

*The Challenge of Mission for our Schools in our Religious Education and Faith Formation Programs*

(2023 JACSA conference)

It is my intention to prosecute a case this morning! It will lack the nuance, exceptions, caveats and complexities that richly populate this space. I intend to be provocative! I hope too, that my words have some resonance with what we have heard and discussed over the past two days.

Let me begin though, with two particular experiences that have exercised an ongoing influence on my approach to faith formation programmes in schools.

My first seven years as a priest were spent ministering in university colleges in Melbourne and Brisbane. This meant that I received immediate and frank feedback on my sermons from students I was living with. More significantly, the experience of being a priest working with uni students was that arguments from authority carried little or no weight. This has shaped the way I see our mission in schools in terms of persuasion and conversation, and the value I see in having a voluntary component to our programmes where possible.

The second experience is that of the Kairos retreat. Last week I did my 87<sup>th</sup> Kairos retreat. 37 of our senior students undertook the voluntary four-day retreat, in holidays, guided by seven Year 12s doing the retreat for a second time, along with one young old boy, and three staff. We do four of these retreats a year, and now have waiting lists for each retreat. A key part of the experience is peer ministry, in which the student leaders give most of the talks and lead the small group discussions. These retreats, in my experience, offer a unique lens into where young people are in their faith journeys. Increasingly so, they reveal the paradox of greater openness to, and great ignorance of, faith. Importantly, they have shown me the possibilities around linking wellbeing and spirituality, a theme that will run through this talk.

**So where to begin. Undoubtedly, and increasingly so, for most of our students, school is church. We have been saying that for many years. But what do we mean by this? What are the implications?**

Undoubtedly, most of our students are fairly disconnected from parishes and Sunday Mass. Insofar as they go to Mass, it is at school. It is true too, that a school can be a place where weddings, baptisms and funerals occur – virtually every weekend one of these occurs at Xavier. But ‘school as church’ has to mean more than an alternative venue for Mass and the sacraments, and more than a fallback for those who have lost connection with the local church. And let me acknowledge here that parishes do not have the same resources of a school, that the pressures on the local priest can be enormous, and that the long-term societal changes are much bigger than any one parish can navigate, but let’s be honest also, that we all have heard horror stories, and that most parishes are not engaging teenagers and young people, and many have given up trying!

Furthermore, our companion schools generally, do not have the same resource of priests as members of staff, and it may well be that Jesuit schools will struggle in the future to have priests on staff. Yet the fact remains that our schools are the experience of church for most of our students. And we might add here that the ideal of family as the domestic church is an

increasingly fragile thing. Thus, the question of mission is what does school as church look like, and what does it imply for us moving forward?

Context:

Understanding **the context** is a key aspect of an Ignatian approach to education. This is true of the religious context also. We know our culture is largely secular, and Christianity is moving into minority status in Australia. We know that religious practice among our families is at low levels, perhaps accelerated by the covid experience, and that we can assume little in terms of religious knowledge in our students. We know that, in some of our contexts, demographics and enrolment decisions have impacted us.

We know there are significant social changes also impacting us – the changing nature of family, the loss of the weekend, the decline in a sense of community, the lack of trust in authority, exacerbated in the church by the sexual abuse crisis, the decline in vocations, the influence of social media, are just some of the factors shaping our context.

Our student body, too, is changing. and it can be inferred from this that our parent body, and perhaps increasingly our staff, are in a highly diverse space:

The Australian Generation Z research in 2018 **identified six types of religious identities among students.**

**The religiously committed students**, with their families, are engaged with their faith and attend worship regularly. This is a relatively small group in our schools, or they are tending this way. They may even feel that school like ours, in trying to speak to all students, ignores or undervalues them. How do we provide a home for them and nurture their faith?

Then there are the **nominal or cultural Catholics** who follow the religious identity of their parents or community. Many identify with a religion culturally and believe in God, but faith outside of school does not play an important in their daily lives. They were/are a majority in our schools. But apart from more recent migrant communities. the process of cultural assimilation is likely to diminish this group in our schools.

Then there are those students who may be said to be **seekers who are actively seeking spiritual truth** but within a rather eclectic worldview.

