

May 2016

# Bearers of Diverse Ecclesiologies: Imagining Catholic School Students as Informing a Broader Articulation of Catholic School Aims

Graham P. McDonough  
*University of Victoria, gpmcd@uvic.ca*

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.lmu.edu/ce>

 Part of the [Curriculum and Instruction Commons](#), [Educational Administration and Supervision Commons](#), [Educational Leadership Commons](#), [Higher Education Commons](#), [Junior High, Intermediate, Middle School Education and Teaching Commons](#), [Liberal Studies Commons](#), [Secondary Education and Teaching Commons](#), and the [Social and Philosophical Foundations of Education Commons](#)

## Recommended Citation

McDonough, G. P. (2016). Bearers of Diverse Ecclesiologies: Imagining Catholic School Students as Informing a Broader Articulation of Catholic School Aims. *Journal of Catholic Education*, 19 (3). <http://dx.doi.org/10.15365/joce.190052016>

This Article is brought to you for free with open access by the School of Education at Digital Commons at Loyola Marymount University and Loyola Law School. It has been accepted for publication in *Journal of Catholic Education* by the journal's editorial board and has been published on the web by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons at Loyola Marymount University and Loyola Law School. For more information about Digital Commons, please contact [digitalcommons@lmu.edu](mailto:digitalcommons@lmu.edu). To contact the editorial board of *Journal of Catholic Education*, please email [CatholicEdJournal@lmu.edu](mailto:CatholicEdJournal@lmu.edu).

## Bearers of Diverse Ecclesiologies: Imagining Catholic School Students as Informing a Broader Articulation of Catholic School Aims

Graham P. McDonough  
University of Victoria

*The purpose of this paper is to provide a comprehensive—although not exhaustive—picture of the kinds of real concerns and concurrently inferred ecclesiological perspectives practicing Catholic students have. It reports findings from an interview study with 16 students at a private Catholic high school in Canada who self-identify as Catholic. With these findings, I seek to demonstrate that it is in a Catholic school's best interest not to rely on narrow or singular definitions of Catholic identity, especially insofar as these are tied to minimal and external markers of institutional affiliation. While the sample's size and particularity do not generalize to a larger population of Catholic adolescents or to all Catholic schools, they nonetheless validly contribute to a modest theoretical claim about the unity and diversity of student experiences, and how they conceptually inform a Catholic school's aims. In the conclusion, I hypothesize that student spirituality will be optimized if it is conceptualized and discussed in explicit, pluralistic terms.*

### Keywords

Catholic Education, Catholic School, ecclesiology, religiosity, aims

The sociological data from recent years has shown a decline in parish participation among Canadian Catholic youth (Bibby, 2009), which seems to indicate a concurrent decline in Catholic practice across their whole lives. Although other factors such as family influence students' participation and practice, it can be hypothesized that Catholic school experience has at least some effect, even if framed modestly as complementary to the family and the parish. But no matter what influence the school might have, the way it directs its efforts suggests something to students about the kind of faithful practitioner the school desires them to be. So, if it wants to respond to this phenomenon, the school would need to know something about the kind of

Catholic student who decides to remain with the Church. Overlooking this question could result in relying upon narrow or inaccurate assumptions about who students are, what they want, and what they need.

The purpose of this paper is to provide a comprehensive—although not exhaustive—picture of the kinds of real concerns and concurrently inferred ecclesiological perspectives practicing Catholic students have. It does so by reporting findings from an interview study with 16 students at a private Catholic high school in Canada who self-identify as Catholic. A sample of Catholic students in a Catholic school is of interest here insofar as these students are not only bearers of these views, but are also brought into association with others in the Catholic school as a public ecclesial space (McDonough, 2011, p. 289). This paper is not concerned with proposing a theoretical or practical mechanism for grappling with this diversity; however, it is interested in demonstrating that it is in a Catholic school's best interest to attend to a variety of Catholic experiences, and hence to avoid problems like those Rymarz (2011) observed when too narrow a focus in religious educational aims leads to overlooking religious diversity, and those Rossiter (2011) likewise warned against when the various dimensions of student spirituality receive inadequate attention.

The findings from this study reveal the various concerns participants have with aspects of their religious experience. Some of these concerns reflect a desire for greater adherence to the discipline of practice and doctrine of the faith, while others reflect disagreements with some teachings that are controversial among Catholics. The discussion of the findings moves toward realizing these real concerns within the framework of Avery Cardinal Dulles's (2002) comparative ecclesiology to show that the variety of Catholic religious experience and concern in a school need not be interpreted merely in terms of *degrees of observance*, and can reasonably be seen as complementary but irreducible kinds of emphasis and understanding of what it means to be Catholic. While the sample's size and local particularity makes it insufficient for drawing a comprehensive conclusion about all Catholic adolescents who remain in the Church, they nonetheless offer a variety of valid perspectives that contribute to a modest, tentatively posed theoretical claim about the unity and diversity of experiences among these students. In the conclusion, I also hypothesize that student spirituality might suffer in theory if it is not discussed in explicit terms where several options are available to students.

