Article

'Go and Make Disciples of All Nations': Challenges to Catholic School Leaders in Promoting Christian Values in a Secular Society

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Abstract

There are many lessons to be learned from the findings of research that would be advantageous in realising the potential of Catholic schools to contribute to the common good of a secular society. In summary, it is possible to highlight the following inferences, which were drawn from research undertaken by the writer: (1) From the perspective of Catholic school leaders, Catholic education faces considerable challenges and, sometimes, antagonism, within a secular society, which can impose significant pressures on the conduct of their work. (2) There is a need to disseminate information to individuals and groups within and outside Catholic schools of the Christian values that are promoted by the Church. (3) Catholic schools make a significant contribution towards the common good of society, which is not always generally appreciated and should be more widely publicised. (4) Catholic communities and their leaders would benefit from ongoing opportunities to engage in continuing professional development and formation that would nourish and nurture the enhancement of spiritual capital in their schools.

Keywords: Catholic education; leadership; spiritual capital; mission integrity; formation

1. Introduction

Arguably, one of the principal purposes of Catholic education, and perhaps its underlying motivation, is to strengthen and to maintain the culture of Christian life and spirituality. This paper sets out to consider significant challenges in a profane and largely agnostic society that confront leaders in Catholic schools, who have a responsibility to sustain their distinctive mission, values, and ethos. There is a danger that the commitment of Catholic schools to the sacred and the spiritual aspects of human development may potentially be diluted in the face of demands made in the secular marketplace.[1] In the context of challenges presented by the hegemony of market values and competitive individualism, it is also intended to indicate that Catholic schools can make a significant contribution towards the consolidation of a culture of Christian spirituality, virtue, values of community, solidarity, and service to the common good.

In a small-scale case study that elicited the voices of headteachers in Catholic schools in one diocese (Fincham 2019, 2022), it was evident that they face considerable challenges in exercising their responsibilities as spiritual leaders. It was found that leaders in Catholic schools are subject not only to pragmatic concerns about funding and the recruitment and retention of staff but also face challenges, both overt and implied, to the Catholic identity and integrity of their communities. Catholic school leaders are tested, for example, by pressures of social media, which have an impact upon the mental and emotional health

of young people, and by a pervasive secular mind-set that intrudes upon faith practice in families and in the community. It was also evident that in meeting these pressures in sustaining the leadership of their schools, they need to draw on spiritual and religious resources which will enable them to fulfil their educational vocation.[2]

2. A Counter-Cultural Message

One of the fundamental purposes of Catholic education is to impart the Christian faith to the next generation. This reflects Jesus's call to:

> Go, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. (Matthew 28: 29)

This is what is called the Great Commission, through which Jesus sends out his disciples to spread the good news of the gospel. 'Mission' is derived from the Latin 'mitto' or 'mittere' meaning to 'send out.' It implies that Jesus sent out his disciples to communicate the Good News. In effect, Jesus instructed his disciples to disseminate what he taught, to be witnesses of his life, to preach repentance, to forgive sins, to serve humanity, and to baptise in his name.

It is also worth recalling that at the first Pentecost, the disciples, having hidden in the upper room in fear of their opponents, were empowered by the Holy Spirit to go out into the world to proclaim the Good News. The implication is that while they would work in the world and be engaged with it, they would not be of the world. The disciples were committed to conveying a message that would reach out beyond their enclosed group to those outside their circle, and they would invite outsiders to be united with them in a language of faith understood across the world. This was a moment for the early church to commend its Christian vision to others.

In relation to Catholic education, this principle is endorsed by The Sacred Congregation for Catholic Education (1977, n. 87), which states:

> If all who are responsible for the Catholic school would never lose sight of their mission and the apostolic value of their teaching, the school would enjoy better conditions in which to function in the present and would faithfully hand on its mission to future generations.

The principles that underpin this mission do not necessarily conform with prevailing attitudes in a secular society. Indeed, they can often be regarded as counter-cultural. As Groome (2021, p. 38) states,

> The dominant assumption now is that we live in a secular age—largely absent of faith or religious influence, especially in the public realm.

Secularism reflects the separation of religion from the state and extends to the view that the role of religion in any public sphere should be minimised or removed. This emphasises the overarching importance of the material world. In defining secularism, Grace (2017, p. 24) says it is:

> . . . a denial of the validity of the sacred and of its associated culture. It works to replace this by developing logical, rational, empirical, and scientific intellectual cultures in which the notion of the transcendent has no place.

3. Challenges of Secularism

Secularism is a complex phenomenon, which encompasses both a syncretism and polarisation of secular and Christian perspectives. In many circumstances, secularism presents a narrative that rejects religion as a dimension of human experience. It may preclude, obstruct, or even deny opportunities for Catholic schools to provide an authentic Catholic

education. Accordingly, a secular environment obliges Catholic school leaders to confront significant opposition to their mission of bringing young people to an understanding and experience of God through the person of Jesus Christ.[3]

According to Charles Taylor (2007), in a secular age God is marginalised. Faith-based education is regarded as incompatible with the needs of a modern technological society. It is argued, furthermore, that as faith-based schools disseminate ideologies founded on superstition, irrationalism, and delusion (Dawkins 2006), they have a detrimental influence on the education of children and should be abolished.

