Chapter 12
Educational Leadership in Catholic Schools: A Practice-Based Theology of Vocation

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Abstract This chapter reports on some findings of a large-scale theological action research project with Catholic school leaders across England and Wales—*Visions for Educational Leadership*. The particular theme that is identified is that of 'vocation', as both a problematic and potentially fruitful starting place for developing a theology which might better serve Catholic school leaders today. The inductive reading of this theme, drawn from the testimonies of more than 70 senior school leaders in the non-private Catholic sector, allows for a proper complexifying of 'vocation', which deepens and particularises a theology for educational leadership as Christian calling. Once some misgivings around the terminology have been identified, the argument moves to three particular areas of learning about vocation from the school leaders: job-as-vocation; 'layered' vocations; and 'lay' and 'religious in vocational thinking'. From these bases, a first account of what characterises the particular vocation of Catholic school leaders is outlined, drawing, again, on the testimonies of the leaders themselves. In these ways, the beginnings of an integrated practical–theological articulation of the charism of schools leaders are set out, and questions raised as to the practical implications of such a theology.

Keywords Vocation · Catholic school leadership · Catholic education
Lay leadership

Introduction: Theology-and-Practice for Catholic Schools Leadership: Setting the Scene

The question of educational leadership in Catholic Schools is one which is open to exploration from a number of perspectives, and which has received increasing attention in recent years (Dosen and Rieckhoff 2015; Grace 1995; Friel and

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Hodgson 2015). Such studies, along with the plethora of Church documents on Catholic Schools, offer both practical guidance and magisterial vision for those whose work is carried out in these schools. What is offered in this chapter, however, is a specifically *theological* perspective. In particular, what follows is a reading of educational leadership practice in Catholic schools, as seen through the lenses of theologies of Church and sacrament, with their characteristic attention to *grace-in-ordinary*. This sacramental ecclesiological perspective is further characterised by the conviction that, in order for a 'whole-theology' of Church and Christian faith to be developed, attention must be given the voices and practices of those whose lives embody that faith and ecclesial reality in the world. It is a theological approach which, taking Vatican II's teaching on Divine Revelation seriously, insists on the integration of these insights from practice as an essential source for theological learning:

> This tradition which comes from the Apostles develops in the Church with the help of the Holy Spirit. For there is a growth in the understanding of the realities and the words which have been handed down. This happens through the contemplation and study made by believers, who treasure these things in their hearts (see Luke, 2:19, 51) through a penetrating understanding of the spiritual realities which they experience, and through the preaching of those who have received through Episcopal succession the sure gift of truth… (Dei Verbum 1965, par. 8)

With this in mind, the theological understanding of Catholic School Leadership developed here draws on the data and processes of a large scale, 'theological action research' project, involving around 50 Catholic state schools across England and Wales (VfEL 2016). Using the approach developed by the author and her co-researchers (Cameron 2010), the practice-based accounts and insights from over 70 senior school leaders in this sector are brought into critical conversation with theological themes from the Christian tradition, so as to open up new and authentic ways on thinking about these faith-full practices in embodied theological ways. It is a research project rooted in a particular context in which a number of concerns can be seen as motivating factors: the crisis facing the recruitment of Catholic school leaders in England and Wales; the increasing stresses and demands facing school leaders, especially in the state sector, relating to performance and related financial systems; and the ongoing debate about the purpose of and sociopolitical justification for Catholic schools in an increasingly secular and plural society. Yet, whilst these concerns initiated many of the questions behind the project, the aim has been not so much to identify direct responses to them. Rather, we start our thinking in a different, perhaps 'deeper', place—a place from which we can discover fundamental theological realities, discerning the movements of the Holy Spirit already at work. The practical–theological question then is how to respond to these pneumatological realities as our priority, rather than strategic, political and financial pressures. For, real as these latter are, they are, theologically, secondary to how God is leading us to love within and through them.