### Theoretical Framework

In 2009, sociologist Reginald Bibby presented a large-scale picture of adolescent Canadian Catholics, marking a decline in their service attendance—defined as attending Mass monthly or more—from 56% in 1984 to 37% in 2009 (p. 179). Those attending weekly dropped from 28% in 1984 to 21% in 1992, and remained the same in 2000 (Bibby, 2004, p. 18).<sup>1</sup> A parallel decline was also featured regarding the enjoyment that all Catholics, including adolescents, were receiving from their institution, as those who indicated “a great deal” or “quite a bit” dropped from 33% in 1984 to 17% in 1992, although rebounding to 24% in 2008. The 2008 data also specifically reported a 46% enjoyment rate for those who attended monthly or more (Bibby, 2009). Finally, he reported that significant numbers of Catholic adolescents would “be open to more involvement with [their] religious group if [they] found it to be worthwhile.” (p. 180). This finding broke down to 55% for those outside the province of Quebec who attended less than monthly, and 67% who attended monthly or more. Within Quebec, the figures were 30% and 65%, respectively.

Bibby’s (2004, 2009) figures indicated more than a declining commitment to practice. The fact that large numbers of Canadian Catholic adolescents who attended Mass monthly or more accepted and approved of premarital sex (59% outside Quebec/61% inside), homosexual relations (33%/32%), and same-sex marriage (36%/31%) showed that a nonreception of Church teaching was concurrent with nonparticipation at the parish (Bibby, 2009, p. 57). International Social Survey Program data confirmed Bibby’s (2009) findings: Only 9% of Canadian Catholics—adults included—agreed with Church teaching on contraception, 36% on homosexual sex, and 40% on abortion (in Greeley, 2004, p. 92). In bare institutional terms, if one defines a Catholic person by his or her weekly Mass attendance and assent to all Church teaching, then these data show that such persons are in the minority among self-identified Catholics. Apparently, the Catholic school receives a diversity of beliefs and practices among its Catholic students.

Describing this diversity requires broadening the markers that one uses to indicate Catholic experience, and Dulles’s (2002) *Models of the Church* demonstrates one way this enlargement is possible. Dulles (2002) described his

---

<sup>1</sup> Outside the province of Quebec, the figures move from 37% in 1984 to 27% in 1992, rebounding to 31% in 2000. Quebec showed an uninterrupted decline from 16% to 11% and 7% across the same years (Bibby, 2004, p. 18).

book's purpose as an attempt to achieve a balanced ecclesiological outlook on the Church, especially so as to overcome the limitations of regarding the Church according to a single institutional model, or in dichotomous terms like "prophetic vs. priestly" or "vertical vs. horizontal" (pp. 1–2). Dulles (2005) acknowledged that it is a "matter of historical record" that "theological pluralism has always existed within the Catholic Church" (p. 5), which allows one to conclude that while there are many possible ideas of what "Church" is, no one model is completely satisfactory because it cannot capture its full mystery (p. 10): "In order to do justice to the various aspects of the Church, as a complex reality," he wrote, "we must work simultaneously with different models" (Dulles, 2002, p. 2). Working with diverse ecclesial models allows persons the means to acquire a richer understanding of Church, especially insofar as they "[help] people to get beyond the limitations of their own particular outlook, and to enter into fruitful conversation with others having a fundamentally different mentality" (Dulles, 2002, p. 5). The intent to inform a balanced ecclesiology and continuing conversations within the Church thus informs Dulles's (2002) ultimate hope to "foster the kind of pluralism that heals and unifies, rather than a pluralism that divides and destroys" (p. 5).

As Dulles (2002) pointed to the existence of several richly distinct ecclesial models within the rubric of Catholic orthodoxy, it follows that this is one firmly supported way in which to claim that Catholicism sustains diversity within its unity. Here it is enough to point to just two such models and show that the differences between them demonstrate the limitations of bare sociological definitions. These models are the Church *as Institution* and *Church as Mystical Communion*. For the institutional model, Dulles (2002) pointed to Robert Bellarmine's classical definition of the Catholic Church as

the community of men [sic] brought together by the profession of the same Christian faith and conjoined in the communion of the same sacraments, under the government of the legitimate pastors and especially the one vicar of Christ on earth, the Roman pontiff. (qtd. in Dulles, 2002, p. 8)

This definition, in Dulles's (2002) view, places the external, visible elements of the Church ahead of the inward experiences of its members: so while this model has an advantage for enabling strong corporate solidarity through cult, creed, and code, it does so at the cost of placing profession prior to authentic belief, which

lower[s] the Church to the same plane as other human communities . . . and [neglects] the most important thing about the Church: the presence in it of God . . . [and the] communion of men [sic] with one another through the grace of Christ. (p. 9)

By contrast, for the *Mystical Communion* model, a member cannot merely be defined in the sociological sense because this would overlook “a transforming mystical union, deeper and more intimate than anything describable in moral or juridical terms” (Dulles, 2002, p. 49). Rather, membership “is used in an organic, spiritual, or mystical sense, referring to the Church as a communion of grace” (Dulles, 2002, pp. 49–50). This model abounds in the Second Vatican Council documents through its “People of God” (Dulles, 2002, p. 46) and “Body of Christ” (Dulles, 2002, p. 47) imagery, and while it has some disadvantage for obscuring “the spiritual and visible dimensions of the Church” (Dulles, 2002, p. 52), it has the distinct advantage of overcoming the shortcomings of the institutional model “to revivify spirituality and the life of prayer” among its members (51). The comparison between these two models shows that an emphasis on the institutional markers can neglect the internal spiritual experience of some of its members, while emphasizing that mystical experiences can obscure the boundaries between who is and is not Catholic. This comparison between models also offers support to Greeley’s (2004) description of how, for those who disagree with some Catholic teachings, “the intensity of their religious imagination experience and imagery cancels out the negative impact of their ethical dissent,” and when this is coupled with “a strong feeling of closeness to God,” it keeps them “close to their Church” (p. 76)

