

## The Vatican and the Catholic Dialogue School as a “Place of Differences Living Together in Harmony”

---

### *A New Instruction: 45 Years after “The Catholic School”*

On 25 January 2022, on the Feast of the Conversion of Saint Paul the Apostle, Cardinal Versaldi and Archbishop Zani, respectively prefect and secretary of the Vatican Congregation for Catholic Education, signed a new instruction entitled *The Identity of the Catholic School for a Culture of Dialogue*. The document was only published two months later, on 29 March 2022, on the website of the Vatican in five languages: English, French, Italian, Spanish, and Portuguese.<sup>1</sup> The document comprises 97 paragraphs and three chapters (15 pages in print). Its chapters are (1) Catholic schools in the mission of the Church, (2) those responsible for promoting and verifying Catholic identity, and (3) some critical aspects. The text has 91 footnotes referring to documents of the Second Vatican Council, encyclicals and other papal statements, and references to canon law. Footnote 17 notes that this is one of the many documents of the Congregation for Catholic Education, from *The Catholic School* in 1977 to *Educating to Fraternal Humanism* in 2017, and the document on the question of gender theory in education (2019). As the introduction mentions, this new instruction emerged from the World Congress on *Education Today and Tomorrow – A Renewed Passion* that was held seven years earlier (2015) in Castel Gandolfo by the Congregation for Catholic Education and attended by representatives of Catholic schools from all over the world.<sup>2</sup>

1 The text was published on the website of the Vatican by the Congregation for Catholic Education for Educational Institutions: [www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/ccatheduc/documents/rc\\_con\\_ccatheduc\\_doc\\_20220125\\_istruzione-identita-scuola-cattolica\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/ccatheduc/documents/rc_con_ccatheduc_doc_20220125_istruzione-identita-scuola-cattolica_en.html). In this article we refer to the English version of the text using the numbers of the paragraphs.

2 See the program of this meeting on the Vatican website: [www.educatio.va/content/dam/cecc/Documenti/ELA.pdf](http://www.educatio.va/content/dam/cecc/Documenti/ELA.pdf).

*Interpreting Catholic Identity:  
Practical Challenges and a Deeper State of Emergency*

In the introduction, the text promises to be an “intentionally concise and practical tool” (§7). Still, in fact, it is not: it is a lengthy, demanding, and rather theoretical exposé on the nature, the problems, and the future of Catholic school identity. Of course, this is an extensive and complex matter, and the document does face the many challenges of Catholic education today with a sense of realism and an open mind. Remarkably, the deep and fundamental crisis of Catholic education we face today is only mentioned in paragraph 33 of the document, referring to Pope Benedict XVI’s description of a “widespread educational emergency”.<sup>3</sup> This emergency is understood as an “epochal change” (§33) that is a consequence of social fragmentation and a rupture in the relationships and communication between the generations. In this context, Pope Francis calls for a “global compact on education”,<sup>4</sup> a long-term collaboration between institutions, families, and individuals for “a concrete pedagogy based on bearing witness, knowledge, and dialogue” (§34). But the general crisis in education does not seem to be the primary reason for the publication of this instruction. In the first paragraph, we read that the Congregation for Catholic Education has been confronted with “cases and conflicts and appeals” (§1) that result from different interpretations of the traditional concept of Catholic identity. These more practical problems are, of course, the consequences of rapid changes in educational institutions due to processes of secularization, pluralization, and globalization. At this stage in the document, it is not mentioned what these “cases” are. Still, based on further reading of the document, one can presume that the congregation refers here to situations where personal convictions, lifestyles, or gender identities of staff members of schools openly clash with central church teachings and the presupposed Catholic identity of these schools (creating “scandal in the community”, §80), and/or to situations where local schools claim the adjective “Catholic” when there are serious reasons to doubt their authentic Catholic identity (see §56). In clarifying such issues, the document refers both to church teaching and to canon law, so the nature of the document is a mix of theological and legal reflection.

We start our analysis with the church’s understanding of the nature of Catholic schools in this new document. In chapter III, on “some critical aspects”, the congregation rejects some “divergent” interpretations of the term “Catholic” in the Catholic school: on the one hand, a vague or narrow understanding of Catholic

3 BENEDICT XVI: *Letter of His Holiness Benedict XVI to the Faithful of the Diocese and City of Rome on the Urgent Task of Educating Young People*, 21 January 2008, available online at: [www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/letters/2008/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_let\\_20080121\\_educazione.html](http://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/letters/2008/documents/hf_ben-xvi_let_20080121_educazione.html).

