

How to Provide Catholic Education in a Post-Secular and Post-Christian Flanders?



Introduction

I would like to tell you today the story of the catholic dialogue school in Flanders: *How to Provide Catholic Education in a Post-Secular and Post-Christian Flanders?* I would like to illustrate how, since 2015, we with Katholiek Onderwijs Vlaanderen are engaged in an attempt to re-contextualise the catholic identity of our 2419 schools, centres, boarding schools, art academies, colleges and universities. After a rather personal comment I will set forth our development of vision on the catholic dialogue school, on the social and the ecclesial-theological legitimacy of the project and on its practice in the life of schools: in the big and in the small things, in the ordinary and in the special things of concrete school life.³⁵

“Behold, I am doing a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?”

In 1997 I was invited to attend a congress organised by the Office of Catholic Education in Flanders. This congress was designed to appraise how in the 21st century starting from a Christian inspiration one can contribute to education. A Bible verse in Isaiah was the congress’ lead: “Behold, I am doing a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?” (Isaiah 43:19). Looking back, I

would say it was a prophetic occasion in more than one respect!

I was asked to comment on the congress’ dealings with the question at hand.³⁶ My most important critical observation was that one should be aware that catholic education could shift into a faceless values education of which the Christian inspiration hardly could be recognised. I truly remember the remark of a participant, she was a teacher of religion, who put forward: ‘we ensure values for the young people like being polite, helping each other, autonomy, solidarity, environmental awareness’. I asked what precisely turned these values into Christian values? Because, finally, each school, also the state schools, will claim these same values. No answer was given to the question at that moment and so I thought that it was necessary then to take on the question myself.

Two years later, in 1999, at KU Leuven, my home university, I was asked to reflect on how the university could deal with its catholic identity in a thoroughly secularised context. I set out four points of view a university with a catholic tradition could take: secularisation, reconfessionalisation, values education and identity in dialogue.³⁷ Afterwards I broadened these four models to reflect on catholic identity to education as a whole. In this context the concept of what we call today the project of the catholic dialogue school, came although embryonic, into being. Didier Pollefeyt, my colleague in Leuven, elaborated these models into an empirical instrument,

³⁵ This text is based on the first chapter of my book: *Het evangelie volgens Lieven Boeve: mijn ambitie voor onderwijs*, Leuven: Lannoo Campus, 2019. Another version of this text served as a contribution to the 2019 conference of the Conférence Européenne de l’Education Catholique: *Catholic Dialogue Schools under Construction: From Theory to Practice*, gepubliceerd in *The Catholic School and the*

Intercultural and Interreligious Challenges: CEEC Acts of the International Symposium, Brussels March 14-15, 2019, 142-155.

³⁶ The result can still be read in the record book: *Kiemkracht*, Tiel: Lannoo, 1998, 136-144.

³⁷ Published in *Ethische Perspectieven* 10 (2000) 4, 250-258

which he called the *Melbourne Scale*: an instrument to measure among pupils, teachers, parents ... the existing ideas on the catholic identity of their school, and the possible public support for a change and renewal of it.³⁸

In these 1999 reflections, I assumed we should take seriously not only the secularisation of our society, but particularly the increasing pluralisation. The once very catholic Flanders did not evolve into an irreligious region, but rather into a region of multiple ideological and religious positions. Consequently we cannot assume that everyone's thinking is alike: previously Christian, now secular.

From now on identity always is about dealing with difference, and especially about the way we are related to others. Do we turn ourselves against the other to ensure our identity? Or can the encounter with the other provide opportunities to learn something about ourselves, about who we are or could be? Especially at this point the dialogue appears: when we make room for the other's voice, then our own self-securing ideas are being put under pressure. And so opportunities are offered to discover, through the confrontation with the other, our own identity. In other words, the starting point of encountering the other is no longer the search for similarities, but the attention we pay to how we differ from each other. Because difference makes it interesting to engage in dialogue. Through dialogue we learn about the other while at the same time we get to know better who we are, and so doing, through engaging the difference encountered in dialogue, we may be able again to discover what we have in common. Not despite our differences but by respectfully working through them. When catholic dialogue schools engage into this dialogue, they as well might be able to become once again more aware of their identity: precisely by opening oneself up to the other, they might rediscover the inspiration they stem from. For identity is

what makes one specific. One learns about one's identity especially in relation to difference, from the encounter or confrontation with the other.