Hostility to faith schools is manifested through both an insidious and overt secularism, which has become increasingly more widespread and more antagonistic to them. Within this context, the very existence of Catholic schools is questioned by what Cardinal Cormac Murphy O'Connor described as 'aggressive secularism' (Grace 2017, p. 117). Bullivant (2013, p. 105), too, draws attention to the rise of New Atheism, a polemical perspective which deprecates all religious discourse. Proponents of New Atheism adopt an uncompromisingly militant approach towards religion, claiming that it is redundant in a modern society and should be rejected as being 'irrational,' illogical' and 'unscientific.' Significant protagonists of New Atheism include Daniel Dennett (2006), Sam Harris (2004), and Christopher Hitchens (2008), who have contended that the transmission of faith is a form of indoctrination. From this perspective, in the face of modernity, rationality, and science, any concern for spirituality and transcendence is outmoded.

In practice, Catholic schools face major challenges in maintaining their distinctive identity from various directions within a secularised society. Indeed, pressures on Catholic schools to conform to a secular worldview ultimately question their very existence. The British Humanist Society, for example, asserts:

> We aim for a secular state guaranteeing human rights, with no privilege or discrimination on grounds of religion or belief, and so we campaign against faith schools, and for an inclusive, secular school system, where children and young people of all different backgrounds and beliefs can learn with and from each other. (British Humanist Society n.d.)

The National Secular Society, too, calls for

> . . . a complete separation of religion and state and the creation of spaces where religious freedoms may be exercised but never privileged. (Oldfield et al. 2013, p. 13)

It is argued that schools with a religious character are anachronistic in a modern secular society in which there has been a decline in religious practice. In a culture that denies the value of the sacred and transcendent, religion and faith are regarded as superfluous in education. However, in the spirit of openness, it is also important to understand legitimate concerns that have been expressed against the provision of Catholic education within the public sector. There is value in conducting a systematic examination of opposing views.[4] The Sacred Congregation for Catholic Education (1977, n. 20) reflects:

> . . . as the State increasingly takes control of education and establishes its own so-called neutral and monolithic system, the survival of those natural communities, based on a shared concept of life, is threatened. Faced with this situation, the Catholic school offers an alternative which is in conformity with the wishes of the members of the community of the Church.

Accordingly, schools with a religious character offer an alternative philosophy of education based on faith. Catholic and other faith-based schools can therefore contribute positively to a free, pluralistic, and democratic society, as they can potentially provide a critique of the secular world.

All teaching involves the transmission of values, whether it is secular, or Marxist, or Islamic or Christian. Therefore, to propose—as some protagonists do[5]—that community schools offer an education that is 'neutral' is misconceived. After all, as Grace (2017, p. 26) argues:

> ... there has not been, and in human society, cannot be, a school or an educational experience which is entirely autonomous, objective, neutral and ideologically free.

There is a danger, though, that a hegemony of secularisation will create a culture in which the provision of education and student learning is narrower and restricted exclusively to the measurement of pragmatic outcomes through so-called 'scientific objectivity.' But, are Catholic schools becoming less spiritual and more instrumental?

4. Balancing the Secular and the Religious

Catholic school leaders, having a responsibility for the spiritual and personal needs of children and young people as well as their academic progress, face major challenges in meeting these needs in a secularised society. Thus, within a funded system, Catholic school leaders are challenged to achieve a viable balance between, on the one hand, realising their commitment to their schools' spiritual mission while on the other hand meeting their obligations to the secular state. As Catholic schools contribute to the common good of the wider society, they have a dual responsibility both to impart their religious faith and to comply with the laws of the state: i.e., to serve both 'God and Caesar' (Matthew 22: 21).

Jesus' response to this question in Matthew's gospel raises issues about how far it is possible for Christians to submit to earthly authority. The passage presents a reflection of the relationship between Christian and secular perspectives. This has implications for Catholic schools. While maintaining the distinctive Christian principles that should inform the mission of the school as a Catholic learning community, educators in Catholic schools must also be cognisant of the values of the secular world. Thus, leaders in Catholic schools face a significant challenge in maintaining an appropriate balance between the two.

The sentiment is reinforced by The Congregation for Catholic Education (1997, n. 9), which said:

> ... the Catholic school should be able to offer young people the means to acquire the knowledge they need in order to find a place in a society which is strongly characterized by technical and scientific skill. But at the same time, it should be able, above all, to impart a solid Christian formation.

It is evident, then, that the aim of Catholic schools is not only to prepare young people for adult life in a commercial and technological world, but also to promote Christian values that advocate the virtues of faith, hope, and love.[6]

It is important to recognise that headteachers in Catholic schools in England and Wales should not only be conversant with the Catholic principles of education, but they should also be practising Catholics:

> As a minimum requirement the Bishops expect that the posts of Head Teacher or Principal, Deputy Head Teacher or Deputy Principal and Head or Co-ordinator of Religious Education are to be filled by practising Catholics. (Catholic Education Service 2023)

Accordingly, headteachers in Catholic schools, through their personal example as spiritual and religious leaders in the life of the community, are committed to impart Christian values. They are expected to be spiritual leaders who embrace and communicate the school's faith-based vision. Consequently, they not only carry out their leadership

responsibilities as other headteachers do but also have a responsibility to act as spiritual and religious leaders. Bryk et al. (1993, pp. 334–35), for example, explain:

> Catholic educators must struggle to discern the valuable contributions of this larger, secular culture while maintaining fidelity to the religious ideals that have vitalised Catholic schools since Vatican II. Such openness with roots inevitably creates organisational tensions and dilemmas.