4 FRANCIS: *Message for the Launch of the Global Compact on Education*, 12 September 2019, available online at: [www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/pont-messages/2019/documents/papa-francesco\\_20190912\\_messaggio-patto-educativo.html](http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/pont-messages/2019/documents/papa-francesco_20190912_messaggio-patto-educativo.html).

identity, on the other hand, a reductive or purely formal interpretation of it. We use for our analysis of the different interpretations of the Catholic school the so-called Victoria scale, a typology we developed in the past decade to conceptualize, measure, and enhance Catholic school identity. This is summarized in Figure 1. It presents four types and four subtypes of school identity.<sup>5</sup>

### *Against a Narrow Catholic Monologue School*

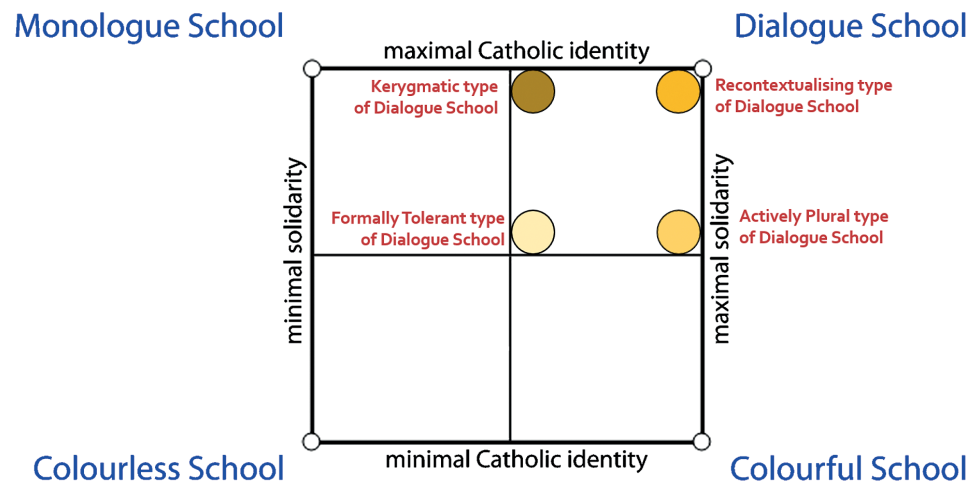


Figure 1. Diagram of the *Victoria Scale* model, which includes the four subtypes of the Dialogue School.

First of all, the church distances itself from a narrow Catholic school model. In the words of the document, “in such schools, there is no room for those who are not ‘totally’ Catholic” (§72). In our own words, the church distances itself from a Catholic Monologue School, a school only by and for (“total”) Catholics. Such a narrow model is discarded because it contradicts the church’s vision of a so-called “open Catholic school” that wants “to dialogue with everyone” and the model of a “church which goes forth” (§72, referencing *Evangelium gaudium*, 20-24). The argument for this critique of the Monologue model is the universal character of the Catholic message and the missionary impetus that comes from it. Thus, the Catholic school cannot confine itself to an “island”. The reason for this is not so much to include and embrace difference as such but to not lose the opportunity to bear witness to a Catholic culture to all. We call this the “kerygmatic type” of Catholic Dialogue School in our analysis.

<sup>5</sup> D. POLLEFEYT/J. BOUWENS: *Identity in Dialogue: Assessing and Enhancing Catholic School Identity: Research Methodology and Research Results in Catholic Schools in Victoria, Australia (Christian Religious Education and School Identity)*, Zürich-Berlin: Lit, 2014.

### *A Critique of Reductive (Christian) Values of Education*

The Catholic school should cultivate a healthy awareness of its Christian identity. For that reason, the church also criticizes reductive and formal views on Catholic school identity (§69). A reductive interpretation of Catholicity happens when only one dimension of Catholic identity is developed, such as its liturgical, spiritual, or social aspects. To be more concrete: a Catholic school is more than celebrating the Eucharist throughout the year, the work of a school chaplain, or the organization of social justice projects.

In other places in the document, too, we see a warning against reductionist approaches. “The Church through schools cannot be reduced to mere philanthropic work aimed at responding to a social need” (§10). This comes close to what we have called a “Christian values education approach of Catholic schools”,<sup>6</sup> where the identity of the Catholic school is “translated” into social or ethical values (“peace”, “tolerance”, “respect”, etc.), with a weak, weakening, and in the long-term disappearing link with the Catholic tradition, as we see happening today in many Catholic schools all over the world.<sup>7</sup>

It is remarkable that charismatic views on Catholic identity are also accused of reductionism (§69). This happens in Catholic schools that put themselves under a banner of “Christian inspiration” or “charismatic fulfilment” to avoid the term “Catholic” and the ecclesial belonging it implies. And indeed, we see in some schools how the central “charismatic figure” replaces more and more a reference to Christ or the Catholic Church.

### *A Rejection of Colourless Tendencies in Catholic Schools*

Finally, a “purely formal view” (§70-71) of Catholic school identity is also critiqued. This happens when the Catholic identity is only presented in terms of legal status, property, or a (civil or ecclesial) status. This is what we call the “Colourless School” or the “formally-tolerant” Catholic Dialogue School: a school that only generates its identity from administrative processes, legal constructions, rankings, or financial pragmatics. Mostly, “Catholic” is replaced here by “Quality” (in Dutch, “Katholiek” and “Kwaliteit” both start with a “K”). Therefore, as a reaction and critique against this (sub)model, the church is saying that the life of a teacher in a Catholic school is the exercise “of a personal vocation in the church, and not simply...the exercise of a profession” (§24).

