



# The Profile of Priests Involved in Catholic Education in Victoria

## Analysis of Aggregated ECSI Research Data 2011–2018

by Didier Pollefeyt and Jan Bouwens

### Abstract

Over the years, a good number of priests have taken part in the ongoing *Enhancing Catholic School Identity* (ECSI) research survey project. This has been conducted in primary and secondary Catholic schools in the four dioceses in Victoria. Many of the priests who have taken part in ECSI research are parish priests or college chaplains, but there are also priests on the teaching staff, in school leadership teams, and among the staff of diocesan Catholic education offices who have participated. After pulling together the data that was collected between 2011 and 2018, and isolating this special group of respondents, we were able to examine closely the specific ECSI profiles of the priests. We then compared their results to that of other respondent groups, such as students, school leadership, teaching staff, parents, and diocesan office personnel. The analysis of these results shows that priests are very supportive of the ECSI endeavour, while simultaneously expressing their own unique perspective.





## Summary

With his vast experience in Catholic education leadership, Monsignor Thomas Doyle has been a key partner in the *Enhancing Catholic School Identity* (ECSI) project from its beginning. To acknowledge and celebrate his involvement, meta-research has been applied to the collected data of participating priests. The findings of the ECSI research reveal the unique position of priests working within Catholic schools across Victoria. When singled out as their own respondent group, the researchers have found a profile that marks out the priests' responses to today's diversifying, detraditionalising and secularising context, as distinct from the context of school leadership and teachers. As Victorian Catholic schools are encouraged to emulate the Recontextualising Catholic Dialogue School model, these findings confirm the special role that priests will continue to play in furthering the relevancy and necessity of Australian Catholic education in our contemporary age.

## Introduction

The empirical research of the *Enhancing Catholic School Identity* (ECSI) project has at its heart pastoral aims. This is due in no small part to the keen involvement of Monsignor Thomas Doyle over the course of many years. In fact, the goal of the research into Catholic school identity has come to mirror that of Mgr Doyle's own life's work. As a priest, he has endeavoured to shepherd his flock into being their truest selves, as sons and daughters of God, as brothers and sisters to one another, as a community that is built (and continually under construction) to serve the needs of the world. Throughout his career and in his ongoing ministry, Mgr Doyle took a special interest in Catholic education through his twenty years of involvement in Catholic Education Melbourne. In addition to his directorship, he also had a keen interest in his brother priests and their collective work in parishes, schools, and other Catholic institutions. It is for this reason that, in celebrating the life of Mgr Doyle, we turn to the ECSI research data collected from priests working in Catholic schools by way of the ECSI research tools and methodology. In shining a light on their profile from the ECSI perspective, this is also a way to honour the work undertaken by Mgr Thomas Doyle, as well as his enduring standing in Catholic education in Australia.





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ECSI (<https://www.ecsi.site/au/>) is an ongoing research endeavour born out of a love of and appreciation for Catholic schools, and the unique and formative role these institutions play in the lives of students and their families all around the world. ECSI is undertaken within the *Faculty of Theology and Religious Studies* of the Catholic University of Leuven in Belgium (KU Leuven) by the *Centre for Academic Teacher Training*. Since the centre's inception in 2006, the research has been carried out under the auspices of the *Catholic Education Commission of Victoria* (CECV). Promoted by Prof. Dr. Didier Pollefeyt (co-author of this document), ECSI has been assessing the personal, theological, and professional identities of the people who comprise the communities within Australian primary and secondary schools.

All of this empirical research is done with the view of capturing the current climate in Australian Catholic schools in order to further understand how the Catholic identity of these schools can be best promoted in the quickly evolving context of the twenty-first century. Students, staff teams, school leadership, parents, religious and priests within the schools, as well as parish members, are invited to participate in this research by taking a series of surveys that ask for their opinions on their current Catholic school, and on their ideal Catholic school, in relation to an array of issues. The surveys cover a range of topics, which include how the surveyed individual responds to religion, how they see their school as it currently stands, and how they might envision their ideal school. This data is collected and displayed in graphic form so that at a glance the temperature of the school community can be taken. In honour of Mgr Doyle, the surveys contain a specific research question concerning the collected data of participating parish priests: 'What is the profile of priests involved in Catholic education?'

### Descriptive statistics and selected background variables

The ECSI research is ongoing. The research documented in this chapter, however, has been sifted out of ECSI research across an eight-year period, from 2011 to 2018. Of a total of 186,586 total survey respondents during this time, here we are concerned with data provided by the 148 priests in the sample. What do we know of these survey respondents? From the descriptive statistics collected through the survey research,

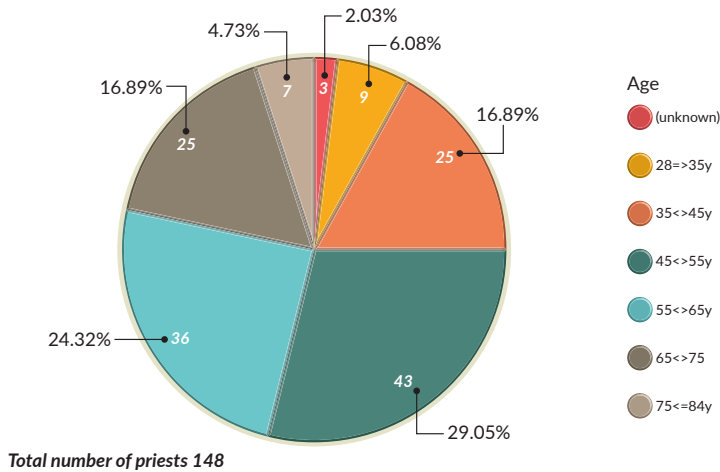




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we can learn some basic details about the men that make up this group of priests.

**Figure 1: Age distribution of the 148 priests who responded to the ECSI research survey (2011-2018)**



*In terms of the age distribution of the priests, the mean age is 54 years with the youngest priest being 28 and the eldest 84.*

Though the majority of this group of priests fell into the middle age category (45-65 years old), there is certainly an intergenerational range within the group, including representatives from those who are new to the priesthood as well as veteran priests. The surveyed priests hailed from all four of the dioceses in the State of Victoria: Melbourne, Ballarat, Sandhurst and Sale. The majority of them – 95 priests (64.2% of the respondents) lived and worked in the Archdiocese of Melbourne. Twenty-four priests (16.2%) were from the Diocese of Ballarat, 19 priests (12.8%) were from Sandhurst, and the smallest group of 10 priests (6.8%) were employed in Sale. Just over half of the participating priests (54.1%, or 80 priests) noted that they were involved in a primary school, while 63 priests (42.6%) specified that they were involved in a secondary school, and a tiny proportion worked in one of the Catholic education offices (3.4%, or 5 priests).

Most of the priests in the sample identified as functioning within the Catholic school as a member of the leadership team (64.2%), while a





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significant minority identified as classroom teachers or other personnel (32.4%). The tiny remainder indicated that they worked in the diocesan Catholic education office (3.4%).

The priests who participated in the surveys did not have the opportunity to indicate precisely what level of involvement they had in the school or in the parish, but in the case of most it is likely they were leading figures in the parish and that they are moderately to significantly involved in the religious life of the school (for example, in saying Mass, confirmation, first communion and reconciliation). Qualitative research undertaken by the ECSI team indicated that most priests were happy to be involved in the Catholic education curriculum, and religious life in particular, though they were often stretched thin, working in one or even several parishes and schools and even, especially in the country areas, travelling great distances between activity locations.

Turning to the initial outcomes of the surveys, we looked at the background variables of the priest respondents – the data that was collected concerning their ethnic background, relationship with Christ, support for the Catholic faith, personal prayer life – as well as assessments of diversity and other factors within their workplace (e.g. school or CEO).

We considered how the priests responded to the question concerning their familial country of origin: 'What is your main ethnic background? In other words: what is your country of origin, or the country of origin of your parents or grandparents? Choose one option from the list that applies most.' (Instead of selecting from the provided dropdown list, the respondents were also able to manually enter a country or racial identity into a text box.)

While there was certainly diversity of background, ethnicity, and cultural experiences within this group of priests, as hinted at by the country-of-origin data above, was there diversity of opinion and experience when it came to aspects of religious belief? In some respects, there was a spread of opinion, and in others a large consensus. For example, when it came to their Christian faith, all priests indicated having some level of faith in Christ. Most (82.5%) assessed their faith as 'strong', while a minority (17.5%) described their faith as 'average'. Similarly, in terms of their relationship to the Catholic faith tradition, we saw strong and





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supportive results. The faith levels and support for Catholicism were backed up by an active personal prayer life among the priest, with most respondents indicating that they prayed in their own time daily.

