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Fragmented Catholicity and Social Cohesion: Faith Schools in a Plural Society

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Fragmented Catholicity and Social Cohesion: Faith Schools in a Plural Society

Ann Casson

Bern, Switzerland: Peter Lang, 2013

190 pages, \$64.95

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Reviewed by Cristobal Madero, S. J.

Today, the life of the Church relies on the work of an aging and largely female population of religious and lay people. The future of the Church depends largely on the formation of young Catholics. Even though the education and formation of younger generations has long been a concern for the Church—addressed through formal and informal institutions—that mission has now become a matter of its survival. In considering this context, high schools emerge as institutions in which the Catholic Church can transmit the faith both in its personal and social aspects.

Fragmented Catholicity and Social Cohesion: Faith Schools in a Plural Society by Ann Casson presents an excellent study highlighting key aspects of how students are developing Catholic identity. It is relevant research that assesses whether Catholic high schools threaten or support social cohesion. The author uses in-depth ethnographic investigation from three Catholic high schools in England and interviews with relevant actors within the educational process. Three findings in this research could be particularly helpful for the decision makers in Catholic schools in England and beyond: (a) the different Catholic identities developed by young Catholics, (b) the transmission of the faith, and (c) the impact of high school admissions policies on social cohesion.

The process of building a religious identity is for young Catholics a process “which reflected a fragmentary view of Catholicity; the student’s views of their Catholic identity appeared varied, fluid, and fragmentary” (p. 152). As Casson uncovered in her research, for some students the chapel of the school was crucial to forming and representing Catholic identity; however, for others, the chapel was less significant than the school year pilgrimage to Lourdes.

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Casson identified eight identities: *hardcore Catholic*, *baptized Catholic*, *halfway Catholic*, *Catholic pilgrim*, *golden rule Catholic*, *school Catholic*, *Catholic atheist*, and *family Catholic*. She found that each of these identities linked to members of the younger generation feeling that they have a Catholic identity even if they do not share understandings or beliefs with the Church's authority.

For the majority of the students studied, school is the only place where they find elements to build their identities as Catholics. These resources are not found in the parish or within their families. Therefore, transmission of the faith in the schools is crucial. The work of school staff is especially important. Casson recognizes that the composition of the staff—in terms of Catholic identity—is changing. More accurately, the Catholic ethos of the school community is becoming precarious. This is another element that contributes to a problematic fragmentation of identity. The young need role models to show them the basis and applications of the faith in Jesus Christ. If we believe that the staff, mainly teachers, have an important role in the transmission of faith, the Church needs to improve its commitment to the formation of those collaborators.

Admission policies to Catholic schools show a disturbing element that is fundamentally contrary to the mission of the Church. Instead of helping to build communities, the policies lead to an educational system that promotes ghettos. The policies eventually build schools for Catholics, schools for Muslims, schools for rich, and so forth. Casson suggests that these narrow policies, such as requiring proof of baptism, contribute to the distance between the Catholics and the rest of the society. Even though Catholic school communities make good progress in bonding, it is not the case for bridging. Social cohesion becomes an unsurpassable issue for a Church that wants the Kingdom of God to be started in this world.

One of the things I missed throughout the reading of *Fragmented Catholicity and Social Cohesion: Faith Schools in a Plural Society*, is at least a slight reference to the social and economic approaches of Catholic schools. It may be the case in England that the Catholic Church only has schools for a single social class. However, I tend to think that the research could be further developed if the socio-economic variables are taken into consideration. In Latin America as well as in the United States educational systems, further studies in line with Casson's work must include variables allowing researchers and practitioners to evaluate whether a suggestion that is beneficial for rich Catholic schools equally applies to Catholic schools serving the poor.

As Pope Francis continues to invite the Church to read the signs of the times through the understanding of the Church as missionary by nature, Casson's book provides the lens to see what the Church must do in the high school context to ensure not only her survival, but her mission of communicating the Gospel.

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