

LIVING VICARIOUSLY: SOME IMPLICATIONS OF THE NEW EVANGELIZATION FOR CATHOLIC SCHOOLS

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This paper argues that the New Evangelization of Pope John Paul II is an appropriate response to a culture where vicarious expression is becoming a dominant mode of religious affiliation. Vicarious religious affiliation described variously as a type of practical atheism, providing a metaphorical safety net or keeping intact a tenuous religious memory has clear implications for Catholic schools. Schools no longer can rely on the committed and ongoing support of parents and others and must clearly reemphasize their distinctiveness in a marketplace that is replete with religious options. One way of doing this is to cultivate a strong religious identity

An Overview of the New Evangelization

The key reference point for the new evangelization is the encyclical letter, *Redemptoris Missio* of Pope John Paul II.¹ This encyclical occurred in an historical continuum starting with the conciliar decree on missionary activity *Ad Gentes* and Pope Paul VI's apostolic exhortation, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*. In this regard, it provides an example of the Catholic understanding of tradition as both conserving the essentials of the past as well as responding to new realities and challenges.²

For Pope John Paul II, this new phase of evangelization was not new in the sense of being an innovation that moved beyond the Church's traditional mission of proclaiming the Gospel to all nations. However, a new sense of evangelization emerged

¹ John Paul II, Encyclical Letter, *Redemptoris Missio*, in J. Michael Miller (Ed) *The Encyclicals of John Paul II*, (Huntington, Indiana; Our Sunday Visitor Inc, 1996).

² This dynamic and personalist understanding of tradition is spelled out by Dulles. Avery Dulles, *The Reshaping of Catholicism: Current Challenges in the Theology of Church*, (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1988), 75-93. Here Dulles acknowledges the contribution of Blondel to this notion.

from the teachings of the Second Vatican Council, and in the social reality of many Western countries.³ Pope John Paul II identified three elements in the Church's commitment to evangelization. The first was the essential missionary focus of the Church on proclaiming the Gospel of Christ to those who have not heard it. This remains the proper, or classical, sense of the term. The second element focused on those with strong Christian affiliation who were "fervent in their faith and Christian living".⁴ However, there was a third, intermediary element, it is from here that the new evangelization takes its meaning.

Particularly in countries with ancient Christian roots, and occasionally in the younger Churches as well, where entire groups of the baptized have lost a sense of the faith, or even no longer consider themselves members of the Church, and live a life far removed from Christ and his gospel. In this case what is needed is a "new evangelization" or a "re-evangelization".⁵

The Pope's understanding of evangelization has clear points of reference in *Redemptoris Missio*, these being that evangelization is fundamental to the Church's mission and has its origins in the Trinity itself.⁶ It is always focused on faith in and a personal encounter with Christ, and this results in a profound experience of conversion;⁷ evangelization is the task of the entire Church and is concretely located in the activity of the local Church.⁸ It seeks to engage and transform culture, takes place in a variety of contexts and should, therefore, be creative in a bold range of expressions so as to address new situations.⁹

³ Dulles, *Reshaping*, 144-149.

⁴ RM, 33.2.

⁵ RM, 33.3.

⁶ RM, 46.

⁷ RM, 41-49.

⁸ RM, 72.

⁹ RM, 32.

The New Evangelization as a Response to Contemporary Culture

The new evangelization is a response to a well documented decline in religious commitment in many countries that share a strong historical Christian association. This weakening can be understood in a variety of ways. An important theoretical perspective on the weakening association of post-conciliar Catholics with the Church, with manifold implications for Catholic education, is offered by the notion of vicarious religion. Davie, coined the phrase “believing without belonging” to describe the religious affiliation of many Europeans.¹⁰ Kavanaugh writing from an American perspective also develops some similar ideas under the heading of “a culture of lived atheism”.¹¹ In these views, belief is best understood by fairly generic metaphysical categories rather than orthodox Christian beliefs.¹² In these terms most people are believers as the alternative, an unadorned atheism, is not a position many are comfortable identifying with, a point made by a number of influential modern theologians.¹³ Solle argued that the notion of atheism needs to be re-considered to avoid overemphasizing its ideological or philosophical basis. She pointed out that the classical distinctions between atheism and theism are no longer

¹⁰ Grace Davie, *Religion in Britain since 1945: Believing Without Belonging*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994).