### The Doyle Questionnaire

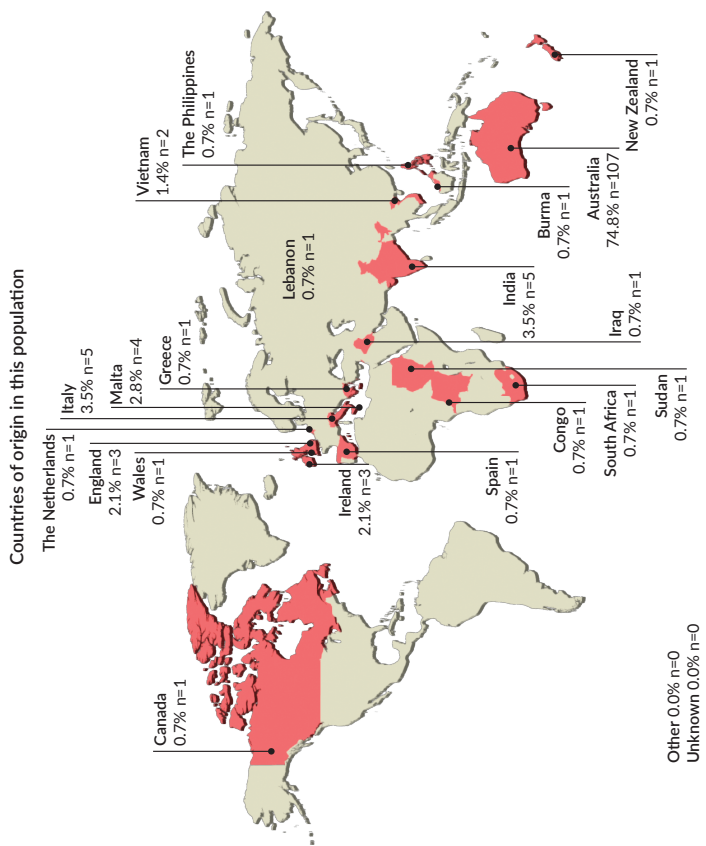
Part of the ECSI survey is the Doyle Questionnaire. This questionnaire, named after the very Mgr Doyle who is celebrated in this *festschrift*, added depth to the ECSI survey research by providing further opportunities for respondents to consider highly specific aspects of their current and ideal school. Its survey items were wide-ranging, covering such questions as to what degree a school or CEO setting is a devotional environment, to what extent the school or office's Catholic identity seems nominal, and to how uniform the community appears.

The Doyle Questionnaire also asked a few questions concerning the identity of Catholic schools, including whether the respondents support the Catholic identity of schools and then, in terms of specific features of Catholic identity, would they like a lot less, the same, or a lot more of these in their current schools.

So how did the respondents react to the Doyle Questionnaire and assess the Catholic and communal features of their workplaces? For this group of 148 priests, there was consistent agreement with their school being described as 'a good place to grow closer to God', environments where 'people believe and think in many different ways', and where generally 'people believe in God'. Through their pastoral interactions with staff, students, families and alumni, the priests generally saw a high level of Catholic faith, where spiritual life and religious practices are well-regarded and encouraged. At the same time, the priests also seemed to assess their schools and offices as having significant freedom for diversity of thought and belief (e.g., 'In my school/office, people believe and think in many different ways'.) Some in the group even pushed for a bit more variation in terms of their ideal school. Furthermore, while there was significant agreement about how 'everybody wears the same style of clothes' in their current school or office, there was a decrease in support for this option in relation to an ideal school. So we found evidence of the beginnings of a slight shift away from uniformity of dress in a Catholic school setting, which is in itself no small thing.



**Figure 2: Country of origin of the priest respondents**



*From the responses of the 148 priests to this question, it is clear that most of the priests identified as being from Australia. Close to three-quarters of the group selected this option. Of the other countries represented, 19 identified with a country in Europe, and 16 with other countries in the world.*



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Following this we explored the three Attitude Scales: the Post-Critical Belief Scale, the Melbourne Scale and the Victoria Scale.

### The ECSI Post-Critical Belief Scale

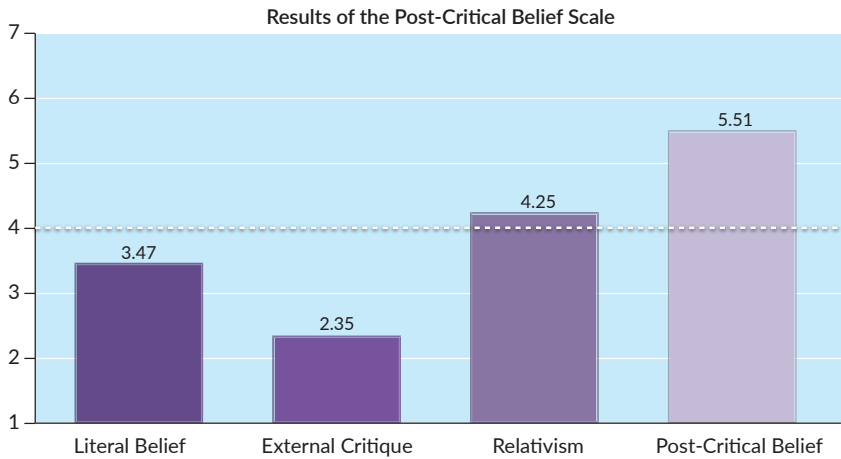
The ECSI research is interested in assessing and enhancing the identity of Catholic schools. In regard to this, remembering that a school community is made up of individuals, while its institutional identity is something that can be observed from the outside, it is something that springs up from the identities of the people inside the school, those people who make up the school community. It is for this reason that the Post-Critical Belief (PCB) Scale, also a component of the ECSI research survey project, is such an important part of the research.

As an additional element of the ECSI research survey project, the Post-Critical Belief Scale surveyed respondents to make their self-assessment of how they relate to religion. On one axis, the scale outlines whether a respondent believes in the existence, work, and interaction of God with the world, raising the question of whether 'the transcendent' exists and to what extent along a sliding scale does the transcendent relate to us. On the other axis, the scale considers whether a respondent views religion and its many components in a highly literal way or a highly symbolic way, with many possible points in between. Mapping the priests' answers along the scale shows us four possible viewpoints (in broad brushstrokes) and by way of these we can see how the group tends to believe, and where there may be diversity in the expression of this belief. Of the 148 priests surveyed, 122 filled in the PCB Scale.

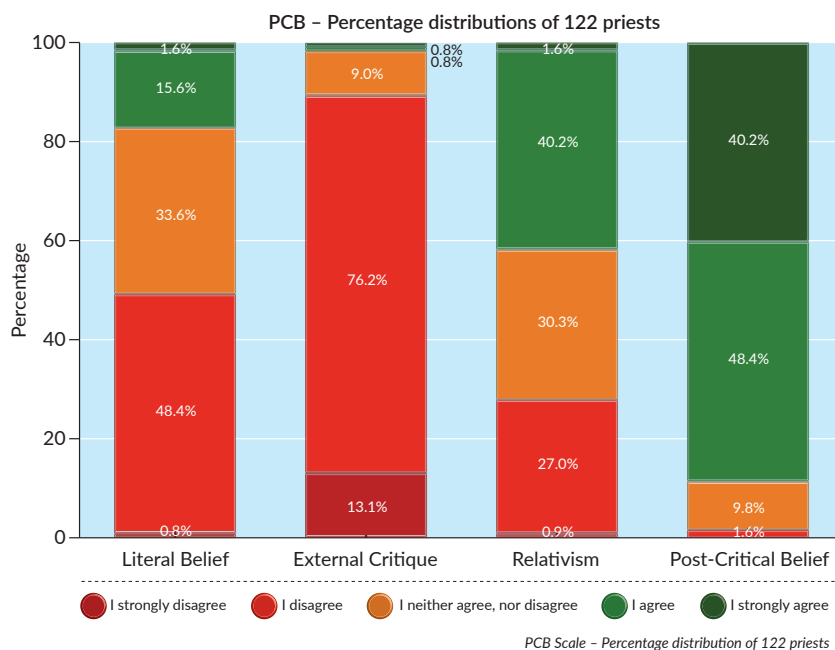




Figure 3: Results of the Post-Critical Belief Scale

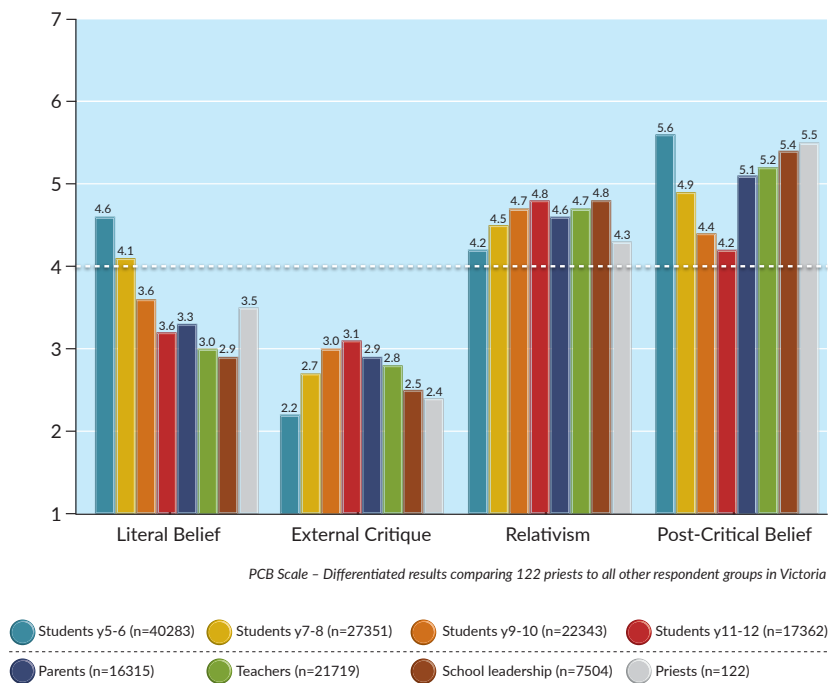


**Figure 4: The PCB Scale – Percentage distributions of 122 priests**



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**Figure 5: The PCB Scale – Differentiated results comparing 122 priests to all other respondent groups in Victoria**