6 See D. POLLEFEYT: “The Shift from Christian Values Education to Recontextualisation”, available online at: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=tuG\\_vqLSJ\\_k](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tuG_vqLSJ_k). For more information, see D. POLLEFEYT/J. BOUWENS: *Identity in Dialogue*, 53-55.

7 See the empirical results in our study D. POLLEFEYT: “Teaching the Unteachable or Why Too Much Good Is Bad”, in: *Religions* 12 (2021), 1-22, at 6.

In line with *Lumen gentium*, the church considers the school “not so much as an institution but as a community” (§16). This is an important message for Catholic schools today. All over the world, we see how boards of Catholic educational systems are taken over by professionals, managers, economists, communication specialists, lawyers, etc. They rule schools as companies, with teachers as employees, students as clients, and parents as “stakeholders”. Such boards would not reject or diminish the Catholic identity of the school *per se*. Nonetheless, in such logic, identity becomes first and foremost a “PR instrument” or a “quality label”. The “C” of Catholic is identified with the “Q” of quality. In our research, we have called this the “formally-tolerant” type of Dialogue School, and, in more extreme cases, the Colourless School.<sup>8</sup> The Catholic identity is “tolerated” as long as it does not overly disturb the success of the school that is constantly measured with other parameters, sometimes to such an extent that Catholics and non-Catholics no longer recognize the Christian message at work in their schools (or universities). As a critique of this situation, the Vatican states that “school leaders are more than just managers of an organization” (§48).

### *The Emergence of the Idea of a Catholic Dialogue School*

What, then, is a truly Catholic school in positive terms? For the new Church document, it is a school that welcomes diversity and, at the same time, has a firm Catholic identity. In our research over the last 15 years, we have called this type of school a “Catholic Dialogue School”, one that combines openness for diversity with a strong option for the Catholic faith as its privileged point of reference.<sup>9</sup> We distinguish such a school type from the so-called Colourful School, which is characterized by diversity but has no preferential relationship to a specific worldview or religious (*in casu*, Catholic) perspective. The Catholic school, the instruction argues clearly, is endowed with a particular identity: “The reference to a Christian concept of life centred on Jesus Christ” (§20).

In a Catholic Dialogue School, a “culture of dialogue” (§87) takes centre stage, as the title of the new Vatican document indicates. Such a dialogue happens among the school members, within the secular and plural context. Still, it is often forgotten that also, and even primarily, such dialogue occurs with the Catholic tradition and the God of Jesus Christ, who is mediated by it. More broadly, in such a school, “reason enters in dialogue with faith” (§20). All school members are invited to such a dialogue: believers, other-believers, and other-than-believers. In the words of the new Vatican instruction: “Dialogue combines attention to one’s own identity with the understanding of others and respect for diversity” (§30).

8 D. POLLEFEYT/J. BOUWENS: *Identity in Dialogue*, 61-62.

9 Ibid. 63. See also, the four subtypes of the Catholic Dialogue School: [www.kuleuven.be/thomas/page/videodatabank/label/9727/](http://www.kuleuven.be/thomas/page/videodatabank/label/9727/).

For the first time, the church formulates a theological underpinning for the “Dialogue School model”: “The Church considers dialogue as a constitutive dimension, as she is rooted precisely in the Trinitarian dynamics of dialogue, in the dialogue between God and human beings and in the dialogue among human beings themselves” (§30). In our understanding, this is the most ground-breaking statement of the new Vatican document: the dialogical concept of Catholic school identity is nothing less than the consequence of an understanding of a God who is Godself dialogical because God is love. Perhaps this is logical from a theological point of view, but in a secular and plural world, it is nothing less than revolutionary and interruptive.<sup>10</sup>

The document describes two preconditions that make a Dialogue School possible. First, there should be a sufficient number of Catholics in such a school who can witness and dialogue with people of other beliefs and worldviews. “It should be borne in mind”, the document says, “that the predominant presence of a group of Catholic teachers can ensure the successful implementation of the educational plan developed in keeping with the Catholic identity of the schools” (§47). The Vatican does not deliver a deeper reflection on this precondition, even if this is no longer evident in many schools today. In a lot of Catholic schools, teachers who practice the Catholic faith are increasingly becoming a minority. The document does not mention a necessary minimum. Still, it states that “those who do not profess any religious belief must recognize and respect the Catholic character of the school from the moment of their employment” (§47). Secondly, a Dialogue School recognizes and appreciates diversity. It is characterized by openness and hospitality. In line with previous Church documents, the Vatican recognizes that Catholic schools are characterized by “welcoming pupils from different cultural backgrounds and religious affiliations” (§27). The document is unambiguous in that “schools, even Catholic schools, do not demand adherence to the faith” (§28).

