Springfield Elementary School, she enrolls Bart in St Jerome's Catholic School. But as Bart and Homer find out, Catholic school has much more to offer than good discipline. Through Fr Sean (voiced by Liam Neeson) they encounter understanding, hospitality, fun and good learning – some of the hallmarks of a good Catholic education.

In Ireland, parents choose Catholic school for a variety of reasons. A 2008 study showed that parents who send their child to Catholic schools<sup>1</sup> actively choose a school with a religious denomination.<sup>2</sup> However, a more recent study (2011) found that the factors that most influenced parents include an education that encourages their imagination, the discipline in the school, geographical proximity and the quality of the education provided by that school.<sup>3</sup> The quality issue includes provision of a schooling experience that parents wish their child to have.

This study also reveals consensus on many different themes, including a conviction that the Catholic school has unique identifiable characteristics and is considered valid and valued in modern Ireland.<sup>4</sup> Of course, the clear defining feature of any Catholic school, indeed any faith school, is belief in God.

In this paper I attempt to explore the Catholic belief in God, how it informs the spirit of a Catholic school and affects the type of education found there. To do this I draw from Catholic Christian theology and from my own experience working with voluntary second level schools. I go on to outline the significant threat to this type of

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<sup>1</sup> In both the 2008 and 2011 reports the phrase 'Catholic schools' denotes primary schools under the patronage of a Catholic bishop.

<sup>2</sup> Irish Catholic Bishops' Conference, *Parental Understandings of Patronage* (2011) <http://www.catholicschools.ie/2011/09/28/parental-understandings-of-patronage/> [accessed 10 May, 2013].

<sup>3</sup> The 2011 study was conducted with principals, teachers, priests, assessors, pastoral council members and pupils, who participated in a series of focus group discussions in February and March 2011. It was one element of a wider consultative process carried out as part of the Church's internal reflection on Catholic primary school patronage. In his Executive Summary – Parental Understandings of Patronage (October 2011), researcher Eoin O'Mahony outlines how the rationale for the study arises from work conducted with a much larger set of parents in 2007/08 around factors determining school choice.

<sup>4</sup> Irish Catholic Bishops' Conference, *Report on Catholic Primary Schools* (2011) <http://www.catholicschools.ie/2011/10/07/executive-summary-report-on-catholic-primary-schools/> [accessed 11 May 2013].

education, especially at second level. My hope is to give those who are making choices about schools and children an appreciation of what the Catholic school can offer. A secondary hope is to raise awareness that if reasonable action to preserve the sector is not taken quickly, the choice to send one's child to a Catholic second level school will not be there for some, perhaps for many, in the near future.

### **The question of God will not go away**

Every education philosophy reflects beliefs about meaning and purpose. There is no such thing as a value neutral education. All schools express an ethos by its choices, actions and attitudes. Whether established by the state or by some voluntary group, all schools espouse a particular vision of the human person and of life in the world. What is of ultimate value to the short human life is of universal concern.

Faith schools deal with questions of meaning, purpose and ultimate value with reference to God (although language for the Mystery that Christians term God differs among faith traditions). Regardless of whether an individual believer is convinced, questioning or unconvinced, for believers in general, the question of God is important. This becomes a major contributing factor to a school ethos, or to use the language of the Education Act 1998, a school 'characteristic spirit'.<sup>5</sup>

### **School Characteristic Spirit**

Every school has a characteristic spirit, either by design or by default. There is no such thing as teaching and learning from a neutral standpoint. Faith based schools, like all schools, have a legal responsibility and a right to uphold a school ethos or characteristic spirit. In Catholic schools, this characteristic spirit is rooted in Catholic Christianity, which gives rise to certain principles or ways of looking at the world. It contributes in many specific ways to the type of education offered there.

A characteristic spirit can be like an iceberg – only the tip obvious; the invisible bulk providing the anchor. Because of its theological tradition, the Catholic school can name its anchors. The invisible bulk is easily made visible to anyone – supporter and critic alike – who looks below the surface. When debating the question of what type of school to choose for their children, parents can therefore consider the ways a Catholic spirit vivifies a school and its lived out, everyday dimensions.

