

## Article

# A Narrative Approach to Discerning Some Key Issues for Catholic Education in a More Synodal Church

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**Abstract:** Synodality is described as a mentality that esteems three actions: encountering, listening, and discerning. This mentality is applied to a discourse on Catholic education premised on three illustrative narratives. Narratives are used as a suitable instrument to gain deep insights into the lived experience of teachers working in Catholic schools. Several concurrent themes are identified as emerging issues for a more synodal church. These include challenges in providing enough teachers to animate the religious identity of schools. This is linked to profound changes in patterns of religious affiliation that have been evident for several decades. Considering this, acknowledgement needs to be made that the lived experience of teachers entering Catholic education today is distinctive and different from previous generations. In light of this, a number of points of discernment are made. These include the need for ongoing, nuanced teacher recruitment and formation, as well as a reconceptualization of religious education (RE) to take into account changing cultural dynamics and providing more practical support for teachers, especially RE teachers.

**Keywords:** synodality; encounter; listen; discern; catholic education; teachers



**Citation:** Rymarz, Richard. 2023. A Narrative Approach to Discerning Some Key Issues for Catholic Education in a More Synodal Church. *Religions* 14: 1121. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14091121>

Academic Editors: Eamonn Conway and Renée Köhler-Ryan

Received: 7 August 2023

Revised: 24 August 2023

Accepted: 28 August 2023

Published: 30 August 2023



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## 1. A Reflection on Synodality

This is a portentous time in the Catholic Church as the notion of how to become more synodal, one of the central concerns of the papacy of Pope Francis, is gradually realized (ITC 2018). The aim of this paper is not to substantially contribute to this discourse on synodality and what it means for all aspects of Catholic education. Rather, it is a reflection on how best to accommodate the notion of synodality, recognizing that it has not been fully elaborated on, and that the first session of the Synod on Synodality will open later this year. At the same time, although it is necessary to give an indication what sense of the term synodality is being used. This paper follows the expression of synodality given by Pope Francis at St Peter's in Rome on 10 October 2021 in his homily at Mass to mark the opening of the Synodal Path. He noted the following:

Celebrating a Synod means walking on the same road, walking together. Let us look at Jesus. First, he *encounters* the rich man on the road; he then *listens* to his questions, and finally he helps him *discern* what he must do to inherit eternal life. *Encounter, listen, and discern* (Pope 2021).

The understanding of a synodal process in this paper is based on optimizing three actions: encountering, listening, and discerning. A synodal approach also places great emphasis on a genuine encounter with the reality facing those working in Australian Catholic schools. Implicit here is what Archbishop Costelloe of Perth described as non-defensive listening, which makes a genuine attempt to understand the complexities of Catholic education today through the prism of those most intimately involved in it. On the basis of this understanding, the next step is to respond on the basis of an authentic discernment. This can be seen as a twofold process: firstly, to gather information in an open and non-prejudicial way and then to plan a course of action which privileges the lived experience of those involved. Encountering, listening, and discerning all value the

actual over the ideal, and this is also a characteristic of Pope Francis's thinking, perhaps best encapsulated in the dictum that "realities are more important than ideas" (EG 2013, p. 231). He expounds on this notion with the following explanation:

Ideas—conceptual elaborations—are at the service of communication, understanding, and praxis. Ideas disconnected from realities give rise to ineffectual forms of idealism and nominalism, capable at most of classifying and defining, but certainly not calling to action. What calls us to action are realities illuminated by reason. Formal nominalism has to give way to harmonious objectivity (Lamb 2023).

Synodality, as embodied by encounter, listening, and discernment, is utilized in this paper as a process to better capture the reality or lived experience of some of those working in Catholic education. The primary structure of the paper reflects the use of narratives. Narratives offer a way to curate complex information in a way that resonates with a synodal mentality. Narratives also allow for a reflective discourse to develop as information can be appropriated at various levels. Hauerwas (1997) demonstrated this in his theological approach. From a sociological perspective, Higgins (2006) described a micronarrative as a useful way of capturing a large amount of indicative information that can act as a type of summative principle, and that can then be expanded on at length. Use of a narrative can then lead to a sounder discernment of some of the issues and challenges facing Australian Catholic schools in general and religious education in these schools in particular. In this paper, three narratives are offered as a platform for further reflection, discussion, and then discernment. There is also a cumulative element here as each narrative leads to the next.

