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The quality of mercy: a central characteristic of authentic Catholic school ethos

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With the reform of the Irish Junior Cycle since 2015, the discourse around school ethos in Ireland is gaining momentum. This paper explores one particular quality of Catholic ethos highlighted by Pope Francis since the beginning of his papacy – the quality of mercy. His articulation of mercy as core to all Catholic ministry reminds Catholic schools of their role as warmly inclusive communities that enable all to flourish, and their particular responsibility to those who are most in need. However, it can be difficult for many in the English-speaking world to get a sense of what mercy (*misericaordiae*) actually means. This paper attempts to break open the papal understanding of mercy and the significance of mercy for Catholic schools today. Using examples from three schools, it illustrates some characteristics of a merciful Catholic school community. The focus of the paper is second level school, although the principles may be of interest to those working with other education sectors.

Keywords: Mercy; Catholic ethos; Pope Francis; Catholic school; community

The vision of the reformed Junior Cycle¹ in Ireland (Republic of) recognises the importance and influence of school ethos (Department of Education (DES) 2015). Using the language of the Education Act (1998), Junior Cycle documents outline how the programme offered by a school should reflect the characteristic spirit (ethos) of that school (DES 2016). This recognition has seen increasing attention to the issue of ethos in Irish education. It is welcomed by Catholic trustees, many of whom have been engaged in processes of articulation and support of Catholic school ethos since their establishment over the last two decades. The following paper, adapted from a keynote address given at the 2022 conference of Network for Researchers in Catholic Education, sits in this context.

Introduction

One of America's most loved writers, James Baldwin, grew up in Harlem in the 1920s and 1930s. In his memoirs, he writes about the hardship of being a child in that place and time, about the poverty and despair that was part and parcel of his youth, about

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the price that he and his community paid for the racism of American society. But he also writes about the sources of life that illumined his young life in the midst of what he calls ‘dark times.’ Several teachers feature on that list, most noticeably

The never-to-be-forgotten Mr Porter, my black math teacher, who soon gave up any attempt to teach me math. I had been born, apparently, with some kind of deformity that resulted in a total inability to count. From arithmetic to geometry, I never passed a single test. Porter took his failure very well and compensated for it by helping me run the school magazine. He assigned a story about Harlem for this magazine, a story he insisted demanded serious research. Porter took me downtown to the main branch of the public library at Forty-second Street and waited for me while I began my research. He was very proud of the story I eventually turned in. But I was so terrified that afternoon that I vomited all over his shoes in the subway.

The teachers I am talking about accepted my limits. I could begin to accept them without shame. I could trust them when they suggested possibilities open to me ... I was an exceedingly shy, withdrawn, and uneasy student. Yet my teachers somehow made me believe that I could learn. And when I could scarcely see for myself any future at all, my teachers told me that the future was mine (Baldwin 1985, 662).

Mr Porter’s understanding of his role was not limited to his job description. Baldwin’s account reflects a teacher who was asking some of the most important questions a teacher can ask: Who is this child and how can I help to identify and nurture their gifts and encourage them to put those gifts at the service of others? These are questions central to any good education, regardless of the tradition of the educational enterprise. They certainly lie at the heart of any school that claims a Catholic ethos. With their deep theological roots feeding a positive view of the world and of human persons (cf Groome 1998; 2021), Catholic schools are well poised to uncover the potential in every person and the importance of contributing to community and the common good.

This paper speaks to the importance of Catholic school ethos in three ways:

1. First, it shares the findings of a research project on the experiences of being Catholic in second level schools in Ireland today, and some significances of those findings.
2. The main part of the paper explores Catholic ethos and one particular quality highlighted by Pope Francis since the beginning of his papacy – the quality of mercy – and why it is so important for Catholic schools.
3. Finally, it uses examples from three schools to illustrate some characteristics of a Catholic school with a merciful heart.

The focus of the paper is second level school, although the principles may be of interest to those leaders and teachers working with primary, tertiary and other education sectors.