Later in this article I outline two of the fundamental anchors of Catholic Christianity and how they give rise to the characteristic spirit in Catholic schools. However, in order to understand Catholic schools, we must first try to understand what the Catholic Christian tradition means by the word 'God'.

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<sup>5</sup> Department of Education, *Education Act, (1998)*  
<http://www.irishstatutebook.ie/1998/en/act/pub/0051/sec0015.html#sec15> [accessed 2 June 2013].

## God as Mystery

To begin, God does not refer to a person. There is not some person out there, much older, wiser and more powerful than average person whose name is 'God'.

Theologian Michal Himes explains 'God' as a bit of shorthand which functions in Christian theology almost as the X functions in algebra. When working through an algebraic problem, one's focus is X. But X is the shorthand for the thing one doesn't know. In a similar way, God is the name of the Mystery that lies at the root of all that exists. Because we are talking about ultimate mystery we must never forget that we will never have the last word on God, never have anything close to complete comprehension. But that must not stop us trying.<sup>6</sup>

## God as Love

Like any great religious tradition, Christianity maintains that while it cannot say everything about the Mystery that is God, it can say something. As there is no absolutely right way to talk about God, Himes uses the phrase 'least wrong way'. For Christians, the least wrong way to imagine God is God as love.<sup>7</sup> The New Testament repeats this over and over again in the parables and ministry of Jesus, but it is said most forthrightly in one of its very late documents, the first letter of John. In chapter 4 of this letter we read that God is *agape* - self-giving love (1 John 4:8,16).

The Greek word chosen to describe the love that is God is curious. The word *agape* denotes a particular kind of love. *Agape* is a purely other-directed love, one that seeks nothing in return. It is translated well as *self-gift* – the gift of oneself to another without expectation, regardless of whether the gift is accepted or rejected. The cornerstone of Catholic schools then – the primary reason they even exist - is to bring people onto contact with the God that is self-giving love. This becomes increasingly important as education is more and more commodified.<sup>8</sup> An instrumentalised education driven by economic imperatives may satisfy the market but it will never suffice for holistic education – in and of the person. Authentic Catholic education is an antidote to instrumentalisation because at its heart is the person, in and of themselves. An education that humanizes rather than instrumentalises is just as good if not better for society; it puts things in right order. When we are really loved in and of ourselves, it frees us to genuinely love in return.

## How this love is expressed

We see glimmers of agapic love in the world around us. It is sometimes beautifully depicted in the world of children's popular culture. For instance, in *The Lion King*,

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<sup>6</sup> Michael J. Himes & McNeill, D. P., *Doing the Truth in Love: Conversations about God, Relationships, and Service*, (New York: Paulist Press, 1995).

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Kathleen Lynch, Grummell, Bernie & Devine, Dymphna, *New Managerialism in Education: Commercialization, Carelessness and Gender*, (UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).

Mufasa gives his life to save his only son – little lion cub Simba. The wonderful children’s book *Guess How Much I Love You*, has Big Nut Brown Hare showing Little Nut Brown Hare a love that has no bounds. But we can also see agapic love at work in our schools. Since 2008 I have worked first as faith development coordinator and latterly as faith leadership and governance coordinator with CEIST.<sup>9</sup> Of the myriad of practical examples I have witnessed in CEIST schools, I lift up just two which mirror the type of love that is *agape*.

### **School A**

School A is located in a small, poor, very deprived parish which is host to feuding drug families in a socially divided city. About 20% of the students in School A come from this socio-economic background.

When the feuding started some years ago, the number of children enrolling in the local feeder primary school declined rapidly. Numbers in School A dropped accordingly. However, many of the teachers’ daughters continued and still continue to attend this school. Their success and the success of so many of the girls who attend School A is a very strong and positive beacon in a place where it is both needed and deserved. This message of faith in the school reverberates throughout the wider community.

During this period, School A not only maintained its numbers; it also developed a very strong reputation, locally and nationally, in debating, shows, musicals, and choir. This is largely due to the enormous generosity and commitment of both principal and staff and their shared belief that the school should and can be a vibrant community of hope, especially in the socio-economic context in which it operates.