## 2. Narrative One: We Just Cannot Get Enough RE Teachers

Marcus has been working in Catholic schools for over a decade. He has recently taken on a leadership position in a large secondary school on the growing fringe of a substantial metropolitan center. The school is expanding rapidly and, in a few years, will have a fully integrated second campus, doubling the enrolment. As the population of the area will continue to increase in coming years, there is no concern, whatsoever, about the school maintaining enrolments. A major part of Marcus's responsibilities is to coordinate curriculum offerings and ensure there is adequate staffing to meet these needs. His position gives him an informed perspective on contemporary Catholic education.

In a recent meeting, Marcus offered a strong response to my questions about his new job.<sup>1</sup> He noted that there is a general difficulty in recruiting teachers, especially in certain subject areas. Aligned with this is a need to increase teacher retention rate. He noted that "it's not about us, it's a more general thing, lots of teachers leave the profession after a few years. They decide it's not for them".

One particular issue strikes him as urgent, and this too relates to teachers. He commented emphatically, "we just can't get enough RE teachers, nowhere near enough!" As is common practice in Australian Catholic schools, RE is "on every line". This means that it is offered at all year levels throughout the year as part of the school's curriculum. When pressed on this shortage, Marcus offered the following commentary: "Being an RE teacher begins with having a knowledge base, and that is becoming increasingly rare". The key issue, though, is more profound. Marcus explained, "they're just not connected, good authentic witnessing teachers with a sense of an active, committed faith, and most of them have never had it!" He then, tellingly, referred to the "bottom line". Every cycle (there are two cycles per week), we have 20 classes with no RE teacher. That's 40 classes a week. He concluded somewhat despairingly, "where do we get these RE teachers"?

There are many aspects to Marcus' story, and some of these are elaborated on. The enrollment pattern implicit in the narrative is worth drawing attention to. In recent years, growth in Australian Catholic school enrolment has stabilized with national increases slightly below population growth. In some parts of the country, enrolments are falling, but there are many places such as in the large coastal metropolises where pockets of growth are strong and sustainable.<sup>2</sup>

Marcus's narrative points to a very significant issue that will be a central part of the future discourse surrounding Catholic education. This is not primarily about staffing, although finding sufficient numbers of teachers remains a national concern (Madigan and Kim 2021; Rajendran et al. 2020; Stacey et al. 2020). The particular issue facing Catholic schools is how to find enough teachers who can provide strong witness and animate the mission and identity of the Catholic school. This problem is seen most acutely in Marcus's reflection that 40 RE classes every week in his school have no teacher. A wide range of literature offers a rich conceptualization of what is a seminal challenge for a more synodal church (Smith et al. 2014; Dillon 2018; Dobbelaere 2002). This challenge can be encapsulated in one question: How do Catholic schools find a sufficient number of teachers (and others) who can animate the mission and identity of schools? (Morey and Piderit 2006). The key term here is "sufficient number", sometimes referred to as critical mass (Marwell et al. 1991). A derivative question, related directly to Marcus's narrative is how Catholic schools find adequate numbers of authentic RE teachers?

The first step in addressing these questions is to recognize that the decline in strong levels of religious affiliation has been a phenomenon evident for several decades. There is a large literature conceptualizing this gradual decline (Crockett and Voas 2006; Creasy Dean 2010; Hudson 2016; Inglehart 2018; Stoltz 2020). The next narrative also offers an *entrée* to better understanding this decline and suggests a richer contextualization of the questions raised by Marcus.

### 3. Narrative Two: The Shape of Things to Come

In the early aughts, I was invited to undertake a study of university Catholic student groups. The first step was to find out the "lay of the land", identifying the location and size of groups with a view to more intensive investigation later. I was surprised to find that university Catholic student groups had all but disappeared from the Australian tertiary landscape. The project was never completed. The only functioning Catholic university groups that I was able to find were ones dedicated to Asian Catholics, often called Marian Societies. As such, the results were never published and are being reported here for the first time.

The significance of this narrative lays, primarily, in what it anticipates about the future of Australian Catholicism. Close to 25 years ago, undergraduate Catholics enrolled in major universities were no longer joining associations that were established to nurture and support them in their transition to adulthood. There are several elements to this narrative which are elaborated on here.

The challenges that are evident in the staffing of Catholic schools today are the consequences of profound and unanticipated changes in cultural patterns from previous decades. This story of doomed research on university Catholic groups is an illustration of this. The significance of this decline was not readily evident even then. I can recall taking these findings to various church leaders and being surprised by their reaction. They did not see the absence of these clubs as especially concerning. Rather, they explained that this development was a consequence of a general cultural change. An expression that was, perhaps, coined in those days was that "young people today have a different way of connecting". Undoubtedly, this was a positive, optimistic analysis of the situation. I was less sanguine about the findings, and, even now, this has caused me to reflect on the significance of university Catholic clubs and other similar socializing institutions as predictive examples of the eventual decline in religious affiliation.

