2. THE DISTINCTIVE CHARACTER OF A CATHOLIC SCHOOL: EXPECTATIONS OF TEACHERS

Upholding the distinctive character of the Catholic school

What is expected of a teacher in this regard?

“Thy kingdom come”
Catholic schools share in the evangelising mission of the Church, which is to promote openness to the kingdom of God. A school community tries to become an expression of the presence of the kingdom of God.

Christ-centred schools
We are not simply guided by the teaching of Jesus, as one would follow the teachings of a great sage. We are not tied merely to the idea of Christ, but to Christ himself. We say our schools are “Christ-centred”: the Risen Christ, living and present amongst us by his Spirit, is the source, the centre, the inspiration of the school.

Gospel values
In a Catholic school we try to give people a sense of what Jesus meant when he spoke about the kingdom of God. We hold before our learners a vision of the world as God wants it to be, and we try to live and act in accordance with that vision. We seek to impart and exemplify values, which we often call “Gospel values”, such as sharing, simplicity, “littleness”, the common good, magnanimity and service.

What we try to do in Religious Education
Especially in Religious Education, we invite students to explore the insights which the accumulated religious wisdom of the ages offers for understanding the reasons for our existence. We suggest a way to live life in friendship with God and in harmony with others. We point students towards the possibilities envisioned by the kingdom of God, and we invite them to let the Good News profoundly affect their lives.
Religious Education promotes free, informed and full response to God’s call in everyday life. We seek to give young people the knowledge, understanding and skills to think spiritually, ethically and theologically, and encourage them to be aware of the demands of religious commitment in everyday life.

Celebration

Our joy and delight at the presence of our risen Saviour and his life-giving Spirit amongst us find expression in liturgical celebrations which are high points in the life of a Catholic school. Daily prayer is built into the rhythm of school life.

A freely-chosen vocation

Given that teachers freely choose to join a Catholic school knowing what the school strives to be and how it sees its mission, it is surely reasonable to expect teachers to honour and support what the school tries to undertake. While the right to freedom of religion and the conscience of each individual are respected, it would not be fair to join a Catholic school simply for selected benefits seen in isolation from the school’s total mission.

A partner in the school’s mission

You don’t have to be a Catholic to be a partner in the school’s mission! It is hoped that all teachers will feel welcome and inspired to contribute their gifts and insights to what the school is trying to do. It is hoped that attendance at school Masses will not just be out of duty but that all teachers will enter into the community spirit of these occasions and will participate eagerly in the spiritual life of the school.

Even when you tacitly uphold the values and vision of the school, just by being the person you are, you can be a partner and a co-worker in the school’s mission. It is what the teacher is that teaches.

Integrity in Ministry

“Integrity in Ministry” is a document which sets standards of behaviour for employees in Catholic schools. It arose as part of the South African Catholic bishops’ response to the very serious situation of sexual abuse of children by clergy and religious. The standards of behaviour are based on an understanding of education as ministry and service, and on the right of children to feel safe and unthreatened at school.
The eight standards of “Integrity in Ministry” are:

1. Commitment to vocation in education ministry

We often talk in Catholic schools about seeing our work as more than just a job, but as a vocation, a calling.

Living out this commitment requires that we have to be open to personal growth. We may be expected to participate in formation programmes that the school may organise which help us to explore our vocation. We may also be required to engage in a developmental appraisal process.

2. Commitment to education as a ministry in the Church

A Catholic school is part of the Church, and we see our work in Catholic schools as very much part of the educational and evangelising ministry of the Church.

3. Commitment to Service

Jesus gave us an example of service when he washed his disciples’ feet. Following his example, all who work in Catholic schools are called to serve others, especially the learners.

We live out our commitment to service by trying to work in creative co-operation and harmonious relationships with others.

We serve our learners by preparing and delivering interesting and challenging lessons. We timeously return their work that we have taken in to mark. We are on time for lessons and we do not leave classes unattended.

When working with our colleagues, we consult widely and seek consensus before taking important decisions. We exercise great caution in the use of our position or our institutional power, never using these for our own advantage. We create an environment where it is safe for others to offer constructive criticism.

4. Commitment to Justice

The Catholic Church is committed to social justice (see pamphlet 11 on Catholic Social Teaching) and Catholic schools try to make their contribution towards its realisation. This includes trying to put the demands of justice into practice in the daily life of the school. In all our dealings with others – colleagues, learners, parents - we try to act fairly. We do not discriminate against anybody. We do not lie to our learners. We are mindful that justice is best promoted by example.
5. Respect for the Dignity of all Persons
We recognise that each person is created in the image and likeness of God, and thus we respect the inherent dignity of each person. We are mindful of individual differences and cultural and ethnic diversity. We are especially sensitive to people who may feel alienated from the school community. We use language that is respectful of all.

6. Stewardship
We must be conscious that we are stewards, not owners, of school property. When we handle school money, we must do so responsibly. We must keep our classrooms clean and tidy, and actively encourage learners to keep the school neat and clean and to look after school property. We must be sensitive to the demands made on support staff.

If vandalism is a problem in the school, then clearly we have not successfully communicated the idea of stewardship to our students.

