



# Life to the full

The mission and purpose of  
Catholic schools in Australia

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### Acknowledgement of Country

The National Catholic Education Commission (NCEC) acknowledges the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples of this nation. We acknowledge the traditional custodians of the lands on which our school communities are located. We pay our respects to ancestors and Elders, past and present for they are the keepers of the memories, traditions, the cultures and the hopes of their peoples. The NCEC is committed to honouring Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' unique cultural and spiritual relationships to the land, waters and seas, and their rich contribution to society

*Cover artwork: 'Transience' by Lorraine Chow, St Monica's College, Epping.*



## Foreword

I am pleased to welcome the publication of 'Life to the Full: The Mission and Purpose of Catholic Schools', produced by the National Catholic Education Commission, to stimulate our shared understanding and ongoing dialogue on the nature and mission of our Catholic schools.

Over two centuries, the formation of children and young people has been at the heart of our mission of evangelisation and education in Australia, serving children of Catholic faith, other faiths and of no faith background. Together with families, parishes and the broader Catholic community, our Catholic schools are often the principal meeting point for young people with the Church. It is through their experience of Catholic education that our young people encounter Christ, deepen their knowledge and love of God, and are formed as future contributors to Australian society.

As such, our schools must be steadfast in their commitment to evangelisation, catechesis, religious education, and spiritual and moral formation. They must have a visible Catholic culture and be places of lively Catholic imagination and spirituality; be centres of prayer, Eucharist and Reconciliation.

On the occasion of the 200th anniversary of Catholic education in Australia, the Bishops identified Catholic schools as a "jewel in the crown of the Catholic Church in Australia", with few parallels in other countries. They are shining beacons in our society, offering an experience of schooling that recognises and supports the full human development of young people.

As Christ said He had come "that they might have life, life to the full" (John 10:10), we seek to draw out our students' gifts, address their challenges, and enable them to experience fullness of life. Catholic schools have long aimed for education to foster academic and spiritual formation, personal enrichment and community contribution, resulting in many graduates serving others as spouses and parents, civic leaders, professionals, workers, and volunteers, or dedicating their lives to religious vocations.

Catholic education faces significant challenges as it seeks to remain faithful to its mission and identity in an increasingly secularised context. These challenges might manifest themselves in different ways in different ecclesial and social contexts. This includes decreasing involvement in parish life, the formation needs of staff, access for the most marginalised in our communities, as well as the impact of national reform agendas, teacher workforce challenges and the like.

To speak about living the mission and purpose in Catholic schools, we must be clear as to what our mission and purpose is. This discussion paper aims to support engagement in deepening our shared understanding of the mission and purpose of Catholic education and how we each play our part in bringing this to life in a meaningful way for our students, staff and families.

I thank the National Catholic Education Commission and the work of their Faith Formation and Religious Education standing committee for steering this paper, which I commend to all engaged in Catholic education.

Yours sincerely in Christ,

Most Reverend Anthony Fisher OP  
Chair, Bishops Commission for Catholic Education

## Purpose

In 2015 at a national conference of the Italian Church, Pope Francis said we must realise “we are not living in an era of change, but a change of era”.<sup>1</sup> The intervening years have not dulled this challenge in any way. It is in recognition of the global shifts in how people live and work in the world that the National Catholic Education Commission publishes this discussion paper on the missionary purpose of Catholic schools.

The discussion paper is intended for Catholic schools to complement existing local resources and provides an opportunity for dialogue to enhance the shared understanding of why Catholic schools exist in Australian society. It will outline who we are, what we do, why and how we do it.

It is aimed at supporting principals, leadership teams, school governance bodies, clergy, teachers, and all who work in and with Catholic schools, to understand, communicate, and apply the fundamental mission of our schools in each local context.

