# What makes a school Catholic?

This article aims to look at how a group of primary head teachers' in the North West of England perceive the Catholic nature of their schools and how they give their account of Catholic education for contemporary society. They go on to describe their feelings about the school's mission. The head teachers' views of how they identified their school's Catholicism are critiqued alongside the models of Catholic schools laid out by James Arthur (1995) in The Ebbing Tide, and in the light of Catholic Church teaching on the nature of Catholic schools.

**What makes a school Catholic?**

In England Catholic schools evolved historically to serve a community of the Catholic faithful but, in the twenty first century, is this how head teachers still see their purpose? This article looks at research carried out in the English North West with Catholic primary school head teachers to identify what makes the schools they lead Catholic schools. The English Catholic school system evolved along with other denominational sectors to serve the young of its own faith community. However, in the twenty first century, Catholic schools may not be categorised solely by membership. Of the nineteen schools that took part in this research, not one was a hundred percent Catholic in terms of its admissions. This article is drawn from research which discusses this question with serving primary school head teachers in the English North West. The research aims to map how head teachers' perceive the Catholic nature of their establishments and how they articulate their vision of Catholic education for contemporary society. What follows is an outline of the historical context of Catholic education and an examination of the responses of Catholic primary school head teachers when asked what made their school Catholic. The head teachers' views of how they described their school's Catholicism are critiqued alongside the models set out by James Arthur (1995) in <u>The Ebbing Tide</u> and in the light of Catholic Church teaching. Arthur describes three models of Catholic schools, holistic, pluralistic and dualistic. I will discuss how these three models fit with the contemporary situation in Catholic schools in the North West of England over a decade later and question whether the Catholic tide is 'ebbing' in primary education. The question was asked as part of a wider study for a PhD thesis conducted in the North West of England 2006-2008, entitled 'Educational Inclusion and the faith school, issues facing leaders and managers in Catholic schools in the North West.'

*The Historical Context of English Catholic Schools.*

Historically, Catholic education has evolved in England alongside other faith foundation schools, from the voluntary work of its members. The Roman Catholic Church provided education to its own community of believers and through the work of religious teaching orders.

> The origins of popular education in this country are ensconced in these charity schools formed as a direct consequence of the 18th and 19th centuries' 'Age of Philanthropy'. Throughout England and Wales the clergy initiated schooling as a means of carving out their evangelical crusade. (Parker-Jenkins, Hartas, Irving 2005 12)

Throughout the nineteenth century, the number of Roman Catholics grew from its English recusant basis as Irish migration strengthened the Roman Catholic presence. Michael Hornsby Smith (1987) also identified the growth in the number of conversions following Newman's conversion in 1845(1987 23). But the real growth in Catholic education followed the restoration of the Catholic hierarchy in 1850 and the establishment of the Poor Schools Committee in 1847. The next twenty five years saw a substantive growth in the provision of Catholic schools in England. In 1851 there were 99 elementary Catholic schools with a pupil population of 7,769 by 1874 there were 1,484 schools and 100,372 pupils (Hornsby Smith 1987 4). This education took place in a parish setting and was determined to preserve the '*Faith of our fathers*' (Grace 2002 59). The Education Act of 1870 established state education alongside the existing Church based organisation though the Act aimed to fill up the gaps in existing provision by the creation of Board schools, paid for by taxation and governed by popularly elected School Boards. In addition, the grant to existing Church schools, voluntary schools, was increased. The Catholic Church's belief was that a separate school system allowed Catholic parents to educate their children according to conscience. The 1870 Act enabled Catholic parents to achieve this '*faith bastion*' (Grace 2002 8) with state financial support.   However, the fifty percent funding by the State certainly did not

remove the financial pressures upon the voluntary system. The policy of providing a place for every Catholic child in a Catholic school, derived from Canon Law 1374(McLaughlin, O'Keefe, O'Keeffe 1996 4) the law of the Church, that made it a command rather than a choice, coloured by the threat of certain damnation by the tone of Canon 2313 which prescribed *'excommunication for a Catholic who entered a 'mixed marriage' with the intention of educating children outside the faith'* (McLaughlin, O'Keefe, O'Keeffe 1996 4). Canon Law made it clear that the model of Catholic schooling it promoted was Catholic children must attend Catholic schools. A Catholic school was defined, therefore, by its Catholic membership.

