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***Catholic Schooling for Tomorrow's Adult Laity:
Projecting the Status Quo or Planning for Change?***

Abstract

North American Catholicism currently faces two trends that will likely influence its future. First is the widespread disagreement among Catholics on issues of ordination and sexual morality (Bibby 2009; Greeley 2004), and second is the numerical decline and aging of clergy and religious (CARA 2013). Importantly, these trends exist within the post-Vatican II context where theoretical questions have arisen concerning lay participation in Church governance (Nilson 2000). The salient issue for Catholic schools is how, if at all, they might respond to these phenomena as part of their mission to educate Catholic students for participation in the current and future Church. This study uses interview data from students in a diocesan Catholic high school to illustrate how, in theory and practice, the address of these issues presents a choice between practices that reflect aims to teach descriptively about a Church that is not changing, or prescriptively about one that is.

Introduction

How do the Catholic students in a Catholic school experience that institution preparing them as the lay participants in today's and tomorrow's Church? While Catholic schools provide the service of education to all, including non-Catholics and non-Christians, its Catholic students are ostensibly distinct insofar as the school aims to promote their participation in the Church. Although Church documents state that parents are the primary educators of their children (Vatican Council II 1996a, no.3), the Catholic school is unique for being the public institutional intersection of several families' religious views. In this sense the Catholic school assumes some responsibility for the education of the future's lay adults.

In today's North American Catholic Church two major trends appear to be salient for the laity's experience of its future. First, there is widespread disagreement among Catholics regarding Church teachings on the ordination of women and sexual ethics (Bibby 2009, Greeley 2004). This trend signifies the fact that, whether these teachings change or remain constant, for many Catholics ecclesial participation involves some measure of coordinating disagreement with belonging. Second, the number of clergy and religious is declining, and those who remain are, on average, aging (CARA 2013). The implications are that the accessibility of sacraments and nature of worship may change if parishes cannot be suitably staffed. These trends also occur

alongside the theoretical tensions concerning the laity's participation in Church governance in the aftermath of Vatican II. In particular, theologian Jon Nilson proposes that the current structure that presumes juridical-administrative franchise to descend from sacramental power, and not competence, is problematic in its own right, and moreover only reinforces the laity in a position of dependence, rather than complementarity (2000, 405-6). So in an age where the laity is divided on certain matters, the clergy is in decline, and the Church's understanding of lay participation is not theoretically without trouble, the question for Catholic schools remains how, if at all, they are responding to this situation.

This paper draws from an interview study with 16 Catholic students to show that their diocesan high school adopts a posture that provides them with a solid general perspective on their role as lay persons in the Church. In this regard students are fluent with the concepts like religious freedom and as well conceive of lay persons as recipients and distributors of tradition. As these subjects are drawn from the explicit content and methods that students encounter, it seems safe to conclude that their school focuses on preparing students for a Church that will not experience much change.

Past these general topics, however, when it concerns the discussion of controversial Catholic issues, the declining priesthood, and the role of lay persons in the Church, student perspectives illustrate how the school devotes much less to the particularistic claims about how students, and the laity generally, should respond publicly to these phenomena. The data illustrate the presence of much diversity among students in this regard, ranging from those who would admit married and female clergy, to those who find that the school is not emphasizing enough a bold presentation of doctrine in its current form. Preparation for lay roles in this school thus eschews students' particularistic responses to the future Church's concerns, and focuses more on decontextualized, although not unimportant, approaches to educating for lay participation.

Methods

This argument is based in literature with interview data used to illustrate the existence of its claims in practice. It focuses on adolescents because they are at the existential stage that coordinates the institutional and relational aspects of Church (Fowler 1981). As they spend a major part of their day in a Catholic school, it follows that their experiences there significantly influence how they frame this task. All 16 participants self-identify as Catholics and attend a private Canadian Catholic diocesan high school. They represent grades VIII through XII, and include 8 women and 8 men. All participants were recruited with the assistance of the school, and, with parental permission, volunteered for a 60-90 minute semi-structured interview with me.

There are two possible limitations with this method. First, it may have attracted only participants who are already highly engaged with the institutional Church and/or their own personal practice. Hence it may not be representative of all Catholic students within that school, or across all Catholic schools. Second, although students bring their own views to the school that reflect values in their homes and parishes, the results may also be narrowed by the effect of one teacher or a group of teachers in the school. This second limitation may be mitigated,

however, by my observation that students tended to refer generally to the school rather than individual teachers when discussing the pedagogical treatment of controversial issues.

