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Pluralizing Catholic Identit(y/ies)

Abstract

I examine the claims of two prominent Catholic educational thinkers regarding the state of Catholic culture and identity in North American Catholic schools. In an age where Catholic school distinctiveness is perceived to be eroding because of the pressures of secularism and lack of religious commitment among the Catholic laity, Timothy Cook (2001) proposes that Catholic educational leaders become “architects of Catholic culture,” and Richard Rymarz (2013) perceives several challenges to the permeation of Catholic identity in Canada’s Catholic schools. Interestingly, though, neither author conceptually explores what Catholic culture or identity mean in today’s context, and simply refer to them in untroubled singular terms. I contend that any proposal concerning Catholic school culture and identity is at best limited unless a *plurality of Catholic identities* is acknowledged; moreover, I propose that a social-ecclesial mechanism needs to be established for including and coordinating this plurality in the school.

Introduction

The “Catholic identity” of Catholic schools has received much attention in recent years, and in this paper I focus on how two influential Catholic educational theorists have treated it. First, Timothy Cook directs his book *Architects of Catholic Culture* (2001) toward responding to a perceived decline in Catholic identity that he sees concurrently with a downward trend in the number of clergy and vowed religious staffing Catholic schools since the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965). Second, Richard Rymarz (2013) posits that declining identity is due to a perceived lack of religious commitment among the lay teachers, parents, and students in these schools (19). In response Cook places much emphasis on the leader’s role. Even though he acknowledges good teachers are essential for a school’s Catholicity (2001, 86), for Cook the obligation to create identity nonetheless always falls back to the leader as a prior facilitator. Rymarz offers a different response. At the end of his article he remarks that a top-down imposition of identity will not likely be wise, and hence a grassroots revival from teachers and the community might be preferred (2013, 19). All of this discussion is interesting, but remarkably takes place without first defining Catholic culture and identity. So while both authors make insightful contributions to conversations about Catholic schools, they also share a limited conception of Catholic culture and identity in singular terms that does not recognize its diversity. This assumption has implications that impede a comprehensive discussion of this subject. It also raises the question of what the existence of multiple Catholic identities means to the school’s political-ecclesial organization. The purpose of this paper is therefore to argue that

Catholic educational theory should acknowledge multiple Catholic identities, and from here consider how a school could respond to this fact.

I begin this argument by demonstrating the existence of multiple Catholic identities through a triangulation of sources from theology (Dulles, 1974/2002), sociology (Dillon 1999; Greeley, 2004); and educational theory (Feinberg 2006; Casson, 2013; McDonough 2015 in press). Against this backdrop I then demonstrate that the presumption of a singular Catholic identity is a key feature of the selections from Cook's and Rymarz's work. The third section discusses the implications of relying on this theoretical basis, while the fourth points toward the question of what political-ecclesial mechanism would be required to explicitly conceive of the school as a convergence of multiple Catholic identities.

Multiple Identities

Avery Dulles' book *Models of the Church* (1974/2002) provides a normatively aligned theological demonstration of multiple ecclesial identities. This book's first edition was published in the years immediately following Vatican II, and so it amplifies that council's acknowledgment that Catholic identity cannot be reduced to its institutional features like "visible structures [and] especially the rights and powers of its officers" (2002, 27), which prevailed in the pre-conciliar era. To wit, in articulating how the Church is a complex entity that cannot be adequately understood exclusively through one model (2002: 10, 20-21, & 24), Dulles does not erase the institutional model, but rather returns it to a humble standing along other valid expressions. So while he identifies the institutional model with providing "a strong sense of corporate identity (2002, 35), Dulles also warns against an inflated *institutionalism* that tends toward "clericalism, juridicism, and triumphalism" (2002, 31). The implication for Catholic schools, therefore, is to be mindful that any overemphasis of Catholicism's external features can preclude other equally important dimensions.