The 1902 Education Act further advanced the links between State and 'voluntary' Church schools in the 'dual' system of education.

> Inside and outside Parliament there was outcry against 'Rome on the rates'… The LEA's [Local Education Authorities] provided grants for school maintenance. Denominationally specific teaching could be requested but at the same time teachers were to be appointed regardless of denominational allegiance. In return for the right to provide denominational teaching in church schools the buildings had to be provided by the denominations. (Gates 2005 19-20)

The Catholic population provided not only the physical building of the school but also the majority of children who attended and teachers who staffed them. (Gates 2005 19-20) This created a system where Catholic schools became simultaneously embedded in the State provision and a separate, educative community of faith. Cardinal Heenan (1905-1975) described Religious Instruction in this period thus, '*The chief method of teaching Christian doctrine in Catholic schools was to make children learn the catechism and Bible history*' (Konstant 1966 7). The Catholic faith was taught as a series of questions to which the Church had all the answers.

The 1944 Education Act did much to build a *'climate of common interest and a strong sense of partnership'* (McLaughlin, O'Keefe, O'Keeffe 1996 5) and established the building of publicly funded secondary schools. It developed the Voluntary Aided system (which almost all Catholic schools opted for) which allowed Catholic schools' governing bodies the right to still appoint their own staff, deliver their own religious education and worship as a corporate body of faith under the direction of the diocesan bishop. James Arthur suggests, '*The Catholic body clearly desired an education to take place within the perspective of the Catholic faith, so that believing children of believing parents could be taught by believing teachers in Catholic schools'*(Arthur 1995 7-8). Though subsequent years saw the money provided by the state for school building increasing from fifty percent to the current ninety, it was the changes in the Church itself and the post war society that forced the Catholic community to address again how its schools served the body of the Church and again ask, what makes a school Catholic?

The 1950's and 1960's saw an expansion in Catholic secondary education so that the aim of Catholic children in Catholic schools taught by Catholic teachers was '*as nearly realised as it ever can be*' (Report to the Bishops of England and Wales 1981 4). However, the Church itself began a rigorous re-evaluation of the relationship it had with the faithful when Pope John XXIII called Vatican II. The Second Vatican Council sat from 1962 to 1965. During this period it produced a number of constitutions and doctrines that looked at the Roman Catholic Church's teaching. The Council identified a theological ideal that Catholic education should try to meet, that is, the complete formation of the human person in the *'Declaration on Christian Education'*.

> A true education aims at the formation of the human person in the pursuit of his ultimate end and of the good of the societies of which, as man, he is a member, and in whose obligations, as an adult, he will share. (*Gravissimum educationis* [Declaration on Christian Education] 1965 n1)

The '*Declaration on Christian Education*' challenged schools to shape this ideology into a practical theology that would direct the ethos of a school. Of course, in England and Wales this process has not taken place in a vacuum. It has been part of the change in the Catholic community's response to the Second Vatican Council and it has been subject to the many changes in education and society that have fundamentally altered how schools operate. These shifts in the understanding of what it meant to offer a Catholic education were combined with a changing society and the growth of an educated Catholic middle class (Hornsby Smith 1987 79). Catholic schools found themselves in shifting contexts. '*An increasingly pluralistic British society, resulting from the growth of immigration in the 1950's and 1960's, also raised issues about the understanding of non Christian faiths*' (Chadwick 1997 87). However, the number of children who attended Catholic schools continued to grow.(http://www.natsoc.org.uk/schools/the_way_ahead/report.html) Catholic schools still form a significant proportion of the state sector 1 723 schools in 2006 (Catholic Education Service 2006) when this research began The proportion of building costs that can be claimed back from state funds has also grown but so has the degree of accountability to the public purse as schools have experienced delegated budgets, the influence of market principles and, since 1988, a statutory national curriculum. Is what makes a school Catholic its membership, ethos, funding or does it seek to bear Christian witness with the society it serves? James Arthur's (1995) three models of education show how altering the nature of admissions may alter the identity of a school so that the historical Catholic ethos under which a school was founded may be weakened so that the Catholic identity of the education it offers is changed. In the following sections of this article I am going to examine how head teachers describe the Catholic nature of their schools in the twenty-first century and compare what they say to Arthur's (1995) three pictures of possible outcomes.