In responding to the demands of implementing the policies and expectations of a secular government, leaders in Catholic schools must, at the same time, also face challenges in finding a balance with their commitment to promote Christian values and ethos. But Grace (in Grace 2002a, p. 7) asks:

> Can a legitimate balance be found between Catholic values and market values or will market forces in education begin to compromise the integrity of the special mission of Catholic schooling?

How do Catholic school leaders maintain a balance between meeting not only the demands of a secular society but also the religious commitments of the school? Grace (2009, p. 10) challenges researchers of Catholic education to interrogate critically pressures that are faced by leaders in Catholic schools in exercising their role as spiritual leaders within a secularised society:

> We need to investigate the various ways in which an increasingly secularised and globalised international culture is affecting the consciousness and behaviour of children and youth. Case studies of the ways in which Catholic educational institutions and educational initiatives are able to be counter-cultural in practice would be valuable for international learning and evaluation.

In response to this, I set out to conduct research in Catholic schools, obtaining feedback from fieldwork visits that involved semi-structured interviews with headteachers across nine primary and secondary schools. Among other things, my research elicited empirical evidence that would enable me to evaluate the extent to which they face pressures in maintaining their mission in a secular society. The findings that emerged from the investigation indicated that Catholic educational leaders face significant existential challenges from a critical secular culture.

5. Method

Considering the above reflections, I set out to investigate challenges that headteachers in Catholic schools today face in exercising their leadership in a secular society. In exploring these questions, it was explicitly the intention of the research to give voice to the personal experiences of headteachers working in Catholic schools.

The research was located within an ethnographic framework, which by definition is an interpretation of reality (Hammersley 1992, p. 49). To enable the reader to be aware of any bias, therefore, it would be appropriate to clarify the researcher's ontological perspective. I would define myself as a practising Catholic in full communion with the Church. I have had the experience of working in Catholic education since 1975, initially as an English teacher in a Catholic secondary school and subsequently as Head of Year, Head of House, First Deputy, and acting headteacher.

Despite my background and experience in Catholic education, my aim as a researcher was to adopt the stance of a neutral observer who would examine data in a disinterested way. For the interviews, I identified headteachers in five primary and four secondary Catholic schools in a purposive sample (Cohen et al. 2018, pp. 156–57) within a diocese in England to gain insights on the pressures and tensions that they were experiencing. While the sample was small, I considered that in publicising the challenges faced by this group

of Catholic school headteachers, the findings would encourage a wider engagement in the discussion.

Each of the interviews lasted about an hour, and with the permission of interviewees, they were audio-recorded and transcribed. It should be noted that, compared with 20 per cent of the school leaders in Grace's (2002a) study who were avowedly religious, there were none in this study.[7]

An advantage of conducting semi-structured interviews as part of the investigation was that it enabled respondents to articulate their lived experiences. Advocating the adoption of semi-structured interviews, Kvale (1996, p. 1) states that 'if you want to know how people understand their world and their life, why not talk to them ...' Additionally, there were ethical implications involved in presenting individual perspectives publicly, and therefore it was important that their views were recorded with discretion. It was paramount to protect the privacy of the people who volunteered to share their experiences and opinions and to ensure that the identification of participants remained anonymous. It was therefore essential that issues surrounding confidentiality and anonymity were secure.

In presenting transcriptions of their responses, references to the participants in this study are anonymised, and for ethical reasons, pseudonyms are used. With ethical considerations in mind, too, each of the headteachers was invited to sign a consent form before the interviews took place. My concern was that, in deciding to conduct face-to-face interviews with headteachers, I did not impose on their valuable time.[8]

6. Results

Among the responses of the headteachers of Catholic schools who were interviewed during the investigation, it was acknowledged that faith schools faced significant challenges from the secularisation of society.

> ... secularism I think is certainly impacting on faith schools. (Headteacher 4 primary)

It was admitted that there were occasions when the pressures of secular challenges seemed unbearable.

> ... there are times where you could easily just give in to the cynicism of the society that does impinge on our schools. (Headteacher 3 primary)

From the interviews with headteachers, moreover, it was generally agreed that pressures arising from an increasingly secular culture impacted detrimentally upon leadership in Catholic schools. One headteacher suggested that this was manifested in Catholic schools being subject to unwarranted criticism.

> ... take society, and you say you know it is become more secular. The pointing the finger at those who aren't the norm, be that individual people [or] organisations ... and it's so much easier to point that finger with the media and the technology and the social networking that we have today. (Headteacher 4 primary)

Headteachers in Catholic schools who participated in the enquiry said they experienced intense pressures from secular interests. One primary headteacher, for example, indicated that Catholic schools were criticised by secular colleagues as having outmoded attitudes. These pressures, it seemed, from the perspective of headteachers who were interviewed, were becoming more aggressive and antagonistic.