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It is notable that the two perspectives of believing in God that flank either side of the graph are far from equal. Post-Critical Belief is the most popular selection, with the majority of priests indicating that they have faith in God and that this faith is mediated through the power of symbols and other intercessions – through the Church, its sacraments, prayer, family, community, the Scriptures, hagiography, theological writings, icons, story, art and so on. God is an active presence in one's life through all of these means, yet remains out of one's full and complete grasp. The Divine is and remains as of yet both a revelation and a mystery. Against this we see a small cohort who would lean to a more Literal understanding of God – whether they view themselves as having special access to the Divine through virtue of their priesthood, or due to adherence to Church dogma, or through an at-face-value approach to the Scriptures. Those who hold onto Literal aspects compose just a small portion of this group (15.6%), while a tiny minority might describe themselves as actual Literal Believers (1.6%). Most priests in this small group were hesitant about Post-Critical Belief (9.8%) but only 1.6% rejected Post-Critical Belief. So there are approximately 1.6% (or two priests) in this group with a 'pure' Literal Belief.

Turning to the statements of External Critique that communicate an active rejection of the Divine and religious content, we find that the priests tend to strongly disagree with these notions. There is a tiny minority who agree with some and disagree with other aspects of this cognitive belief stance, while only one or two priests strongly agree with this perspective. This supports a strong level of belief in God among this group, which is fitting for their vocation of leadership within the Church and in caring for its members.

The other stance that rejects the transcendent rises just above the line marking the turning point to agreement. This indicates there is some support amongst this group for Relativism. We note that this support comes from about two-fifths of the priests, with close to one-third agreeing with some aspects of Relativism. This measure of support means it falls under the umbrella of their overarching Post-Critical Belief. So, Relativism is not an ideological rejection of God, but an understanding that belief in Christianity (or any religion) can be dependent on many contingent factors, and that one's own belief

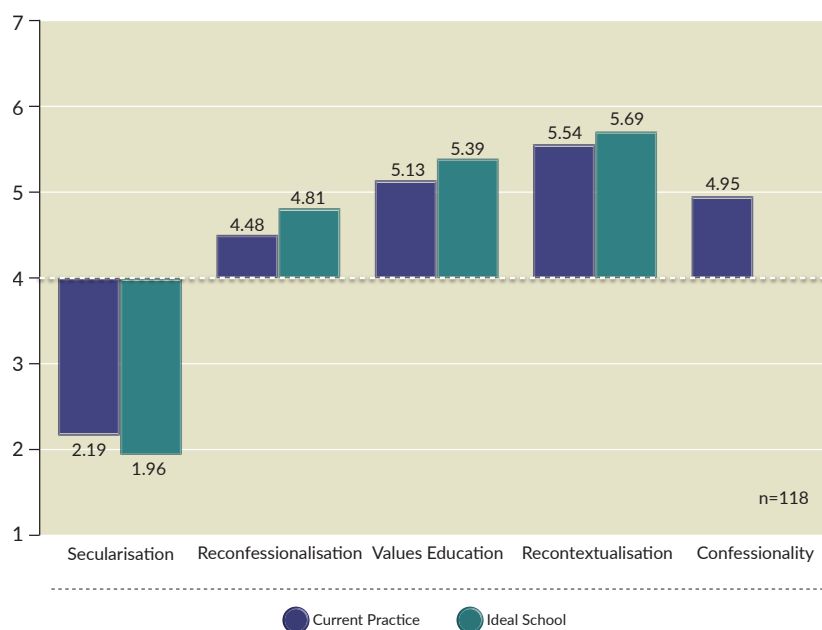


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in God and practice of Christianity still requires an empathic care and concern for people of other beliefs.

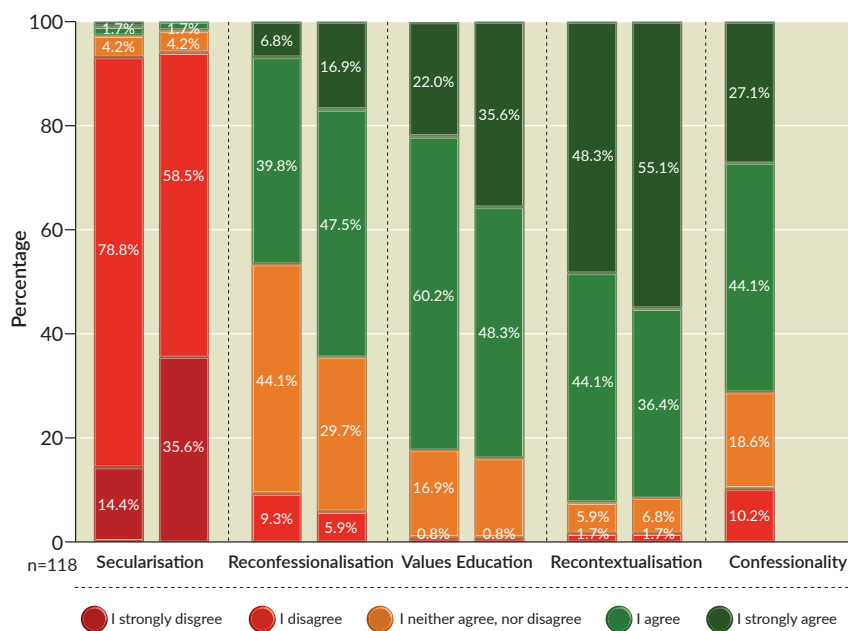
As we look at the differentiated results among all ECSI respondents in Victoria from 2011-2018, it is notable that the priests lead the way in terms of Post-Critical Belief, a promising insight for their support for Catholic schools and an introduction of a nuanced and hermeneutical approach to Religious Education. Their agreement with Relativism and External Critique is lower than that of the lay leaders, teachers and parents, and their acceptance of Literal Belief higher, perhaps providing a ballast to contemporary trains of thought.

**Figure 6: Results of the Melbourne Scale: the mean scores of 118 priests**



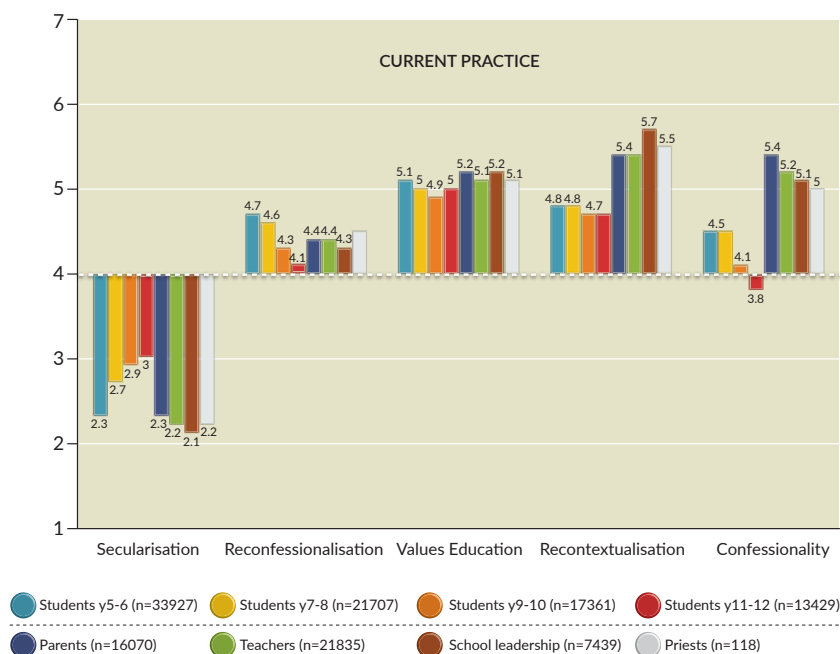
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**Figure 7: Percentage distribution of the 118 priests**



