Catholic High School Liturgy: A "Faithful Presence Within"

Fr. Stephen Reilly

As another Holy Day of Obligation rolls by, the question arises once again about the wisdom and sustainability of current Mass provision in our Catholic schools in Scotland. In our Cathedral parish here in Motherwell, we have three Sunday Masses, but between us as clergy we normally celebrate eight Masses on Holy Days, mainly in school settings, with varying degrees of enthusiasm and participation on the part of pupils. What is the point? Are we (as is often argued) sacramentalizing pupils who have never been evangelized, never mind catechized? In addition, as Catholic schools worldwide also become increasingly multi-faith—with, for example, 20 percent of non-Catholic pupils in Catholic schools today in the U.S. compared with 5 percent in 1972—is compulsory Mass attendance responding to the spiritual needs of all pupils?[1] And how can we strike a balance between the school's responsibility to celebrate liturgically and the freedom of individual members to either embrace or opt out of such celebrations?

For a 2013 article, Catholic educational researcher Ann Casson asked a group of secondary school pupils in England about their experience of Mass in school.[3] While the pupils were at different stages of the life of faith and showed varying degrees of enthusiasm for the liturgy, nonetheless, "the celebration of Mass was one of the most frequent responses by students to the question of what could be demonstrated to show that their school was Catholic."[4] This finding is remarkably similar to studies in other anglophone countries among young people in teacher training. In Australia, Leonard Franchi and Richard Rymarz found that student teachers spoke positively of Masses in a school setting, "which were more vibrant [than the parish setting] with accomplished music, great participation, and more focused preaching."[5] Meanwhile, here in Scotland, Roisín Coll's interviews of student teachers concluded that they considered a variety of liturgical and prayerful events and practices to be emblematic of the school's ethos and leadership. Although these included Masses, the students widened the liturgical discourse to include staff retreats, prayers before exams, the Sacrament of Reconciliation, and the creation of a school oratory.[6]

This emerging pattern across multiple jurisdictions encourages us to evaluate liturgy in the school setting under two linked strands: what does liturgy contribute to the identity of the Catholic school, and does it enhance the pupils' spiritual and religious development?

The Identity of the Catholic School

The Catholic school is a community of memory, carrying within it stories, traditions, and embodied history. It is a culture, an ecosystem, a web of meaning. It is little wonder that changes—for instance to the name of the school or to the uniform—are hotly debated and even strongly opposed, bound up as these seemingly external things are with the school's very identity. As sharers in the mission of the Church, Catholic schools are also part of the living memory of the Church, where a Catholic anthropology, a vision of education and the virtuous life, and the values of the kingdom of God expressed in the Beatitudes are incarnated and made into a living culture. Indeed, the purpose of Catholic schooling is expressed precisely in Church documents as an evangelizing dialogue between culture and the Gospel.

French sociologist of religion Danièle Hervieu-Léger wrote of religion itself as a "chain of memory," in which the charismatic message and presence of the founder is passed on from generation to generation, preserving an original story and spirituality. For her, religion achieves this above all through ritual.[7] Such a vision accords with the Judeo-Christian notion of memorial (Greek:

anamnesis; Hebrew: *zikkaron*) in which through ritual remembering the founding events of our faith are brought alive and their salvific fruits applied to those celebrating them. For Jewish people, this means principally the memorial of Passover, in which the events of their liberation from Egypt are recalled and celebrated in word, food, gesture, and song. For Catholics, at the heart of Mass we recount Jesus' exhortation to "do this in memory" of him, to repeat his ritual action performed during the new and definitive Passover celebrated at the Last Supper and fulfilled in his death and Resurrection. For Catholics, therefore, "When the Church celebrates the Eucharist, the central event of salvation becomes really present and 'the work of our redemption is carried out.'"[8]

