

Dialogue:

Catholic schools are often identified as places of dialogue between culture and faith and faith and life. This article explores what dialogue entails and some of the opportunities for dialogue that exist with our schools. Chris Richardson is a retired Catholic secondary headteacher and diocesan commissioner. He is currently an associate lecturer in Catholic school leadership at St Mary's University, Twickenham.

A new orientation

Orientating the Church towards dialogue was one of the major achievements of Vatican II.¹ It marked a radical departure from what had gone immediately before. Even fifty years earlier, advocating dialogue within the Church, let alone with those outside it, would have been considered ridiculous. The prevailing view was that the Church possessed 'the truth' and had a duty to make that truth known, shining the light of truth on those with whom it came into contact. What could the Church learn from those who did not possess the truth? Error had nothing to teach believers and, indeed, was a source of danger for them. This is well illustrated, for example, in the Church's attitude to the ecumenical movement. After World War I Catholics were forbidden from involvement in the developing ecumenical movement. As late as 1948 Pope Pius XI regarded the Mother Church's ecumenical objective as recalling her erring sons (sic) and leading them back to her bosom (*Mortalium Animos* n. 4).

Not only did dialogue insinuate itself into the language of Vatican II but during the Council Pope Paul VI published his encyclical *Ecclesiam Suam* (ES), which was an extended treatment of the importance of dialogue for the Church and for its relationship with other people. He recognised that dialogue was 'demanded' because the sacred and the profane were

no longer seen as distinct and the Church had to engage with the world around it. This world was made up of many different peoples with a wide variety of beliefs and ways of seeing the world. It was also a world that comprised people who could no longer be treated like children (Cf. ES n. 78).

Catholic schools, places of dialogue

Dialogue also found its way into the Declaration on Catholic Education, *Gravissimum Educationis*. The template for this declaration, *Divini Illius Magister*, issued by Pope Pius XI in 1929, did not mention dialogue. The Vatican II declaration mentions it twice, as does the first document produced by the Congregation for Catholic Education in 1977. The

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Congregation's 1982 document mentions it eleven times. It is a regular feature of subsequent documents including the one in 2013 dedicated to intercultural dialogue.

Catholic schools are places of dialogue,



more than a friendly chat

where the Gospel is given a privileged hearing. For many young people, school is the only place where they will come into contact with the Gospel. The preliminary document for the World Congress on Catholic Education held in 2015 acknowledges the value of dialogue in bringing young people to an understanding of 'truth, good and beauty'. It recognises that communication between students and teachers is circular rather than unidirectional, and also that there is a need for teachers to provide 'credible testimony' rather than relying on the weight of their authority.²

Talking together

What then is this 'dialogue' with which we are encouraged to engage? The word itself is derived from two Greek words *dia*, meaning across or together and *logos*,

which means words or talking. Dialogue can be taken to mean talking together. It is however much more than a casual conversation and is certainly to be distinguished from alternating monologues, where people speak in turn without really hearing what the other has to say. The ground-breaking insights into the meaning of dialogue were provided by the existentialist philosopher Martin Buber³ in the early 20th century, and his influence can be felt in ecclesial documents from Vatican II onwards.⁴

Understanding the other and ourselves

For Buber, dialogue is not just an attempt to understand another person's argument or point of view but an attempt to understand the other person taken as a whole. It recognises the other person as an equal

and not as someone to whom something must be done, such as to convince them. This *I/Thou* relationship, as he described it, regards both participants as subjects and neither as objects. According to Buber, it is through such a dialogical relationship that we come to understand ourselves as well as the other person. He saw God as the eternal *Thou*, and the relationship between individuals and God as the foundation of all other relationships.

Dialogue is a process aimed at mutual understanding. A journey along a road without a predetermined destination. A journey which enriches both parties. Among its pre-requisites are trust, open mindedness, and a willingness to listen. It requires the courage to open oneself up to another and risk having to change one's opinion. It requires the humility to accept that truth is beyond the grasp of an individual, and to respect the worth of an alternative point of view. The values that underpin dialogue and give it integrity and vitality cannot simply be adopted for the occasion. They have to be intrinsic to participants, values that inform their life. This is why Buber sees dialogue as an authentic way of being.

Types of dialogue

Dialogue can take a number of forms. Plato argued that thought was a form of internal dialogue. When we grapple with a new idea and weigh it against what we already know we engage in a form of dialogue between conflicting perspectives with the aim of arriving at a new or enhanced level of understanding. This is a good metaphor for dialogue with another person, where we are not dismissive of an alternative point of view but rather consider it an opportunity to gain new insights.

It is often argued that dialogue is a rational activity because without the underlying logical structure of the discussion it would be impossible to proceed. This is no doubt

correct but dialogue also requires a degree of empathy, of understanding feelings. In our current age emotions and experience often inform the language with which we express our opinions.

