

Finn, A. (2014) Once a Catholic? The impact of changes in Catholic identity and in Catholic schools. Cardinal Winning Lecture, Sir Charles Wilson building, Glasgow, UK, 01 Mar 2014.

Once a Catholic, always a Catholic?

Behind this simplistic assumption, there can often be very different Catholic identities. There are the clergy, those directly involved in religious education and those actively involved in the liturgical or community life of their parish; very traditional Catholics and very progressive Catholics; practising Catholics and converted Catholics; those inactive, non-practising, unable to practise or simply lapsed; and, finally, those whose church affiliation involves their christening, first communion, wedding and funeral. In Spain, this last group is sometimes called *catolicos de cuatro ruedas*, four wheeled Catholics, because they only go to church on special occasions- and generally by car.

Although these groups are very different and have different concepts of church, they all identify themselves as Catholics. (SLIDE2)

And even in this room some Catholics may have different priorities and even different beliefs from the people sitting next to them. If we unite around a common core of belief, is my faith the same as yours?

So, what do we think of when we hear the word 'Catholic' today? Just what is the perception of a Catholic? Whom do men say that I am?

This concept of my own identity as a Catholic and the perceptions it brings with it for others was firmly brought home to me when I was appointed to the post of Chief Executive in the GTCS. The Times Educational Supplement interviewed me about my priorities and reported that the values I had learned when I was growing up in Cumnock in Ayrshire had strongly influenced the way I had gone about my various jobs. Following this article, a number of posts and comments appeared in online forums. Now, online forums, for example football forums, are not the most reliable sources of information and do not always attract the most informed or balanced commentators. On this occasion, a TESS reader, presumably a well-educated teacher, expressed his concern about Catholic values influencing the GTCS, taking the opportunity to criticise the church, its beliefs and, of course, its priests. His views, while supported by some, were quickly shot down by other contributors.

Interestingly, the article never mentioned *Catholic* values or priorities,

just values and priorities. It surprised me therefore that our online orator should make assumptions about the priorities and values which would drive me in my post in GTCS. For, although the article revealed that I had spent many years teaching in working class denominational schools, it said nothing that would justify his apprehensions. These were based uniquely on his attitude towards my religion.

In 1989, as the recently appointed Headteacher of St Andrew's, Kirkcaldy, I had another informative experience. Asked by my parish priest to say something about my vision for the school on Education Sunday, I emphasised the importance of the ethos and spiritual life of the school. I then spoke about the values of our Catholic school, the standards of care and concern which it fostered and, importantly, argued that it provided a valuable education which could improve the life chances of pupils from all backgrounds and abilities. I told them I was from a mining community, from a family which wanted children to better themselves and to gain as much as they could from education. Our Catholic school in Kirkcaldy was well-placed to help their children achieve these same aspirations.

These were my values as a young Catholic Headteacher; and they remain so today. And my priest, who became a good friend, was delighted. He later told me that some parishioners had expected me simply to argue for the retention of Catholic schools and to encourage a "backs to the wall" approach to their defence.

So, how do those of us who are Catholics understand that label in 2014? Is our understanding and expectation of Catholicism the same now as it was when I was a pupil in primary school? Am I the same type of Catholic that my parents or grandparents were? Do young people brought up as Catholics also today think differently? And, of course, what are the implications of these changes for the future of Catholic schools and of the Church in Scotland?

I grew up in Cumnock, which had a very small Catholic population, many of whom belonged to families which had arrived at some time as migrants from Ireland, Italy or the Baltic. Almost everyone I knew attended church and parishioners were generally very compliant in matters of faith; few Catholics questioned the authority of the priest or disagreed, at least in public, with his or church teaching.

Cumnock people were generally very friendly. However, Catholics attended a different church, our names, school and even holidays were

often different; and we sometimes felt misunderstood. Suspicion and distrust of the Catholic minority was not uncommon. I remember sectarian name-calling, brick-throwing, “friends’ telling me I was “OK for a Fenian” and in particular, a rather shady little campaign to stop my father becoming the first Catholic Provost of the town. It is to the town’s credit that he was elected overwhelmingly and became Provost in the burgh’ s centenary year. In 1966, that was still very unusual.