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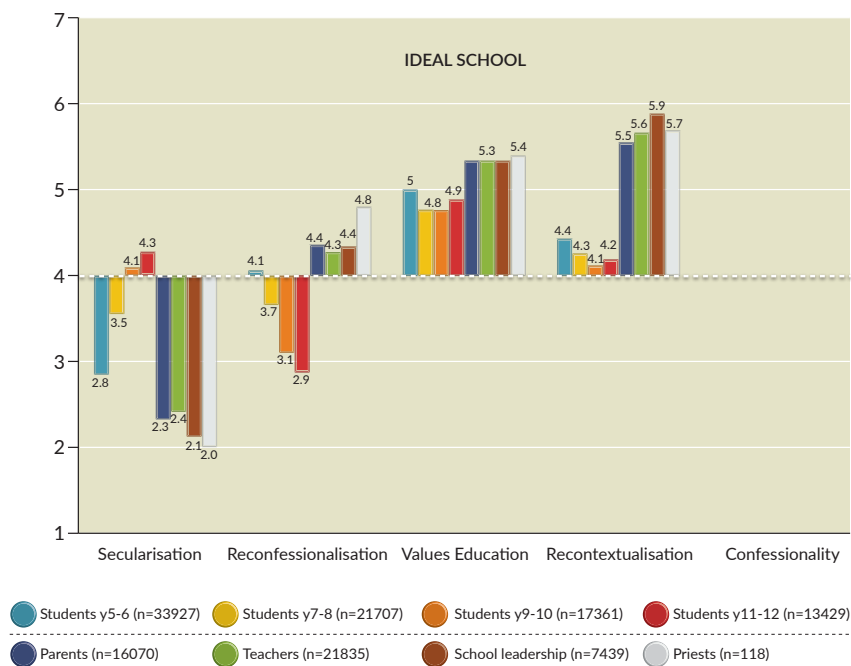
**Figure 8: Melbourne Scale, factual level – differentiated results comparing 118 priests to all other respondent groups**



Melbourne Scale, factual level –  
Differentiated results comparing 118 priests to all other respondent groups

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**Figure 9: Melbourne Scale, normative level – differentiated results comparing the 118 priests to all other respondent groups**



Melbourne Scale, normative level –  
Differentiated results comparing 118 priests to all other respondent groups





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The Melbourne Scale is a survey tool that identifies five Catholic school types that are concerned with ways a religious perspective is (or is not) expressed at school. Four of these types – Reconfessionalisation, Christian Values Education, Recontextualisation and Confessionality – indicate that some kind of religious framework is evident. The fifth type, Secularisation, refers to a diminishing religious perspective or one that the respondents can no longer detect. Considering their position in schools, it is good to remember that the surveyed priests considered the current practice of their unique school settings, so that there was not one school that was being assessed by all respondents.

Even as the priests referred to different schools on the current level, we found a shared perspective in that their schools actively Recontextualise the Catholic faith. This means the schools engage with the Catholic faith on multiple levels and through myriad intersections, reinterpreting the tradition in light of today's globalised cultural context. Most respondents agreed with the Recontextualising statements being applicable to their school, therefore Recontextualisation towered above the other options. Few respondents detected any evidence of Secularisation. Most of the priests also saw Values Education being used as a means to connect modern culture and faith, while close to half of the priests saw schools repackaging a classical approach to Catholic education, that is, Reconfessionalisation. While Reconfessionalisation (on both levels) was a bit high from the ECSI perspective, these levels make sense in regard to the role that a priest may take up within a certain Catholic school setting – their first priority is to the *cura animarum*, to care for the souls of their respective parishes. The group reported a significant score for Confessionality, higher than that detected by the students and lower than that detected by parents and staff.

As for their 'ideal school', it seems that the priests were generally content with how their current schools appeared in the Melbourne Scale typology, as their ideal schools would only boost present tendencies. So, their hope was to continue Recontextualising Catholic school identity, aided by an ongoing application of Values Education, and an even slightly increasing Reconfessionalising approach. The general rejection of Secularisation was further intensified.

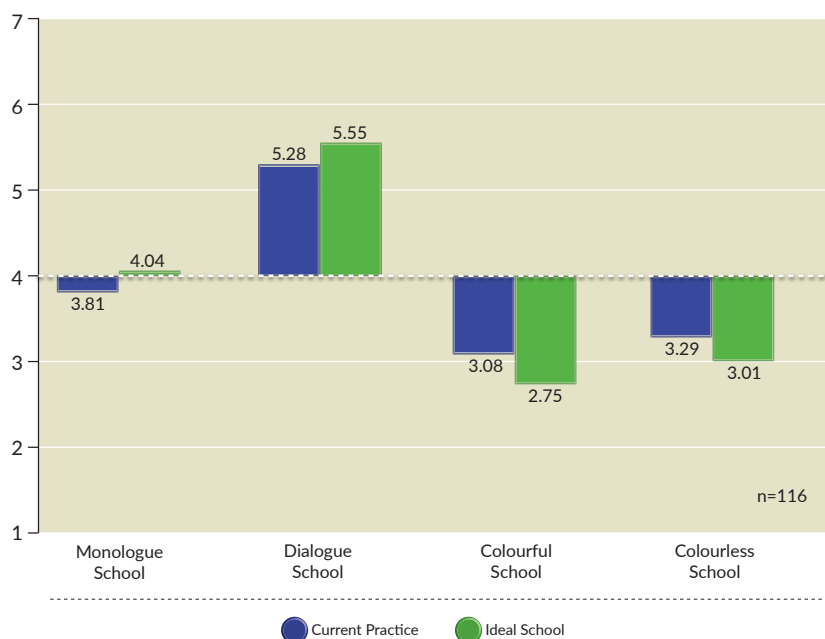
These descriptive mean scores and percentage breakdowns give us a small window into Victorian Catholic schools from the rectory



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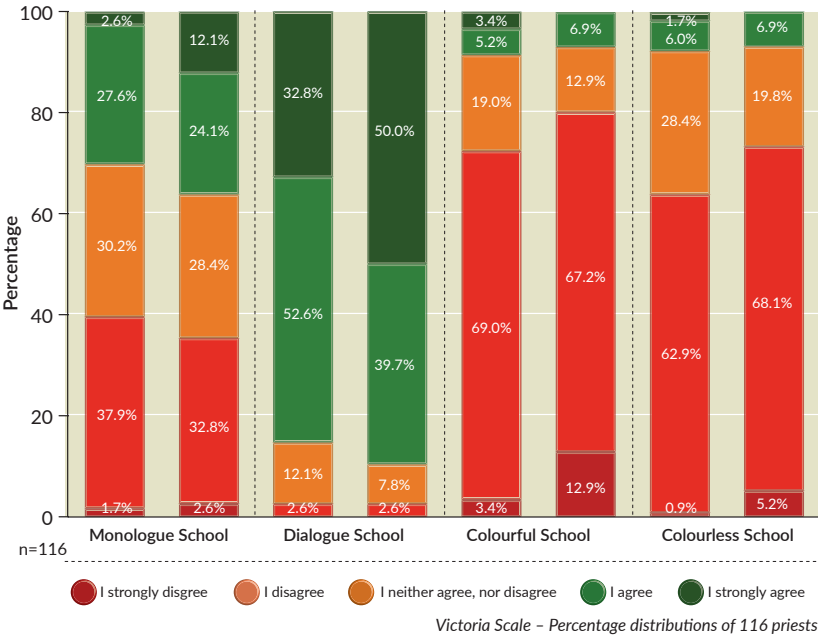
perspective, while the normative results reveal a group of priests ready to Recontextualise roles in their own school (and parish) and eager to support the school leadership and staff with their endeavours to do so.