Following Hervieu-Léger, we might contend that the chain of memory essential both to the school's living culture and its evangelizing mission is above all expressed in religious ritual. There, the essence of the school is modeled, celebrated, shaped, and challenged. Consequently, school liturgy must be prepared and celebrated with the utmost care so that its subjective impact will match its inner objective purpose. In the first place, as much as possible, the liturgy should *look* like the Church. It should be an intentional icon of the heavenly liturgy it foreshadows: composed of male and female, young and old, presenting a visible expression of the diverse community it embodies in the various ministries as it gathers around the altar. Full, active, and conscious participation should be the goal. This is achieved through the preparation of the pupils spiritually and practically for the celebration, the embracing of ministries, song and response, and prayerful silence. Patronal saint's day Masses are often successful in this regard, featuring advance study of the life of the school's patron saint in religious education lessons, high-quality music, visible involvement by respected senior pupils, and recognition of the school's year-long charitable activities. Schools, buoyed and challenged by a recognition of liturgy's crucial role of school identity formation, should elect to give similar priority to the other key liturgical celebrations. As the academic year unfolds, prayerful events of this caliber can ensure, in Franchi's memorable phrase, that "the Liturgical Year acts as a form of whole-school spiral curriculum, presenting afresh each year the theological and cultural capital at the heart of the Church's life."[9]

So, from the point of view of the Catholic school, the celebration of Mass on holy days of obligation and all shared worship throughout the liturgical year are a manifestation of the school's responsibility and duty to express itself as a Catholic community. They are privileged ways in which the chain of memory can be continued and renewed, and in which the identity of the school can be modeled to staff and students, as well as shaped and challenged by her Risen Lord standing in her midst.

The Spiritual and Religious Development of the Pupils

The second aspect under consideration is the contribution of school liturgy to the spiritual and religious development of the pupils. Being required to attend a liturgy to which they and many of their peers are apathetic and resistant does not carry much promise for growth in the life of faith. Indeed, as might be expected among teenagers, Casson's study of English schoolchildren found a degree of resistance, resignation and indifference to compulsory worship in schools alongside an appreciation of a sense of belonging and community engendered[10]. Does mandatory Mass represent a limitation of freedom of conscience, and, as such, is it counterproductive?

A major study of young Catholics in the U.S. may help to answer this question. Among other indicators, the study sought to gauge the influence of attendance at Catholic school on the religiosity of young adults.[11] Although Catholic pupils attending Catholic schools were much more likely to report that they attended church services regularly than their Catholic counterparts attending other

schools, the authors concluded that this difference could be mainly accounted for by their compulsory attendance at school rather than parish worship. Indeed, once they had left school, the number reporting regular attendance dropped precipitously, from 63 percent to 23 percent[12].

Nonetheless, the number of former Catholic school pupils saying that they *never* attended church remained relatively low (24 percent), leading the authors to conclude that "mandatory Mass attendance in Catholic high schools thus seems to create a habit or perceived norm among students, which they see as important enough to continue to respect."[13] In addition, those who attended a Catholic high school were also less likely to disaffiliate from Catholicism entirely, retaining a residual sense of identity and belonging. The authors also note that the religious socialization represented by communal worship and the influence of religious adults and peers had the greatest effect on the religiosity of pupils who lacked such supports at home[14]. Therefore, if we count encouragement to faith practice in adulthood as a goal for Catholic schools, there is some qualified evidence for the positive effect of Catholic schooling—including school liturgies—on adult faith practice. What is more, the effect is likely to be most pronounced among those we might consider least engaged.

Memory and Belonging

The ability of memories of school liturgies to influence adult affiliation and practice, even in residual and fragmented form, gains credence from a psychological principle known as the "reminiscence bump." This principle describes how what has traditionally been considered as the formative period for young people has a solid basis in brain function, such that in adult life we retain a disproportionate number of memories from adolescence and early adulthood compared to earlier or later stages of life. The influence of "autobiographical recall" in this period is also linked to the development of personal identity as we enter adulthood.[15] Applying this insight, we can have confidence that the powerful representation of the Paschal Mystery in the Eucharist, in which the school simultaneously expresses its own communal memory and ecclesial identity, can leave a lasting impression in the memories of the pupils in the period of the deepest formation of the self.