Historians tell us that schools in working class areas were given relatively low educational priority until the 1950s. Smout says that their

*“ education (was) a matter of low social priority once the perceived needs of the middle classes had been attended to ” (SLIDE 3)*

Knox is even more explicit:

*“the educational system catered mainly for an elite section of Scottish society. Although the door to higher education was more open than in England, workers and their families, women and Catholics in general, were excluded. For these groups, education was sparse and the quality poor.*

The Catholic primary school I attended was very much a school for Catholics. The facilities weren’t great - I was in a class of around 50 in P6 and the building was so overcrowded that P3-5 was taught in another building six miles out of the town. The teaching staff, mostly members of the Cross and Passion Order, had a strong focus on the Eucharistic programme, with clear expectations of a shared faith agenda. The school was caring and supportive but its academic aspirations for pupils, especially those from certain backgrounds, were not always high.

History also tells us that minority, underprivileged, populations often use education to improve their life chances. This was certainly the case in the late 50s and 60s when a period of educational expansion led to newer secondary buildings and better resources in schools, including Catholic schools. The arrival of comprehensive education then offered new opportunities from which Catholic schools could benefit. And, consequently, when I started teaching in 1975, Catholic schools had already begun to build a reputation for both the quality of their care and their learning standards.

Andrew McPherson of Edinburgh University confirmed this progress in a survey of examination results in 1989. He found that pupils in Catholic

schools gained the equivalent of one grade more than those in other schools in each examination taken. He attributed this advantage to shared values in a caring school community. Of course, these or similar features can be found in many schools, not just denominational schools: but they are fundamental requirements of the Catholic school and essential to its ethos.

Research of a similar quality has been limited since 1989. However, recent inspection reports suggest that high standards in Catholic schools are generally being maintained, with many denominational schools achieving very good grades in inspection. Of course, some Catholic schools could, and should, do better but the overall pattern of achievement is good.

In preparing for this event, I looked at 99 secondary inspection reports published between 24 February 2012 and 23 February 2014. I restricted my sample by including only local authority schools of a meaningful size, excluding 11 independent schools and some small, all-through schools with tiny secondary departments. I am not claiming that my sample is statistically valid; it has not, for example, been balanced for demography, size or actual exam performance. However, the results are interesting.

On the attached charts, I have plotted the proportion of inspection grades given to schools across the evaluation range used by inspectors. (SLIDES 4-6) In this sample, no unsatisfactory grades were found and the distribution across other grades indicates that most schools in Scotland are performing quite well. However, the overall performance of the 14 Catholic secondary schools within the sample is even better. Not only are Catholic schools regularly judged to be caring, inclusive establishments in which positive values are nurtured, they clearly also offer high quality education and deliver good results.

Associated with this general improvement in the quality of Catholic schools has been the development of a burgeoning Catholic professional class which is now gaining employment in areas which might previously have been impossible.

Education itself has traditionally offered opportunities for progress by minority groups; and this has certainly been the case for Scottish Catholics. In 2013, according to my own analysis, no fewer than 12 of Scotland's 32 Education Directors or leaders, many Heads of non-denominational schools and, of course, the CEO of the GTCS and a former CEO of SQA had all attended Catholic schools in their youth.

In addition, it is no longer uncommon for Catholics to be found in important posts across Scotland's professional, academic or political world. In 2013, for example, Scotland's senior medical officer, Law's Lord President, and the two most recent Lord Advocates were the products of Catholic schools. In Politics, several Cabinet Ministers and Shadow Cabinet Ministers in the last 10 years have a similar background. So, when Helen Liddell became only the second Catholic to hold the office of Secretary of State for Scotland (John Reid was first in 1999) her appointment attracted media comment because she was the first woman to hold the post.