Theoretical Framework

My analysis differentiates between, on the one hand, what might be an emphasis on students' opinions of what the Church should be, and on the other hand general concepts like religious freedom or the fact that lay persons hand along tradition, all in their neutral sense. To illustrate the practical difference between these aims in the education of lay persons, consider Gerard Mannion's concern about "problems like "the chronic shortage of priests, disagreements about how to disagree, competing ways of being Church, and episcopal inadequacies in addressing scandals of abuse and secrecy, financial impropriety, and accountability" (2007, 196) as a framework that emphasizes ecclesial transformation in a particular way. While abstract concepts are important in their own right, to seriously convert Mannion's views into educational aims would quickly challenge any claim that a Catholic school should emphasize decontextualized conceptual neutrality. Specifically, he prescribes the necessity of learning from ecclesial experiments that "[broaden] ecclesial horizons, casting light on systemic problems that the church faces across the globe," and the necessity to "avoid choosing non-controversial ideas and practices, and leaving aside the challenging aspects of transformed church structures and active political engagement" (2007, 197). For a student to learn about religious freedom or lay participation in a generic sense, therefore, while important, does not cross into this aim. The advantage of sustaining a generic approach, however, may satisfy a prudential hope to avoid conflict in the school and a belief that it should provide students with factual knowledge about their Church, and not stoke uninformed opinion. If this is indeed the status quo in Catholic educational practice, in theory it collides with theologians' observations about the inadequacy of current ecclesiological structures. Anne Hunt notices, for example, that while lay Catholics are increasingly "well-educated—including theologically well-educated" (2014, 13), in the years since Vatican II's recognition that laity are more than simply the remnant of the Church that is not clergy (Lakeland 2003, 13), and can at least cooperate in ecclesial decision-making (Pope 2004, 8), nonetheless "they [continue to] have little influence and involvement in the decision making and governance of the church as such" (Hunt 2014, 14). Current sociological conditions suggest that the future Church may feature more expressions of lay particularity: the implication for Catholic educational theory is thus in how to respond.

Findings

Generic Catholicism: Sustaining the Status Quo

When presenting and discussing controversial issues the school can emphasize aspects of Catholic teaching that can accommodate a wide variety of views while also not substantially challenging the structures of Church authority. In this way it provides crucial learning about concepts within the Church without making any explicit prescriptive statement about how one's stance relative to Church teaching speaks to how one is positioned as a lay person in the Church.

Participant 6 describes this in terms of how the concept of religious freedom underscores the school's receiving student disagreement with teachings that are controversial among Catholics:

They will always say what the Church believes and they will try to explain why they believe that and if the person is comfortable maybe ask them why they believe that and try and get them to understand again like what we believe but it is not like they will force it on them.

In the register of personal belief this approach follows Church teaching to protect students from coercion (Vatican Council II 1996, nos. 2 and 4). It also does not push them into a position where they are alienated and unhappy with their experience. But when analyzed in terms of how this emphasis positions the disagreeing student as a lay person, in bare descriptive terms, it simply leaves the student alone in a negative space where it is implied that lay persons in the Church receive, but do not cooperate publicly – at least outside the classroom, in the discourses surrounding controversial issues.

Three participants relate their conceptualization of the laity primarily in terms of participating in and distributing the Catholic tradition as they themselves have received it. Participant 5 describes his role as a necessary contributor to the Church's growth, as lay persons are indispensable to sustaining the Church's tradition:

Like my role I think would be to help build the Church up. Like the lay people are like the foundation of the Church because there is so many more than priests or nuns. So I think like kinda like the pillars like the corner stones sort of. Kinda just like be there and help it to grow ... and trying to give what you can ... just constant support.

Two other participants suggest that for them the laity's role begins (perhaps) simply with "being there" or "being present." Participant 6 states that the laity's role begins with "just being there. It is good to just be there. The more people the better." Her formulation of *presence* noticeably suggests that it has importance for her as an individual, but that it also extends beyond herself as individuals aggregate into community. One is therefore present for self, God, and others. Participant 9's articulation of the difference between her presence in the worshipping community and the other activities she performs in the Church reveals a similar view of the multiple aspects of *presence*: "I am a participant in the Mass and I am a child of God and things like that. I guess that is my role is just to like, is to be present and be there and to pray and be part of the community as well as the more concrete [things I do]."

Neither Participants 6 nor 9 say anything which suggests that their comments imply only the minimum of one's attendance counts as a sufficient presence in the Church. In fact, one could easily infer from Participant 6's remark that "It is good to just be there" and Participant 9's observation that presence implies her praying and being "part of the community" that they have some clear idea or ideas in mind of how their presence and participation are qualitatively linked. In this way they *are* the Church insofar as they constitute it. For all these participants, however, their expression of the laity's role can be contingently described in terms of an institutional model of Church that regards the laity as the beneficiaries of the grace mediated through the

clergy (Dulles 2002, 33). In descriptive terms, then, the laity in this model is only active within the boundaries set by the institution, and does not take a role in responding to changes in the Church. To the degree that this conceptualization of the laity sits within these boundaries, these reports sit within a generic understanding of the laity's role within a Church that does not change.