¹¹ John Kavanaugh, *Following Christ in a Consumer Society*. (Maryknoll, NY.: Orbis Books, 25th Anniversary Edition, 2006), 112.

¹² This definition of belief is described as a soft form of secularization by Voas and Crockett. David Voas and Andrew Crockett, Religion in Britain: Neither Believing nor Belonging, *Sociology*, 2005, 39: 11-28. Mason and his colleagues comment that many of these beliefs would be more accurately characterized as “inconsequential opinions on matters religious”, Michael Mason, Andrew Singleton and Ruth Webber, *The Spirit of Generation Y: Young People's Spirituality in a Changing Australia*. (Melbourne: John Garrett Publishing, 2007), 56

¹³ In the post war period de Lubac addresses three kinds of modern “humanistic” atheism, the Nietzschean perhaps being closest to what is being discussed here. Henri deLubac, *The Drama of Atheistic Humanism*, (New York: New American Library, 1963), 5. Rahner devotes much to a discussion of atheism, identifying four basic pillars. See, Karl Rahner (ed), ‘Atheism’, *Sacramentum Mundi: An Encyclopedia of Theology*, (New York: Herder&Herder, 1968), I, 117-119. There is also some overlap with Kung’s notion of “secular quasi-religiousness”, Kung, *God*, 555-556.

descriptive, due in large part to a fracturing of a unified definition of atheism.¹⁴ Many are in effect living out a type of pragmatic atheism which does not see itself as a counterpoint to any ideological or theological position. In distinguishing between different kinds of atheism, Kasper supported this idea. He described the dominant form of atheism, at least in a European context, as a practical one which is not a denial of God but which regards an indifference to God as the most rational position to take.¹⁵ An important manifestation of this attitude is a willingness to agree with what Solle saw as superficial statements such as “Do you believe in God”, but bewilderment with more substantive questions that make real demands on belief and action.¹⁶ This has a parallel in Davie’s terminology where belonging as typified by participation in Church rituals such as sacramental worship for Catholics or strong identification the Church’s moral teaching is markedly on the decline.¹⁷ Religious affiliation then acts as a metaphorical safety net. Its main purpose is to help people in difficult times but it is not regularly used. Brown described this as very restricted use of religion, in times of crises, as an example of its “functional irrelevance’ in the lives of many people.¹⁸

This idea of religion as a safety net can be extended to a generalized argument about the nature of religious belief in contemporary culture. The attitude to the Church of many Catholics is not hostile. The typical pattern of religious socialization has been

¹⁴ Dorothee Solle, *Thinking About God: An Introduction to Theology*, (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1990), 171-182.

¹⁵ Walter Kasper, *The God of Jesus Christ*, (New York: Crossroad, 1996), esp. 7-12. The other two forms of atheism are a cerebral type, which rejects the “God hypothesis”, and one that arises out of harsh life experiences, 16-26. Bibby makes a similar point when he describes the many so-called atheists, a-theists, that is not really denying the existence of God but holding a type of theism, Bibby, *Restless Churches*, 1.

¹⁶ Kasper, *Jesus Christ*, 183-195, at 186.

¹⁷ Certainly in Britain a key question that cannot be addressed fully here is how long a person can hold religious beliefs, or perhaps more to the point orthodox Christian beliefs, without belong to a community. This issue is discussed further in Steven Bruce, ‘The Truth about Religion in Britain’, *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 1995, 34, 417-430.