The school has also developed close links with the local parish and through the parish, the local community. Liturgy, understood and celebrated as an important unifying symbolic activity is very significant in the school. To my mind, however, the annual trip to Lourdes is particularly striking. This trip, an annual highlight in the school calendar, is open to every senior student. Some years ago the chaplain – a Mercy Sister who gives her time and commitment on a voluntary basis - managed to secure a major sponsor who makes an annual donation. The local congregation of the Sisters of Mercy also makes a contribution. The chaplain and staff organise fundraising activities such as bag packing so that the students also raise money. Through the heartfelt generosity and commitment of the school community, every student who wants to go can travel and everyone who travels can contribute towards the cost.

### **School B**

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<sup>9</sup> In 2007, five Catholic religious congregations engaged in post primary education for over three and a half centuries – Daughters of Charity, Presentation Sisters, Sisters of the Christian Retreat, Sisters of Mercy, Missionaries of the Sacred Heart – in the spirit of their founders, together established CEIST – Catholic Education, an Irish Schools Trust. CEIST provides a new moral and legal trustee framework enabling their schools to continue to offer post-primary Catholic education into the future as a viable option and as an integral part of the Irish school system. CEIST is built on the founding vision of the five congregations, emphasising the dignity and rights of the human person, empowering the most vulnerable in society and enabling young people to become catalysts for social transformation throughout the world. For more details see [www.ceist.ie](http://www.ceist.ie)

School B is a large school serving a small town and its extensive rural hinterland. It is not the only school in town. Some years ago the HSE approached School B and requested that it accept a student who had a troubled history. Patrick (not his real name), aged 15, had been through a number of foster homes. He talked to no one. In fact, he shut off all possible communication by means of headphones constantly in his ears. Patrick was “alone in the yard and the assembly area.”<sup>10</sup> Both his attendance and punctuality were erratic.

Despite severe cutbacks in successive budgets, School B has heroically maintained its standards in the pastoral care of students, especially those who are most in need. Since the DES abolished the position of Home School Liaison some years ago, the post has been filled on a part time voluntary basis by a Presentation Sister. Although Guidance Counsellors are no longer ex quota and most schools are struggling to provide any sort of Guidance Counselling, School B has prioritised this service through fundraising and the goodwill of those on staff who are qualified in this area. Along with senior management and Year Heads, these people form a care team which serves the students in ways one can never fully know.

In short, School B has a highly evolved practice of vigilance, care and early intervention which has transformed life for countless students, including Patrick. In his particular case, a small but committed group including staff, his (new) foster mother, and a social worker who was involved with the local hurling team, galvanised around the Year Head. They set to work to support him day after difficult day.

During a recent visit to School B I witnessed Patrick, open and happy, chat easily with the principal and banter with his peers. The Year Head described how  
“[He] has light in his eyes, communicates well with people and has self-belief. He asks for help and will identify difficulties in his path. He hasn’t missed a day in months and has finished up loving school. [Patrick] has gone on to win a [Quiz Team] All Ireland medal . . . is well regarded by his class and has good friends. He is aiming to pursue a course in UCD. We will always admire him for how he has overcome so many obstacles in his life at this tender age.”<sup>11</sup>

Of course such experiences are not exclusive to CEIST schools. What is noteworthy however is that in both of these cases the inspiration behind what they are doing and why they are doing it is directly linked to the Catholic ethos.<sup>12</sup> The studies of sociologist Robert Bellah & colleagues conclude that acting compassionately and reaching out to those in need is not sustainable without recourse to the impetus or source of the virtue. When we lose the ability to connect our good behaviours and concerns for the common good to the source, those very behaviours and concerns begin to diminish.<sup>13</sup> It is very clear in the minds of both principals that their attitudes, choices and actions are inspired by their faith - the same faith which informs the school characteristic spirit.

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<sup>10</sup> The Year Head in conversation with the author.

<sup>11</sup> The Year Head in conversation with the author.

<sup>12</sup> The Principal & Chaplain of School A in conversation with the author; the Principal and some staff members of School B in conversation with the author.

