

# ***Catholic Identity and Mission in a Secular Age: On Being Faithful***

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## **Introduction**

I have changed the title slightly as identity and mission have to go together. There is not much point in having the identity of the Dominican Education Council unless you do something with it – the mission that should flow from an appreciation of your identity. Around this theme, I want to share with you today three thoughts – a thought about Catholic identity and mission; a thought about the importance of the social teaching of the Church in a secular age to express the mission that flows from our identity; and a thought about the Dominican contribution and the richness it brings to the wider Church. I'll pepper these thoughts with stories from my background of working with communities in developing countries for over 25 years. Since they are stories about human beings, I trust you will be able to pick something from them for your own field.

## **Catholic Identity and Mission**

To put it mildly, these are difficult days for Catholics. Timothy Radcliffe, the former Master of the Order, wrote recently in 'The Tablet' that "crises are not to be feared"<sup>1</sup>. He points out that it was through repeated crises that God drew closer to his people. Timothy writes: "Painfully, the Lord is demolishing our high towers and our clerical pretensions to glory and grandeur so that the Church may be a place in which we may encounter God and each other more intimately"<sup>2</sup>. It has often resulted in a serious look at the identity and mission of Catholic orders as well as institutions. With the change from religious to lay leadership in the Catholic educational sector over the years, that is true for you even before the current maelstrom.

Theology Professor Neil Ormerod, a colleague of mine here at ACU, recently presented a paper to our own Identity and Mission Committee where he offers a theological analysis of the key terms 'identity' and 'mission'. I thought it might be helpful if I summarised his thoughts. He makes the initial point of saying that all Catholic institutions share "in some manner" the identity and mission of the Church though it is neither feasible nor appropriate for them to partake in all aspects of identity. He writes "what is important for the life of the Church is that through the full variety of structures and institutions which emerge from its life all aspects of its identity and mission be expressed, not that each individual structure reflects that totality"<sup>3</sup>. A secondary school is not a parish and should not aspire to all the same goals. Identity will change over time as the Church is transformed by its fidelity to its mission.

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<sup>1</sup> Timothy Radcliffe OP, *Towards a Humble Church*, The Tablet 2<sup>nd</sup> January 2010 p 4.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, p. 5.

<sup>3</sup> Neil Ormerod, *Identity and Mission in Catholic Organisations*, private paper July 2010.

In a section on the Catholic educational sector, Neil suggests that, with the sacramental preparation of the pupils, a primary school could be seen in some ways as an extension of the parish as it tries to form pupils in a Catholic identity which covers the religious, moral, cultural and social aspects of identity. In a secondary school, he claims that an emphasis on the Church's social mission through outreach and social justice activities is most appropriate, given that the identity has been established and it has to be strengthened through participation in the mission. This resonated with me. When I was Director of the Scottish Caritas (SCIAF) many years ago, we had an automatic entry to present development education to all pupils in Catholic schools (which are publically funded). At a 'Feed the World' march through the centre of Glasgow, some of the participating aid agencies wrote down which schools the pupils came from. A massive 90% came from Catholic schools, despite their being a minority, though a large one, in the West of Scotland. I know from Caritas Australia that such support is common here. Neil concludes by saying that identity is inherently exclusive – boundaries of belonging are set – and, though others can be invited in, that is a free invitation which can be taken up or rejected without consequences. The Church's mission, on the other hand, is inherently inclusive "since anyone can take part in its transformative work, particularly in the social dimension"<sup>4</sup>.

### **Social Dimension of the Church's Identity and Mission**

This brings us to the importance of Catholic Social Teaching. I am sure you have had many seminars on CST and this is not to be another but I would like to introduce you to the framework of Fr Bryan Hehir. He was the former President of Catholic Charities, also a Caritas member, and the largest private domestic poverty-relief agency in the USA. He said of identity: "A person without identity and integrity is a threat to himself or herself. But an institution that loses its moral compass and its sense of identity is a much larger threat to society"<sup>5</sup>. At a Caritas seminar in 2002, Bryan elaborated on our Church identity. It has two principal dimensions – one is a community of the baptized which exists to serve others and the other is an institution which exists to serve both that community and all humanity. Articulating a vision of Catholic identity derived from three key documents of the Second Vatican Council<sup>6</sup>, he said that the ministry of serving society, human dignity and human rights was intrinsic to the Church's mission and life. This ministry is one of the three central tenets of the faith – *Kerygma* (preaching the Word of God), *Leitourgia* (worship) and *Diakonia* (the ministry of serving others). Catholic identity fulfills its social role in collaboration with other institutions, including the State. Catholic social teaching provides the principles by which the social ministry is to be carried out – for example, the option for the poor which is a norm the

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid. p. 8.

