

## Educator's Guide to Catholic Identity

by Paul Sharkey

Dear guests,

Dear dr. Sharkey,

I'm very pleased to help launch Paul's new book, the "Educator's Guide to Catholic Identity." You know, I heard a rumor that Paul was originally planning to use the title, "Catholic Identity for Dummies", but I think the final title will resonate much better with his intended audience of educators and leaders in Catholic education. I'll say a bit more in a few moments about the ways in which this book will engage such an audience.

As Paul acknowledges very well, and as I know well from my years of research and experience with Catholic schools, Catholic identity is most definitely a complex concern. Certainly here in south Australia, there's little doubt that many are in favor of Catholic schools; and that many are in favor of strengthening the Catholic identity in these schools. However the questions faced today are complex nonetheless. Strengthening Catholic identity? Yes; but what kind of Catholic identity? An encounter with the gospel? Belief in God? Yes, of course, but *with what kind* of cognitive approach will young people encounter the gospel and develop their belief? A school identity that interacts with the broader culture? Yes, of course as well; but in what way? And dialogue as pedagogy? Yes, everyone's in favor of dialogue; but what kind of dialogue should be fostered in Catholic schools? These are the questions that we've studied in the ECSIP project – a project that Paul has not helped to lead here in Victoria, but a project that he has also helped to extend to other parts of Australia.

It should be no surprise that Paul builds his work around questions like these after having spent some time with us in Leuven to study very adeptly the concern for Catholic identity. In a practically organized way, Paul helps us reflect on the complexity of questions like these regarding Catholic identity today by focusing his book on twelve different but interrelated areas of concern; from 'commonly anticipated' components of Catholicity such as Christology, liturgy and prayer, curriculum, and pedagogy, to other components that most certainly should not be overlooked such as ecology, befriending difference, and using data for planning purposes.

Paul's book invites Catholic educators – and in particular those responsible for leadership in Catholic education – to wade into the murky and sometimes tumultuous waters of what 'Catholicity' means and looks like in Catholic schools today; certainly this is a most *relevant* invitation. Paul's mastery however is that he does so in a way that makes this invitation *practically accessible* to his audience; that is, *the venture is not too scary* for those who are willing and interested. Allow me briefly to highlight three important ways in which this book

is made both relevant and accessible for anyone working in or concerned with Catholic education today.

First, this is most certainly a well-woven work of dialogue among a number of important sources. Throughout the book, Paul brings us into conversation with front-line issues that confront Catholic schools through dialogue with the experience and teachings of the wider church, with best-practices in the field of education, with the perspectives and attitudes of the world beyond Catholic schools, and of course with some of the most current research and scholarship on Catholic education and the identity of Catholic schools – such as that which we conduct at KU Leuven. In fact, not only does the book exhibit great continuity with the ECSIP research, it also takes practical steps towards enhancing it further through practical engagement with educators and school leaders. The way in which each short chapter integrates this variety of sources makes for rich but manageable pieces of reading that could be used throughout the year at various staff gatherings, meetings, and formation sessions. Those educators and leaders who use this book in their own formation and planning, as well as for that of others, can trust that Paul has drawn from a wide variety of meaningful and relevant sources.

Second, this book is a rich source of real-world examples of what some teachers and leaders are doing today in Australian Catholic schools to give meaningful shape to forms of Catholic identity that are both theologically legitimate and culturally plausible. In each chapter, Paul offers snapshots of school life that prompt thought about an unfolding and continually re-shaping Catholic identity. He recounts personal examples from his visits to schools and conversations with educators and students both as a way of framing the key concern of each chapter, but also as a way of providing food-for-thought for those looking to learn from the experiences of others. As Paul himself acknowledges, “the examples of school life that are presented in this book were chosen because they are typical of the efforts being made by educators to provide their students with meaningful points of encounter with elements of our faith tradition” (p2). Those educators and leaders who engage this book can therefore trust that it is as much a critical analysis of important issues concerning Catholicity in Catholic schools as it is a reflection of exemplary trends and practices already underway.

A third way in which this book is made both relevant and accessible to Catholic school educators and leaders is through the effective integration of practical components for reflection and action. Paul acknowledges that “doing and being have to be held together and integrated in the life of a Catholic school. Reflection and action are both integral to the religious leadership that needs to be exercised continuously at all levels within the school community” (p4). Each chapter therefore contains both *prompts for reflection* and suggested activities for action. Both the reflections and action-activities could easily be used during times of staff formation, leadership team meetings, departmental planning, and other such gatherings. With the integration of both reflection and suggested activities, Paul provides numerous opportunities for all readers to engage in active reflection, not only on

the living, evolving Catholic identity of the school, but also on the readers' own individual life-narratives and their interaction with the unfolding story of the identity of the school.

In addition to these three highlights of the book – and there are others of course, but I'm only given a maximum of ten minutes! – I would also like to share in Paul's affirmation of the Catholic school as a frontier space. Not only is this idea of 'frontier space' one of the twelve identified topics for thought, discussion, and action (that is, it is its own chapter), it also serves as somewhat of a running theme of reflection throughout the book. I share Paul's appreciation for the Catholic school of today as a frontier space. Not only should we not take the Catholicity of our Catholic schools for granted, we must also appreciate that we live and work in a time and space of great potential for encounter and growth. Certainly, as Paul acknowledges, "schools cannot presume to give to students what belongs to God, but they can take responsibility for the quality and substance of the 'Jesus spaces' and 'kingdom spaces' they create" (p9). In quoting prof. Jack Haers regarding the complexity of frontier spaces, Paul exhorts educators and their students to "encounter one another on a territory that is only partially familiar, that contains unfamiliar and as yet unmapped, unexpected features" (p13; cf. Haers, 2004). Certainly a book like this provides opportunities to encounter one another on questions of Catholic identity, and serves as a guide for educators and leaders working together to chart the course ahead for shaping such Catholic identity in Catholic schools.

Therefore, with the launch of this book in mind, it's clear that the "Educator's Guide to Catholic Identity" is a prominent work of practical theology made relevant and accessible by a great educational leader to other educators and leaders in Catholic education. It's a work that's sure to be relevant both here in south Australia as well as in other parts of the world facing similar challenges. May you and many of your colleague-leaders and teachers find it useful in the important work of Catholic education today.

I like to congratulate Paul with this achievement. Since the book has so many ties with Leuven, I thought it was appropriate to express my appreciation to Paul with a gift from Leuven, a brand new pen set with the KU Leuven logo, which is at the same time an invitation to Paul to start writing a next book engaging and inspiring all of us to continue our mission on catholic school identity in the future.