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David Austin

The Eucharist
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The Eucharist in the Catholic School

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This reflection is written against the background of the changing patterns in Catholic practice, particularly in Western countries, which challenge the Church in dealing with those who are ‘un-churched’. The Eucharist is at the centre of Catholic life and so with that conviction I offer some principles that I believe are applicable in a range of pastoral settings and cultures, even where Catholic practice remains relatively strong.

My focus here is on the Catholic school but always acknowledging parents as the first and best teachers of their children and recognising the central role of the worshipping community of the parish. Much of the content will be familiar but I hope this synthesis will be a useful resource for teachers who are charged with the responsibility of supporting parents in the faith formation of children through their commitment to quality Catholic schools. Catechists too may find food for thought in these lines as they reach out to the many children attending public schools and their families.

The place of the Catholic school in relation to the parish will vary from place to place, some as an integral part of the parish community, others serving a particular region or wider community. The role of the priest is crucial and so I include some reflections which I trust will be personally helpful and encourage confidence in those called to preside.

I write with great hope that the charismatic witness and pastoral example of Pope Francis will help reawaken Catholics to the presence of our loving God, even when we may forget that his grace and love continue to accompany us at every moment.

THE EUCHARIST IN THE LIFE OF THE CHURCH

‘The Mass is something to love!’ This statement by former Archbishop of Brisbane, John Bathersby describes very simply what the Eucharist should be for us and what we should wish for our children. Though it is theologically complex, somehow the

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Eucharist needs to touch the everyday lives of ordinary Catholics – child, adolescent and adult – for whom the Eucharist is the unique gift of Jesus’ flesh and blood, his very self, and the celebration and expression of our true identity as the Church, the Body of Christ. The Eucharist is Jesus’ gift to the Church and it is the gift of the Church to the faithful, including our children. Indeed it is a matter of our very identity!

Through Baptism, each is called to grow in the knowledge and experience of his/her faith, and this includes participation in the Eucharist. Whatever our age, we are continually ‘becoming’ the Body of Christ, becoming what we ‘see’ and what we ‘receive’. The crushing of wheat to make the one loaf and the crushing of grapes to make the one cup symbolise the profound nature of our personal life and faith journey in which all the different seasons of our human experience help us grow into the Body of Christ.

Many Catholics need a deeper understanding of what is happening at Mass. In my experience, a good place to start is with the basic structure of the Mass, what each part is about, and how we can participate in each – *Gathering Rite, Liturgy of the Word, Liturgy of the Eucharist* and *Communion/Dismissal Rites*. Appreciation of the *experience* of the Mass can be brought to life through reflection on the rhythm, pace and moods of the liturgy, how the different elements interact with one another – sound and silence, movement and stillness, speech and song, and so on – and how we respond (cf *Environment and Art in Catholic Worship* n 25).

Other essential understandings which enhance Eucharistic participation include the various ways in which Christ is present – in the Assembly, the Word, the Eucharistic elements, and the person of the Priest (cf CSL n 7). In the school’s efforts to embody and express a Catholic identity, what could be more powerful than the realisation of the importance of the assembly? This is expressed very clearly in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (n 1141). Christ is present in the assembly and children need to learn to be the assembly. These elements are fundamental aspects of the celebration and a growing appreciation and experience of Eucharist in these areas strengthen our identity as Church.

Far from being a private devotion or prayer, the Eucharist becomes what we do together – gathering in community, listening to the Word, praying for the Church and the world, receiving the Body and Blood of Christ *together* – after which we are sent forth changed to ‘glorify the Lord by our life’ and ‘announce the Gospel of the Lord’.

Thus the Eucharist *forms* us and this formative dimension of liturgical celebration is expressed beautifully in the document *Music in Catholic Worship* published in 1972 but still relevant

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today – ‘Faith grows when it is well expressed in celebration. Good celebrations foster and nourish faith. Poor celebrations may weaken and destroy it’ (n 6).

Our understanding of Eucharist is deepened by our reflection on the experiences of our lives and the lives of those around us in union with the humanity of Christ who chose to share our human condition. Jesus seeks to make his home in us and have us make our home in him, and he does this in the most special way through the intimacy of the Eucharist

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For many children and their families, Catholic schools provide their primary – and often *only* – experience of Church. Our schools seek to sow the seeds of faith and are in the unique position of being able to teach children the fundamental truths about the Eucharist, prepare them carefully to participate in liturgical celebrations, and extend them in their experience of faith.