The catholic dialogue school: mission statement

In 2015, the management board of Katholiek Onderwijs Vlaanderen, the Catholic Education Office which supports Catholic education in Flanders and Brussels, agreed to a mission statement on the project of the catholic dialogue school. As a result, since then the catholic dialogue school serves as the framework for Flemish catholic schools to conceive of their own pedagogical projects. This short mission statement consists of five sections.

The introductory section addresses all those involved in catholic education: pupils, staff, parents. All of them, whatever their religious or ideological convictions, are welcome in our school provided they are willing to actively engage in the pedagogical project of the school, together with all others belonging to the school's community.

The following three sections concern the kind of education we offer. In the first paragraph we mention our intent to provide a qualitative and inclusive education: a broad personality development for everyone, taking into account that education is more than just training and instruction. The second paragraph about the *catholic* approach of the school, is relying on the so called theological virtues (faith, hope and love) and remembers that our school's project is inspired by the core intuitions of the Christian tradition: proceeding from the belief in God's creation that our freedom is a given freedom and invites us to take responsibility, proceeding from the love we have come to know in Jesus and which is the mystery of reality, and

³⁸ Cf. D. Pollefeyt e.a., *Katholieke dialoogschool: wissel op de toekomst*,

Antwerpen: Halewijn, 2016.

proceeding from the hope of the belief in the resurrection, stimulating us over and over again to look beyond, making room for the unexpected. The third paragraph, about the catholic *dialogue school* states that we realise this catholic inspiration today through the dialogue with everyone at school, whatever his or her philosophical background. In this dialogue we all are looking for identity, for what distinguishes us and what unites us, in a society in which identity is no longer pre-given nor taken for granted. In this way we prepare pupils and students to live together in difference. It is the assignment of the school to make the Christian voice sound in this conversation in a contemporary and refreshing way.

The last concluding paragraph indicates what the catholic dialogue school brings about: for schools it provides the possibility to recontextualise their own inspiration; for pupils and students it offers a training ground that prepares them to live and live together in a meaningful way in our VUCA-society (*volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous*). And as regards the broader society, with the project of the catholic dialogue school Flemish catholic education intends to actively contribute to an open, meaningful, tolerant and sustainable society.³⁹

The empirical research results from KU Leuven as well as the decision-making process within Katholiek Onderwijs Vlaanderen made it clear that the project of the catholic dialogue school did not just come out of the ivory tower of some academics. On the contrary, it picked up on an implicit dynamic already present in many schools,

especially in the ones that already had been confronted with religious and cultural plurality. The project of the catholic dialogue school offers them a frame, a way of thinking and a language to address those challenges through entering into the dialogue with their traditions and with the current context, so as to renew their own pedagogical projects.

Schools cannot but follow their own pathway in these. Because as much as the catholic school as such never existed, neither does the catholic dialogue school. Within the great family of catholic education, there is much room for a proper approach, inspiration and dynamic. For a lot of schools,

recontextualising their identities along the lines of the catholic dialogue school, means that they are actively looking – once again – for the tradition they inherited, for the inspiration of their founders, and that they inquire after what has motivated the former

generations to take up their engagement for children and youngsters. By continuing this engagement in an appropriate and renewed way, they themselves more consciously follow in the footsteps of their predecessors. By doing so they as well become heir and testator. And such exercise concerns schools founded by a religious order or congregation as well as schools founded by the parish, diocese ... For all of them it is a necessary and at the same time inspiring exercise to recontextualise their tradition into the present period, answering to the contemporary contextual challenges; 2419 schools therefore means 2419 different catholic dialogue schools



39 Cf. <https://pincette.katholiekonderwijs.vlaanderen/meta/properties/de-identifier/Sta-20180416-53>

Social legitimacy: dialogue, identity and difference

As said before, secularisation is no longer up to explain how we look at religious identity, religion, church. Pluralisation makes the religious and ideological landscape no longer a continuum between churchd catholic people and secularist atheists, with many positions in between (unchurched Christians, agnostics ...). That landscape rather is a patchwork of different ideological and religious positions, which are at the same time internally pluralised as well. This pluralisation has become extremely visible in our society because of the growth of the Muslim community. However, this growth is less overwhelming as some would have us believe. Nevertheless, the presence of Islam is a new identity- and culture-defining factor, asserting itself, certainly also in socio-political discussions. Moreover other religions beside the Islam are visibly present in the public space. The alternative for catholic confessionalism is no longer atheism and secularism, but a variety of positions and persuasions. According to the European Value Study (2011),⁴⁰ a lot of people also consciously indicate that they do not belong to one of the established religious and ideological traditions and communities. Which is not to say that they would not be in their own ways in search of sense and spirituality away from the classical religious paths. Living together in difference more and more becomes an assignment. In this context the project of the catholic dialogue school finds its reason to be.