**Figure 10: Results of the Victoria Scale**

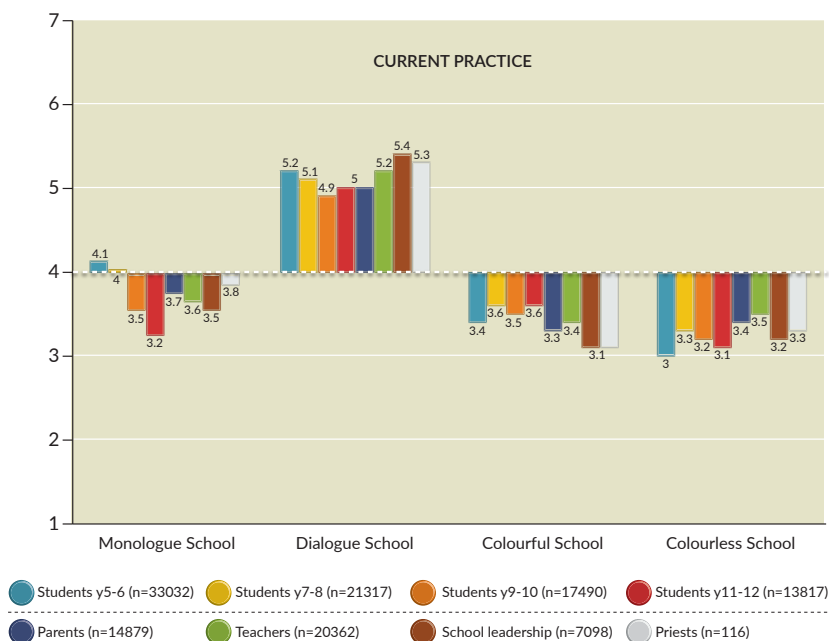


*Victoria Scale: the mean scores of 116 priests*

**Figure 11: the Victoria Scale – percentage distributions of 116 priests**



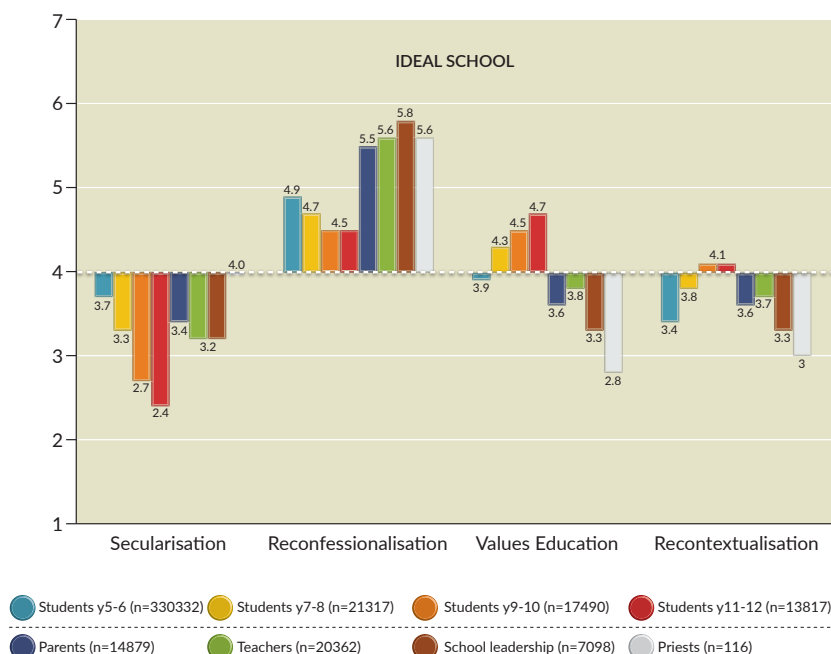
**Figure 12: Victoria Scale, factual level – differentiated results comparing 116 priests to all other respondent groups**



*Victoria Scale, factual level –  
Differentiated results comparing 118 priests to all other respondent groups*

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**Figure 13: Victoria Scale, normative level – differentiated results comparing 116 priests to all other respondent groups**



Victoria Scale, normative level –  
Differentiated results comparing 116 priests to all other respondent groups



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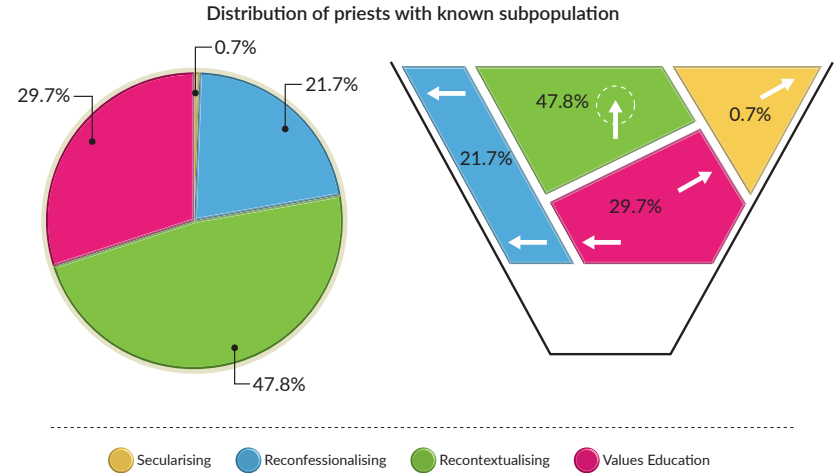
The ECSI research covers the intersection of school life and professional life by way of the Victoria Scale. This tool identifies how schools negotiate institutional Catholic identity in relation to the religious and philosophical diversity present within and surrounding their communities. Again, there are four basic typologies that the Scale outlines: the Monologue School, the Dialogue School, the Colourful School and the Colourless School. When looking at these collected priest results, as well as the other respondent groups in the comparative graphs, one must be mindful that the 'current school' refers to the different respondents' schools from all over the state of Victoria.

Overall, these priests saw their schools as looking mostly like the Dialogue School type. On the ideal level, the Dialogue School soars above the other three options, due to strong support and next to almost no resistance. However, when looking at the Monologue School, we saw differing voices begin to articulate themselves. There was an almost neat divide between agreement, hesitation and disagreement on both what the priests presently perceive, and their normative preference. Roughly one-third wanted to see their schools become schools 'by Catholics and for Catholics', another third hesitated at this and still another third put up some resistance to this notion. There was little support or longing for the secularising school types among the priests (the Colourful School and Colourless School). But it still should be noted that a very tiny minority seemed to wonder about or support these school models on the ideal level.

Even though most of the surveyed priests took up ECSI's normative preference, the Victoria Scale revealed that this was not a monolithic group, particularly in relation to the Monologue School. Furthermore, there were significant distinctions between the priests and the other adult groups. The priests put up strong resistance to the secular school models but were more open to maintaining the Monologue School type that promotes Catholic identity at the risk of solidarity with others. This perhaps indicated a preference for a Kerygmatic Dialogue School, which takes a more proclamatory approach to the Catholic faith in a school setting, in comparison to a Recontextualising Dialogue School, which emphasises a more robust and transformative interaction between Christianity and the diversity within the school doors.



**Figure 14: Subpopulations**



*Distribution of priests with known subpopulations – graphical presentation*



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In ECSI terms, the subpopulations were named after four of the five types of populations that compose the Melbourne Scale: the Secularising, Reconfessionalising, Recontextualising and Values Education subpopulations. Even though this indicates a strong relation to the Melbourne Scale, it is important to remember that the priests' answers to an array of statements from across the questionnaires directed these respondents into one of these subpopulations. This means that these priests expressed agreement or disagreement to a range of survey items in a manner predictable of a certain type of approach to school life. Subpopulations are essentially groups of like-minded respondents within the group as a whole. Out of the 148 participating priests, 138 belonged to one of the four identified subpopulations.

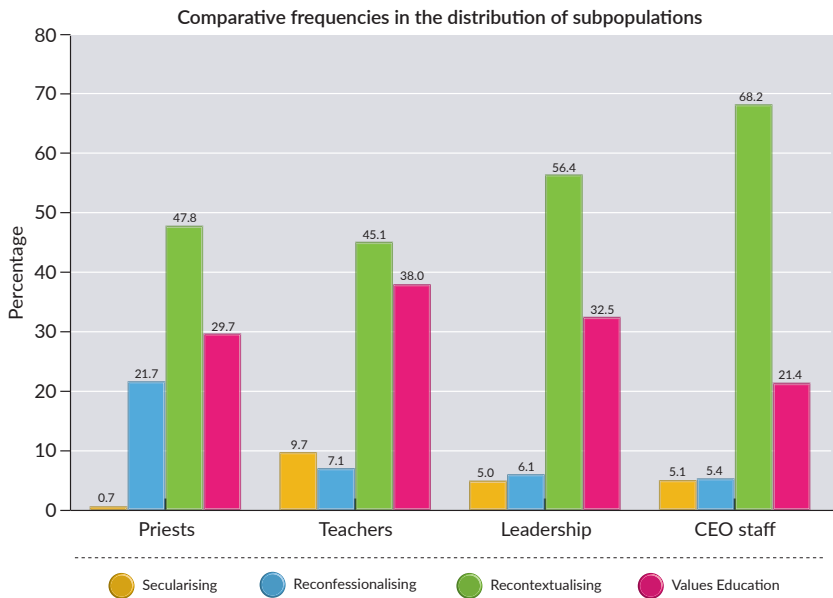
The largest subgroup among the Victorian priests desired a Recontextualising Catholic school identity. These men wished to stand in the tension between tradition and culture and hoped to see the school they were involved with go on to re-articulate its Catholic identity in a manner both theologically legitimate and culturally plausible. Not far off from this, close to 30% of the priests would rather a strategy of Christian Values Education took prominence at school, meaning, they preferred direct and immediate connections between culture and Christianity with the hope that these links would make the Catholic faith grow all the more appealing to students. There was a small, but not insignificant core among the group, roughly one-fifth, that wanted to reinvigorate the school with a clear Catholic identity, to catechise the students and school community, as it were. Surprisingly, there was even a Secularising subpopulation, although fortunately small, among these priests. To these men, Catholic school identity was already eroding, and they chose to watch it slip away. And in terms of their ideal school, they may even help it along with a push.

