

# Cultivating Identities: The Catholic School as Diverse Ecclesial Space

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[See table of contents](#)

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Article abstract

I argue that the crisis of identity Catholic schools are experiencing in the 21st century also presents an opportunity for a rediscovery and expanded conversation, both within and beyond the confines of the institutional Church, of what it means to exist separately from the mainstream without restricting internal diversity. I begin by presenting salient historical, theological, and sociological features Catholicism and Catholic Education during and since the Second Vatican Council (1962-5) to establish the context and substance of its modern identity crisis. I then provide a review of current controversies within Catholic schools to demonstrate how they are symptomatic of this crisis, but also potential catalysts for exploring new options. The next section argues both for the merits of recognizing multiple Catholic identities, and imagining the Catholic school as an institution that assembles and coordinates them. I propose that the fact of multiple Catholic identities should be interpreted as differences in kind, rather than by their degree of difference from a narrowly constructed idea of Catholicism. I also propose that the intersection of these identities at school should be encouraged as a way of nurturing both students' own identities and their ability to encounter religious difference within their own tradition and community. The conclusion demonstrates how in practice this model presents a promising means of possibly deepening individual and institutional religious identity(ies) in today's world, and for responding to controversial issues that arise within Catholic schools.

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# *Cultivating Identities: The Catholic School as Diverse Ecclesial Space<sup>1</sup>*

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*Abstract: I argue that the crisis of identity Catholic schools are experiencing in the 21st century presents an opportunity for a rediscovery and expanded conversation, both within and beyond the confines of the institutional Church, of what it means to exist separately from the mainstream without restricting internal diversity. I begin by presenting salient historical, theological, and sociological features of Catholicism and Catholic education during and since the Second Vatican Council (1962–65) to establish the context and substance of its modern identity crisis. I then provide a review of current controversies within Catholic schools to demonstrate how they are symptomatic of this crisis, but are also potential catalysts for exploring new options. The next section argues for both recognizing multiple Catholic identities and imagining the Catholic school as an institution that assembles and coordinates them. I propose that the fact of multiple Catholic identities should be interpreted as differences in kind, rather than by their degree of difference from a narrowly constructed idea of Catholicism. I also propose that the intersection of these identities at school should be encouraged as a way of nurturing both students' own identities and their ability to encounter religious difference within their own tradition and community. The conclusion demonstrates how in practice this model presents a promising means of possibly deepening individual and institutional religious identity(ies) in today's world, and of responding to controversial issues that arise within Catholic schools.*

## **Introduction**

Think of this paper as pondering the significance of my academic work on Catholic education, with the intent of pausing, looking around, and asking, "What next?" Much of my work in this field has been a critique of how Catholic schools respond to their encounters with situations that they perceive to threaten their identity. For example, in Ontario's Catholic schools, Marc Hall was going to be denied access to his prom in 2002 if he took his boyfriend as a date (Grace & Wells, 2005), and in 2011 students like Leanne Iskander were not going to be allowed to organize Gay-Straight Alliances (GSAs) because the prevailing view in their schools, backed by the Ontario Catholic Bishops and Catholic School Trustees Association, was that such phenomena are contrary to Catholic teaching (Callaghan, 2014). There were several dimensions to the arguments over these issues, but the political disagreements all boiled down to the bishops and trustees asserting the denominational rights of Catholic schools as distinct from, and contextually precedent over, the secular individual rights of students in these schools. Same-sex dance partners and formal organizations of non-heterosexual

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<sup>1</sup> A version of this paper was presented as the Early Career Invited Lecture at the Annual Meeting of the Canadian Philosophy of Education Society, June 2015, in Ottawa, ON.

students were perceived as being contrary to these schools' Catholic identity. One result was that those who disagreed with the decisions made were certainly pushed further to the ideological margins of their schools. Another result was that the bishops' and trustees' stance presented a distorted picture of the Church's complexity to students, Catholics at large, and persons outside the Church because it depended upon a narrow conception of Catholic identity. In the end it was only the Ontario Superior Court that granted Hall his right to attend the prom with his boyfriend (Grace & Wells, 2005, p. 257; Hall [Litigation Guardian of] v Powers, 2002), and the Ontario Legislature that required GSAs in all publicly-funded Catholic schools (An act to amend the Education Act, 2012, §12, nos. 2 & 3). I agree with both outcomes, but am also dissatisfied with the fact that the same solutions were not obtained (or obtainable) at local administrative levels within the schools and school districts themselves. At the same time, I am not surprised; there was apparently little if any theoretical framework within the field of Catholic education to have enabled such a result at that point. Hence my dissatisfaction is with a weakness in the field.