Today more than ever, dialogue is a challenge. We are living in a time in which identity, the desire for it and especially the claiming of it, are the order of the day. In this sense, approximately three strategies are emerging. So you can obtain identity by opposing yourself to the other: historically this is a classical strategy that starts from an

us-them opposition. The other is a stranger and therefore does not fit into your world. You see him as a threat to your identity. It is a tried and tested way of acting, at best presented in the scapegoat mechanism. In resisting the other we feel one. Moreover, the negative attitude towards what is strange, relieves us from the task of speaking out positively about what might connect us.

Another strategy, opposite to the first one, considers the far too big obsession about identity as the real problem. It makes us intolerant, self-enclosed. Supporters of the second strategy praise plurality and diversity as such. For them, diversity is an asset: the other is no longer an outsider, to the contrary, he or she is already one of us. The trap of this second strategy lies in the welcoming of the plurality so that the differences with the other are disappearing far too easily. His or her strangeness is no longer recognised. Such an attitude can lead to cultural relativism or an all too easily equating the other with ourselves.

The third strategy is one of dialogue. It does not start from a self-securing and -enclosing identity, nor from welcoming the other unconditionally. On the contrary, it proceeds from recognizing the difference which comes along with the recognition of plurality. Precisely because he or she is strange to us, the other challenges us in who we are. He or she forces us to ask ourselves how we relate to that other person, and what he or she stands for. Therefore, in the dialogue with the other we first of all are invited to get to know ourselves. And through such we might find out what we can have in common despite our differences. More succinctly formulated, one could say that thanks to dialogue we learn that what we think we have in common often contains major differences. And simultaneously the dialogue makes it visible that in the difference there can be a concealed commonality. Judaism, Christianity and Islam

⁴⁰ K. Abts, K. Dobbelaere & L. Voyé, *Nieuwe tijden nieuwe mensen: Belgen over*

arbeid, gezin, ethiek, religie en politiek, Tiel: Lannoo, 2011.

say they believe in the same God, however, if we take a closer look there is still a big difference between those religious beliefs. And Ramadan and Lent seem to be similar religious practices, although they have a completely different meaning. But that being the case, in many words and practices in which the worldviews differ from each other, we can discover at the same time a common longing for understanding and respect, for love and security, for meaning and cohesion.



So what is dialogue then? It is a conversation in which we first of all listen and try to understand each other in all differences so as to come closer to each other and to live together in a better relation to each other. This requires a lot of goodwill, suspending prejudices and judgments and above all much empathy and a considerable amount of imagination. As a result a catholic dialogue school can never be a monologue school starting from its own self-secured identity, thinking there is nothing to learn from the conversation with the other. Perhaps Catholic circles once thought they had a monopoly on

the truth, but that claim was probably enough proof of the contrary.

Moreover, differences are not simply absolute, as sometimes is said today. 'We have a Christian culture, they are Muslims, or Hindus. And those are not compatible.' This insight applies to both interreligious and intercultural differences. At the same time, at the other end of the spectrum, it is also dangerous to presume too easily a ground of commonality, as if it were just available, let alone could be imposed. The commonality I was referring to a moment ago, can only be acquired through the hard labour of dialogue. It is a commonality the partners in dialogue are in search of, but once they have found it, it can serve to strengthen the cohesion of our internally pluralised contexts and to underpin the rule of law in our democratic societies. Only through such dialogue can the so-called Böckenförde-paradox be adequately dealt with.

In his 1976 book, *Staat, Gesellschaft, Freiheit*, the German philosopher, Ernst-Wolfgang Böckenförde, observed that modern democracy is based on values which democracy itself cannot provide nor guarantee.⁴¹ Modern democracy thus consumes the values from which it receives its legitimacy, without itself being able to replenish these values. In other words: democracy does not lead from itself to more democracy, nor does it automatically result in more democracy. For a society can democratically choose to be ruled by a dictator.