> ... [secular pressures] always appear to be quite aggressive, antagonistic when they do challenge; it's never a gentle challenge let's face it. (Headteacher 1 primary)

There were concerns that some individuals and organisations advocated the closing down of faith schools.

I suppose the only thing that . . . occasionally makes me concerned is if you hear people saying . . . if this government gets in, then we are going to abolish church schools, faith schools, you hear those kinds of threats. (Headteacher 8 secondary)

Some headteachers in the research indicated that they were concerned about the campaign of the Humanist Society of Great Britain, which set out to abolish faith schools. Headteacher 5 (primary), for example, indicated that secular interests in society have frequently focussed negative attention on the nature and practice of Catholic education, and that it was continuous and ongoing, stating that

. . . the Humanist Society are constantly trying to attack us.

Organisations such as the National Secular Society challenge what they call 'religion's disproportionate influence on governments and in public life.' There was a view that secular interests had deliberately identified causes for discriminating against Catholic schooling. Headteacher 5 (primary), for example, reflected:

. . . we used the word 'donations' [in communications with parents] and they were saying we shouldn't use that—we should use some other word. . . . but looking at that I checked all the non-Catholic schools who use the same wording as I had been using but they hadn't been picked out. They were picking on us because we were a Catholic school.

Among the challenges that they face in attempting to fulfil the faith mission of the Catholic Church, it seems that they encounter significant and increasing tensions within a prevailing secular culture that supports a competitive educational environment. One headteacher who was interviewed claimed that in a competitive market-oriented environment, other schools in the neighbourhood would attempt to undermine the reputation of their Catholic school. At meetings, for example, Headteacher 8 (secondary) recalled that

. . . I'd been told by a teacher whose daughter goes to a local primary school who isn't Catholic, [that] the head . . . came in and said that their school was the best in [the locality]. Okay—he can crack on with that—it's not true. And then we had a couple of parents at our open evening, and they came along, and they said do you know we went to school X the other day, and the head got up in front of however many hundred people and said 'Well you can discount [the Catholic school] because it's a faith school. We are the best school in [the locality], and we've got the best results.'

It was considered that sometimes the situation was not helped where parents were unfamiliar with Catholic principles. It was claimed, for example, that this was displayed by a poverty in the quality of understanding of Catholic faith values:

The most common experience of secularism is in fact from parents who choose Catholic schools for a variety of reasons but often lack any basic spiritual or theological literacy to understand how the specific curriculum design, pastoral provision and ethos represents a blend of academic, spiritual and philosophical elements predicated on a belief in the living Christ. (Headteacher 7 secondary)

Another headteacher pointed out that this situation was made more difficult by the fact that parents of children in Catholic schools held a range of views about Catholic educational beliefs.

And you know your constituent of parents range from . . . the husband or wife of the vaguely practising [family] or . . . [the] nominally Catholic person who

has no interest in religion at all, to the very very kind of conservative Catholic wing. And you've got to steer a very diplomatic course between those two camps. (Headteacher 8 secondary)

It was argued that there was a challenge for leaders in Catholic schools in trying to balance different perspectives, while at the same time not losing sight of maintaining Catholic values. Headteacher 8 (secondary), for example, opined:

. . . I think most reasonable people understand there's a difference between a school and the Church per se. But at the same time . . . [we need to ensure] we're singing from the same hymn sheet.

In a secular age, Catholic schools can feel besieged and Catholic school leaders feel obliged to adopt strategies to meet the demands of major challenges to their values. It was suggested that one response to the challenge of secularism was for headteachers to provide convincing arguments that supported the maintenance of faith schools.

And my counter to them, what I'd like to say to Humanist type societies, is okay why are our faith schools oversubscribed in that case? Why are the parents wanting their children to come here? And you're telling us in a secular society faith schools shouldn't exist, you know—there's a mismatch there. (Headteacher 1 primary)

Thus, it was considered that Catholic leaders needed actively to defend their values in a forceful way.

I do think though that there is a place for being able to articulate in a muscular way what Catholic schools stand for. (Headteacher 6 primary)

We do have to defend . . . sometimes it does feel like defending . . . the institutional Church, . . . and its teachings—and I've got no problem with that at all. (Headteacher 8 secondary)

There was general agreement amongst Catholic headteachers who were interviewed in the research that their responsibility to express spiritual leadership in the community is constantly under scrutiny in a pluralist secular culture. This amounts to a challenge to the mission integrity of Catholic schools.[9] This challenge was acknowledged by at least one of the headteachers in the enquiry:

. . .mission integrity . . . the tension between market forces and Catholic spirituality, I think [is] an absolutely key thing for us to do. (Headteacher 6 primary)

One headteacher adopted a more assertive approach to the challenges they experienced from hostile forces, suggesting that opposition to Catholic education was unjustified. Headteachers in Catholic schools have to deal with practical issues in a pastoral way informed by Gospel values.

I had a lad here in my office who's not been in school all year, he's been involved in this County Lines[10] thing, he's been sucked into a gang who he's been used to take class A drugs around the area. Absolutely horrendous situation. We've . . . been working with mum and social care, and we've got him to come in to school for the first time today and we talked about how much we wanted him to make a success, and all the rest of it. And he was really . . . he didn't burst into tears, but you could see he was quite tearful—he has found the whole process very, very difficult. But again, it's those moments of redemption . . . would it happen in other schools?—yes it probably would. It's just we live it in a different way, and we have an understanding of it in a different way. (Headteacher 8 secondary)

This seems to resonate with the comment of Pope Francis regarding the pastoral responsibility of the Church as 'a field hospital that takes in the weakest people: the infirm.'[11] This headteacher argued that one reason why church schools should continue to be supported was that they were an essential element to schooling in this country.