Then there is a growing number of students who are interested in the spiritual and who will take up opportunities in this space; however, religion and church seem largely irrelevant to their spiritual journey, with the possible exception of church at school. Referred sometimes as **'nones'** these religiously unaffiliated are the fastest growing group in societies like Australia and the United States. This group is perhaps the more interesting groups in our schools in terms of religious identity and setting the tone among students. In a recent article by Antony Funnell for the ABC he notes:

*And in a consumerist world where personal choice is prioritised, Professor Woodhead argues more and more people are opting to craft their own form of religious belief. Young people are very concerned about their identities. They want to find a spiritual, moral and communal life that is personally meaningful for them, and*

*they want to have much more authority in their quest and in their spiritual development,"*

There is both opportunity and challenge here.

Then there are those **who profess indifference** to church and spirituality, indeed to any questions about meaning. And finally, there are those **caught up in worldly concerns**, who really have no space for the spiritual or religious, but they are not necessarily against it – it is simply not on their radar. If these two groups – the indifferent and the worldly – dominate and shape the school, then our religious identity and culture is likely to be marginal, and we will follow the path of many independent schools who have largely ceded their religious heritage. It becomes at best about catering for pockets of students in an indifferent world, even if it is in name a religious-based school.

All six religious identities are present in our schools, though the proportion may vary from school to school, and the proportions may be evolving.

**How then can our RE programmes and faith formation programmes address the realities of our student boys (and staff and parents!)? and how can this be an experience of Church?**

In looking at the religious life of a school, it seems to me that we have three key areas to focus on:

1. **The first challenge is to provide significant experiences in this space.** Students today will respond to experiences, and it is the key point of entry. The experiences will vary from school to school, but the experiential is the key. It might be experiences of service and immersions. Good experiences of prayer and liturgy are important. Retreats can be an invaluable avenue for experience. One of the values of World Youth Day is around experiences.

An element of choice, where possible, is I think important in maximising the value of experiences. And amidst the many pressures on schools, from industrial agreements, to costs, to staffing and enrolments, we are at a tipping point if we don't give priority to these experiences.

For example I believe the Kairos retreat is the most successful tool we have for reaching large numbers of students spiritually, But, it may be let drift and not assigned a priority in our attention, and for our companion schools it may simply be put in the too hard basket.

Our schools have to walk their talk if they are to be authentic and be convincing to students, and the nature of the experiences we offer is telling about our identity.

2. The second, an opportunity, **is to draw links between spirituality and wellbeing.** I believe this a point of difference that Ignatian spirituality can bring to school life. Good psychology and good spirituality should walk together. Dr Xavier Symons, a Postdoctoral Research Fellow at the Human Flourishing Program at Harvard University, recently described some of the findings from the Harvard Human Flourishing Program which considered six domains of wellbeing: happiness and life

satisfaction; mental and physical health; meaning and purpose; character and virtue; close social relationships; and financial stability. He reflected that “*It was staggering to learn that Generation Z (age 18-25) scored worse than every other generation on all these metrics of wellbeing*”.

What has particular relevance for us was this finding from the study: ‘*There is one social factor that is remarkably effective in decreasing suicidality, depression, anxiety and substance abuse among young people*’. *What is it? ‘Active participation in a religious community (religious community here means a Church or other community). People who are actively involved in a religious community experience a fivefold decrease in suicide risk. They also experience modest improvements in all-cause mortality; depression; substance abuse; anxiety; and life satisfaction*’.

Other surveys and studies have corroborated the broad thrust of the Harvard findings. For example, Vanessa Wadih cited yesterday *Assessing Spirituality: The Relationship Between Spirituality and Mental Health* by David Brown et al.

What are the implications for us?

This is an area, it seems to me, of hope and promise. Ignatian spirituality has something meaningful to say in this space, and I think students can get it and value it. The tradition of giving priority to *cura personalis* is a good starting point. Inculcating a practice of gratitude seems to be an important thing in today’s world, and it marries well with Ignatius’ quite extraordinary statement that ingratitude is “the cause, beginning, and origin of all evils and sins.” Moreover, the ideal of generosity in service, in the use of one’s gifts, also brings together a wellbeing approach with our spirituality.