History, and especially the 1930ies, has taught us that this is not just a harmless thought experiment, but constitutes a real possibility. Also today, this risk is not imaginary: tolerance, the protection of minorities, an attitude of dialogue, resistance to violence, attention for human integrity, freedom in solidarity, the search for

⁴¹ Cf. E.-W. Böckenförde, *Staat, Gesellschaft, Freiheit: Studien zur Staatstheorie*

und zum Verfassungsrecht, Suhrkamp, 1976, p. 60.

connections and for resolving conflicts ... all these values are not pre-given, self-evident to all, and thus to be taken for granted. The so-called modern universal values, upon which democracy is founded, do not exist from themselves. They only exist in as much as they are carried along in the identities of individuals and communities, when narratives and practices, ideas and attitudes become anchored in who people are, in what motivates them, in what they believe. When democracy is not supported by the people themselves, from their identities and traditions on, democracy will not survive.

Precisely at this point, education, and especially free initiative in education, can take on an important role. Indeed, it is because of this that the freedom of education is under pressure in less democratic societies. Because active freedom of education, of organisation and of religion are antidotes to political and ideological dictatorship. The project of the catholic dialogue school therefore is a training ground in democratic citizenship. From a Christian anthropology and worldview it actively nurtures the insights, values and attitudes needed for such a society. Hospitable to all, the catholic dialogue school invites children, youngsters and adults, to search for identity, for what unites them and what distinguishes them, and so doing to contribute to an open, meaningful, tolerant and enduring society.

Theological legitimacy: the critical voice of the Gospel

We choose explicitly not to become just dialogue schools, but to grow into *catholic* dialogue schools. So, our pedagogical project intends to be no less catholic as was the obvious confessionalism of our schools, at the time when almost everybody was self-evidently catholic. And likewise the project is not less catholic than the project of the Christian values education in the second half of the former century, when catholic schools were looking for their place and role in a

secularizing society. Because it should not go unnoticed: a catholic dialogue school is not about a free and noncommittal dialogue, nor is it about a dialogue starting from a blank sheet of paper.

It is precisely because our schools intend to be catholic, be it in a new way, that they are open to the other and enter into dialogue. And in this dialogue we introduce the Christian tradition from which the school emerges, in the same way that the other is invited to share his or her tradition. The catholic dialogue school starts thus from its own Christian tradition and translates it into the contemporary context.

This kind of open dialogue today is highly necessary and never value-free. Each dialogue partner brings in his or her story, questions and beliefs and invites the other to share them. The questions stemming from this dialogue are: What do you hold on to? What is important to me? And do these values differ that much from one another? Or do we perceive something we have in common beyond the difference? In a catholic dialogue school we enter into dialogue based on the catholic reference framework. We do not hide the identity from which we are making school. At the same time we invite everyone to see if they are able to engage themselves from their own background into this dialogue. We want to be very clear about it, also to those who are not choosing our schools, because they are catholic schools.

Dialogue is not just about exchange. Within the dialogue we are not just equals, because our positions shift depending on whether we are speaking or being spoken to. In other words: a dialogue does not involve symmetry, but a continually shifting asymmetry. When speaking we put ourselves into a vulnerable position towards the other; when really listening we (temporarily) set on hold our immediate judgment. The pedagogical translation of the catholic dialogue school adds another dimension of asymmetry to this:

also the pedagogical relation between teacher and pupil does not start from symmetry but from asymmetry – and even this asymmetry, depending on one's role, is reciprocal. From his or her expertise the teacher teaches the pupils (he or she has something valuable to offer), and at the same time the teacher learns from the pupils when he or she starts working with them in the classroom.

A choice for dialogue, therefore, is not a neutral one. Even more: it is precisely within this dialogue that the Christian voice can sound and may contribute to the search for identity of all at school, Christians and non-Christians alike, and this with a new kind of freshness. 'In a contemporary and challenging way' as is written in our mission statement: this Christian voice indeed continuously puts us to the test, Christians as well as non-Christians. At the least, it makes Christians look over and over again for where the God of Jesus of Nazareth may reveal Godself again today. Because the real secret of the catholic dialogue school is indeed a booklet of two thousand years ago, with stories and words of Jesus going to publicans and sinners, to Samaritans and other people who did not really belong to the default, and he did so often to the great displeasure of those close to him, and to the concern of the authorities. It is this Jesus who taught us about God as love par excellence. It is the same Jesus who in his meeting with the Syro-Phoenician woman, learned himself to radicalise this love ("because the dogs also eat the crumbs falling from the table of the children"). Catholic education lives from the conviction that the greatest experience of freedom consists precisely in the love for one's fellow human being, and certainly the fellow human being who is in danger of being marginalised - a freedom in solidarity with those who are vulnerable, which can go as far as the cross.

