Reflections on Catholic Identity and Mission

Gabrielle McMullen FRACI
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During their pontificates Popes John Paul II and Benedict XVI have given a particular impetus to Catholic agencies across the globe reviewing their Catholic nature and explicitly strengthening their Catholic identity and mission. The transition from priests and religious founding and conducting such agencies to lay leadership of Catholic education, health care and welfare has been a significant factor in this development. The secularisation of the wider society and the “culture of relativism” identified by Pope Benedict XVI have also driven the critical need to engage with Catholic identity and mission.

This paper has three foci — it will explore the concepts of Catholic identity and mission, examine some of the significant work undertaken on the identity and mission of Catholic universities, and consider Catholic residential colleges in the framework of the higher education ministry of the Church.

What Do We Mean by Mission?
Let me start then with the simpler question, What do we mean by mission? Mission is a particular work or works undertaken by a Catholic agency as a ministry of the Church. Significantly, agency “implies some notion of identity”.

What is Catholic Identity?
Now let me move to the more complex question, What is Catholic identity? Significantly, Bishop Michael Putney of Townsville has highlighted that “the question of Catholic identity is a far more complex and profound question than sometimes is realised”.

1 Emeritus Professor Gabrielle McMullen retired in 2011 as Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Academic) of Australian Catholic University. She has a long-standing interest in Catholic identity and mission, chairing the University’s relevant committee for over a decade and convening the four cross-sectoral colloquia on identity and mission in church-based organisations which were hosted by Australian Catholic University in 2007–2010.


At the heart of Catholic identity is Jesus Christ and the salvation of the world, and his communion with God the Father and the Holy Spirit. Catholic agencies, which authentically manifest Catholic identity, will have Christ at the heart of their ministry. Those who work there are now his face, his hands and his presence in the world, as they continue his ministry of teaching, healing or charity.

**A Theological Analysis**

Two leading Australian theologians, Professor Neil Ormerod of Australian Catholic University and Rev Dr David Ranson of the Catholic Institute of Sydney, have recently published insightful analyses of Catholic identity and mission.

**Professor Neil Ormerod**

In his paper Ormerod presents identity and mission as “multi-dimensional”, identifying four key dimensions — namely religious, moral, cultural and social dimensions, while acknowledging the priority of the religious dimension. In summary these dimensions are defined as follows:

- **Religious identity and mission** — Catholic education, health care and welfare services are conducted by the Church in exercising its ministry of charity. They continue the mission of Jesus Christ in the modern world and share in the Church’s religious practices, such as “prayer, liturgy ... and the praise of God in all things”.

- **Moral identity and mission** — Catholic agencies seek to operate on, and their staff to witness to, the right relationships, behaviours and actions annunciated in the New Testament and subsequently developed in Church teaching. Further, the advocacy of Church agencies challenges “the moral standards of the society at large” and their service “demonstrates that ... a higher standard can be lived”.

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• **Cultural identity and mission** — This dimension relates to bringing the “tradition of moral reasoning” to address issues and practices related to each agency and contributing to the further development of the tradition. This contribution stands in powerful contrast to prevailing “relativistic moral codes and philosophies”. Advocacy and contributions to teaching, research and public debate also relate to cultural identity and mission. Further, I would see the formation of staff for the delivery of services reflecting Catholic values as key to this dimension.

• **Social identity and mission** — This is where “the Church is most visible” to the world in the work of its agencies — parishes, dioceses, educational, health care and welfare providers, charities and other ministries, which share “the mission of Jesus ...[which is] achieved through a substantial commitment to the ongoing ordering of the life of the community”. Grounded in the Church’s commitment to the dignity of each person and the common good, Catholic agencies provide an institutional response to the Church’s special role in relation to the disadvantaged and “take on a prophetic role to speak for these people and promote a more just social order”.5

Ormerod makes an interesting distinction in relation to identity and mission, highlighting that mission is “inherently inclusive, since anyone can take part in [a Catholic agency’s] transformative work” while identity is “inherently exclusive ... and establishes boundaries of belonging” — for example, a commitment to the Catholic values and ministry of the agency.6

Significantly, Ormerod argues that:

> part of the Church's deepest ‘identity’ includes principles of growth and development ... This transformed identity becomes the new base from which all further developments will occur ... options taken in relation to the Church's mission over the centuries have shaped forever its emerging identity ... [Further,] that identity will change over time as the Church is transformed by its fidelity to its mission.7

5 Ibid., 431–437.
6 Ibid., 438.
7 Ibid., 431–432.
Rev Dr David Ranson

Ranson has also analysed identity and mission, arriving at similar but somewhat different dimensions, namely religious imagination, social commitment, ecclesial tension and an apostolic strategy. They provide further understandings of identity and mission which can be summarised as follows:

- **Religious imagination** — “The Catholic religious imagination entertains a triune God, ... the dream God has for the world... [and] a way forward in the presence of suffering”, and thereby “shapes Catholic identity.