## Introduction

Catholic education entered the Australian story a little over 200 years ago and, in partnership with families and parishes, shares in the mission of the Church in educating young people. Our call is to work together with “shared passion to create a community of belonging and solidarity worthy of our time”.<sup>2</sup>

Vatican II explained the mission and purpose of Catholic schools as creating a school community animated by the Gospel spirit, in which children and young people could grow “according to the new creatures they were made through baptism” and be illumined by faith.<sup>3</sup>

The understanding of the purpose of Catholic schools today is founded on this premise of Catholic schools as communities for the baptised but is broadened to embrace *all* those seeking schooling based in the Gospel spirit. Such a position:

calls for courageous renewal on the part of the Catholic school. The precious heritage of the experience gained over the centuries reveals its vitality precisely in the capacity for prudent innovation. And so, now as in the past, the Catholic school must be able to speak for itself effectively and convincingly. It is not merely a question of adaptation, but of missionary thrust...<sup>4</sup>

**For professional learning resources and reflection questions to support this discussion paper visit [www.ncec.catholic.edu.au](http://www.ncec.catholic.edu.au)**

## The vision of a Catholic school

Catholic schools are Christ-centred communities committed to educational excellence.

Every Catholic school exists to propose to their students the religious and moral beliefs underlying a life-giving Catholic vision about what it means to be human and have a loving relationship with the living God and the world in which they live.

Catholic schools form individuals to flourish – to live good lives in this world and contribute to building a just and healthy society, and in eternal life with God.

Catholic schools are “called upon to offer an educational service appropriate to the present times”.<sup>5</sup>

They are communities of welcome, forgiveness, equality, inclusion and encouragement to experience, live and proclaim the joy of the Gospel. They are nourished by prayer, liturgy, witness, social justice, service and pastoral care.

The mission of Catholic schools is centred around the integration of faith, learning, life and culture. This does not just happen in the classroom, but through the witness offered by teaching and non-teaching staff, and through the experience of the student being part of a community which models this integration in a life-giving way.

Catholic schools work in partnership with parents and parishes, as they accompany students on a journey of personal and spiritual growth: to think well, to feel well and to do good.



Artwork: Alexandra T, St Joseph's School, Renmark.

## Context

# EDUCATIONAL

“Everyone has the right to education.”<sup>6</sup>

Catholic schools educate almost 62 million children and young people across the globe.<sup>7</sup>

In Australia today, there are close to 2,000 Catholic Schools educating over 800,000 students and employing over 100,000 staff. These include schools governed by Dioceses, Religious Institutes and Ministerial Public Juridic Persons.<sup>8</sup>

For Australian Catholic schools, “the stories of our school communities are stories of diversity and inclusion, of resilience and persistence, of commitment to improvement and innovation, of great hope and faith in God, and in the human spirit”.<sup>9</sup>

Catholic Schools in Australia exist as centres of education aspiring to excellence, fulfilling all the regulatory expectations required of them by state, territory and federal governments.

Catholic schools have a distinctive vision, character and identity, participating in the mission of evangelisation of the Church. They derive their energy, vision and direction from the Gospel of Jesus.

Catholic schools offer Australia a place “of evangelisation, of complete formation, of inculturation, of apprenticeship in a lively dialogue between young people of different religions and social backgrounds.”<sup>10</sup>

Catholic schools are integral to the greater landscape of Australian education and are committed to the goals of the *Mpartnwe* declaration.<sup>11</sup> These provide for an education that “plays a vital role in promoting the intellectual, physical, social, emotional, moral, spiritual and aesthetic development and wellbeing of young Australians”.<sup>12</sup>

The school community works together to know each child and to care deeply for them on their journey, including beyond the school gates. For every child and young person in Catholic schools we “seek to draw out [their] gifts, address their challenges and enable them to experience fullness of life”.<sup>13</sup>

Education has become increasingly complex. There are significant societal, political, and governmental expectations connected to educational attainment and achievement against national and international benchmarks. Within this setting, Catholic schools seek to provide an excellent education with learning experiences and pedagogies that prepare students for life, work and experiences yet to be discovered in the service of humanity.

The challenge of attracting and retaining teachers and staff who understand the mission and purpose of Catholic education, and are living witnesses, has become more pronounced.

“Teachers and leaders need to know confidently where the Church comes from and where Catholicism stands within it. This will enable them to sustain engagement with contemporary expressions of Catholicism and open dialogue with fellow staff and with students so that they too might experience them as meaningful for their lives.”<sup>14</sup>

This shift requires Catholic universities, school systems and communities to re-commit resources to support formation for mission for staff in all roles in the Catholic school.