Overall, therefore, this Church now punches above its weight in Scotland. However, as Catholicism developed a more confident role in society, with a larger middle class professional population than ever before, many Catholics began to question more openly elements of church teaching. Many rationalised their concerns and remained active but critical Catholics; others, however, simply discontinued their attendance at Mass.

A decreasing trend in church attendance is, of course, not limited to this church or, indeed, to this country. It is happening across the world with the most severe declines in recent years taking place in Ireland.

In the 2001 census, for example, 16% of Scotland's population identified themselves as being Roman Catholic, which computes to around 816,000 Catholics in a country of 5.1 million. The most recent estimate by the Bishop's Conference (in 2010 but based on figures from 2008), estimates that the Catholic Population is 667,017 and that that average weekly Mass attendance is 185,608, This gives a practising rate of almost 28% of the Bishops' figure (23% of the census figure). (SLIDE 7)

Attendance at Mass is just one indication of Catholic identity. It might have been anticipated, however, that a decline in church attendance would have implications for the sustainability of Catholic schools. Instead, those claiming Catholic identity, often former Catholics, sometimes two generations away from active practice, continued to recognised a value in Catholic schools and chose to enrol their children.

In the latter part of the twentieth century, too, Catholic schools began to enrol pupils whose link to the Church was more distant. Initially, the biggest impact of this was probably in Dumfries and Galloway and, to a lesser extent, in the East of Scotland. When I moved to Fife in 1988, the vast majority of our school's population was still Catholic, even if many

families were not regular church attenders. During my tenure, there was a steady growth of children of other backgrounds, many of them coming directly from successful Catholic primary schools in which they had had very positive experiences. When families sought enrolment, the admission meeting always covered the nature of the school and its values and parents were generally very supportive. Some of the things they said were amusing. To strengthen their case, for example, a number claimed a link to a distant, Catholic past- I used to compare this to the recruitment of footballers to national teams on account of their grandparents' nationality; one told me he didn't know much about the Church but he had met a nun; another, dressed in a Rangers top and with some interesting tattoos, told me he wanted his children to come to the school but didn't want any of that "Catholic stuff" – within a year, he became a huge supporter of the school.

Unfortunately, it was not in our school that my two favourite stories occurred. In one West of Scotland village, a parent fell out with another local school and asked the Head to enrol her three children, adding, "if you need to, just turn them" and my all-time favourite was told by a headteacher who received a request to enrol 5 children, all with different fathers, and all of whom, Mum said, were good Catholics.

Catholic schools, therefore, are currently very popular but they serve a much wider population than was once the case. In the course of the last few weeks, I surveyed a sample of Catholic schools across Scotland and gained data about current patterns of enrolment. Many headteachers with whom I have been in contact found it very difficult to say how many of their pupils are Catholic, partly because Council enrolment systems register only "Christians" and partly because it is more difficult these days to identify what a Catholic is.

The results of the survey are informative. Although not a definitive sample, it shows that the trend of enrolling high numbers of children from less defined religious backgrounds is continuing and expanding.

The enrolment of children of other religious backgrounds remains highest in the East of Scotland and South of Scotland. However, it is now also very common in the West of Scotland and in Central Scotland. Catholic schools which have a very positive reputation -for attainment, for affective development or even for their facilities- are sometimes inundated with placing requests, often at the expense of other local schools. This happens as much in affluent areas as in relatively deprived areas.

To illustrate the diversity of Catholic schools in 2014, I could give examples of secondary schools where over 90% of pupils are “Catholic”; and, indeed, in central Scotland, a number of schools have stated figures of over 80%. On the other hand, without looking too far, I can find Catholic secondary schools where the figure given is around or lower than 50%. In all examples, too, headteachers tell me that practising rates might be as low as 30%.