- **Social commitment** — This “theological imagination... translates into a particular social commitment...underscored by the understanding of the Kingdom of God, to which all Catholic agencies are accountable”.

- **Ecclesial tension** — “The theological imagination... and the social commitment that emerges from such an imagination, [are] exercised... within a particular ecclesial context”. Catholic identity is challenged by the tensions in the Church of “local” and “universal”, “institutional” and “charismatic”, “memory” and “imagination” and so on; i.e. by local, national and universal agendas, by adherence to national policy versus acting on agency inspiration, and by whether how we have acted in the past is how we should act in the future, respectively.

- **Apostolic strategy** — Engagement in “a radical dialogical approach to the questions and issues of life... preserves Catholic identity... Catholic organizations should be known for the way their engagement in partnerships, and with the issues with which they must contend in a complex, pluralistic environment, accord with [an apostolic] strategy”.

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Ranson argues that these four characteristics are “essential to Catholic identity”.9

**Insights on Catholic Identity and Mission from the Catholic Higher Education Sector**

Catholic universities represent a major commitment of resources to ministry and, at their best, can have a profound influence on the development of culture. In this context the Church and especially Catholic higher education institutions themselves have invested in a very significant manner in the exploration of their Catholic identity and mission. In particular, Pope John Paul II issued *The Apostolic Constitution on Catholic Universities* in 1990.10 Its Latin title, *Ex Corde Ecclesiae — From the Heart of the Church*, signalled the centrality of Catholic higher education to Church ministry. Not only were the very first universities established by the Church but so many of those who now lead and work in Catholic agencies are graduates of the universities, theologates, teachers colleges and other higher education ministries conducted by the Church.

The *Apostolic Constitution on Catholic Universities* specifies the following four “essential characteristics” of a Catholic university:

1. A Christian inspiration not only of individuals but [also] of the university community as such;

2. A continuing reflection in the light of the Catholic faith upon the growing treasury of human knowledge, to which it seeks to contribute by its own research;

3. Fidelity to the Christian message as it comes to us through the Church;

4. An institutional commitment to the service of the people of God and of the human family in their pilgrimage to the transcendent goal which gives meaning to life.11

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It seems to me that these characteristics are relevant also to a Catholic university college, including “reflection in the light of the Catholic faith upon the growing treasury of human knowledge”—this series of occasional papers represents such a contribution.

Another key Vatican document, *The Presence of the Church in the University and in University Culture*, states that a university:

only achieves its full identity when, at one and the same time, it gives proof of being rigorously serious as a member of the international community of knowledge and expresses its Catholic identity through an explicit link with the church, at both local and universal levels; an identity which marks concretely the life, the services and the programs of the university community.\(^{12}\)

Extrapolating to Catholic residential colleges, they will achieve their “full identity” when they realise both excellence and unequivocal Catholic identity with respect to the life, programs and services of the college. The Catholic identity should be underpinned and nourished by explicit links to the Church.

From a legal perspective, in relation to Catholic universities, Provost has identified two elements to Catholic identity, the external and internal dimensions:

The external dimension refers to the…public image as Catholic, and…to its relationship with the Catholic Church, particularly the Church hierarchy. The internal looks towards its commitment to Catholic values.\(^{13}\)

The internal commitment is critical in order to manifest the external dimension and achieve a strong and mutually-enriching relationship with the Church.

Archbishop Michael Miller CSB of Vancouver was formerly President of the University of St Thomas in Houston, Texas and then Secretary of the Vatican’s Congregation for Catholic Education. He has challenged Catholic universities as follows:


creative ways must be found to strengthen the Catholic identity of the church's institutions of higher learning so that they will remain faithful to their noble calling. Catholic is not just a label, but a fundamental principle informing its organizational, administrative and academic structure, its programs, curriculum, ambience, outreach and the formation of students. The university's Catholic ethos must be visible and embodied in the concrete decisions of its daily choices and life.

While the challenges are still many… there is nothing more thrilling or exhilarating than for a Catholic university to affirm courageously and confidently its specific identity, owning it and rejoicing in its vocation of service to society and the church.14

A Catholic residential college similarly has a “vocation of service to society and the church” and needs to affirm explicitly its specific identity.15

Challenges and Initiatives in Relation to Catholic Identity and Mission

I will now consider some challenges for Catholic agencies in relation to their Catholic identity and mission and suggest potential initiatives to address them. Mannix College faces such challenges as it seeks to realise its mission of providing excellent residential, academic and pastoral support to students in a Catholic context as a college affiliated with Australia’s largest secular university.