¹⁸ L.B. Brown, *The Psychology of Religious Belief*, (Orlando,FL.: Academic Press, 1987). 217

weak and has left few scars. The Church exists and this is a good thing, many feel in some way part of it, albeit, in a distant sense. Nonetheless, having the Church there makes people feel comfortable, it is reassuring to know that there are committed religious believers as long as there is no expectation that one must join them. This attitude has been called vicarious religion, which Davie defined as “the willingness of the population to delegate the religious sphere to the professional ministry of the state Churches”.¹⁹ In terms of the new evangelization this delegation of responsibility results inevitably, if not immediately, in a loss of personal connection to the faith community. Given the choice, few people would want a metaphysical safety net removed. One of the strongest manifestations of this is religious affiliation in the Nordic countries and Germany. Here people pay substantial taxes to keep Church’s running in some style. Bureaucracies are staffed, buildings, especially churches, are maintained and special events funded. The population takes great civic pride in preserving their heritage and does not want to see the substantial signs of the past disappear. There is, however, in terms of Christian commitment, a Potemkin quality about all of this. Religion does not play a significant part in the lives of most people.²⁰ The exception is, perhaps, in times of crisis such as a disaster or the death of a popular public figure, or at significant life transition points.

This sentiment is well captured in following quote, provided by Bibby:

Some observers maintain that few people today are actually abandoning their religious traditions. Rather, they draw selective beliefs and practices, even if they do not attend services frequently. They are not about to be recruited by other religious groups. Their identification with the religious tradition is fairly solidly fixed, and it is to these

¹⁹ Grace Davie, *Religion in Modern Europe: A Memory Mutates*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 59.

²⁰ This attitude has been described, as a pun on Davie's original term, as belonging without believing.

groups that they will turn when confronted with marriage, death and, frequently, birth.²¹

In the United States a similar phenomenon, namely, a loose, non directive type of religious affiliation amongst youth and young people has been noted.²² Many young people do not seem to be very interested in increasing the strength of their religious affiliation or in exploring new spiritual paths. Smith and Denton in their landmark study encapsulated this mentality well when they wrote:

The majority of U.S. youth appear to believe that it is okay for others to be eclectic seekers, but they themselves are not particularly interested. They seem happy being part of the tradition they were raised in, which to them looks largely satisfactory even if it is not terribly central or important.²³

Certainly, most emerging adults see religion as having a positive effect as a place where basic moral principles are acquired, but beyond this religion has an increasingly minor role to play. This reduction of religion to morality by American teenagers has been powerfully encapsulated by Dean as “the triumph of the cult of nice”.²⁴ Smith and Snell describe the prevalent view among many emerging adults as that they have “graduated” from religion in the sense that they have gained from it all that they need and have now moved on.²⁵ A number of American researchers have provided a perspective on some of the implication of this lack of strong commitment for of Catholic educational institutions in the United States.²⁶ Commenting on the generational differences amongst American Catholics, D’Antonio and his colleagues have noted much less commitment among the

²¹ Reginald W. Bibby, ‘Secularization and Change’ in W.E. Hewitt, (Ed), *The Sociology of Religion: A Canadian Focus*, (Toronto: Butterworths, 1993), 65-80, at 79.

²² Kenda Creasy Dean, *Practicing Passion*. (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2004),

²³ Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teens*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 266.

²⁴ Kenda Creasy Dean, *Almost Christian: What the Faith of our teenagers is telling the American Church*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), chapter 2.

²⁵ Christian Smith with Patricia Snell, *Souls in Transition: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of Emerging Adults*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 286-287.