7. Competence in Pastoral Care
Pastoral care is about creating a network of care which pervades every facet of school life. Pastoral care involves everybody. It requires being aware of, and responding to, the situation of children who may belong to communities which suffer social brokenness.

It embraces an attitude that says “we are a school where everybody is helped to grow.” We should direct the energies of the school towards unlocking people’s giftedness and becoming all that they can be.

Acting with competence in pastoral care means recognising our professional limitations in areas requiring expertise which we do not have, and being ready to refer people to competent professionals.

8. Self-care
Teaching is demanding and stressful. We need to look after ourselves – our bodies, minds and spirits!

We should seek spiritual nourishment by following a regular discipline of reflective reading and prayer, or other spiritual practices.

We should eat well and correctly, get regular health check-ups, get regular physical exercise, get enough rest and sleep and have friendships and interests outside of the school.

These are not luxuries, but are necessary for our physical and emotional well-being.
Questions to ask yourself

1. Do I identify with my school’s mission and purpose?
2. What insights and gifts can I contribute to the school’s mission of advancing receptivity to the kingdom of God?
3. How do I understand the vocational aspect of my job?
4. Do I make use of the opportunities in my school for staff to reflect together on what we are doing, and for spiritual growth?
5. Do I enter into the spirit of the school’s prayer life and liturgical celebrations?
6. Do I educate learners towards a sense of social responsibility and solidarity with the poor, disadvantaged and marginalised?
7. Am I committed to service?
8. Do I exercise my pastoral responsibilities towards my homeroom or register class?
9. Do I affirm and respect the differing religious identities, backgrounds and traditions of learners?
10. Does the way I interact with my learners communicate to them: “I believe in you”?
11. Do I submit my learners to humiliating punishments?
12. Do I try to act justly towards everyone in the school community?
13. Do I have a warm relationship with the school’s support and administrative staff and do I include them as part of the school community?
14. How do I contribute to building the community which is our school?
15. What am I doing to look after my spiritual health and emotional well-being?
16. “What you see is what you get.” Does this describe me? Do other people see me as a complicated person full of “issues” or as a simple, straightforward person?
17. Am I calm and serene? Or am I usually drained, on edge and frenetically busy?
18. What am I doing to look after my physical health? Do I have adequate leisure time? Do I get regular exercise? Do I eat properly? Do I get enough sleep?
19. Do I know how to balance work and relaxation? Do I enjoy simple pleasures, like going for a walk, or spending time with family and friends?
20. Do I live with an awareness of and a connection to nature – the sunlight, the rain, the stars, the birds, the breeze, the changing seasons? Or does the beauty of God’s creation escape me?
Some thoughts to consider

Christ’s prophetic words in the synagogue at Nazareth, which he read from the scroll of Isaiah, are the same words that Catholic schools are so bold to claim as their own today:

“The spirit of the Lord has been given to me, for he has anointed me. He has sent me to bring the good news to the poor, to proclaim liberty to captives and to the blind new sight, to set the downtrodden free, to proclaim the Lord’s year of favour.”

Luke 4:18-19

To teach children well, first you must love them, and love them all equally.

St Marcellin Champagnat, Founder of the Marist Brothers

We are there with young people, not overbearing or authoritarian, but simply and humanly ourselves, caring, encouraging, stimulating, open and receptive to all alike, and yet showing a preference for those to whom preference is never shown.

From a document for teachers in Marist Brothers schools

The identity and success of Catholic education is linked inseparably to the witness of life given by teaching staff. Such is the role expectation of the school teacher in Catholic schools.

Apostolic Exhortation Ecclesia In Oceania, Pope John Paul II, 22 November 2001

During childhood and adolescence a student needs to experience personal relations with outstanding educators, and what is taught has greater influence on the student’s formation when placed in a context of personal involvement, genuine reciprocity, coherence of attitudes, life-styles and day-to-day behaviour.

The Catholic School on the Threshold of the Third Millennium, Sacred Congregation for Catholic Education, Rome, 1997, §18

Catholic schools share a common purpose with the Catholic Church, in bringing about the biblical concept of the “reign of God.” This implies working towards a transformation of person and society, characterised by relationships of justice, love, liberty and peace. Catholic schools aim to bring about this transformation by providing the embodiment of a relevant and coherent view about the meaning of human persons and of human life; by attempting to facilitate a holistic and integrated education acknowledging this; and by promoting religious and moral formation congruent with Kingdom values and the Catholic tradition.

McLaughlin 1999

The Catholic school sets out to be a school for the human person and of human persons. “The person of each individual human being, in his or her material and spiritual needs, is at the heart of Christ’s teaching: this is why the promotion of the human person is the goal of the Catholic school”. This affirmation, stressing man’s vital relationship with Christ, reminds us that it is in His person that the fullness of the truth concerning man is to be found. For this reason the Catholic school, in committing itself to the development of the whole person, does so in obedience to the solicitude of the Church, in the awareness that all human values find their fulfilment and unity in Christ.

The Catholic School on the Threshold of the Third Millennium, Sacred Congregation for Catholic Education, Rome, 1997, §9