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Catholic Agencies:
Making a distinct contribution to Australian social welfare provision?

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A notable contributor to social welfare in Australia

The Catholic Church is one of the largest providers of social welfare services in Australia, with estimates as to the number of persons receiving services annually ranging from half a million¹ to more than one million². Although more than three-quarters of Catholic welfare agencies have been established since the mid 1970s, a few have been providing services to Australians since the early part of the 19th century³. Nevertheless,

The range of quality of services provided by the Church has not been well recognised. The church’s role as a major provider throughout the last 170 years has not been well documented or embedded in the social policy discourse. …

The negative publicity that has surrounded some in the Church has negated to some extent the ‘good works’ undertaken by the Church over the last 170 years. It is timely that the ‘hidden’ nature of these services needs to be ‘put out there for all to see’ and celebrated.⁴

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3. Camilleri and Winkworth, ‘Mapping the Catholic social services’.
One example of the ‘hidden’ nature of Catholic contributions is that historical accounts of Australian social work have mostly failed to recognise the significant influence of Catholic social workers and agencies in the development of welfare provision including professional social work services in this country. Notable Catholic contributors include Father John McMahon who in the 1920s went from Perth to study his doctorate at the Catholic University in Washington DC where he came into contact with the National School of Social Sciences, which had been established by the university as a college for women to study social services. McMahon negotiated the scholarships which were taken up in 1928 by Norma Parker and Constance Moffitt who were Catholic students at the University of Western Australia, and who on their return are credited as being Australia’s first trained social workers. Within a few years, their achievements included the establishment of social work services at St Vincent’s Hospital Melbourne, St Vincent’s Hospital Sydney and Catholic Social Service Bureau in Melbourne. Norma Parker became a noted academic, was the first president of the Australian Association of Social Workers from 1946 to 1954 and her efforts contributed to the development of the Australian Council of Social Service (ACOSS). However of committees on which she was a member, claims would be made that there was no Catholic representation. Catholic social workers also played a pivotal role in establishing social work services in South Australia and in Sydney contributed to the establishment of the Catholic Welfare Bureau, which by the 1950s had become a major provider of social services in Sydney. In the early 1960s, when the Federal Government started funding marriage counselling, it was Catholic organisations which fought for these new programs to be staffed by qualified social workers. Catholic agencies continue to establish innovative welfare services to this day.

A distinct contribution?

Although Catholic social workers and Catholic agencies have made a substantial contribution to welfare provision in Australia, the question arises as

to whether this has been distinctive. There is some support for such a contention in respect of welfare provision the 19th and earlier parts of the 20th century. In the 21st century, a not uncommon response to such a question is that Catholic social welfare provision is underpinned by Catholic Social Teachings of which the core principles include dignity of the person emerging from an understanding of the worth of human life; the notion of ‘common good’ which recognises the rights and choices of individuals need to be balanced with those of the broader community; a ‘preferential option for the poor’ which seeks to direct resources to those who are most in need; and a recognition that membership of the human community bestows on individuals a range of rights and protections as well as duties and obligations. Hence, for Catholic agencies, there is an implicit obligation to:

i. Provide services which promote the inherent dignity of the individual and each individual’s participation in family life and community networks
ii. Provide services which are accessible, particularly to the most disadvantaged in the community
iii. Speak out publicly so as to improve public policies and programs and identify areas of unmet human need.

Nevertheless, Catholic social teachings are not widely understood as anything more than a superficial basis and in Australia it has been claimed that:

Catholics have a very rich inheritance of social thought, but … make very poor use of it, despite vast practical efforts in the fields of health, education and social services. We have very few specialists in this area even in the theological colleges or the universities … Although we have developed a great rhetoric of social justice in Catholic circles, and have clearly identified a set of principles to guide our policies, we have barely begun to explore their implications beyond our immediate concerns.

One of the implications of Catholic social teachings is that Catholic welfare

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provision should be aiming to provide the services which communities and individuals need. This is far from new and for example, it has been said that back in the 16th century:

The first Jesuits opted out of patterns of ministry centred on local churches, and sought to serve wherever the need was greatest: ‘we accept the care of those for whose well-being and salvation either no one cares at all, or else they care negligently’.18

However, this may be difficult to achieve in the contemporary funding context, with many Catholic agencies being highly, and in some cases almost totally, reliant financially on contracts funding from government sources which specify what services must be provided.19 Interviews with the chief executives of a number of Catholic agencies have revealed that while external funding may cover direct program costs, agencies were not being reimbursed for increased infrastructure costs associated with running these programs.20 Hence, any discretionary funding that agencies might have wanted to use to provide additional services, may be required to provide infrastructure support for funded programs.