<sup>13</sup> Robert N. Bellah, Madsen, Richard, Sullivan, William M., Swindler Ann, & Tipton, Steven M., *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (New York: Harper & Row, 1985).

From a Catholic worldview perspective, the encounter with compassion and commitment as described above is an encounter with *agape*. Where there is love, there is God. Where there is God there is love. Deeply ingrained in the fabric of many Catholic schools, it is something sensed and encountered, rather than written up in brochures or advertised on websites. Yet it can make a real difference to the education of a child. I noted earlier that the characteristic spirit of a school deeply affects the type of education it offers. Here I consider two anchors of Catholic Christianity and the visible ways they can vivify the characteristic spirit of a school.

### **1) Meaning and ultimate meaning**

The first anchor relates to the basic human question: does my life have meaning and if so where does it come from; do I give meaning to my own life or does my life have a meaning outside the one I give it? Meaning refers to the significance or import of something – why something matters. People make meaning in their lives in all sorts of ways, for instance through the experience of love and friendship, or of making a contribution to society. For the Christian, life has meaning and is meaningful. There is more to life than what we see on the surface. Part of the function of the Catholic school is to help students search for and discover this meaning for themselves.

A natural corollary to the question of meaning now adds the word ‘ultimate’. Is there an ultimate meaning to my life and is there an ultimate purpose to existence? How one answers these age old questions will be predicated on one’s belief or not in God. If one does not believe in God, there is no ultimate significance to one’s sense of meaning, value or purpose. This life is all there is – nothing more. Belief in God, on the other hand, presumes there is an ultimate dimension to life. Life has significance beyond what we ourselves notice or attach. Rather than invented, meaning, value and purpose, are discovered through faith in God. How one views that God then becomes an essential question. If one believes in God, then one’s image of God is very important.

### **The Christian belief in God**

For Catholic Christians, the Mystery of God that is self-giving love (referred to earlier) is revealed in Jesus Christ. Jesus is the face of God. Through knowing him we come to know God. This has huge importance in a world where disconnected images of God can sometimes emerge. One such image is that of the Cosmic Computer Player. This is a god who sits on high, makes judgments on his subjects and punishes at will. Like a player sitting at an enormous cosmic computer, this god randomly pushes buttons that can have catastrophic consequences, from the death of a child to tsunami wave destruction. A second anti-Christian image is that of the Therapeutic God whose sole function is to make us feel good about ourselves. The Therapeutic God feeds our hunger for affirmation without ever challenging

destructive behaviours or helping us to discern how best to grow into the people we were made to become.

### **The Christian image of God**

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

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

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

In a Catholic school the nativity story cannot be presented as one Christmas story among many. It is *the* Christmas story. It is the story of the Incarnation – a central mystery for Christians. The baby in the manger is often depicted with his arms wide open in welcome; only from this central and rooted position can we be sure of our responsibility to do the same. This is the real nature of inclusion. Recent research identified the inclusive nature of Catholic schools as they continue to meet the needs of the marginalised in our societies.<sup>14</sup> Here is the inspiration (considered so important by Bellah) for welcoming the privileged and the marginalised, the majestic

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<sup>14</sup> Irish Catholic Bishops' Conference, *Report on Catholic Primary Schools* (2011) <http://www.catholicschools.ie/2011/10/07/executive-summary-report-on-catholic-primary-schools/> [accessed 11 May 2013].

and the ordinary, the familiar and the foreigner from a distant land, from a different religious tradition. When placed in this context, the evidence that inter-faith and inter-cultural initiatives work best in schools where the Catholic population is most committed to its own religious practice makes perfect sense.<sup>15</sup>

## **Relationship with Jesus Christ**

The belief in God as revealed to us in Jesus Christ is the inspiration, mission and vision of the Catholic school. Further, Christians believe not only in Jesus Christ as the inspiration, but that relationship with him has the power to transform the human condition. We are all imperfect, incomplete. Every one of us is flawed and vulnerable. We are at our best and become our best in positive relationships, especially in positive relationship with God.