<sup>5</sup> Bryan Hehir, 'Identity and Institutions: Catholic Healthcare Providers must refashion their identity as Actors and Advocates in the World', Health Progress, November 1995 p. 23.

<sup>6</sup> Lumen Gentium, Gaudium et Spes and Dignitatis Humanae.

Church should not only follow but urge on other institutions because such principles resonate with all humanity. Bryan stresses, however, that the positive principles have to be balanced by negative norms which define issues and forms of activity which the Church cannot contribute to and which it should publicly ignore or critique. A good recent example of that was the Australian Bishops' intervention in the asylum seeker debate.

I want to concentrate on the application of the principles, at least to Caritas work. As the Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church<sup>7</sup> states, these are permanent principles and values, criteria for judgment and directives for social action – they are not a blueprint for society and have to be applied differently depending on context. But they have to be applied. Let me give a couple of examples from Caritas – and in the discussion period we can talk about their application in the educational sector.

After the tsunami hit Thailand, the tourists and Thais were well taken care of. Our local people went looking for those who weren't – and found the so-called sea gypsies, the Mokkan people, and the many illegal Burmese migrants, groups that didn't count in society and far away from the TV cameras that attracted other aid agencies. For us, this was taking the preferential option for the poor seriously. But you might not get on to CNN – and you might not be popular with some groups in the Church. But you are being prophetic.

In Sri Lanka, again during the tsunami, we knew of the tensions between different religious groups in the south of the country. Instead of buying goods from one trader at the cheapest rate, we were careful to buy from a Hindu trader, a Muslim one, a Christian and a Buddhist and made sure the community knew it. The community followed our example and then worked more closely together. That was conflict sensitivity in action – an application of the peace with justice principle which ultimately leads to a reconciled society.

While these are examples of the application of the principles within the context of mission, a lack of appreciation or understanding of the Catholic identity of, in this case Caritas, can undermine the mission.

During the Turkish earthquake a few years back, some agencies did not want volunteers to use the Caritas T-shirt with its flaming cross logo as it was "too Catholic". Interestingly enough, it was the mostly Moslem Turks who objected to this and wanted to continue to wear the overtly Christian sign on their T-shirts. The result was we heard of amazing stories of how our young Moslem volunteers wore their shirts proudly because Caritas did not discriminate and was fair to everyone – unlike the local authorities – and didn't proselytise.

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<sup>7</sup> Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2004.

In Chad, where we were struggling to care for the thousands of Darfurian refugees who had crossed the desert border and were sheltering under scrub, a member of our team did not think it important to tell the local Archbishop what she and the team were doing – yet he was key to our being able to operate within his vast diocese and use the diocesan resources, both human and material, to be of service to the refugees. He was also the teacher of charity within his jurisdiction and called to hierarchical leadership and service that points to the presence of a loving, compassionate God who accompanies people even if their lives are messy. Yet he was sidelined by someone who simply had not understood what the Catholic identity of her particular Caritas had meant – and its relationship to the bishop.

In Sri Lanka after the tsunami, our young team of humanitarians from Europe and North America brushed aside a group of soutane-wearing priests who had rushed to help their own people within hours of the tsunami hitting the Sri Lankan shores and formed their own group to coordinate response. The Westerners' zeal of helping in a 'professional' way – and their lack of cultural and religious understanding - had caused rupture within the Church family and in fact damaged the response. Attitudes like that in turn cause mistrust among members of the hierarchy which stretches all the way to Rome.