The extent to which contracting arrangements in which local agencies tender to be the local provider in statewide programs can lead to similar offerings by very different nongovernment agencies, and potentially limit a Catholic distinctiveness in service provision being apparent to service users. In other words, the situation may emerge in which church agencies ‘have become so fully integrated into the community that their work is typically viewed as merely another component of the continuum of care’.21 From the perspective of outsiders, that some welfare agencies are under the auspices of churches would seem to be a quirk of history and the notion of them being faith-based agencies is questionable.22

If Catholic agencies are not necessarily running different programs from other agencies, distinctiveness is nevertheless possible depending on how programs are delivered. Ray Reid who has worked for Centacare in New South Wales has argued that the ethical or moral stance which underpins service delivery should be a distinctive feature of Catholic social service delivery:

… a Catholic service must be recognisable in its actual delivery. In my view, one recognisable aspect would be that, in the actual delivery of

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19. Camilleri and Winkworth, ‘Mapping the Catholic social services’.
20. Winkworth and Camilleri, ‘Keeping the faith’.
services, no personal action, taken or being considered by a client, which clearly is in clear contravention of Catholic moral teaching is ever explicitly approved or advocated by a worker who is acting in the name of the Catholic Church.\textsuperscript{23}

Reid goes on to argue that workers in Catholic agencies are obliged to go against their professional codes of ethics which place the emphasis on self determination by service users and provide advice which is consistent with Church teachings. Others have also claimed an ‘inevitable conflict between religious and social work values’\textsuperscript{24}, although such claims overlook the existence of a diversity of Christian viewpoints as to the causes and solutions to social problems.\textsuperscript{25} Furthermore, a comparison of Catholic social teachings and the Canadian Social Work Code of Ethics revealed much common ground, even though arising out of very different philosophies.\textsuperscript{26} In summary, there seems to be divided opinion as to whether a Catholic perspective results in a distinctive ethical emphasis in service delivery.

Perhaps the most persuasive arguments that Catholic agencies make a distinct contribution to welfare provision in Australia centre around spirituality. To some extent, the huge growth of Catholic agencies in the welfare sector since the mid 1970s has been attributed to some religious orders changing the focus of their activities from schools to welfare provision.\textsuperscript{27} Although other staff were employed, the presence of members of religious orders and their shaping of agency cultures was influential in their establishment of these agencies. An ongoing legacy is that the ethos in many Catholic agencies attracts some staff who choose working there rather than in higher paid positions elsewhere. When interviewed a few years ago, the CEO of one Catholic agency commented:

\begin{quote}
I think the adherence to a mission and vision draws in creative people who are looking beyond mere recompense. An awful lot of staff don’t do it for the money … I think there is a link between the fidelity to a vision for people in the community and the drawing in of creative people.\textsuperscript{28}
\end{quote}

With the decline of numbers in religious orders in recent decades and the ageing profile of those who remain, the ability of orders to provide staff in welfare agencies has become increasingly limited, and it is not hard to envisage

\begin{footnotes}
\item[23] Reid, ‘Personal morality, 429-430.
\item[26] Ebear et al, ‘Is there a place for social work?’
\item[27] Camilleri and Winkworth, ‘Mapping the Catholic social services’.
\item[28] In Winkworth and Camilleri, ‘Keeping the faith’, 324.
\end{footnotes}
a future of Catholic welfare agencies in which clerics or members of religious orders are an extinct species of employee. However, this does not necessarily mean that agencies need be devoid of a Catholic spirituality. Rather it might just mean that agencies need to work more intentionally on this aspect of their mission and not just assume that it will happen because of their staffing profile.

The organisational context

Unlike in the 19th and earlier parts of the 20th century when those who served by Catholic agencies were overwhelmingly Catholic, service users in Catholic agencies today may be of any, or increasingly, no religion. Similarly, staff in Catholic agencies come from a range of religious backgrounds, many do not identify themselves as Catholics, and some would not regard themselves as being Christian. Therefore, if spirituality is to be an important aspect of contemporary Catholic welfare agencies, past assumptions and practices may need to be reconsidered.

Over the past decade there has been a growing literature about spirituality in organisations. One of the strands of such writing has focused on spiritual experiences within the workplace, especially those leading to personal growth of individuals. A second strand is about leadership and management styles and a third stand is around corporate values and ethics, particularly around being a good corporate citizen and not just interested in profits. One understanding of an organisation in which spirituality is valued is the so-called contemplative organisation. A contemplative organisation is one which strives to:

- Incorporate contemplative practices into all aspects of work;
- Embody and explore organizational values;
- Move between cycles of action and reflection;
- Balance process with product;
- Have an organizational structure which reflects a contemplative philosophy.