To date, there are some places in the scholarship on Catholic education that do not consider exploring any such intra-Catholic diversity among students, let alone considering student spirituality as constitutive of the school’s Catholic culture and structure. Patricia Earl (2007), for example, in the American context, has focused on how the continuing decline of clergy and religious in teaching and administrative positions and their replacement with lay persons has had a negative impact on Catholicity in the schools, and that action is needed to restore it. Her concern is that the Church’s educational mission and offices reflect its institutional identity. Likewise, Timothy Cook’s well-known *Architects of Catholic Culture* (2001) posited that it is the principal’s duty to cultivate and nurture Catholic culture in an age in which the absence of clergy and religious has resulted in conditions where the laity struggles to perform its mission properly. Like Earl (2007), Cook’s (2001)

concern has been to see Catholic identity descending from the strength of its institutional offices. Archbishop Michael Miller's (2007) chapter "Challenges Facing Catholic Schools, a View From Rome" is aptly titled because it reflects the Church's centralized institutional theology and philosophy of Catholic schooling in the abstract, prior to the arrival of students. In the Canadian context, Rymarz (2013) has spoken of the problem of challenges to a school's Catholic identity without entertaining the possibility that such identity may not be uniform across all who have high levels of commitment to both Church and school. One aspect of his conclusion specifically prescribed "that Catholic schools in contemporary culture cannot be unduly influenced by what parents expect from schools" when this influence "sees religion in vicarious terms" (Rymarz, 2013, p. 184). The school should thus present normative Catholicism to its constituents, in his view, rather than reflect the Catholicism(s) of those it serves. All these contributions have scholarly merit, and all share a deep concern that Catholic schools serve students well: but what they also share is their placing of the institutional identity first without considering the perspectives of students. They begin from the structures of the institution, its doctrines, practices, and offices, rather than from the spirituality of the (Catholic) students in (and who help constitute) the school. I do not present this observation as an evaluative shortcoming in these works, but rather as a description of their scope.

There are, however, also other places in the literature that have begun to acknowledge a broader view of the aims of Catholic education and the influence of contributions that students bring to school. The ethnographic study of four Catholic schools in Walter Feinberg's (2006) *For Goodness Sake* empirically supported his typology of Catholic schools according to "traditional," "modern," and "liberation/feminist" types (pp. 48–50) based upon their approach to coordinating the needs of interpreting doctrine, attending to students' pastoral needs, and promoting the development of students' consciences (pp. 46–47). If one is to follow Feinberg's (2006) typology, there is clearly a need to qualify any aims for Catholic schooling so that they include the diverse intra-ecclesial array he has found. Rymarz (2011) echoed the need for such qualification based on his analysis of religious education curriculum in Canada. In his estimation, the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops' religious education documents and curricula over-reach from the cognitive aims of religious education as a scholarly discipline and into the affective aims of catechesis (Rymarz, 2011, pp. 539–540). The bishops' "assumption that senior high school students are living, or will desire to live, 'the way of

Christ,” is simply unrealistic for a whole school curriculum because, “[w]hile this may describe some students in Catholic schools, it does not recognize burgeoning religious diversity” (Rymarz, 2011, p. 540).<sup>2</sup> This article is a helpful reminder that inter-religious and ecumenical diversity exists within a Catholic school as a matter of *kind*, alongside varying *degrees* of Catholic adherence ranging from those who do desire to emulate Christ, to those who do not (Rymarz, 2011, p. 542). However, it does not consider a range of *kinds within Catholicism*, and instead remains with the difference by *degree* language of “distant religious affiliation, described here as consumeristic or vicarious” (Rymarz, 2011, p. 546); one of his earlier articles also referred to them as “capricious” (Rymarz, 2010, p. 303). If Rymarz is correct in his assessment that “passive acceptance of Catholic identity is likely to become increasingly problematic,” and that “a more deliberate and accountable sense of what being a Catholic institution means” is required (Rymarz, 2010, p. 307), there is no barrier in my view to broadening this sense of identity to include reliance on the several ecclesial models that Dulles proposed or the ethnographic observations that Feinberg recorded.

### Methods

I recruited the participants for this study by obtaining permission from the school board and the diocese before visiting classrooms to orally explain the study and present students with letters of invitation. All participants obtained parental permission to be interviewed, and returned with their permission form a short questionnaire that provided basic demographic information, as well as an indication of their initial interest in the study.

The sample represented an equal number of men and women, drawn from grades 8, 10, 11, and 12. A slight majority of 9 represented the upper two grades. In addition to the reasons outlined in the introduction, I recruited adolescents in a Catholic school because they are at the age when they are making important decisions about their faith and participation in the Church

---

<sup>2</sup> Rossiter (2010) provided a congruent criticism of efforts in Australian Catholic schools that restrict their views of Church participation to “religiosity” as a “measure of religious behaviour” because, in his evaluation, “this thinking underestimates the complexity of the spirituality of contemporary youth—and of adults as well” and so when applied to the reform efforts of Catholic schooling sets off from a conceptual origin that is destined to “[propose] a simplistic solution to a complex problem” (p. 130).

that are likely to have significant, lasting consequence throughout their lives (Fowler, 1981). Moreover, as *students*, these participants illustrated the perspectives of those whom the school received and served.