> . . . both the Church of England and the Catholic Church are so involved in education . . . I don't think the country could do without them . . .

It was generally felt that there is a danger that a dominant materialistic and secular social environment is diluting a religious vision of life for many people. Arguably, this reinforces the urgency of clarifying the ethos of a Catholic school. However, not all headteachers recognised a threat to Catholic education from secularisation.

> . . . I don't really know whether the secular thing is really a runner to be honest, I don't really think that people really pay that much attention to it. I certainly am not aware of any hostility to the school, maybe I'm naïve or I'm just not experienced enough . . . for me anyway, I don't really see things through the prism of secularism (Headteacher 6 secondary)

While this view was not endorsed by any of the other headteachers, an alternative view that was expressed was that secular attitudes might actually contribute positively to a more open and inclusive debate in Catholic education. It was considered, for example, that, although secular perspectives might inform the attitudes of parents who send their children to Catholic schools, they may do so in a positive way.

> The children are growing up very much in a non-committed world really where people are open to ideas . . . they're not necessarily culturally Catholic, but they're open to ideas. (Headteacher 7 secondary)

It was pointed out, moreover, that while there are challenges from a secular perspective, there are also reactionary forces from within the Catholic Church. From this point of view, the influence of secular society could possibly provide a counterbalance that facilitates more open-minded attitudes:

> I would almost say in my career I've had more challenges from the more extreme end of the Catholic spectrum about what we teach . . . than I have from the humanists, and I actually see it as a good thing. (Headteacher 7 secondary)

It was considered, too, that this approach might also provide opportunities for dialogue and evangelisation.

> . . . for me I'm excited about the fact that a Catholic school has a real opportunity for evangelisation. (Headteacher 7 secondary)

> . . . this is a missionary place, and you need someone who understands what the mission is and can articulate it. (Headteacher 9 secondary)

Catholic school leaders are also tested by pressures of social media, which have impacted upon the mental and emotional health of young people.

> Social media tends to impact on children's relationships with each other—this kind of invidious never ending you know. When we were young, school finished at half three, you go home—that's home time, it's family time. If you chose to go out with your mates, you'd see them and that was fine, and then you'd come home, and then you'd see them at nine o'clock the next day—there is no escape for kids these days. (Headteacher 8 secondary)

There was a feeling that a pervasive secular mind-set that intruded upon faith practice in families and in the community placed pressures on the school and it was exacerbated by new methods of social media.

> ... the secular society and the new media, social media, the internet and so on and what impact that's having on young people's brains and you know the way that they interact with each other ... relationships and so on. (Headteacher 4 primary)

> And it's very easy for children to hide behind ... to think that the screen affords them some protection ... they can say the most ... hideous things [that] they probably would never say to someone's face, because they're not interacting with a human being, they're interacting with a thing, and they don't see the human behind it. It does cause all sorts of problems ... and [for] parents as well. (Headteacher 8 secondary)

Bringing up children in a modern technological society in which, for example, the environment of social media is prevalent, produces unprecedented strains and pressures on families, and particularly on parenting.

> ... if your parents are on Facebook all the time when they're supposed to be sitting down and having an evening meal with you, then it's no wonder you have a very limited understanding or ability to deal with those things, you know. ... bullying is just you know ... (Headteacher 8 secondary)

This has an impact on the relationship between parents and school, which has led to schools taking on greater responsibilities in supporting parents.

> ... basic parenting is a huge area that the Church needs to think about, and how it might help provide for better parenting. Because parents are ... society means there's less communication in families, there's less time spent together as families. Even you know ... forget actually the opportunity to pray together, people aren't even eating together. (Headteacher 3 primary)

It seemed that the Catholic school, in promoting spiritual and moral values has effectively become the church, parish, and parent for many young people.

> school is becoming more and more the strict parent where... many parents ... [due to] either the inability or unwillingness to take on poor, low-level behaviour at home—for the sake of an easy life... [have] just want[ed] to be friends with their children ... not the parents ... (Headteacher 9 secondary)

It was suggested that, as a result, the school has taken on greater responsibility than ever before for the welfare of young people.

> there was a primary head who said that the school is the parent—her school is the parent for many of these families. (Headteacher 9 secondary)

It was also evident from the interviews that in sustaining the distinctive leadership of their schools in the face of pressures from secular interests, headteachers drew on spiritual and religious resources that would enable them to fulfil their educational vocation. The support of the parish priest, especially for primary school headteachers proved to be significant.

> ... I'm very lucky that my parish priest ... is very very good at making sure that spiritually I'm renewed, [with] retreats through the parish etc. And you know he knows it's me when it's Reconciliation when I'm banging on about workload and that. (Headteacher 1 primary)

> We're very lucky because in our current school ... We've got the parish church ... literally directly outside the school [and the Parish Priest] ... offer[s] that pastoral support and it is felt by the staff. (Headteacher 4 primary)

Headteachers who participated in the research also indicated that the diocese provided spiritual, pastoral, and religious support.