Reflection is a key feature both of Ignatian spirituality and Ignatian pedagogy, and this can be a very positive practice to instill in our students. The examen offers a value and flexible tool here. Creating a culture where students can speak to their deepest desires and vulnerability, tell their story and really listened to by peers and school alike, is so important today, and our spiritual tradition has much to offer in assisting this.

Finally, the strong sense of community in our schools, underpinned by the mission, can provide that key experience of belonging that is a real protective factor for young people today. With this comes the challenge to find ways to build inclusion, particularly with our LGBTI students, and more broadly respectful relationships.

3. **The third area is that the intellectual needs to be a characteristic of our schools’ approach to faith.** Our challenge, both in religious education, and more broadly in the religious life of the school, is that we present an intelligent faith, one that is robust enough to stand up to questioning, that acknowledges the contribution of the church to education and learning, that can accommodate to the present time and context, that resists fundamentalism, and that cultivates the proper primacy of conscience. It feeds into the ‘open-mindedness’ that many of our students referenced yesterday.

Yunuen Trujillo, a writer in US Catholic, recently offered some insights in relation to the fast-growing presence of religious ‘nones’ – *“In my experience”, she writes, “most religiously unaffiliated folks are simply critical thinkers who have been told there is no space for questioning in the church, so they choose to leave. To most nones, affiliating with a religion means being a blind follower, so they choose not to affiliate. However, nones are often spiritual people in search of a more authentic way of life. Many nones still appreciate some aspects of Catholicism as well.*

She goes on to observe: *“By disregarding the nones, we are missing out on a golden opportunity to develop and teach abilities that are essential for the development of a mature faith: the abilities to question, to discern, and to follow our conscience. For the nones, pre-packaged answers are no longer enough. Our way of doing catechesis and our way of doing church must evolve. For the nones, relationship comes first. Loving relationship and community is the only way forward.”*

There is a **more specific area** to be addressed in proposing the intellectual as a characteristic of our schools’ approach to faith formation, and this is particularly true among the young, and it is changing space, and influences the growth in the number of students who might identify as nones. A 2015 American PEW study asked ex-Catholics aged 15-25 to rate 24 possible reasons for leaving the faith. The reason they ranked 4th highest was: ***“Church conflicts with my scientific beliefs.”*** This ranked one higher than not believing in God! And the median age for them reaching this view was 13. I will return to this shortly, but I wonder whether we take this reality seriously enough and earlier enough?

The top three reasons for leaving the faith were:

1. Stopped believing in what the Catholic church teaches. Here surely the relevance of our schools being characterised by an intelligent approach to faith is apparent.
2. Do not like the Catholic Church’s rules and judgmental approach. A school culture that listens and emphasises accompaniment and inclusion has relevance here.
3. Disagree with the Church’s stance on a political issue important to me (eg., immigration, same-sex marriage, death penalty, abortion, climate change). Again, the importance of an intelligent approach to faith in a secular, diverse culture.

Given the three areas of focus – providing key experiences, drawing links between spirituality and wellbeing, and witnessing to an intelligent approach to faith - **how might our RE and faith formation programmes meet these challenges?**

It seems to me that there are a number of aspects to the religious life of the school that we need to address in a more integrated and intentional way:

- a) Our Service programmes are a success story, and if our students own the tag of becoming ‘Men and women for and with others’, then we have achieved something of substance. A disposition towards generosity is a significant characteristic for our schools to aspire to in our students. Immersion programmes can play an important part both in terms of service and an awareness of our global context, and with care can have an important faith component. We need to exercise care so as to not to allow OHS concerns to gut them. The Cardoner project’s Year 13 service year has enormous

value and potential, and is something that all our schools should perhaps give serious thought to.

The underpinning challenge in linking service experiences and an education that promotes a faith that does justice is actually to make the faith motivation real and relevant. Drawing links to Catholic social teaching, as well as articulating the role of the community in building up the kingdom of God, are important. Pedro Arrupe's comment that "*The celebration of Eucharist is incomplete so long as there is hunger in our world*" is not a bad starting point.

