

**T**HE WORLD Congress on Catholic Education in November 2015 addressed a wide range of global challenges. Top of the bill were concerns regarding Catholic identity, as schools across the world face important questions amid increasing secularisation and religious diversity.

So, what does it mean to be a Catholic school and to engage in Catholic education when students and teachers are today more religiously, culturally and ideologically diverse than perhaps ever before?

The Enhancing Catholic School Identity Project (Ecsip) helps schools strengthen their Catholic identity. Based in sound theology and the traditions of the Church, and with appreciation for the changing needs of students and cultures, the project is conducted in partnership between the Faculty of Theology and Religious Studies at KU Leuven in Belgium, the Catholic Education Commission of Victoria and a consortium of dioceses in Queensland, Australia.

We have developed new research instruments to study not only the current attitudes of students and adults, but also a school's potential to enhance its Catholic identity. To date, more than 1,000 schools in Australia, Belgium, the United States, the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, France and the Philippines have participated.

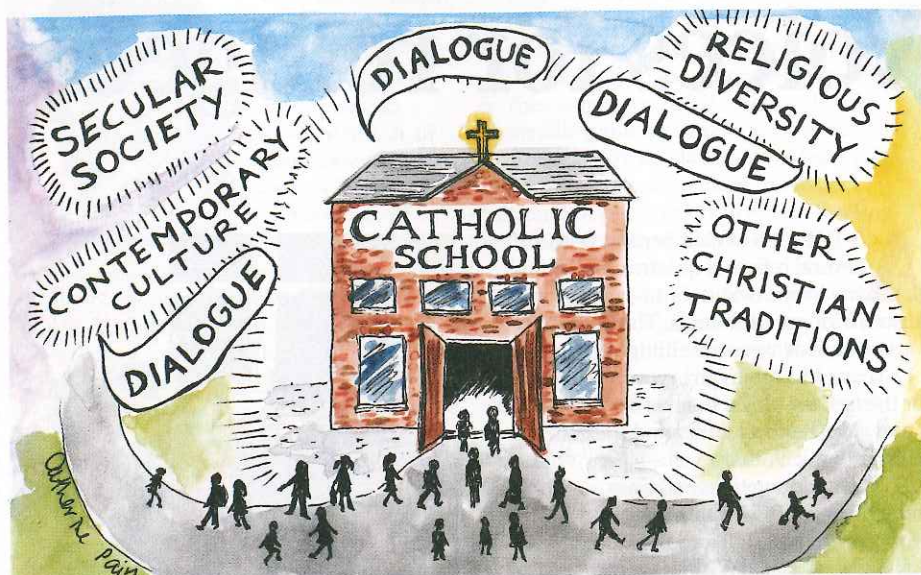
The project operates on the conviction that it is better to know – rather than to intuitively assume – what capacity there is internally for identity-building.

Ecsip uses specialised online surveys and each school then receives a comprehensive report (complete with data, analyses, conclusions and recommendations) showcasing the current support for its Catholic identity.

The research instruments assess both perceptions of the current state of affairs and attitudes towards the future, offering predictions about the likely future shape of a school's Catholic identity.

The Congregation for Catholic Education recently noted that “the finest gift that

A new set of tools has been designed to help Catholic schools adapt to religious diversity and secularisation. The academics behind it, **Didier Pollefeyt** and **Jan Bouwens**, explain how it works



## What does Catholic mean today?

Catholic education can make to a school is that of witness. Catholic schools give witness to a constant, personal network of relationships, which are lived out between the poles of personal identity and otherness.”

Ecsip holds that a vibrant Catholic school community fosters a faith that understands a relationship with the divine cannot be fully grasped, but accessed through symbolic mediation and ongoing interpretation. Whether it is other Christian traditions or other faiths and belief systems

entirely, difference is not a problem to be fought or avoided, but rather an opportunity to be engaged.

For more see: [www.schoolidentity.net](http://www.schoolidentity.net)  
See also: *Schools Practice*, main section, p16.

**Didier Pollefeyt** is vice president for Education KU Leuven and full professor at the Faculty of Theology and Religious Studies. **Jan Bouwens** is chief academic researcher for the Enhancing Catholic School Identity Project at the Faculty of Theology and Religious Studies, KU Leuven.

### ● How the survey works

There are separate surveys for adults and pupils. Adults have 150 questions to answer and are expected to take about 45 minutes to complete the survey. Pupils (aged over 10) have 60 questions and will take around half an hour, write *Didier Pollefeyt and Jan Bouwens*. Examples of questions answered on a seven-point scale, agreement-disagreement:

**My school is a very good place to grow closer to God.**

**The Bible holds a deeper truth which can only be revealed by personal reflection.**

**My school is Catholic, first and foremost because it offers Catholic values and norms that can be embraced**

by Catholics as well as non-Catholics.