The other models he relates are the church as "sacrament," "herald," "servant," and "mystical communion," and "community of disciples". Among these, the "mystical communion" model shows that ecclesial membership cannot be restricted to external behaviours and can also be seen in its spiritual and organic sense of the informal relationship one has with the community of believers, and the prayerful relationship one has with God (2002, 49-50). Dulles also proposes the "community of disciples" model as approaching an integration of institutional structures and relational features, where the biblical basis for discipleship shows a "contrast society" (2002, 200) of Christians united through their shared belief, discipline, and service (2002: 200-203). Each of these models is an irreducible expression of Church, and so for any person or community, Catholic identity can be found through the several permutations of integrating and emphasizing them.

The sociological literature also provides evidence of diverse Catholic identities. Andrew Greeley shows that Church teachings on sexual ethics have not received anything close to worldwide assent (2004, 92), and that there is likewise divergent views about the "essential elements of Catholic identity" (2004, 112; based on Hoge et al 2001, 201). A significant number also remains Catholic while disagreeing with the teaching that restricts ordination to men

(Greeley 2004, 96). He concludes that those who disagree with Church teaching but remain in the Church do so because of their powerful sense of “Catholic imagination” and that their love for the sacraments trumps their ethical dissent (2004: 76, 111-13). Similarly, Michele Dillon (1999) presents a detailed ethnography of how American Catholic groups that support women’s ordination, the rights of non-heterosexuals in the Church, and free choice on abortion construct Catholic identities that sustain their connection to the very institution that excludes them from full participation. Identity variations are not limited to any “progressive” quarters, either, as Michael Cuneo (1999) demonstrates in his description of Catholics whose identity is based upon countering what they see as a loss of doctrinal rigor within normative orthodoxy, and in some cases attempting to resuscitate it from the errors they perceive within Vatican II. All these cases illustrate that one’s identity as being Catholic and constituting the Church is irreducible to one kind.

Finally, educational institutions reflect identity variations. Walter Feinberg’s (2006) ethnographic study identifies four kinds of American Catholic school by the stances they take relative to orthodoxy. The traditional school “stress[es] the fixed nature of doctrine,” the modernist school emphasizes more “the role of individual conscience in deciding moral issues,” while schools based on feminist and liberation theology “view doctrine as flexible and open ended, and use the interpretive opportunities it presents to develop a personal transformation and a commitment to aid the poor and oppressed” (2006, 47). As each school displays its approach publicly through curricular and institutional norms, it follows that there is substantial support for each of these identity kinds that cannot be dismissed as merely isolated incidents. Moreover, Graham McDonough’s work on the laity (2015, in press) and Ann Casson’s (2103) work on “fragmented catholicity” shows that even within the prevailing ideology of a single school there exist varying views on Church teaching and what it means to be Catholic. And ideological diversity even reaches the papacy, which currently demonstrates shifting away from Benedict XVI’s reported preference for a smaller, more doctrinally pure Church toward Francis’ message of greater inclusion and de-emphasis (not change) of Church teachings on abortion and homosexuality (Montagne & Poggioli 2013). It appears more accurate to speak of Catholic *identities* rather than *identity*.

Cook’s and Rymarz’s Presentations

Given the above demonstration it is surprising to find Cook and Rymarz present Catholic identity as an unproblematic concept, rather than one of Catholicism’s complex features. Cook provides little in the way of defining what he means by Catholic “culture” or the identity that ostensibly would accompany it (2001, 3). A reading of his book with a view toward finding out what kind of Catholic “culture” or “identity” he hopes for finds that it is apparently linked to reconstituting an institutional strength equal to what he perceives was present before Vatican II. His identification of and response to this apparent problem is based on a decline and fall narrative for culture and identity that he perceives occurring in parallel with the post-conciliar decline of clergy and vowed religious teaching and administering in Catholic schools. As lay persons stepped into these roles, he maintains, so too did Catholic school identity apparently erode (2001, 1 & 73). Throughout his book he loosely links “culture” and “identity” to the kinds of externally observable features in an institutional ecclesiology, although there is no further

treatment of identity in any ecclesiological or sociological sense. So Cook's assumptions are unfortunately not historicized fully in terms of the ecclesiological changes Dulles reflects during and in the years following Vatican II. Hence his concern for a declining institutional identity in Catholic schools suffers both from excluding multiple ecclesiologies that do not easily reduce to external institutional measures, and overlooking the limitations of the institutional model of church.