In the preinterview questionnaire, I asked participants how important Catholicism was to them. None stated “unimportant”; rather, 11 stated that Catholicism was “extremely” important, with another 3 stating “somewhat,” and another 2 that they were “not sure right now.” The raw data of their Mass attendance was roughly congruent with their ascribed importance of Catholicism; 1 attended more than weekly; 10 attended weekly; 2 attended twice per month; and 3 attended “rarely.” This initial presentation revealed a partial, but not a complete, picture of these participants’ Catholic experiences: They all demonstrated serious engagement throughout their interviews, and the level of depth I found in their responses allowed me to claim tentatively that they found religious questions significant, no matter how they rated Catholicism’s importance or how frequently they attended Mass. I also inferred that this significance in part influenced their willingness to participate in this study. The advantage of this situation is that it provides rich data from students who had apparently developed the habit of thinking through their Catholic experience. The disadvantage, of course, is that this kind of representation also under-represents or even misses entirely the perspectives of Catholic students with nominal ecclesial attachment and/or whose personal investment with Catholic knowledge and experience is currently limited to obtaining necessary credits for graduation.

Past the preliminary information, I collected data through a single, private, semistructured interview with each participant. The semistructured interview has the advantage of ensuring that I asked the same core of questions to each participant across the sample, while also allowing me sufficient flexibility to ask unique follow-up questions to each participant to gather clarity and depth on terms, concepts, and issues they raised in their answers to the core questions. The possible limitation of this design, though, is that its restriction to one interview per participant only shows what responses participants could generate immediately, rather than what they might have developed with more time to think before and after I met them. Simultaneously, however, this limitation presents an advantage to the degree that it shows the unrehearsed working practical knowledge, attitudes, and judgments participants had in their everyday lives, which is presumably somewhat truer to what informed their normal actions rather than revealing what they might have hoped for upon taking time to reflect. Lastly, however, there is

also the possibility of the interviewer effect, where portions of participant responses may have been influenced by relating what they thought I wanted to hear rather than what they really thought.

Because this paper reports from a small sample of highly engaged students within a single school, it makes no claims to generalize to any population. If it is generalizable, it is only so as theoretical perspectives on Catholic education. So, for example, where Participant 9 related her concerns about authentic worshipping practice during school Mass, I cannot say that she shared this concern with a certain percentage of her classmates or Catholic school students generally. However, it does illustratively represent an instance of a theoretical concern that deserves a theoretically adequate reply. So, in this sense, these participants' perspectives are applicable to the degree that they help theorists and practitioners recognize, receive, and respond to them.

I audio-recorded all interviews, and each interview was transcribed. I analyzed and coded the transcripts by hand, using a series of three readings through the whole data set. On the first reading, I wrote an analytic memo for each transcript (Lempert, 2007, pp. 247, 250) to establish the first interpretive step, gain "a general sense" of the data, and begin organizing it into meaningful "chunks" (Creswell, 2003, pp. 191, 192); I also developed a list of themes based on the form and content of participants' responses to my questions. My first reading of the transcripts as a set was oriented toward finding illustrations of intra-ecclesial diversity among the sample that would illustrate Bibby's (2004, 2009) observations *that* there is intra-ecclesial diversity among Catholics, and Greeley's (2004) conclusions regarding *how* this is possible. Moreover, I sought passages that would illustrate variation according to Dulles's (2002) Institutional and Mystical Communion models. In this way, I sought to integrate Bibby and Greeley with Dulles to demonstrate a range in *kinds* of belief and ecclesial association among students, rather than *degrees* of their affiliation according to adherence to the documentary tradition of the institutional model. The relevant themes that arose from this first reading, therefore, were illustrative of (a) participants' existential consciousness of the freedom to be Catholic in their own way, (b) awareness of diversity within Catholic practice, (c) awareness of a wide latitude to discuss faith within the school, (d) how the school contributed to their "meaning-making" as Catholics, and (e) their frustrations as Catholics.

I began the second round by assembling the themes from each transcript into a general list. I then looked for similarities between themes on this list,

and so reduced it to a manageable set of codes. I then read the transcript set again, this time assigning passages to codes, and in doing so attempting to select as great a variety as possible within each code. As the data are descriptive illustrations of “what is going on here” (Wolcott, 1994, p. 13), the description is enhanced when diverse illustrations are selected and juxtaposed to “identify key factors and relationships among them” (Wolcott, 1994, p. 10). The various dimensions within each code therefore demonstrate how the data descend from and confirm the broader sociological and ecclesiological “framework [which] guided the data collection” (Saldaña, 2013, p. 46; Wolcott, 1994, p. 33, cf. 34;). The code of “frustrations” in (e) above, therefore, displays its internal variety when analyzed for how the kinds of frustrations descend from several ecclesiological perspectives. The relevance of each selection was thus based on the criterion of its being something new in answer to the research question (Saldaña, 2013, p. 44), and also insofar as it spoke to all or one of (a) Catholic tradition, (b) pedagogical considerations, or (c) pedagogical considerations within a particular Catholic sense. For the third round of reading, I scrutinized and confirmed the code assignments. Finally, I collected all the relevant passages within each code, and evaluated them for their illustrative efficacy in responding to the research question.