> . . . that's one of the things that our diocese does quite well is that they do put on conferences which always have a spiritual basis, so I think they do that quite well really, so at least once a year we have something that's at our own level. (Headteacher 5 primary)

The diocese also provided support through retired headteachers and leaders who were available as spiritual and religious advisers.

> former heads . . . are given [as] spiritual advisers . . . they're given heads as guides . . . former heads, former leadership team [members] as guides to help them in the spiritual [sustenance] . . . and they look for the points of consolation in their career . . . (Headteacher 6 primary)

Headteachers found solace in experiencing a liturgical culture that enabled them to participate actively in a prayer life, which informed their everyday experience.

> . . . by going to church every week you're sort of nourished spiritually. (Headteacher 5 primary)

> . . . we've gone away for retreat type events for head teachers—I've been to a couple of those. . . . Has it just been a bit of an opportunity for a moment . . . an oasis moment . . . But hand on heart has it had a long-term effect . . . (Headteacher 8 secondary)

Headteachers indicated that their own personal faith commitment also sustained them in exercising their leadership responsibilities in a Catholic school.

> I think the touchstone is the spirituality, the touchstone is the gospel. . . . The touchstone is Christ himself. (Headteacher 9 secondary)

It was evident, too, that the spiritual nourishment of headteachers was important in maintaining their distinctive vocational commitment.

> . . . you need that spiritual intellectual nourishment to help you believe in what you're doing more. (Headteacher 9 secondary)

Overall, the headteachers who took part in the study gave the impression that their spiritual and moral mission is vulnerable to secular interests that attempt to undermine them. On the other hand, given the challenges of a secular and materialistic society, mission integrity in these Catholic schools seemed to endure robustly.

7. Discussion

This admittedly small-scale research investigation was based on interviews that were carried out with nine primary and secondary headteachers in Catholic schools in a diocese in England. The enquiry set out to elicit the views of headteachers in Catholic schools about leadership challenges they faced in their experience of headship within a secular society.

Admittedly, although the results cannot be generalisable on the greatest scale, they are still indicative, and the findings of the research yielded rich data for consideration. Evidence indicated that within an increasingly secularised society, despite well-documented academic and social success, Catholic schools in England have been subject to a variety of challenges and changes in recent years. While pragmatic concerns such as balancing the school budget and ensuring the recruitment and retention of suitable staff were pressing issues for headteachers, it was also evident that they faced pressures in maintaining the mission integrity of their schools in the face of secular challenges.

From an examination of the transcripts of the interviews with the headteachers, several tropes emerged that resonated with issues that have been discussed in the literature. Most headteachers who participated in the research, for example, articulated anxieties

about the impact of secularism on their schools. Responses also indicated that secularism poses existential challenges not only for Catholic education but also for education in all faith communities.

Participants indicated that, together with Christ's encouragement to disseminate his message to all people, there was a need to publicise the contribution of Catholic schools in supporting the Church's mission to serve society. Moreover, if the Catholic school has a responsibility 'to hand on the cultural legacy of previous generations' (Vatican Council II 1965, n. 5), it would be advantageous for those working in Catholic schools to appreciate the cultural capital that informs their ethos. To meet this need, leaders indicated that opportunities to engage with both formal and informal in-service provision had been appreciated. These are manifested through external support, e.g., from the parish or from the diocese, or from personal resources of spirituality informed by faith. There are implications, therefore, for the greater provision of opportunities for faith development, faith renewal, and continuing professional formation for those who teach in Catholic schools (Fincham 2010, p. 76). This reflects the view of Wilkin (2019), who advocates for the provision of in-school formation programmes for the next generation of leaders in Catholic schools.

Responses from headteachers in Catholic schools acknowledged that resources of spiritual capital sustained them in their mission.[12] But there is a question about how far Catholic schools can continue to maintain their spiritual capital. Traditionally, the identity of faith-based schools in a Catholic tradition was not an issue. Typically, schools were staffed by priests and religious leaders supported by a few dedicated lay people related to the life of the local parish. When I first started teaching in a Catholic secondary school fifty years ago, for example, there were two priests and two nuns working as teaching colleagues in the school. The presence of Religious Sisters, Brothers, and clergy were symbols that characterised a Catholic school's identity. They were, as it were, religious role models. In their outward appearance and behaviour, they were living witnesses to the faith, emulating Christ's ministry and mission. Modelled on Jesus the Good Shepherd, they were visible signs of the person of Christ.

However, between 1970 and 1990 there was a sharp decrease in the number of priests and religious leaders working in Catholic schools. During that time, the personnel of Catholic schools became almost exclusively lay, and what constituted an authentic Catholic school became a critical question. If statistics were available today, the numbers of religious individuals working in Catholic schools would be negligible.

The disappearance of religious and teaching orders from Catholic schools has had profound effects on leadership. Grace (2017, p. 58), for example, warns that:

Without a strong conception of vocation among teachers in Catholic schools the mission of common good service in education is likely to become vulnerable to the influences of contemporary commercial and market ideologies in education and to secular emphases upon academic and skills productivity alone.