This is not to say that there has been absolutely no work in the field, but that the kind of work that has been done does not suitably recognize or address the complexity of these problems. The debate on controversial issues within Catholic education has been dominated by arguments that rely too narrowly on a dichotomy between uniformly Catholic and "secular" (whether "liberal" or "postmodern") perspectives. One unfortunate result of this limitation is that both Catholicism's internal diversity and its potential to inform these debates gets overlooked. Moreover, the entrenchment of these opposing views may in practice contribute to adversarial and isolationist stances that are unhelpful in exploring the ways in which church and state (may) intersect or find congruence. The debate over the Gay-Straight Alliance controversy in Ontario provides a good recent example. From liberal and postmodern perspectives, respectively, Lauren Bialystok (2014) and Tonya Callaghan (2014) provide interesting and valid critiques of the Ontario Catholic bishops' and school trustees' stance that disapproves of and would prohibit GSAs in Catholic schools. While these criticisms are informative in theory, in practice their potential to gain attention from and influence Catholic leaders is unfortunately very limited since their reliance on "secular" thinkers like Kant and Foucault overlooks the Catholic contexts that govern these schools and may even be perceived as hostile to their aims. The kinds of Catholic theological work that are congruent with Bialystok's and Callaghan's and would complement them from that perspective, like Richard Shields' (2012) excellent criticism of the Ontario Catholic Trustees' "Respecting Difference" document, are regrettably mainly shared only among a relatively smaller audience of theologians and hence at some academic distance from the audience that reads on educational topics. My point here is that the structure of higher education institutions often impedes the kind of enriched and contextually-sensitive dialogue that would enhance a disinterested, secular philosophical commentary on Catholic education.

The example of Shields' work notwithstanding, the literature on Catholic education has a parallel weakness that is equally concerning. One of its major problems is a tendency to portray the aims of Catholic education or schooling in too-narrow terms of assent to propositions of doctrine (truth or faith), which unfortunately precludes its ability to acknowledge internal diversity regarding the interpretation and reception of doctrine. This tendency also elevates doctrine and reception of institutionally-defined normativity to a place that overshadows other elements of Catholic experience,

including hope, charity, informal community, and one's personal relationship with the divine.<sup>2</sup> Gabriel Moran argues that an excessive focus on propositional faith throughout Catholicism's history has created conditions that exaggerate its importance (especially relative to the suppression of *hope* as a foundational concept of *de jure* equal status) and so contribute to a distorted picture of Catholicism as a multi-dimensional phenomenon (Moran, 1968, pp. 98–107). Thus, when philosophers of education pick up the epistemic question of Catholicism's doctrinal truth and consider its distinction from the approaches to truth that govern secular schools, they can risk sliding into an excessively institutional understanding of the Church that leaves a reductive impression about (faith's importance in) the aims of Catholic education and the reasons people subscribe to it. Some students may attend to learn more about the prevailing magisterial truth, exactly as it is present in church documents, while others may be attending to receive the service of schooling even though they are non-Catholic or non-Christian.<sup>3</sup>

The overemphasis on faith and truth also highlights a mismatch between some of the aims articulated by magisterial sources and the lived experiences of many Catholics. Kevin Williams (2010a, p. 1) introduces one such illustration that centers its aims upon “the salvation of ... souls” (Peter, 1:3–9) and a Thomistic-inspired personalist conception of “the blueprint for perfect human living” (Beck, 1971, p. 117). This perspective is based upon “a conviction about possessing the [unambiguous] truth about the ultimate purpose of life and endeavouring to pass this on to young people” (Williams, 2010a, p. 2); a truth that presents itself as a “substantial, thick, or comprehensive conception of the purpose of human life” that sits in sharp contrast to the “procedural, thin, limited, or restricted theories that underpin public schooling in liberal democracies” (2010a, p. 3; 2010b, p. 24). Yet while it is fair to characterize this presentation of Catholic education (and Catholicism, for that matter) as the one approach (among many others) that enjoys much privileged approval at the institutional level, at the same time it overlooks the fact of theological and sociological diversity within the Church as a community of persons.

In another article, however, Williams (2010b) presents a wider scope of Catholic education and points to some of its instances of internal diversity, especially where students' lived experiences of Catholicism does not align with the doctrinal pronouncements of the pope and bishops. The sociologist Michele Dillon (1999) provides a snapshot that gives empirical grounding to this non-alignment, reporting in substantial detail on the phenomenon among “pro-change” adult Catholics, whose experience within, and contribution to, the Church and Catholic identity means organizing to promote the dignity of non-heterosexual persons, the ordination of women, and access to free choice for abortion. While Dillon's work does not consider the experiences of Catholic students in schools, Ann Casson's (2013) book *Fragmented Catholicity and Social Cohesion* makes a very important contribution by extending past the magisterium's preference to “[emphasize] vocation, idealism, and consensus, and [avoid] or [repress] conflicts which should be confronted” (p. 15; cf. Grace, 2002). Instead Casson “aims to discover the Catholic faith as it is lived by its participants (in this case students) rather than as it is defined by the hierarchy” (p. 31). Likewise, John Sullivan (2014) points out that “Catholic school leaders ... need to be vigilant that they do not encourage pretence, hypocrisy, or impose an official position that floats above and outside of [the] personal realities and perceptions” of those they serve (p.

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<sup>2</sup> In the next section I present Avery Dulles' (2002) distinction between *Institutional* and other models of the Church.

<sup>3</sup> See McDonough (2012, p. 21–24) for a more detailed analysis of the complexity of Catholic education and schooling.

565). As well, Graham Rossiter has made several influential contributions that propose attenuating any emphasis on articulating Catholic school aims in terms of a magisterially-defined truth or set of aims, and instead beginning with the spiritual (2011) and identity (2001) needs of the students in Australia's Catholic schools.

