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Towards a conception of the fundamental values of Catholic education: what we can learn from the writings of John Paul II

Abstract

This paper sets out to explore and examine online discussions of twenty-two students pursuing the M.A. programme in Catholic School Leadership at St Mary's University College in Twickenham, London. In response to a question about the views of Blessed Pope John Paul II on the fundamental values of Catholic education, they shared their perceptions through online postings in a virtual learning environment (VLE). The focus of this paper is to draw inferences from the responses that they made.

Keywords

Catholic education, Pope John Paul II, faith, family, vocation, mission, Jesus

1. Introduction

In his address on Catholic Education in Melbourne in 1986, John Paul II said: "The life of a teacher, as I know from personal experience, is very challenging and demanding, but it is also profoundly satisfying. It is more than a job, for it is rooted in our deepest convictions and values. To be intimately concerned in the development of a young person, of hundreds of young people, is a highly responsible task. As teachers, you kindle in your students a thirst for truth and wisdom. You spark off in them a desire for beauty. You introduce them to their cultural heritage. You help them to discover the treasures of other cultures and peoples. What an awesome responsibility and privilege is yours in the teaching

profession"[1]. It is not, perhaps, widely appreciated that Blessed John Paul II took a considerable interest and concern in education and the role of teachers. Yet, during his long papacy (1978-2005), he issued a large number of encyclicals, apostolic letters, exhortations, addresses and other public documents on the subject of teaching. Characteristically, all these statements were both creative and faithful to the spirit of Vatican II[2].

With regard to education, he consistently supported the spirit of renewal affirmed by Vatican II[3], as expressed in the seminal document, *Gravissimum Educationis*[4]. Throughout his writings and speeches, where the subject of education was a salient theme, John Paul II emphasised the primary role of parents in their children's education, the value of family life and the education of young people for the future of humanity. In his encyclical, *Fides et Ratio* (1998), moreover, he also explores the implications of relationship between faith and reason in education.

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, Catholic education faces considerable challenges. In a globalised, post-modern world that is characterised by moral relativism, materialism and hedonism, it is evident that Catholic schools are confronted with potential tensions in balancing the demands to achieve quality in secular terms, whilst, at the same time, upholding Catholic educational principles. Consequently, the reflections of John Paul II on education are of particular interest when addressing contemporary issues.

In their aim to maintain a distinctive Catholic ethos and identity, informed by gospel values, Catholic schools face compelling forces from the market economy, from materialism, atheism and secularism, as well as from the influences of the media and celebrity. In contemporary society, therefore, faith can often be

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[1] Address of John Paul II to the council, staff and students of the Institute of Catholic Education, Melbourne (Australia), 28 November 1986, n. 3.

[2] Indeed, Father Gerald O'Collins, S.J. (2008: 13) argues that the teachings of John Paul II followed Vatican II with fidelity and creativity, developing perceptions on "the presence and activity of the Holy Spirit in all individuals, cultures and religions" (p. 13) also points out that John Paul II's "favourite biblical source was John's Gospel, which he quotes or to which he refers 48 times". G. O'Collins and M. Hayes (eds.), *The Legacy of John Paul II*, Leominster 2008, Gracewing Publications, p. 3.

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[4] For references to Vatican II documents, see A. Flannery, *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*, Collegeville 1984, MN: Liturgical Press.

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marginalized and dismissed as irrelevant. In an address in Glasgow, Scotland, Pope Benedict XVI drew attention to the phenomenon of "aggressive secularism": "Today, the United Kingdom strives to be a modern and multicultural society. In this challenging enterprise, may it always maintain its respect for those traditional values and cultural expressions that more aggressive forms of secularism no longer value or even tolerate"[5].

The decreasing numbers of religious and clergy involved in schools produces additional concerns for Catholic education. Gallagher[6], for example, says that in England a critical concern is that of the nurturing and development of future leaders, which has implications for the vocation of teaching: A major concern of those with responsibilities for Catholic schools is the decline in the number of those applying for headships and deputy headships.