Some Core Concepts and Opening Theses

The position just outlined might be helpfully elucidated by stating some central theses, or opening positions, which underlie the research we are about to describe. First, informed by the fundamental Catholic theology of revelation, referred to above, the research proceeds on the conviction that, even whilst a 'crisis' in school leadership is spoken of, Catholic school leaders embody and *know* in their practice (though often not explicitly) a deep theology and spirituality which is shaped by their work. They hold a *phronesis* (practical wisdom) of theological significance. This conviction leads to a second position: that what is needed is a clearer and ongoing articulation of this *phronesis*, voiced by those whose practices and lives embody it. The development of an authentic practice-based theology requires a discernment through these very voices of practice, demanding that processes are enabled by which these voices can be heard and attended to.

The resulting articulation of Catholic school leaders' *phronesis* is essential in a number of ways. At a time, when recruitment to senior leadership positions in Catholic schools is difficult, an account of the wisdom, and spirituality of the work can enable the shaping of a charism of Catholic school leadership. The naming and reflection of such a charism allows a communication of a vision, or hope for the work, which can be handed on, or shared with the next generation of educational leaders in our schools. But, the benefits of such an articulation of charism go further than questions of leadership succession. At its best it not only gives the basis and vocabulary for a deepening reflective living of schools leadership—a spirituality, if you will; but it also has potential as a gift to the wider Church. This is because in those who lead our Catholic schools we encounter embodiments of lay vocation in the world, working for the common good, often embroiled in contentious questions of our political and social context. Here, we see 'faith community leaders' of a rarely heard sort, whose experience gives fresh, and vital accounts of church, evangelisation, grace and Christian vocation in the world. These accounts—and others like them—are crucial sources for the much needed renewal of church today. It is for these reasons that the Catholic school, and its community, presents itself as a proper locus for theology—and especially for ecclesiology, holding, as it does, a potential for better understanding an ecclesial charism in and for the world.

The Visions for Educational Leadership Project: A Brief Outline

The key source for this chapter's argument is data arising from a 2 year theological action research project—*Visions on Educational Leadership* (VfEL 2016). As a piece of theological action research (Cameron 2010; TARN), the project did not simply generate data through interviews and the like; rather the research processes involved conversational practices involving the variety of stakeholders, which were

participative, reflective and iterative. As a participative and conversational process, it was also characterised by an intentional interdisciplinarity, involving theologians, sociologists, practitioners, educational scholars, and diocesan advisors, which enabled a multi-perspectival account of the realities being discerned. And it is *discernment*—rather than analysis, coding or statistics solely—that determines the approach to the data gathered: an iterative, prayerful and reflective dwelling on the words of practitioners, in the light of what the reader brings in terms of her or his own expertise in theology, sociology, education and so forth.

These research characteristics can be seen in the outline of the process undertaken for the VfEL project, which took place between 2012 and 2014. Based at the *Heythrop Institute for Religion and Society*, and in collaboration with the Bishops' Conference of England and Wales *Catholic Education Service*, the lead researchers were the present author, Dr. James Sweeney and Mrs. Margaret Buck. As such, the Heythrop research team incorporated academic expertise in theology, sociology of religion and practical theology, as well as in-depth knowledge of ecclesial policy and practice in relation to Catholic schools in England and Wales. With the help of a research assistant, Dr. Robert Ivermee, over 70 Catholic school leaders across seven dioceses were interviewed, with the conversations being recorded and transcribed for reflection. Once an initial group reflection from the research team had taken place, the identified key themes were shared with—and tested through—focus groups of schools leaders, extending the original cohort of interviewees. This process led to further refinement of themes and ideas, which were then written up into thematic papers. These papers were shared with participants at the 2 day research colloquium in November 2014, who included not only research participants, but also clergy, diocesan education advisors, academics and members of the *Catholic Education Service*.

The thematic papers presented for that colloquium can be found online[1] (VfEL 2016), but a summary of these themes here is helpful for providing the wider context for the chapter's focus on *vocation* as the basis for a theology for Catholic school leadership. For whilst 'vocation' emerged as a key theme (VfEL 2016, Paper 1) it did so in ways related to the four other themes: schools leadership and normative/policy positions; schools, churches and Church; the formation of Catholic school leaders; and the Catholic school leader and the evangelisation of culture. These areas together describe the complex interpenetrating environments and cultures that the Catholic school leader is required to negotiate. As an organisation with a faith identity and an ecclesial mandate, the state Catholic school is, at the same time, funded by a secular state, which has its own requirements, targets and ethos regarding education. More complex still, the Catholic school leader works not simply with children and young people who are part of the core church community, but rather the majority of their 'faith leadership' is carried out with students and families at some distance form the

[1]The report and full data can be found at TARN, the *Website for Theology and Action Research Network* https://theologyandactionresearch.net and the VfEL (2016). *Visions for Educational Leadership Project papers* which can be freely accessed at: https://theologyandactionresearch.net/visions-for-educational-leadership/.

visible, parish-based, sacramental life of the church. Theirs is a work of visible faith responsibility in the complexity of ordinary family lives, most of which are primarily shaped by the prevailing culture of our late modern secular context. It is here that the particular and remarkable 'vocation' of Catholic school leadership is carried out.