The experience of being Catholic

Religious identity and practice in Ireland is changing. Census data indicate that the Catholic population has fallen by approximately 17% over the last five decades. At the same time, the proportion of those with no religion continues to rise. In 2016, 9.8% of the population identified as non-religious, up from 0.04% in 1961 (Central Statistics Office 2017). A recent study developed this further, finding just 54% of

16–29 year-olds identifying as Catholic, and 39% as not religious (Bullivant 2018, 6). 26% of young people in this age group say they never attend a religious service (7), demonstrating that along with Catholic identity, Christian religious practice in Ireland is also decreasing, especially among young people. This trend is not particular to Ireland: since at least the beginning of this millennium, adolescents in England who regularly attend and participate in religious activities are a minority among their peers (Kay and Francis 2001). International patterns echo these findings, with Western, once Christian-majority nations, moving increasingly towards no-religion (PEW Research Center 2019).

The implications for students who identify with/practice a religious tradition in this context are beginning to come under scrutiny, for instance, in a recent report (Meehan and Laffan 2021) from the National Anti Bullying Centre (nABC) at Dublin City University (DCU). Arising out of a research project funded by the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission, this report investigates views and experiences of teachers of Religious Education (RE) in second level schools in Ireland on inclusive Religious Education. One findings of this study was that approximately 12% of respondents voiced concern about religious based bullying. One teacher said, ‘There can be hostility from non religious students towards students who express faith at times.’ Another stated, ‘Strong beliefs by students can be ridiculed.’ Teachers singled out Christians as a particular target group, with comments such as ‘I suspect Christians get the greatest flak today. There is a general intolerance of the Christian worldview which needs [to be] addressed’ (Meehan and Laffan 2021, 21). Further, teachers are most concerned about the negative stereotyping of those who identify as Catholic (12%) and least concerned about those who identify as atheist (2%). Students who identify as Catholic were most frequently the subject of concern. Teachers made comments such as:

- ‘A Catholic student is more likely to be ridiculed or laughed at for their faith position so they tend to be silenced by the prevailing trend towards a secular humanist worldview’
- ‘It is now seen as archaic to hold Catholic values among the student body’
- ‘It is socially acceptable in Ireland to insult/belittle Catholics/Catholicism’ (22).

Whereas to date this is a minority concern among teachers, and new to Ireland, the concerns raised reflect the growing field of international research suggesting that in rapidly secularising societies, those who continue to practice any religion are vulnerable to bullying, especially the previous majority religion (cf Schihalejev et al. 2020; Kittelmann Flensner 2018; Moulin 2016; Iprgrave 2012). For instance, Iprgrave identified that when an atheist cool sweeps the school, adolescents can consider religious participation as ‘abnormal’, with adverse consequences for young people who practice. In these settings, religious adolescents risk ridicule and social exclusion (Iprgrave 2012). Similarly, the international research project REDCo (Religion in Education. A Contribution to Dialogue or a Factor of Conflict in Transforming Societies of European Countries) undertaken with 14–16-year-olds found that some religiously-committed students feel vulnerable in the classroom (Weisse 2011).

The views and concerns of teachers highlighted in this report are interesting in the context of the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic. Research during this period indicates that many people see themselves as having become more reflective, more prayerful and closer to God during the more severe period of lockdown. One result of

Covid-19 is that people seem to be asking: What is really important? What gives us meaning and purpose? Where should we root our values (Byrne and Sweetman 2020)? At the same time, opportunities for young people to talk about religion or faith appear limited to the RE classroom (Cullen 2019), despite their desire for a safe space to learn and talk about their own and others' religions, beliefs and truth claims in schools (NCCA 2017). Further, it seems that young people identify as religious at some level, but may find it difficult to appear so: as one teacher suggested: 'holding a religious worldview can be a lonely experience in modern Ireland' (Meehan and Laffan 2021, 21).

It seems that second level students in Ireland recognise the importance of religion and faith. However, practising a religion, particularly the Catholic religion, leaves them open to bullying. This is significant, especially in light of the dominant educational discourse on wellbeing in schools (Meehan 2019). Iprgrave (2012) concludes that when students feel forced to conceal or deny their religious identity, both personal and communal (school community) wellbeing are compromised. The importance of community is acknowledged in the definition of wellbeing employed in Irish second level education:

student wellbeing is present when students realise their abilities, take care of their physical wellbeing, can cope with the normal stresses of life, and have a sense of purpose and belonging to a wider community (NCCA 2021, 5).