Another interesting finding from the subpopulation data is how the priest group took a much different shape, in comparison to the other adults in the Victorian schools, over this eight-year period. Positively, a nearly non-existent percentage of the priests desired Secularisation, while this number is a bit higher among teachers, school leadership and CEO employees. The percentage of priests in the Recontextualising and Christian Values Education subpopulations fell to within a range similar to the school and CEO staff in the same subgroup. The biggest





Figure 15: Comparative frequencies in the distribution of subpopulations (priests, teachers, school leaders and CEO staff





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distinction lies with Reconfessionalisation. Only small minorities among teachers and leadership, and especially members of the diocesan Catholic education offices, wished to Reconfessionalise their schools, whereas one-fifth of these surveyed priests took this approach. When moving between parish and school environments, it is understandable that the urge to Reconfessionalise would be more prominent among the priests. This can even be befitting their role in a school, which is pastoral and sacramental in nature, as long as such Reconfessionalisation does not hold back any efforts made by the school to Recontextualise their Catholic school identity.

### Exploratory Factor analysis

In addition to the 148 priests taking the ECSI survey research between 2011-2018, further meta-research was performed on their data. Next to other analyses, an in-depth exploratory Factor Analysis using no less than 83 survey items was undertaken, based on the items in the three Scales, with additional items from the Profile Questionnaire and the Doyle Questionnaire. This statistical method revealed seven 'latent patterns', called Factors. Seven Factors were brought to light, and they show underlying patterns and trends for this group of priests. Each of these trends are elaborated on below.





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Variable	FA1	Score	Type	Survey Items
MAN17_2	0.87	0.89	RecontN	I think that religion classes should aspire to help all students, Christians as well as other-believers, to discover meaning in their lives and to deepen their humanity in dialogue with the Catholic story.
MAN6_2	0.82	0.83	ReconfN	My 'ideal school' should have a clear preference for the Catholic faith and therefore would want to guarantee that all students become better Catholics.
VAN7_2	0.78	0.89	DiaN	My 'ideal school' would invite everyone to consider the meaning and value of the Catholic faith, while at the same time honouring each person's own identity.
MAN7_2	0.73	0.87	ReconfN	If their Catholic identity is disappearing, I think schools should try all the harder to restore the tradition and clarity of the Catholic faith.
VAN8_2	0.73	0.93	DiaN	My 'ideal school' would look creatively and with an open mind for ways to renew and 'translate' being Catholic in the midst of contemporary culture.
MAN19_2	0.72	0.87	RecontN	I think that Catholic schools should freely bear witness to their Catholic inspiration and should bring different viewpoints in dialogue with each other against the background of the Catholic story. As such, it renders service to the identity formation of all involved – other believers and Catholics themselves.
MAN16_2	0.68	0.90	RecontN	I think that a Catholic school should be searching for renewed ways to realise the Catholic message of faith, hope and love amid today's new cultures.
PA26	0.66	0.83	Post-Critical Belief	The sacred scriptures hold deeper truths that are only revealed through personal spiritual reflection.
MAN8_2	0.64	0.88	ReconfN	I wish to stress that religion classes are an important means for forming every student more deeply in the Catholic faith.
MAN11_2	0.62	0.90	ValEdN	I think that – first and foremost – a Catholic school should offer gospel values and norms that are agreeable to everyone, Catholics as well as others.
PA20	0.62	0.76	Relativism	The way in which a person is religious is simply a matter of where he/she comes from.
D25N	0.62	0.73	Uniform	In my ideal school, everybody wears the same style of clothes.
PA7	-0.57	0.92	Literal Belief	Only officially sanctioned religious leaders (for example, priests) can give answers to important religious questions.
PA6	-0.52	0.73	Literal Belief	Ultimately, there is only one correct answer to each religious question.
VAN3_2	-0.47	0.76	MonoN	A Catholic school should avoid entertaining non-Catholic views and practices because they could threaten its Catholic mission.
<b>Score</b>	<b>84.6%</b>			

*Exploratory Factor Analysis – Factor 1*





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Variable	FA2	Score	Type	Survey Items
PA14	0.88	0.16	External Critique	In the end, faith is nothing more than a safety net for human fears.
PA32	-0.83	0.10	Post-Critical Belief	The core message of my religion is still valuable to me, despite the many injustices carried out in its name.
PA16	0.82	0.03	External Critique	Faith is an expression of a weak personality.
PA8	0.77	0.15	Literal Belief	One should take the stories of the sacred scriptures literally, the way they are written.
PA24	-0.76	0.20	Relativism	One can find valuable answers to important questions about life just as well in either religious or secular conceptions of the world.
PA29	-0.74	0.12	Post-Critical Belief	Despite the fact that the sacred scriptures were written in a completely different time and place, they still contain a message that is relevant for us today.
MAN4_2	0.66	0.03	SecN	In my 'ideal school', God, Jesus or the Bible needn't be mentioned anymore.
PA3	-0.65	0.26	Literal Belief	Even though this goes against modern rationality, miraculous events in the sacred scriptures really did take place in the way they are told.
PA12	0.63	0.18	External Critique	The world in which the sacred scriptures were written is so far removed from us that those texts have little relevance for life today.
PA13	0.59	0.12	External Critique	A scientific understanding of human life and the world makes a religious understanding obsolete.
PA9	0.58	0.19	External Critique	Faith is more of a dream that turns out to be an illusion when one is confronted with the harsh reality of life.
Prayer	-0.57	0.17	Prayer	How often do you pray in your own time? (Prayer at school or at church does not count.)
VAN15_2	0.53	0.19	ColfulN	In my 'ideal school', a preference for specifically Catholic formation would be replaced by programs based in universal values (respect, diversity, dialogue, inclusion).
VAN19_2	0.43	0.19	CollessN	A school should safeguard the personal freedom of each individual to choose for him/herself what to believe and how to live, even though this trivialises the Catholic faith.
<b>Score</b>	<b>14.9%</b>			

*Exploratory Factor Analysis – Factor 2*





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The first and most prominent Factor links survey items that relate to the priests' support for both Recontextualisation and significant Reconfessionalisation. The average strength of the priests' agreement with this latent variable (Factor) was 84.6%, which is considerable. When we interpret a combination of these statements, we see the priests leaning forward into Recontextualisation while turning to look back to the reminder provided by Reconfessionalisation. The priests understood the Catholic faith as being both something to be advanced and expressed in novel ways, and being a process of constant renewal, while a part of that renewal is a return to the Tradition as a touchstone (Reconfessionalisation). With priests likely viewing themselves as both leaders into future faith expressions and stewards of the Catholic tradition, they straddle the line between Recontextualisation and Reconfessionalisation. In a school setting, this mostly resembles the subtype of the Kerygmatic Dialogue School. In looking at the survey statements included in Factor one, we see how they lean towards either Recontextualisation or Reconfessionalisation. See the following two sentences for example. 'My "ideal school" would invite everyone to consider the meaning and value of the Catholic faith, while at the same time honouring each person's own identity.' 'My "ideal school" should have a clear preference for the Catholic faith and therefore would want to guarantee that all students become better Catholics.'

The second Factor links survey items that relate to the priests' rejection of disbelief and atheism. The overall score of 14.9% means that the priests strongly disagree with the latent variable expressed by the combination of survey items grouped in Factor 2. (In order to take into account the negative loadings of some items, their meaning needs to be 'inverted' when interpreting the items as a whole.) The pattern that is being revealed here, is that the priests had a strong aversion to ignoring, silencing, or repressing religious awareness, experience, and action. The priests were disturbed when people said bad things about the Christian faith; when they called it foolish, or merely saw it as a safety net for human fears, or as an expression of a weak personality; and when they tried to remove it from the public realm. In response, these priests maintained that religious faith has so many relevant and valuable things to offer to people, despite the possible critiques that some may give. Especially through frequent personal prayer, they felt





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that people can discover the great importance of a religious life and build the religious identity that the priests cherish so much.

In the third Factor, the priests expressed their aversion to a gradual Secularisation of Catholic school identity. Inversely, this means that they pledged their support to the continuation and nurturing of the religious identity of schools. The overall score of 36.6% indicates that the priests feared that schools may become neutral institutions that refrain from influencing the lives and beliefs of the students, that schools may consider religion and values as private matters that are left to the individual, or that schools allow individuals to believe and act in any way they personally prefer as long as they don't hinder other people. In other words, the priests feared the advance of the Colourless School model. Secularisation occurs when religious beliefs are relativised, individualised, and privatised, and on top of that also suspected of having a questionable impact on the lives of people. The priests hoped that the opposite happens in Catholic schools in Victoria, and that these trends – to the extent they take place – are halted and reversed.