The Problematic Language of 'Vocation'

I have used the language of vocation to describe Catholic school leadership here as it reflects one of the strongest emerging themes from the data, and is the central point from which this chapter's attempt to begin a theology for this work of educational leaders. It is a language which certainly has some currency within the many Vatican documents dealing with education. Here, this quote from Vatican II's Declaration on Christian Education can illustrate this type of magisterial rhetoric, with all the tendency to idealisation that it often involves:

> Beautiful indeed and of great importance is the vocation of all those who aid parents in fulfilling their duties and who, as representatives of the human community, undertake the task of education in schools. This vocation demands special qualities of mind and heart, very careful preparation, and continuing readiness to renew and to adapt'. (Gravissimum Educationis 1965, par. 5)

In part because of the unhelpful tendency of the language of 'vocation' to idealise or 'spiritualise' the everyday realities of educational practice, the research questions did not use it—nor did the researchers expect this language to be used by more than a few of those interviewed. It is particularly significant, then, this terminology was frequently employed by those interviewed to describe their relationship with their work in school, and that it was also recognised warmly in the focus groups. If we are looking for a strong starting place from which to develop a theology for Catholic school leadership this would seem to be one, reflecting as it does not only the tradition as reflected in magisterial teaching, but also the tradition as lived by those whose practice currently embodies this work.

To say this is not, however, in any way to suggest a simple affirmation of the magisterial view of Catholic schools work as 'vocation'. In fact, the accounts from practice challenge, complexify and so deepen this language in ways which detail important particularities for Catholic school leaders in particular and (I would suggest) for the understanding of 'lay vocation' more generally.

Vocation: Yes and No

We can begin our proper complexifying of this notion by referring to the 'yes and no' nature of the witness of the interviewees. A first observation has been that the language was used very much more widely than expected, and that this was often

very much in ways which affirmed and embraced the language as properly describing the leaders' approach to their work. These quotes are typical[2]:

> Wherever I am, whatever I'm doing, it's always a part of me. I'm always conscious that a head of a Catholic school is a vocation…
>
> I wouldn't be sat here if it wasn't for that real kind of vocation that I feel, like God's called me to do this.

At the same time, a sizeable and interesting minority group voiced real misgiving around the use of the term. These can be seen as two sorts, both with theological and practical significance. A first concern was with the potential to use the language of 'vocation' in exploitative ways: it's a term easily 'abused' as a rhetoric for getting more out of people than is just or healthy, and so becomes part of the recipe for burnout, stress and disillusionment. At the same time, even with these dangers recognised, there was often an appreciation that, none the less, 'vocation' was a term that said something about the work which was not otherwise easily expressed. What became important was the need to examine and deepen understanding of what this language truly meant, and reject the managerial and exploitative uses on the basis of a better theological, personal and spiritual understanding. One head teacher expressed it like this:

> Vocation is used as an excuse. Our job is truly a vocation. I mean there is no doubt about that, for a Head Teacher. But when you are asking more staff to work more weekends, the notion of vocation becomes problematic…

A second misgiving expressed by the interviewees concerned the 'religious' overtones of 'vocation' language. This quote sums up these misgivings:

> In a typical Catholic upbringing, your vocation meant that you were going to be a priest or a nun and that was it, and certainly my parents and grandparents would never have thought of teaching as being a vocation. It was a good job to get and it meant standing in the community but not necessarily a vocation, which I think does have a particular religious connotation.

