1. Introduction

What does a ‘Public Catholic University’ mean? To analyse that question we need to delve into the history of the only such institution in Australia and one of the very few in the world: Australian Catholic University, which is a public Catholic University. The question asked invites us to address what makes a Catholic university special or distinctive in the public sector.

In order to examine the issues involved we need to consider some of the differences between being ‘public’ and being ‘Catholic’ and the attributes that accrue to both terms and also to the notion of a secular society. In attempts to define ‘public’ there is often recognition that the term incorporates the meaning of ‘secular’ which carries a set of shared values; both public and secular, for example, illustrate the practice of a moral code that is independent of all religious practices and considerations. In what follows, the relevance of values is examined in some detail and brief analysis of corporate citizenship is provided as a useful example of the differences between being public and being Catholic. It seems sensible then to conclude with some comment about the special challenges for a university that tries to be both.

2. On Being Public and Catholic

The word ‘public’ technically means ‘common to all’, ‘open to all’ and ‘allowing the participation or involvement of everybody’. This is a critical feature of the term ‘public’ which accrues added meaning in education when it is taken routinely to refer to the provision of financial support by Government. To some, it means serving the needs of a secular society but the dichotomy between religious and public or secular can be misleading. The special challenge of a public Catholic university is that it is both based on a religious ethos and is public at one and the same time. There is the additional assumption that its openness (regardless of religious beliefs or race, for example) must be respected at all times.

At the outset, we need to look further into what the terms ‘Catholic’ and ‘public’ actually denote.

2.1 Being Catholic The Catholicity of a student-centered university expressly means that the university engages staff and students in ways that meaningfully relate the intellectual elements of education to the moral, philosophical, spiritual and religious dimensions of their culture and life. These moral, spiritual and religious values quite properly should be subject to and receive
critical and scholarly reflection. They demonstrate their concrete realisation in an integrated learning context infused by a sense of the Catholic mission of a university dedicated to the standards of good scholarship.¹

2.2  **Being Public** As already mentioned, a public university is open to all, and in the normally understood context of higher education in Australia it is supported financially by Government and accountable to Government for its performance. Public accountability is typically reflected in the Commonwealth’s Higher Education Funding Acts and in the expectation that a public university formally complies with Government’s policies and regulations. The financial assistance is granted under the condition that the university spends its funds in accordance with an educational profile approved by the Federal Minister with established reporting lines to the State Governments in the territories where the university resides.

3.  **A History of Formation**

In March 1988, formal interactions first began in the Catholic educational sector relating to a discussion paper of the Minister for Employment, Education and Training, the Hon J S Dawkins, on higher education in Australia. Six months later the Minister issued an invitation to participate in a unified national system. In response to that invitation, four Catholic colleges formed an association that aimed to meet the Minister’s minimum requirements. The expectations of the Commonwealth Government were clear. There was to be one institutional profile, one governing body, a single coordinated system of accountability, and one award granting body. A Planning Committee was formed in April 1989 and it resolved to endorse the development of a Catholic University of Australia as the final form for the association. On 18 July 1989 the Planning Committee resolved to adopt the title ‘Australian Catholic University’ for the new institution and on 15 October 1989 the Catholic Archbishops of Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane and Canberra communicated formally to Minister Dawkins their intention to pursue the establishment of a Catholic university. Finally, in 1991 appropriate legislation was sought for this entity at state and territory level accordingly. At that time, the Planning Committee noted the importance of liaison with the National Catholic Education Commission and with the Episcopal Conference in the proposal’s development.

The agreement of the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference was required to use the word ‘Catholic’ in the name of the proposed Australian Catholic University. The company of the University, Australian Catholic University Ltd, was incorporated on 5 November 1990 and the inaugural meeting of the

governing Senate of Australian Catholic University was held two and a half weeks later.

The Catholic Church provided the properties occupied by the four predecessor colleges, and the Archbishops and Bishops associated with the relevant Archdioceses and Dioceses in which the four colleges had campuses became members of Australian Catholic University Ltd and were subscribers to the Memorandum of Association that established the Company. The congregational leaders of the religious orders associated with the Colleges were also Members of the Company.