The fruits of my reflection were manifold. On a personal level, it made me realize how important university Catholic societies were for my formation and transition into adult Catholicism. Such was my involvement in the Monash University Newman Society, circa 1980–1985, that I was elected a life member of the group! Even then, membership of a Catholic university student group was a counter cultural action. Only a relative few joined such associations, although I do not think anyone anticipated that these groups would soon disappear altogether. Why was such involvement so important to me? The most

obvious answer was in the social network I was immersed in. I met my wife there. The best man at my wedding, and the godparents of our children and grandchildren were in the Newman Society with me. I recently went to the 60th birthday of a dear friend I first met in those days. The Newman Society provided me with the social network that reinforced and nurtured my religious beliefs and practices. The importance of these associations with a human community was eloquently captured by Lonergan when he wrote the following:

Great saints are rare and even they call themselves vessels of clay. The need for teaching and preaching of rituals and common worship is the need to be members for one another, to share with one another what is deepest in ourselves, to be recalled from our waywardness, to be encouraged in our good intentions (Lonergan 1977).

The Newman Society also provided a vehicle to test and question religious suppositions. My undergraduate days represented the first time I spoke in public about religious issues and wrote my first pieces on religious themes. It was where I first encountered the writings of St. John Henry Newman; it was the first time I participated in study and prayer circles. Most importantly, perhaps, was that I was able to seek the counsel of wiser and holier mentors from those who served as chaplains to the society. I could go on, but I think the point is made.

There is an abundance of sociological evidence that underlines the importance of supportive communities, especially, as establishing a foundation for future strong religious affiliation (Bengtson et al. 2013; McPherson et al. 2001; Everton 2018). Berger and Luckmann, in a seminal study, pointed out the importance of legitimizing structures for religious groups, most particularly in cultural contexts where the place of religion is heavily contested. Young adults need to clearly see the plausibility of religious association, and one of the best ways to do this is to be able to practice what it means to be a religious person and to have concerns and doubts addressed within a supportive network. This raises the following question: What then happens if these structures and networks are unavailable? There is a short-term implication here for the individuals involved who would have benefited from such structures and networks. For the purposes of this paper, however, the more important implication is for religious communities in the long term. The pathway to nurturing those who in the future will primarily do the work of religious institutions has been greatly impaired. Hence, the question of finding sufficient numbers of teachers who can animate mission and identity and teach RE authentically needs to be considered as not an immediate problem but one with historical antecedents.

Greeley (2004) made the point that the demise of strong religious affiliation can be associated with the loss of a range of support structures, broadly defined, which in isolation is not significant; however, when they disappear *en masse*, then the sociological impact is clear. The demise of university Catholic associations was an indicative marker of what lay ahead, likened to a loosening of the chain of memory, even if this was some decades into the future (Hervieu-Leger 2000).

Bruce (2011), one of the most strident secularization scholars, also drew the conclusion that the waning of strong religious identity, both institutionally and personally, can largely be traced to loss of human capital in religious communities. Those most likely to be the leaders in religious communities are usually the products of an extended developmental process (Kasselstrand et al. 2023). The scope of this can vary depending on the religious community, but the key notion that this cultivation is a defined social mechanism is most evident in clear socialization processes (Archer 2012). In the case of Catholic schools, these leaders would be the teachers who are prepared to strongly animate the religious identity and mission of the school. To use Morey and Piderit's (2006) terminology, these leaders would become the animators of religious ethos not just the accompaniers.

The immediate consequence of the weakening of plausibility structures was not the complete and sudden abandonment of Catholic affiliation. What was likely, however, was that the cultivation of strong or what some term as thick Catholic identity was becoming exceptional (Schweitzer 2007). In its place were larger numbers of Catholics who retained a

loose baseline identity. Over time, this would diminish further, and this gradual loss of strong identity has been conceptualized as transitional secularization (Bullivant 2019).

What then can be said of teachers entering Catholic education today? It can be assumed that most lack exposure to strong socializing religious experiences, especially involvement in a supporting, nurturing faith community. While they are not likely to eschew religious affiliation completely, they are also unlikely to display the strong religious commitment necessary for animation of the religious identity of schools manifested, perhaps most obviously, in a ready supply of authentic RE teachers.

