

Catholic Identity Today: A Position Paper

Timothy J. Cook, Ph.D.

Creighton University

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Catholic identity signifies our essence, our distinctive character, and our *raison d'être*. It is the soul of our schools. Identity does not happen by itself as it seemed to when women and men religious staffed our schools. It must be attended to and nurtured. As we think about Catholic school identity today, we must be mindful of the 21st century context in which our schools exist and in which our children are growing up. For example, today's Catholic school students are growing up in a society and a Church where interaction between faith traditions is becoming increasingly commonplace. In recent years, over one-third of Catholic newlyweds have married outside the faith (Creighton University, 1999). Many of our Catholic school students come from interfaith marriages. Balancing religious diversity with Catholic identity is one of many challenges and opportunities for the contemporary school. Simply put, today's Catholic school is not your father's Oldsmobile. With this in mind, I offer these reflections about Catholic school identity for you to consider.

Conceptualizing Contemporary Identity

In defining our identity, it is useful to ask ourselves these and other fundamental questions:

1. What makes Catholic schools distinctively Catholic? How are they different from public and other private and religiously-affiliated schools?
2. What is the charism of Catholic schools in a multi-faith society in the 21st century? What gifts do they provide the church and society?
3. When you hear the statement, "I received a Catholic education," what should it signify today? How is the student experience different? What sets our graduates apart?

In earlier decades, people associated Catholic school identity with sister-teachers, religion class, and Catholic students in uniforms. Steinfels (2003) suggests that Catholic school identity today has less to do with who the students and teachers are and more to do with what is taught and how we teach in Catholic schools. Tuohy (2004) agrees that we need to broaden our definition of Catholic education beyond education for Catholics.

Because Catholic schools are schools first, they must be good schools before they can be good *Catholic* schools. Canon law indicates that academic excellence is an essential element of, not separate from, the Catholic character of our schools (Beal, Coriden, & Green, 2000). *Catholic* is an adjective that clarifies our ecclesial relationship and signifies what distinguishes us from public schools, as well as other nonsectarian and religiously affiliated schools.

What makes us Catholic? Even though we share many things in common with other types of schools, it is our distinctive configuration of school aims, outcomes, characteristics, and culture that makes us Catholic. One diocesan vision statement does a wonderful job of defining its contemporary identity broadly, using a configuration of characteristics that includes "diverse student bodies," "person-centered learning communities," "Catholic Social Teachings," "parish life," "productive moral citizens," and "parents as primary educators." It seems to me, however, that each of these characteristics needs to be fully understood and fleshed out in order for the diocese to operationalize them.

What is the charism of Catholic school education today? Our charism (i.e., inspired character and contribution) can be determined, in part, by asking what unique contributions Catholic schools can make to the mosaic of American education.

Because our schools exist in a society and world that tend to be divided, fragmented, secular, and dehumanizing, our schools can make a worthwhile difference by centering our educational project on the following ideals.

- **Christian Humanism** – Our faith teaches the sanctity of each human being. Catholic schools strive to help students become fully human – mind, heart, imagination, and soul - in an environment where students feel safe to discover their unique identity and gifts and where all human life and differences are valued. Each Catholic school is called to be a “school for the human person” (CCE, 1997, #9). The diocesan vision statement speaks of “person-centered learning communities,” which relates to this ideal.
- **Relationships** – Christianity is all about relationships whether we’re talking about the Trinity or the Great Commandment (Mark 12:28-31) or the viewpoint that all knowledge finds its origin and unity in God. A gift that Catholic schools can provide our students, families, church, and society is a “culture of relationships” that helps students nurture their relationship with God, self, others, the local and world community, & creation and one that helps students understand the relationship between concepts and how faith intersects culture, learning, and life.
- **Global Solidarity** – Our students are growing up in an increasingly interdependent and interactive world. Three years prior to the events of 9/11, the U.S. bishops stated: “At a time of dramatic global changes and challenges, Catholics in the United States face special responsibilities and opportunities. We are members of a universal church that transcends national boundaries and calls us to live in solidarity and justice with the peoples of the world. As Catholics and Americans we are uniquely called to global solidarity” (USCCB, 1998). Because we belong to a universal church that operates a worldwide system of schools, American Catholic schools should be leading the country in global and international education. It flows naturally from who we are as church. Schools have not capitalized on this inherent part of their identity. If we want to make a unique and invaluable contribution to American society and distinguish ourselves from public and other private schools, we should accentuate the global and international aspect of our Catholic identity. We should promote global awareness and solidarity, multicultural perspectives, and international relationships. Our schools should be *Gospel and Global*.