On one level what we see here is, a widely recognised struggle which many Catholic lay people have the notion much encouraged magisterially since Vatican II, that we all have a vocation—a particular way of living Christian holiness in the particularities of our lives (see, Lumen Gentium 1964; Haughey 2004; Jamison 2013; Hahnenberg 2010). It seems that, for all that is said on an official-Church level, and for all the pastoral renewal programmes than emphasise lay vocation, there remains a strong sense that vocation is 'religious'—which is to say, that it pertains to the church *ad intra* in its identity, being properly applicable to those individuals who publicly and in total-life ways serve the church's mission as what might be understood as ecclesial personnel. However, this limited view of vocation highlights more fundamental, more deeply rooted theological and spiritual perspectives. In particular, it suggests a 'small' reading of 'church' and mission,

[2]In the remainder of this chapter a selection of quotes will be presented from the VfEL project. The sources for these quotes can be found at TARN (https://theologyandactionresearch.net).

which tends to confine the ecclesial to the Church institutions, and the gathered-in community of sacramental practice. More profoundly, it implies a separation of 'sacred' and 'secular' which disables any thorough-going account of lay vocation in the world—which has a properly 'secular' character (*Lumen Gentium*, par. 31)—as something of divine purpose, or graced mission. Our inherited thinking around *vocation*, *church and world* have not served us well in the practical theological understanding of vocation in the world. As we shall see, the inductive learning about the vocation of Catholic School leaders struggles to articulate the spiritual and practical realities of the vocation as it is practised, and, in doing so, challenges some inherited notions of 'vocation' whilst enriching the theology of Christian call. In order to demonstrate this, I will illustrate three sets of questions around vocation which came to light through the research: job-as-vocation; the idea of 'layered vocations'; and the persisting problem of the 'religious' connotations of vocations language.

Job-as-Vocation

There is, in much of the literature and preaching around 'vocation' a strong sense of an extraordinary *call*. In order to discern one's vocation—which, after all, means 'calling and so implies the hearing of a call expressed by *One who Calls*—the person is expected to encounter some moment of decision, revelation, conviction about what God wants of them. Even whilst the growing literature in the theology of vocation calls these ideas into question, they persist in our communities, and in the ways we speak. The difficulty with such notions was shown up in the VfEL research as school leaders, whilst wishing to speak of their work as 'vocation', struggled with the awareness that, on the whole, their journey to this vocation was pragmatic, made up of 'ordinary' career choices. Very many of those interviewed had never set out to be school leaders, and found their way there 'by accident', as posts opened up, colleagues and mentors encouraged them, and their own sense of possibilities grew. There were no extraordinary accounts of explicit 'calling', for all that the majority were committed to speaking of their work as vocation. What emerged, in fact, were accounts of vocation-discovered, vocation followed through a step-by-step process in which the 'goal'—in a vocational sense—was often obscure.

For, unsurprisingly, the reality for most of the school leaders was as much about employment, job security and family finances as about a sense of vocation. Those practical realities of training for and working in *job* sat uneasily with more traditional notions of vocation, as this instructive comment revealed:

> I struggle a little bit with vocation. I made a very deliberate choice for the career that I wanted, a very well planned choice coming from a family of teachers and both parents being school leaders, knowing all the ins and outs and all of the good bits and all the bad bits and I still do it, but very deliberately. So I don't know … and I don't actually know

> whether I'm the person to say whether this is my vocation. Who knows in 10, 15, 20 years what I might do and I might go 'actually that's my vocation'. I don't know.

As a lay person, the Catholic school leader has a contract, a salary, a pension and an expectation round retirement. The job is not totalising, or eternal, nor even necessarily permanent. And yet, the sense of vocation persists. To make sense of this, we need to radically to address some of our assumptions about lay vocation.

'Layered Vocations'

One of the ways, we might reassess our thinking in this area is through reflecting on our school leaders' testimony about a complexity of vocation realties or facets to their lives. In particular, it was common for the interviewees to nuance their language of their job as 'vocation' by referring to it as 'part of' a vocation—one aspect of a complex reality of living the fundamental call to holiness in the world as a lay person who is necessarily embedded in secular (and sacred) realities.

> I think this is what I was called to do. To me this is part of my calling in the same way as it is to be son, to be husband, to be brother, to be father, to be Head Teacher.

> The fact that my particular vocation and calling has been in education has been a privilege and a tremendous blessing. It is part of a calling and what I hope God wants me to do in this stage of my life.