Considering this history, the Catholic nature of the University is formalised through the objects of the Company in the Memorandum of Association, and the Public nature of the University rests in its accountability to the Federal Government, as approved by the relevant Minister.

This brief account does not reflect the enormous contribution that particular individuals made to the formation of Australian Catholic University. Neither does it attempt to capture the complexity of the religious and secular political climate which existed at the time the University was formed. The motives for the Church’s involvement in higher education were social, political and religious and, overall, higher education was seen as a means of increasing the ability to influence the course of the country’s development. The passage to maturity was difficult. An alternative proposal to form Australian Catholic University was formulated and rejected in 1989; then after subsequent political conversations, it was accepted. Two years later, in 1991, Australian Catholic University was born, with considerable help from the Church which did not have the resources to fund the University privately.

The history set down here is really intended to demonstrate how Church and State were intertwined integrally and intimately in the development and formation of Australian Catholic University as a unique concept of higher education in Australia. At all points, expectations of Church and State co-existed and continue to do so at one and the same time. Public accountability and Church influence went hand-in-hand in the first instance and still do. The result is a unique entity that has special educational characteristics.

More needs to be said about the Catholic identity of Australian Catholic University as this identity establishes its unique feature in the public sector.

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2  P W Sheehan, ‘Surviving As A Catholic University’ Unpublished paper presented at AGM of the Sovereign Order of the Knights of Malta, (23 June 2001)

4. Catholic Distinctiveness and Identity

‘A Catholic university is a place where there must be ongoing dialogue between faith and reason, a clear infusion of Christian ethos and Catholic values, and where the Catholic ethos must animate the relations between students and staff as well as the interactions of staff and students amongst themselves. It must be contemporaneously relevant to both Society’s and the Church’s needs’.  

The ethos that defines a Catholic university focuses on a commitment to values that are imbedded formally in the Gospels. These are: respect for the dignity of others, tolerance and responsibility, and ethical behaviour and sensitivity to justice. A defined sense of purpose and meaning aims to give coherence to living.

For a university to be truly Catholic, both staff and students should be exposed to its culture personally and deeply enough that their attitudes, habits and values are affected by it. A sense of the spirituality and sacredness of the vision it operates under should be widely understood and infiltrate the educational process and the environment in which everybody works. The vision of the University should reflect the mission and the traditions of the Church; by virtue of its identity as a university, a contemporary Catholic university needs to recognise and articulate the definite tensions in being what it is and what it represents. Finally, the Church and public nature of a public Catholic university require that a public Catholic university live by the Catholic ethos and function according to the same academic standards as all other universities which operate in a pluralistic and tolerant culture of scholarly endeavours.

5. Some Advantages of Being Catholic

Some would query whether a focus on Catholic distinctiveness affects the quality or stringency of academic efforts, but the guidelines set down for a good Catholic university unequivocally attest the ideals of the pursuit of truth. These guidelines as stated in Ex Corde Ecclesiae argue that the ‘basic mission of a university is a continuous quest for truth through its research, and the presentation and communication of knowledge for the good of society’.

4 P W Sheehan, ‘Some Special Challenges Facing A Contemporary Catholic University’ Australasian Catholic Record (2002): 79/2, 133

5 Pope John Paul II, Apostolic Constitution on Catholic Universities (Boston, Mass : St Paul Books and Media 1990) Section 30
In pursuit of this ideal of the quest for truth, there are certain advantages of being a Catholic university. One is that a Catholic intellectual can bring differences in interpretation or cognitive perspective that may help to shape the kinds of questions he or she can choose to examine scientifically. As Heft concludes, the relationships involving academics’ personal beliefs and their professional work are complex and they are open themselves to the richness of scholarly, intellectual scrutiny. A related advantage is that a Catholic university enables the Catholic point of view to enter equally and fully into rational debate where that point of view stands or falls on its own merits. A Catholic university acknowledges this challenge and as Cardinal Clancy argues elsewhere, it seeks no special advantage in claiming its rightful place in the scholarly world of tertiary education.