In primary, quite different patterns are developing, especially in the East. (SLIDE 9) I found examples of schools which had so many placing requests that they were having to restrict entry to those who could prove they were Catholic and/or who already had children in the school. It was also claimed that some families had engaged with the church simply for the purpose of gaining access to a school. One headteacher described this pattern as follows: *“Many families seem to have a 'link' with the church but don't seem keen to state a commitment to it. Those families that have no link with the faith often say when I'm enrolling their children that they feel the children get a better education at a catholic school or that catholic schools have higher standards”*. Heads suggest that families *“like the ethos and promotion of Christian faith and gospel values”* and some cite parents saying *“I went to a Catholic school and I think it teaches right from wrong”* or advise that they *“have children from well-informed Christian backgrounds (eg the children of our local Church of Scotland minister)”*.

Across Scotland, I found some primary schools with very high Catholic populations, as much as 87%- 100% Catholic. But I also found examples of hugely popular schools, often quite small and/or in deprived communities, whose falling roll had then been significantly boosted by the arrival of economic migrants from, for example, Poland and by the increasing enrolment of local pupils of undefined religious backgrounds. In some of these schools, the number of traditional Catholic pupils was remarkably small and, consequently, they no longer delivered an annual sacramental programme. And yet, impressively, every headteacher told me that their school was still a community of faith and that all who enrolled children in the school were aware of and comfortable with its practices.

What is perhaps clear from this summary is that Catholic schools have changed significantly, that many children who attend Catholic schools today have a limited understanding of the Church and that, for them, *the school is the Church*.

Inevitably, too, this led me to look at the religion of teachers in Catholic schools, as lower numbers, especially of practising Catholics, has clear implications for the operation of schools.

The schools survey (SLIDE 9) did not reveal any fixed pattern across Scotland. Generally, most primary schools have a high proportion of Catholic teachers and most secondaries deliver a balanced curriculum with the support of teachers of other backgrounds. There was no clear correlation between schools with low proportions of Catholic pupils and the number of Catholic teachers. Sometimes schools with a very high number of Catholic children had relatively small numbers of Catholic teachers to care for them. In one secondary school, for example, around 33% of teachers were Catholic.

A number of schools across Scotland had experienced difficulties in filling posts, including promoted posts. Directors have also recently advised of difficulties in recruiting good headteachers in some areas, particularly in denominational schools. In one recent case, Scottish Borders Council took quite exceptional steps to appoint a suitable headteacher.

In addition, a number of those who identify themselves as Catholic teachers have the same irregular practice as their pupils and may therefore have little genuine experience of the Church. Of course, many such teachers will support the school's community life and contribute to the wider ethos of a school with great conviction, dedication and commitment. Because of the growth of specialist teachers in secondary, most will not be required to teach RE. Catholic primary teachers, on the other hand, are always expected to teach RE. Some will be delighted to do this and will do it very well; others, however, may be both uncomfortable with this responsibility and unfamiliar with the expectations which it places upon them.

Most Catholic schools, particularly at secondary level, also have quite excellent service from teachers who are not Catholic. In my old school, several such teachers sent their own children to the school and were hugely supportive of its ethos and community life. As well as teaching skill, they brought great value and commitment to the school and we were delighted to have them. But a Catholic school cannot depend on that level of commitment from those who are not Catholic; it also needs a strong complement of reliable Catholic teachers.



In theory, the Church approval system guarantees a steady stream of suitable teachers - and to some extent it does. Approved teacher figures (published by Scottish Government, December 2013) now show a healthy proportion of approved teachers; and I know that SCES considers these figures to be on the low side. (SLIDES 10 and 11).

However, in gathering evidence for this talk, I came across a number of Headteachers who had concerns about aspects of the operation of approval in practice. Some told me that the pattern of granting approval was not always consistent, with some priests signing off forms for teachers whom they hardly knew, while others sought to apply very rigorous, and perhaps unreasonably high, standards.