²⁶ William V. D’Antonio, James D. Davidson, Dean R. Hoge, and Katherine Meyer, *American Catholics: Gender, Generation and Commitment*. (New York: Alta Mira Press, 2001).

millennial generation. They comment: “If a sizeable number of young adults do not understand their faith well enough to explain it to their own children, they have a problem, and so does the Church.”²⁷

The chain of memory

Vicarious religion also serves as a link to the historical memory of religion.²⁸ It is a tenuous link to a metanarrative that no longer figures in the lives of many who cannot, nonetheless, bring themselves to part from it entirely. In ways that many cannot articulate, the religious memory connects the immediate to the ultimate and this is what gives it its enduring quality. To live without these chains, or rather to live when these chains have been suddenly severed, is to be rootless and drifting in a sea of indistinguishable choices and possibilities – a very postmodern image.²⁹ Over time other chains of memory will emerge and individuals will re-orientate themselves to a new reality based on the bonds that have developed to replace the old ones. This process takes time and can be unsettling, so it is no surprise that many in Western countries seek to keep alive the memories that they have. It is unlikely, however, that these bonds will ever become strong and compelling in the sense that they have a direct or decisive influence on how people live.

²⁷ William V. D’Antonio, James V. Davidson, Dean R. Hoge and Mary Gautier, *American Catholics Today: New Realities of Their Faith and Their Church*. (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2007), 83.

²⁸ This idea is developed in Daniele Hervieu Leger, *Religion as a Chain of Memory*, (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2000).

²⁹ For a contrasting view on how choice impacts on religious vitality see, Mary Jo Neitz, *Charisma and Community: A Study of Religious Commitment within the Charismatic Renewal*, (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 1987), 257-258; Lynn Davidman, *Tradition in a Rootless World: Women Turn to Orthodox Judaism*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 83-85. These authors, and others, argue that what is critical is not the number of choices but the quality of the religious options available.

The idea of vicarious religion offers many insights into the world of post-conciliar Catholics. It explains church attendance on special occasions, because it is important to mark these events as reminders of a different reality that can re-entered when necessary. Perhaps more significantly it offers an explanation for the continued existence of Catholic schools.³⁰ Catholic schools in many parts of the Western world exist as, perhaps, the most tangible part of the general religious memory. To be sure the Western world provides a wide array of political and economic models for Catholic schools. It applies best to those countries where parents must make some type of conscious decision, often financial, to send their children to Catholic school. In the United States where historically schools have existed as part of parish structures, many schools are now faced with new challenges.³¹ One of the major ones is how to deal within a rising sense of vicarious religious identity amongst its constituents.

For an interlude of years Catholic schools provide a daily point of contact between the Church, once or twice removed, and the individual. Parents send their children to Catholic schools for many reasons but religious formation is not the primary or even secondary one. Flynn has shown that in a five point forced response, parents consistently place religious considerations last as their reason for choosing Catholic

³⁰ Anthony Spencer of the Pastoral Research Centre Trust notes that in the England and Wales many parents have their children baptized specifically to get them into Catholic schools which are seen as a more academic alternative. This explains a curious “bump” in figures for late baptisms, a 5% increase against a steady decline in total number of baptisms. It is also worth recording that figures in the study for catholic participation in the three “rites of passage” - baptism, marriage and funerals has fallen 23% since 1958, with marriage the most affected. Spencer comments that the decline is “pretty horrific”. *Children Baptized to get into Catholic schools*, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/main.jhtml?xml=/news/2008/01/12/nedu312.xml>, obtained 14/1/08.

³¹ Terence McLaughlin, Joseph O’Keefe and Bernadette O’Keefe, ‘Setting the Scene: Current Realities and Historical Perspectives’, in Terence McLaughlin, Joseph O’Keefe and Bernadette O’Keefe, (Eds), *The Contemporary Catholic School*. London: Falmer Press, 1996.

schools.³² Nonetheless, they like having Catholic schools available, and would oppose any initiative that would make them less accessible. We see here again the vicarious principle in action -that which in their regular lives is absent is present at the school. Parents and students may feel comfortable, for example, with symbols such as religious pictures and crucifixes around the school even if these are not present in the home. In the same way having a church in the local area gives people a sense of reassurance even if they rarely go inside it. Catholic schools also offer a sense of history and continuity, keeping alive the religious memory in a very concrete way. For many families earlier generations may have gone to the same school as well as siblings. Many Catholics feel that is beneficial for their children to have some mild religious instruction, and develop a type of homogenous moral sense that they attribute to the school imparting certain values. Along with this are also taught inoffensive and largely generic religious views.³³ One day, however, this association with the school will end and it will not be replaced by a connection with the worshiping community of faith, since this would involve too high a level of commitment.