So, as I have proceeded to work with the purpose of contributing to the voices that wish to ameliorate this problem, I have at several times implied that the Catholic school can be a unique public space that itself contributes to the intellectual and social improvement of the Church. However, I have not yet gone into much detail about the features of that space. Throughout my writing, then, I challenge any narrow idea of what "the Church" is and what it means to be "Catholic." This review of my work therefore makes a threefold demonstration of how its themes converge upon theorizing the Catholic school as a unique ecclesial space. First, I demonstrate that the unhelpful limited construction of Catholic identity can be overcome by recognizing multiple Catholic identities that each have a basis in Catholic theology and sociologically-demonstrated practice. Second, I use this demonstration to argue that the school should be regarded as an intersecting point of these multiple identities. Finally, I argue that the school's response to these Catholic identities should be to support and nurture them academically and socially. In quick summary, I will be arguing that the school's Catholic identity should be a meta-identity that nurtures and coordinates many particular identities.

## **Historical, Ecclesiological, and Sociological Context**

### **How Catholic Schools Are Relevant in Canada**

The above concern about identity is important in its own right, but to illustrate the scale of its significance I present here a brief statistical overview of publicly-funded Catholic schooling in Canada (see Table 1). While Catholic schooling is a relatively minor phenomenon in British Columbia (21,331 students attended Catholic schools in 2012–13, or 3.47 percent of the 614,541 students in all BC public and independent schools) and Manitoba (5,115, or 2.55 percent of 200,807 total students in 2014), which are the two provinces where up to fifty percent public funding is provided for independent schools, it is a much larger phenomenon in the three Canadian provinces where one hundred percent public funding is established for Roman Catholic schools through Section 93 the *Constitution Act*. For 2012–13 in Ontario there were 643,089 students in Catholic schools, or 31.66 percent of the 2,031,195 enrolled in all that province's publicly-funded schools. In January 2013, Alberta reported 144,315 Catholic school students, or 23.45 percent of its 615,296 total students, and Saskatchewan's 38,366 Catholic school students in 2013–14 constituted 22.43% of its 170,582 total students. *Catholic schooling in Ontario alone is a larger system than all schools in either BC or Alberta.* The total size of the publicly-funded Catholic school system in Canada thus exceeds that of the entire public system of one of its mid-sized provinces: the systems listed here together count for 138.7 percent of British Columbia's and 138.5 percent of Alberta's entire public systems. By weight of sheer numbers, the policies in Catholic schools are significant matters of public policy.

Table 1: Enrolment in Publicly-Funded Catholic Schools Compared with Total Enrolments in BC, MB, AB, ON, & SK<sup>4</sup>

Province with Publicly-Funded Catholic Schools	Total Provincial Enrolment	Catholic School Enrolment	Catholic School Enrolment as Percentage of Total
<i>Independent Schools</i>			
British Columbia	614,541	21,331	3.47
Manitoba	200,807	5,115	2.55
<i>Fully Funded Schools</i>			
Alberta	615,296	144,315	23.45
Ontario	2,031,195	643,089	31.66
Saskatchewan	170,582	38,366	22.43
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>3,631,701</b>	<b>852,216</b>	<b>23.47*</b>

\* This percentage figure is calculated from total enrolments, and not a sum of percentages.

## Vatican II: The Church in the Modern World

So, having established the scale of Canadian Catholic schools' relevance, the next step is to demonstrate how the Catholic Church has room to admit plurality within its own structures. The normative place to begin is with a short discussion of the Second Vatican Council, which was held from 1962 to 1965. The purpose of the Council was to update the Church and bring it into the modern world. While its meaning is disputed among Catholics (Faggioli, 2012) and there are some problematic elements in its documents (Hogan, 2004; Hunt, 2014), these topics are best reserved for another discussion. For the purpose of establishing context in this argument, there are five features of the Council documents that are significant. First, the Council's updated constitution defined the Church first as People of God and Body of Christ, *before* being hierarchical (Vatican Council II, 1964/1996d, Chapters 2 and 3). This is significant because it provides the basis from which to say that Catholic identity belongs to all Catholics and cannot be reduced to the clergy, bishops, pope, and other institutionalized features. Second, the *Decree on the Apostolate of Lay People* (Vatican Council II, 1965/1996a) upgraded ordinary Catholics from the negative state of being "not clergy" (Lakeland, 2004, p. 10) to a positive definition that recognized them as competent actors within the Church and secular world. The significance here is to open the way for greater participation from all members of the Church, rather than leaving them in a deferential state that depends on the clergy for identity. Third, the *Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions* (Vatican Council II, 1965/1996e) and *Decree on Ecumenism* (Vatican Council II, 1964/1996f) promote dialogue and emphasize all that is holy within non-Christian and non-Catholic religious traditions—which was especially important in the aftermath of the *Shoah* and World War II. The implication for identity may initially appear oblique here, but it has a bearing on a Catholic person's or institution's self-presentation when encountering non-

<sup>4</sup> See Federation of Independent Schools BC, 2014a & 2014b; Manitoba Education and Advanced Learning, 2015; Alberta Education, 2013; Ontario Ministry of Education, 2013; Saskatchewan Ministry of Education, 2013.

Catholics and non-Christians (McDonough, 2015b). Popes John Paul II and Benedict XVI regarded dialogue as important, but taught that when participating in it, Catholics should regard Catholicism as the apex of all religious belief and all other Christian denominations and non-Christian religions as only approximations of Catholicism (Pope John Paul II, 1990, article 36; Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, 2005, article 22).<sup>5</sup> Both of these popes fervently opposed what they perceived to be religious relativism, but what I see to be reasonable pluralism.<sup>6</sup> Pope Francis, for his part, seems to have abandoned both the triumphalism and the conflation of relativism and pluralism in those teachings. Fourth, the *Declaration on Religious Liberty* (Vatican Council II, 1965/1996b) emphasizes non-coercion in belief, and fifth, the *Decree on Christian Education* (Vatican Council II, 1965/1996c) speculates in its closing paragraph that Catholic education could lead to “internal renewal of the Church” (article 12). All together, the documents of Vatican II established the basis for reconsidering what it means to be Catholic and “a Church” beyond the prevailing nineteenth century anti-modernism and the heavy reference to institutional features that had dominated since the Council of Trent (1545–63).