#### 4. Narrative Three: Who Is Teaching RE? A Tale of Two Teachers

To further explore the lived experience of younger teachers in Catholic schools, two narratives are offered. As with Marcus, these teachers are real people, and listening to their stories gives further direction to our discernment of the future of Catholic schools and RE in a more synodal age. Following on from the previous narrative, it can be assumed that both individuals are exemplars of the generations working in Catholic schools not strongly socialized into religious belief and practice. The first narrative is that of Siobhan.<sup>3</sup>

I met Siobhan when she took part in a study I was conducting, and, after interviewing her, I gleaned some characteristics of her background and worldview. She was typical of young early career teachers working in Catholic schools. She had a positive experience of being a student in Catholic schools and was very enthusiastic about her job. She was not an active member of a worshipping community but saw what she called the “whole sacramental system” as being an important part of Catholic education. When she was visiting her mother, she went to Mass with her and regarded this as a perfectly natural and proper thing to do. She described her Catholic affiliation as being associated with having certain values, which she acknowledged were embraced by a wide range of people including many who were explicitly not religious. Siobhan’s narrative is reflective of the dominance of moral, therapeutic deism as a descriptor of young adults’ worldview (Denton and Flory 2021).

One weekend, I was in the cathedral in the town where Siobhan worked. At the main Sunday Mass, there was, for lack of a better term, the first communion induction session. These are common throughout Australia and involve children who are to make the First Communion coming to Mass, and who receive some form of catechesis during the service. On this morning, unusually, the cathedral was a hive of activity with various groups of children being marshaled and directed to various corners of the cathedral and to the hall outside. After a time, I noticed that the person expertly coordinating all of this was Siobhan.

Let us now move onto Winona. I met Winona in another study, and she too found herself teaching in a Catholic primary school, teaching sacraments at a junior primary level. In this diocese, there was no active sacramental program in parishes, and very few children in Winona’s Catholic school were making their First Communion. Winona, nonetheless, taught the sacrament units as it was an important part of the course and, in her terms, “it was important that children know more about this”.

On a personal level, Winona’s background and beliefs aligned quite well with the growing number of people in Australia, and elsewhere, who declare themselves as having no religion. Winona did not come from a family with any real religious roots; she never attended faith-based schools, and all her tertiary education was in secular institutions. She was teaching at the school to fill a need for teachers. In contrast to Marcus’s narrative, Winona’s school was not in an area of growing population. Winona was responding to a clear need. In addition, one of the attractions of taking on this position was that, if she remained at the school for a number of years, she was guaranteed a permanent position in a more attractive part of the diocese.

The narratives of Siobhan and Winona give good insight into the lived experience of many teachers working in Catholic schools (Lacey et al. 2022; Belmonte and Rymarz 2023). It is important in a synodal church to encounter and listen to these stories, and it is also vital to then discern what actions are needed considering these experiences. A key aspect



of Siobhan's narrative is her capacity for her role in Catholic schools, not just as a classroom RE teacher but also a leader in parish-based catechesis. All of this occurs without her being associated on a regular basis with a parish community.

### 5. Discerning a Way Forward

These narratives and the accompanying contextualization encourage discernment of a path forward. Discernment is a key aspect, the final stage in the synodal process, as discussed in the introduction. Given the volatility of the current social and ecclesial context, this path is not clearly illuminated but rather is a route that offers some hope and, in time, may lead to a clearer sense of what lays ahead for a more synodal church. It is, nonetheless, a purposeful approach, one that is derived from the lived experience of those working in Catholic schools.

Two points suggest themselves as fruitful discernments arising from the narratives reported. Firstly, there is a clear need to prioritize teacher recruitment and training. This is a timely response to Marcus's dilemma of finding enough teachers. It also is an acknowledgement of Siobhan's story and, perhaps most pertinently, Winona's story. The need for formation can be reiterated with a simple recounting of the narrative sequence given in this paper. There is an urgent need for teachers, especially teachers who can provide witness and authenticity when teaching RE. Then, there have been major changes in religious socialization which have resulted, *inter alia*, in a general weakening in the strength of religious affiliation. Lastly, we can see two examples of what younger teachers working in Australian Catholic schools today "look like".