- b) The liturgical and prayer life of the school needs to provide both experiences and be educational. There is a basic catechetical imperative. In the younger years a strategy around the prayers to be taught and fostering devotional life needs to be in place - ways of praying, icons, psalms, music, devotions, meditation. We have a significant resource in the Ignatian examen (which has the added benefit of linking the spiritual and wellbeing). Where possible, providing frequent and good experiences of the Eucharist is important. Our contexts are quite varied as to what is possible. But asking our music programmes to give a priority in this space can be invaluable.
- c) inculcating in the school culture key themes of Ignatian spirituality: 'Finding God in all things', 'looking to the good first', 'love is shown more in deeds than words', 'the magis', generosity, 'men for others', 'a faith that does justice' can shape our culture. The insight of the learned Rector of St Aloysius that what we recognize in school assemblies can tell us a lot about a school is worthy of reflection. The role and nature of retreats are important, and it can often contain the best memories of faith for our students. We also need to be careful that our experiences of liturgy, prayer services and the like do not become primarily messaging around social issues etc rather than God-focused.
- d) For my purposes I wish to make the case that the nature, style and intent of our RE programmes is critical. For many students, even as they acknowledge the positive offerings in our schools, RE is identified with the religious life of the school. RE not only communicates content but the feel around faith in a school – what is prioritized? What type of faith does a school in fact present to students? What actually works?

By way of context, early this year I got a message on Facebook from a former student whose marriage I had celebrated:

Our daughter Claire was in tears this afternoon when I got home. She had religion at school today (Year 9 at ..... ) and they were asked 'How should we read the Bible?' Her answer was 'With a grain of salt. The Bible was written thousands of years ago, mostly by men in different times. We should take the morals of the stories, not the literal stories.' Her classmates shouted her down, questioning if she was even Catholic. Her teacher then said it was not known if the Bible was largely written by men, that it wasn't fact. Claire, never one to stand down from an argument, tried to say that it is not likely that women would have been allowed to write a book in the Bible. Again, her classmates shouted her down. She decided not to say anything again. The class ended and off to lunch, with the teacher saying 'No blood in the playground'. Claire is

upset because she felt that she wasn't allowed to have her own opinions and thoughts on the Bible, she wasn't being respected or supported.

Claire's image of God and her experience of church through school is surely being shaped in unintended ways by what happens in Year 9 RE. Claire's story is a reminder that a student's experience of school may shape in lasting ways a negative sense of church and faith.

Jesuit and Ignatian schools should be characterised by an intelligent approach to faith. There is an element of religious literacy, of course, particularly as much is being lost in the transmission of faith, or lack thereof, in family. I would make no apology for having this academic intent. Rather than abdicate this space, it is the how and the what is taught that is critical.

We should have the conviction that our tradition is open to questions, that it welcomes robust discussion, that faith and reason can walk together. We need to be careful that our teachers aren't arguing from authority and that fearful of saying the wrong thing, they aren't closing down genuine questions. To achieve a reality that our RE is characterised by an intelligent approach to faith, I would argue that some roadblocks need to be removed and some critical issues must be addressed more explicitly in RE, and earlier rather than later, by the age of 14-15. At Xavier I have called these **apologetical lenses** that need to be included in the curriculum between Years 5-9. For the sake of structure, I would identify 6 of these lenses:

- We need to show that the existence and nature of God is **open to reason and can be held by reasonable people**. Part of this task is to address false or inadequate images of God that can exercise a continuing influence on the religious imagination of our students, and in doing so hamper a more mature understanding of the God-question.
- We need to address sensitively but directly **the problem of suffering and evil**. Fr Richard Leonard's small book, *Where the Hell is God?*, is, in my experience, an invaluable resource for older students, but some of its key insights could be used for younger students. The puppet master God sending tests or punishments needs to be de-constructed at an early age! Otherwise the death of a grandparent, or watching a tragedy unfold on their screens, can lead to an early crisis of faith, often unnoticed by family or school.
- **the issue of faith and reason**, and especially a perceived conflict between a scientific mindset and faith needs to be tackled forcefully. Evolution and Adam and Eve need to be in the curriculum in the early years of high school. Also, the rich history of Jesuits and Jesuit schools in the history of science offers empirical evidence of the compatibility of faith and science as well as offering a wonderful link between science and Ignatian spirituality.