A fourth advantage of being Catholic is that the ethos that drives the University’s distinctive mission can be unusually sensitive to highly relevant features of society in general. The spiritual needs of students who are Catholic, who are members of other religions, or who are not members of any religion at all, can draw special meaning from the integration of the Catholic ethos into the institution as a whole. The Catholic Mission does not dictate the personal formation or growth of students who choose not to look for purpose in terms of Gospel values, but it provides meaning for those who wish to look for it. Through the search for spirituality, education then becomes vital to the task of discovering personal balance, psychological equilibrium and cultural well-being.

Finally, a Catholic ethos makes for greater tolerance of other people’s differences, aims to foster human potential in pro-active ways, and projects values that help order and maintain an ethical society. All aim towards the maintenance and preservation of a common, public good.

6. Some Advantages of Being Catholic and Public

In these and other ways, there are particular ways of viewing Society and of educating persons to contribute to it that clearly benefit the public good. For many, this expresses the division between the Catholic and the secular; the differentiation between those terms, however, is not as sharp as it once was. The concept of social justice was more of a Catholic one than it was a

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7 E Clancy (Cardinal) Homily (on the nature of a university) The Chronicle (September 2000): 10-11

defining feature of general society, but it fits better now than it used to with the notion of a secular society. Likewise, pastoral care was once thought to be a Catholic concept rather than a public one, yet no public university these days would want to be viewed as not caring for its students. In the past, there were more obviously Catholic ways of perceiving the world and secular ways of viewing it. Now, the discussions that may have separated public or secular from Catholic or religious in the past are blurring. The common, public good that tangibly involves us all can decidedly benefit from the Catholic perspective which emphasises the Christian values that underline the concept of social justice and the legislative bases of public conduct in Australia. As Molony claims, the fundamental basics of all social justice are the rights of human beings to be treated with dignity and respect and these are key characteristics of the Catholic mission.

A corollary of this point of view is that we need to rethink the contribution of religious thinking to education. Morality flows from religious beliefs and morality is an integral part of education. A Catholic university gives religion a special place in education. As Heft argues, its inevitable agenda is not the conversion of students, but their intellectual development. If students are to behave ethically and morally – and this is to the public good – then a religious ethos has a valuable and beneficial role to play not only in instigating these attributes with the tasks of education, but the Catholic intellectual tradition can imbed morality and ethicism into standards of learning more effectively and directly by bringing knowledge together that has been separated in the past. The integration of knowledge, says Heft, presents a fuller grasp of the truth. Creative links can be forged in a public Catholic university that transcend the arbitrary fragmentation of knowledge.

There are many who legitimately praise public education. The advantage they see is that education is open to everyone. Kirby, for instance, poses the alternative to public, secular education as one that is private or Church in character. Kirby is right in insisting that the term ‘public’ represents the involvement, or potential involvement of all, but perhaps incorrect in

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11  J L Heft, ‘Challenges and Opportunities : Graduate and Professional Education’ Fall Faculty Address, University of Dayton, USA (1994)

12  Ibid

13  M Kirby, ‘In Praise of Public Education’ Graduation Address, University of South Australia, (27 April 2001, Adelaide)
opposing or contrasting public education with an education that is private or Church in character. Australian Catholic University is living testimony to the combination of both public and Church in a single entity. The fact that it exists and functions in both these ways belies the opposition or necessary contrast of public with Church.

One of the emotional arguments made by the proponents of public education is that in the public educational setting (for the most part argued in the school context), we can learn the values of Australian democracy, equality and good citizenship especially well. These are public goals, common to us all and perfectly legitimate goals for any worthwhile educational setting: they serve the good of society and foster its betterment. But I would argue that being just public can lead to a less desirable or achievable result than being public and religious at one and the same time. Let me illustrate the point.

Certainly, academic excellence and professionalism inevitably do not entail secularisation.14 A Catholic, public university offers no apology for its Catholic commitment or for its commitment to educating those who are not Catholic. Necessarily, it serves the needs for which Church and state are established and exists in a world that can best survive by attempting to re-discover the ideals necessary for a Society under the threat of excessive secularisation. Society is looking to discover afresh the principles of justice and respect for others, and to pursue ethical attributes and behaviour with greater rigour. As Burtchaell argues,15 Catholic campuses owe it to their students and to society to cast a constructive eye on a better future. Both being Catholic and being public can help create a genuinely wider world to do that.