Donal Dorr, who is an Irish Catholic author has suggested that terms such as ‘harmony, trust, good communication, cooperation, transparency and honesty’

34. Dorr, *Faith at Work*, 55.
are among the attributes of an organisation which values spirituality. Clearly the management and leadership of an organisation have a crucial role to play in establishing and maintaining such an organisational culture. However, organisations which supposedly share a common religious tradition don’t necessarily reflect this in their philosophy or working practices. For example, the authors of a study of the mission statements of all 28 Jesuit universities in the US have commented that while they might have expected to find

... the same spirituality, enunciated in the same basic manner. Such does not appear to be the case with Jesuit universities. Terms essential to a characterization of organizations founded on a specific spirituality are sometimes absent and sometimes redefining in remarkably different ways. For example, almost all of the universities declare themselves to be Jesuit, yet the term goes undefined or is defined differently by each organization.35

While a religious ethos underpins the broad aims and objectives of Catholic agencies with a religious auspice, the language by which this is communicated to the wider world may have been translated to something more like an ‘imperative to care’.36 This raises the question as to what is understood by ‘spirituality’. Spirituality has been described as ‘obscure’,37 ‘fuzzy’38 and ‘a word everybody uses, but nobody knows what anyone means by it’39. For example, spirituality is used by some as an interchangeable term for religious practice and assumes the spiritual person to be one who has an intentional relationship with the Christian God. In stark contrast, God seems to have been totally excised from some people’s understandings of spirituality, and spirituality is defined in terms of meaning. However it is defined, for any working conceptualisation of spirituality to have a degree of authenticity, it needs to be able to deal with the struggles and messiness of human life40 rather than as a ‘quasi-indicator of mental health’41 or panacea to life’s problems as is suggested by the following definition:

Spirituality is a personal search for meaning and purpose in life, which may or may not be related to religion. It entails connection to self-chosen and or religious beliefs, values, and practices that give meaning to life, thereby inspiring and motivating individuals to achieve their optimal being. This connection brings faith, hope, peace and empowerment. The results are joy, forgiveness of oneself and others, awareness and acceptance of hardship and mortality, a heightened sense of physical and emotional well-being, and the ability to transcend beyond the infirmities of existence.42

In seeking to make sense of, and respond to, contemporary thinking about spirituality, the question may arise as might be whether Catholic social service agencies have sufficient expertise in spirituality to consider these issues on their own. At one level, there may be a need for agencies to be engaging in dialogue with theologians.43 Welfare agencies may also be able to partner with Catholic retreat houses and other centres of spirituality in developing programs or other initiatives which contribute to meeting the spiritual needs of service users. However, it has been suggested that the offerings of retreat centres have often been irrelevant to service users of welfare agencies:

... most of the programmes offered at churches and retreat centres are focussed on individual growth, and often seem ... ‘more concerned with domestication than liberation, with the status quo than new birth’. Moreover, spirituality is often regarded as transcending the concerns of this world rather than being immersed in the messiness of daily life.44

One group of people who are ‘immersed in the messiness of daily life’ are the social workers and other direct service staff in Catholic welfare agencies. However, such staff may find it difficult to discuss religion or spirituality in their professional work, and until recently it was more than likely that social work students might never hear the words religion or spirituality during their professional training. Within social work, religious behaviours have often been viewed as evidence of psychopathology and caution has sometimes resulted in all persons, whether workers or service users, with religious beliefs being treated with suspicion.45 Consequently, many social workers have themselves been encouraged to keep their religious beliefs and practice privatised and something

which they do not discuss in the workplace.46

Agencies making it known to staff that spirituality is considered to have a legitimate place in social service provision, by itself will not be sufficient to entice many social workers to change their ways of working. Staff development programs in which social workers have the opportunities to explore the synchronicities and tensions between their understandings of both social work and spirituality are likely to be required. To support such enterprises, there have been several monographs dedicated to the subject of spirituality and social care which have emerged in recent years47 as well as a plethora of articles in social work journals. However, not all of these promote understandings of spirituality which might be recognisable or acceptable within a Catholic framework. One recent book discussing aspects of spirituality and human service delivery included contributions from authors from a diverse range of perspectives including Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism, Paganism as well as contributions from indigenous Australians.48 It has also been claimed that there are synergies between social work theory and New Age spiritualities.49