Such examples are not just anecdotal. If you look at serious evaluations of the response to the Asian tsunami, for example, from NGOs as well as the UN, you will see that they are unanimous in saying that a lack of coordination among NGOs, a lack of appreciation of local coping mechanisms and community-based organisations (CBOs) and a lack of cultural and religious understanding were behind the reasons that we were not as efficient as we let on to the general public.

What I find fascinating is that these principles resonate with people of other faiths, let alone other parts of the Christian family. Caritas Mauritania which has a 99% Moslem staff held a workshop on Catholic Social teaching so that the staff would know the ethics behind Caritas work. The group was enthusiastic because they recognised the same values in Islam and asked for a workshop on identifying them more precisely in the Qu'ran. One of my last talks at the Vatican was in the Secretariat of State to a group of new diplomats from mostly Moslem countries. I stressed that CST was the backdrop to all our work in all countries, regardless of the majority faith. It shaped our identity which led to the way we carried out our mission. One of them came up afterwards and asked if we could start a Caritas in his country.

Bishop Kevin Dowling of South Africa describes CST as "one of the truly significant contributions of the Church to the building up of a world in which peoples and communities can live in peace and dignity, with a quality of life that befits those made in God's image"<sup>8</sup>. To my mind, it is a key to uniting identity with mission in the secular

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<sup>8</sup> Bishop Kevin Dowling CSsR, Address printed in 'The Tablet', downloaded 13<sup>th</sup> August 2010.

age and making the Gospel message relevant to life and society, no matter the belief system of the hearer.

## **Divisions in the Church**

I am sure that some of you are occasionally assaulted through email by Taliban Catholics who have been “sacramentalised rather than evangelised”<sup>9</sup>. These people are tiresome and way off beam but that doesn’t stop them being listened to. There are also millions of ordinary Catholics, many of them supporters of Catholic institutions, who are not crazy but just confused. It is important to reassure them that the Catholic identity is alive and well but in a dynamic way, not held in aspic.

These divisions can be characterised at the parochial level by a Bernadette going to the social justice group and a Brendan to the prayer group and guess who the better Catholic is? We all know the syndrome.

Pope Benedict XVI addresses this in his latest encyclical, *Caritas in Veritate*. We need both a personal conversion to Christ and we need to change society; we need to be pro-life as this is part of what human dignity is about as well as be involved in justice and peace where peace, in the wonderful phrase from *Gaudium et Spes* (#78), is “an enterprise of justice”. The spirituality which governs our contemplation and our actions has to be both vertical – deepening our personal faith and our relationship with God - and horizontal – an engagement with the world. The Canadian Oblate writer, Ronald Rohlheiser, says we must learn to be comfortable leading both a peace march and a devotional prayer session. We should not choose between justice and Jesus, interiority and action. We must be thoroughly in the world while being rooted elsewhere. Our identity must reflect both sides of what being Catholic means.

Let me turn now to the Dominican contribution.

## **The Dominican Contribution**

I suppose you all know the story of the man who wanted to join a religious order. He had a dream one night that he was walking down a lane with high hedges on each side. On one side, he hears beautiful Gregorian chant and peers over the hedge and there are the Benedictines. He goes further and then hears loud disputation. He looks over the hedge and there are the Jesuits indulging in casuistry. He goes further and then hears laughter and the tinkling of glasses and munching of food. He peers over the hedge and there are the Dominicans. The rationale is that life is a mystery to be enjoyed, sensing the presence of God in all things – and communicating that to others. I have stayed in many Dominican priories and they have always been places of welcome and hospitality.

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<sup>9</sup> Damian Byrne O.P., former Master of the Dominicans (1983-1992), *The Ministry of Preaching in To Praise, To Bless, To Preach: Words of Grace and Truth*, Dominican Publications 2004 (p. 234).

Henri Nouwen, the great spiritual writer, said that the spiritual life consists in moving from hostility, marked by fear of the other, to hospitality, the welcoming of the stranger. Dominicans have turned that into an art form.