Cook's narrow view of Catholic culture continues through his conflation of "organizational culture" with "Catholic culture" (2001, 5-6ff). So where a secular organizational culture based on liberalism might encompass many relatively smaller constituent cultures, a Catholic equivalent would be an institution where multiple approaches to Catholicism are present. And of course, any explicit or tacit promotion of a dominant Catholic identity that claims normative superiority over other kinds would threaten to undermine this plurality. On this count Cook is noticeably silent. It is laudable that he speaks elsewhere of accommodating diversity, but unfortunately these discussions are limited to race and so elide internally ecclesiological and ideological diversity (2001, 8). Cook only constructs Catholic school identity in terms of the sum of "academic excellence," "religious mission," and "globalness/multiculturalism"; notably, even these component terms are not defined or analyzed (2001, 12). His identification of key themes in Catholic school identity like "liberty and charity," "Christian vision of the world," "knowledge illumined by faith," (among others) (2001, 12), and his admonition that Catholic educational leaders promote a "Gospel Culture," "Faith Community," "Relationships," (12-16) and "gospel values" (19) in Catholic schools, unfortunately, because it does not recognize the intra-Catholic diversity that these terms imply, only raise more questions about whose conception of them will prevail.

The purpose of Rymarz's (2013) article is to examine the challenges presented when contemporary Canadian Catholic schools attempt to actualize a permeation ideology (2013, 16). Rymarz claims that a decisive factor in the identity of a school is the level of commitment held by "teachers, parents, and students who make up the school community," and that the main threats to identity are low commitment, privatized spirituality, and secularization (17). To counter these apparent threats Rymarz states: "For a permeation of Catholic identity in schools to be realized significant numbers within the school community must be prepared to animate its Catholic identity" (17). All this discussion takes place without any ecclesiological or sociological exploration into what identity means, and so when Rymarz raises James Provost's claim that teacher identity should mean "Catholics in full communion" (18), without any discussion of what "full communion" means or whether it is a contested concept in light of Catholicism's internal diversity, there is evidence here that identity is being constructed as a singular entity against which persons are measured *by degrees of adherence* rather than *kinds of commitment*. There is also no way to state with certainty that what Rymarz names as "privatized spirituality" is really a deficiency, since instead it may indicate a lack of satisfaction with of the prevailing institutional norms that remains unexpressed for lack of recognition or support.¹ In other words, if identity and commitment are conceived as narrow standards and then measured

¹ Bibby (2004) reports that 56% of Catholic adults and 46% of Catholic adolescents would increase their involvement with the Church "if [they] found it to be more worthwhile" (2004, 47; cf. Bibby 2002, 50)

by degrees, one practical consequence could be enabling the conditions where silent resistance, exercised through withholding *any* strong form of religious presentation, and with the intent to avoid conflict, becomes the norm.

Surprisingly, Rymarz concludes that rather than focusing on philosophy or theology, his “paper has focused ... on the human element that is pivotal if the goals of permeation are to be realized in Catholic schools” (2013, 19). Notably this “human element” omits the sociological reality of multiple “thick” identities and the impact they feel from the dominant institutionalism. Interestingly, Rymarz’s positing that rather than being imposed from above, Catholic identity needs to be generated from the grassroots (19), raises questions of how such a phenomenon is possible given that all normative epistemic, moral, and ecclesial power for officially Catholic action is invested hierarchically. For instance, those who measure Catholic identity “by degrees” of a singular norm might respond that anything else is not “thick” but rather deficient – in some cases referred to colloquially as “cafeteria Catholicism.” This view, however, aside from overlooking of the theological basis for dissent within Catholicism (see McDonough, 2012), also reflects a consequence of institutional non-recognition and non-cultivation of multiple identities, since it places those for whom they are appropriate at a disadvantage for lack of formal curricular support.