In the shorter term, however, the existence of relatively large numbers of Catholics who have exercised a choice to retain a loose level of affiliation, or to use the safety net of vicarious religion, presents two least two important consequences for the new evangelization. On the one hand these people have retained a connection with the faith community, albeit loose and often on their own terms. They are nonetheless not

³² Marcellin Flynn, *The Culture of Catholic Schools: A Study of Catholic Schools, 1972-1993*, (Homebush, NSW: St Pauls Publications), 171. Students' religious expectations are similar. Of the 12 lowest priorities for Catholics schools 11 listed by students were of a religious nature, 164.

³³ Mason and his colleagues remark, that the beliefs that remain "are those which are less costly, such as belief in an undemanding, indulgent deity. So if a person's former faith has dwindled to the point where they now think that on balance there's something out there", Mason et al, *Gen Y*, 55.

hostile to the faith tradition and may be open to being invited to a deeper commitment. In terms of evangelization this situation is easier than reaching out to Catholics or others who have no connection whatsoever with the faith community. On the other hand, large numbers of loosely connected yet satisfied members makes the task of renewal difficult. At the very least, it makes change harder to implement because there is no immediate felt need for it. The new evangelization as envisaged by John Paul II, sets for itself a demanding standard, that of, closer union with Christ and a desire to tell others about this. Any Catholic agency which seeks to engage in the new evangelization will face a difficult task as many members of the community will not see the need for such a renewal. One of the most powerful options that Catholics today can exercise is the choice to remain a member of the faith community in a loose sense, one that guarantees them a right to their own personal, private and ineffable spirituality that does not, amongst other things, lead to adherence to common creedal positions.

Further Implications for the New Evangelization in Catholic Schools

In the light of the demands of the new evangelization there needs to a reconceptualization of the mission of Catholic schools recognizing both the world in which they operate and their capacity to respond. The wider Church has limited resources and corporate energy and must, therefore, prioritize pastoral strategies. A foundational principle is that there is a need to restate the proposition that Christian belief and commitment are reasonable positions. In a vicarious religious climate there is little danger that the Christian view will be directly challenged or even countermanded. Religious opinion is much more likely to be marginalized and removed from serious

discourse as a worldview that can deeply transformative and relevant to contemporary life. The need for this type of renewal is one of the founding assumptions of what Dulles has called post critical theology.³⁴ This arises out of an awareness that the fundamental relationship between the wider culture and the Church has changed, largely in terms of a disproportionate power relationship, where the Church lacks the capacity to engage with culture on an equal footing. The Church has lost its privileged position, has become one voice among many, and to be heard must be able to articulate its message with power and conviction. Over-commitment or fanaticism in religious belief is very far from being an issue in Western cultures. Rather it needs to be clearly re-stated that religious beliefs can be firmly held by reasonable people. Dulles put this well when he wrote: “Our contemporaries, well aware that religious tenets are capable of being questioned, need to be shown how firm religious commitments may nevertheless be responsible”³⁵ This resolve to state again the relevance of the Christian message to the wider society is very much in keeping with the goals of the new evangelization. It takes place, however, within a cultural context where the notion of strong religious commitment, over and above vicarious attachment, is seriously challenged.