### Findings

For this argument, I have chosen to present quotations from the findings on student frustrations because it is at the point of conflict between their own expectations and the expectations or behaviours of others that several participants’ ecclesiological commitments emerged in high relief. These frustrations descended from and illustrated real and substantive ecclesiological concerns with understanding participation in the Church, and so were not of a relatively trivial variety—like not enjoying waking up early for Mass on Sunday morning, for example. “Frustrations” here is a neutrally inclusive term that is independent of one’s ideological position within the Church, and the variance among the findings here almost makes that point self-evident. Some participants were frustrated by the Church’s rules (or their manner of presentation), as Participant 7 showed immediately, below, while others, like Participant 9, expressed his/her wish for stricter observance to the norms for practice. Several participants expressed their displeasure with the stereotypes that others hold about Catholics, while Participant 13 struggled against what

she perceived as an excessively judgmental application of Catholic orthodoxy. Each illustration, in its way, presented an instance in which externally imposed indicators clashed with one's internal spiritual reality and/or personal experiencing of the institution.

Participant 7 illustrated a point whereby the perceived over-emphasis on a rule-based approach to Catholic practice posed a barrier to nurturing good relationships, which, within the context of her describing preparation for the sacrament of reconciliation, was its desired end. In this example, she referred to the relationship a person develops with God during reconciliation. The interpretation of this finding must also be presented with the qualification that, from a Catholic perspective, solid relationships should reflect solid doctrine, and vice-versa. Hence, it must be noted that the desired aim is that rules and relationships complement each other, rather than sit in binary opposition. Nevertheless, this complementarity can, for various reasons, sometimes become or be perceived as distorted or misaligned. For Participant 7, the experience of her school's introduction of reconciliation tended toward the excess of a rules-based presentation. The over-emphasis on regulatory form over affective content resulted in a barrier she perceived between the student and the intended experience of divine encounter:

I find a lot of the time when we are being taught this the people teaching us get very caught up in the step-by-step process of like reconciliation and I think it scares people more than it helps people because you need to pray, you need to go see a priest, you need to tell the priest everything you have done, which can be very intimidating for people, and then you have to be truly sorry – like they list off all the things you have to do in order to gain redemption but I think it sort of misses the message of God's mercy in those . . . the way they present it in all those steps – I think it scares people.

When asked what message of God's mercy she would like to see emphasized, Participant 7 replied in terms of thinking about how the divine is easily accessible if one remembers that God's presence flows throughout the created world and in relationships with others, and is not perceived as hidden behind a series of obstacles. If an approach to highlighting God's accessibility were given more weight for those seeking reconciliation, she maintained, then more frequent and stronger encounters would result:

I would like the fact that we are all made in God's image to be emphasized. Because we are all made for God and God loves all of us and even though we do make mistakes, God will be there to guide us. We don't need to be afraid of reconciliation; we don't need to be afraid to see God. And we don't need to worry about all those steps in between because if we pray and we truly, sincerely love God and want to be with God, we will find our way there. I don't think we need to be so caught up in all the technical details as we are.

Participant 7 cautioned that too heavy an emphasis on doctrine and the rule-following aspect of faith could potentially have a distorting effect if it alone, without true relationship, becomes the basis for one's Catholicism. In other words, she had not gone so far as to discard any externally visible ritual forms, but recommended a different approach to them in favor of re-emphasizing that encountering God is the primary aim in reconciliation. The *Institution* model remained valid for her, but if it was—or was perceived to be—disproportionally emphasized at the expense of other models, like *Mystical Communion*, it eclipsed other important aspects of her spiritual life.

Four participants expressed frustration with the stereotypical views that others have about the Catholic Church and Catholic persons. This frustration tended to occur when the participants received perspectives and opinions from others who over-generalized from their view of the institutional Church into a judgment of its particular members. While participants acknowledged that the institutional Church was by no means perfect, they also recognized the inductive fallacy of taking the (imperfect) part to represent the whole. Participant 9 demonstrated this in relating how some persons, in her experience, attempted to paint a dim view of Catholicism based on a narrow look at its institutional history. As she related:

there have definitely been lots of like popes and things in the past who have been very secular and done things and its – I guess people who pinpoint those popes in particular and say, “oh well the Catholic Church did this and the Catholic Church did that,” and that is definitely very frustrating . . . You can't blame it on the whole religion. I think that is something frustrating.

Participant 9's comment here is important because it reflected the view of someone with a strong commitment to both the Church's external, institu-

tional forms and a rich private relationship with God. In other words, her Catholic experience tended toward a tight overlap between the *Institution* and *Mystical Communion* models. Part of her statement here thus reflected a view that the institutional Church was not deficient in its own right and needed both fair representation and to be presented in balance with other aspects of Catholicism. So her comments here illustrated how a person with a strong institutional identification is wary of some of Catholicism's critics reducing the Church to its institutional expression, because it distorts both the institution qua institution, and overshadows the Church's informal relationships and spiritual aspect.