*Methodology*

I conducted active, semi-structured interviews across nine primary schools with head teachers and school governors from schools within the Roman Catholic Diocese of Lancaster in the North West of England. The interviews offered key themes for discussion rather than closed questions as I felt that this approach offered me the flexibility to explore more areas in depth and allowed further questions to emerge in the course of the conversation forming a focused interview. As I already knew some of the respondents as former colleagues or peers the definition of my role as interviewer was not clearly defined as an 'outsider', as, I was not an outsider to the profession, or to the head teacher's role, or to the language of Catholic primary education. The limitations this perspective may bring to the data are accepted as part of this research. In addition to the interviews, I used a questionnaire in nineteen primary schools to gather data on the religious profile of schools' intake and staff, ethnic background, schemes of work for Religious Education and frequency of Religious Education lessons and acts of worship. The use of speech marks ("") denotes words spoken by an interviewee. As each participant school was given a separate number, these numbers are used so that different voices are identified but participants remain anonymous.

*The research project*

The research undertaken suggests that Catholic schools have shifted and are continuing to shift away from the historic model of Catholic primary education that was a place for every Catholic child in a Catholic school, forming part of the state funded sector. (Jackson 2003) James Arthur's suggestion that the faith of a child is not a result of Catholic education but a '*presupposition*' (1995 231) is in many cases not applicable in the research area. I want to question whether this shift has undermined the Catholic identity of the schools.

Arthur (1995) suggested three different models of Catholic education, holistic, dualistic and pluralistic. Firstly, he suggests that the holistic model is dependent on the school having a significant presence of Catholic teachers and pupils.

> The Catholicity of the school depends on their being a body of people whose lives are deeply imbued by the Catholic faith, and who are therefore able to bring the light of Christ into every aspect of school life. On this model the Catholic school together with the family and the parish, may be seen as one of the principal constitutive elements of the Church's life. Such a school would explicitly share the aims of the Church. (Arthur 1995 231)

Elements of the holistic model of Catholic education do seem to be reflected in the head teachers' descriptions of what makes their school Catholic. The head teacher of school 5 felt the Catholicity of her/his school was identifiable because of the school environment, curriculum and relationship with the parish.

> "Well, straight away every room has a crucifix in there, the religion that is taught inside the school ... So as far as the RE teaching is concerned we use a Catholic scheme. We follow the liturgical year, we celebrate feasts, we have Catholic Mass we have a good relationship with the Catholic church...the priest's a welcome visitor, we put Christ at the centre of what we do. So it's Catholic but it's also very much Christian based."(Head teacher 5)

This view suggests that the atmosphere is Catholic because of artefacts, religious education, worship following patterns of the Catholic liturgical year, celebrating Mass, links with the parish and priest and a Christ centric view of the school. John Haldane (1996) suggests that the primary function of a Catholic school is '*to provide forms of education through which the essential doctrines and devotions of Catholicism are transmitted*' and that the provision of this education is a '*non-negotiable…duty*' (133). The head teacher's final comment about Catholic and Christian as it hints at an integrated Christian ideal, rather than an exclusive view of Catholic education only for Catholics. The head teacher of school 2 suggested that though the school did have children of other faiths, s/he felt that there needed to be some significant baptised community.

"I know some people have said 'How can you have a Catholic school if say you've only got 40% or 20% of baptised Catholic children in it?' I know we're not in that position. I've got to be honest and say that I do actually think that it is important that you do have a Catholic community at the core, at the heart of every school because I think otherwise it would be very, very difficult to say it's a Catholic school. I also think that it's important that you've got a significant number of practising Catholics because then you've… got the values and the beliefs at the heart of the school." Head teacher 2

S/he went on to describe how the management team needed to be united in their Catholic outlook in order to achieve "*the sort of community that you want*" and that the support of parents and parishioners was "*at the heart of our Catholicity*". This suggests that though the school did admit those of other world faiths, the head teacher saw a high proportion of baptised Catholic as lying at the heart of the school community.