A critical question on the future of Catholic schools is what is the likely trajectory of those who are, at present, described as displaying a vicarious sense of religious affiliation. Rymarz has proposed that one way of conceptualizing the future of Catholic

³⁴ Avery Dulles, *The Craft of Theology: From Symbol to System*, (New York: Crossroad, 1995), 3-17,

³⁵ Dulles, *Craft of Theology*, 6. It can only be noted here but this attitude can be contrasted with other recent approach which place great emphasis on some type of critique. Groome, for example, in his *Shared Christian Praxis* argues that educators need to employ, amongst other things, a “hermeneutic of suspicion” in relation to “the Christian Story/Vision”. Thomas H. Groome, *Sharing Faith: A Comprehensive Approach to Religious Education & Pastoral Ministry. The Way of Shared Praxis*. San Francisco: Harper, 1991), 232. Groome does name other hermeneutics, such as of retrieval and of creative commitment which could be given more emphasis as a way of balancing an undue emphasis on suspicion, especially when Shared Christian Praxis is used in the classroom.

institutions is to see this as either following a quest or secularization paradigm³⁶. If a quest paradigm is adopted then many of those who have been described in this paper as displaying a vicarious religious sense will achieve some type of resolution and in the future provide the strong commitment and witness that is vital to the continuity and flourishing of religious communities. In this view Catholic schools should focus on providing a broad and inclusive model of education, one that appeals to what some have called a generation of seekers³⁷. In the first instance, and it can only be noted here as it is beyond the scope of this paper, it is not clear how this approach takes into account the demands of the new evangelization. Secondly, this rationale seems to be best adapted to countries where Catholic schools have been a long established and receive full or very substantial government support.³⁸

Another perspective, however, sees vicarious association essentially as a stage in secularization process that will lead, over time and if not addressed, to a greater disaffiliation. A manifestation of this in the United States is the declining enrolment in Catholic schools from a high point in the mid nineteen sixties.³⁹ The changing demographics of parishes have lead many Catholic schools into perilous financial straits

³⁶ Richard Rymarz A Fork in the Road: Religious Quest and Secularization. *Australasian Catholic Record*. 2010, 87(3), 259-271.

³⁷ Wade C. Roof, *A Generation of Seekers*. (San Francisco: Harper, 1993), 27-78. David Lipsky and Alexander Abrams. *Late Bloomers: Coming of Age in America*. (New York: Times Books, 1994), 29-52.

³⁸ Richard Rymarz, 'Religious Identity of Catholic Schools: Some Challenges from a Canadian Perspective'. *Journal of Beliefs and Values*- in press.

³⁹ *Catholic School Enrollment Dwindling* obtained from http://www.usatoday.com/news/education/2008-04-09-catholic-schools_N.htm, 9th of April 2008. James T. Mulligan, *Catholic Education : Ensuring a Future*, (Ottawa: Novalis, 2005), 108-113. Feehan argues that in order to survive Catholic schools in Canada need to maintain, at all costs, a distinctive identity. Kevin Feehan, 'The Canadian Constitution and the Catholic Community', keynote address *Canadian Confederation of School Trustees Association Conference*, Ottawa 26th of September 2008.

with a consequent need to boost student numbers.⁴⁰ In these and other similar circumstances where schools enroll very large numbers of non Catholic students the task of evangelization becomes very problematic.⁴¹ This is largely due to the lack of a critical mass of students, staff and parents who can animate and not just support the Catholic ethos of schools.⁴² Evangelization in Catholic schools also seems especially vulnerable if a strong majority of parents are sending their children to them for reasons that are not derived from a strong sense of religious commitment.⁴³ In the United States, for instance, where educational choice is heavily constrained by the financial burden of choosing private schooling, parents with strong religious motivation are more likely to choose Catholic schools.⁴⁴ If Catholic schools, in essence, offer a generic type of education this places them in direct and fierce competition with other schools. If parents are concerned primarily with the religious aspect of Catholic schools then this is a relatively stable clientele. Other schools cannot provide this educational dimension. They can, however, provide other educational experiences and if these are placed ahead of the religious dimension of the school in the eyes of most parents then enrolment in Catholic schools could fluctuate according to shifts in demand. The trend here, however, would indicate a continuing decline in enrolment. The rationale for the new

⁴⁰ Beste notes that only 16% of Catholic children in the USA attend Catholic schools. Jennifer Beste, 'The Standing of children within the Roman Catholic Church, in Don Browning and Bonnie Miller-McLemore, (Eds.), *Children and Childhood in American Religions*. New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2009, 56-71, at 62.