Catholic schools are able to provide wonderful opportunities to share the gift of God’s love to an ever-increasing number of staff, students and families from diverse social and religious backgrounds.

## IN RELATIONSHIP TO CHURCH COMMUNITY

“Challenges exist to be overcome! Let us be realists, but without losing our joy, our boldness and our hope-filled commitment. Let us not allow ourselves to be robbed of missionary vigour!”

(Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, n. 109).

In the last three decades, Australia has become home to over 120 faiths. Christians now make up fewer than 50% of the Australian population. Catholics are the largest sub-group.

As the socio-cultural landscape continues to evolve, increased cultural, religious and social diversity sees a trend away from organised religion that typifies our increasingly secular society. The number of people identifying as having no religion is significant. However,

“The shift to secularity in this sense consists, among other things, of a move from a society where belief in God is unchallenged and indeed, unproblematic, to one in which it is understood to be one option among others, and frequently not the easiest to embrace.”<sup>15</sup>

Catholic schools affirm the legitimacy of the seeker, pursuing meaning making and authenticity in their own lives. In fact, such openness presents an encouraging opportunity to share the Gospel of Jesus with all people.

Part of the growing social evolution is a mistrust of institutions. The sexual abuse crisis has increased the impact of this on all institutions, including the Catholic Church.

The Catholic Church in Australia serves as a cornerstone of support and care, positively influencing communities through its involvement in education, healthcare, aged care, social welfare, and pastoral care alongside its advocacy for human rights. Through these multifaceted efforts, it profoundly impacts the lives of many, championing justice, dignity and compassion for all.

Catholic schools are often the first point of contact with the Church and are, for many, their only experience of Church and Catholic life. Whilst the parish traditionally has been seen as the centre for evangelisation and catechesis, the mission of the Catholic school has expanded to be the active faith community for most Catholic school students, families and staff.

Catholic schools show people “how the Gospel is the goal of their quest for authenticity, even as Jesus calls them to a conversion of mind, heart, and action.”<sup>16</sup>

Catholic schools, in being open to new possibilities and in truly understanding the contexts of those they serve, enable the mission to speak anew. In this way Catholic schools can renew and revitalise their mission in support of the wider Church.

## Relationship with God

“The desire for God is written in the human heart because the human person is created in God and for God.”<sup>17</sup>

Our Christian understanding is that every human person is created in the image and likeness of God.

Such an understanding affirms that all people are equal and unique beings loved by God with the capacity for relationship with the Trinitarian God – our very model of loving relationship. Relationship with God opens each person to the love and grace of God.

Catholic schools “share in the Christian vision of the human person, directed towards the dignity and the flourishing of each person”.<sup>18</sup>

## Jesus our Hope – God with us

The Catholic school is founded on the person of Jesus. The values and teachings of Christ, as presented in the Gospels are central to the vision of a fullness of life that Catholic schools offer in seeking to form students alongside parents and parishes.

“Christ is our inspiration, the very life of our purpose as Catholic educators. Everything we do is illuminated by this.”<sup>19</sup>

Everything we do is for this, everything we do is because of this, because of the hope that Jesus brings.

Every member of a Catholic school community is “called to a personal relationship with Jesus”.<sup>20</sup> Through an invitation to relationship with Christ, Catholic schools provide a unique opportunity to come to know God and what it is to be fully human. By encountering Jesus in liturgy, prayer, scripture, and the Sacraments, students can develop a sense of meaning and purpose, inspiring them to become agents of change in the world.

Worship plays a central role in the life and mission of Catholic schools as places of evangelisation and catechesis. Regular liturgy, prayer, and Sacramental celebrations offer graced opportunities for students, staff, and families to deepen relationships with God, encourage spiritual growth, and foster a sense of belonging as they generously live out the Gospel values of love, service, and compassion.

“At the heart of Catholic education there is always Jesus Christ: everything that happens in Catholic schools and universities should lead to an encounter with the living Christ.”<sup>21</sup>

As we work together in mission, we bear witness to the love of God and the compassion that flows from God’s love. When we accept mission, the risen Christ enables us to dream of a better life and future wherein we create communities that are filled with love, forgiveness, kindness, healing, and possibility and to take effective, grace filled steps to achieve this.