With the loss of religious models from Catholic schools in England and Wales, the responsibility for maintaining and renewing the spiritual capital of those schools has fallen on the vocation of lay men and women dedicated to fulfilling the mission of the Catholic faith (See also The Sacred Congregation for Catholic Education 1982). Thus, the continuing success of Catholic schools is dependent upon the vocational commitment and faith leadership of lay school principals, headteachers, and school leaders. As Pope Paul VI (1976, n. 464) advised:

Today young people do not listen seriously to teachers, but to witnesses; and if they do listen to teachers, it is because they are witnesses.

Therefore, if it is to secure its distinctive ethos, a Catholic school requires sufficient staff committed to its Christian message. A reduction in the 'critical mass'[13] of committed Catholic staff as effective custodians of the spiritual capital of the school could have a significant impact on the sustainability of Catholic education. A Catholic school is dependent on those who will support its authentic Catholic ethos.[14]

In the light of this research there is a further question that is implied regarding the number of students from other faiths or none who attend Catholic schools.[15] In the past, most children who were enrolled in Catholic schools were drawn from Catholic families whose values were generally in line with the professed values of the Church. Catholic teaching on education asserts that Catholic schools are established to support Catholic parents who wish to bring up their children in the Catholic faith (Vatican Council II 1965, n. 3). However, as the Catholic school also participates in the evangelising mission of the Church (The Sacred Congregation for Catholic Education 1977, n. 7), it will aim to provide a Christian vision of existence to all people. This is particularly resonant in Catholic schools in which students are not Catholics.[16]

The question is, how does education in the Catholic tradition relate to other Christian, faith, and non-faith traditions in a secular society? In today's context of pluralism, there is an argument that Catholic education should be catholic, ecumenical, and interfaith (Carmody 2017, pp. 164–68). However, this gives rise to a concomitant debate regarding whether the promotion of a faith-based education should be confessional or non-confessional[17] (See Whittle 2016).

Following the reforms introduced by the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965), the Catholic Church articulated a view that encouraged openness with persons of goodwill throughout the wider world. This approach welcomed dialogue with those of other faiths and those with no faith.

> In the certainty that the Spirit is at work in every person, the Catholic school offers itself to all, non-Christians included, with all its distinctive aims and means, acknowledging, preserving and promoting the spiritual and moral qualities, the social and cultural values, which characterise different civilizations. (The Sacred Congregation for Catholic Education 1977, n. 85)

As the largest faith-based educational organisation in the world, the Catholic Church has an extensive reach in the education of children and young people. Thus, Jones and Barrie (2015, p. 119) state:

> In the twentieth century there was a remarkable increase in the number of Catholic schools so that currently there are approximately a quarter of a million Catholic schools educating approximately fifty million students.

Internationally, Catholic schools play a significant role in serving a variety of communities. The Salesians of Don Bosco, for example, are responsible for schools and colleges in more than one hundred and thirty countries across the world and give witness to a constructive commitment to Catholic education in diverse communities throughout North and South America, Europe, Africa, Asia, and Oceania.

Nowadays, many Catholic schools around the world demonstrate an openness to others, accepting students from all backgrounds, classes, and faiths, including Christians, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, and members of other faiths or none. In Britain, increasingly, admissions to Catholic schools include students from an emerging multicultural and multi-faith population.[18]

In 2016, Paul Barber, Director of the Catholic Education Service in England and Wales, commented that Catholic schools were

> ...beacons of diversity and integration up and down the country. Often, parents of different faiths and none value the distinctive and unapologetically Catholic ethos of the Church's schools. (Barber 2016)

Nothing can be gained from an internecine conflict between competing worldviews.[19] For Haldane (2024, p. 228) an appropriate strategy would be to engage in a critically creative discourse in which what is of authentic value in secular modernity could be accommodated with productive synergy within the Catholic tradition. It is proposed here, though, that, despite evident tensions and differences in outlook, where there is mutual respect within a secular society, Catholic schools have the capacity to contribute to the common good.

There are many lessons to be learned from the findings of this research that would be advantageous in realising the potential of Catholic schools to contribute to the common good of a secular society. In summary, it is possible to highlight the following inferences that were drawn from the research:

- From the perspective of Catholic school leaders, Catholic education faces considerable challenges, and sometimes antagonism, within a secular society, which can impose significant pressures on the conduct of their work.
- There is a need to disseminate information to individuals and groups within and outside Catholic schools of the Christian values that are promoted by the Church.
- Catholic schools make a significant contribution towards the common good of society, which is not always generally appreciated and should be more widely publicised.
- Catholic communities and their leaders would benefit from ongoing opportunities to engage in continuing professional development and formation that would nourish and nurture the enhancement of spiritual capital in their schools.

Notes

[1] The Congregation for Catholic Education (1977, n. 43), for example, states: 'Education is not given for the purposes of gaining power ... Knowledge is not to be considered for material prosperity and success but as a call to serve and to be responsible for others.'

[2] Gallagher (2003), in a comprehensive discourse on the relationship between faith and contemporary culture, highlights 'secular marginalisation' as a phenomenon in which 'the faith dimension cannot easily make itself heard in any public debate.'