Theologically, this thick concept of dialogue is linked to the concept of revelation as defined by the second Vatican Council.⁴² In the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, *Dei Verbum*, the insight that God reveals himself through dialogue with humanity, history and the world, is put into words.⁴³ The Holy Scriptures are the first and therefore the normative testimony of this revelation and of the faithful answer that people gave to this revelation. In the history of Israel, in the life of Jesus and in the event of the first Church – and its interpretation by later generations and communities of faith – God actually allows us to get to know God and up till this day God is doing so. Throughout it is a history of narrative and interpretation, which is ongoing up till today. In this history God reveals Godself as a God of interrupting love, concerned about people, taking them away from false certainties, calling for love of neighbour, justice and peace, disclosing closed stories, rescuing people from sin, and creating perspective beyond human expectation. Based on this faith, for Christians dialogue can never just be a pedagogical or anthropological opportunity, but is first and foremost a theological necessity. Because it is through dialogue with actual people in actual histories that God reveals Godself – possibly also today.

Calling upon the active contribution of all – a new statement of commitment

Until recently somebody who wanted to apply for the position of teacher in Flemish catholic education had to sign added to the employment contract, the 'mission statement of catholic education'. This 'mission statement' is dated 1994 and rather strongly based on the Christian faith of both the school and the teacher, taken for granted. If one does not share this faith, one is called to respect the Christian identity of the majority in school, as

⁴² Cf. For this paragraph, L. Boeve, *Faith in dialogue: the Christian voice in the catholic dialogue school*, in *International Studies in Catholic Education* 11 (2019) 1, 37-50.

⁴³ Cf. the first chapter of my: *Theology at the Crossroads of University, Church and Society: Dialogue, Difference and Catholic Identity* (T&T Clark), London: Bloomsbury, 2016.

well as the Christian education project of the school.

In other words: the catholic character of the school was actually presumed to be supported and realised by the faithful. Non-believers or non-Christian-believers were supposed to respect it and certainly not contradict it aloud. The project of the catholic dialogue school is changing that presumption. Respect is no longer enough. Whichever his or her religious or ideological background, everyone is asked to commit oneself and to actively contribute to the realisation of the pedagogical project of the school. As from 1st September 2019 we therefore have a new ‘statement of commitment of catholic education’ in Flanders.⁴⁴ The change of the term ‘mission statement’ into ‘statement of commitment’ illustrates this change of attitude:

“Even if [to members of staff] the catholic identity of the school is no longer evident, nevertheless they will choose from within their assignment, to fully engage this specific pedagogical project. Even more: they are its privileged and essential partners. That is why the school expects all of them to actively contribute to the life at the catholic dialogue school in conversation with pupils, each other and the school leader(s). Whatever their convictions may be, that is where they can find the inspiration to collaborate in the catholic pedagogical project of the school.”

Teachers do not have to be catholic, but are called upon to contribute from their own inspiration to the project of the catholic

dialogue school. That is why not only non-believing, but also believers of other faiths can find their way to our schools. In the first place we expect them all, from their own religious or ideological background, to appreciate dialogue and connection. For also non-Christians may hold to a relational anthropology. By actively participating in the conversation and by letting their own voices resound in that dialogue, they help to start the exchange and mutual learning processes. Moreover, they can even colour the dialogue when the Christian voice is brought into the dialogue, precisely because of the difference. If I spoke earlier about searching for a ground of commonality, on which we can build a

society in difference, then the catholic dialogue school is a place of practice to find that consensus. And a teacher who is not religious or adherent of another religion can also contribute to this: by equipping young people and

challenging them to take account of their own identities and to see how they can contribute to that ground of communality.

I was privileged to witness this when I attended two years ago a religious education class on Candlemas day (2 February), in a religiously and culturally very diverse primary school in Ghent. Two teachers in front of the class: a Catholic and a Muslim. Formally the catholic teacher was the teacher of the Roman Catholic religious education class but by working in team they cleverly used the religious difference to explain the meaning of light and thus also Candlemas within the Christian tradition. And as Flemish



⁴⁴ Cf. [https://www.katholiekonderwijs.vlaanderen/Statement of commitment](https://www.katholiekonderwijs.vlaanderen/Statement%20of%20commitment)

tradition has it, they concluded the class with a lot of pancakes, which all children enjoyed tastefully.