Our Foundation and Guiding Force

Catholic identity serves as the foundation and guiding force for the Catholic educational project. Everything we do and aspire to be should flow from the wellspring of our identity. It should permeate the school’s culture, the school’s way of life, because school culture is what brings identity to life (Cook, 2001). Our identity should guide policy decisions and provide direction for our educational program. As examples, our belief in Christian humanism encourages us to provide personalized education like the innovative Mary Ward Catholic Secondary School in Toronto. It compels us to institute anti-bullying programs, cultivate the arts, and eliminate dehumanizing discipline techniques. Our belief in relationships propels us to experiment with interdisciplinary curriculum and instruction and emphasize relational skills and cooperative learning. Our belief in global citizenship inspires us to participate in World Youth Day, stress fluency in foreign languages, begin international service trips and linkages with Catholic schools abroad, and seek admission to the International Baccalaureate Organization (IB).

The Lens of Student Experience and Graduate Outcomes

It is important to look at our school's Catholic identity through the eyes of our students. I once asked a Catholic school 4th grader in Australia, "How is your school different from the public school down the street?" He responded, "There's less bullying here." This exchange reminded me that for students, their lived experience in our schools is the true measure of their school's Catholic identity. It's where our written mission becomes the living mission. It is where the rubber hits the road. What do we want our students to experience in a *Catholic* school? Is it caring relationships? Good liturgy? Looking at our identity through the lens of student life serves as an excellent litmus test and forces us to translate our lofty ideals into human experience.

Oftentimes we think of Catholic identity in terms of school objectives instead of student outcomes, inputs rather than outputs. In *Alice in Wonderland*, when Alice asked the rabbit, "Where are we going?" He responded, "It depends on where we want to end up." We need to think of our identity in terms of who we want our graduates to be. How are our graduates different? Many schools and dioceses have generated a list of graduate outcomes and/or created a graduate profile. For instance, Creighton Prep, a Jesuit school in Omaha, crafted a document known in shorthand as the "Grad at Grad." Catholic schools in Ontario, Canada utilize the *Ontario Catholic School Graduate Expectations* as their guide. Once we identify desired outcomes, we can determine what we need to do to achieve them. This approach connects every activity to a desired outcome and vice versa. For example, one diocese lists "spiritual leaders" as a desired descriptor of its graduates. Good questions for educational leaders in that diocese to ask themselves are: "Is there a common understanding of the term's meaning?" "What do / can schools do to produce graduates who are spiritual leaders?"

Formation for the Apostolate

Catholic schools will fulfill their evangelizing mission only to the degree that all school personnel (e.g., administrators, board members, teachers, support staff, coaches) understand it and actively participate. Therefore we must be more deliberate about 1) recruiting, 2) forming, and 3) evaluating school personnel in light of our religious mission and identity. We must implement systematic recruitment for the apostolate that should begin with our current students. We must intensify our efforts and devote more resources to provide apostolic formation to today's personnel who come from more diverse backgrounds than in the past. Our vowed religious forebears benefited from built-in, lifelong religious formation. Today, ironically, Disney provides more specialized formation for their cast members than we provide for Catholic school personnel. "Formation is indispensable; without it, the school will wander further and further away from its objectives" (CCE, 1982, #79). Apostolic formation that amounts to a single, one-size-fits-all annual retreat is an insufficient and outdated approach. Recent formation initiatives worth investigating include the University Consortium for Catholic Education (UCCE), which consists of universities that recruit and prepare teachers for Catholic schools. In addition, various networks of religious order schools (e.g., Lasallian, Jesuit, Xaverian, Sacred Heart) offer extensive formation for school personnel in relation to the network's focused identity and mission.