Projecting into the Future: Addressing Controversial Issues

The findings also reveal two contrasting approaches to Catholic religious education and the Church that demonstrate the presence of differing expectations among lay students. The first is Participant 2's view that the laity needs to be better informed about Church teaching on controversial issues. His concern is that a curricular emphasis on content knowledge has been subordinated to an approach that opens the discussion of student opinions. I count this view as "particularistic" because it reflects a unique perspective on the laity's role in responding to controversial issues. To the degree that this perception is accurate, it suggests that a deficiency in "basic" knowledge of Church teachings leads to distortions when discussing controversial issues. He stresses it is essential that young Catholics acquire this knowledge because it provides them with a clear picture of their religious beliefs and culture. Being raised within the structures of a Catholic family, parish, and community – while important – is nonetheless insufficient to achieving this end, because, "A recent convert would probably know more about the faith than I would because they are forced to learn the basics. But here you are brought up in a way that you don't really need to learn the basics." This knowledge is important both for his personal belief and so that he can accurately represent the Church to others:

[I]n order for me to talk about abortion and issues like euthanasia and issues like you know abstinence and things like that, I need to know essentially what the Church believes in order to talk about questions like that with people around me.

Noticeably, his conception of "Church" in this statement is predicated upon corporate unity of belief on these questions, and so could easily be synonymous with *magisterium*. And his stance here resonates with Participant 4's comment that more and better education is required for a recovery of ordained and religious populations:

I think one of the problems as to why we are getting fewer and fewer priests is that people are leaving the Church because they are not being taught correctly or they are not getting enough information to understand so I guess some of them don't realize the importance of it so they just leave the Church. And if there are fewer people in the Church then there are less people to be called and realize that their calling is to be a priest.

These particular views, however, contrast with Participant 3's own particularity. Her concern with ordination is not *how* it is taught, but *what* is taught. She maintains that the current teaching on ordination diminishes the female role in the Church:

I think that women need to have an equal chance to become preachers of God or something because in God's eye everybody's equal ... I think that means that

boys are equal to girls. I think that means that everybody needs to have an equal chance to do what they want. And if a woman wants to become a priest right now, they can't and I think that they should have that chance to become a priest or a pope or a bishop or come up and do that, because they need to have a say in the world as well.

Her conception of fairness, rooted in this view of equal opportunity, extends from more than her desire to see women perform the same work as the male priesthood, like presiding at Mass, administering sacraments, or overseeing a parish, for instance, and into the larger scope of ecclesial politics, so that women can exercise greater participation and influence to the point where they have a fair opportunity. Such is the theo-ecclesiological basis of her disagreement with Participants 2 and 4. In pedagogical terms the question for curriculum design and for the school is how to position these two contrasting particularistic views of the laity: one which would intensify the normative focus on Church teaching and discount the entry of student opinion, and another which, if given a voice, would look for more ways to become involved in the reform of the Church. It is apparent from the sample that neither of these orientations prevail in the school and that it has found some (tacit) agreement in a generic middle ground which coordinates Church teaching and the sharing of personal opinion within a conception of laity that listens to and receives its direction from the hierarchy.

Conclusion

If one of the school's distinguishing marks is its position of coordinating the particularities of multiple students and families in its community, these juxtaposed views raise questions about what role the school has in responding to the larger reality of the Church. My analysis here does not evaluate the responses adopted at the participants' school, but only demonstrates an instance in practice where a Catholic school must choose, explicitly or implicitly, what to do. Emphasizing general educational aims and so leaving the concerns about controversy, declining priests and religious, and the theological ambiguities of lay participation outside the school has some prudential advantages in terms of its focusing on legitimate religious learning that does not arouse strong feelings of difference that might alienate some students and families from the school. If a school were to, for example, follow any particularistic view to its educational end, it would do so at the potential cost of alienating those who felt that their concerns were left unaddressed – possibly diminishing their feeling of welcome in the Church. One might offer an attempt at compromise, say, where curriculum following both of these particularistic interests were given something of an equal share or emphasis, although this idea quickly unravels when one notices that it does not fully satisfy Participant 2's desire for greater rigor that admits less personal opinion. The data also reveals that the school does not perceive a false binary choice between competing particularities, and has recognized that a reasonable solution simply involves bypassing or suspending particularities in favour of emphasizing some generic theological aspects of being a lay person. Thus no particularistic viewpoint is totally satisfied, but neither is it completely alienated. The questions in theory remain for another study to consider: Is this compromise the only or best choice available: does it merely trade one false binary for another, and what might be the limitations in this apparent choice between generic and particularistic pedagogical approaches?

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