Indeed, the decline in the number of vocations arguably presents a considerable challenge to the spiritual culture in Catholic schools. It is in this context, that Grace[7] considers whether or not this decline in the religious orders working in Catholic schools will lead to a decline in the spiritual capital of Catholic schools, which he defines as "resources of faith and values derived from commitment to a religious tradition".

Hornsby-Smith[8] pointed out as long ago as 1978 that there is a paucity of academic research in Catholic education. Although it should be acknowledged that in the course of the past thirty years, there has been an increasing interest in Catholic education as a subject of empirical research, educational scholarship and literature in this area still remains underdeveloped. There have been few studies, for example, from the perspective of teachers in Catholic schools. This study therefore sets out to investigate, in particular, how teachers working in Catholic schools responded to the published works of Pope John Paul II.

The intention of this paper is to present the findings of empirical research, in which the reflections of teachers upon speeches, papers and letters about education issued by John Paul II are explored. It was anticipated that themes identified in

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[5] Pope Benedict's Homily at Bellahouston Park, 16th September 2010 http://www.kristosmedia. org/Admin/Uploads/media/56/BenedictXVI.pdf (20 I 2012).

[6] M.P. Gallagher, *Catholic Schools in England and Wales: New Challenges*, in: G. Grace and J. O'Keefe (eds.), *International Handbook of Catholic Education: Challenges for School Systems in the 21st Century*, Springer 2007, Dordrecht.

[7] G. Grace, *Catholic Schools: Missions, Markets & Morality*, London 2002, Routledge, Chapter 10.

[8] M. Hornsby-Smith, *Catholic Education: The Unobtrusive Partner*, London 1978, Sheed and Ward.

his work by the teachers would contribute to an understanding of contemporary concerns surrounding Catholic education.

2. Small-scale Research Study

Teachers who participated as students in the M.A. progamme in Catholic School Leadership at St Mary's University College in Twickenham, London[9], during 2010-2011 were asked to reflect upon speeches, papers and letters by John Paul II on the subject of education and identify significant passages for shared discussion.

The topic of discussion under consideration from within the online forum was articulated as follows: "John Paul II wrote many speeches, papers and letters about education. We have much to learn from his inspiring writing which often addresses the fundamental values of Catholic education. Choose ONE paper which captures your interest. From this paper choose ONE statement that you find interesting and relevant to your work as a Catholic educator".

Students were invited to share their views through an online discussion forum in a virtual learning environment. As in any traditional classroom, students had the opportunity to respond to a variety of topics arising from their reading and their experience. The focus of this paper is to examine contributions that were made to the discussion on the published work of John Paul II.

The main difference between a real classroom and a virtual classroom is that the discussions are asynchronous, i.e., students are able to post their contributions at any time of the day. Consequently, the interaction is democratic to the extent that, unlike in a real classroom, where it may be difficult for everyone to have their say, every online student would be able to take part in the discussion and offer their contributions in their own time. No one needs to feel left out through a lack of opportunity to speak.

The participants in the course are teachers from all phases of education – primary, secondary and tertiary – who hold a variety of responsibilities as classroom teachers, middle leaders and headteachers in Catholic schools. Potentially, therefore, they would contribute postings which reflect a wide range

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[9] An M.A. programme in Catholic School Leadership, which provides opportunities for teachers to relate specifically to leadership issues in Catholic schools, is offered at St Mary's University College in Twickenham, London. International students can participate in the course as Full Distance Learners. Currently, as well as U.K. students, there are students from Malta, Africa and India, who are engaged in their studies towards the M.A.

of practical experience within Catholic education and consequently offer a rich source of material for analysis.

Twenty-two teachers responded to the topic for discussion, sharing their interpretations and perceptions of the speeches, papers and letters that were delivered by John Paul II on the subject of education. With reference to the parameters of the rubric stated above, the writer set out to conduct an enquiry into the online contributions.

3. Discourse analysis[10]

From the point of view of the writer, the primary focus of this enquiry was to investigate the postings in respect of John Paul II's published work on education that participants shared within an online virtual learning environment. In order to investigate their contributions, their responses to the online activity were examined through a form of discourse analysis.