What is witnessed to here is a lived reality of vocation in which God's call is not any clearly packaged 'thing'; but rather it is an ongoing, sometimes murky, journey of discernment, shaped by practicalities, cultural realities and subject to change in its particularities. The vocation is not—and cannot be—identical with a job, or even with a family role. Rather the profound personal vocation is lived out in variously embodied and 'worldly' ways. For our school leaders, their work was truly vocational, but sat within an acute personal and what could be called a *leaderly* awareness of the *layeredness* of lay vocation, as illustrated through the observation that:

> The sense of being more at one with yourself when you're doing a job that you really enjoy doing is great; but people on our staff, they may well have the vocation to be a teacher, but they also have the vocation to be a parent and a partner, and have a life outside the school.

The Lay/Religious Tension

These two sets of insights—job-as-vocation, and *layeredness* of vocation—helps provide a fresh lens for reflection on that persistent, and previously outlined question around vocation: how can a lay person's paid professional life be considered 'vocation', when it is not 'religious'? We can begin to see a need to reconfigure the ways in which we think theologically and spiritually about the

realities of secular living, so as to develop an account of the work of grace, the Holy Spirit, and the Divine Call which is true not only to our faith tradition, but also to the experiences and lived-vocations of schools leaders, and others like them. The challenge is to name the realities of Christian vocation within this context of *ordinary* living, of jobs, careers and many-faceted family, social and work lives. It is a challenge which has the potential to deconstruct lingering notions of 'superior' and 'inferior' living of Christian vocation, and offer a vision of vocation-in-ordinary, learnt for those who live such callings:

> What I don't like about vocation is that it suggests in some way that our role is something special and sort of sets us apart … I suppose a holy sense of the word. But you know, what we do we do because we love doing it and it's really, really important, but so are the jobs that lots and lots of people do. I don't like to put us on a pedestal as something that is particularly special compared to whatever everybody else does. I don't like the idea that we're kind of these God-chosen people, that we are almost the next stage from being a nun or a priest.

What all these observations about the use of 'vocation' language among our Catholic school leaders suggests is that there is a lived and articulated tension between a strong sense of their work as vocation, and the equally strong sense that this language needs considerable modifying to really match their realities. My argument is that these misgivings and the strong felt need to continue using the language of vocation, *together* indicate a proper theological complexifying of a concept which is both central to contemporary Catholic ecclesiology and mission, and yet too often unexplored. In particular, this concept (vocation) has tended to remain abstract or idealised, with especially difficult results for those called to live Christian vocation in the world. The specific place of Catholic school leaders, as faith leaders in secular political, as well as ecclesial, communities, makes their testimonies not only a rich resource for a theology for Catholic school leadership, but also a gift to the wider church in deepening our understanding of vocation-in-ordinary.

Characterising Catholic School Leaders' 'Vocations'

A start may be made in developing a theology for Catholic school leaders, based on the implied understanding of vocations set out in the previous section, by a closer attention to what the school leaders themselves say about what characterises their work as vocation. In this regard, probably the mist overwhelming and fundamental statement about what it means to work as a Catholic school leader focuses on the language of *love.* 'Vocation is about love', was a statement of one head teacher which summed up a wide-ranging set of accounts, around care, relationship and doing what was possible to help students and their families. Nor should such language be underestimated for its significance; one school leader described how, when they were new to Catholic schools, they were immediately struck by how often and consistently the work done by her colleagues in a Catholic school was

framed, explicitly, speaking of loving. Whilst by no means having the monopoly on love and care, it would seem that the freedom to speak and reflect on love as central to the Catholic school practice is a central and distinctive characteristic.

Such an expression of vocation in terms of love is, of course, a thoroughly biblical and mainstream Christian characteristic—so familiar to us that perhaps it runs the risk of appearing mere rhetoric. However, the persistent context for describing the *loving* of school leadership was that of concrete, practical action. What was described was not, in the main, *feelings* of affection, but rather *practices of love*:

> It's going the extra mile for these children because you want them to be the best they can be and it doesn't stop at 4 o'clock or half past four. The job entails carrying on and seeing it through and we all know as heads what that involves and talking to families at 6 o'clock at night or doing a home visit or whatever it might be. I think it's that passion for wanting to help children as much as we possibly can and to live the Gospel values within all that.