However, the reality driving admissions to many Catholic schools seems to be number on roll and its direct link with the school's delegated budget from the Local Authority which is why Arthur's holistic model is rejected in practice if not in principle by all the heads interviewed as the data gathered in the questionnaires showed no school admitted only Catholic children. In areas, where the Catholic population has been largely replaced by those of other faiths or no stated faith, schools are faced with the stark reality of admitting children in order to secure budgets or diminish in size to serve a smaller group or close. The head teacher of school 1 described their admissions policy "*as a school with falling numbers…anybody else who's interested really*". Gerald Grace (1996) identifies Catholic heads at '*the meeting point of Catholic values and of market values, of Catholic morality and of pluralistic challenges to these*'. (71) It is possible that any single model of Catholic education would struggle to address these multiple challenges.

John Sullivan (2002) suggests that Arthur's (1995) thesis reveals a '*weakening of the Catholic dimension...a failure to permeate the curriculum with Catholic principles*' (38) as a result of changes in society Catholic distinctiveness has weakened. However, the conclusions

that I draw from the research undertaken are that it is how Catholic schools locate that distinctiveness that has changed from the historic perspective and it is how a school proclaims the nature of its Catholicity that makes it distinctive, not its admissions.

The second of Arthur's models I am going to examine in light of discussions with head teachers is the dualistic model. Arthur describes a dualistic Catholic school as one which,

> separates the secular and religious aims…Religious education, school assemblies, school liturgy and religious events in general are seen as having no relevance to, for example, the teaching of science [dividing education and religion] conceptually and practically. (Arthur 1995 227)

All the schools that participated in the research taught religious education as a discreet subject for around two hours a week which is the same curriculum time as other core subjects. One head teacher (School 8) did point to the religious education curriculum as being the source of the school's Catholic life.

> "I went to Catholic primary school and Catholic secondary school and I would have said prior to working in a Church school, a Catholic school that the Catholicity, it probably wasn't Catholicity, it was probably more Church foundation in that the ethos and the moral values and the way of life that we were taught about really, the Catholicity, would be the Gospel values based in the Catholic faith. Now, how that comes about in school would be through RE sessions, whole school collective worship sessions, I don't know whether, I don't know whether it can come out anywhere else." Head teacher 8

This head teacher of school 8 places the Catholic nature of the school mainly in the religious education teaching and the worship, though s/he does comment on other areas such as parish links and religious artefacts. S/he recognises that this may be very similar to the practices of other church schools and suggests that the Catholic nature of the school probably should be expressed in other areas. However, some elements of Arthur's dualistic model could be found in some practices generally across all schools, for example, the use of Catholic teachers to teach religious education and moving those who were not Catholic to deliver other subjects, information technology being the example given by the head teacher of school 2. Only one

head teacher, school 7, talked about the governing body when s/he described where the Catholicity lay, "*I think I would start at the Governing Body I think as a Catholic school then it's the Foundation Governors…they drive the Catholicity of the school*". In voluntary aided faith schools it is the governing body, rather than the education authority that have responsibility for the appointment of staff. Governing body appointments that lead to a diversity of beliefs among the staff are sure to alter the ways in which it can provides an environment of spiritual enrichment, but equally an indifference to belief may be more limiting. '*The presence of staff who does not worship regularly with the church community may present greater difficulties than the presence on the staff of teachers from different religious traditions.*' (Bishops' Conference of England & Wales 1997 20) Governors, who are volunteers, are left to make these decisions about what constitutes a practising Catholic and how far this knowledge should influence their choice of candidate for a teaching post within the terms of equal opportunities legislation. However, Arthur's (1995) argument that a school cannot be called a Christian community without qualification (228) when a diversity of beliefs exists, may suggest that Christianity comes from a Christian membership, rather than from a Christian outlook. Potentially, this is an exclusive position which could suggest a school can only be Christian if it consists of a Christian collective and is at odds with the views expressed by the majority of head teachers and governors.