Participant 15 also acknowledged that some of what Catholicism's critics have taken up has a basis, but she likewise decried the hasty generalizations that she sometimes heard. For instance, she reported that when it was discovered that individual Catholics have their own prejudices, this fact can sometimes improperly develop into a perception that all Catholics hold the same views. "I guess some people who are Catholic can be prejudice against like, just things that they don't like, and then the whole faith kinda gets pinned with being prejudice." When asked if she could refer to a specific example, she mentioned that:

A lot of people believe that we are, they kinda stereotype us to be prejudice against homosexuals. That's one of the big ones. And yeah, I don't really agree with them making everyone in the Catholic faith to be prejudice, 'cause not all of us are.

To continue, when asked if she was aware of some Catholics who had made some poor, unloving, and possibly even hateful statements about homosexual persons, she stated that she had, and that when this happened, it was a source of frustration because "it just kind of confirms the stereotypes, right. Where, you know, I don't agree with it, and I don't think we should fall into being those kind of stereotypes." So where she found that others made unfair generalizations about Catholics, she also believed that Catholics themselves ought to take some responsibility for not tarnishing the whole Church's image. In this way, unfair treatment of the institution through over-generalizing obscures both a generous view of what it enables and the individual spirituality of the persons associated with it.

Participant 16 remarked that he experienced some frustration that others misperceived him (and others) as overly zealous religious devotees simply be-

cause they attended Mass weekly: “People think that when you go to church every Sunday, that you’re maybe like an ultra-religious, like evangelical, like convert everybody you see person. You know, which is obviously not the case with most people that go to Church.” He ascribed this misperception to a general trend in secular culture whereby the media looks upon religious devotion as somewhat odd. When those who have limited religious experience, or whose religious participation is declining, consume these mediated messages, it simply reinforces that mediated bias. For Participant 16, then, living as a person with religious commitment in a society that has little knowledge of organized religion and removes religious dialogue and expression from the public forum creates some frustration. His frustration, therefore, like Participant 15’s, seemed to lay with a distorted institutionalism—in this case projected from without—obscuring an accurate view of the Church and of one’s interior spirituality.

Finally, Participant 8 expressed his annoyance at the implication—which he stated that he had received from some persons within the Church—that all Catholics (must) think alike on every issue, and that there is no room for interpretation as one receives messages from religious authorities. In his view, this kind of approach to faith dulls the individual will and restricts the warrant for believing something to the office of the person who proclaimed it:

Lots of Catholics believe that, say the Catholic Church says something, or if that Jesus says something that every Catholic should believe the exact same thing. I do not believe – I seriously do not believe that there are two Catholics out there who think the exact same. I do not think that at all. I think everybody should have their own opinion to that and if they are going to share their opinion they should back them up with good answers and give the other person a chance to believe it. I don’t think that the pope or priests or anybody has the right to tell people that you must believe in this. Unless people are believing it is right to kill people or something like that . . . common sense stuff.

Participant 8 made this comment from within an intellectual framework that heavily emphasizes one’s religious freedom and existential development as a faithful person. This response also indicated that he, too, was wary of both over-generalizing from the Church’s public doctrine into the minds of individual believers, and the use of institutional office to enforce, rather than persuade, in order to achieve such adherence. In neither case did he negate

the importance of the institution, but simply cautioned against excessively emphasizing it.

A fourth source of frustration was what some participants saw as a decline of authentic participation and discipline among their peers. Participant 9's report here indicated an irritation that arose from her observing how some of her peers participated when Mass was celebrated. In her view, they were simply "going through the motions" of participating, without authentically attempting to achieve any spiritual depth or connection with the community and God. She began by postulating that this inauthenticity arose from being required, rather than choosing, to attend:

Well they have to get up for Mass, and they have to go, and then they sit and they get up and they sit and they stand and they kneel whenever they have to and they take the Eucharist but they don't – and they might say the "Our Father" but they don't say the "Our Father" in the sense as a community or like saying it or trying to like understand that it is more than just words. Or when they stand at certain parts, or when they take the Eucharist, or maybe they might not even listen during the sermon, might just start daydreaming, they physically go, but they don't do it with their soul I guess.

In short, she worried that some people were merely reciting the words and copying the gestures as a minimal *institutional* requirement for participation, rather than meaning them as a way of building relationships with God—which is congruent with the *mystical communion* model—and community.<sup>3</sup> She based her interpretation not merely on inference, but on real communication that she received from her peers, or real observations that she made while at Mass: "When you see people giggling or texting or laughing [during Mass] and you know that they are not paying attention. They don't really want to listen, they are just there cause they have to be." As she placed great value for herself on the spiritual and existential significance of a complete participation in the Mass, she ostensibly experienced some real disappointment when others around her did not share that same sense of authenticity

---

<sup>3</sup> Dulles's (2002) "Community of Disciples" model (pp. 195–217) is a helpful additional interpretive framework here because of its integrative features that "[illuminate] the institutional and sacramental aspects of the Church and [ground] the functions of evangelization and service that are central to the herald and service models" (p. 198).

or aim for a maximal experience. In ecclesiological terms, I infer, therefore, that her disappointment stemmed from her perceptions that their Catholic experience clung mainly to a nominally weak institutional affiliation, and was neglecting any other spiritual engagement with Catholicism. Here one can see further evidence of the strong overlap, alluded to earlier, between Participant 9's institutional commitment and her private spiritual practice.