### *What Kind of Catholic Dialogue School? An Option for a Kerygmatic Understanding of Dialogue*

The question that arises now is how the church sees the relationship between Catholic identity and diversity and what is the framework in which they understand “the dialogical approach to a multicultural and multi-religious world” (§17).

10 D. POLLEFEYT/J. BOUWENS: “*Assessing and Enhancing Catholic School Identity: Towards a Recontextualising Catholic Dialogue School*”, in: M. BADART/G. VALLÉE (eds.): *Acts of the International Symposium, The Catholic School and the Intercultural and Interreligious Challenges*, Brussels: CEEC. European Committee for Catholic Education, 2019, 42-64, at 46: “In Christianity, God is incarnated, he became flesh. Moreover, God is triune (he is one and three), meaning that there is dialogue in God himself. If we speak about Dialogue Schools, it is not because it is a pragmatism, an answer to the call of pluralizing context, but because we believe that our god is a dialogical God. Then you have a faith community which is not closed, but open and inclusive. That faith community offers mediations that invite us to stand in a living relationship with the three living gods.”



In many places in the document, for the congregation, dialogue is, in the first place, a context and a place of evangelization. Dialogue opens the space to bear witness to the Catholic faith. This passage is crucial: “The Christian presence must be shown and made clear, that is, it must be visible, tangible, and conscious. Today, due to the advanced process of secularization, Catholic schools find themselves in a missionary situation, even in countries with an ancient Christian tradition.” (§28) For the congregation, dialogue, as an authentic expression of our humanity, is not a strategy for achieving specific goals “but rather a path to truth” (§30). The document refers to an earlier statement of the Vatican from 2002: “Schools, even Catholic schools, do not demand adherence to the faith. However, they can prepare for it. Through the educational plan, it is possible to create the conditions for a person to develop a gift for searching and to be guided in discovering the mystery of his being and of the reality that surrounds him until he reaches the threshold of the faith. To those who then decide to cross this threshold, the necessary means are offered for continuing to deepen their experience of faith.” (§28)<sup>11</sup> The Catholic Dialogue School is thus an educational project inspired by the gospel to bear witness to Christ, even though the church accepts that the outcomes of such confrontation with the gospel do not necessarily result in conversions to Catholicism.

### *The Kerygmatic Catholic Dialogue School*

In our own research, we have called this type of school a “kerygmatic type of Dialogue School”.<sup>12</sup> Such a model has analogies with the (narrower) Monologue School (which is rejected in this Vatican document, as we have seen). Supporters of the kerygmatic Dialogue School believe that the Catholic tradition represents a meaningful and valuable message that ought to be heard by everyone. Ultimately, the truth offered by the Catholic faith is more fundamental and fulfilling than the insights of other religions and ways of life. A Catholic school should prioritize the Catholic faith and practices over other religions and world views. Students choose to enrol in a *Catholic* institution. Therefore, it is reasonable to expect everyone to participate in the religious school project – though various levels of involvement may be possible. This type of school commits to the religious education of (all) its students. Also, the teaching staff is expected to have a Catholic commitment to the school’s identity. Education is mission. In such an understanding, it is generally undesirable to change the content and form of the Catholic

11 CONGREGATION FOR CATHOLIC EDUCATION: *Consecrated Persons and Their Mission in Schools: Reflections and Guidelines*, 28 October 2002, §51, available online at: [www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/ccatheduc/documents/rc\\_con\\_ccatheduc\\_doc\\_20021028\\_consecrated-persons\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/ccatheduc/documents/rc_con_ccatheduc_doc_20021028_consecrated-persons_en.html).

12 D. POLLEFEYT/J. BOUWENS: “Dialoog als toekomst: Een katholiek antwoord op de verkleuring van het onderwijslandschap”, in: P. KEERSMAEKERS/M. VAN KERCKHOVEN/ K. VANSPEYBROECK (eds.): *Dialoogschool in Actie! Mag Ik er Zijn Voor U?*, Antwerpen: Halewijn, 2013, 49-60.

faith to make it “fit better” in today’s ever-changing cultural maelstrom. The essence of Catholicism is defined by tradition and should be preserved and, if necessary, protected against other convictions.

At the same time, the Catholic School of the kerygmatic type is different from the Monologue School because it welcomes certain levels of diversity. Not every student needs to be or become Catholic. After all, Christians must show hospitality and respect for people with different convictions and ways of life. This too is very clear in the Vatican statement. Genuine Catholic faith is characterized by a welcoming, relational, and dialogical attitude towards otherness. Faith cannot and should not be imposed on others, neither with explicit nor implicit pressure; more specifically, it should not be imposed on minors (children and teenagers) in a compulsory school context.