Also the 2018 declaration on religious education by the Flemish bishops endorses this and thus enables hiring also non-Catholic teachers as teachers in catholic primary schools. The bishops confirm that one can no longer expect all teachers to teach religious education. Until recently this was a standard practice. At the same time the bishops call upon schools to be creative with this new reality, in order to guarantee qualitative religious education, for example by team teaching, hiring a special teacher for religious education, and so on.

Very interestingly, there is the additional effect of such an opening that also baptised young people who want to become teachers actively ask themselves whether they are willing or able to teach religion. Willing but also able to do so: do they have sufficient expertise? Are they sufficiently familiar with the Christian faith? Are they in one way or another involved in the Christian faith community? Teacher training programs at our catholic university colleges respond to this: they offer two distinct paths: on the one hand, a path for all those who want to work in a Catholic dialogue school, and on the other hand, a more specific path for those who want to teach religion as well. Because that too is a commitment with specific expectations in terms of expertise, commitment and attitude.

To be realised in things big and small, ordinary and special

How then do you realise the catholic dialogue school? I already said it is mainly a way of looking, a perspective. The project offers a language and a framework to search together for identity through dialogue, and to introduce the Christian faith as a privileged dialogue partner into that conversation.

Then how do we do that? First of all in ordinary school life, everyday schooling. That's the reason why our new curricula for primary and secondary education are explicitly based on the pedagogical project of the catholic dialogue school. In these curricula one can find connections to the project in all subjects and domains. By working with those curricula in classes and programs, schools already partly realise the catholic dialogue school.



(Cathedral of Orvieto, Italy)

More concretely, to embody our pedagogical project, we focus on seven signposts, based on the biblical intuitions: unicity in solidarity, vulnerability and promise, hospitality, justice, sustainability, imagination and generosity. Furthermore, schools are free in choosing a specific signpost they intend to concentrate upon. Based on their own background, target group or pedagogical approach, they can put forward for example sustainability or imagination, or vulnerability and promise. Moreover, they can add an additional signpost out of their own pedagogical tradition. A school founded by a diocesan sisters congregation which cherished 'serving love' as motto could possibly choose that motto as its eighth signpost. It is up to the team of teachers and school leaders to decide how these signposts may take shape in subjects,

projects and the rest of school life and how they will colour it.⁴⁵

But the catholic dialogue school also crystallises in school regulations, special care policies, personnel policies and leadership. Striving for adequate conflict mediation as a core dimension of a relational school climate can be an example of this. Our Office offers professionalization initiatives for schools to become proficient in this.

As a matter of fact, the pedagogical project of the catholic dialogue school constitutes the background for all kinds of support and pedagogical guidance offered by our office of Katholiek Onderwijs Vlaanderen, whether it is about new curricula, professionalization or quality development at school. Whether a school intends to upgrade its assessment policy, its school organisation, its guidance of pupils, participation of personnel, participation of parents, or quality development: just by doing the things a school is expected to do, schools are already on their way to become a catholic dialogue school. To conclude this first point, the catholic dialogue school can and should become visible in the major educational matters of ordinary school life.

But also with regard to the small things in ordinary school life, the catholic dialogue school is to be realised: in the generosity of teachers and pupils towards each other, the caring and attention for those who experience difficulties at school, the atmosphere in the teachers' room, the commitment to the school project, the work on behalf of children of refugees ... and the appreciation for all of this. In a catholic dialogue school dealing with differences in dialogue stimulates being in relation and understanding.

At the same time the catholic dialogue school can (and has to) become visible at special

occasions and special moments, for example when a new school has been built and is offering space for pupils to encounter each other. Or when the chapel has been reorganised and receives a new place on the campus. Indeed, infrastructure as well can be important for the realisation of a catholic dialogue school. Once I visited an American catholic university building with very small corridors, so designed that students would not have the opportunity to enter into conversation with each other. On the other hand, I have the opportunity to celebrate the opening of a new school building and I can't help but notice the size of the corridors and halls. Or when a reorganisation of the school yard resulted in a lot of space for encounters. But the catholic dialogue school can also be given special attention when giving a new name for the school or for a clustering of schools. Or at the festivities at the opening of a new wing of a school building (and the blessing of the crucifixes), or the celebration at the beginning of the school year explicitly referring to the inspiration of the school. Or in the speech of the headmaster at the proclamation ceremony, in which she or he looks back on the past years and recalls what the school wanted to offer to its pupils. Initiatives such as Community Service Learning, in which pupils get to know themselves by engaging voluntary social work and reflecting on it. Of course, the catholic dialogue school also has to do with the way in which Roman Catholic religious education is dealt with at school, and how in this subject the dynamics of the catholic dialogue school, including the explicit sounding of the Christian voice, is made visible. The same can happen during school retreats but then with even more personal and group involvement.