Finally, Participant 13's testimony challenged the claims she perceived from some Catholics she encountered who saw their way of belief and practice to be best. Religious belief and Catholicism were important for her, but she observed that her lived experience as a faithful person was unlike that of some others in the school, which led her to wonder if she was truly or sufficiently Catholic when compared to that group. She distinguished between those whom she called the "stereotype Catholics," who appear to make a high-intensity or high-definition demonstration of their faith, and those like her, who maintain belief in a relatively low-intensity or low-definition mood.<sup>4</sup> Apparently, it was her self-comparisons against the former group that initiated these concerns:

I feel like the fact that there's . . . a lot of people in the school that are so into it – it makes me feel like, oh maybe I'm not that Catholic, and I doubt my faith sometimes, and I actually had a little, like a pretty big doubt not too long ago, a month or two ago. I just realized that I'm never going to stop believing in God.

In response to the (perceived) pressures of external institutional adherence, Participant 13 here relied on her internal, private belief in God to sustain her as a Catholic. At the same time, she reported finding or at least feeling some solidarity with others whose approach to Catholicism was similar to hers. As she related, "There's a lot people that are like – like me I think. I'm not super, super, I guess what people would say, stereotype Catholic, but I'm – I'm still Catholic, right. I'll stand up for my beliefs." Her specific frustration has to be

---

<sup>4</sup> In using this distinction, I am following Participant 13's language, including her self-perception as "low key" in her approach to the faith. Distinguishing between groups within Catholicism is always difficult, problematic, and prone to inaccuracies, especially if used to make judgments about a person's Catholicity or level of spiritual commitment or maturity. The important finding is that Participant 13 observed some difference and expressed it in this way. Whether or not it is a theoretically stable construct outside her interview is a matter for another work to consider.

inferred somewhat from this report. Ostensibly, she was somewhat frustrated by the fact that this perception led her to doubt her own Catholicity, although this frustration seemed to be mitigated by her own determination to “stand up for my beliefs.” It could be conjectured that she was also frustrated by a lack of vocabulary with which to respond to the challenge she perceived from “stereotype Catholics,” which left her without a strong rationale for responding to the institutional claims they may have made and in a position of simply asserting herself. Unfortunately, there is no data available to demonstrate the strength of this speculation.

### **What Ecclesial Commitments do Catholic Students Bring to School?**

To answer this question in terms of the empirical findings reported above means, of course, letting go of any temptation to wager a response in either prescriptive or hopeful terms. This act does not mean abandoning a theoretical perspective, however, and in fact means moving one’s attention into different theoretical territory. A good way to demonstrate this redirection is to begin by recalling that all the students in this sample demonstrated a sufficient level of seriousness to volunteer to participate and engage thoroughly with the questions I posed to them. There was no apparent correlation between the level of engaged seriousness and their reported Mass attendance or considered importance of Catholicism.

The observation of diversity among students, especially within the scope of what frustrated them as Catholics, suggests that it is not helpful to consider (all) intra-ecclesial diversity in terms of graduated seriousness, from “adherent orthodox” to “cafeteria Catholic,” crudely put. Rather, it seems more helpful to consider qualitatively different kinds of serious Catholic involvement, say by placing those who emphasize institutional structures and consistently orthodox practice and doctrinal adherence on the same level of seriousness as those who emphasize the mystical communion models, even if they do not maintain the same consistency of orthodox doctrinal adherence.

From this observation descends one scholarly implication for research and two professional implications for the school. The implication for research is that it would be of interest to develop a model that describes the various institutional and spiritual dimensions of Catholic life, and possibly also how one’s ideological grounding and outward expressive dimensions influence his or her orientation toward the institution and spirituality. This would provide scholars, practitioners, and laypersons with a means of locating and describ-

ing the approaches that people bring to Catholic educational (and other) institutions in a way that does not default to identifying “incomplete adherence” with “low involvement,” thus distorting the personal spiritual element of the Church.

In professional application, the school will notice, first, that it is receiving students who may perceive themselves and their peers in this way, and so may have to decide—or develop some theoretical framework for thinking about how to decide—what these perceived differences mean in the school. Second, the diversity of views demonstrated from this sample also shows that in theory that the Catholic school is in a position to be a meeting place for this diversity, and that its response will, in some way, influence students on how they think about its meaning, and also how they perceive public space within the Church’s institutions. It implies questions like, “How important is it to acknowledge and talk about these differences?” or “Would talking about these differences merely exacerbate tensions unnecessarily and needlessly disrupt time that might be better spent learning something else?” Theorists and practitioners also might explore more the merits of using Dulles’s (2002) models to show students different kinds of approaches to orthodoxy: including the limitations of any one model to describe the Church.

Because this sample did not include students who are nominally Catholic to the point that they are unconcerned with their faith or distanced from it for some reason, this study cannot be read with the hope of learning some means to re-invigorate those students’ senses of religious enthusiasm and Catholic identification. However, the findings do reveal some information that is of interest to those who might wish to understand more about those “nominal Catholics” in Catholic schools. First, one can observe that the kind of student who remains with the Church has a comprehensive experience of practice, where “comprehensive” means a coordination of institutional identification and spiritual relationship with God and fellow persons in community. Especially for the students like Participants 7, 8, and 13 who disagreed with some of what the Church teaches, practices, or emphasizes, their firm grounding in the spiritual realm partly informs their concern to remain in the Church and persevere with their attempts to harmonize disagreement with belonging. This observation is consistent with Greeley’s (2004) finding that a concern to be close to God trumps ethical disagreement with some Church teachings. However, it also shows how students with consistently orthodox beliefs and practices find themselves attempting to coordinate their outlook with the fact that not all their Catholic peers have the same *kind* of devotion

that they do. Here one can see the various kinds of experiences that some “richly spiritual” Catholics have had, and that because even these are diverse, one cannot reduce diversity in Catholicism to the “practices a lot” versus “practices little” dichotomy because there is diversity in both those categories, too. So these illustrations may, at a later date, be extended to provide a theoretical framework for understanding why and how the nominally Catholic students are continuing within a Catholic school, and what their needs might be.