In short, a positive experience of community where all are welcome and diverse religious practices are celebrated is a significant contributor to student wellbeing.

Catholic ethos

Communities differ and different communities have different qualities. Catholic education ethos suggests a certain quality of community. This is not one that demands conformity, uniformity, sameness, nor one that ostracises those who are different, who make mistakes.

Catholic education is inclusive. It provides the opportunity for holistic growth, academic excellence and achievement for all Far from being segregated, exclusionary spaces, Catholic schools stretch outward with a common goal of creating a better world for everyone (Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS) and Catholic Schools' Trustee Service (CCTS) 2022, 2–3).

In other words, the experience of community in a school which claims a Catholic ethos should be welcoming and inclusive.

Catholic school ethos and the quality of mercy

The concept of ethos generally involves the formal values, beliefs and practices that emanate from a mission statement, and/or the informal atmosphere arising from everyday elements within a school (Faas, Smith, and Darmody 2018), such as the 'use of images and symbols, as well as the goals and expectations' (Norman 2003, 2). Such formal and informal aspects in a Catholic school should emanate from that faith tradition. In this paper, Catholic school ethos refers to the network of Catholic understandings, values and relationships that form the foundation of a school, and how that foundation is expressed in a contemporary context (cf.

O’Connell, Liffey, and Meehan 2021). According to Pope Francis (henceforth Francis), authentic Catholic school ethos has much to offer young people and their families today because of a key quality – the quality of mercy (2015).

The liturgies of the mass begin with that appeal for mercy so familiar to Catholics: Lord have Mercy, Christ have Mercy; *Kyrie Eleison, Christe Eleison*. It is a prayer readily recognised by Catholics across the world. But what Francis is saying in words and in actions is that mercy is universal – its appeal extends to everyone and all creation. He has shown that the message of mercy has the power to capture the imagination of believers and non believers alike. This is important because it reflects the reality of Catholic school communities. The research shows internationally and schools have long recognised at a local level that the population of Catholic schools – students, parents, teachers – is a very mixed population including believers, searchers, non believers, the indifferent, and increasingly, those of other faith traditions (cf Hession 2015; Smyth, Lyons, and Darmody eds 2013).

When in the Spring of 2015 Francis announced a Jubilee of Mercy, many recognised it as a defining moment of his papacy. ‘Perhaps we have long since forgotten how to show and live the way of mercy,’ he writes in *Misericordiae Vultus* (The Face of Mercy), the document marking this Holy Year (2015, no.10). In this document, the Pope gives the holy year a motto taken from Luke’s Gospel: ‘merciful like the father’ (Luke 6:36). Mercy is a key word that indicates God’s action towards us.

The mercy of God is his loving concern for each one of us ... he desires our wellbeing and he wants to see us happy, full of joy, and peaceful As the Father loves, so do his children. Just as he is merciful, so we are called to be merciful to each other (Francis 2015, no.9).

Referring to Luke’s Gospel, Pope Francis reminds us that Jesus asks people, above all, not to judge and not to condemn. ‘If anyone wishes to avoid God’s judgment, he should not make himself the judge of his brother or sister ... Human beings, whenever they judge, look no farther than the surface, whereas the Father looks into the very depths of the soul’ (no.14).

Explaining his reasons for calling this Jubilee, Francis identifies mercy as the key aspect of Jesus’ ministry and work and the central function of the church. ‘Jesus Christ is the face of the Father’s mercy’ he writes. ‘Jesus of Nazareth, by his words, his actions, and his entire person reveals the mercy of God’ (no.1). It is through mercy that Jesus reads the hearts of those he encounters and responds to their deepest need. Jesus’ ministry during his earthly life is a sign of the centrality of mercy in the Christian faith. His person is nothing but love, a love given freely, seeking nothing in return. ‘The relationships he forms with the people who approach him manifest something entirely unique and unrepeatable,’ states the Pope. ‘The signs he works, especially in the face of sinners, the poor, the marginalized, the sick, and the suffering, are all meant to teach mercy. Everything in him speaks of mercy’ (2015, no.8).