### **Ecclesiological Re-Emphasis: Models of the Church**

The Catholic term for the Church’s political self-understanding is *ecclesiology*. Prior to Vatican II, the dominant ecclesial model was that of the institution, emphasizing its “visible structures” and “especially the rights and powers of its officers” (Dulles, 2002, p. 27). This model connects quite easily to defining Catholic identity with features like attendance at Mass or willingness to state one’s assent to the pronouncements of one’s bishop. At its best, the institutional model provides a strong sense of corporate identity (p. 35), while its major weaknesses are promoting deference to the clergy, doctrinal legalism, and a tendency to encourage thinking that the Church represents the kingdom of God on earth (p. 31). Other weaknesses include its reliance on externally observable behaviours and inability to describe inward features like one’s prayerful relationship with God.

In the aftermath of Vatican II, theologian Avery (later Cardinal) Dulles took up the task of articulating the several other models of the Church that were gaining prominence alongside that of the institution, and that are irreducible to it and each other. The constraints of space here do not permit a detailed examination of each of the Servant, Sacrament, Herald, and Community of Disciples models, so for the purposes of a concise demonstration I will focus on the Mystical Communion model, which presents one of the most apparently striking contrasts with the institutional emphasis. This model sees the Church primarily as an informal social group based on personal relationships with both God and community. The “People of God” and “Body of Christ” language in the Vatican II constitution of the Church (Vatican Council II, 1965/1996d, article 33; Dulles, 2002, p. 42) reflects this paradigm by describing the Church as an entity that exists prior to, and in broader scope than, just its clergy. Doctrine also remains important but does not take first place as one’s basis for self-understanding as Catholic, nor does a doctrine’s documentary basis preclude personal and divine relationships in constituting the Church. So already this model establishes a new, non-institutional basis for identity. Of course, it is also possible to have a richly prayerful life *and* strictly adhere to papal teaching, which is

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<sup>5</sup> Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger was prefect of the Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith when its 2000 document *Dominus Iesus* was issued. He later ascended to the papacy as Benedict XVI. There is no evidence to suggest that his views changed while he was pope.

<sup>6</sup> See Ruitenberg (2007) on this philosophical distinction.

simply a way of stating that Catholic spirituality does not preclude doctrine or other institutional features (or vice-versa). As no single model can adequately encapsulate all the Church's dimensions (p. 2), Dulles also points out that the Mystical Communion model's weaknesses are in obscuring the boundary between the spiritual and visible Church, tending toward excessive divinization of the Church, obscuring the sense of mission for its members, and leaving unanswered the question of whether the Church is based on informal friendships or a communion of grace (p. 52–53). In summary, and from the perspective of a theologian who aligned his work within Catholic orthodoxy, Dulles's models show that, while Catholic identity is not necessarily a problematic concept, any attempt to reduce it to one model only certainly is, and it is perhaps preferable even to speak of *identities* in the plural.

### Sociological Diversity

Where Dulles shows a diversity of ways of understanding how the Church is constituted, he does not show anything empirically concrete about the range of views among Catholic persons. In other words, one could speculate that all Catholics think alike, no matter what ecclesiological model (or combination of models) best suits them. And while I do not have data that absolutely connects these models to the diversity of thought among Catholics, what I present here shows that diversity of views among Catholics is concurrent with diversity of ecclesiological models in theory. One of the main places where Catholics diverge in thought is on sexual ethics (see Table 2). In Canada, one can see that reception of Magisterial teaching on sexual ethics is low, and that even in places where reception is higher, like in the Philippines, there is still a significant minority that would permit abortion in some cases—recalling that in Catholic law, “[f]ormal cooperation in an abortion constitutes a grave offense ... [and that] ‘A person who procures a completed abortion incurs excommunication *latae sententiae*, [which means] by the very commission of the offense’” (Catholic Church, 1983, article 1398; as cited in Catholic Church, 1997, article 2272). In other words, to have, perform, or counsel a person to have an abortion results in an automatic self-excommunication.

Table 2: Sexual Attitudes of Catholics<sup>7</sup>

Country	Premarital Sex	Homosexual Sex	Abortion: Even for the Poor
Canada	9	36	38
USA	20	55	54
Brazil	23	83	88
Philippines	63	84	71

*Note.* Numbers indicate the percentage of Catholics responding that these acts are “always wrong.”

Greeley (2004) also reports significant numbers of Catholics in Germany, Spain, Ireland, the United States, Italy, Poland, and the Philippines who favour the idea that the next pope “should allow priests

<sup>7</sup> See International Social Survey Program, 1998 (as cited in Greeley, 2004, p. 92).



to marry,”<sup>8</sup> “allow women to become priests,” and generally “be more open to change” (Greeley, 2004, 96).<sup>9</sup> In summary, a diversity of thought exists within Catholicism, and strict adherence to, or belief in, all teachings seems not to be a feature of all Catholics. Ostensibly there are identity implications that follow from the coordination of membership and these disagreements.