Discourse analysis is a process that is difficult to define but, in general, it can be considered as a means by which a researcher might understand the language of social interactions. Discourse analysis may consider any aspect of linguistic activity and can be applied for the purpose of examining both spoken and written forms of language. However, whilst it is acknowledged that, as discourse analysis does not elicit hard facts, the reliability and the validity of the findings are dependent on subjective and interpretive processes (and interpretation will inevitably be subject to bias); it nevertheless has the potential to provide a basis for gaining a perspective of participants' observations.

For the purpose of this study, the writer adopted a systematic approach by setting out to identify meaningful categories or themes in the online discussions. The process of selection of themes was conducted through close scrutiny of the text allied with the use of the "Find" function on Word. By interrogating the discussions shared by online contributors, the writer was able to identify recurring themes that could be abstracted from the texts.

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[10] Discourse analysis (DA) is a term given to a range of theoretical approaches by which text or speech can be analysed. See Potter J., *Discourse Analysis as a Way of Analysing Naturally Occurring Talk*, in: D. Silverman (ed.) 1997, (Chapter 10): "Discourse Analysis as a Way of Analysing Naturally Occurring Talk", in: D. Silverman (ed.), *Qualitative Research,* London 1997, Thousand Oaks, New Delhi: SAGE Publications). In the present paper, discourse analysis is used as a means of identifying salient themes identified by the writer that arose from an examination of the postings made by participants towards online discussions.

In particular, through a careful analysis of the comments that students posted online, the following recurrent themes were identified: Faith; Family; Vocation; Mission; and references to Jesus. These themes were identified on the basis of being the most frequently referred to in the twenty two students' postings.

4. Ethical Considerations

In order to produce reliable outcomes, a research study needs to conform to ethical guidelines. Ethical problems can arise from all methodologies and can appear at any stage. It was therefore acknowledged that potential ethical repercussions of procedures and conduct that might confound the results of the investigation should be anticipated.

According to Sapsford and Abbott[11]: "… *confidentiality* is a promise that you will not be identified or presented in an identifiable form, while *anonymity* is a promise that even the researcher will not be able to tell which responses came from which respondent".

Consequently, consideration was given in particular to ensuring the confidentiality and the anonymity of respondents. As the participants were known to the writer personally, all information gathered would be treated with the strictest confidentiality and the anonymity of the participants would be preserved. Therefore, information that could identify them as individuals would not be disclosed.

5. Results

In this section, the results of the study are presented systematically in respect of the salient themes that were identified.

Faith

In an analysis of online contributions, it was apparent that a number of respondents to the question placed emphasis on John Paul II's reflections upon the subject of faith in education. Whilst secular values present a considerable

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[11] R. Sapsford and P. Abbott, *Ethics, politics and research*, in: R. Sapsford and V. Jupp (eds.), *Data Collection and Analysis*, London 1996, Sage. Ch. 13 quoted, in: A.R.J. Briggs and M. Coleman (eds.), *Research Methods in Educational Leadership and Management*, Thousand Oaks CA 2007, Sage (2nd edition.).

influence on education, Catholic schools are, notwithstanding, called upon to develop the gift of faith. One contributor (Student One[12]), for example, quoted from the Pope's address at the opening of the Catholic Education Centre in Perth during his Pastoral Visit to Australia (1986: n. 2): "In the midst of these different currents of the modern world, Catholic education seeks to be faithful to its religious dimension. Catholic education is called upon to develop the gift of faith".

What resonates with this student is that faithfulness to the religious dimension is central to education in Catholic schools. Religious Education is a fundamental component of the mission of Catholic schools. It is not to be regarded as a "bolt-on" supplement to the curriculum but should be integral to the whole curriculum. As one of Graham Greene's characters says, "It's like one those sticks of rock: bite it all the way down and you'll still read Brighton"[13].

Another student (Student Two) refers to John Paul II's apostolic letter, "Proclaiming Saint Thomas More" (2000), where the Pope refers to Saint Thomas More as someone: "…who distinguished himself by his constant fidelity to legitimate authority and institutions precisely in his intention to serve not power but the supreme ideal of justice" (ibid; 2000, n. 4).