⁴¹ Richard Rymarz, Religious Identity of Catholic Schools: Some Challenges from a Canadian Perspective. *Journal of Beliefs and Values*- 31(3), 29-310.

⁴² Richard Rymarz, Who Will Labour in the Vineyard? The New Catholic Mentality and Religious Commitment. *Journal of Religion and Society*, 2009, 11, 12-22.

⁴³ Martin Cieslak, The Lack of Consensus among Catholics for Establishing new Elementary Schools. *Review of Religious Research*, 2005, 46, 105-106.

⁴⁴ For an excellent overview of the issues around choice and Catholic schools in the United States see, Kevin Schmiesing, (Ed.), *Catholic Education and the Promise of School Choice*. Acton Institute Christian Social Thought Series, 2009.

evangelization seems to be reflective of the secularization thesis. If religious disaffiliation is part of a life journey that will eventually correct itself why is there any need for a focused intervention?

One strategy for Catholic schools is to cultivate a strong religious identity. This is one where Catholic culture comes to life not as an abstraction but as a concrete reality. Chaput has pointed out: “Catholic culture comes from an active Catholic faith. Unless we truly believe and practice our faith, ‘Catholic culture’ is just a dead skin of nostalgia and comfortable habits.”⁴⁵ This argument springs from a sense that the best response to a culture where vicarious religion is ascendant is for Catholic schools to offer a clear alternative”.⁴⁶ An important aspect of religious identity for Catholic schools should be to provide an entrée into the metaphysical dimension of belief. Flanagan speaks of this in terms of a need for the Church to move beyond a passive engagement with culture and be conscious of the need to actively create a space where the discernment of the sacred can be undertaken.⁴⁷ Dulles expressed this idea in Christian terms when he wrote, “[People] are desperate for a vivifying contact with the eternal Spirit in whom all things begin and end, the God who can bring life even to the dead.”⁴⁸ Catholic schools need to make a case for how they can help provide an interface with the divine.

⁴⁵ Charles J. Chaput, *A Light to the Nations: The Meaning and Future of the Catholic Church*. Obtained on 1/4/2008 from <http://www.holyspiritinteractive.net/columns/guest/charlesjchaput/alight.asp>. Chaput is the Archbishop of Denver.

⁴⁶ Arthur Madigan, ‘The New Evangelization of American Intellectual Culture: Context, Resistance, and Strategies’, in Joseph Koterski and John Conley, (Eds), *Creed and Culture: Jesuit Studies of Pope John Paul II*. (Philadelphia: Saint Joseph’s University Press, 2004), 93-116, at 104.

⁴⁷ Kieran Flanagan, *The Enchantment of Sociology: A Study of Theology and Culture*. (London: Macmillian, 1996), 17-20.

⁴⁸ Dulles, *Dilemma*, 550-551.

In a culture where vicarious religious expression dominates, Catholic schools can provide both an alternative to those who are seeking a genuine religious dimension to education and a place where authentic catechesis can take place. If the metaphysical narrative is presented credibly, it can offer an attractive alternative.⁴⁹ This may never appeal to the majority of people but it does have some intrinsic value, especially to the religious consumer who is asking, “What does this Catholic school have to offer that will make me choose it over the other available options?” A Catholic school which attempts to answer this question in terms of merely a social or moral vision will be faced with ferocious and relentless competition with other groups who provide a similar vision.⁵⁰ Frame encapsulated some of this thinking when he wrote:

Those churches that do not present an attractive and credible alternative to popular culture will disappear...churches that lack doctrinal rigor and are preoccupied with the promotion of social justice and cultural inclusion will be the first to go. Their place will be taken by secular advocacy groups with tightly defined constituencies and social policy expertise.⁵¹

If we accept the notion that the Church needs to take a more evangelistic tone in large as a response to the central tent of the new evangelization, namely, that many are living a life far removed from Christ and his gospel one important consequence follows. This concerns the human agents who can bring the ideals of the new evangelization to fruition. In Catholic schools who are to be the vectors of the new evangelization? They are likely to display the characteristic of the religiously highly committed. They are not Catholic because their parents were or they drifted into this unreflectively. They have

⁴⁹ The sacred and profane dichotomy is a key part of, for example, the thought of Berger, Peter Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* Garden City, (NY: Anchor, 1967).