### **How Should a Catholic School Respond to Internal Diversity?**

So the fact of diversity is one thing, but the question of what it means and how a Catholic school ought to respond to it is another. One possible response is to suggest that the sociological diversity shown above is indicative of a decline in Catholic rigor, possibly because of a decline in Catholic identity in students’ families, and so the school should amplify its programming to guide students toward a tighter reception of Church teaching. In other words, the parents and students are the problem, and it is up to the school to correct them according to normative standards. This approach, however, falls flat, and I speculate that such an assessment would be shared by many of the teaching professionals in Catholic schools today as well. For one thing, these schools also serve many non-Catholics and non-Christians, for whom such an aim is outside their concern from the start. And since Church teaching on religious freedom prohibits coercion (Vatican Council II, 1965/1996b, article 2), any move past the expository voice on Church teaching, and attempting to cultivate belief or reception where the prevailing attitude is already the opposite, would drift too far toward very problematic moral territory. Moreover, in pragmatic terms, such a move would simply take time that would be better spent in other areas. So this problem of Catholic identity will have to be remedied in another fashion.

Even though this option is unavailable, it does not mean that the subject of resuscitating Catholic identity where it has apparently sagged has been absent from the Catholic education literature. There remain other ways, congruent with Church teaching and more closely aligned with the norms of practice, in which it can be discussed, and scholars of Catholic education have devoted much time and energy to their study. That does not mean that these other ways are unproblematic, however, and the way in which I will demonstrate this is to show that their notions of Catholic identity are both singular and institutional in a way that defines identity from the “Church as given” stance and then move on into how this given Church can be made more attractive to, or possibly even re-shape, those it serves. They do not consider encompassing a plurality of identities or a broader ecclesiological perspective. In bare terms, these other ways conceive of the school as bearing a singular institutional identity that it must project toward the students, rather than considering some of those it serves as also being and constituting “the Church,” and so already possessing an identity of their own. So what I wish to demonstrate here is how the way in which one looks at the question “What is Church?” or “Who is Church?” informs the way in which one looks at Catholic schooling.

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<sup>8</sup> This statement applies to Catholicism’s Latin rite, which is the dominant rite in the countries surveyed, and whose priests are generally celibate. There are some married Latin rite priests who, as married clergy in other Christian denominations like Anglicanism, have converted to Catholicism. There are also married priests in Catholicism’s Eastern rites. In all cases the marriages preceded ordination.

<sup>9</sup> This data applies to the papacy of John Paul II (r.1978–2005). His successors are Benedict XVI (r.2005–2013) and Francis (r.2013–present).

As a brief demonstration of these perspectives, I point first to Timothy Cook's well-read work *Architects of Catholic Culture* (2001). In this book, he describes the school's Catholic identity as "encompass[ing] a religious mission as well as academic excellence centered on the liberal arts" (p. 32), where the religious dimension includes several themes such as "a spirit of liberty and charity based on the Gospel" (p. 33). There is no discussion that breaks down Catholic identity into anything more specific or variable. If anything, Cook's carefully vague use of "identity" in the singular could invite the suggestion that it is inclusive, but it could just as easily be read as a kind of avoidance of intra-ecclesial diversity. Other places in the literature feature bolder language. Patricia Earl's (2007) lament regarding the shift in teaching staff from priests, brothers, and nuns to lay persons has resulted in a "concern that the laity will receive the formation needed to preserve and perfect the identity of the Catholic school" (p. 38). She explicitly places the laity in a position of dependence upon the clergy and religious, and constructs the identity of the school according to the external institutional features of clerical and vowed religious office when she asks, "[w]ith fewer religious on staff to model and mentor the laity, how can the laity be taught and what should they be taught to enable them to continue to build a Catholic system of education?" (p. 40).

Finally, Richard Rymarz, in his article "Religious Identity of Catholic Schools: Some Challenges From a Canadian Perspective" (2010), worries that a "passive acceptance of Catholic identity is likely to become increasingly problematic and the Catholic school of the future will be based on a much more deliberate and accountable sense of what being a Catholic institution means" (p. 307). Rymarz builds his argument on a perception that "[m]any Catholics lack an identity that makes them different or distinct from others in the general culture" (p. 302; see Smith & Snell, 2009), and that "[t]he weakening religious affiliation ... [has] had just as much impact on parents who now send their children to Catholic schools" (p. 304). Nowhere in his article on identity does he engage with a theory of what identity is or could be, and there is no mention of possible legitimate plurality within Catholicism. I do, however, applaud Rymarz for offering a small qualifier by way of quoting Greeley, who observes that "[e]very generalization about values that begins with the word Catholic is likely to be misleading, if not erroneous, precisely because the generalization will mask substantial differences in values that exist among Catholic subpopulations" (Greeley, 1977, p. 252; as cited in Rymarz, 2010, p. 305). I submit that these brief portraits are generally indicative of how theorists of Catholic education discuss Catholic identity: any discussion of *kinds* of identity is thus subordinated to considering it by *degrees* of a singularly normative standard (McDonough, 2015a, p. 4). The implication for practice is immediate: the possibility of multiple identities is overlooked, identity is constructed as a singular norm, the school is often evaluated to be deficient when measured against that norm, and this deficiency is seen to be in need of remedy.

## **My Work**

With the context set, it is now possible to return to the introduction's promise of an exposition of my work. The three major topics in this treatment concern (1) dissent in Catholic education, (2) the role of Catholic schools in educating the laity, and (3) my recent exploration into the school's role as a place where interfaith and ecumenical dialogue can happen. All three topics demonstrate my consistent conclusion that the Catholic school needs to be thought of as a unique public ecclesial space, but

without taking the next step into a fuller discussion of what that space is. That fuller discussion follows this exposition.