Leadership Succession

Effective leaders are essential for Catholic schools to reach their potential and fulfill their mission in an ever changing world. Research about organizational success pinpoints good leadership as a decisive element. All of us have seen this phenomenon played out in the Catholic school setting. Generally, we must build leadership capacity in and for Catholic schools. Specifically, we must be intentional about identifying potential leaders and ensuring that leaders have the specific preparation they need to advance the mission of Catholic schools. Many public school districts have created principal academies to prepare future leaders for their district. The Association of Catholic Leadership Programs (ACLP) is a consortium of universities that provides leadership preparation for Catholic schools. Currently, Creighton University's Education Department is working with the Omaha Catholic Schools Office on a Leadership Development Framework that 1) identifies the specific attributes and competencies that are needed for effective Catholic school leadership in the Archdiocese and 2) generates a plan for developing aspiring and current leaders. Although these examples focus on the chief executive, we should interpret leadership broadly to include school board members, school pastors, assistant administrators, teacher leaders, and even student leaders. Furthermore, because leadership demands are increasing, we should think in terms of shared leadership and other ways that we support leaders.

Religion Teacher Qualifications

A recently published national study indicates that the reason most frequently given by parents for enrolling children in Catholic elementary schools is "quality religious education" (CARA, 2006). Quality instruction requires qualified teachers. Catholic high school religion teachers are less qualified than other public and private school teachers in terms of academic preparation, pedagogical training, and teaching experience. The figures for high school religion teachers who would be considered by *No Child Left Behind* to be "highly qualified" are embarrassingly low and the figures for religion teachers who are teaching "out-of-field" are unacceptably high. The situation in elementary schools is even more acute. Steps must be taken to raise the professional qualifications of religion teachers to positively impact student growth and learning and ultimately strengthen the religious mission of Catholic schools (Cook, 2002, 2003; Cook & Hudson, 2006). "Everything possible must be done to ensure that Catholic schools have adequately trained religion teachers; it is a vital necessity and a legitimate expectation" (Congregation for Catholic Education, 1988, #97).

Accountability and Assessment

Are we who we say we are? Do we do what we claim to do? Do we make a difference in the faith life of students? Are our graduates any different from others? Are we worth the continued investment of resources? These are very legitimate questions that we must address in this era of educational accountability. Archbishop J. Michael Miller, former Secretary for the Congregation for Catholic Education, believes that Catholic schools need to provide quality assurance for the religious dimension of their institutional mission and evidence that each school is fulfilling its apostolic purpose. "This collaborative and systematic exercise of assessing a school's catholicity would serve to identify, clarify, and strengthen its effectiveness in its service of Christ and the Church" (Miller, 2006, p.63). It is no longer sufficient to measure a school's religious character by the feeling we get when we are there. Our task is to create and/or implement structures, protocols, and instruments that help us assess the degree to which we are living our Catholic identity and fulfilling our

religious purpose. We must determine what data and evidence we need to collect, analyze, and communicate to our constituencies in this regard. In the final analysis, we must systematically measure and monitor our mission effectiveness.

Resource Allocation

To realize our potential as *Catholic* schools, we will be required to allocate additional resources of time, energy, and money. As we consider the bottom line in an age of competing interests for limited resources, we would do well to remember these words from Luke. "For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also" (Luke 12: 34).

Concluding Reflection

It has been my experience that a robust Catholic identity and contemporary vision contribute greatly to a school's vitality. Lack of these attributes, on the other hand, tends to leave a school impoverished.

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