In the contemporary world, potential tensions are created for Catholic schools where they are challenged to aim not only to uphold Catholic educational principles but also to achieve quality in secular terms. John Paul II, though, reminds us that the ideal of aspiring to "the dignity of a child of God"[14] should supersede any response to the demands of the secular state. As Jesus said: "Render unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's, and unto God the things that are God's"[15].

We recall, too, that, at the scaffold, Saint Thomas More is reputed to have uttered, "I die the King's good servant, but God's first". By his example, whilst Catholic schools are obliged to respect the authority of the state, they must nevertheless faithfully maintain their mission integrity[16]. As it points out in

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[12] For ethical reasons, references to participants are anonymised.

[13] Quoted from *Brighton Rock* by Graham Green, Penguin Modern Classics, Harmonsworth 1938, Middlesex.

[14] Congregation for Catholic Education, *Lay Catholics in Schools: Witnesses to Faith*, n. 18.

[15] Matthew 22,21.

[16] Gerald Grace (2010) defines mission integrity as "...fidelity in practice and not just in public rhetoric to the distinctive and authentic principles of a Catholic education." This implies fidelity not only to local statements but to the statements authorised by the Vatican. Mission integrity involves more than performance indicators and relates to questions surrounding the religious, moral and social purposes of education. G. Grace, Mission Integrity: Contemporary Challenges for Catholic School Leaders, Presentation to: ACU: 5th International Conference on Catholic Educational Leadership: Sydney: 2-4 August 2010.

Gravissimum Educationis[17], the proper function of Catholic education is "…to order the whole of human culture to the news of salvation so that the knowledge the students gradually acquire of the world, life and man is illumined by faith"[18]. A critical question is whether or not mission integrity can be sustained by future leaders in Catholic schools.

Family

A distinctive element of Catholic education is the importance it places on the family in the education of children. Thus, it states in *Gravissimum Educationis* that: "Since parents have given children their life, they are bound by the most serious obligation to educate their offspring and therefore must be recognized as the primary and principal educators"[19].

Primarily, education is the responsibility of parents. The role of the Catholic school is to support families in partnership in the upbringing of their children. Indeed, it was significant for two online contributors (Student Nine and Student Eleven) to point out that John Paul II reiterates the view that it is a responsibility of the Catholic school "…to emphasize the essential role of the family in human and Christian education"[20].

Fundamentally, we recall the Holy Family - Joseph, Mary and the child Jesus – as an image that informs the Christian concept of the family. Indeed, an examination of the relationships between Joseph, Mary and Joseph provides us with insights into the complex relationships within a Christian family home. In this respect, Student Eleven again referring to John Paul II's (1978) address to participants in the Third International Congress on the Family quotes: "…the family atmosphere must be one of trust, dialogue, firmness, rightly understood respect of incipient freedom: all things which permit gradual initiation to meeting the Lord and to habits which already honour the child and prepare the man of tomorrow".

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[17] Pope Paul VI, Declaration on Christian Education *(Gravissimum Educationis)*, in: A. Flannery, *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*, Collegeville 1984, MN: Liturgical Press.

[18] Pope Paul VI (1965) Declaration on Christian Education *('Gravissimum Educationis')*, in: A. Flannery, *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*, Collegeville 1984, MN: Liturgical Press, n. 8.

[19] Pope Paul VI (1965) Declaration on Christian Education *('Gravissimum Educationis')*, in: A. Flannery, *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*, Collegeville 1984, MN: Liturgical Press, n. 3.

[20] The Third International Congress on the Family 1978.

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From the same address, too, in which John Paul II acknowledges "the orientations of the Second Vatican Council", another online contributor (Student Seventeen) quotes: "In this field, goodwill, love itself, are not sufficient. It is a skill that parents must acquire, with the grace of God, in the first place by strengthening their own moral and religious convictions, by setting an example, by reflecting also on their experience, with each other, with other parents, with expert educators, with priests".