Catholic schools are very successful in *building community* and *faith-community* at that, so why not name that reality, and name it again and again? The Eucharist belongs in this setting and its celebration within the school community is an essential element of the experience of formation in the faith which is the Catholic school’s primary task, supporting the role of parents as the first teachers of their children in matters of faith.

Catholic Schools exist within the framework of the Church for the purposes of evangelisation and catechesis of children and their families and, as far as possible, the experience of Catholic schooling must be an experience of Church. Schools must operate out of a ‘clear ecclesiology’ and so every Catholic school must strive to be a *worshipping community*.

This is a major challenge in an age where many Catholics no longer practise their faith as they once did, yet this must not detract from what the Eucharist means and the power of this Sacrament to form us, sometimes in spite of our human weakness. Regular Catholic practice cannot be presumed among all staff and so staff formation becomes a priority, both in personal faith development and in their capacity to form children in faith through leading them in prayer.

The Catholic School has a duty to exhibit and encourage in its community a sense of *Catholic identity*. Through our experience of family life, we grow to understand who we are and what it means to be a member of our particular family. Our ‘experience’ of being Church in turn opens up for us what it means to be Catholic, particularly through the Sacraments and worship. Catholic schools have a special responsibility in this regard and helping children

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develop a sense of Catholic identity is invariably something that our Catholic schools do very well.

The Catholic school should be ‘different’ from a school that is not Catholic, not in an elitist sense but in the sense of being a strong Christian community. This sense of community expresses a faith dimension and the deeper realities of what it means to be ‘Church’ and part of the Body of Christ. Experiences of prayer and worship together form and strengthen the community, particularly through the celebration of the Eucharist.

Liturgy expresses, celebrates and forms us in our faith. Participation of children in school Masses is fundamental to the experience of a Catholic education, preparing them for that ‘*full, conscious and active participation*’ to which the Church calls us (CSL n 14). This is the right and duty of the faithful by reason of their baptism - including children.

In fact, the Church affirms the place of the Eucharist in the life of the school and its programme of formation in faith through the liturgy and makes this clear in the publication of the *Directory for Masses with Children* and the *Children’s Lectionary*, as well as the *Eucharistic Prayers for Masses with Children*. To exclude children from participation in the Eucharist is to exclude them from the heart of the Christian story. Consider the following:

A fully Christian life is unthinkable without participation in the celebration of the Eucharist. Hence the religious initiation of children should have the same object. The Church, which baptises infants and entrusts them with the gifts conferred by this sacrament, should make sure that they grow in communion with Christ and with the Christian community. The sign and pledge of this communion is to share in the Eucharistic table ... (*Directory for Masses with Children* n 8).

Church documents stress the need to consider the special receptivity proper to children’s age and growth. The experience of liturgy needs to be comprehensible to them, both through celebrations of Eucharist and other liturgical rituals which are appropriate to a child’s age and faith development. Liturgical celebrations and prayer in schools also expose children to Catholic ritual and symbolism, liturgical language, different ways of praying, and an appreciation of the ‘sacred’ and of God’s presence in our hearts – extending children in their experience of faith.

Celebration of the Eucharist in schools occurs in the context of the broader ‘*operating model*’ of a Catholic School which reflects a particular model/style of Church – in its ethos, atmosphere, values, sense of community, spirit of welcome, student and staff

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management, pastoral care, leadership style, curriculum, quality of teaching, meaning of learning, as well as its view of human nature, success/failure, strength/weakness.

The principles of the Catholic School are grounded in ‘ecclesial principles’ and are influenced by the ‘ecclesiology’ of the local diocese, the school’s patron saint, and the unique charism of the religious congregation that founded the school and/or operates the school. This multi-faceted ‘model’ not only colours how we do liturgy in the school but opens up many opportunities for creativity in teaching children to pray and forming them in faith.

The life of the school consists of a structured timetable of terms, learning cycles, cultural and sporting events – some even being described as ‘seasons’! Liturgy lends itself to being incorporated into the life of the school, particularly through celebrating the Seasons of the Liturgical Year but also particular occasions of celebration and significance – achievements, successes, anniversaries, losses, struggles, crises – the joyful and the tragic. The school community is touched, often very deeply, by every human experience and emotion.

