

*Chapter 14*

**'Why are Catholic Schools Afraid to be Catholic Schools?'**  
**Challenges to Leaders of Catholic Secondary Schools in Ireland**

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### **Introduction: The Current Context for Catholic Secondary Schools in Ireland**

The population in the Republic of Ireland (hereafter, Ireland) has become increasingly diverse over the past two decades. New demographics in terms of culture, language and belief systems are enriching her once relatively homogeneous society and a school system which continues to reflect the country's historic relationship with the Roman Catholic Church.

During penal times in Ireland, generally, schools for Catholics were forbidden until the *Relief Acts* of the late eighteenth century when Nano Nagle, Catherine McAuley and Edmund Rice, among others, began to establish schools for Catholic children. Following Catholic emancipation in 1829, Catholics sought to assert their new-found freedom and to establish schools which reflected their empowered sense of identity. This has resulted in the Roman Catholic Church being responsible for the patronage of 90% of primary schools and approximately 50% of post-primary (second-level) schools in the Republic of Ireland today.

While the majority of the country's population still identify as Roman Catholic, there has been a rise in the number of people in Ireland declaring that they have no religion and an increase in those loosely attached to their Christian identity. The 2016 census highlights the decline in numbers of people identifying as Roman Catholic, falling from 84.2% in 2011 to 78.3% in 2016 (CSO 2017). While these figures are still high, religious practice rates, particularly among young people, have declined considerably. Mass attendance dropped from 91% in 1971 to 35% in 2012 according to some estimates (Ganiel, 2016).

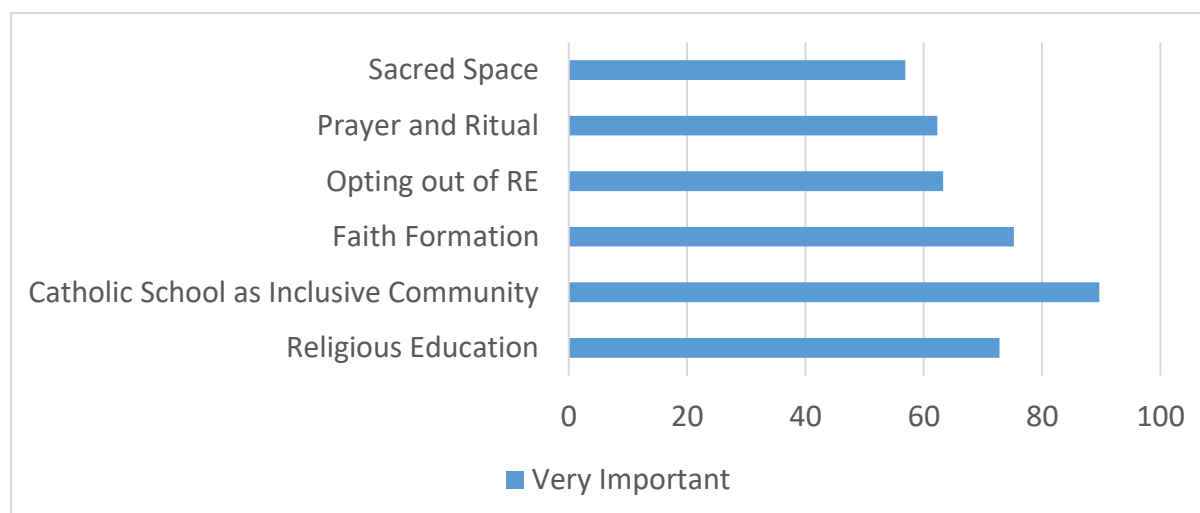
Parents within minority faith groups and parents who wish for multi-denominational or secular schooling for their children in Ireland are now seeking to establish primary and second-level schools which reflect their own identity and ethos, for which the Irish constitution allows. However, educational provision has not yet caught up with developments in Irish society. This has resulted in many Catholic schools welcoming a growing religiously and secularly diverse student body within their school communities, both enriching and posing challenges for the schools.

### Research Informing National Guidelines

To help with formulating these guidelines, research was conducted in 2018 with principals and members of Trustee Bodies for Catholic schools. A short online questionnaire was sent in February 2018 to all principals of Catholic voluntary secondary schools in Ireland (approximately 340 schools) and to members of the Trustee Bodies who own the schools. 118 responses were returned and provided rich data to inform the writing of the guidelines.