[3] Notably, in 2012 Rabbi Jonathan Sacks engaged in a public debate with Richard Dawkins on the relationship between science and religion. Sacks (2011, p. 11) maintained that '...the cure of bad religion is good religion, not no religion, just as the cure of bad science is good science, not the abandonment of science.'

[4] Pring (2018), for example, has scrupulously explored conflicting arguments in favour of and against the continued maintenance of faith-based schools that prepare pupils to live in a pluralistic and diverse culture within a contemporary secular context.

Balancing contrasting perspectives, he provides a forensic examination of opposing arguments and considers the rationale for challenges that face the future of faith-based schooling.

[5] For a reflection on this discourse see Halstead and McLaughlin (2005). 'Are faith schools divisive?'

[6] This principle is further emphasised in the Religious Education Directory (Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales 2023). In this document, in which the Catholic bishops exercise their canonical rights in relation to setting standards for religious education in Catholic schools (Code of Canon Law, can. 804), it is maintained that the primary goal of a Catholic school is to promote the educational mission of the Church, i.e., 'to proclaim the Gospel of Jesus Christ' (Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales 2023, p. 9).

[7] Grace (2002b, p. 121) adds that 'among the 48 lay headteachers, three were former members of religious orders.'

[8] It was evident during the conduct of the research that head teachers are under considerable pressure to fulfil the responsibilities of their role, and I take this opportunity to thank those who gave generously of their time to assist me in the enquiry. While, admittedly, a value judgement on the part of the researcher, it was evident that the faith leadership of each of the head teachers who participated in the interviews was informed by the values of their personal and spiritual vocation.

[9] According to Grace (2002b, p. 162) 'Mission integrity may be defined as fidelity in educational practice, and not just in public rhetoric, to the distinctive and authentic principles of a faith-based schooling.'

[10] 'County lines' is a form of child exploitation where gangs and organised crime networks groom children to sell drugs. Often these children are made to travel across counties, using dedicated mobile phone 'lines' to supply drugs.

[11] Pope at Audience: Church a 'field hospital' that cares for sick—Vatican News https://www.vaticannews.va/en/pope/news/2019-08/pope-francis-general-audience-church-cares-for-sick.html (accessed on 30 June 2023).

[12] Spiritual capital relates to 'resources of faith and values derived from commitment to a religious tradition' (Grace 2002b, p. 236) and implies that Catholic school leaders need to experience opportunities for their own religious development, for example, by attendance at retreats and study courses.

[13] The notion of a 'critical mass' assumes that students will benefit from role models of religious faith as examples to emulate if they are to develop spiritually.

[14] An indication of the reduction in the numbers of Catholic teachers in Catholic schools over the past ten years is indicated as follows:

Year	Primary	%	Secondary	%
2014	22,392	65.7	23,983	43.6
2015	22,986	63.9	23,850	43.1
2016	23,234	62.3	23,835	41.9
2017	23,296	61.4	23,525	41.4
2018	23,370	60.6	23,146	40.7
2019	23,184	59.5	23,156	40.0
2020	23,018	59.0	23,049	39.6
2021	22,816	58.2	23,180	38.6
2022	22,748	57.3	23,401	37.7
2023	22,419	56.5	23,347	36.6

Source: CES website

[15] It is worth considering, in this context, the numbers of pupils attending Catholic maintained schools in England and Wales in the past ten years:

Year	Number of pupils	Number of Catholic pupils	% Catholic pupils
2014	774,121	538,014	69.5
2015	778,246	535,026	68.7
2016	782,666	533,677	68.2
2017	786,030	526,158	66.9
2018	784,249	516,878	65.9
2019	786,779	504,282	64.1
2020	787,109	497,671	63.2
2021	785,195	484,883	61.8
2022	820,994	480,315	58.5
2023	821,549	462,778	56.3

Source: CES website

[16] For example, in a case brought against the then secretary of state for education by Humanists UK, humanist parents contended that the syllabus offered by the Catholic school potentially infringed their human rights (R (Fox and ors) v Secretary of State for Education 2015). However, in his review, the judge did not agree that it did in their case. In his judgement, he stated that: 'It may

be said that a parent such as the third claimant, who chooses to send their child to a school with a religious character, cannot complain if that school chooses syllabus content that reflects that character. A reasonable response might be to enrol the child at a different school' (R (Fox and ors) v Secretary of State for Education 2015, para. 56).

17 A confessional account of Catholic education pertains where pupils are taught to acquire defined theological beliefs.

18 It is noteworthy that Catholic schools make a significant contribution to education in countries that are not Catholic. In Karachi, for example, one of the most prestigious schools in Pakistan is the Convent of Jesus and Mary, a Catholic girls' school, whose alumni include Benezir Bhutto. Managed by nuns of the order of Jesus and Mary, it serves mainly Muslim families, but also Parsis and Hindus. Former head teacher, Sister Berchmans, who received the Benedict medal from Cardinal Vincent Nichols on behalf of St Mary's University at Westminster Cathedral in 2019, worked in Pakistan for more than sixty years. In 2012 she was decorated by the Government of Pakistan for her services in education and promoting interfaith harmony.

19 Barnes (2023), in the light of the Commission on Religious Education (CoRE 2018) report on religious education in the National Curriculum, provides a range of perspectives that illuminate the contemporary discourse surrounding the place of 'worldviews' in religious education.

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