Headteachers also had concerns about the selection of staff for their schools. As Catholic heads, they want to employ teachers who will be able to support and develop the ethos of their schools as communities of faith. Conscious of their accountability to parents and employers, however, they also want to recruit *high quality* teachers who will maximise pupil achievement. If they are fortunate in selection, heads will have both. However, at times of teacher shortage or, as is currently the case, when employers are reducing staffing complements and transferring staff to save money, heads can face a clash of priorities. If you had to choose between a very good teacher who is not Catholic and what we might best describe as an adequate Catholic teacher, which would you choose? And if you already have in your school a good teacher who is committed to the school but may not be eligible for approval, would you not, like some Heads, become frustrated.

These are very big issues, which are much easier to identify than to resolve; and finding a balanced and appropriate way forward before will be very difficult. Since the reputation of Catholic schools is now built on high standards of learning and achievement, as well as on Catholic ethos, we must however try to find a way to help schools face these challenges, while still ensuring that Catholic ethos is supported and protected. I therefore suggest that the Church should review these issues before they became too difficult to address.

Clearly, Catholic schools also need to adapt their teaching styles, if not perhaps their curriculum - or at least its presentation, to take account of changing patterns. Good teachers never assume that last year's lessons can simply be delivered to this year's cohort; they recognise that their class will contain children of different backgrounds, abilities and levels of interest; and they vary their approach to take account of these

circumstances. Just as a good priest will never assume an exact conformity of belief and understanding in his parishioners, so, too, good teachers will teach the children who are in front of them, taking account of their prior knowledge and experience, seeking to engage their interest in their learning and aiming to maximise reflection about and growth in understanding and knowledge. Consequently, a series of lessons on the same or a similar topic can be delivered differently to groups of children in different parts of Scotland.

For teachers, these are fairly basic and familiar concepts. But if they are important in the History or Maths classroom, they are equally important in the teaching of Religious Education. In the past, we openly depended on practising Catholic teachers teaching Catholic children in Catholic schools. We should now accept that these days have probably gone.

Looking back, I remember a number of teachers who, while qualified in other subjects, were quite uncomfortable and unsure of their knowledge of Religious Education, yet were asked to teach it. Wearing my GTCS hat, I consider that Catholics with a teaching qualification in another subject are not professionally equipped to teach this important part of the curriculum. Like other secondary Heads, I increased the number of specialist RE teachers in my school with the intention that religious education would always be delivered professionally by teachers who really understood the issues in an RE class and knew how to teach them. And yet, despite this, I did not want RE to be seen as just another subject on the curriculum.

The information I have shared with you today has implications for the future of our schools and we must consider these implications carefully. There will no doubt be those who will regret these demographic changes and may even bemoan the fact that young people no longer attend church in the numbers that they once did. Indeed, in some parishes, very few young people of school age attend.

I take a different view. Teachers have an opportunity to support and nurture young people as they develop positive values and commitments which will be of value to them, to society and perhaps even to the church, in later life. I rejoice in the work of young people in Catholic schools, in their remarkable commitment to charity, their care and commitment for families and for the local and international community. When I attended the Caritas Award ceremony, for example, I met young people who put important values into practice, whose lives are an example to all of us. They put Christ's message into practice in a way which is both inspiring

and meaningful. Regardless of religious practice, they have an energy, a spiritual energy, which we should cherish and support.

We also need to listen to their views. Young people often consider that the Church judges them, and indeed others, too much. Like many older Catholics, they want to see a more modern, listening church (but perhaps not too modern SLIDE 12) and they are more inclined to respond to a Church which, like Pope Francis, seeks to re-emphasise the value of living a simple Christian life, with commitment to and understanding of others, even those who behave in ways that we might not approve of:

*The Lord is compassion and love,  
slow to anger and rich in mercy.  
He does not treat us according to our sins  
nor repay us according to our faults*

Pope Francis, indeed, makes his own views very clear: (SLIDE 13)

*It hurts to see how in some Christian communities, and even among consecrated persons, we consent to various forms of hatred, slander, defamation, revenge, jealousy, desire to impose our own ideas at any cost, and even persecution that seems like a relentless witchhunt. Who are we going to evangelise with that behaviour?" Pope Francis 2013*

Today's young people are our conscience when they tell us they are unhappy that western governments' belief in a market-driven materialism has widened the gap between rich and poor, leaving us with the disgrace of food banks in 21<sup>st</sup> century Scotland (SLIDE 14); that we have been involved in too many wars in the last forty years; and that we need to give priority to our work here on earth. Who or what is guiding them when they tell us this?