Dialogue is not just about talking. It can involve sharing the 'joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties' of everyday life. Behaviour is another form of dialogue. How we act is an expression of who we are and what we stand for. In a sense life is dialogical. Our contact with other people changes us and them.

Barriers to dialogue

There are barriers to dialogue, some more significant than others. Any attempts to deceive, coerce or exploit negates dialogue. Insults, ridicule and even rhetoric are proscribed. Dialogue tries to get beyond prejudice, disputes about the meaning of words, generalisations and ideology as it seeks understanding. Even tolerance can be a barrier because it respects the integrity of the *status quo* whilst dialogue does not regard any position as stat-

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ic but rather as organic. Dialogue seeks mutual transformation.

Another barrier is our western adherence to the law of non-contradiction, that something cannot be true and false at the same time. Other philosophical traditions are not constrained by this. The Catholic Church often claims to embrace 'and/as well' rather than 'either/or'. We profess

Image: Dreamstime



that God is three and God is one. We acknowledge Christ as fully God and fully man. Paradox can be instructive. The end of the prayer of St Francis acknowledges that 'in giving we receive, in forgiving we are forgiven and in dying we are born to eternal life'. Non-contradiction can be a barrier to dialogue which often requires apparently contradictory positions to be set alongside each other.

It can be argued that doctrine is a barrier to dialogue. Defence of something considered immutable is incompatible with genuine dialogue. However, the Church teaches that we should engage in doctrinal dialogue with courage and accept that this may result in a need to revise our own position (Cf. *Humanae Personae Dignitatem*⁵). Pope Benedict XVI, writing as Joseph Ratzinger, argued that mission

and dialogue should not be seen as opposites but rather should 'mutually interpenetrate'. According to Pope Benedict, allowing my own limited understanding of truth to be broken down helps me to gain a better understanding of the truth about God, which I can never fully comprehend.⁶ Doctrine and dialogue can be seen as different aspects of an evangelical process as long as they are approached with intellectual humility.⁷

There are those who have reservations about dialogue and worry that it erodes the authority of the bishops, obscures Church teaching, and elevates the status of dissent. They remind us that dialogue is not the only form of communication in the Church and that proclamation plays an important part. Others invoke the *sensus fidei* and argue that where scripture and tradition inform the dialogue then faith and practice are enriched. Perhaps this is fertile ground for genuine dialogue.⁸

Harmonious tension

Schools are dialogical institutions providing a venue for contrasting validity claims to dialogue with each other. As a Catholic community, where we acknowledge the presence of God among us, we strive for dialogue, which allows different points of view to be held in harmonious tension. As on many other occasions when we discuss our faith, we are drawn back to the Trinity. Here we find harmonious counterpoint. Here we find the theological underpinning of our commitment to dialogue.

Dialogue between faith and culture

The documents emanating from the Congregation for Catholic Education speak frequently of the importance of schools in providing opportunities for dialogue between faith and culture in the hope that this will eventually lead to a synthesis of these. Indeed, the Church teaches that 'man comes to a true and full

humanity only through culture' (*Gaudium et Spes* n. 53). In part, this synthesis is modelled in the lives of Catholics on the staff, who demonstrate how to live an authentic Christian life within the culture that they inhabit. In a sense, they are the answer to the question, 'How can I be a Christian in the modern world?' That they sometimes fail to live up to what they profess is part of the example that they give. The weaknesses of the human condition often cause us to fail but once we acknowledge our shortcomings we can pick ourselves up and try again.

The dialogue between faith and culture also involves trying to understand what it is that we believe and what we can learn from culture. The Church has a history of being dismissive of dominant cultural trends. During the late 19th and early 20th century 'modernism' was condemned and with it new ways of studying Scripture. During the 20th century popes have condemned many 'isms' of the 'post-modern' world such as relativism, individualism, and syncretism. Rarely are the positive elements of modern culture celebrated. Is enough attention given to the rise of ecology, feminism and spirituality?⁹ Is enough attention paid to what our students actually think?¹⁰ If we are to walk with them on their journey of faith and help them to understand the relevance of the Gospel for their lives, then we must first listen to them as Jesus did to the disciples on the road to Emmaus.