In the first place, it starts with God. Mercy in its truest sense comes from the historical self-revelation of God, who is love (I John 4:8,16). The biblical understanding is of a God who suffers with his creatures, who has a heart (*cor*) with the poor and for the poor (*miseri*), whatever that poverty – material or spiritual – might mean. In the Bible, the term ‘heart’ is not understood simply as an internal organ necessary for human life. It describes the core of the human person, the place of his or her deepest feelings and power of judgement. In the Bible, compassion is not regarded

as weakness or unmanly softness, unworthy of a true hero. Jesus is full of compassion for the widow of Nain who has lost her only son (Luke 77:13). At the death of his friend Lazarus his sadness moves him to tears (John 11:38). The true heroes have merciful hearts that lay claim on their attitudes and actions regarding all their relationships – with family, community, with God and with themselves.

It can be difficult in the English speaking world to get a sense of what ‘mercy’ actually means. The English word ‘mercy’ has its roots in the Latin word ‘*merces*’ meaning reward or fee – so it has to do with the recompense owing to one who has given something. Giving rise to words such as merchant and mercantile, in many ways it is more at home in the world of commerce than spirituality. However, in the Spanish/Italian world of Francis, the word mercy – *miser cordiae* – has a much richer resonance – a close translation might be ‘a sensibility of heart for those in need’ (Meehan 2015, 12).

This sensibility results in action: Mercy demands action – otherwise it remains removed and remote. For Francis, the father figure at the centre of Luke’s Gospel, Lk Chp 15, is the perfect exemplar of God’s mercy. The father shows his sensibility of heart for both his sons: – the younger, the repentant prodigal, the child who abandons home and squanders the family fortune, the son who eventually ‘comes to himself’ and goes home to repent only to be enveloped in the merciful embrace of his father. It is the same with his elder son – the boy who is good, loyal, and dutiful but whose bitter resentment threatens to tear the family apart. Here too, the father looks into the heart of the child and meets him where he is needed most.

Walter Kasper (2014) writes that it is the biblical concept of *hesed* that comes nearest to a true understanding of God’s mercy. In later books of the Hebrew Scriptures, *hesed* (hesed) is rendered ‘mercy’ in most English translations (Lydon 2011, 77). The unmerited loving kindness central to *hesed* goes beyond emotion, sympathy or grief. It means God’s free and gracious turning towards the human person, full of care. It concerns a concept of relationship rather than a single action; a disposition or ongoing attitude that disposes the merciful one to action. Applied to God, it is an unmerited and unexpected gift. It exceeds all human expectations and explodes every human category. In the reality of God’s *hesed*, something of the mystery of God is revealed (Kasper 2014, 43–44).

Universal human virtues

The practice of mercy is central to both Judaism and Islam. Within the Jewish tradition, the pages of the Hebrew Scriptures are steeped in mercy. The Book of Psalms for instance contains many wonderful verses about mercy, love and hope. Mercy is the term often used in the psalms when talking about God’s love and care over all of humanity. The truth of God’s mercy and love (*ar-Rahman ar-Rahim*) is the central message of Islam. All chapters in the Quran save one begin with the phrase ‘in the name of God ... the Giver of Mercy’ (Selcuk 2015). Indeed, for Francis, interreligious engagement with mercy has the potential to eliminate every form of closed-mindedness and disrespect, and drive out every form of violence and discrimination.

Kasper describes how compassion and mercy are universal human virtues. As such they can encourage people to engage with other cultures and religions and to work together for understanding and peace in the world. However, he is concerned about the tendency towards social Darwinism in society today. According to these tendencies, the promotion of one’s own selfish interests and the rights of the stronger,

without regard for others are legal tender. Those who are unable to hold their own sink fast. In addition, in the wake of globalisation of the economy and financial markets, unregulated, unchained neocapitalist forces have taken hold. For such forces, human beings and entire peoples have become ‘collateral damage’ in the greed for money. Where compassion and mercy are lost, where egoism and indifference concerning fellow human beings gain ground, where interpersonal relationship is confined to economic exchanges, the humanness of society at large is in danger. In this sphere, it appears that things do not look good for mercy and compassion.