Participants were asked to identify the matters they considered it would be very important to be addressed in the guidelines.

Table 1: Participants selection of most important areas to be addressed in guidelines



As can be seen in Fig.1 the most important theme they wished to be addressed in the guidelines was an understanding of the Catholic school as an inclusive community (89.6%). The next most important area highlighted by participants was the fostering of faith formation for Catholic students (75.22%). This was closely followed by the teaching of religious education (72.81%). This points to the change in focus within religious education in many Irish Catholic voluntary secondary schools over the last twenty years from being catechetical in nature to being focused through the State-sponsored syllabuses on learning *about* and *from* Christianity, and from different beliefs.

The challenge of parents using the ‘right to withdraw’ their children from religious education was highlighted by 63.25% of participants. Guidance on sacred spaces (56.9%) and leading prayer and rituals in a diverse Catholic school (62.28%) was also considered very important.

### **Challenges to Leaders in Catholic Schools**

The participants were also asked to comment on the challenges and opportunities they face regarding religious diversity in their school context. Three main themes emerged from the data:

- The reality of nominal Catholicism and the new ‘nones’
- The pressure on Religious Education (RE) as a subject
- Faith formation of Catholic students

### **Nominal Catholicism and the ‘New Nones’**

A significant number of respondents highlighted the challenge that there is ‘...an increasing number [of students] wanting to withdraw from RE class or not wanting to engage with the ethos of the school or participate in rituals and retreats’ (Principal 38). One participant stated:

It would appear that students of no faith and students of different faiths are now the majority in our schools. Many parents see little value in their sons studying RE. Indeed, in the staff room there are many non-Catholics. This is the context. The overwhelming majority of teachers support the school ethos but some from a humanist point of view. Prayer and ritual can be problematic especially a full school Mass which we celebrate once a year.  
(Principal 60)

Principal 32 also stated: ‘We have a great RE programme and great teachers but students in Leaving Certificate, with permission from their Catholic parents, sign their daughters out at RE time’. Another participant highlighted handling nominal Catholicism as more challenging than accommodating different beliefs including those of no religious belief: ‘For us it is the students who are nominally Catholic whose parents don’t want them to attend RE class rather than the students of other or no religion who have approached us’ (Principal 6).

In 2010 the Joint Managerial Body for secondary schools [JMB] along with the Association of Management of Catholic Secondary Schools [AMCSS] commissioned the first set of national guidelines for inclusion of students of different faiths in Catholic secondary schools (Mullally,

2010). The challenge for school principals, then, was mainly concerning how they could actively welcome and include different faith groups in their Catholic schools. Eight years later this reality seems to have changed as highlighted by Principal 20: 'The challenge of dealing with students with no faith is greater than dealing with a student who has a faith'. A lack of clarity as to expectations in relation to the growing need to address inclusion can, clearly, create situations in the daily running of a school that should be dealt with initially when students and their parents are applying to and being initiated into the workings of the school and its ethos.

One of the fastest growing groups in the 2016 Irish Census were those identifying as having 'no religion'. 10% of the Irish population indicated they had no religion, up from 6% in the 2011 census (CSO, 2017). This is following international trends. In Britain, for example, half the population reported themselves as having no religion in 2016 (Woodhead, 2016). The 2016 census in Australia also revealed that 30% of the population state they have no religion. This category is more numerous than those identifying as Catholics in every generational age-group under the age of 70 in Australia (Bouma and Halafoff, 2017). Bullivant's *European Report on Young Adults and Religion* (2018) paints a vivid picture in terms of the proportion of young adults (16- to 29-year-olds) with no religious affiliation across Europe, with 91% in the Czech Republic and 70% in France not identifying with any religion.

Research in the US focused on people under the age of 30 who have disaffiliated from the Catholic Church and now identify as having no religion. 25% of the population, generally, in the US, which accounts for 80 million people, do not affiliate to any religious belief and 40% of people under the age of 30 identify as having no religion (McCarthy and Vitek, 2018). The category for no religion includes people identifying as humanist, free-thinkers, atheists, sceptics or agnostics. They are diverse in their make-up but characterised by their common rejection of organised religion. This movement is wistfully being described as the 'new nones'. Woodhead (2016) argues, however, that 'nones' are not necessarily atheists. They resist religious labels but some believe in God. Many are not typically hostile to faith schools. This fluid belief among young people is suggesting a more blended, porous approach to religious belief and identity (Harmon, 2018), and it is a new landscape for leaders of Catholic schools in Ireland.