In addition, if we have argued above that communal liturgy is crucial in presenting and maintaining a school's memory, identity, and culture, then we can also see how a commensurate strengthening of belonging can benefit the pupils themselves. These students yearn to belong, and they take pride in their school. Although there are many other aspects of the school's identity against which pupils could chafe—such as rules, traditions, routines, and school uniform—these are maintained for the common good and serve a higher purpose. Parents do have the freedom and legal right to remove their children from religious observance; however, for the majority of parents and pupils alike, attendance at whole-school liturgy is an expected part of attending Catholic school. Much like young people might not always embrace family traditions, routines, and visits to relatives, nonetheless these activities remain an expected part of family belonging. In the case of school liturgy, despite some disengagement, Casson's article confirms that pupils understood that attending religious services is "part of the deal" of attending a Catholic school, and they embraced the community-building purposes of liturgy: "The ritual of Mass within the Catholic school contributed to their sense of a Catholic identity and to their sense of belonging to a Catholic community, namely their Catholic school."[16]

To the Spiritual Benefit of All?

What about the many pupils who are not Catholic, as well as those baptized Catholic pupils who no longer believe? Does liturgy contain the potential to foster their spiritual growth if they choose to

attend? As Catholics, we believe that every person is spiritual: called to relationship with God and destined for eternity, whatever their religious affiliation or stance for living. Wider secular society has increasingly joined the religions in embracing a more holistic vision of the human person, including the spiritual dimension, in spheres such as healthcare and education while admittedly struggling to comprehend organized religion's place in spiritual growth.

The idea of spirituality is notoriously vague, but a helpful review of related literature by Jan Grajczonek defines the characteristics of spirituality as including: "feelings about transcendence; ideas about a creator or creative force in the cosmos; sense of meaning and purpose in life; sense of stewardship for the earth; and the aesthetic."[17] In seeking to understand the distinction between spirituality and religiosity in literature, he describes the latter as "being spiritual *in a particular way* as informed by the beliefs, practices and traditions of a religious group."[18] To this he adds that being religious includes a sense of personal relationship with God, belief in an afterlife, and identification with and participation in a local religious community. The key here is that being religious is *a way of being spiritual*, informed by the traditions of a religious body. Such an optimistic and inclusive view can help us to appreciate that all members of the school community can grow spiritually by experiencing a living religious tradition from within, including in its most public and vital from: prayer and liturgy. Indeed, is there any other way to truly understand a religion? As John Sullivan has noted, , a superficial experience of observing and learning about a variety of religions from the outside carries the risk of rendering us merely religious tourists.[19] Instead, the whole Catholic school body can benefit from the opportunity to dialogue with a living tradition from within and to learn *from* as well as *about* religion. That Grajczonek lists participation in a ritual life and prayer as well as relating to religious symbols, art, and music as an essential aspect of being religious underlines the role of communal worship in the development of spirituality (and religiosity) in pupils in Catholic schools.

An Invitation

This article began by questioning whether school Masses, such as on holy days of obligation, are of value within the constraints of clergy availability, competing school priorities, and ambivalent student engagement. It has concluded that Mass and other liturgies perform a vital ecclesial and social function that render them worthwhile: forming and shaping the living memory of the school in the image of Jesus Christ while sustaining a sense of belonging and spiritual growth among pupils, which they carry into young adulthood.

Nonetheless, the free invitation to all pupils to an active faith in Christ Jesus lived in Catholic community and the sacramental life remains that: an invitation. A large majority will not go on to practice their faith liturgically on a regular basis as adults, especially in highly secularized Western Europe. While this may represent an occasion of discouragement for clergy, teachers, and parents alike, two final insights from academic literature may help to frame a faith-filled response.

The first comes from James Hunter's idea of "faithful presence within." During the exile in Babylon, the remnant of Israel faced several possible temptations familiar to religious people today: to reject and oppose the surrounding culture (defensive against); to assimilate with it (relevance to); or seek to remain separate from it (purity from). They chose none of these, instead electing a radical faithful presence within: seeking the welfare of the city and praying for the surrounding culture (Jer 29:4–7), while retaining their own identity and remaining faithful to their God.[21] Surrounded by a secular culture that will be embraced fully by many of our young people, the Catholic school can

model faithful presence to God within the culture today, inviting our pupils to a life-giving relationship with their Savior.