The important role of parents in the upbringing of their children is again underlined. One implication is that, informed by the grace of God, parents need to teach their children wisely about respect for others and for themselves.

Vocation

The word 'vocation' in English is derived from a Latin word meaning 'a calling'. Consequently, the notion of Christian vocation is based on the calling to "be with Him"[21] and may, furthermore, be interpreted as a call to model Jesus' style of ministry. Catholic schools have traditionally drawn on the vocational commitment and faith leadership of its teachers. In this respect, one online contributor (Student Thirteen) refers to John Paul II's (1979) message to the National Catholic Educational Association of the United States, where he says: "But no Catholic school can be effective without dedicated Catholic teachers, convinced of the great ideal of Catholic education. The Church needs men and women who are intent on teaching by word and example – intent on helping to permeate the whole educational milieu with the spirit of Christ. This is a great vocation, and the Lord himself will reward all who serve in it as educators in the cause of the word of God".

Teaching in a Catholic school requires a particular type of vocation that goes beyond the 'call' to help children learn. To be effective, teachers are required to show a significant commitment and involvement in their work. Their values, integrity and sense of dedication are important aspects of their task. There is a well-known maxim that "a good teacher teaches pupils not subjects". According to Parker Palmer[22], the American educationalist, in his book, *The Courage to Teach*:

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[21] Mark 3,14 "He appointed twelve that they might be with him and that he might send them out to preach".

[22] P.J. Palmer, *The Courage to Teach: Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teacher's Life*. San Francisco 1998, Jossey-Bass.

"Teachers are, in effect, signs of the presence of Christ within their educational community. They 'teach who they are'"[23].

Significantly, in considering the notion of vocation, it should be pointed out that Pope Paul VI[24], in his Apostolic Exhortation of 1975, asserts: "Modern man listens more willingly to witnesses than to teachers, and if he does listen to teachers, it is because they are also witnesses".

One online contributor (Student Four) points out that John Paul II, in *Sapienta Christiana* (1979, n. VI), says that: "Teachers are invested with very weighty responsibility in fulfilling a special ministry of the word of God and in being instructors of the faith for the young. Let them, above all, therefore be for their students, and for the rest of the faithful, witnesses of the living truth of the Gospel and examples of fidelity to the Church".

In this respect, John Paul II underlines and elaborates upon the assertion of the Council in the Vatican II document, *Gravissimum Educationis*, that "… teachers by their life as much as by their instruction bear witness to Christ…"[25]. Interestingly, according to Student Four, Pope John Paul II's statement would present a potentially stimulating and thought-provoking theme for discussion on the subject of the vocational implications of the teacher's role in a Catholic school at a staff retreat or day of spiritual renewal: "It would be an interesting statement with which to start a staff retreat or day of spiritual renewal".

Mission

It is evident that teaching, from the beginning, was prominent among the functions of service[26]. The way in which the first disciples responded to the call provides a model for Christian discipleship[27]. The calling is always oriented

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[23] P.J. Palmer, *The Courage to Teach: Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teacher's Life*. San Francisco 1998, Jossey-Bass, 1.

[24] Pope Paul VI (1975) Apostolic Exhortation: *Evngelii Nuntiandi*, Vatican City, Libreria Editrice Vaticana.

[25] Pope Paul VI (1965) Declaration on Christian Education *('Gravissimum Educationis'),* in: A. Flannery, *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*, Collegeville 1984, MN: Liturgical Press, n. 8.

[26] See, for example, Romans 12,4-8: "For just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others. We have different gifts, according to the grace given to each of us. If your gift is prophesying, then prophesy in accordance with your faith; if it is serving, then serve; if it is teaching, then teach; if it is to encourage, then give encouragement; if it is giving, then give generously; if it is to lead,[do it diligently; if it is to show mercy, do it cheerfully".

[27] See also D. Fincham, Discipleship, in: *The Pastoral Review*, Vol. 3, Issue 6, November/ December 2007, pp. 38-42.

towards mission; those chosen are sent to take up Jesus' mission of transforming the world. As Humfrey[28] points out: "The school takes part in the mission of the Church by forming community, making disciples and sending them out into the world to proclaim the Good News of Jesus Christ".