An increasingly plural society is in effect inviting Irish Catholic schools to engage with religious difference and indifference and to consider their own identity in a new way. At the

heart of the Catholic tradition lies a deep respect for humanity. This is supportive of people following their conscience, and of the human right to practice freely and with dignity their chosen belief (Kieran and Mullally, 2020). The Christian vision continues to be relevant for Catholic schools directing them in its goals and overall functioning. The schools continue to be animated by the Gospel spirit of freedom and love and are inclusive spaces where every student is welcomed and belongs. The particular ethos of a Catholic school is characterised by the belief that the living presence of Jesus ‘is the foundation of the whole enterprise in a Catholic School’ (Congregation for Catholic Education, 1977, par. 34), and permeates every aspect of the school day. The Catholic school embraces the Risen Jesus, his presence, his teaching, his command to love God and love neighbour. Pope Francis, in his recent Exhortation to Young People, *Christus Vivit* (2019), describes Catholic schools as seeking to nurture the personal development of every student, fostering their sense of values and encouraging robust dialogue between culture and the Gospel message.

Catholic schools are also called to promote a spirit of mutual understanding between different beliefs and form good citizens within a democratic society. The Church calls Catholic schools to be at the forefront of creating spaces for dialogue between beliefs, including those with no religious interpretation of life, and to model in practice what an inclusive pedagogy is all about (Congregation for Catholic Education, 2013).

### **The Pressure on Religious Education as a Subject**

The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) has recently developed a new specification for Religious Education at Junior Cycle published in 2019 (NCCA, 2019). While this work was in development, the Minister for Education, in February 2018, issued a Circular Letter to all state managed post-primary schools on religious instruction and worship in Community and Education and Training Board [ETB] state-managed post-primary schools (DES Circular Letter, 0013/2018). The majority of these schools are multi-denominational. In Ireland, religious instruction is taken to mean that kind of religious education that takes place ‘in accordance with the doctrines, practices and traditions’ of a particular religion such as the Catholic religion, and formation of the pupils in that faith (Catholic Primary School Management Association, 2012, p. 23). Circular Letter 0013/2018 addressed Article 44.2.4 of the *Irish Constitution*, and Section 30 of the *Education Act, 1998*, which refer to the rights of parents to withdraw or opt their child out of religious instruction in schools under state-

management, or for students to do so once they reach the age of 18. This 2018 circular stated that those who do not want to receive religious instruction should be timetabled for alternative tuition rather than supervised study during religious instruction. Parents, the circular stated, must be made aware that where religious instruction is provided for, alternative tuition is made available. Parents were to be invited, it suggested, to choose for their sons and daughters between religious instruction and the alternative subject(s) offered by the school. The letter caused confusion by moving between religious instruction and Religious Education without differentiating between the two. It went on to also state that parents should inform the school whether or not they wish their child to participate in or be present during religious worship.

The premise for this circular refers to an historical arrangement made between the Irish State and the Catholic Church in the 1930's to include religious instruction among the subjects provided for in a, then, new model of state-managed post-primary schools that were multi-denominational in nature. At the time the majority of students attending these schools were either Roman Catholic or belonging to the Church of Ireland.

Historically, in Ireland, the term 'religious instruction' has been used in the Constitution and legal documents and circulars to refer to an educating *into* a particular religious tradition. However, while the term religious instruction is still championed in some quarters the subject has been referred to as Religious Education over many decades and has changed dramatically in the last twenty years. The advent of the state curricula for Religious Education (Department of Education and Skills 2000, 2003), reviewed in Chapter 13, above, and the renewed version at Junior Cycle (NCCA, 2019), explained by Byrne in Chapter 3 of this volume, has seen a move away from the direct formation of students *into* a particular faith (catechesis) and more towards a broader Religious Education that reflects the growing diversity of beliefs present in Ireland today. The minister's February 2018 circular was deemed misleading for schools that were already teaching an inclusive state syllabus that was written in such a way that students of all beliefs could participate from their own perspective (Byrne, 2018a). Clarification was sought and another circular (Circular Letter 0062/2018) was issued in October 2018. This clarified that schools teaching the state Religious Education syllabi intended for examination, since they are open to all and are not religious instruction in one faith, would not necessitate a particular opt-out facility. Religious instruction and worship, in future, if they were to take place in such schools would be opt-in, and formally so.