**Dissent.** In 2013 I co-edited a book with Nadeem Memon and Avi Mintz entitled *Discipline, Devotion, and Dissent: Jewish, Catholic, and Islamic Schooling in Canada*. In that book, I authored a chapter on dissent in Catholic education, this time focusing on how a diversity of thought exists within Catholic history on the subject of contraception. The short version of the story is that there was a Papal Birth Control Commission in the 1960s that recommended changing the teaching on artificial contraception, but its findings were dismissed by Pope Paul VI in his 1968 encyclical letter *Humanae Vitae* (HV), or “On Human Life,” which upholds the traditional proscription—likely on the grounds that Paul was loathe to reverse the decisions of his papal predecessors. That same year, the Canadian Catholic Bishops published a document popularly known as “The Winnipeg Statement” which assures Catholics who cannot abide by HV’s teachings that they may do so in good conscience and should not consider themselves alienated from the Church. However, today’s statements from the Canadian Bishops on contraception refer to HV, but not the “Winnipeg Statement.” So my chapter in the book points to ways in which Catholic thought can be seen as having a greater diversity in the public record than what Catholic schools typically teach (McDonough, 2013, p. 193–195). Part of the theoretical framework I use in that chapter is based on Walter Feinberg’s description of Catholic schooling in his 2006 book *For Goodness Sake*. The three kinds of Catholic schools he refers to are “Traditional,” “Modern,” and “Postmodern”<sup>10</sup> depending on their orientation toward engagement with, adherence to, or critique of prevailing structures in the Church (Feinberg, 2006, p. 47). Without talking about space specifically, there is nonetheless a presumption in Feinberg’s book, and hence in my chapter, that a suitable institutional environment would have to be available for the kinds of learning in each of these ideological perspectives to take place.

I take another step toward the subject of “ecclesial space” in my 2012 book *Beyond Obedience and Abandonment: Toward a Theory of Dissent in Catholic Education*. In my discussion of possible objections to admitting a pedagogical model based on dissent, I consider a concern that it would corrupt the Catholic identity of the school. My reply is that this view, as imagined,

[uses] “Catholic identity” as a narrowly unproblematized end to justify the means of current practice. In that sense it places one view of Catholicism’s distinctiveness above the moral concerns of the faith’s own members. Strangely, it suppresses the needs of those who participate in Catholic distinctiveness in order to emphasize an image of Catholicism’s unsullied unity and permanence ... A Catholic means of genuinely and adequately addressing these moral concerns is certainly called for, and ... it seems that “Catholic identity” also requires a major reform influenced by the scholarship on dissent. (pp. 255–256)

Here I have shown how dissent is linked, and presents a challenge, to the school’s identity because it goes to the heart of asking what kind of space the school is and what virtues it promotes. Where Catholic identity is typically based on assent to a creed, an emphasis on dissent necessarily augments that discussion. So as a more practical example, my 2014 paper entitled “Challenging Catholic School Resistance to GSAs with a Revised Conception of Scandal and a Critique of Perceived Threat”

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<sup>10</sup> Feinberg (2006) defines the “Postmodern” approach as being “influenced by feminism and liberation theology” (p. 50).

specifically points toward a reconceptualization of “space” when making its case that there is a justification within Catholic thought for GSAs in Catholic schools. There I show how the Ontario bishops rely on a narrow conception of scandal and a prejudicial assessment that any organization of non-heterosexual Catholics is a threat to authority in the Church. The theoretical implication is that to dissent is to say something not only about the issue in question, but also about one’s own identity as a Catholic and the nature of the space in which that dissent is expressed. A practical application emerges in the particular case of Ontario Catholic school GSAs. As these student groups place an ethic of care for persons ahead of the prevailing narrow conception of religious rights,<sup>11</sup> and to the degree that they draw attention to the question of what it means to be non-heterosexual and Catholic, they contribute to a restructuring of the ecclesial public space of the Catholic school and the purposes of Catholic education.

**The laity.** My work on the laity gets even closer to implicating the school as a kind of public ecclesial space. It begins by making the case that Catholic educational theory currently does not do very much to consider the gains the laity made at the Second Vatican Council. The consequence is that religion curricula are premised upon over-emphasizing the magisterial view. This presentation, while important, does not fully describe the range of thought within Catholicism. In my 2011 paper on the “ecclesial agency” that lay Catholic students learn both formally and informally in school, I use the teaching of controversial issues as a test case to demonstrate how the laity is imagined. In the following, then, just insert any issue that is controversial among Catholics, like contraception, GSAs, ordination, and so forth, and the result will be the same:

Students who agree with the Magisterium, critically or not, will remain well served. Those students who do not agree with the prevailing Church teachings on controversial issues will continue to find little or no meaning in raising their objections, unless that is they are prepared for (a) a conversion of thought and/or practice toward the prevailing view; (b) to be drawn into dialogue under the pretense that their opinion matters in the public ecclesial space, when it ostensibly does not; (c) undertaking an exercise in theory or thought that is divorced from real life; or (d) to be frustrated and alienated from the Church. (McDonough, 2011, p. 288–289)