“The person of each individual human being, in his or her material and spiritual needs, is at the heart of Christ’s teaching: this is why the promotion of the human person is the goal of the Catholic school.”<sup>22</sup>



## What is mission?

“Mission is at once a passion for Jesus and a passion for his people.”

(Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, n. 268.)

Catholic schools are a ministry within the Church which recognises, affirms, and engages God’s mission already present in the world. “Mission is located in the life of God, a life of overflowing love.”<sup>23</sup> To understand mission then is to be in relationship with God.

God’s mission is not “primarily our initiative; it is God’s work, and we seek to respond...”<sup>24</sup>

As part of this mission and in partnership with families and parishes, the Catholic school responds by encouraging the flourishing of each student, endeavouring to awaken, nourish and develop the faith life of each child and young person. In doing so:

“Catholic education unites the mission of the Church with service to the total development of the human person ‘it is about human flourishing in a deeply Christian understanding – whatever makes a student more wise, more loving, more fully human is making the student reflect more fully the image of God’.”<sup>25</sup>

Catholic schools endeavour to provide an excellent academic curriculum within a Christ-centred, student focused education. Their goal is to educate the whole person – mind, body and spirit. Catholic schools are more than educational institutions which provide a secular curriculum with religion added on. Catholic schools offer an integral education which “liberates, empowers and motivates students to use their individual gifts with confidence, creativity and generosity in loving and responsible service.”<sup>26</sup>

Education is a means of accompanying and empowering individuals, nurturing their growth and development. Education enables individuals to understand the needs of others, to foster dialogue, and to promote solidarity and cooperation. Through the provision of a Catholic education, we contribute to the overall well-being and flourishing of individuals and communities, aligning with God’s mission of love, justice, and reconciliation.

Each school’s mission is “to develop the sense of the true, the sense of the good and the sense of the beautiful”.<sup>27</sup>

Understanding the mission and purpose of Catholic schools is critical to the lived identity of that mission. All staff need be part of this conversation, for each one of them can and does contribute to the mission of the Catholic school. All staff, especially leaders, need be able to articulate this mission in tangible and specific ways.

## Openness to a culture of dialogue

“The Church must enter into dialogue with the world in which it lives. It has something to say, a message to give, a communication to make.”<sup>28</sup>

Globalisation, technological advancements and social and cultural shifts have transformed the way we live and interact with each other. In the world of young people today, it is essential to understand their unique experiences and challenges. This includes acknowledging their struggles, their concerns about the environment, social justice issues, and their desire for authentic relationships and communities.

Young people in Catholic schools have been educated to question and have seen the weakness and shadow side of institutions. Catholic schools foster opportunities for encounter and dialogue, accompanying children and young people as they explore their ideas in a safe and trusting environment.

Catholic education is required to be open to new ideas, have a willingness to listen and learn, and a commitment to building authentic relationships that foster a sense of belonging and purpose. This requires an openness to dialogue and accompaniment.

As all people are made in the image and likeness of a God, who by God’s very nature as Father, Son and Spirit, is relational. Relationships in the life of the Triune God are the way we truly come to know and understand each other.

As within the Trinity, a culture of dialogue develops when we first listen deeply – *Dadirri*<sup>29</sup> - to others, in a manner that both gives and receives, and offers opportunity for shared growth and enrichment. Through this “encounter and reciprocal listening, not soundproofing our hearts or remaining barricaded through our certainties,”<sup>30</sup> we must lean into each other’s experiences in encounter and dialogue, understanding that the Holy Spirit is at work. Such a disposition, style or way of life, creates an environment of trust and openness that is crucial for fostering fruitful and supportive conversations open to exploring ideas and perspectives that may be different from our own and being willing to engage in constructive dialogue.

In this way, when brought to prayer, we create synodal communities where everyone feels valued and heard, and where the Holy Spirit can work through our shared experiences and insights.

As a pilgrim people, synodality asks us to listen “to the Holy Spirit and the Word of God, to participate in the mission of the Church in the communion that Christ establishes between us”<sup>31</sup> as we walk together.