Importantly, the timing of the survey, taking place within the context of the publication of Circular Letter 13/2018 which had been issued specifically to state-managed schools, meant that principals of Catholic schools were responding to the questionnaire at the height of this controversy, and before the clarifying circular was issued some months later. Many expressed concern about the effect the minister's circular would have on Catholic schools and the pressure they would receive from parents who may wish to withdraw their son or daughter from religious education. Principal 24 stated:

The greatest concern for our Catholic schools is the downgrading of religious education in our schools...students who wish to withdraw from RE class may do so but they should not be rewarded or encouraged by offers of extra tuition in other subjects.

Principal 9 raised a similar concern:

There is also a growing pressure from parents and students especially at senior cycle to be able to withdraw. Given that most of what is taught at senior cycle is very important for the spiritual development of all, irrespective of faith, I think there is a need to educate our parents re the content and importance of RE at senior cycle.

Principal 41 stated: 'a clear distinction between religious education and religious instruction has to be drawn. Religious Education as an academic subject is very different to faith formation or proselytism.' Catholic schools teaching the RE State Curricula are not offering religious instruction as such. Religious Education, as set-out now at second-level by the State in Ireland, takes a broader more dialogical approach. It seeks to open students to education *about* different beliefs in society as well as providing an opportunity to learn *from* these different religions and beliefs in order to deepen their own belief and commitment. As stated earlier, the curricula are written to encompass all beliefs, and students in Catholic schools are invited into dialogue with the Christian vision as well as with each another's beliefs. There is no reason why students of different faiths or students with no religious belief in a Catholic school should not participate fully in this curriculum. Principal 52 echoed this, stating that RE in their school seeks to:

...nurture the faith of those within the school's faith; listen to those from other faith practices share their stories and beliefs. Create a climate of respectful dialogue for the whole school community where the notion of each person's faith is a gift in their lives.



It is important that students in a Catholic school learn *about* each other. The Council of Europe emphasises the importance of teaching about religions and non-religious beliefs and of fostering respect for religious differences (Keast 2007; Jackson, 2014). This is because it could be argued that this helps to develop a cohesive, harmonious society. The Council of Europe identifies Religious Education as one curricular area where students can learn *about* and *from* those whose beliefs are different to theirs while simultaneously developing their own belief perspective (Byrne, 2018b). It also promotes the social development of students and enhances their moral and spiritual development. One of the Trust Board Members in the research stated:

We are very strongly of the view that all students who have opted to go to our schools should participate in religious education classes – and in all ethos related activities. The intellectual, spiritual and moral development of the students all relate to the holistic development of the young person. There is no question of ‘indoctrination’ but rather a belief that students coming from a particular faith system or none, can learn about and from the Catholic faith tradition. The respectful engagement will help deepen their own beliefs (Trust Member 82)

Different approaches are taken to RE in Catholic secondary schools in Ireland, but it is essential that, whatever RE programme is offered by the school, in preparation for State examination or otherwise, the school needs to consider how it invites students of different beliefs into dialogue with the programme, and with the Catholic ethos of the school (Boeve, 2019).

### **Religious Education: A Pedagogy of Dialogue**

Religious Education that seeks to facilitate conversations between different voices and perspectives calls for a dialogical pedagogy. In the Congregation for Catholic Education’s most recent publication ‘*Educating to Intercultural Dialogue in Catholic Schools*’ (2013), schools are called to place intercultural dialogue as an overarching aim of Catholic schooling. An understanding of the growing multi-religious reality of society needs to be fostered where students learn about different beliefs and dialogue with those beliefs and with non-believers. *Share the Good News* (Irish Episcopal Conference, 2010) also provides a rationale and vision for Religious Education in Catholic secondary schools. It states:

Religious Education offered in a Catholic school, particularly at post-primary level, as well as supporting Catholic students in their faith, may find itself facilitating discussion not only among Catholic students, but also between them and students of a variety of faiths, as well as those who may not be committed to a religious interpretation of life. Religious Education holds open the possibility of helping all people to grapple, within their own reality, with crucial questions central to life and to living, playing its part in personal faith formation if the young person is open and interested and supported in following this through in their lives (par. 39).