Nevertheless, this diversity can be an opportunity to proclaim the faith (*kerygma*). Encounter with others and engaging them in dialogue provides an occasion to testify about the Catholic faith in words and through action. This type of school desires to invite everyone into Christianity, arouse people’s interest and passion, inspire them to faith in Jesus Christ, convince students to join the church, and “light their religious fire”. This is thus a model of evangelization in a plural context. Believers should look creatively for new ways to show themselves as truly Catholic in today’s plural society, where the Catholic message can freely resonate amongst other voices. It is important to search for places where God can be found in the world. The kerygmatic Dialogue School holds on to its own Catholic belief (from an insider’s perspective), proclaimed positively and optimistically to all others. Mostly, the dialogue remains one-sided: the Catholic school teaches while the students receive. The student can interact with this Catholic content, but it is only this content and it is to be received or not. This school is primarily concerned with the search for, so to speak, a new “public relations strategy” to advertise a Catholic message that in itself remains unchanged.

### *Dialogue and Power*

Thus, in our analysis, the Vatican chooses a Dialogue School model — not a Monologue School model, but a Dialogue School of the kerygmatic type. The main critique of this (sub)model of the Catholic Dialogue School is that it uses a concept of dialogue that is not reflective of a real authentic understanding of dialogue. Genuine dialogue is symmetrical, and both partners in the dialogue can contribute and influence each other in equal ways. In an authentic dialogue, using truth claims and the power to impose them is highly questionable, and risks undermining the dialogue’s openness. After all, is it not too risky and dangerous to open yourself up and show your vulnerability in a dialogue if the dialogue partner and his/her ideas have more priority, have the power, and if he/she is also ready to use that power? How dialogical is such a “dialogue”? From a critical point of view, such a “Dialogue School” can be criticized as just an instrument



to impose one truth on everybody.<sup>13</sup> One claims to show openness, but ultimately there is only one legitimate position.

In the Vatican document, here under review, we see that the church is wrestling with this dimension of the dialogue approach, mainly because this document was written in a context where the church is confronted with “problematic” behaviour regarding the Catholic identity of the school. Paragraph 82 of the document recognizes that “dialogue and walking together are the main way to resolve these problems, while also keeping in mind the hierarchical nature of the Church and respecting different competencies” (§82). Here we encounter the difficult tension between “dialogue” and “authority”, a tension that is characteristic of all organizations and institutions, and especially of the church, which uses intrinsically normative claims in faith issues. It is somewhat strange and (perhaps) inevitable that the language and the atmosphere of the Vatican text change when moving from the theological parts of the ideal of the Catholic Dialogue School to the more legal parts of dealing with problems that threaten the Catholic identity of the school. The text refers in these legal parts to “the duty of the school leadership” when “teachers or pupils do not comply with the criteria required by the universal, particular, or proper law of Catholic schools” (§51). It speaks about “dismissal” when a person “does not comply to the requirements of the Catholic school and its belonging to the Church community” (§46-47). It refers to the role of the bishop in “publicly... alerting the faithful that this is not a Catholic school” (§58). Of course, this should always happen “after respecting the right to defence of the person” and using a proportional sanction that is eventually reversible. But the tone in these passages is no longer pedagogical or theological, but juridical and repressive. It makes the tension between “dialogue” and “authority” very clear to the reader.

In our analysis, it would have been better not to mix in one document the pedagogical and theological discourse on the identity of the Catholic school with the concrete legal issues that the Vatican is confronted with – especially since these issues are not known or made explicit to the reader.

Firstly, the question is how practical and applicable the legal directions in the document are for a specific school or diocese, given the particular secular legal contexts that are always in place in Catholic schools in different parts of the world. Such directions will not satisfy many: those who want the Catholic schools to become stricter in regard to Catholic identity will find the Vatican’s directions too general and too powerless; those who wish for more openness and tolerance among staff, students, and leadership will find the document too repressive. It is not easy to see the document as very helpful and effective on the legal level.

Secondly, some will see in this mix a discrediting of the authenticity of the concept of the Catholic Dialogue School itself, “which is not so dialogical as

13 L. FRANKEN/P. VERMEER: “Deconfessionalising RE in Pillarized Education Systems: A Case Study of Belgium and the Netherlands”, in: *British Journal of Religious Education* 41/3 (2019), 272-285.

it seems”. The document tries to avoid this last conclusion by “harmonizing” dialogue and authority. We read in the document: “In this framework, doors are open to a true culture of dialogue through *inclusive and permanent communication*. Dialogue and communication practices within the educational community of the local and universal Church must be established, promoted, and practiced even before any tensions arise. They are to be protected and cultivated even during conflicts, and if necessary re-established.” (§87) It is a missed opportunity that the document does not go deeper into the ethical and theological potentiality of forgiveness and reconciliation in this context.