A fourth Factor revealed yet another thought pattern that exists among priests and influences their survey responses in a particular way, so that the statistical method of Factor Analysis can determine it. In this pattern, that has an overall mean score of 71.1%, the priests voiced their agreement to three items that express the Dialogue School, two items that express Relativism/Contingency Awareness, and two items that express Post-Critical Belief, whilst at the same time they voiced their disagreement of what they considered to be the opposite: Literal Belief, External Critique, Reconfessionalisation, and the Monologue School. What is being expressed here is the importance of a hermeneutical, open-minded, and dialogical approach to the Christian religion, as opposed to a Literal, binary, dogmatic, and Monological (mis)use of it. The priests had a keen awareness of Christian faith as an inclusive Post-Critical Belief that relates constructively to diversity and which enters enthusiastically into mutual dialogue with other views and practices. The Post-Critical Belief cherished by the priests maintains that such encounter benefits all and is especially useful in Recontextualising the Catholic faith tradition in the present-day era. The opposite view, rejected by the priests, is an exclusivist outlook that defends Catholicism against other beliefs and lifestyles, that avoids an adaptation of the





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Variable	FA3	Score	Type	Survey Items
VAN18_2	0.76	0.36	CollessN	A school should be a neutral institution that refrains from influencing the students' personal choices concerning religious beliefs and worldviews.
VAN16_2	0.73	0.15	CollessN	In daily life for people at my 'ideal school', religion and values would remain private matters left to the individual.
VAN11_2	0.70	0.28	ColfulN	In order to foster programs and activities that build mutual respect and understanding among students, a school should downplay approaches that are overly Catholic.
VAN17_2	0.69	0.44	CollessN	Each individual at school should be able to do as he/she pleases, as long as one conforms to the school's expectations on campus.
MAN5_2	0.66	0.31	SecN	My 'ideal school' should give up its preference for the Catholic faith so that many different worldviews can be treated with equal regard.
PA19	0.64	0.30	Relativism	Religion is only meant as a general guide for people and can be adapted according to the needs of time of place.
PA10	0.62	0.38	External Critique	Believing in God is wrong because too many people have been oppressed or killed in the name of God.
VAN4_2	0.49	0.53	MonoN	In my view, the aim of a school's religious education classes should always be to turn all students into better Catholic believers.
VAN20_2	0.47	0.38	CollessN	My 'ideal school' would guarantee the right of every individual to form one's own personal conscience free from external influence or pressure by any ideology or religious tradition.
MAN1_2	0.42	0.01	SecN	My ideal school wouldn't be Catholic anymore. Christianity should not be significant in daily school life.
D30N	0.39	0.02	D30N	I think it is okay that schools are Catholic in name only.
MAN14_2	0.38	0.67	ValedN	I think that schools should aim for a middle path that links faith and culture in such a way that all students come to a deeper appreciation of Catholic beliefs and practices.
PA30	0.38	0.57	Post-Critical Belief	Ultimately, religion involves making a commitment without having absolute certainty.
PA23	0.35	0.70	Relativism	One needs to be aware that his/her beliefs are only one possibility among so many others.
<b>Score</b>	<b>36.6%</b>			

*Exploratory Factor Analysis – Factor 3*





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Variable	FA4	Score	Type	Survey Items
PA4	-0.8	0.78	Literal Belief	The only way in which one is guaranteed access to God is by being faithful to a major religious tradition.
PA18	0.72	0.68	Relativism	Each statement about God reflects the time in which it was made.
VAN9_2	0.70	0.81	DiaN	My 'ideal school' would promote dialogue among different worldviews and religions in its search for what it means to be Catholic in today's multicultural society.
PA15	-0.66	0.88	External Critique	In order to fully understand what religion does to people, one has to see it from the outside.
VAN6_2	0.62	0.83	DiaN	My 'ideal school' would live out its Catholic identity precisely by welcoming and valuing the differences among people.
PA27	0.61	0.81	Post-Critical Belief	In order to enrich my religious faith, I should always take into account the historical context of the sacred scriptures.
VAN5_2	-0.59	0.55	MonoN	My 'ideal school' would defend the Catholic way of life against other sets of beliefs that in fact are of lesser value.
MAN3_2	-0.59	0.78	SecN	In my 'ideal school', most people would not have to be religious believers.
MAN10_2	-0.56	0.67	ReconfN	I think we must remain faithful to the teachings of the Catholic tradition while avoiding any 'adaptation' of the Catholic faith to today's secular culture.
PA17	-0.50	0.69	External Critique	People often use religious faith as a way to gain power, and that makes religion suspect.
VAN10_2	0.47	0.60	DiaN	My 'ideal school' would seek to reformulate and reshape its Catholic identity through continuous engagement with the world.
PA22	0.45	0.47	Relativism	The ways in which people describe 'God' are merely human creations that change easily with history.
PA28	0.43	0.71	Post-Critical Belief	The sacred scriptures are a guide, full of signs in the search for God, not a literal transcription of God's own words.
<b>Score</b>	<b>71.7%</b>			

*Exploratory Factor Analysis – Factor 4*







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Catholic faith to today's secular culture, that limits the access to God to Catholics only, that clings to the Catholic faith tradition for certainty and support, while it uses religion as a questionable way to gain power.

A fifth factor expressed yet another concern that drove the priests' survey responses. As a group, the priests moderately agreed (with a mean score: 61.3%) with a tangible and effective formation of all the students in Catholic ethics, morals, values, and norms, so that they can live meaningful and true lives according to the teachings and the example of Jesus. This education in ethics was considered as one of the important tasks of the Catholic Church, and the priests felt the call to be the shepherds that guide the faithful to a moral life of significance, and conscience, under the inspirational leadership of the bishops and the pope. Through such education in Catholic values and norms, that have the ability to address and unite a wide variety of learners, it was hoped that many students would come to appreciate Catholicism more deeply. Notwithstanding the priests' genuine concern for the wellbeing of God's people, a certain sense of superiority was connected to their moral convictions. Although some priests ran the risks of Christian Values Education as ECSI describes it, we detected hesitation and moderation among other priests. In any case, the desirability of such an approach, and their contribution to it, was a debate that plays an important role in the minds of Catholic priests.

The next pattern, Factor six, relates to the priests' understanding of the importance of personal belief in the Catholic faith and how Catholic schools can be instrumental in fostering a strong religious commitment. There was significant approval of this factor (78.6%), which means that the priests attached great value to this. The main thought pattern defining this factor was that Catholic schools can and should be environments that promote a devotional relationship to God – and this for both Catholic and non-Catholic students. They felt that Catholic schools existed to help people grow in the Catholic faith and move closer to God, that all those who are present there ought to be believers, although different levels of appropriation can exist. The priests were strong supporters of Catholic schools that make their mission come true: to promote the faith among as many people as possible.





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The Factor Analysis algorithm is able to distinguish yet another 'latent variable' that helps describe the views and attitude of priests. That is, Factor 7 described a pattern that was passionately declined (mean score: 28.0%), namely the complete Colourisation of Catholic Schools. Where Factor 3 pointed at the priests' concern that the Catholic schools in Victoria might Secularise by gradually turning into cold, neutral, Colourless environments, Factor 7 pointed at the priests' fear of a creeping process of relativisation and pluralisation, that turns Recontextualising Catholic Dialogue Schools into Actively Plural Dialogue Schools, and then into secularised Colourful Schools. In such a doomsday scenario, people prefer to ignore Catholic school identity, in favour of honouring the various personal truths within the school community; Colourful Schools welcome everybody without distinction, even though this undermines their Catholic identity; and ultimately, when it comes to living a good life, every person freely determines his/her own way. In Colourful schools the teachings of the Church are subject to change, and the word of God doesn't carry weight anymore since God doesn't really exist anyway. ECSI promotes an active dialogue between Catholic identity and the diversity that exists in society and in the school, and the priests actually support and help promote such dialogue. However, it is good to keep in mind that the majority of the priests are at the same time also suspicious of the growing diversity in Catholic schools because they fear that this could erode the Catholic identity in the longer term, as revealed in Factor 7.