### **Faith Formation for Catholic Students**

The third theme to emerge from the data was the concern leaders in Catholic schools have for the faith formation of Catholic students. Principal 31 stated: ‘Students of other religions are much stronger in their faith than Catholic students, so the emphasis must be on educating Catholic students in instruction in that faith’. Another principal suggested:

Faith as a source of resilience, faith as a map of how we treat each other, faith as a crutch for leaning on when needs must, should not be ignored. Having a faith or not is becoming more important than what faith one belongs to (Principal 46).

Catholic schools are called to meet their students where they are in their faith or belief journey and to provide space, not only for healthy dialogue between students, but also for reflection and opportunities for the faith development of students who are aligned, however tenuously, with the Catholic faith. This space is always invitational, and while RE may open the Catholic student to their own faith development it is often outside the classroom that this conversation will take place. Students from other faith backgrounds are also encouraged to grow in knowledge of their own tradition and religious practice in a Catholic school (Mullally, 2019).

Opportunities for prayer and ritual are crucial components of what Catholic schools offer to Catholic students and to others if they wish to participate (Byrne, 2017). A great many of the Catholic students in Catholic schools have less and less experience of ritual and prayer outside that which they are offered in their school. Prayer and sacramental experience are a central feature of a Catholic school. Principal 76 stated:

Accommodation of other faiths or none in an inclusive setting is critical but so is celebration of our own Catholic faith tradition in our schools. Living with that tension between accommodation and celebration is key.

Some respondents highlighted the challenge of engaging students with rituals and the liturgical year, for example: ‘How do we cater for students who refuse to attend RE classes, Masses, the Sacrament of reconciliation, carol services etc.?’ (Principal 33), and another principal who asked: ‘Why are Catholic schools afraid to be Catholic schools...?’ (Principal 26).

Catholic schools recognise the religious freedom of their students and their families and do not seek to coerce or indoctrinate students of different beliefs into the Catholic faith. Rather, 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 civilisations.’ (Congregation for Catholic Education, 1977, par 85). At the same time, the Catholic school holds the right and duty to offer faith formation based on the values of the gospel to Catholic students (Congregation for Catholic Education, 1988, par. 6).

Whilst uncertainty was expressed by some principals about how best to honour this challenge, this moment, it seems, offers an opportunity to involve all partners of the school community in a review of what it means to be a Catholic school in a contemporary context. Boeve (2019) argues that Catholic education can reimagine its identity in the context of difference and plurality. Catholic schools do not have to choose between being either Catholic or being open to difference. It is precisely through the process of dialogue between people of differing beliefs that one’s own identity is deepened. Crucially, dialogue ‘...opens up the room to introduce once again the Christian voice within the conversation’ (Boeve, 2019, p. 37).

### **Conclusion**

The research which took place, and the process of writing the JMB national guidelines for inclusion of students of differing beliefs, reflect the challenges faced by school leaders in Catholic schools in Ireland today. Catholic schools need not fear the credibility of their identity or their voice in a landscape of unbelief and religious diversity. The Catholic voice has as valid a position in the public square as any other voice. Inter-religious and inter-belief dialogue is at

the heart of the Catholic school enterprise as one of the means to imitate and live the vision and mission of Jesus (Congregation for Catholic Education, 2013).

Catholic schools in Ireland, as part of the Catholic community and providing for the education of Catholic students, have recently embraced more clearly the variety of students attending these schools. Leaders in Catholic schools, as the majority tradition in the Republic of Ireland, therefore, seek to be hospitable to people of different beliefs and dedicated to their inclusion in the school community. The school, of course, holds the right and duty to contribute to the faith formation of Catholic students based on the values of the gospel. At the same time the Catholic school invites everyone in the school community into dialogue with the vision and mission of the school. This process is always invitational and respectful. It encourages all the partners in the Catholic school to reflect, to listen, to discuss and to be open to deepening their own spiritual lives.

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