**Approaches to service delivery**

One approach to incorporating spirituality into social work practice has been to offer small numbers of staff or students the opportunity to learn more about the practices of a spiritual tradition, such as the spiritual exercises of St Ignatius Loyola.50 Indeed it has been suggested that there are thus close links between the spirituality of the Exercises and the margins of church and society, the places where questions are being asked of inherited tradition, the places where images of the self are being renegotiated.51

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While there may be a place for offering such opportunities, a much more creative approach is going to be needed if Catholic welfare agencies are to engage on the level of the spiritual with more than a handful of staff or service users. In my own work in which I have been exploring the connections between spirituality and social work, I have suggested that

Spirituality involves an awareness of the other, which may be God or other human or divine beings or something else, which provides the basis for us to ask establish our needs and desires for, understand our experiences of, and ask questions about, meaning, identity, connectedness, transformation and transcendence. While for some individuals these concerns will be integrally associated with their religious beliefs, and may only make sense within a specific religious framework, meaning, identity, connectedness, transformation and transcendence are intrinsic to the human experience, whether or not individuals regard these to be in the realm of spirituality.52

Undoubtedly conceptualising spirituality in this way is contentious. However, if you are going to convince social workers that spirituality (or anything else for that matter), is relevant to their practice, you need to be able to explain it in language which they might understand and words such as meaning, identity, connectedness and transformation are very much part of the contemporary social worker’s vocabulary. Whether or not we have the remit to assist individuals in resolving these, acknowledging and validating these concerns is a fundamental way in which social workers can and should show respect for the spiritual dimension of the lives service users.53 This need not require either considerable time or specialist expertise on behalf of the social worker, but rather a change of perspective:

… spiritual care is much more than simply an added task to be done or an extra skill that has to be learned. Rather, it has to do with seeing the world differently, and in seeing it differently, acting differently within it. Spiritual care has to do with asking different questions of those to whom we care and, equally as importantly, being equipped and prepared to respond appropriately and openly to the answers one receives. Spiritual care is as much a way of being as a way of acting.54

This might involve a more conscious focus on the strengths and not just the

deficits of service users. It is worth remembering that one of the strengths of Catholic welfare provision has long been its sense of caring for the person and not just that aspect which is problematic.55 For social workers, attending to the lived experience of service users means listening for meaning rather than making assumptions as to what individuals make of situations or events, what they consider gives their life meaning, determining how important it is in the current situation, and the extent to which such experiences can form a resource in dealing with particular circumstances or may be adding the problem.56 As one Canadian social worker interviewed in a research study noted:

I say, I’m really interested in understanding what this means for you. And is there anything about your own cultural background, or what this means in your own community, that would be helpful for me to understand, because I may not know that. I’m not going to assume anything … I’m going to wait and hear how it’s been constructed in their lives.57

As to going about this, much of the literature from Catholic traditions of spirituality taps into issues which have direct applicability for social work practitioners. There is a strong emphasis on the importance of lived experience and a recognition that the needs, outlooks and experiences of people vary at different point in the lifespan. Some of the themes considered by writers of Catholic spirituality are issues which can readily be incorporated into social work practice in a range of settings, such as rituals58, creativity59, the importance of place60, and belonging61. These topics provide a way of beginning conversations in which spiritual issues and values and beliefs may surface, and by opening up discussion on these topics, service users may choose to respond by discussing specific religious practices or beliefs which are important to them.62 This is not to say social workers should always avoid explicitly raising issues of religion, but to suggest that attending to spiritual needs should not be

limited to those service users whom social workers are confident would respond positively to discussions about their religious beliefs and practices.

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, Catholic agencies have and can continue to make a distinct contribution to social welfare provision in Australia, by offering models of service delivery which have sought not to excise the spiritual from the more prosaic needs with which individuals present when seeking assistance from welfare providers. However, for this to be most effective, a whole of agency approach is required rather than leaving consideration of matters spiritual to those staff involved in direct service delivery. There are many challenges and dilemmas which agencies are undoubtedly going to have to address if they want to ensure spirituality is on their agendas in the 21st century. But the fact that several Catholic agencies wish to pursue this agenda,\(^{63}\) is from my perspective, a feature that distinguishes Catholic welfare agencies not just from the more secular agencies but also from some of the other supposedly faith-based agencies.

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\(^{63}\) An earlier version of this paper was presented to representatives of a number of Catholic welfare agencies in Victoria who form Esther’s Voice, a forum discussing the place of spirituality in the human services.