But the other side of the story is the countless number of people who give of their time, energy and material means to ease the burden of others. Personal and group commitments contribute to the success of organisations such as the St Vincent de Paul Society, Caritas England and Wales, and Compassion International – a Christian advocacy ministry that helps children out of economic, social, physical and spiritual poverty with the aim of enabling them to become responsible, mature and fulfilled Christian adults. Teachers too model mercy, representing a sacramental vision of teaching and leadership. Take for example this account from a parent of three sons and a daughter who attended Catholic school. She writes of the witness of teachers that she experienced through her role as a probation officer:

A number of years ago, prior to my own involvement in the school as a parent, there had been a spate of very nasty break-ins in the city. It emerged that a gang of young people from various secondary schools – the Jes² included – had been involved During those court cases – which entailed a number of appearances by the defendants over a period of months ... the students from the Jes were always accompanied either by their headmaster or a senior teacher in a role of support. The teachers sat with their students in the body of the court. At the time I remember thinking that there must be something special about a school that was prepared to put its corporate head above the parapet and show support for its pupils, when everyone else seemed to be baying for blood over the nastiness of the crimes committed. Here it seemed everyone was to be respected, included and cherished, cared for out of a mutual concern (Allen 2015, 77–78).

The Jubilee of Mercy was to celebrate and break open this key quality which Francis sees as the heart of the ministry of Jesus, the mercy that should be the core function of the Catholic Church and all its ministries, including education.

Fratelli Tutti and a culture of encounter

One of the most serious threats to merciful community is a culture of indifference. A common theme throughout his papacy, Francis is clearly concerned about the lure of indifference and individualism. He continually offers the challenge to break away from being closed in on oneself and one’s own little nucleus of relatives and friends. A culture of indifference arises not from ill will or malice but from eyes that won’t see, ears that won’t hear, hearts that won’t be stirred. The challenge of Christianity today then is to move from a culture of indifference to a culture of encounter. This is the central message of his 2020 encyclical *Fratelli Tutti*. This document reminds us that in the Christian Scriptures, the ‘whole law is summed up in a single commandment, ‘You shall love your neighbour as yourself’“(Gal 5:14). These words of Jesus compel people of Christian faith to recognise Christ himself in all people (cf. Mt 25:40.45), regardless of faith tradition or worldview.

A central tenet of the Judeo-Christian tradition is that everyone is created in the image and likeness of God. ‘Since everyone is made in the image of God, then we need

to recognize, honor, and respect the image of God in everyone. No exceptions' (Rohr 2018, 71–72). For Francis, this is central to being Catholic: When hearts are open, sensitive to the difficulties of others, 'they are capable of identifying with others without worrying about where they were born or come from' (Francis 2020, no.84). In the process, we come to experience others as part of the human family.

By acknowledging the dignity of each human person, Francis believes humanity can contribute to the rebirth of a universal aspiration to a single family: 'Let us dream, then, as a single human family ... as children of the same earth which is our common home, each of us bringing the richness of his or her beliefs and convictions, each of us with his or her own voice' (Francis 2020, no.8). Building merciful community then, is a central theme in Catholicism and should be a key characteristic of Catholic schools (cf. Groome 2021). A corresponding theme is the call to serve others, above all those who are victims of poverty and injustice of any kind (Irish Catholic Bishops Conference 2008). Francis wants Catholic schools to foster a 'culture of encounter' that is rooted in the dignity of all people, who share a common humanity (Francis 2013, no.21). A true 'encounter' is not just with people who think alike, but with those from outside one's own circle, with those who are different (Francis 2020, no.85, no.90, no.147). 'The overlapping presence of different cultures is a great resource, as long as the encounter between those different cultures is seen as a source of mutual enrichment' (Francis 2013, Introduction). The presence of different cultures in Catholic schools is a source of richness for everyone.

Of course this is not exclusive to Catholic thought. For instance, Rabbi Jonathan Sacks writes

When we move from the politics of 'Me' to the politics of 'Us', we rediscover those life-transforming, counterintuitive truths ... that a nation is strong when it cares for the weak, that it becomes rich when it cares for the poor, that it becomes invulnerable when it cares about the vulnerable (Sacks 2020, 21).

The papal vision is of Catholic schools as warmly inclusive communities that enable all to flourish, reflective of the ideal of living as a single human family. This ideal, as held up in *Fratelli Tutti* depends on both the individual and the community. 4000 years ago, the prophet Amos warned of the outcomes for a people devoid of mercy. Hear this word, he says, you who live with arrogance, heedless of others:

Therefore, because you trample on the poor
and take from them levies of grain,
you have built houses of hewn stone,
but you shall not live in them;
you have planted pleasant vineyards,
but you shall not drink their wine. ..
Seek good and not evil,
that you may live (Amos 5:11,14).