For Student Fourteen, therefore, it was worth bearing in mind that John Paul II wrote in his exhortation to the Church in Europe (Ecclesia in Europa) that: "Catholic schools are sometimes the only means by which the Christian tradition can be presented to those who are distant from it. I encourage the faithful involved in the field of primary and secondary education to persevere in their mission and to bring the light of Christ the Saviour to bear upon their specific educational, scientific and academic activities".

As two other online contributors (Student Fifteen and Student Twenty) affirm, these sentiments are emphasized in the Vatican document, *Catholic Education on the Threshold of the Third Millennium*[29], which not only celebrates the importance of teaching but also draws attention to the challenges that are implied: "Teaching has an extraordinary moral depth and is one of man's most excellent and creative activities, for the teacher does not write on inanimate material, but on the very spirits of human beings. The personal relations between the teacher and the students, therefore, assume an enormous importance and are not limited simply to giving and taking. Moreover, we must remember that teachers and educators fulfil a specific Christian vocation and share an equally specific participation in the mission of the Church, to the extent that 'it depends chiefly on them whether the Catholic school achieves its purpose'".

Significantly, another online contributor (Student Nineteen) points out that the same Vatican document[30] draws attention to the fact that, with regard to mission, the Catholic school is essentially concerned with the education of the human person: "The person of each individual human being, in his or her material and spiritual needs, is at the heart of Christ's teaching: this is why the promotion of the human person is the goal of the Catholic school".

Hence, the Catholic school is charged with the mission of providing possibilities and opportunities for all members of its community to aspire to all that is best in the human spirit.

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[28] P. Humphry, Worship in Catholic Schools, in: M. Hayes and L. Gearon (eds.), *Contemporary Catholic Education*, Leominster 2002, Gracewing, pp. 79-90.

[29] Congregation for Catholic Education, *The Catholic School on the Threshold of the Third Millennium*, Vatican 1997, Rome, n. 19.

[30] Congregation for Catholic Education, *The Catholic School on the Threshold of the Third Millennium*, Vatican 1997, Rome, n. 9.

Jesus

It is axiomatic that the person of Jesus is at the heart of Catholic education. The Sacred Congregation for Catholic Education[31] emphasised this when it asserted that in a Catholic school Jesus is "the foundation of the whole educational enterprise". A number of online contributors chose quotations from John Paul II's addresses that reinforced this fundamental principle. Student Three, for example, shows that in his 1982 address to the staff and students of St Andrew's College of Education, Glasgow, John Paul II said: "In reflecting on the value of Catholic schools and the importance of Catholic teachers and educators, it is necessary to stress the central point of Catholic education itself"[32].

This view is reinforced by an online student (Student Three), who, in another contribution, points out that, in 1978, in his message to the National Catholic Educational Association of the United States, John Paul II said that Catholic education is above all: "…Catholic education is above all a question of communicating Christ, of helping to form Christ in the lives of others".

Another online contributor (Student Twenty-One) quotes from John Paul II's (1986) homily on the occasion of the beatification of Father Kuriakose Elias Chavara and Sister Alfonsa Muttathupandathu, when he says: "Jesus … speaks to everyone. We are called to holiness. We are all called to communion with him: with his Heart, with his Cross, with his glory".

Student Five indicates that in his Address to the rectors, professors and students of the Institutes of Catholic Education in Rome in 1979, Pope John Paul II said: "As mankind is approaching the year two thousand, it is not permissible for the People of God to delay, to stop, or to move back. The Church must walk in history with her eyes turned backwards (Ecclesia retro-oculata) and at the same time forwards (Ecclesia ante-oculata), but, above all, fixed upwards towards Christ, her Lord (Ecclesia supra-oculata): levatis ad Dominum oculis... It is from above, in fact, it is from him that she gets inspiration, strength, resistance, courage…"[33].

This is a positive message of hope. In considering the centrality of Christ in Catholic education, we recall, for example, the words of Jesus: "… I am always with you until the end of time"[34].