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

If our education system is to avoid instrumentalisation and instead foster the whole child, it needs to allow for questions of meaning and ultimate meaning. Children need access to resources to live and explore these dimensions of what it means to be human. An emerging difference in school identity is concerned with this question of ultimacy. Given their theistic foundation, Catholic schools will naturally allow for this dimension of human life. An instrumentalised education that ignores Mysteries, Meaning and the possibility of ultimacy, deprives adolescent spirituality of otherness beyond their comprehension, and confines their world to the instant and immediate. In a society where teenage suicide is very much a reality, can we afford to ignore the psycho social effects of this type of education?<sup>16</sup>

## **2) Sacramental Imagination**

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<sup>15</sup> See for example John Coolohan, Caroline Hussey & Fionnuala Kilfeather, *The Forum on Patronage and Pluralism in the Primary Sector: Report of the Forum's Advisory Group* <http://www.education.ie/en/Press-Events/Conferences/Patronage-and-Pluralism-in-the-Primary-Sector/The-Forum-on-Patronage-and-Pluralism-in-the-Primary-Sector-Report-of-the-Forums-Advisory-Group.pdf> [accessed 4 June, 2013]

<sup>16</sup> See for examples Des O'Neill, *We need to talk about spirituality in healthcare*, *The Irish Times*, (Tuesday June 19<sup>th</sup> 2012) <http://www.irishtimes.com/news/health/we-need-to-talk-about-spirituality-in-healthcare-1.1067314> and Patricia Casey, *The Psycho-Social Benefits of Religious Practice* (2009) [http://www.ionainstitute.ie/assets/files/Religious\\_practice-1.pdf](http://www.ionainstitute.ie/assets/files/Religious_practice-1.pdf) [accessed 10 May, 2013].

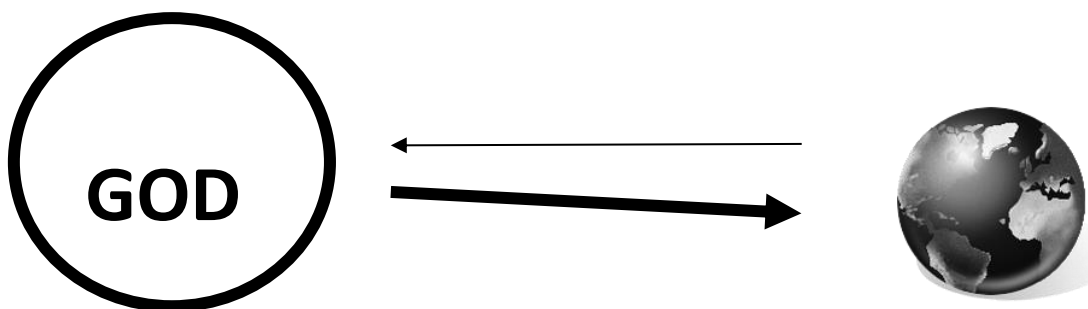


A second Christian pillar that can contribute enormously to the characteristic spirit of a Catholic school is that of sacramental imagination. Let me introduce this concept through the work of C.S. Lewis. When Lewis was asked why he had written *The Chronicles of Narnia*, he replied that he wanted children to experience something of “the deeper magic of life.”<sup>17</sup> Through his stories, he hoped that children would experience God and encounter the power and mystery of Christ through the character of Aslan. *The Chronicles* were written in a way that would engage with the real lives of children - their curiosity and wonder and sense of unfairness, their experiences of friendship and betrayal. Moreover, these stories were to awaken their sense of the sacred. In short CS Lewis wanted to share the central Christian belief that the presence of God can be discerned in all dimensions of life – the sacramental imagination.

A truly Catholic education encourages the habit of seeing beneath or behind what is obvious and noticing the sacred. Sometimes the scales can fall from our eyes out of the blue. For instance, the birth of a child might prompt a profound experience of a life force and for a moment we feel an extraordinary connection to God. However, rather than a momentary or ‘out of the blue’ effect, Catholic Christianity attempts to notice the presence of God in ordinary and everyday life. God’s presence is not confined to a major event, to churches and holy places, or indeed to formal Religious Education; we can experience God through the bits and pieces of our daily lives.