The giving, whether of food, drink or welcome, comes from the tradition of *contemplata aliis tradere* – communicating to others the fruit of our contemplation – what we have learnt from our own experience of faith and contemplation. ‘Tradere’ means to hand down or bequeath in Latin and it’s where we get the word ‘tradition’ from. Postmodern people are discouraged by what they see as hypocrites in the Church but attracted to those who show an authenticity and whose lives don’t stray too much from what they say. That authenticity requires a greater freedom than the freedom of the market place. It requires the freedom of authenticity where acts come from the core of your being and where there is a consistency in beliefs and actions. The current Papal theologian, a Dominican called Wojtech Giertych, was once talking to a group of Lay Dominicans in the Czech Republic about morality and he drew a small square on the board and said: “Let’s say these are the Ten Commandments. Is that what God is interested in – a set of rules?” They all nodded. “No”, he said, and drew a square round the rest of the board. “That is freedom. It is what we do with that that God is interested in”. Hospitality, authenticity, freedom – huge gifts that the contemplation of the Dominican Family has given to others over the centuries and which has made us more human.

But those gifts have their origin in the Gospels and within the Church as a whole. The English Dominican, Herbert McCabe, wrote in his book of essays, *God Matters*<sup>10</sup>, of an enthusiastic convert who wrote to him saying that if the Church were full of Dominicans, everyone would want to join. His riposte was that this was preposterous as the Dominicans were not the Church but only part of it just as Dominican schools are part of the Catholic educational system but the larger identity is Catholic. That combination does not begin with regarding this secular age as ‘sinful’ but takes a more optimistic line and ends, as Schillebeeckx noted, with “writing a fifth Gospel with our lives”<sup>11</sup>.

The last story illustrates the transformation that can come over others if we are faithful to our mission that flows from our identity. I tell it all the time so my apologies if you have already heard it. At the end of 2003, an earthquake struck the ancient town of Bam in Iran. Over 26,000 people died, many more were injured and 60, 000 made homeless. That part of Iran is 100% Moslem and we had a team from several Caritas members working there in link with our Caritas Iran and in fact they are still there with the people. One of the Caritas workers, a sister, was asked by one of the earthquake victims, an old Muslim lady, for a Bible. “I can’t give you one” she said “the authorities would close us down and Caritas does not do that kind of thing anyway. But you are a good Moslem. Why do you want one anyway?” The old lady replied: “There are many

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<sup>10</sup> Herbert McCabe O.P., *God Matters*, Continuum 2005.

<sup>11</sup> Editorial, *America*, January 18, 2010.

people helping us here but you people are different. I want to see what makes you treat us with such respect and love”.

The Jesuit Jon Sobrino who works in El Salvador says that, when those from the ‘overdeveloped’ world share the lives of the poor in his adopted homeland, they become transformed as their old selves of acquisition slough off revealing their deeper selves where the true Christian identity resides and where the authentic freedom results in our showing solidarity with others, not pity. That is a wonderful legacy from the Church to the world that, despite all the current travails, can change our world. After all, as Schillebeeckx said towards the end of his life, outside the world there is no salvation – *extra mundum nulla salus*.

In summary what I have tried to share is that out of the current crisis can come renewal. Reassessment of Catholic identity and mission must be undertaken by Catholic institutions frequently in a rapidly changing world. It is not part of the identity of Catholic institutions to reflect the totality of the Church’s mission. In secondary schools, it might be important to stress Catholic Social Teaching (CST) principles in cementing identity by pointing to the mission – serving others and the common good and making society just. Identity is inherently exclusive and the mission is inherently inclusive. I have offered the Hehir framework of CST which stresses the positive but which also occasionally has to say ‘no’. Application of these principles is essential though they have to be contextualized and a lack of understanding about Catholic identity can, in fact, undermine these principles. The Dominican contribution to Catholic identity is overwhelmingly life-giving, stressing hospitality, radical freedom and authenticity and ultimately points to what it is to be human. It arises out of contemplation and is shared with others. It becomes our ‘Holy Preaching’ and transforms the world.

### **Possible Discussion Points**

- In your work are there aspects of Church identity and mission which you are expected to take on and which you think inappropriate?
- How can you use CST principles in a school context?  
(e.g. Does a campaign called a ‘48 hour famine’ maintain people’s dignity? Is it true?)
- Any conflicts between a Catholic identity and a Dominican one?
- How do you express your Dominican charism?

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