Within this fundamental living of love in the schools context, the school leaders gave a special place to care of those who might be considered disadvantaged, marginalised, or living with some kind of poverty—whether material, emotional, relational or spiritual. This consistent *option for the poor* was explicitly related to the importance that the tradition of Catholic Social Teaching had in the thinking and practice of many of those interviewed. The call to love was 'particularly [for] the ones that don't get a lot of love and care elsewhere', and called leaders to seek to embody inclusion in an authentic way in their schools. This particular focus on loving those most in need, and providing a safe place for relationship and care. This was often directly related to the leader's sense of vocation as the following two quotes illustrate particularly clearly:

> I think there are things that we should do that fit in with that sense of vocation, such as the way that we include all children, the way that we accept children who may be rejected from elsewhere. I think that's really part of our strong mission. As Catholic schools, we should be taking and really welcoming those families and children who are marginalised or failed elsewhere.

> I have always believed during my teaching career in the transformative role of education in helping the most vulnerable … I carried that sense of vocation into my role as a Catholic leader. I can't stress it enough that my role as a leader of a Catholic community that deals explicitly in inclusion for all, but particularly for those who need it the most, is central to who I am.

The vocation to love in the ordinary context of a state school in our society, is especially shaped by a Gospel sensitivity to be loving in the places of poverty, suffering and greatest need—even, when, as a few of the interviewees suggested, this might make the achievement of academic targets, with all their financial implications, more difficult to achieve.

It is, perhaps, the practice of love in places of brokenness that lies behind the surprising power with which another, unexpected, characteristic of school leaders' vocations emerged in the interviews: that of being a *missionary*. Here, the theological lens is called into sharp focus through an awareness of the ecclesiological

significance of the Catholic school. As in some sense ecclesial, the Catholic school is a bearer of Catholic tradition and teaching, and specifically is mandated to carry out the church's educational mission in cooperation with parishes and families. As set out in a key document of the Vatican Congregation for Catholic Education:

> The complexity of the modern world makes it all the more necessary to increase awareness of the ecclesial identity of the Catholic school. It is from its Catholic identity that the school derives its original characteristics and its "structure" as a genuine instrument of the Church, a place of real and specific pastoral ministry. (The Catholic School on the Threshold of the Third Millennium 1997, par. 11)

At the same time, that very complexity of the modern world named here is not only the context for the Catholic school as an ecclesial institution, but also the prevailing cultural formative power among the vast majority of the school's community—both students and staff. The Catholic school is not, and cannot be, separatist in any countercultural relation with its social context—not least of all when (as in the VfEL schools) there is a financial and political relationship with the secular state, upon which the existence of Catholic schools depends. This identifies the Catholic school as a locus of significant ecclesiological interest—a place where we sit at the tangled interface of Church and secular culture, and discover in the faith-full practices of those struggling to live lay vocations in their jobs and many-faceted lives, something that can be aptly called *Church-in-ordinary*.

Especially, important in this church-in-ordinary are the places, where the lived experience of such ecclesiality and the vocation to love as described, has led to a different set of emphases from those held by magisterial or clerical accounts—what we might call official-church. Such moments can be identified in the VfEL research, where many of the senior leaders were offering accounts of the Catholicity of their schools not so much based on the number of Catholic students or staff, but rather on qualities of mission and loving engagement with the world as they found it. Increasingly, it was precisely as numbers of Catholics—especially practising Catholics—dwindled within schools that school leaders rediscovered the energy that comes from a vocation orientated to mission, rather than a job of maintenance. For in this context the Catholic school could be seen as '*offering something of the Church, of Christian, Catholic faith to those outside*', and working with families who are often at an impossible distance form the parish locus and embodiment of church. Such an instinct is well expressed by this head teacher:

Vocation for me is spending time towards mission as well isn't it, because I think the more our schools are not Catholic in the conventional sense, full of baptised Catholics … I think I have developed more of a sense of mission than I have of a sense of preservation or straightforward provision for baptised Catholics.