Finally, the school and/or teacher might discover that there is more than one way of presenting involvement in and attachment to the Church. Where the *Institutional* model of Church has a greater tendency to place external structures and features of belonging ahead of the personal relationship one has with God and community, it fits well with those students whose ecclesial experiences happen to fall into the bare sociological categories that infer Catholicity by measuring parish participation, Mass attendance, and doctrinal adherence. As the data show, the suitability of this model to describe all students falters for its inability to include students who disagree with some Church teachings while maintaining their membership in the Church. It is here that the *Mystical Communion* model offers an advantage for its inclusivity, even if it may not lend itself well to observable measurement. This does not mean that the institutional model need be abandoned, but it does echo Dulles’s (2002) admonition that it, like any other model, must be complemented with other models so as to enable a greater ecclesiological outlook. For articulating the aims of Catholic Education, a Catholic School, a particular religion lesson, or in responding to the concerns of a student or group of students, considering more than one ecclesial model offers a more inclusively catholic means of receiving and attending to all students’ perspectives. Clearly, though, the implication is that the Catholic school would benefit from eschewing a singular image of the Catholic student and thinking instead in terms of the plurality of images of Catholic students, insofar as these students bear diverse ecclesiological commitments within the school and Church.

### References

- Bibby, R. W. (2004). *Restless churches: How Canada’s churches can contribute to the emerging religious renaissance*. Toronto, ON: Novalis.
- \_\_\_\_\_. (2009). *The emerging millennials: How Canada’s newest generation is responding to change and choice*. Lethbridge, AB: Project Canada Books.

- Cook, T. J. (2001). *Architects of Catholic culture*. Washington, DC: National Catholic Education Association.
- Creswell, J. W. (2003). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Dulles, A. R. (1974/2002). *Models of the Church*. New York, NY: Image Books.
- Earl, P. H. (2007). Challenges to faith formation in contemporary Catholic schooling in the USA: Problem and response. In G. R. Grace & J. O'Keefe (Eds.), *International handbook of Catholic education: Challenges for school systems in the 21st century* (pp. 37–60). Dordrecht, The Netherlands: Springer.
- Feinberg, W. (2006). *For goodness sake: Religious schools and education for democratic citizenry*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Fowler, J. W. (1981). *Stages of faith: The psychology of human development*. New York, NY: Harper & Row.
- Greeley, A. M. (2004). *The Catholic revolution: New wine, old wineskins, and the Second Vatican Council*. Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press.
- Lempert, L. B. (2007). Asking questions of the data: Memo writing in the grounded theory tradition. In A. Bryant & K. Charmaz (Eds.), *The Sage handbook of grounded theory*. Los Angeles, CA: Sage.
- McDonough, G. P. (2011). What is assumed about a Catholic student's ecclesial agency, and why it matters to Catholic schooling. *Catholic Education: A Journal of Inquiry and Practice*, 14(3), 272–291.
- Miller, J. M. (2007). Challenges facing Catholic schools: A view from Rome. In G. R. Grace & J. O'Keefe (Eds.), *International handbook of Catholic education: Challenges for school systems in the 21st century* (pp. 449–480). Dordrecht, The Netherlands: Springer.
- Rossiter, G. (2010). Perspective on contemporary spirituality: Implications for religious education in Catholic schools. *International Studies in Catholic Education*, 2(2), 129–147. doi: [10.1080/19422539.2010.504019](https://doi.org/10.1080/19422539.2010.504019)
- \_\_\_\_\_. (2011). Reorienting the religion curriculum in Catholic schools to address the needs of contemporary youth spirituality. *International Studies in Catholic Education*, 3(1), 57–72. doi: [10.1080/19422539.2011.540140](https://doi.org/10.1080/19422539.2011.540140)
- Rymarz, R. (2010). Religious identity of Catholic schools: Some challenges from a Canadian perspective. *Journal of Beliefs and Values*, 31(3), 299–310. doi: [10.1080/13617672.2010.521006](https://doi.org/10.1080/13617672.2010.521006)
- \_\_\_\_\_. (2011). Catechesis and religious education in Canadian Catholic schools. *Religious Education*, 106(5), 537–549.
- \_\_\_\_\_. (2013). Permeation of Catholic identity: Some challenges for Canadian Catholic schools, Part 1. *Journal of Religious Education*, 61(1), 14–21.
- Saldaña, J. (2013). *The coding manual for qualitative researchers*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Wolcott, H. (1994). *Transforming qualitative data: Description, analysis, and interpretation*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

*Graham P. McDonough, Ph.D. is an associate professor in the Faculty of Education at the University of Victoria and an associate fellow in the Centre for Studies in Religion and Society at the University of Victoria.*