### **A false understanding**

The belief that God is present in the ordinary and everyday bits and pieces of life has often been lost in time and translation. The insight of theologian Richard Gaillardetz helps to make this point. In the first illustration (figure 1), the emphasis is on the distance and difference between God and the rest of the world.<sup>18</sup> The central point is that God is an individual, out there beyond our planet.



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<sup>17</sup> Geoffrey Marshall-Taylor. "The Narnia Effect, the Deeper Magic." *The Way Supplement* 86 (1996): 63-69.

<sup>18</sup> Richard Gaillardetz, *Transforming Our Days: Spirituality, Community, and Liturgy in a Technological Culture*. (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2000).

## Figure 1<sup>19</sup>

Gaillardetz believes that this is the way many Christians think about God today. In this framework, God is outside the world and responds from time to time to our prayers and intercessions. Our encounters with God only happen at particular times, perhaps in response to prayer or attending mass. In this way, life is organized in a dualistic manner between what is sacred and what is secular. So for instance, saying a prayer is sacred while studying specific subjects, engaging in extracurricular activities or participating in sports are secular pursuits. Of course this is at best an impoverished notion of Christian theology and the characteristic spirit of the Catholic school.

### A more authentic understanding

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



## Figure 2

From this theological perspective, everything in the life of a school - making friends, reading a poem, winning one day and losing the next - can disclose the presence and action of God. When the spirit is attuned, we can notice God any time, any place – in the corridor, classroom or chapel. Those moments when we notice or experience God in our lives are referred to as sacramental moments. A sacrament reveals the presence of God; it is a moment of encounter with Christ. While we might be familiar with the seven Sacraments of the Catholic Church, we need to remember that everything can disclose God’s presence and so everything can be sacramental.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> This image is copied from *Ibid.*, 48.

<sup>20</sup> See Michael J. Himes, *The Mystery of Faith: An Introduction to Catholicism*. (Cincinnati, Ohio: St. Anthony Messenger Press, 2004).

This sacramental imagination, or to use Lewis' phrase, the ability to see 'the deeper magic of life', is a natural capacity. However, it needs to be nurtured so that it becomes part of our way of being. Habits such as the ability to pause, to pray, to be present to oneself and to become aware of the presence of others and of God in our lives, foster the sacramental imagination. But they need practice. Just as a hurler completes thousands of drills so that a particular move becomes a natural part of his game, so the practice of habits forms a sacramental imagination. These habits then are fundamental to the daily rhythm of a Catholic school.

One real value of a sacramental imagination is the understanding of the whole world and all people as sacred. Everything and every person is capable of revealing God, and is worthy of justice and respect. This goes to the heart of what it means to be Catholic; the emphasis on social justice and service to others is part of the lived heritage of Catholic schools. In a 2012 ESRI survey, Catholic schools were deemed the most inclusive school type at primary level and more likely to enrol children from non-Irish backgrounds, from the Traveller community and with special needs.<sup>21</sup> The inclusivity of the Catholic school as it continues to meet the needs of the local community, in particular, the needs of the marginalised in our society, also emerged from research conducted by the Catholic Schools Partnership. It is therefore of little wonder that the Minister for Education and Skills noted that one of the strengths of the (predominantly Catholic) primary system has been that the local primary school has been very inclusive of all children within its community.<sup>22</sup>

However, it is clear that most Catholic voluntary secondary schools, including Schools A and B referred to earlier, are attempting to provide a quality education against the backdrop of slow starvation of the sector.

### **Financial starvation**

Voluntary secondary schools receive significantly lower funding from the DES than other secondary schools. According to Ferdia Kelly, General Secretary of AMCSS, most people do not realize that schools in the Catholic secondary sector are severely disadvantaged in terms of annual grants compared with the other two post primary sectors i.e. Community and VEC.<sup>23</sup> For example, a Catholic school of 400 pupils receives 90 euro per pupil less per annum than a similarly sized community school, and 212 per pupil less than a 400 pupil vocational school. On average over 30% of annual expenditure in a Catholic voluntary school must be raised by the school itself through fund raising in the local community. In the current economic

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<sup>21</sup> Marike Darmody, Emer Smyth, & Selina McCoy. School Sector Variation Among Primary Schools in Ireland (2012). [http://www.esri.ie/\\_\\_\\_uuid/7c3b20b7-0671-43a1-8ca7-7d073b36e6d0/BKMNEXT221.pdf](http://www.esri.ie/___uuid/7c3b20b7-0671-43a1-8ca7-7d073b36e6d0/BKMNEXT221.pdf) [accessed 3 June 2013].