Critical Balance
The critical balance between identity and mission represents a tension for a Catholic agency. If the focus is too narrowly on Catholic identity, the mission of the agency in the wider community is likely to be seen as exclusive and be compromised. On the other hand, an over-emphasis on mission risks reducing the agency to a “generalised form of humanism… and it [then] loses its specific contribution to the transformation of the world”.16 Like Catholic health care and welfare, Catholic higher education and access to the Church’s residential


15 Ibid.

colleges should be provided not only for Catholics but also extend “beyond the frontiers of the Church”.  

**Constant Re-engagement**

Identity and mission are never static — there must be constant re-engagement with identity and mission as circumstances change. As quoted above, “identity will change over time as the Church is transformed by its fidelity to its mission”; it “is not something ‘possessed’, but rather a dimension that is both constant and unfolding.” Each Catholic agency will craft its “Catholic identity in ways that specifically fit its local internal and external environments” and this is:

> a creative process that is an ongoing, never-ending challenge as the conditions around us change ... the process is not an academic exercise by a few theological experts, but a process in which people in creating Catholic identity are themselves at the same time transforming both their lives and the world around them.  

**Mission as the Senior Partner**

Our Catholic agencies operate in an environment experiencing great change, where there are often tensions between maintaining both Catholic identity and viability, and between mission and business, whereby “the mission is to be the senior partner driving or permeating all decisions in the business side of facilities”.  

Importantly, for Catholic agencies to achieve their “full identity” they must realise both a high standard of service and unequivocal Catholic identity. Thus, business implies excellence rather than viability and, for their leaders, this requires great professionalism as well as “accepting, and being transformed by, the values and truths of Catholic identity”. The excellence will encompass both quality services as well as inclusiveness in relation to access to them.

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21 Ibid., 7 and 84, respectively.

22 Ibid., 82–83.
Employment
With respect to both leaders and staff of Catholic agencies, the employment process should ensure that appointees share a commitment to the values and mission of the agency. This will require clear articulation of the agency’s identity and mission in the advertisement, interview and contract for a given role. Generally, a critical mass of staff who are committed Catholics would be the goal of Catholic agencies and Mannix College should consider for which of its leadership roles this requirement might be critical. Those in the leadership team at the College and in other Catholic agencies, whether or not they are Catholic, need “to have an operative willingness to accept, and be transformed by, the truths and values of Catholic identity”.

Induction and Formation
Leaders and staff need induction into and some ongoing formation in relation to their agency’s Catholic identity and mission. Induction and formation of those in Catholic agencies were a concern of Pope Benedict XVI in his first encyclical, *Deus Caritas Est — God is Love*:

> We are dealing with human beings, and human beings always need something more than technically proper care. They need humanity. They need heartfelt concern. Those who work for the Church’s charitable organizations must be distinguished by the fact that they do not merely meet the needs of the moment, but they dedicate themselves to others with heartfelt concern, enabling them to experience the richness of their humanity. Consequently, in addition to their necessary professional training, these charity workers need a ‘formation of the heart’.

As noted above, excellent services and faithfulness to Catholic values are both essential characteristics of authentic Church ministry. Thus, ensuring professional competence and developing leadership capability are also critical elements of Catholic identity and mission. This is especially important if our leaders are to be change agents in enhancing the ministry of charity and the Church’s Christian presence in the world.

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23 Ibid., 83.

Succession Planning

Succession planning is a key strategy for our Catholic agencies in relation to their identity and mission, in what I might describe as phase three in a progression. We are have passed from the era when many Catholic ministries, like Mannix College, were conducted by priests and religious, whose vocation and formation had ensured they were prepared for ministry, to a subsequent period during which many former priests, religious and seminarians bring or brought the fruits of their formation to serve our agencies, to a time when the laity will be largely responsible for Catholic services. Thus, human resources planning, employment processes, induction and professional development all need to align with this evolution, as do governance and the preparation for and ongoing formation of those in governance and trustee roles. The richness of the Church’s social teaching can underpin these endeavours. In relation to the third phase, Ranson expresses hopefulness concerning the “imagination” of the laity “with their own sense of professional vocation, passion and spirituality”.

Pope John Paul II was similarly optimistic:

The reduced number of religious and new forms of ownership and management should not lead to a loss of a spiritual atmosphere, or to a loss of a sense of vocation...This is an area in which the Catholic laity...have an opportunity to manifest the depth of their faith and to play their own specific part in the Church's mission of evangelization and service.

The importance of a critical mass of committed Catholic staff was noted above and these challenges to the laity are predicated on achieving that goal, while working in partnership “with many other men and women of good will”.

Ambience
Where Catholic identity and mission permeate an agency, they will be evident in all its aspects — its governance, leadership, organisation, programs, administration and general ambience. The relationships between leaders and staff, and the nature of the service to the community will reflect the Christian inspiration of the agency. This is a particular challenge to achieve across all aspects of a service and its staff.