Without teachers such as Siobhan and Winona, Catholic schools would not be able to meet staffing requirements. Thus, what then is the best way to accompany them? In addressing this question, the first thing to recognize is the need for a nuanced approach to formation. As illustrated by the narratives offered here, younger teachers working in schools have had different life experiences, and their familiarity with and interest in the mission and identity of Catholic education vary. A dedicated formation program for teachers such as Siobhan would take into account her history of familial Church involvement, her positive association with Catholic education, and her readiness to take on leadership roles in the religious life of the school. The support and accompaniment given to teachers such as Winona need to have a different focus, as her encounter with Catholic life, broadly understood, has been minimal.

One approach to teacher formation which offers great promise is a professional learning community strategy (Hord 1997). In essence, this involves teachers with similar intent coming together to plan what is needed for them to be better able to fulfill their roles. A key element here is allowing teachers to contribute their own lived experience to the formation process, and then to arrive at common goals to work toward. In the process of achieving these goals, a good deal of engaging, informed instruction is required. This is paired with ample time for reflection and dialogue.

Secondly, thinking about the teaching of RE should be cognizant of the same contextual issues. Teachers and students in Catholic schools are reflective of generations who have a much looser connection to an explicitly religious worldview. Approaches to religious education, therefore, could be premised on more philosophical foundations which do not make *a priori* assumptions about truth and meaning, and which recognize the need for engaging content which has a strong cognitive foundation (Pring 2020; Johannesson 2022). There are many possibilities here, and it is a mistake to tie RE in Catholic schools to one philosophical position. A philosophical foundation which can provide such a basis for greater dialogue in RE is critical realism (Easton et al. 2019).

Critical realism rests on a number of principles and offers a philosophical referent to the notion of synodality. Rymarz et al. (2021) described these principles in two terms. The first principle is ontological realism, and it arises from the study of existence and the nature of being. Ontological realism posits that reality does exist, and it does so independently of the individual's perceptions. We can come to know more about reality by careful study

and engagement in standard educational processes. We can trust our knowledge, and it can improve, gaining us greater insights and understanding. For RE teachers, religious knowledge can be improved and engaged with in the same way.

A second principle of critical realism is epistemic relativity, and this refers to the nature of knowledge. While ontological realism allows speculation, our knowledge of things can change and is always subject to review and revision. It can be tested against argument and evidence. Rational and informed judgements can be made on the basis of what we have learned, and this can then provide better understanding.

In RE, we can use critical realism as a way of encouraging respectful dialogue in the classroom. Think of the RE classroom that Winona, in particular, is working in. Like herself, the students do not come from a religious background but are enrolled in a school which has a strong religious foundation. This foundation is manifested in many ways, one of the most important being an emphasis on religious education across the curriculum. The RE curriculum is grounded on the lived experience of a Catholic worldview, and this is presented as ontologically valid. There are other ways of understanding the world, and these also have ontological reality. In a modern RE classroom, the diversity of views from students is inevitable and something which can add to a rich dialogue. What unites this diversity in the classroom should be a common goal amongst all for better understanding. In a critical realist framework, this can be achieved as reality is something that exists independently of human perceptions of it.

If assumptions about human knowledge and the capacity of the learner to be able to improve their understanding are well grounded, then the goal of religious education in contemporary Catholic schools becomes clearer, and the best way to support teachers is also illuminated. RE teachers working within a critical realist paradigm need to be given abundant practical support to be able to facilitate student learning and to assist students to become more self-directed learners. To return to a point made in the first narrative. It may seem a mundane one, but would Marcus's task in finding teachers to fill the 40 classes per week without a RE teacher be easier if he was able to offer a wide range of support materials both conceptual and practical to assist prospective teachers? In addition, this support could then be seen as a departure point for future formation pathways for RE teachers.

**Funding:** This research received no external funding.

**Institutional Review Board Statement:** Not applicable.

**Informed Consent Statement:** Not applicable.

**Data Availability Statement:** Not applicable.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The author declares no conflict of interest.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> The narrative is modified to protect identity; Marcus is a fictitious name, and the conversation reported here took place in a social, non-research setting.
- <sup>2</sup> Data from the National Catholic Education Commission underline the stabilization of enrolments in Catholic schools in recent years. Two features of this emerging pattern are noted here. Firstly, after a long period of strong growth, enrolments are nationally just below increases in population. Secondly, the largest growth in enrolments in schools is amongst non-Catholics. Catholic Education Statistical Report, Sydney: NCEC <https://ncec.Catholic.edu.au/resource-centre/Catholic-education-statistical-report-2021/> (accessed on 15 July 2023).
- <sup>3</sup> Once again, names and other identifying features are removed or altered. These two accounts have not been reported before as both projects were focused on other issues, and the material reported here in the narratives was incidental to the research projects.

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