**In my opinion, the aim of religious education classes should always be to turn all students into better Catholic believers.**

**My “ideal school” should look creatively and with an open mind for good ways to be Catholic in the middle of contemporary culture.**

### ● Categorising the school

The survey results allow us to make a detailed analysis about the approach of the school, its staff and pupils.

We begin by looking at the type of religious belief found in the school, for which we have four categories:

**LITERAL BELIEF** assumes a direct

connection with God and sees truth as definite, absolute and fixed.

**EXTERNAL CRITIQUE** dismisses all religious experience because contemporary science and faith are seen as incompatible.

**RELATIVISM** holds that each religion possesses some useful moral teachings and beautiful writings, but that all religions are ultimately insignificant.

**POST-CRITICAL BELIEF** is aware of the variety of belief options and the many critiques of religion but nevertheless affirms a relationship with God as interpreted through symbols and sacraments in the context of a faith community.

We believe a post-critical belief offers the strongest building blocks for Catholic school identity. Next we look at attitudes within the

school, helping it to understand both the tensions and opportunities it faces. Here, we have five possible categories in which to place a school:

**A CONFessionALLY-BASED school is largely unaffected by secularisation or pluralisation and does not allow its Catholic identity to be challenged.**  
**INSTITUTIONAL SECULARISATION indicates a school that is abandoning all obvious signs of being Catholic.**  
**RECONFessionALISATION is an active strategy towards reinforcing Catholic identity against the challenges of increasing diversity and the changing times.**  
**CHRISTIAN VALUES EDUCATION attempts to connect so-called Christian values, presumed to be commonly shared, to the gospel message that shapes the living of a good life. This approach tends to disintegrate when the gap between culture and faith grows wider and diversity increases.**  
**RECONTEXTUALISATION continues the next chapter of the story, mindful of tradition, but also conscious of its present-day context. This school is engaged in renewing its Catholic profile and attempts to reinterpret its understanding of Catholicism in a diverse world.**

Recontextualisation is the category we promote. Finally we assess the school's pedagogical approach, placing it in one of four categories:

**A MONOLOGUE SCHOOL strongly focuses on its religious identity, deliberately rejecting openness to other religions, which are considered undesirable and even threatening.**  
**A DIALOGUE SCHOOL emphasises its Catholic inspiration but takes the multicultural world seriously. Many voices and views are engaged with, but all in the context of the Catholic story.**  
**A COLOURFUL SCHOOL makes a great effort to recognise other beliefs, to the detriment of its Catholic identity.**  
**A COLOURLESS SCHOOL sees religion as a private matter and it is up to pupils to make up their minds. It is Catholic only in name.**

We advocate the "Dialogue School", which develops both a meaningful encounter with the living Catholic tradition and solidarity with others.

#### ● What the survey looks like

Ecsip reports run to between 50 and 100 pages and resemble the kind of Ofsted report most parents would love to have access to, *writes Isabel de Bertodano.*

Though there are no academic results, they give a vivid impression of a school, from the religious and socioeconomic

backgrounds of the pupils to the number of years of teaching experience among the staff.

At times the language is dense and academic, but in addition to a comprehensive analysis of the survey results there are dozens of photos of the school, from project boards on the walls, to corridors and playing fields.

*The Tablet* was shown a report on a primary school in Australia. More than 90 per cent of pupils aged 10 to 12 had taken part, in addition to almost all teachers and some parents. The school was found to have a strong Catholic identity, which "most of the adult and student respondents give obvious support to". The majority were found to have a "Post-Critical Belief".

However, though staff at the school urged a Dialogue approach, there was a tendency for students to want a Colourful school. This has an "overly heavy focus on the similarities between different traditions, glossing over the very real differences" and failing to fully respect the individuality of each tradition.

The report observed "potential problems" here and advised caution about "activities that gradually water down the inherent solidarity with others in the Christian tradition". It warned that "when the way of a

Colourful school is chosen, the shift to a Colourless school is seductive and almost inevitable".

The school was also warned against taking a literal approach towards Catholic teaching as children tend to find aspects of this implausible as they grow older. Likewise, a Christian Values Education is found to be ill-equipped to withstand the complex situations young people find themselves in as they grow up, causing them to reject the Church.

### The school was warned against taking a literal approach towards Catholic teaching

Recommendations included improving staff understanding of Post-Critical Belief and encouraging staff to talk to children about their own faith.

Ernest Christie, director of learning, teaching and Catholic identity in the Diocese of Townsville,

Australia, said he had found the ECSIP survey very useful. All 32 schools in the diocese undertake the survey once every five years.

"It delivers a rich and accurate array of data that provides each school (and in turn diocese) with trends in relation to Catholic identity," said Christie. "As a school the principal and their team know whom they are dealing with. As a diocese, we can make big-picture responses to emerging data."

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