THE CHALLENGES

Changing patterns in Catholic practice continue to impact significantly on the Church and, even among those who describe themselves as ‘Catholic’, the percentage who attend Mass weekly has fallen. Many attend less regularly, while others do not come at all. Families are often ‘time-poor’ and rely more and more on the school to teach ritual and form children in faith. This is a great challenge to the Catholic school as it seeks appropriate policy and practice in relation to school Masses and liturgies.

Existing in the wider social context and being subject to guidelines from education authorities and other regulatory bodies place further pressures on the Catholic school, often through increased demands in subjects and time to teach and assess. Besides being good schools, Catholic schools must maintain their focus on their religious mission and meet the challenges of those whom they serve.

The broader and often negative impact of our secular society on individuals and families affects the values, outlook and expectations of members of the school community, including staff, and presents considerable challenges to the school in its calling to be a Christian community and to the wider Church in meeting people where they are at in their daily lives.

Besides coming to know and grow in a personal relationship with Jesus, being exposed to the explicit mission of the Catholic school, to strong Religious Education and Personal Development

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programmes, to Catholic action through social justice initiatives, and to the communal dimension of prayer and worship can help children grow in a faith which will sustain them in their adult lives. Every one of us needs to discover the living presence of Jesus in our hearts and know his grace that changes us. Coming to faith is in fact a lifetime task.

It is easy to forget that each member of the community is at a different stage in his/her faith journey and this includes children, parents, families and staff. Might we include priests and religious here as well? The fact that each of us is 'unfinished' makes it all the more imperative that the school help children to see the face of Jesus in the community of the Catholic school and in the experiences of liturgy and prayer that are part of the everyday routine.

Is it too bold a statement to suggest that baptised children should enjoy the same rights as baptised adults when it comes to liturgy? At the same time, young people's experiences of liturgy need to be formative and should not be separate from their formation in the faith and the development of their devotional life so that they can learn to pray the liturgy and pray in their personal life.

Children who are not Catholic should be expected to participate to the extent that they are able. While technically this makes attendance at school Masses 'compulsory', these gatherings are an essential part of the school programme and under normal circumstances attendance is a reasonable expectation and not a violation of a child's conscience. In a specific circumstance, a child, either Catholic or non-Catholic, might be excused for a serious reason.

Given the nature of Catholic practice, or lack thereof, children need to be given clear guidelines for receiving Holy Communion or simply approaching the priest or minister for a blessing. While done differently in various parishes and school communities, the blessing has a significant impact when it is done well. As well as being inclusive, this may also be a way of helping students and their families to face up to the 'gaps' in their lives in terms of their faith development and what being a 'practising' Catholic really means.

To make attendance at school Masses 'optional' contradicts the purpose of why the Catholic school exists in the first place. It is even less logical than making Mathematics or English classes optional. All are part of the school's curriculum and the parents' agreement with the school at the time of enrolment. The life of faith can never have the status of being an 'option' among others in the Catholic school.

Parents enrolling children in a Catholic school must agree to support the values of the school and accept that their children

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will participate in all aspects of school life, including Religious Education and liturgical celebrations. Sadly on occasion, some parents' desire to have their child attend a Catholic school is not matched by their own openness to being part of a worshipping community and the process of faith development.

A WAY FORWARD

Celebrating the Eucharist in the Catholic school is not a simple issue but we may need to take some risks, while at the same time protecting the Sacrament. Reverence for the Eucharist may be enhanced by having the Blessed Sacrament reserved in the school chapel, prayer room or other 'sacred space' where students can visit and pray.

The basic principles of good liturgical celebration need to be followed so that the emphasis is on *participation* rather than *performance*. This will help priests to preside with dignity and warmth and not feel that they need to do a 'song and dance' routine to keep students' attention. In my experience, children have a genuine openness to being led in prayer, including at Eucharist. When properly prepared, they expect something special to happen and are open to it.

While the school has a special role in integrating the Eucharist into the life of the school community, basic guidelines need to come from those responsible for Catholic Education which reflect the values, rationale and policy of the Diocese. A pastoral and people-friendly approach is preferred here, one that emphasises invitation and participation in liturgy rather than discouraging participation. It is difficult to imagine a Diocese excluding the celebration of the Eucharist from the life of any Catholic school.

Addressing these issues in a positive context of our call to be Church would seem to offer genuine hope. In the final analysis, it is hardly reasonable to expect children to embrace attendance at Mass in their later years if they have been denied the experience of the Eucharist along the way. Simply to learn about the Eucharist in class may prepare the mind but on its own runs the risk of being knowledge divorced from experience when a sincere love of the Mass must come from the heart where we hunger for and experience God.