What I am trying to say is again better expressed by Pope Francis himself (SLIDE 15):

*"Because faith is a way, it also has to do with the lives of those men and women who, though not believers, nonetheless desire to believe and continue to seek. To the extent that they are sincerely open to love and set out with whatever light they can find, they are already, even without knowing it, on the path leading to faith. They strive to act as if God existed, at times because they realize how important he is for finding a sure compass for our life in common or because they experience a desire*

*for light amid darkness, but also because in perceiving life's grandeur and beauty they intuit that the presence of God would make it all the more beautiful.*

(....)

*Any-one who sets off on the path of doing good to others is already drawing near to God, is already sustained by his help, for it is characteristic of the divine light to brighten our eyes whenever we walk towards the fullness of love. (Lumen Fidei, December 2013)*

In today's talk, I have suggested strongly that we should become more positive in talking about catholic education, stressing its value and its values and putting behind us any residual recidivist defence of an outdated image of the Catholic school. Instead, we should be very proud of the progress which has been made and the standards which have been attained by Catholic schools, progress which has offered life chances to Catholics (and, increasingly, to children of other faiths) which by far outweigh the aspirations of those responsible for the 1918 Act; progress which is now attractive to those of many faiths and none. We should celebrate the fact that our schools generally offer admirable service to the communities which they serve, whether advantaged or disadvantaged, whether Catholic or of other faiths.

As Scotland prepares for a referendum in which it will decide whether it should become an independent state, mature enough to take its own decisions, our country must also be mature enough to accept that there is a continuing demand for denominational schools. A Scottish Government report has recently stated that there is no evidence at all that the presence of denominational schools helps to promote sectarianism. Catholic schools are not narrow or inward-looking; they provide positive service to very wide communities. They never did and never could support such an evil prejudice.

And if our country needs to act maturely, so too does our church. Despite the Church's difficulties in recent years, the Christian message still commands support from Catholics. Pope Francis has made an excellent start in changing the Church's image, and so have Cardinal Vincent Nichols in England and Archbishop Tartaglia here in Glasgow. Let us accept the mistakes of the past, with humility and sorrow, and move forward to a fairer, more open and mature, less defensive Catholic church, which is a beacon for good in this country.

And in our schools, we might do worse than bear in mind the work of Oscar Romero, Archbishop of San Salvador, who was shot on the steps of his own cathedral because he stood up for the rights of the poor. This is his prayer and it could easily be ours: (SLIDES 16 and 17)

*It helps, now and then, to step back and take a long view.  
The kingdom is not only beyond our efforts, it is even beyond our vision.*

*We accomplish in our lifetime only a tiny fraction of the magnificent enterprise that is God's work. Nothing we do is complete, which is a way of saying that the Kingdom always lies beyond us.*

*No statement says all that could be said.  
No prayer fully expresses our faith.  
No confession brings perfection.  
No pastoral visit brings wholeness.  
No program accomplishes the Church's mission.  
No set of goals and objectives includes everything.*

*This is what we are about.*

*We plant the seeds that one day will grow.  
We water seeds already planted, knowing that they hold future promise.  
We lay foundations that will need further development.  
We provide yeast that produces far beyond our capabilities.  
We cannot do everything, and there is a sense of liberation in realizing that.*

*This enables us to do something, and to do it very well.*

*It may be incomplete, but it is a beginning, a step along the way, an opportunity for the Lord's grace to enter and do the rest.*

*We may never see the end results, but that is the difference between the masterbuilder and the worker.*

*We are workers, not master builders; ministers, not messiahs.  
We are prophets of a future not our own.*

Anthony Finn  
1 March 2014