<sup>22</sup> Coolohan et al, 84.

<sup>23</sup> Ferdia Kelly, 'Catholic Voluntary Secondary Schools in Ireland – The Challenges for the Future', in *Catholic Schools – Faith in Our Future*, ed Maedhbh Uí Chiagáin (Dublin: AMCSS, 2012).

climate such pressures on the school and local community are not sustainable. Ferdia Kelly contends that such fundraising pressures

places a huge burden on school management, made up mainly of volunteers who give willingly of their time and expertise, and in turn reduces the time available for all of the other responsibilities that boards of management must undertake. In particular, there are serious concerns about the workload carried out by principals in Catholic secondary schools as a result of the absence of management and administrative supports exacerbated by recent cuts in funding.<sup>24</sup>

### **Curriculum pressures**

The very severe cuts in finance and personnel in successive national budgets from 2009-2012 have also resulted in curriculum pressures. Decreased finance and loss of staff means that many schools have been forced to reduce their curriculum. When the broadest choice of both subjects and programmes is no longer available in a school, parents and pupils have little choice but to look elsewhere. This flies in the face of recent research from the Catholic Schools Partnership demonstrating the broad parental wish that their children are part of a community through the school, where the school is local to the home.<sup>25</sup>

Ferdia Kelly's remarks are a stark warning of the consequences:

As a society in Ireland we need to address the reality that we are, in the name of austerity, creating a scenario where tracts of the Irish countryside will have no voluntary secondary school. Is this the type of society we want, where children are forced to spend long hours being transported out of their local school community where each pupil is known and cherished?<sup>26</sup>

In short, the uneven playing field of funding has resulted in curriculum pressures, staff losses and budgetary deficits. However, the most obvious indicator of the forced hunger of the sector is the rate of school closures.

### **A future of love lost**

The decline in number of Catholic voluntary secondary schools has been rapid, with a decrease of over 100 in the past twenty years. While many of these closures have resulted in community schools as a result of amalgamation, the impact of this decline means that there are now areas of the country where there is no Catholic voluntary school available to parents. The school transport scheme provides support for those

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>25</sup> Irish Catholic Bishops' Conference, *Parental Understandings of Patronage* (2011)

<sup>26</sup> Ferdia Kelly, 'Catholic Voluntary Secondary Schools in Ireland – The Challenges for the Future', in *Catholic Schools – Faith in Our Future*, ed Maedhbh Uí Chiagáin (Dublin: AMCSS, 2012), 12.

from minority religious traditions who desire a faith based education, but to date no such facility is available to Catholic parents, with potentially devastating effects.

Take for example the plight of School C. School C is about 20 miles from a city and has traditionally catered for a large rural area with enormous success. The school has deep links with the community and is loved and respected by past pupils and their families as evidenced by the number of people willing to serve on the Board of Management and give voluntarily of their time and resources. However, two new VEC schools are under construction on the outskirts of the city, between the city and School C. As a result, for the first year in living memory, enrolment for 2013 has noticeably dropped. This is directly related to the inequitable transport scheme. In other words, parents who wish to send their children to School C using the scheme but who live closer to the new VEC school will be offered transport only to the VEC school. One wonders how this sits with the Irish Constitution which clearly supports parents in their choice of school.<sup>27</sup> Ironically, although State rhetoric is strongly in favour of plurality of provision, at second level we are witnessing an invidious erosion of choice.