> "But it goes beyond the Church because it's also about...going out into the community and
> having an awareness of the issues that there are in the broader community and the issues that there
> are worldwide... It's a way of life isn't it?" Head teacher school 2

In Catholic Schools and *Other* faiths (1997) the Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales, suggest that a distinctive yet inclusive identity for Catholic schools can be found using a model, where in addition to offering a high quality academic education, Catholic schools should nurture the faith, promote the spiritual and moral development of every person attending the school, develop a community characterised by openness and

dialogue and serve the community (Bishops' Conference of England and Wales 1997 19-20). This model suggests that schools should all offer these three components. Schools, individually facing different challenges, could discern how they interpreted and emphasised each aspect. In terms of Arthur's three models of Catholic schools this suggests that a school's Catholicity is not just linked to its admission policy but on how it interprets the Catholic service it can offer to the community it serves. As the need to promote community cohesion has become a statutory requirement upon schools the relationship of the school with the wider community, not just the parish community, will come into sharper focus, but whether the school is itself part of the local community is a different question. As Geoffrey Short (2003) points out the most '*serious practical criticism of faith schools ...is that they are likely to lead to a fragmentation of society*' (129). It is important Catholic schools understand their role in the community as well as how they serve the community in which they are situated. The governor from school 9 suggested that this was how s/he saw their school. "*Offering the best educational opportunity... what we want is that child to have developed and grown as a whole person...particularly* [with] *regard for the spiritual dimension of that child's growth*". The duty of the school is to serve the community in a way that is distinctly Christian. The evidence of this research suggests that the discernment of who attends a Catholic school often comes down to numbers and the pressures of budget management as no school reported that it was oversubscribed or that it was turning children away on grounds of religious belief. However, the result of this, even when a 'Catholics first' admission policy is operated, is that schools find themselves with a body of children who are not of the Catholic faith without having necessarily given careful consideration to how they will develop the openness and dialogue of their educational community. '*The claim to be religiously inclusive can sound like a readiness to accommodate that slides into an abandonment of tradition an assimilation into secular culture*' (Sullivan 2002 2). Admitting all children places the school

under an obligation to nurture whatever religious beliefs that child holds whilst being a Catholic school obliges them to maintain a distinctive Catholic focus. The real challenge for schools in these circumstances is how to balance fidelity to the Catholic faith and encounter with those of other faiths without falling into religious relativism.

The third of Arthur's (1995) models of Catholic school, the pluralistic model, discusses an open admissions policy and its implications for the Catholic nature of the school. As I have suggested though heads were working on Catholic's first admissions, falling numbers meant in reality schools were offering places to children of all faiths and none. Arthur (1995) suggests that this means Catholic schools would cease to be confessional but instead would attend to the '*full diversity of religious faith and commitment within a school*' (229). Arthur's suggestion is that admitting the wider community rejects the possibility of evangelisation and catechetic. Arthur views this as a pluralistic school, '*simply opening its doors to the local community*' (230), suggesting that this approach would reject evangelisation. Dialogue can be seen as part of a process of evangelisation and a way of helping individuals develop a better understanding of their own beliefs. I would argue that it is not the presence of those who believe differently that poses a threat to undermine faith but a lack of understanding and knowledge of how to approach interreligious dialogue constructively. The head teacher of school 9 also offered a Christ centred view of the school but s/he articulated this with a picture of an inclusive school open to the community.

> "I think it's absolutely fundamental to this school… I think that the fact that there are so many children of other faiths in this school is just testament to our Catholicity and testament to the fact that we are open and we're not judging anyone else. We are saying we are all here on our own faith journey to work together. We still teach the same, from the same scheme of work….as an all Catholic school would teach from. So the material that the children are taught is exactly the same. The difference would be… when it's something we can share about Islam or Hinduism then we would invite somebody to come in just to give all the children that perspective. The school staff work very hard alongside parishioners…school staff are very influential in the running of the Parish sacramental programmes and just Christ is at the centre of this school Christ is the reason we are as we are. I think that is the reason we are a Catholic school." Head teacher 9

The head teacher of school 9 imparts a sense of the school serving the community in which it finds itself in a distinctly Catholic way. There is an environment in which individual differences are recognised and the dignity of personal belief respected, though Catholicism still informs the religious education curriculum, opportunities to learn about other faiths is not lost. The link with the parish is maintained. This suggests that finding opportunities for interreligious dialogue should not act as an obstruction to proclamation. The head teacher of school 6 felt the school was actively living out the Gospels.