How easy it is to live life at the surface and to forget those around us, especially those who are in need. However, for a school to function as an authentic Catholic community, it must have mercy at its core.

The ‘merciful’ Catholic school: some characteristics

The experience of mercy is not exclusive to biblical figures or ancient times. Much of our experience of mercy comes from our homes, our families, and our schools. The following three examples of schools with a ‘sensitivity of heart for those in need’ illustrate mercy at work.

1. Inclusive attitudes, practices and policies

Catholic schools have a long history of reaching out to those on the margins. In a major national survey, Catholic schools in Ireland 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 (Darmody, Smyth, and McCoy 2012). This occurs not just through social outreach programmes or the shoe box appeal at Christmas, although these are important. Real inclusion occurs through what happens on the ground.

School A is located in a small, poor, very deprived parish which is host to feuding drug families in a socially divided city. Many of the students in School A come from this socio-economic background. Many expressions of this school’s Catholic ethos are inspirational. However, the annual trip to Lourdes is particularly striking. This trip, an annual highlight in the school calendar, is open to *every* senior student, despite their socio-economic backgrounds. 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 every student who wants to go can travel and everyone who travels can contribute towards the cost. Nobody feels like a ‘charity case’: by donating time and effort towards the fundraising activities, everyone who wants to can travel, and everyone who travels contributes towards the cost.

2. A community of care

Pastoral care of students is much more complex and resource consuming than it may at first appear. In this school, children are presenting with complex physical, mental, emotional issues, often emanating from very distressing backgrounds. The issues some schools are dealing with are of the most serious kind. There is also the fall-out for those students who now find themselves outside of special education needs support. Increasingly, some schools are trying to address the temporal needs of students in terms of food and clothes. In some instances, parents are coming to speak to the guidance counsellors for their own needs.

School B, a city centre school serving a very disadvantaged population, provides quality care through initiatives such as Class Tutors, Big Sister Mentors for first-year students, a positive behaviour programme called Thoughtful Together, and staff mentors for the big state examinations students. All of this is done voluntarily, with staff and some senior students giving very generously of their time and expertise.

Some years ago School B introduced a House System, based on that of the fictitious Hogsworth School of Witchcraft and Wizardry attended by Harry Potter. Every student and staff member belongs to one of four Houses. Students can earn points for their House through attendance, taking part in competitions and events, winning

these competitions, and by displaying target behaviours identified in Thoughtful Together. The House System has also given rise to a programme of student leadership whereby students apply and are interviewed for the positions of House Captain and Vice-Captain. As a result, student attendance has improved, and their sense of community and belonging has contributed greatly to their enjoyment of learning and engagement with school.

From very limited resources, pastoral care in this school is done quietly, considerately and with the commitment and goodwill of staff and the wider school community.

3. Integration of migrant students

For this example, I borrow from a recent study between Ireland and Malta on how school ethos can inspire the integration of Newly Arrived Migrant Students (NAMS) (Meehan and Borg Axisa 2022).

School C, on the island of Malta, is open to children of all religions, and is over-subscribed. Like many Catholic schools, it has a reputation for high academic standards and achievement. In 2022, as in previous years, the demand for Catholic schools in Malta saw more than twice as many applications as places available (Archdiocese of Malta 2021). Enrolment is through a centralised ballot system, which ensures that every applicant from any walk of life has equal chance to attend a Catholic school, despite demand exceeding capacity. In practice, however, the popularity of Catholic schools among the middle classes means that School C caters largely for this demographic.

Recently and somewhat controversially, in response to the ongoing migration crisis in the Mediterranean region and the founding order's outreach to refugees, the school governors decided to allow a quota of places for NAMS. The school leadership had to win over local parents to this way of thinking and convince them of the obligation and mutual benefit of this decision – a process which took time, patience and determination. School C strategically yet discreetly supports these students so that they receive a quality of teaching and learning similar to every other student. Echoing the mutual transformation of Francis' culture of encounter, the school leadership fully supports this move as it offers a 'more profound education experience to all students' (Meehan and Borg Axisa 2022, 5).