I infer that part of what I mean by students being “well served” includes a knowing or feeling that the school is “my space too” or “our space”—not “their space that I am visiting.” The more the school is a space and place that provides sufficient intellectual and social supports for the way I (or we) think, the more I (or we) can find that this space is available for exploring my (or our) identit(y/ies). So not much later on in the same article I prescribe how Catholic schools can help to re-invigorate the Church (recall Vatican Council II, 1965/1996c, article 12, quoted above):

Of all the Church’s institutions, Catholic schools are the best situated public space—although certainly not the exclusive forum—for the entertainment and nurturing of disagreements that loyal lay Catholics have with the Magisterium. The fact that their capabilities in this area are underappreciated points to the need for further research on how they might understand and teach toward a conception of loyal dissent. (McDonough, 2011, p. 289)

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<sup>11</sup> Theologian Richard Shields (2012, p. 322 & 327) argues that the Ontario Catholic School Trustees Association’s 2012 document “Respecting Difference” does the opposite and places religious rights ahead of care for persons.

**Dialogue.** As my final topic in this section, I wish to point briefly to the argument I have presented that the way in which Pope Francis talks about dialogue with non-Catholics and non-Christians implies that the Catholic school could be imagined as an egalitarian intercultural space—which in this context means “inter-religious” but following the theoretical structure of political interculturalism (McDonough, 2015b). This view sits in contrast to how, if Catholic schools were to have heavily subscribed to and structured their practice upon John Paul II’s and Benedict XVI’s views on inter-religious and ecumenical dialogue, they would have emphasized that other religions and Christian denominations are holy in themselves but still at best only approximations of Catholic Christianity. Francis’ encyclical letter *Evangelii Gaudium* (2013) downplays these views by omitting them, and while still requiring that all persons bring their strongest religious selves into any inter-religious association, prescribes that they do so in a way that maintains that such dialogue “is about agreeing to live together, a social and cultural pact” (article 239). Learning to create such a pact, in a theoretical and practical space where no prior template exists, could constitute a reasonable intercultural end of Catholic education, should one follow Francis’ words seriously here. Inasmuch as the Catholic school is an ecclesial space that can be established to respond to internal diversity, it can do the same for external diversity.

### The Catholic School as Public Ecclesial Space

What would a Catholic school look like if it acknowledged all the above calls for change in theory and practice? A facile answer would be summative: the school would nurture dissenting views, promote a strong conception of the laity in its own right and with a view to a Church that is changing as the number of priests declines, and finally emphasize speaking across religious differences, both within and outside of Catholicism. The weakness of that answer is that it sidesteps the prior question: “What is the theoretical basis for a school that emphasizes plurality within the Catholic tradition?”

It should be apparent that the synthesis of my body of work to date has proposed a “liberalization” of the Catholic school, where “liberalization” means a framework of political-philosophical liberalism *transposed into Catholic ecclesiology*, and not “liberal” in the popular sense of describing ideologically “progressive” Catholics who wish for Church teachings on sexual ethics and ordination to change. So the first pillar of this kind of structure is that it admits much diversity. “Fine,” someone with a commitment to the status quo might retort. “We do that already in that there are students of multiple races and creeds already enrolled with us—we have unity in our diversity.” As is already apparent, though, the kind of intra-ecclesial diversity I promote pertains to looking past gestures that simply point to the presence of observable differences as an end in itself and do not disrupt a narrow institutional ecclesiology. It pertains to opening a new perspective on how to understand the intra-Catholic ethical and epistemic diversity already present within many schools. In other words, I will be concentrating on how the school receives expressions of substantive differences of intra-ecclesial belief insofar as they challenge the status quo in the school and Church. This leads to the second pillar of liberalization, which is trying to maximize the fullest reasonable expression of that diversity. This reflects the purpose of my book on dissent (McDonough, 2012), as its main starting point is to get beyond a situation where the school only politely receives a disagreement before carrying on as though it did not matter (pp. 3–4). So within this tradition that is both ecclesiology liberal and Catholic, it is

my hope to describe a normative framework that both supports this diversity as reasonable plurality, not relativism, and is able to adjudicate among them when conflicts arise within the ecclesial polity.

This is potentially a tricky case to make, as I can imagine someone arguing for the status quo saying that such a mechanism of recognition and adjudication already exists in the institution of the monarchical bishop, and so there would be no need to try to replace it with this liberal framework. To be clear, it has never been my argument to abolish the hierarchy, although I do think its role could be revised in a way that would re-evaluate any emphasis on maintaining a singular orthodoxy and instead focus on emphasizing and cultivating multiple approaches to orthodoxy. It is clear, after all, that bishops do not always agree among themselves, and even the recent ascent of Francis to the papacy has shown substantial differences between his and Benedict's approaches to that office. The implication for education is that in order for lay persons to participate in this complex, dynamic, and pluralistic entity, they need to learn not only *that* and *how* intra-Catholic plurality exists but also how to respond to other Catholics who think differently from them (McDonough, 2012, p. 225). And very importantly all the above is contingent on distinguishing by *kinds* of Catholic identity and not *degrees* of narrowly-defined Catholicism (McDonough, 2015a, p. 4). After all, the question of "Who is Church?," which remains front and center throughout all this thinking, should be a constant reminder that Catholicism is irreducible to its hierarchy, institutional expression, or public piety.