### Summary and Conclusion

While the Enhancing Catholic School Identity survey research is first and foremost concerned with the perspectives that school community members – that is, students, staff members and parents – take on the 'current practice' of their school, and their hopes and dreams for an 'ideal Catholic school', the data has also given us an interesting vantage point through the participation of 148 priests over the course of several years. From their responses, we can learn about these priests' areas of care and concern for these school communities spread across the state of Victoria. Among many other positive attributes, the empirical research reveals that there is strong unity among the priests about the important Recontextualising work they currently testify is taking place





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Variable	FA5	Score	Type	Survey Items
PA5	0.66	0.73	Literal Belief	Religion is the one thing that gives meaning to life in every way.
MAN13_2	0.61	0.50	ValedN	With regard to the diversity that exists at schools, I think that schools should aim to link everyone's common experiences and values with the example of Jesus.
PA2	0.59	0.40	Literal Belief	The principles of my religion are unchangeable since religion is given to us by God.
D28N	0.58	0.86	Church_ leadership	In my ideal school, people listen to the leadership of the Catholic Church: the bishops and the Pope.
MAN12_2	0.51	0.85	ValedN	I think that religion classes should try to link the students' sense of values to the Catholic faith, hoping that they would appreciate Catholicism more deeply.
PA1	0.49	0.45	Literal Belief	The only way to live a meaningful life is to be a person of religious faith.
MAN15_2	0.49	0.85	ValedN	The mission of Catholic schools is to present values and norms that are acceptable to a diverse student population, thereby bringing them closer to the Catholic faith.
MAN18_2	-0.48	0.33	RecontN	I think that Catholic schools should positively value and even encourage a multiplicity of worldviews and religions because it forms and deepens the personal identity of all involved, Catholics as well as other-believers.
VAN2_2	0.46	0.53	MonoN	Rather than adapting Catholicism to contemporary culture, my 'ideal school' would prefer that contemporary culture is aligned to Catholicism.
<b>Score</b>	<b>61.3%</b>			

*Exploratory Factor Analysis – Factor 5*





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Variable	FA6	Score	Type	Survey Items
D23N	0.84	0.95	D23N	My ideal school is a good place to grow closer to God.
MAN20_2	0.76	0.80	RecontN	The mission of Catholic schools is to foster a dialogue between the Catholic faith and the diversity that exists at school, resulting in a renewal of the faith and the personal growth of all involved, Catholics as well as other-believers.
D24N	0.72	0.94	D24N	My ideal school helps the students to grow in the Catholic faith.
VAN1_2	0.60	0.47	MonoN	In a Catholic school, all students and teachers should be Catholic in faith and practice.
D22N	0.56	0.88	D22N	In my ideal school, people believe and think in many different ways.
D21N	0.50	0.93	D21N	In my ideal school, people believe in God.
VAN13_2	0.45	0.33	ColfulN	It would be good if a school were to move away from a strong focus on Catholic identity, so that each student can develop him/herself through engaging with many different points of view.
Dsupp	-0.45	0.98	SupportCathID	Do you support the Catholic identity of schools?
<b>Score</b>	<b>78.6%</b>			

*Exploratory Factor Analysis – Factor 6*





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Variable	FA7	Score	Type	Survey Items
D23N	0.77	0.03	D29N	I prefer to ignore Catholic school identity.
VAN12_2	0.67	0.25	ColfulN	In my 'ideal school', the truth of the Catholic faith tradition would be left behind in favour of honouring the various personal truths within the school community.
MAN9_2	0.57	0.26	RecontN	My 'ideal school' should hold fast to its Catholic identity now that it is threatened by the increasing diversity in society.
PA25	0.56	0.38	Relativism	At best, religions offer guidance for life, but each person ultimately has to determine his or her own way.
MAN2_2	0.53	0.06	SecN	I find it no problem that Christianity is slowly disappearing from school life, because my 'ideal school' wouldn't be Catholic anyway.
PA11	0.50	0.30	External Critique	God is only a name for that which one cannot explain.
PA21	0.49	0.42	Relativism	So-called 'official' teachings about God and faith are actually susceptible to change since, after all, they come from specific people in specific circumstances.
PA31	0.43	0.65	Post-Critical Belief	Expressing creativity in prayer and ritual offers me a richer encounter and closer relationship with God.
VAN14_2	0.42	0.16	ColfulN	A school should make every effort to welcome and be inclusive towards people who are different, even though this undermines the school's Catholic identity.
<b>Score</b>	<b>28.0%</b>			

*Exploratory Factor Analysis – Factor 7*





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in Catholic schools, and for the continued pursuit and encouragement of these schools to take the shape of the Recontextualising Dialogue School type within varied local contexts.

Of course, the members of the group do not all feel the same. They have a range of opinions and points of view, and there is even a small number of priests who would advocate for a classical Catholic school Confessionality by way of Reconfessionalisation. What might we posit accounts for these differences? Certainly, the men have undergone different life experiences: from place of birth, childhood and family experiences, the vagaries of young adulthood, complex journeys to the vocation of the priesthood, and variations in schooling and theological training. The priests will likely have had different experiences in episcopal oversight, depending on the diocese or archdiocese. There are also significant differences that come from being a diocesan priest as opposed to an order priest (e.g., Jesuit, Franciscan, Benedictine, Dominican, Marist, and so on). Different school contexts might inspire different preferences according to the research, such as primary and secondary education, country school or city school, schools with varying financial positions and affluence, co-educational schools or single-sex education, and so on.

There was more unity than diversity between this group of priests spread over Victoria, however. And the general pattern we discovered is quite interesting. This group of priests had received excellent theological and spiritual training. This resulted in the highest Post-Critical Belief score among the adult respondent groups in Catholic schools in Victoria. The priests in the Victorian dioceses could clearly distinguish Literal from Symbolic Belief, and they opted for the latter. At the same time, they showed a positive openness for cultural and religious diversity that exists in broader society as well as in schools. Nonetheless, they were more careful in embracing diversity than other adults in Victoria. Even though Literal Belief, in general, was rejected by the priests, their score was still higher compared to other adult groups. This can be interpreted as them having an awareness of the seriousness and the objectivity of the Catholic faith, a belief that Catholic belief is not a mere interpretation of reality, but that the symbols of the Catholic faith refer to a living reality (God or Christ) which is at the same time beyond our grasp. No more than a few priests rejected this ECSI perspective of faith, some from a





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Literal Belief stance, others from more unbelieving perspectives. In this sense, the priests are the keepers and protectors of the Catholic faith tradition in their parish and school communities. As Catholic priests they expressed this concern, and they emphasised the uniqueness, the power, and the non-exchangeability of the faith mediated through the Catholic Church as inspiration for contemporary Catholic education.

With regard to the identity of Catholic schools as educational institutions, the priests preferred a Recontextualising approach. In this sense, as well as in rejecting the threat of secularisation, they were partnering with the school leadership and the teachers. But also in this regard, the priests showed a particular concern and explicit emphasis. In their view, Recontextualisation went hand in hand with Reconfessionalisation, which meant renewing the faith tradition in order to consolidate its future. Moreover, the priests strongly believed that Christian Values Education is an excellent method to Reconfessionalise. A majority of the priests were hardly aware of the risks of Values Education and the potential secularising effect it can have on the students. Nevertheless, the general preference was very much in the centre of the normative perspective of ECSI: that 71.1% of the priests did support Recontextualisation. They were aware that Recontextualisation could only occur within a mature, Post-Critical Belief stance. That is why they underline the importance of maintaining a devotional relationship with God among Catholic school members.

A similar pattern could be observed in the Victoria Scale results. The priests in Victoria supported the Catholic Dialogue School, just like the school leadership and the teaching staff. However, here the gap between the teachers and the school leadership was wider, particularly regarding the support for the Monologue School model, a school by Catholics and for Catholics that wishes to (re)initiate all school members in the Catholic faith tradition. While most teachers and leaders regarded this model with skepticism, among the priests we detected various positions regarding the Monologue School: 35.2% were pleased to support it, 28.4% were in hesitation, and 35.4% rejected this model outright. Nonetheless, all of these subgroups held on to their support for the Catholic Dialogue School. This revealed that different understandings about the Catholic Dialogue School live among the priests.





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For the first group, those who supported the Monologue School (35.2%), the Catholic Dialogue School was first and foremost a place to proclaim the Catholic message in a pure and unapologising way to a large number of people. We call this the Kerygmatic Catholic Dialogue School. For the third group of priests, those who clearly rejected the Monologue School (35.4%), the Catholic Dialogue School was a context to renew the Catholic faith tradition through open dialogue with all those who were culturally and religiously different. We call this the Recontextualising Catholic Dialogue School. It is here that the ongoing debate among the priests was situated: what is the exact place, role and contribution of the Catholic faith in the dialogue with other believers and other-than-believers in Catholic schools? The second group of priests (28.4%) took a stance in between both positions.

As one of the initiators of the ECSI research, it should give Mgr Tom Doyle great pleasure to find out that his fellow priests and the Catholic schools connected to their parishes and faith communities are responding to this new and challenging climate – one that is diversifying, secularising and detraditionalising – with such outspoken support for the Catholic Dialogue School model. The ongoing reflection and conversation on the relation between the Kerygmatic and the Recontextualising types of Dialogue School is very fruitful and will form the basis for the enduring flourishing of Catholic education in Victoria – and by extension in Australia and the world – today and into the future. Mgr Doyle made this dialogue possible and kept insisting on it throughout the years of his leadership, as a gift to Catholic families and to their non-Catholic neighbours. It is right to celebrate this as a part of his legacy.







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