Challenges to the 'merciful' Catholic school

Schools reflect the reality of life. Students, teachers and leaders, like all members of the school community, bring with them the joys and the difficulties of their own circumstances when they pass through the school gates. The reality of these circumstances, and the busyness and unpredictability of everyday life in schools, mean that a position of mercy is not always easy or even possible. Difficult situations can arise, for example when students act up in class, disrupting the learning environment, or when students (or teachers) behave badly towards other members of the school community. These difficulties can present challenges to school leaders and teachers when they advocate mercy amid the expectation to exercise consistently the school rules, discipline procedures and code of behaviour.

A merciful heart suggests that some behaviours that on the surface seem unacceptable might need reviewing in the light of mitigating circumstances. The challenge is

to have eyes that see, ears that hear, hearts that are open (Meehan 2015), to see behind the behaviour to the child. 'It is our ability to see the world not only from our own perspective but from that of others, that gives us our privilege and responsibility as moral agents' (Sacks 2020, 239). Too many schools investigating incidences of bad behaviour discover that the student in question is facing exceptionally difficult home circumstances. But does making an exception in a difficult case have the undesirable consequence of undermining a rule designed to protect the common good? The tension between the individual and the community, the person who behaves badly and the community as a whole, is all too real in schools. This tension escalates when the behaviour is consistent. Take for example the case of a young person who constantly shows a tendency to lose his temper and lashes out so that other pupils are being badly hurt; on investigation, his father is in prison, his mother cannot cope. There is a real tension between the need to protect other students from assault and the need to take into account the real difficulties facing this young person. Justice, and the perception that justice is being served, can be uneasy companions to the merciful heart.

In answer to the enduring question, *mercy for whom*, Groome looks to the model of Jesus as teacher. For Jesus, all can repent and change their ways; mercy is for everyone, especially those who need it most. In fact, it is the merciful heart of Catholic education that has most potential for moral formation, appealing to the hearts and souls of students with 'a noble and empowering vision' (2021, 136). At the same time, he highlights practical implications concerning discipline in a Catholic school. 'The key is to hold students responsible for their behaviour, but not to act as if infringements define who they are' (2021, 137). A merciful heart separates the action from the person. It says to the student who has been caught in lie 'I know you are not a liar, so why on this occasion are you lying?' To the student who has cheated in an exam, 'you are an honest, honourable person. What happened that you felt the need to cheat in this exam?' If we say to a student 'you are a cheat' we are encouraging their self-image in that direction and we cannot be surprised if the behaviour continues. It is far wiser, advocates Groome (2021), 'to recognise and affirm people's potential goodness, even when they are falling short of it. And Catholic educators have the spiritual foundations to do so' (137). Sullivan reminds us that in every Catholic school the purpose of the authority granted to teachers and school leaders is 'to facilitate the empowerment of others and to create a climate where the invitation to respond freely and fully to the gospel may be heard' (Sullivan 2000, 158).

Conclusion

The religious landscape of Ireland is changing. Like in other jurisdictions that have experienced rapid secularisation, it can be difficult in Irish schools to identify or practice as Catholic. On the other hand, it appears that exploring questions of faith and relationship with God are still important to many. In this context, Catholic school ethos with its essential quality of mercy has as much to offer as ever.

Building merciful community is central to Catholic school ethos. This can be challenging: it demands growth in realistic knowledge, love and acceptance of ourselves, an understanding of the world in which we live, and seeing our abilities as being for the benefit of others and not just ourselves. Mr Porter helped the young James Baldwin to develop his literary talents and put them at the service of his school

community through the school magazine. In Catholic schools, leaders and teachers as well as students are called to be ‘merciful like the father.’ The ‘mercy of God is his loving concern for each one of us ... he desires our wellbeing and he wants to see us happy, full of joy, and peaceful As the Father loves, so do his children. Just as he is merciful, so we are called to be merciful to each other’ (Francis 2015, 9).

Notes

1. Junior Cycle refers to the first three years of second level education in Ireland, generally undertaken by 12–15 year old students.
2. Coláiste Iognáid is a Jesuit, bilingual, non-fee-paying school with a comprehensive intake in Galway City, Ireland. It is known locally as ‘the Jes.’

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