For older students Francis Collins, the founder of the human genome project, and an evangelical Christian, offers some real insight about the Bible and faith in his book, *The Language of God*.

- **the authority and nature of Scripture** needs to be clearly catechised. The insight that the Bible is a library of books of different genres that needs to be understood and

interpreted, that it carries the fallibility and world view of its human authors, and yet in a real way is the word of God, needs to be conveyed, and conveyed forcefully and frequently. In the minds of many students RE is identified with teaching the Bible, and our Catholic tradition in this space needs to be effectively communicated.

- **the relationship between faith and justice** must continue to be emphasised, with Catholic social teaching and its faith underpinning communicated in a more systemic way
- finally, there is **the issue of the historicity of Jesus**, which may come as a surprise to us. The 2021 Australian Community Survey asked a representative sample of Australians, “Which of the following statements best reflects your understanding of Jesus Christ?” **22% agreed that “Jesus is a mythical or fictional character”;** **29% said they “Don't know” if Jesus lived; and just 49% affirmed that “Jesus was a real person who actually lived.”** Jesus is moving into Adam and Eve territory, and as a casualty of the faith and reason conflict. This has implications for worship, prayer and church. John Dickinson on the ABC noted: *“This new survey is also bad news for historical literacy. This reported majority view is not shared by the overwhelming consensus of university historians specialising in the Roman and Jewish worlds of the first century. If Jesus is a “mythical or fictional character”, that news has not yet reached the standard compendiums of secular historical scholarship.”*

In drawing this presentation to an end may I make a few observations about staff and families, short but vital if we to progress the mission.

There is much to be said for the formation of staff in Ignatian spirituality etc. and on the whole, it seems to be well-received. Staff in-service opportunities, staff retreats and Retreats in Daily Life, the Province Ignis programmes, all generate connections with the mission of the school. The IPP complements this in the education space.

A tension point in this, and it addresses the challenges facing mission, centres on RE teachers. Anecdotally, it is becoming more difficult to recruit RE teachers, and in passing, if the church is to be serious about the future, it must give priority to preparing RE teachers especially through our two Catholic universities. I would suggest also that our schools in general have not given priority to PD for RE teachers at a time when they face growing and diverse challenges, as put forward in the is talk. I would also suggest that our schools should be giving priority to the employment of youth ministers, or something akin to this.

Education is a partnership between school and home. There are initiatives in this space, with some programmes for communicating Ignatian spirituality to new parents. I know Ross Jones had had some programmes running. We have a small one at Xavier. This is an area where resources and approaches might need to be shared. Pilgrimages, retreats and prayer experiences for parents may be opportunities we need to take up more fully. I suspect too, we need to focus attention on communication with parents over Catholic identity and find ways to engage them in this space. The XSJN at Xavier has been a successful venture in involving parents and past parents in service opportunities akin to their children.

The influence of parents surely exercises its influence on our students, and this generation of parents largely have an openness to exploring spirituality and religious expression, as well as inclusivity and diversity. They may carry less baggage than the previous generation, but also



they themselves are less grounded in the faith. They may be relying more on their devout grandparents for religious guidance. The school has taken over from the parish and to some extent also taken over from their parents in the religious formation of our students. This generation is more influenced by social media and the internet in their spiritual exploration. Perhaps schools should be looking at some engagement with grandparents around the faith formation space, though the how is challenging and there may be complexities in attempting it due to family dynamics.

And so to return to the question as to how is school church? There is the obvious but nevertheless fundamental starting point of building communities in which our students are known and valued, where they feel included and belong. The role of liturgy and prayer, the importance attached to religious education programmes, the countless ways, big and small, in which we communicate, or not, that we are faith-based schools, all have important roles to play in making the experience of our schools an experience of church. But I would argue that there are three priorities for us as Jesuit and companion schools that should both define us, and deepen the experience of our students of school as church. **The first challenge is to provide significant experiences in this space.** The second, an opportunity, **is to draw links between spirituality and wellbeing.** The third area is that **the intellectual needs to be a characteristic of our schools' approach to faith.**

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