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[31] The Sacred Congregation for Catholic Education 1977, n. 14.

[32] John Paul II, 1982, n. 5.

[33] John Paul II, 1979, n. 5.

[34] Matthew 28,20.

6. Limitations of the enquiry

This study does not claim to be an exhaustive account of everything that John Paul II wrote on the subject of education. Indeed, the concern of this study was rather to focus on exploring recurring themes that were identified by the writer in examining online contributions made by students participating in the M.A. in Catholic School Leadership at St Mary's University College.

As a small-scale enquiry, of course, it was subject to limitations. It could only, for example, draw on the reflections of a small group of students who responded to the given topic; it is not claimed to be a representative sample of teachers. However, the online contributions offered a range of responses to statements made by John Paul II, which provided a lively forum for discussion.

As an ethnographic study, confined to a relatively small number of people, it would be difficult to generalise from the findings. Nevertheless, there are advantages in exploring the responses of contributors to online discussions rather than conducting a survey of a broader population in that it was possible to elicit readily available information within a limited time. Another advantage was that, in gathering phenomenological data, it was possible to explore and interpret the views of the contributors in a personal and individual way.

It should be conceded that the analysis and interpretation of the responses of the online contributors is open to challenge. Observations obtained from qualitative data are characteristically partial. In analysing the information, therefore, the writer identified what appeared to be recurrent themes in the online contributions in order to draw inferences from views expressed about the pronouncements of Blessed Pope John Paul II's on the subject of education.

There is a linguistic aspect to the enquiry, too, insofar as it can be argued that language is determined within a social and ideological context[35]. The construction and representation of the language of discourse is influenced by the context in which it takes place. Thus, it is acknowledged that, semantically, the themes under review have theological implications that are relevant to the analysis.

Whilst it might be argued that this investigation is very limited and, as a result, the analytical scope may be circumscribed, it does nevertheless reveal concerns that are currently exercising teachers. To this extent, it can contribute to a continuing conversation about the nature and purpose of Catholic education.

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[35] M.M. Bakhtin for example, talks of "speech genres" and, in particular, "utterances", which have a resonance because they are characteristic of the wider (in this case, theological) narrative. M.M. Bakhtin, *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*, Austin 1986, University of Texas Press.

7. Summary

It would be pertinent here to draw together some final reflections upon the postings made by online contributors on this subject. These reflections are presented systematically according to the salient themes were identified above: Faith; Family; Vocation; Mission; and references to Jesus.

Faith

From a phenomenological viewpoint, every online contributor will have presented an individual perspective to share for reflection, so it is perhaps not surprising that they should respond in different ways to the given topic. Whilst there were diverse responses, however, it was possible to identify recurring themes in their postings.

Through an analysis of the online contributions, for example, one impression was that, throughout his writings and speeches on the subject of education, Blessed Pope John Paul II consistently affirmed the spirit of the Second Vatican Council as expressed in its seminal educational document, *Gravissimum Educationis*. Thus, for example, he emphasised that knowledge should at all times be illuminated by faith[36].

It is evident that a faith dimension should pervade all aspects of the Catholic school. Indeed, there is a constant need to promote a consistent, distinctive and specifically Catholic ethos. A challenge for Catholic schools, therefore, is to articulate a clear vision of Christian faith informed by Gospel values.

Family

For some of the teachers who participated in online discussions, John Paul II's (1978) address to the Third International Congress on the Family was noteworthy. In line with Vatican II, John Paul II recognises that the primary role of parents in their children's education is pre-eminent. It is evident in the 1965 conciliar document, *Gravissimum Educationis*, for example, that the role of the family in the education of young people is significant, because, as "…it is the parents who have given life to their children, on them lies the gravest obligation to educate their

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[36] The Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace asserts: "The Church's social doctrine is knowledge enlightened by faith, which, as such, is the expression of a greater capacity for knowledge". Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, Vatican 2004, Vatican Pubs, n. 75.

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family. They must be recognised as being primarily and principally responsible for their education"[37.]