In the next paragraphs, we want to go deeper into the pedagogical and theological problems related to the concept of the kerygmatic Catholic Dialogue School and present another subtype of the Dialogue School: the recontextualizing Catholic Dialogue School, which tries to answer the question of the authenticity of dialogue. The problem with the kerygmatic Dialogue School is broader than its unilateral and authoritative nature. The most profound problem is its difficulties with true alterity and difference. In the kerygmatic dialogue, the other has finally nothing to contribute to the identity of the Catholic school, which is a pre-given. The tradition cannot change or be enriched by the interruption that the other creates in the school’s identity. The kerygmatic dialogue is a strategy of “implanting” Catholic Identity through dialogue in the hope of not creating “symptoms of rejection”. The main concern is proclaiming the gospel in challenging and changing times without overly changing or transforming it accordingly. A consequence is that people become – despite the promise of dialogue – objects rather than subjects of evangelization, and there is little room for a positive contribution from those who are and remain different. To be sure, these people are tolerated and also respected in an inclusive Catholic school. Still, the value of their identity and how it could contribute to the school’s Catholic identity remains unrecognized. In our empirical research, we see how such an approach, in the long term, becomes ineffective and even counterproductive when students start to see, understand, and strongly resist this use of dialogue as an instrument of evangelization.<sup>14</sup>

### *The Recontextualizing Catholic Dialogue School*

In our typology,<sup>15</sup> we have developed another (sub)type: the so-called recontextualizing Catholic Dialogue School, which tries to find a positive answer to the challenge in the kerygmatic (sub)type. In this dialogical model, encountering others and entering into dialogue with “otherness” is more than a mere “opportunity for proclamation”: it is constitutive, at a fundamental level, of our understanding of faith. In the encounter and dialogue – and at times confrontation – with the other/Other – God reveals Godself, new layers of meaning in the

<sup>14</sup> See footnote 7.

<sup>15</sup> See footnote 12 and Figure 1.

Christian message are discovered, and the Catholic faith is recontextualized.<sup>16</sup> Here, dialogue is bilateral and reciprocal; all participants are vulnerable and susceptible to new meanings; the other believers are no less than the Catholics at school. The truth of Catholicism here is not in the first place a set of fixed *a priori* that should be presented (or imposed) on others but can only be discovered and realized through a continuous process of interpretation, discovery, and appropriation from within the tradition in a certain context. Such engaging dialogue of the Catholic faith with a multicultural society requires an open, inquiring, searching stance.

The new *Directory for Catechesis* of the Catholic Church (2020) speaks about a “hermeneutical” relationship of the faithful with the Catholic tradition.<sup>17</sup> This asks for a continuous re-interpretation and re-contextualization of the Catholic faith in a new context. In such a model, the “other” is not just an object of evangelizing efforts or someone only to be tolerated passively in the name of religious freedom. Rather, it is someone who – from his or her particular stance – can contribute to the project of the Catholic school and its specific Catholic identity. It is because Catholic schools are sensitive to diversity that, in a plural context, they can become more aware of their particular Catholic identity in terms both of positive identity and openness and hospitality for the other.

Dialogue Schools of the Recontextualising Type are constantly looking for new ways to express and experience the gospel and for new practices to make faith come true today. They stand with one foot in the Catholic faith tradition and with the other foot in a yet unwritten future. It remains open what the result of this search will be. As our world evolves and changes, so does the identity of Catholics living in that world and the specific way the original Christian inspiration is being shaped today. In each new era, the Catholic faith inevitably renews its profile; it *recontextualizes* itself and rediscovers God in a different way over and over again.<sup>18</sup> From this perspective, there will not be “one” but many different forms and expressions of Catholic (Dialogue) Schools.

### *A Double Asymmetry in Catholic Education*

In a recontextualising Catholic Dialogue School, an active dialogue with the world, the context, and the different religions and philosophies of life are of decisive importance. Dealing with differences helps Catholics to discover and

16 For a deeper analysis of the concept of recontextualisation, see J. BOUWENS: “Recontextualizing Catholic School Identity: Five Criteria”, in: J. MOONS/R.A. TE VELDE/A.L.H.M. VAN WIERINGEN (eds.): *Teaching and Tradition: On their Dynamic Interaction*, Leiden: Brill, 2022, chapter 9.

17 PONTIFICAL COUNCIL FOR THE PROMOTION OF THE NEW EVANGELISATION: *Directory for Catechesis*, Washington, DC: United States Conference of Bishops, 2020, §196.

18 See L. BOEVE: *God Interrupts History: Theology in a Time of Upheaval*, New York: Continuum, 2007.

shape their own Catholic identity. Therefore, it is of great value that various philosophical and religious insights, practices, and ways of life co-exist in the Catholic school. By acknowledging, respecting, and truly valuing the differences between people, the school can (re)discover its *Catholic* identity. Inclusivity and this openness to “the other” is fundamental for such a type of Catholic school identity. All members of this type of Dialogue School are supposed to contribute to the mutual dialogue out of a willingness to converse with the Catholic tradition – which is foundational for the school project. This model has room for people with authentic non-Catholic faith profiles. At the same time, no one can distance themselves from the constitutive and privileged Catholic dimension of the school identity. All school members must recognize, accept, and value this preferential relationship with the Catholic tradition. This goes much further than pure “tolerance” or “respect” (which in themselves are not even specific Catholic values).