## Nurtured by Witness

“The greatest attraction to investigating spirituality and religion is observing people who live out a genuine faith.”<sup>32</sup>

Witnesses provide inspiration in the way people live their lives with a sense of purpose, meaning and hope. A personal witness to faith found in community provides the opportunity for individuals to connect, explore and deepen their own spirituality and beliefs.

For Catholic schools this means that “the Christian presence must be shown and made clear, that is, it must be visible, tangible and conscious.”<sup>33</sup> It must permeate the life of the school for “Catholic schools’ primary responsibility is one of witness”.<sup>34</sup>

The authenticity of the Catholic school relies heavily on the witness of staff. It is vital that the Catholic culture is one that is created by all members of a school, in individual and collective action.

As disciples of Christ, Catholic school educators are called to give positive witness to Jesus and to the beauty of the Gospel for their students. Witnesses bring Jesus’ teaching to life; make it real, attractive, and impossible to ignore. They unite the joy of the Gospel with truth, demonstrating that we are loved by God and are objects of God’s infinite mercy.<sup>35</sup>

In embodying and becoming authentic witnesses, the story of Jesus that is shared must sit within culture and context, today and tomorrow.

*Artwork: ‘Spring’ by Isla Wigmore, Sacred Heart Primary School, Diamond Creek.*

## More than a job

“Teaching is a beautiful expression of our hope for the young. Teaching recognises the dignity of the young as truth-seekers [and] embodies our hope for their future. Every school is a sacrament of hope.”<sup>36</sup>

Vocation is that nourishing sense that we are meant to be doing what we are doing; that our work is of inherent value to others and to us. The origin of that sense of purpose, of mission, is intimately connected to who we are as a person, to our own particular gifts, talents, and sources of contentment expressed in the service of others in the world.

The notion of vocation is intrinsically entwined with a relationship with God. The word vocation comes from the Latin, *vocare*, and means ‘to call’. For the teacher, this vocation has “an extraordinary moral depth and is one of [a person’s] most excellent and creative activities, for the teacher does not write on inanimate material, but on the very spirits of human beings”.<sup>37</sup> Catholic educators who respond to God’s call can bring out the skills and talents and draw forth the dignity and possibility in each student.

Understanding that working in a Catholic school is a vocation highlights the importance for Catholic educators to understand their roles as witnesses, knowledge specialists and having the opportunity to create a culture of dialogue.

We are called to be people who seek together a disposition of mind and heart and a means for accompaniment of all - together in faith - with families, students and staff to share the message of the Gospel which gives every person’s life meaning, beauty and purpose.<sup>38</sup>

“There is no vocation without mission... God’s call to love is an experience that does not allow us to remain silent.”<sup>39</sup>

## Conclusion

“In an age awash in information, often transmitted without wisdom or critical sense, the task of forming present and future generations of Catholic teachers and students remains as important as ever. As educators, you are called to nurture the desire for truth, goodness and beauty that lies in the heart of each individual, so that all may learn how to love life and be open to the fullness of life. ...At the same time, Catholic education is also evangelisation: bearing witness to the joy of the Gospel and its power to renew our communities and provide hope and strength in facing wisely the challenges of the present time.”<sup>40</sup>

The task before each person involved in the mission of Catholic schools is both challenging and immensely rewarding.

It is hoped that this short discussion paper and accompanying resources will deepen our shared understanding and mutual desire to realise the mission and purpose of our Catholic schools, places where our students are

“inspired by their encounter with Jesus Christ and nurtured by a Catholic education ... will be young women and men of character and ideals, and will contribute as leaders and disciples in our world”.<sup>41</sup>



*Artwork: 'For the life and love of God' by Melissa V, MacKillop Catholic College, Warnervale.*

# Footnotes

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- 8 Ministerial Public Juridic Persons are entities formed in accord with canon (Church) law to perform a specific function. In this case, providing education. For more information on Religious Institutes and Public Juridic Persons go to: <https://ampjp.org.au/about-mpjps/>
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- 27 ACBC. (2021). 200 Years Young: A pastoral letter from the Bishops of Australia to the leaders, staff, students and families of Catholic education in Australia, p. 2.
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- 34 *Ibid*, n. 57.
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