> "I believe that we are a very Catholic school because I believe that we preach and live out the Gospel and the word of God in a very special way so yes we are Catholic and every person that comes into the school realises that we are a Catholic school and we believe in the Catholic faith and we will share our faith with everybody and that Catholic faith is implicit in everything we do. But also, we are probably catholic with a small 'c' because we feel that we are universal and because of our community we seek to not preach but to live out the Catholic message whilst also trying to respect and understand everybody else's faith and everybody else's culture." Head teacher 6

This is a different model of Catholic education as it is based not only on a sense of shared Catholic identity but on vocation of dialogue and mission. Aad de Jong, (2007) writing about Catholic schools in the Netherlands, comments that Catholic education has traditionally followed an identity based approach which are '*more self orientated instead of orientated to other people, to bigger communities and collective actions*'. He goes on to suggest an alternative model of participative identity.

> To exaggerate the difference somewhat, one could say that traditional approaches are more interested in who God is and what images accord best with him, whereas participation-orientated approaches consider it more important to find ways of (co)existing with others as God wants us to do.( de Jong 2007 367-370)

I would suggest that the head teacher of school 6 and to a certain extent the head of school 9 are both offering a distinctly Catholic education by bearing witness as a visible Christian presence and participating in the community they serve. The reasons why they have adopted this approach may be economic as well as spiritual but they both show the ability to develop a Catholic vision of education for their context, that feels inclusive and open to interreligious

dialogue whilst maintaining a Christ centric base. There was a sense that some head teachers were trying to reach out to their community in a spirit of inclusion and encounter. The real difficulty for head teachers is how to interpret this in terms of practical theology to overcome barriers to proclamation as part of their Christian mission and engage in meaningful dialogue so they can still answer how their school is Catholic.

Catholic schools in England are often a historic space built by a previous generation to *'socialize children into the past traditions of their faith and to hand on and shape their faith to a new generation'*. (Sedgwick 1992 249) but in the contemporary school climate, driven by budgets reliant on school roll, children who are not Catholic are admitted to schools in the research area. The difficulty faced by heads is how to remain dedicated to the duty to proclaim their faith whilst being open to encounter and dialogue with those of other faiths. Arthur's pluralistic model suggests that an open admissions policy fundamentally weakens the Catholic nature of the school.

*Conclusion*

The model of nurture, service, openness and dialogue, suggested in <u>Catholic schools and *other* faiths</u> (1997), seems to best support contemporary Catholic education in the research area. Head teachers do seem to be struggling with the desire to faithfully proclaim Catholicism through using a Catholic religious education scheme taught by Catholic teachers supporting Catholic charities and trying to articulate a Catholic vision whilst admitting and nurturing those who are not Catholic. The teaching of the Catholic Church suggests that *'Christians who lack appreciation and respect for other believers and their religious traditions are ill-prepared to proclaim the Gospel to them'* (Pontifical Council for Inter-religious Dialogue 1991 n73). There is not a sense of a cohesive approach across all schools. The lack of development in this area has led to a range of snapshots developing from school

to school as head teachers try to offer service to their parish and community and openness and dialogue within their school. Though none of the schools do appear to be falling into the religious pluralism Arthur's argument suggests is a  consequence of an open admissions policy, there is a danger that without a clear understanding of how to engage with the 'other' in their midst head teachers will be forced to interpret their individual circumstances. The potential consequences of this approach may lead to a fragmentation of the understanding of what makes a Catholic school Catholic. What makes schools Catholic in the scope of this study seems to be a combination of Catholic admissions and Catholic head teachers' interpretations of how to be a Catholic presence in the community they serve. Though the Catholic tide in education does not seem to be ebbing, it is certainly changing. Some head teachers maintained a congruent Catholic voice in the circumstances they served and a significant challenge for the future must be how to form leaders with a clear vision of how to be a Catholic school when the faith of the children who attend cannot be presupposed.

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