There is no dialogue possible without identity, while at the same time, identity is always shaped in dialogue. Here, dialogue is also no casual exchange of equivalent perspectives, striving for perfect symmetry. We criticize this, in line with the document, in the so-called Colourful School (see Figure 1). A Colourful School differs from a Dialogue School because in the former type, diversity is celebrated with no preferential reference to a specific religious tradition. All perspectives are equal as long as they “respect” each other. More and more Catholic schools tend to such a model and sometimes even see it as the ultimate “Dialogue School”, because it tries to eliminate every form of asymmetry. But we agree with the Vatican document that such schools can no longer be called authentically Catholic, since they give up the privileged relationship with the Catholic tradition constituting the Catholic Dialogue School.<sup>19</sup>

A fundamental pedagogical asymmetry characterizes authentic dialogue: it allows words that come from “Elsewhere”, that are spoken to us “from above” (and mediated by our tradition), a Word that is transformative for the individual and the school community. In contrast to the Colourful School, this is the non-negotiable core of the recontextualizing Catholic Dialogue School: the pedagogical asymmetry that lies within the preferential option for the Catholic faith that, paradoxically, is not chosen but presented to us. At the same time, we discover its incredible richness and opportunities. For this reason, such a type of dialogue has always a clear kerygmatic moment or movement.

But this type of Dialogue School is also characterized by another asymmetry: not only the asymmetry of the Word of the tradition (and the teacher, school, or church that presents it authentically) but also the asymmetry of the other and his/her tradition that interrupts and transforms us and challenges my school and me to re-consider my own tradition, to recontextualize it. This makes it different from the kerygmatic Catholic Dialogue School. The word of my tradition

<sup>19</sup> See footnote 11.

interrupts the other, but simultaneously, I allow being spoken to and interrupted by the other – like a sort of “outside prophecy” (*Fremdprophetie*).<sup>20</sup>

For this reason, we speak of a *double asymmetry* typical for Catholic education: I am the master, and the other is my student; but also: the other is my master, and I am his or her student, because God reveals Godself also in him or her to me, whoever he or she is.<sup>21</sup> Such an authentic dialogue possibly results in a “mutual transformation” of every partner in the dialogue and the traditions they hold and share. Such an understanding of a double asymmetry in the dialogue does not destroy the authority of the school’s evangelizing mission but qualifies it or puts it in the service of the other. In this way, the Catholic school is the *diakonia* of the church to the world.<sup>22</sup>

### *New Developments in the Church’s Understanding of the Catholic Dialogue School*

In the context of this analysis of the 2022 Vatican document on Catholic schools, the question is now whether – next to the kerygmatic Catholic Dialogue School – we find traces of the recontextualizing Catholic Dialogue School in the recent document. In other words, is diversity either mostly described in terms of formal respect and tolerance and placed in an evangelizing context, or is diversity considered in positive terms as a possible source of richness, an opportunity to discover and to re-discover, to formulate and to re-formulate the relational identity of the Catholic school itself? In general, it must be noted that the kerygmatic (sub)model is dominant in the text. This can be explained by the fact that the text is put in a framework where Catholic identity is threatened in specific cases, and dialogue is confronted with its limits.

Nonetheless, paragraph 30 of the document comes closest to the recontextualizing type of dialogue. The text refers to a statement by Pope Francis asking

20 E. SCHILLEBEECKX: “The Magisterium and the World of Politics”, in C. CORNILLE (ed.): *The Enduring Wisdom of the Founders of the Concilium: Congar, Rahner, Metz, Schillebeeckx and Küng* (Concilium 2022), London: SCM Press, 2022, 99-116, at 106.

21 See the interpretation of the Other in Levinas by R. BURGGRAEVE: “Affected by the Face of the Other: The Levinasian Movement from the Exteriority to the Interiority of the Infinite”, in: *Dialegesthai: Rivista di Filosofia* 11 (2009), published: 5 July 2009, available online at: <https://mondodomani.org/dialegesthai>: “In that sense, Levinas can say that the other is my *Master*, who by means of its appearance itself instructs me masterfully about its irreducible alterity, without my already containing this instruction within the depths of myself or my being able to let it simmer up from within me. I can entirely not foresee nor predict the word of revelation of the face; I do not have a grasp on it in any way whatsoever. I am neither the designer nor the creator, but the one who receives, the one who listens and in listening obeys, the ‘created one’”. For a pedagogical application, see: R. BURGGRAEVE: “Alterity Makes the Difference: Ethical and Metaphysical Conditions for an Authentic Interreligious Dialogue and Learning”, in: D. POLLEFEYT (ed.): *Interreligious Learning*, Leuven: Peeters, 2007, 231-256.