The Church maintains that a child's first encounters with loving relationships should be experienced within the home. The role of the Catholic school is to collaborate with the home. Consequently, the main purpose of the Catholic school is to support parents of the children in their task of educating their children. There are a number of potential implications for Catholic schools in contemporary society, however, with regard to the education of parents, considering the degree to which parents are active in the Church.

In today's society, moreover, there is a question about what is meant by 'family'. Indeed, the assumption that a family represents the marriage of a husband and wife is often open to question. It is interesting to quote, for example, from a sixth form lesson in which students were discussing the question of fidelity in marriage, when a teacher was asked: "Why does my mother say I can't sleep with my boyfriend at the weekend when her boyfriend lives with us all the time?"[38.]

Vocation

Another challenge for Catholic schools relates to teaching as a vocation. With the reduction in the numbers of religious and clergy on the staff in Catholic schools, the physical presence of a vocational life is less evident. Today, teachers in Catholic schools are now almost exclusively drawn from the laity. This has created challenges for teachers with regard to balancing a commitment to teaching as a vocation and the responsibilities of home and family life. How far is teaching to be considered as a vocation and how far it is to be considered as a job of work? There are longer term implications, too, with regard to maintaining the distinctive ethos of the Catholic school[39.]

In addition, there are concerns about the appointment and retention of staff who are conversant with the Catholic ethos and mission. Fewer staff in Catholic schools have received a Catholic education or formation, let alone are

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[37] Pope Paul VI (1965) *Declaration on Christian Education ('Gravissimum Educationis'),* n. 3, in: A. Flannery, *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*, Collegeville 1984, MN: Liturgical Press.

[38] Catholic Education Service, *Education for Love*, London 1998, CES, 18.

[39] A detailed investigation of the concept of teaching as a vocation is elaborated in Lydon's, *The Contemporary Catholic Teacher: A Reappraisal of the Concept of Teaching as a Vocation in the Catholic Christian Context*, Lambert 2011, Academic Publishing: Saarbrucken.

'theologically literate'[40]. There is consequently a need to provide opportunities for spiritual formation.

Mission

The Catholic school also has a responsibility "to hand on the cultural legacy of previous generations"[41]. It would be advantageous, therefore, to provide opportunities for those working in Catholic schools to develop an understanding of the cultural capital[42] that informs their distinctive mission.

There are also wider socio-political and cultural challenges. Of contemporary interest, for example, through their reflections upon the writings and speeches of John Paul II, online contributors indicated concerns about how Catholic schools might balance potential tensions between meeting the secular demands of the state, on the one hand, and fulfilling the faith mission of the Catholic Church, on the other.

Jesus

The values that explicitly arise from the teachings of Jesus Christ make Catholic school communities distinctive. In the Catholic school the commitment to such values arises from the school's mission being based on those teachings. From an analysis of the postings of online contributors, it was, perhaps, unsurprising, therefore, that it was possible to identify in their selection of passages from the work of John Paul II on the subject of education a significant number of references to Jesus Christ.

In the context of contemporary society, Kavanaugh[43] says that there is a "… spiritual crisis at the heart of social and political and economic evils".

Within this spiritual desert, the Catholic school can bring the Good News of Jesus Christ into the lives of young people. The Catholic school, therefore, has

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[40] Weeks (2007), for example, argues that for those working in Catholic schools one contemporary challenge is to raise their level of theological literacy, which he defines as, "… the ability to communicate knowledgeably how the faith of the Church relates to contemporary everyday experience…". See N. Weeks and G. Grace, *Theological Literacy and Catholic Schools*, London 207, Institute of Education, University of London.

[41] *Gravissimum Educationis,* 1965, n. 5.

[42] The notion of cultural capital, which is drawn from the work of Bourdieu, is developed and elaborated in relationship to Catholic education by Grace (2002). Cultural capital refers to the accumulation of cultural traditions and knowledge that will contribute to a particular social formation.

[43] J.K. Kavanaugh, *Following Christ in a Consumer Society*, New York 2004, Orbis, xiv.

the opportunity constantly to respond to the presence of Jesus Christ, by recalling that "…where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them"[44].

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[44] Matthew 18,20.

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