In summary, Cook’s and Rymarz’s assumption of identity in singular terms thus defaults to being their last word, rather than the first, on what should be a more comprehensive topic. Theorists like Terence McLaughlin (1996, 138) and Sean Whittle (2014, 85ff) have expressed disappointment with this kind of conceptual looseness within Catholic educational theory, stating that it reflects a kind of vague “edu-babble” employed to the author’s advantage by obliquely promoting his or her idea of “piety and faith commitment” (Whittle 2014, 85). I do not raise this point as a harsh criticism, but rather to wonder what could be gained by reconsidering Cook’s and Rymarz’s works in terms that acknowledge multiple Catholic identities. All these observations point to the question of what it means to imagine Catholic identity: is it a prior, authorized uniform concept that leaders and the laity need to implement, or does it exist in multiple conceptions to be found within a community, and their overlap to be discovered and negotiated within some kind of social-ecclesial framework?

Implications

The commonly found way of discussing Catholic school identity is found when there are calls like Cook’s and Rymarz’s to insert a positive expression into a negative space where it has diminished. The evidence above, however, shows that this evaluation by degrees has major limitations; moreover, it also assumes that persons who identify by these different kinds are willing to accept this negative assessment and are receptively permeable to “remediation” by the prevailing kind. To be fair it is important to note that in procedural and instrumental terms both Cook and Rymarz do attempt to avoid alienation by imposition. The positive side of Cook’s reliance on “edu-babble” allows him some latitude to remain remarkably vague on precisely what constitutes identity – for illustrative purposes his “architects” model could apply to both pre-conciliar sympathies and liberation theology – and Rymarz recommends that identity be nurtured from the grassroots rather than imposed from above. In these ways both theorists

demonstrate sensitivity and openness to an inclusive catholicity that aims to avoid an ideological split between the governors and the governed. However, given that what is considered normative is already defined by the hierarchy, without any further explicit theoretical discussion taking place what is likely to emerge from the grassroots and into formal implementation will likely privilege those whose idea of Catholic identity aligns best with that of their local bishop's.

Practical problems may also result. Assuming that a school's teaching staff is internally diverse, some frustration may result if certain ideological commitments prevail at the expense of others. And even a staff with its own uniform conception of Catholic identity might still find itself non-aligned with the community it serves. However, discussing Catholic identity beyond what prevails officially is risky for educators because it concerns their perceived credibility in the community, and ultimately their job security. To address the limitations of this situation and explicitly open the concepts of Catholic culture and identity to greater acknowledgment and inclusion of salient differences – the ecclesial elephant in the room – may provide the room for greater participation for all persons in the school. Reading Cook and Rymarz within a framework of promoting a fuller discovery and nurturing of identities, and creation of an institutional identity that reflects the ecclesial will to discover their intersection and coordination while acknowledging differences, seems to be a more promising way of bringing about an inclusive and possibly even flourishing catholicity to Catholic schools.

What Mechanism Can Coordinate Multiple Identities?

The ecclesiological question of coordinating multiple identities inevitably becomes a pedagogical question insofar as the school must confront the issues of how to organize itself and teach in light of diverse perspectives. Raising the subject of greater lay involvement allows that, even though the laity is not directly involved in decision making in the same way that the clergy is (Nilson 2000: 402 & 405), a model that admits multiple Catholic identities would at the very least afford direct lay consultation toward informing an institutional response to internal diversity. It might also mean a re-thinking of the educational leader's role in terms that point away from suggestions that they are guardians of a singular identity, and seeing them instead as the coordinators of an overlapping consensus among identities.

An inherent concern might be that this “overlapping consensus” language too closely resembles a Rawlsian political liberalism superimposed onto Catholic institutions. This framework might have some initial practical advantages toward greater inclusivity, but be vulnerable to criticisms that it overlooks the particularities that make an institution Catholic and not liberal. This is a valid concern, but it need not undermine all responses to plurality. The normative baseline for inclusion would of course depend upon a Catholic epistemology, and even though the boundaries of this are controversial (McDonough 2012), they would not nearly extend as far as what secular liberalism admits. Developing some form of egalitarian, Catholic communitarian decision-making process would provide a preferable model that does not risk losing contact with its normative thought and practice. The role of the school would thus be to nurture these divergences and their coordination, placing the aim of Catholic education more into the domain of academically supporting ecclesial roles for their Catholic students. Developing such a mechanism would in itself constitute building Catholic culture and identity.

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