22 See D. POLLEFEYT (ed.), *Interreligious Learning*, and ID.: *From Inter-Religious to Inter-Worldview Learning*, Leuven: Peeters, 2022.

for “the courage to respect differences, because those who are different, either culturally or religiously, should not be seen or treated as enemies, but rather welcomed as fellow-travelers, in the genuine conviction that the good of each resides in the good of all” (§30).<sup>23</sup>

Another indicator of the presence of the recontextualizing subtype of Catholic Dialogue School is the use of the term “mutual” in the text. By using this term, the text implies that a double asymmetry is at work in the school’s dynamic identity. It is interesting to see that the text uses the concept of “mutuality” no less than ten times in reflecting on the identity of the Catholic school. Some of these references relate directly to the understanding of Catholic school identity:

Between pupils of different talents and backgrounds [the school] promotes friendly relations and fosters a spirit of *mutual* understanding (§19).

School has the important task of bringing people into contact with a rich cultural and scientific heritage, preparing them for professional life and fostering *mutual* understanding (§29).

The culture of care becomes the compass at local and international level to form people dedicated to patient listening, constructive dialogue, and *mutual* understanding (§36).

Rekindle our dedication for and with young people, renewing our passion for a more open and inclusive education, including patient listening, constructive dialogue, and better *mutual* understanding (§97).

In these references and quotes (and broader teaching) of Pope Francis in this text, we see the seeds for a shift towards a more recontextualizing understanding of the Catholic Dialogue School. In our analysis, the framework of the severe problems that the congregation is facing in Catholic schools today and worldwide that need to be addressed makes such a move from a kerygmatic to a recontextualizing understanding of Catholic schools – in one and the same text – too challenging. It is our hope that, in the coming years, the congregation will further reflect on the concept of dialogue, on the double asymmetry typical for a pedagogy for Catholic schools, and on a more active approach to diversity. This will become increasingly urgent if Catholic schools want to remain inclusive and hospitable since the pluralizing world will penetrate deeper and deeper into Catholic schools in the future. Of course, this does not solve or even anticipate all the *legal* issues that every school (as every organization) faces. But interestingly, the Vatican document makes it already clear that “*mutual* exchange and trusting conversation” can solve many problems “without the Bishop having to intervene formally” (§62). A recontextualizing Catholic Dialogue School can also give new insights to reflect on a more relational concept, not only of tradition but also of authority in context. Finally, the rich Church tradition on forgiveness and reconciliation can also be included in this reflection.

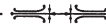
23 This statement was made by Pope Francis during this apostolic journey to Egypt on 28-29 April 2017. FRANCIS: *Address of His Holiness Pope Francis to the Participants in the International Peace Conference. Al-Azhar Conference Center, Cairo, 28 April 2017.*



## SUMMARY

**The Vatican and the Catholic Dialogue School as  
a “Place of Differences Living Together in Harmony”**

As the recent publication of the 2022 Vatican instruction entitled *The Identity of the Catholic School for a Culture of Dialogue* points out, Catholic education currently finds itself in a state of crisis, and there is a necessity to come to a shared vision on the future of Catholic schools. Our contribution firstly explores the understandings of Catholic education and Catholic school identity through an overview and analysis of different forms of Catholic schools, based on the Victoria Scale typology. Secondly, the contemporary phenomena of individualization, globalization, and pluralisation further emphasize the need for Catholic schools to be based on principles of dialogue, which alone can provide an adequate relation between Catholic identity and diversity. This understanding of Catholic identity is addressed extensively by exploring the understanding of the concept of dialogue. In relation to this, there is a need to distinguish in the 2022 Vatican document two approaches of dialogue that are intertwined in the document itself, (a) the kerygmatic Dialogue School (which appears to be dominant in the text) and (b) the recontextualizing Dialogue School. We present the latter paradigm as a preferred option, due to its capacity to exceed the realm of mere tolerance and understand dialogue with diversity as an opportunity to rediscover and recontextualize the identity of Catholic believers, other-believers and other-than-believers alike. It is the aim of this contribution to address and draw further attention – in dialogue with the 2022 Vatican instruction, to the need to engage in an examination of the meaning and implications of a true recontextualizing Catholic Dialogue School.



Didier Pollefeyt (Menen, Belgium, 1965) is full professor at the Faculty of Theology and Religious Studies, KU Leuven. He teaches catechetics, didactic of religion, and Jewish-Christian relations. He is Director of the Centre for Peace Ethics, KU Leuven and promotor of the Enhancing Catholic School Identity (ECSI) project.

Jan Bouwens (Turnhout, Belgium, 1978) studied philosophy in Antwerp and Amsterdam, and Catholic theology in Leuven, where he also completed the Academic Teacher Training for Religious Education. Since 2007, he has been a research fellow at the Faculty of Theology and Religious Studies at KU Leuven, assigned to the Enhancing Catholic School Identity (ECSI) project, directed by Prof. Didier Pollefeyt.