Of course, a genuine fear is that schools may provide a more attractive experience of liturgy than the local parish. This is a most difficult area to address but it remains a parish responsibility to help all members of the community to feel included. Carefully planned, parish sacramental programmes which are welcoming and involve the wider parish community are crucial. In addition, schools are often in a position actively to promote the importance

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of participation in parish worship, particularly parish primary schools where a close partnership already exists. In secondary schools, there may need to be more dialogue with pastors of feeder parishes.

Celebrating Masses for children is very demanding, yet it is essential for priests to have a positive relationship with students as this will enhance the experience of liturgy. Presiding is not easy and some priests face significant challenges when asked to preside at school liturgies – including that of communicating in a way that is easily understood by children of different ages, keeping the homily simple, feeling comfortable in different settings and with simplified rituals, and perhaps overcoming lack of confidence, self-doubt or feelings of fear (even terror!) at the prospect of facing 1,000 children in a chapel, hall or gymnasium.

Might we consider developing some materials for priests to help them overcome these concerns – even sharing at a Deanery meeting where priests can discuss their joys, successes, anxieties and fears in presiding at school Masses? Might those of us who are priests benefit from having someone help us look closely at, and reflect upon, our presiding style?

Young people need to know that their priests love them and school Masses offer us unique opportunities to demonstrate this. Encouragement and affirmation are essential dimensions of our communication with children, especially in a liturgical setting where we can challenge them to embrace ‘goodness of life’. Speaking of affirmation, our teachers need plenty of this too, especially our RE teachers!

Every one of us, I’m sure, is serious about helping young people find in the liturgy ‘something to love’. The awkwardness of adolescence should not dampen our spirit in offering Eucharist in schools. Growing up is not easy and children need to learn that it’s okay to believe in Jesus, okay to pray, okay to be religious, okay to go to Mass. In fact, those who attend Mass regularly should be encouraged to become ministers – servers, lectors, ministers of communion, welcomers – and be accepted in their home parishes in these roles.

Parents are the primary educators of their children and an integral part of how we respond to this issue. Schools and parishes can support parents through appropriate catechesis. Many parents need to learn that a school Mass or liturgy is not a performance but a prayer that calls for their participation too. Careful catechesis of parents is well within the capacities of our schools, particularly primary schools where parental presence at school celebrations is often strong but not always reflective of participation.

And there is a crucial need of backup in the home – the real

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challenge of Religious Education programmes to provide resources for parents, including aids for family prayer. Simply harping on the 'obligation to go to Mass' will not succeed with people today, especially when some celebrations do not 'nourish' their faith or speak to them where they are at in their lives.

How often should schools celebrate Eucharist? Many schools gather for a whole school Mass once per term. Class or unit Masses may be celebrated from time to time, sometimes weekly or as part of a scheduled Parish Mass, depending on availability of a priest.

In the final analysis, our concern is the growth in faith among our children, staff and families, and helping them feel comfortable and at home in this regard. On every occasion, Jesus met people where they were at and faith emerged. The Emmaus story is one such event, '*They recognised Jesus in the breaking of bread*' (Luke 24:31). Perhaps Jesus' response to the disciples of John who asked him, '*Where do you live?*' might be his very response to our young people and to ourselves, '*Come and see!*' (John 1:38f).

Our wish surely is that all the children graduating from our Catholic schools would do so as committed, practising Catholics. However, if that is our criterion for success, then we will be very disappointed. It is hardly realistic in our time but it does not mean that our schools have failed. We can only do the best we can. And lest we feel that our efforts are futile or that it all depends on us, we need to remember that the Eucharist is about who we are – the Body of Christ!

A positive attitude among students towards the Church, indeed a love for the Church, might be the best foundation we can provide. Our Holy Father Pope Francis sets a wonderful example for us here and the late Bishop of Townsville, Michael Putney shares words of hope:

We have to continue to believe that we can inspire a new generation of young people to fall in love with the same Christ, the same Triune God, the same eucharist and the same troubled but beautiful Church which we know so well and sometimes forget how much we love' (*Vatican Council II: Reforming Liturgy* p xxii).

In all this, we are never alone – it is firstly God's work! Faith is not just about our believing in God, it is about God's believing in us - and he does!