Secondly, Catholic schools can help shape what Douglas Davies and Matthew Guest call "transformed retention": the "critically creative process of adaptive change" by which culture is passed through the generations.[22] To teach (and to parent) is to let go, to accept that our pupils have been given the dignity by God to be autonomous agents in their own way through life to the Father. To embrace this reality is to give space to the Holy Spirit, who guides us into the fullness of truth in every age, and to recognize that young people will use creatively what they learned while we were nurturing them in the bosom of our precious faith.

Fr. Stephen Reilly is Coordinator of Spiritual and Pastoral Formation at the School of Education at the University of Glasgow. He is a priest of the Diocese of Motherwell and former parish priest, school chaplain, diocesan religious education advisor, seminary teacher, and pastoral center director.

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[1] National Catholic Educational Association (2022) Data Brief: 2021-22 Catholic School Enrolment, 1. https://images.magnetmail.net/images/clients/NCEA1/attach/Data_Brief_22_Catholic_School_Enrollment_v4.pdf

[3] Ann Casson, "'Religious' and 'Spiritual' Capitals: The Experience of the Celebration of Mass in the English Catholic Secondary School," *International Studies in Catholic Education* 5, no. 2 (2013): 204–17.

[4] Casson, "'Religious' and 'Spiritual' Capitals," 204.

[5] Leonard Franchi and Richard Rymarz, "The Education and Formation of Teachers for Catholic Schools: Responding to Changed Cultural Contexts," *International Studies in Catholic Education* 9, no. 1 (2017): 2–16.

[6] Roisín Coll, "From Theory to Practice: The Experiences of Catholic Probationary Teachers," *Journal of Research on Christian Education* 18, no. 2, (2009): 140–59; Roisín Coll, "Catholic School Leadership: Exploring Its Impact on the Faith Development of Probationer Teachers in Scotland," *International Studies in Catholic Education* 1, no. 2 (2009): 200–13.

[7] Danièl Hervieu-Leger, *Religion as a Chain of Memory*, trans. Simon Lee (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2005).

[8] John Paul II, *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, 11.

[9] Leonard Franchi and Richard Rymarz, *Catholic Teacher Preparation: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives on Preparing for Mission* (Bingley, UK: Emerald, 2018), 16.

[10] Casson, "'Religious' and 'Spiritual' Capitals," 211-212

[11] Christian Smith et al., *Young Catholic America: Emerging Adults In, Out of, and Gone from the Church* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 231–63.

[12] Ibid, 241-243.

[13] Ibid, 243.

[14] Ibid, 243

[15] Khadeeja Munawar, Sara K. Kuhn, and Shamsul Haque, "Understanding the Reminiscence Bump: A Systematic Review," *PLoS ONE* 13, no. 12, (2018): 1-36.

[16] Casson, "'Religious' and 'Spiritual' Capitals," 205.

[17] Jan Grajczonek, "Spiritual Development and Religious Education in the Early Years: A Review of the Literature" (Queensland Catholic Education Commission, 2017), 10. https://qcec.catholic.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/Final_Spiritual-Development-Religious-Education-in-the-Early-Years_A-Review-of-the-Literature.pdf.

[18] Grajczonek, "Spiritual Development, 10 (italics mine).

[19] John Sullivan, *Relative Autonomy and the Catholic University*, in Sean Whittle (ed.) *Vatican II and new thinking about Catholic education: the impact and legacy of Gravissimum Educationis* (New York: Routledge, 2016), 216

[21] James Davidson Hunter, *To Change the World: The Irony, Tragedy and Possibility of Christianity Today* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).

[22] Douglas J. Davies and Matthew Guest, *Bishops, Wives and Children: Spiritual Capital across the Generations* (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2007).