As noted above by Archbishop Miller for a Catholic university, “Catholic ethos must be visible and embodied in the concrete decisions of its daily choices and life”. This same benchmark is applicable to a Catholic residential college and its ministry.

Best Practices
Best practice in relation to fostering Catholic identity and mission should be shared across each sector and with other Catholic sectors — by way of example, in the United States a book has been published jointly by university presidents and their local bishop recording effective practices of collaboration between a given university and its diocese. It is powerfully titled *Promising Practices: Collaboration among Catholic Bishops and University Presidents*.\(^{28}\) Regular opportunities should be provided for the Catholic university residential colleges across Australia and in a number of other countries, which operate similarly but in diverse contexts, to share best practice in this ministry.

Addressing Disadvantage
The *Apostolic Constitution on Catholic Universities* places a responsibility on a Catholic university:

> to contribute concretely to the progress of the society within which it works:
> For example it will be capable of searching for ways to make university education accessible to all those who are able to benefit from it, especially the poor or members of minority groups who customarily have been deprived of it.\(^{29}\)

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\(^{29}\) Pope John Paul II (1990) *Apostolic Constitution of the Supreme Pontiff on Catholic Universities*, Section 34.
In the Australian context and with limited resources, Catholic agencies, including universities and residential colleges, face particular challenges in relation to promoting the dignity, equality and participation of Indigenous Australians, refugees, asylum seekers and other disadvantaged groups. In particular, university colleges need to commit resources for some scholarships and bursaries to open up educational opportunities to disadvantaged students and, upon admission, for their adequate academic and pastoral support. Further, the involvement of members of the college community in social justice programs, like the St Vincent de Paul Society or volunteering, also manifests Catholic identity and should be actively fostered.

Reflections of Pope Benedict XVI

In *Deus Caritas Est* Pope Benedict XVI identifies the Church's “three-fold responsibility: of proclaiming the word of God ..., celebrating the sacraments ..., and exercising the ministry of charity”.30 Critically there is interdependence of the three responsibilities which support and foster one another.

The conduct of a Catholic residential college is one of the Church's ministries of charity. Significantly, to some extent Catholic residential colleges also have the responsibilities of “proclaiming the word of God” and “celebrating the sacraments”. These responsibilities are realised through the presence of a chapel and regular mass, other liturgical celebrations and prayer life in the College. The prominence of Christian symbols, including religious art and imagery, is a further tangible mark of Catholic identity. Members of the college can also witness to the Gospel of Jesus Christ by their approach to building a college community and by the integrity with which they undertake their studies or, in the case of staff, deliver a service to the college. For the present Holy Father, “the measure of an institution’s Catholic identity can be judged by the integrity of its Gospel witness to the church and the world”.31


31 J M Miller (2005) 'Challenges facing American and European Catholic Universities: A View from the Vatican.'
Conclusion

In 2009 at a seminar for leaders from education, health care and welfare agencies organised by Catholic Social Services Victoria, Bishop Timothy Costelloe sdb, chair of the Mannix College Council, summed up what it means for such an institution to be Catholic:

An institution is Catholic if it is, in reality, a ‘sacrament’, that is a sign and an instrument, of the ongoing presence of Christ in the world and as the place of encounter with this Christ.\(^{32}\)

This faithfulness is, and must continue to be, fundamental to Catholic ministries like Mannix College.

In conclusion, in his apostolic letter to mark the close of the Great Jubilee of the year 2000, Pope John Paul II, in Jesus’ words, invited us to:

‘put out into the deep’ ... [and] to remember the past with gratitude, to live the present with enthusiasm and to look forward to the future with confidence:
‘Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and for ever’ (Heb 13:8).\(^{33}\)

May Pope John Paul II’s invitation also be the inspiration of Mannix College and its members as they continue to realise the Church’s distinctive higher education ministry at Monash University through the work of the College.


A missionary endeavour of the Catholic Archdiocese of Melbourne, Mannix College is a residential college affiliated with Monash University.

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Prior to joining Australian Catholic University Emeritus Professor McMullen worked at the Chemical Institute of the University of Freiburg, Germany as a postdoctoral fellow from 1977–1981 and then in the Department of Biochemistry and Molecular Biology at Monash University from 1981–1995. She was also Dean of Mannix College, Monash University’s Catholic residential college, from 1981–1995. She has held fellowships from the Alexander von Humboldt-Stiftung and the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft, and is a Fellow of the Royal Australian Chemical Institute.

Emeritus Professor McMullen’s community contributions have encompassed membership of education, health, theological and welfare boards. On 1 July 2011 she was appointed a Trustee of Mary Aikenhead Ministries, which has been established by Sisters of Charity of Australia to continue their health and aged care, education and welfare ministries.

Her current research interests are the history of science and Catholic identity and mission.
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