Respect different perspectives

Catholic schools are also engaged in dialogue with Christians of other denominations, people of other faiths and non-believers. Respect for these differing perspectives is a pre-requisite for dialogue. Helping people to walk along the path that they are on and reflecting an understanding of the meaning it holds for them builds trust, and helps them to see how the light

of the Gospel can bring their own path into sharper relief. In particular, appreciation must be shown for those 'who are honestly seeking God according to his or her own conscience'.¹¹ Nor should we ignore those who claim to have no belief in God. Often, they have a sense of being part of some-

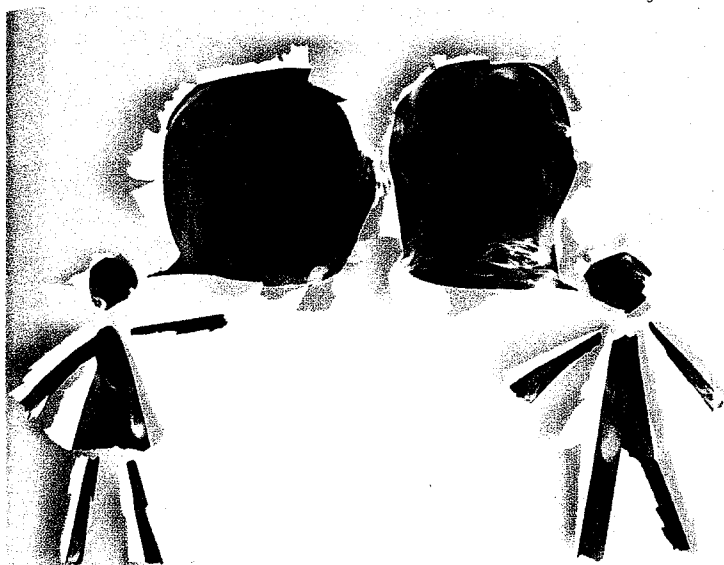
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thing greater than themselves and this provides common ground for exploration.

I remember talking with three head students, sixth formers, at a Salesian school. We discussed their experience of being in the school. One was a Catholic, one an Anglican and the third a Hindu. It was evident from what they told me that they had been strongly influenced by the school's ethos. They reflected on their experience of a school where Christian values permeated daily life. Respect for others was promoted and individual difference valued. Genuine dialogue had taken place between students, with staff, and between the assumptions that individuals brought from home and the values that the school promoted and modelled. Their reflections were shaped by the distinctive educational charism of Don Bosco. I was left with the impression that although they would not all become Catholics, they would always be Salesians.

In the light of the Gospel

Critically, dialogue takes place in RE lessons. Well managed lessons led by knowledgeable and enthusiastic teachers create an ideal environment for genuine



dialogue. Here students can express their opinions and explore alternative points of view but always the Gospel is given a respectful hearing. If the Gospel is not clearly presented and explained, and if students are not able to explore their own views in the light of the Gospel then an important opportunity for dialogue is lost.

I have visited many good Catholic schools over the years but one secondary school that I inspected illustrates the significant role of dialogue in RE lessons. The students, including the fifteen and sixteen year olds, spoke enthusiastically about their RE lessons. They enjoyed the open discussions that took place. On observing lessons, it was clear that genuine dialogue was taking place. The teacher had created an environment where people were confident to express their opinions whilst listening respectfully to the opinions of others. One particular discussion was about the Church's teaching on birth control. The teacher explained Catholic teaching clearly and a wide ranging, insightful dialogue ensued. The students did not all leave the room accepting the Church's teaching but they did leave having a better understanding of the issue and what the Church taught and why. It was clear from other conversations with these students that they had an enormous respect for the teacher and felt that they were constantly challenged to revise their preconceptions about many issues.

In conclusion

Catholic schools provide an arena where constructive dialogue can take place. However, this should not be left to chance. Schools must be mindful of the contexts within which dialogue occurs, nurture the attitudes required for genuine dialogue, and ensure that members of staff have the necessary understanding of the faith to give a coherent account of it in word and deed. ■

- 1 Cf. O'Malley, J. W., *What Happened at Vatican II*, (Cambridge Mass., Harvard University Press, 2008).
- 2 CCE, *Educating Today and Tomorrow: A renewing passion, Instrumentum laboris*, (www.educatio.va, 2015, pp. 11/12).
- 3 Buber, M., *I and Thou* (second edition) translated by Ronald Gregor Smith, (Scribner's Sons, New York, 1958)
- 4 Cf. Benedict XVI, *Speech to the General Assembly of the Italian Bishops' Conference* (www.vatican.va, 27 May 2010).
- 5 Flannery, A., *Vatican Council II* (Leominster, Fowler Wright 1981, p.1007).
- 6 Ratzinger, J., *Many Religions and One Covenant*, (Ignatius Press, 1998, pp.110-112 & 202).
- 7 Caldecott, S., 'Benedict XVI and Inter-Religious Dialogue', *Transformation*, 23/4 Oct. 2006.
- 8 Cf. Hinze, B., *Practices of Dialogue in the Roman Catholic Church* (New York, Continuum, 2006 pp.114-118).
- 9 Gallagher, P. M., *Clashing Symbols: An Introduction to Faith & Culture*, (Darton, Longman and Todd, London, 1997, p. 110).
- 10 Cf. Savage S., et al: *Making sense of Generation Y*, (Church House Publishing, 2006).
- 11 CCE, *Lay Catholics in Schools: Witnesses to Faith*, (www.vatican.va, 1982 n. 42).