### **A history of love lost**

Contemporary political manoeuvring from the outside is not the only threat to Catholic schools. Indeed, sometimes an even greater threat comes from within. We cannot tell the full story of Catholic education in this country at present without reference to the failures of the past. A limited understanding of God and uncritical acceptance of the way church was evolving led in time to an anthropology and a way of looking at the world that was often more anti-Christian than Christian. Many people remember an education that cultivated mortification and punitive discipline, where learning and instilling fear went hand in hand. Ned Prendergast remarks 'Whatever these failures were, they were ultimately failures in love.'<sup>28</sup>

However, as Prendergast warns, we have to be discerning about what we allow to be dumped on the Catholic school. He remembers a country that 'did not waste anesthetic in child dentistry' and describes mid-20<sup>th</sup> century Ireland as 'a tough time, a tough society, [where] schools could be tough places.'<sup>29</sup> Memoirs such as *Angela's Ashes*<sup>30</sup> or *The Boy at the Gate*<sup>31</sup> are vivid reminders of just how tough it

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<sup>27</sup> 42: The State acknowledges that the primary and natural educator of the child is the Family and guarantees to respect the inalienable right and duty of parents to provide, according to their means, for the religious and moral, intellectual, physical and social education of their children.

42.2: Parents shall be free to provide this education in their homes or in private schools or in schools recognised or established by the State.

The State shall not oblige parents in violation of their conscience and lawful preference to send their children to schools established by the State, or to any particular type of school designated by the State.

<sup>28</sup> Ned Prendergast, 'What is Loved Survives', in *Catholic Schools – Faith in Our Future*, ed Maedhbh Uí Chiagáin (Dublin: AMCSS, 2012), 24.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 23-24.

<sup>30</sup> Frank McCourt, *Angela's Ashes*. New York: Scribner, 1996.

<sup>31</sup> Danny Ellis, *The Boy at the Gate*, (London: Transworld Ireland, 2012).

was. With institutional church history and current State policy at our heels, never before have we been so challenged to articulate what Catholic schools stand for and what it can offer to the parents of Ireland today.

## Conclusion

The Report on Catholic Primary Schools (2011) referred to in the opening paragraphs of this article identified a strong parental commitment to the continuation of Catholic primary schools.<sup>32</sup> However, while the public debate in this country focuses on primary schools, without a marked change in government policy, the Catholic second level sector is in danger of dying on its feet. If we want a Catholic second level option into the future, we need to redress the imbalance. This is both urgent and important in the face of an increasingly instrumentalised view of education. What was gained over centuries will otherwise be lost in a generation, and the loss will have consequences both foretold and as yet unseen.

The cornerstone of Catholic schools – the primary reason they even exist - is to bring people onto contact with the God that is self-giving love. The two anchors I put forward suggest that a Catholic school is one which connects people with God, revealed in Jesus Christ. This God is very close, in and of the world, if only we have eyes to see. A truly Catholic school can open our eyes to the presence of God in the ordinary and everyday hopes and successes, sorrows and disappointments of life. ‘Although God is always knocking on the door of the human heart, we must play our part in introducing young people to the one who gives a Christian school its name, its heart, its prophetic imagination, and its catholic invitation that all are welcome.’<sup>33</sup>

God is always seeking out the human heart. Catholic schools help those hearts attune to the one who searches for them. For very many people, Catholic school has been a place of grace. This is true of the past as well as the present. I conclude with the words of John McGahern, a writer never slow to critique the institutions or establishment of his day. Reflecting on his time in Presentation College, Carrick on Shannon, McGahern writes:

I look back on those years as the beginning of an adventure that has never stopped. Each day as I cycled towards Carrick was an anticipation of delights. The fear and drudgery of school disappeared. Without realising it, through the pleasures of the mind, I was beginning to know and to love the world. The Brothers took me in, sat me down, and gave me tools. I look back on my time there with nothing but gratitude, as years of luck and privilege – and of grace, actual grace.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Irish Catholic Bishops’ Conference, Report on Catholic Primary Schools (2011).

<sup>33</sup> Ned Prendergast, ‘What is Loved Survives’, in *Catholic Schools – Faith in Our Future*, ed Maedhbh Uí Chiagáin (Dublin: AMCSS, 2012), 27.

<sup>34</sup> McGahern, John, *Memoir* (London: Faber and Faber, 2005), 171.