The implication then is to recognize that the Catholic school is a multi-user site where the many users have many purposes. No doubt that all students are present so that they can learn academics, and to this I will add that they should also be there to learn how to encounter religious differences—a requirement that applies equally to all persons regardless of their religious commitment or non-commitment. After this point there is divergence depending on the student's tradition and intentions. For the Catholic students the opportunity should be made to have this encounter learned from within a framework of Catholic thought—not in a narrow or snobbish sense, but in an existential sense of this being one's way of engaging with the world. I emphasize here that *some*, but not all, of the Catholic students may align this experience into learning *how to be Catholic*, which presumably they also attempt with their family and parish Church experience.

From here I will point to the de-centering of what some views of Catholicism and the Catholic school might fall back upon or be encouraged to fall back upon. The school's Catholic identity cannot be narrowly defined as the permeation of a normative institutionalism; moreover, it is inaccurate to say that anything different from this institutionalism is necessarily "thin" Catholicism—popularly referred to as "cafeteria Catholicism"—a phenomenon that is unfortunately sustained to some degree by not presenting multiple models of Church and other options about how to be Catholic (McDonough, 2015a, p. 5). Attempts to "resuscitate" (this kind of) Catholic identity (in this way) may be futile in the sense that Catholic students may not be permeable to institutionalism or even a primarily institutional ecclesiology, and so signal their need to seek a new model or models with which to understand themselves in the Church. Instead the school's Catholic identity might be better defined in "thick" terms as its potentially containing the intellectual response appropriate for an environment that nurtures pluralism within its own tradition. The role of a Catholic school as public ecclesial space, therefore, is to cultivate a Catholic intellectual and ecclesial social identity that is the coordinated intersection of multiple Catholic identities: a meta-identity, if you will.

What features might one see in this kind of diverse ecclesial space? By necessity it would be more "deliberately deliberative" in its approach to moral and ecclesiological concerns within the school

and community. Such an orientation would go some way toward solving the problems felt when people are excluded from decisions that matter to them and their group. In his book, *Common Calling: The Laity and Governance in the Catholic Church*, Stephen Pope (2004) offers three very helpful avenues toward boosting the deliberative nature of Catholic political structures. He calls first upon “dialogue,” in the sense of “a communication of views for the sake of mutual understanding based on shared commitment to truth” (p. 12). In the realm of decision-making, the school’s obligation to this requirement is therefore to be dissatisfied with habits of merely listening to the diversity within the school, and to actually encounter it and incorporate it into what it decides. To do less is to misuse the term “dialogue” as naming an empty gesture that only gives the illusion of participation. And so logically it is true or authentic participation that is the second feature Pope calls for. He maintains that participation is quite an appropriate concept because it, unlike “delegation” and “consultation,” “stresses community more than ecclesial rank and signals a sense of cooperation between individuals of equal dignity, relative to the work that needs to be done” (p. 13). Here Pope is thinking about finding a greater role for the laity than simply employing their technical expertise for balancing the parish books, doing odd jobs around the chapel, and organizing social events. Finally, in recognition of the fact that official authority in the Church remains hierarchical, he suggests thinking of authority “in terms of ‘participatory hierarchy’ rather than only ‘command hierarchy’” which evokes the concepts of “trustworthiness and reason-giving” (p. 15), and here I am thinking of those who hold office acting in conformity with good reasons when they are given, and that ordinary lay persons can freely circulate these reasons among themselves and the clergy. The authority to teach in the Church is also its authority to govern, and so expanding the deliberative franchise beyond its current conception also speaks to an obligation for teaching and learning.

As Pope intends to generalize these features to the whole Church, it falls upon me to extend their meaning into Catholic schools. These terms—dialogue, participation, and authority—are meant to apply to all equally, and so not be the property of, or for the benefit of, an elite few. As students need to learn what it means to authoritatively participate in dialogue, so too do the teachers, and the administrators and clergy who support them. Catholic students will need to learn about the features of their Church that enable them to see a reasonable plurality within the tradition, and they will also need to learn how to encounter others within their tradition who do not agree with them. To learn about the variety of opinion on the morality of contraception or GSAs is the academic subject that is required for all students, and to learn how to be in association with those who think differently is the affective and political dimension that follows from it. Likewise, for those partners like teachers, administrators, clergy, and religious who might resist sharing power, or not be accustomed to exercising power collaboratively, and possibly fear “a populist diminishment or watering-down of Christianity” (Pope, 2004, p. 13; cf. Bane, 2004), there will also be a need to learn new models of leadership based on the authoritativeness of participation in genuine dialogue, grounded in the reality of a complex ecclesial organization with an equally complex theology. Students and teachers will need to teach each other about what it means *to be the Church* within its variety of possible expressions, rather than *to be in the Church* as if conforming to a narrow set of membership criteria or attaching oneself as the dependent of a superior office-holder. The alternative to this openness could be what inevitably results when an official or authority makes a decision that alienates a significant segment of the community: unrest stirs beneath the external compliance, and the “real learning” gets pushed to the margins.

*Catholic distinctiveness* therefore is transformed from reliance on a narrow institutional model of sociologically observable features (which has persisted through and since Vatican II) to a place where it is found in the kinds of *Catholic reasons* that a person or institution presents. Such distinctiveness need not rely on sharp contrasts with secular society. Sometimes the distinctively Catholic reasons might be congruent in their end result with what exists in the non-Catholic or secular world—like my argument to support GSAs. So the “public ecclesial space” of the school needs both to emphasize this Catholic intellectual and social-ecclesial dimension, which can be had without requiring or necessitating belief, and to be seen as something that is just as complex as the whole Church is in its theological and sociological reality.

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