⁵⁰ As Dulles points out, “few people come to it [the Church] or remain in it simply because of its social ministry.” Avery Dulles, ‘Dilemmas Facing the Church in the World’, *Origins*, 4(35), 1975, 548-551 at 550.

⁵¹ Tom Frame, *Losing Religion: Unbelief in Australia*. (Sydney: UNSW Press, 2009), 299.

made a decision to join or to remain a part of the faith community. They are likely to see themselves as disciples of Christ in the terms spelled out in the ecclesiology of communion. They could also be described, using Lonergan's terminology, of having fallen in love with God. For them the call to evangelize and to ever deepen their relationship with Christ will be a priority. Every effort must be made to encourage individuals with this type of commitment, to become involved in Catholic schools.⁵² This applies not only to teachers but also to parents and students. In a culture where religion is accepted most readily in its benign, vicarious forms those who take on a much stronger commitment are vital in animating and not just accepting the religious identity of Catholic schools. They bear some resemblance to St Paul, who experienced perhaps history's most famous exogenous conversion experience. He is presented in *Redemptoris Missio*, as the human exemplar for the new evangelization. Paul of Tarsus was a figure who challenged others to a higher standard with a clear and compelling account, and living out, of his faith in Christ. Even a brief perusal of the Acts of the Apostles indicates that the cultural milieu in which Paul operated has some similarity with the vicarious religious marketplace of today. His response is, therefore, indicative. In a society where religion can very easily find for itself a conformable recess, the challenge for Catholic schools is to develop a demeanor that is more truly Pauline in its scope and intention.

Concluding Comments

⁵² Richard Rymarz, Who is Coming to Class Today? The Challenge of an Emerging Catholic Evangelical Student Identity for Catholic Colleges and Universities. *Journal of Catholic Higher Education*, 27(2), 2008, 239-252.

Beyer has commented that much of how Catholics see themselves and live out their faith could be described as cultural Catholicism which is typified by “a diffuse spiritual quest, emotional and largely unorganized or even haphazard practice”.⁵³ Leaving aside the issue of its longevity, there is little chance that cultural Catholicism will provide the energy needed for revitalization and growth. The new evangelization, however, is a proposal that responds directly to this critical issue of how to re-engage Catholics and encourage high levels of commitment amongst more than a relative few of its members.

Most Catholics can choose a religious niche for themselves which maximizes benefits but precludes cost. From this position they are unlikely to move to more demanding levels of commitment. The insights of vicarious religion suggest that most are satisfied with an understated Christian presence in society that gives them options and provides a safety net in times of crisis and also allows for the religious chains of memory to be maintained, however, tenuously. This discussion has led to some features of contemporary culture which makes the task of the new evangelization in Catholic schools challenging. If we take these factors together a reasonable conclusion is that the Catholic school in the future may have to work much harder at animating a religious dimension that is over and above the place that can be consigned to them in a culture that greatly favours expressions of vicarious religion. These challenges become more serious when we consider the human dimension that is at the heart of Catholic education. If the current social conditions prevail a critical issue becomes, how is strong commitment,

⁵³ Peter Beyer, ‘Roman Catholicism in Contemporary Quebec: The Ghosts of Religion Past?’ in W.E. Hewitt, (Ed), *The Sociology of Religion: A Canadian Focus*, (Toronto: Butterworths, 1993), 133-156, at 153.

over what can be termed conventional levels, encouraged and nurtured? Following on from this an important future question is, at least in a theoretical sense, what can Catholic schools do to foster this commitment given the cultural reality in which they exist?