The catholic dialogue school realises itself not only in things big, but also in things small, and this concerns the special as well. It gains visibility, for example, in the attention to the questions of children in the event of the death

⁴⁵ For more information we refer to our supporting publication *Hoop doet leren*,

Antwerpen: Halewijn, 2019.

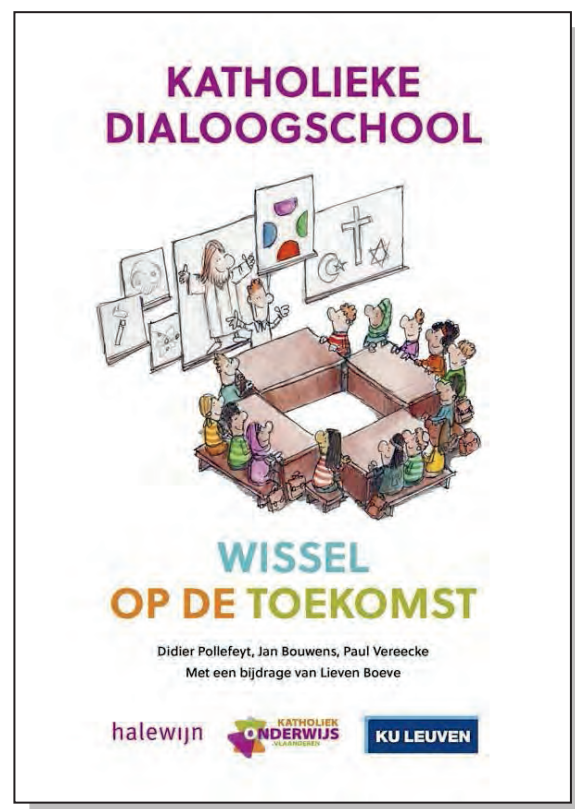
of one of the parents of a fellow pupil, or in dealing with religious festivities (also of other faiths), or important rituals of passage or religious rituals... School pastoral teams or teachers with an interest in pastoral guidance often take care. And Flemish schools themselves are very creative: a school is organizing a dialogue trip to Jerusalem, or sets up an art venue around Easter, or designs a Christmas card, or organises a Christmas celebration for grandparents with a living crib ... Sometimes it is even more surprising. A Saint-Norbert school had to remove the statue of the saint from its facade because of stability problems. Instead of hiding the statue of Saint Norbert in a hall (or giving it away with the building waste), the school decided to put it somewhere in the middle of the school grounds and to move it every three months. Over and over, pupils dashed against the school's identity, both literally and in the spirit.

Designing the catholic dialogue school, and above all making the Christian voice sound in a contemporary and challenging way, requires a large dose of imagination, creativity, but also determination. This was demonstrated recently when a number of school directors started a learning network ('Let them learn') to assist schools that were confronted with (the threat of) expelled refugee children. At the same time, putting the catholic dialogue school to action also requires a sense of reality. One cannot do everything, and certainly not everything at once. Therefore it is very important to give shape to this project, first of all in ordinary school life, by just doing what schools and teachers do anyway (teaching, supervising pupils, speaking to parents, etc.). Further on, it is better, as far as special occasions are concerned, to make some specific choices and then resolutely go for these. Just to give one example, after a process of self-examination using the tools of

the KU Leuven project, a secondary school in Brussels decided to focus mainly on the openings of the day: thoughtfully organised in all classes and in cooperation with a lot of teachers and pupils using well-selected materials.

In conclusion:

The catholic dialogue school is realised in ordinary school life as well as on special occasions and at special moments, in the things big of education as well as in the small signs of attention, care and engagement. With a lot of imagination, creativity, determination, and a sense of reality. And better just one successful realisation rather than too much noise.



**“Catholic Dialogue School,
A Switch on the Future.**