What school leaders were seeing, along with many Church leaders, was 'people who have become disillusioned with the Church or maybe drifted away from the Church.' But rather than trying to develop ways of getting such families 'back' to the parish, headteachers recognised and worked with the reality that '*sometimes one of their ways of staying engaged is actually to send their children or grandchildren to a Catholic school*'. The Catholic school becomes the place where Church and

Catholic faith is most commonly experienced for increasing numbers of Catholics and others in our society. As one of the VfEL research papers puts it, '*the Catholic school [becomes] a place where a "dispersed" enactment of Church occurs*.', a place we might characterise as an instance of church-in-ordinary. To be a leader in such a context is, the VfEL participants suggest, to be a missionary, an evangeliser at the interface of 'official-Church' and the wider world which God calls and graces.

To live leadership of the Church-in-ordinary is always to encounter the complex and varied questions of our time, in particular, concrete contexts, and respond with a practical wisdom (*phronesis)*. The Catholic school leaders interviewed testified to the ongoing experience of finding themselves in such demanding pastoral positions, where the ethics and practices of the Catholic tradition are confronted by realities of difficult, fragmented or merely starkly different experiences of life among staff and students. Unlike their clerical counterparts leading parish faith communities, we should add, Catholic school leaders are, as we have seen, often the *faith leaders* for those at a distance form official and sacramental church life; the starting place for these pastoral encounters are distinguished in this way, often calling for wisdom in a missionary key rather than in a catechetical key. The account given by this head teacher is typical:

> As a Catholic leader I've got to be flexible. To give you an example, we have students at the age of 13/14 years old who disclose to us that they're sexually active. …we give them advice that will ensure their pastoral care. And that has to be our first role as Catholic educators; it has to be, because otherwise it puts them at grave risk, at risk of death in some cases. So that's a degree of that flexibility, but I see that action as being actually central to my role as a Catholic leader. I support my students. I support them no matter what. I'm fully aware of the doctrine of our Church regarding contraception and regarding sexual activity before marriage; … but I'm also fully aware that God has charged me to look after this community. I don't see that as being liberal. I view it as being the rigid application of what I view as my vocation in the school.

It is this everyday experience of pastoral need beyond the boundaries of formal Church discourse that leads to an identification of a fourth characteristic of the Catholic school leader's vocation: that of *integration* and *discernment.* Working with diverse communities, and often with young people at peculiarly vulnerable and shifting stages of their journey, there is a proper reluctance to meet the less-than-perfect with straightforward exhortations to Church teaching. Rather, with that teaching clearly in view, the school leader seeks the next appropriate step, integrating that foundational grace of love and care even into the broken places of the lives they touch.

Concluding Comment: Vocations to 'Church-in-Ordinary'

This chapter has illustrated the ways in which a particular kind of sense of vocation is experienced and lived by Catholic school leaders. Building on fundamental insights concerning the particular demands of a theology for specifically *lay*

vocation, it can be seen how a distinct theology of the vocation of the Catholic school leader might be developed. Such a theology needs to shift the language and surrounding concepts of 'vocation' away from a narrowly *ad intra* ecclesial sense, towards the more many-faceted and layered *ad extra* understanding embodied by those school leaders interviewed in the VfEL research.

By identifying the distinctive characteristics of this *ad extra* ecclesial vocation, I want to close by naming the Catholic school leaders' work as vocations to church-in-ordinary. In a longer essay, it would be possible to develop this idea further by drawing on the VfEL theme of *Schools, churches and Church* (VfEL 2016, Paper 3); it is the key notion of the Catholic school as a locus of *dispersed enactment of Church* that can provide the theological context for Catholic schools leaders' reflection and enrichment of their own account of their particular vocations. In fact, our learning from these school leaders highlights certain profound, and perhaps neglected, aspects of our long, rich and varied Catholic tradition, upon which we need further to reflect: the properly secular nature of the lay vocation, and its implications for the majority's response to the universal call to holiness is at the forefront of these themes demanding our attention; and with this comes a felt need for a renewed understanding of the call to love in the marginalised places of our world, through the wisdom of solidarity, accompaniment and discernment. The detailing of such a theology at the service of Catholic schools leadership is much needed; but it is also entirely possible—when we are committed to hearing the authentic voices of those who live this work, and to the riches, they call out of our longer Catholic tradition. Perhaps, too, such a work might allow a true service to the official-Church, through the vivid, if sometimes messy, the witness of the Church-in-ordinary.

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