The term public is too often reserved as singularly representing freedom and promoting ‘nurseries of the minds and hearts of the nation’.16 The linking of freedom and the secular implies that being secular is the virtue to attain; being Church or being religious is seen as restricting freedom, and thus is regarded as anti-intellectual and unnecessarily limiting. Openness to all is the proper meaning of ‘public’ and Australian Catholic University intentionally joins public with the non-secular. Certainly, private is not necessarily Church; public can indeed be Church as in the case of Australian Catholic University. Being religious is not necessarily non-public; as we have seen, religion can go hand-in-hand with the secular which furthers the path to non-fragmented truth. Finally, being Catholic and public can provide the nurseries of the

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16 M Kirby, ‘In Praise of Public Education’, op cit, 11
minds and hearts of the nation just as easily, and perhaps more effectively, than being public. The search for spirituality through education endures and perhaps overcomes the non-spiritual context in which public education is routinely placed.

7. **Corporate Citizenship as an Example**

Recently, I was approached to cultivate the standards of good corporate citizenship as a CEO of an educational institution which is responsible for higher learning. Success in that endeavour was seen to be based on four main areas: a financial perspective, a business process perspective, a learning and growth perspective, and a customer perspective. I was being urged to implement a holistic management strategy that looked at all four aspects of the institution. In terms of the approach, I was asked to have a balanced scorecard to ‘win the (educational) tournament’.

In all these respects, I felt I was being tempted with publicly desirable outcomes that were intended to serve the common good. In all of them, however, I obtained no sense of how values contributed to the effect, or of how purpose or meaning contributed to the success of education, or how ethics or morality helped shape the final result. Values, purpose and ethics may have all been there, but they were not projected as important at all in the training exercise or in achieving the outcomes that were deemed to be publicly desirable.

Training for the future, as envisaged by a public Catholic university, must reach out to inculcate the attributes of good citizenship which is a state of being and learning in students that is characterised by social trust and responsibility.

Many universities world-wide, particularly those which are secular, are committed heavily to the principles of economic rationalism and continue to search for and train qualities in their students which characterise these principles. Graduates should be trained to be sensitive to justice in this pursuit and must act in accordance with that commitment. In the training of corporate, good citizenship there is clearly a special responsibility in a pluralistic society such as ours to enhance the relevance of values, to behave ethically, and to study the application of values and ethics in a proper way.

Universities are especially important in supplying this sense of moral and social responsibility. It seems that a Catholic university, by virtue of its guiding mission, has a valuable propensity for doing so. As Molony claims,\(^{17}\)

\(^{17}\) J Molony, ‘Social Justice in a Secular Society’, *op cit,* 1
‘as citizens, it is vital that we be concerned with the proper order of society. Without proper order, based on right reason, secular Australia is doomed’.

Given the special challenges of a public Catholic university, let me comment now on some of the factors that can affect the optimal functioning of a Catholic university.

8. Factors Affecting being Catholic in the Future

Part of the uncertainty of the new millennium is that society is being forced to examine more closely the purpose of education. The darker realities of society’s ills cannot be solved without firm adherence to values in ourselves as participants in a caring community. We are in an age when we are distracted by the sundry forces around us. For many, the new millennium is taking us towards an era of moral relativism and the millennium upon us promises to be a world without direction.18

Society generally is doing some marvellous things. In Australia, educational possibilities abound, gender discrimination is less than it was, technology is advancing at a rapid pace; but most people are stressed more than they ever were, the security of long-term employment is far less certain, racial bias is more evident, communities are obsessed with threats against them, suicide is more prevalent, marital breakdown statistically more obvious, and moral relativism confusingly evident. We are a society that encourages both optimism and pessimism simultaneously and we feel we need to behave in both these ways in order to cope. Education has to find meaning and purpose to survive such uncertainty. The task is not easy and in Molony’s terms we need to ‘give flesh to social justice in a secular society’. Core beliefs and values are required to pull us back from an ‘abyss of unknowing’.20 A Catholic ethos-based higher education system can supply just that.

As argued above, the journey to find an anchor of core beliefs and attitudes is necessarily partly spiritual in character. Spirituality expresses accurately the search for meaning that draws us away from the lack of self-discipline and absence of adherence to tradition. Moral guidance is needed to reverse the passage towards moral relativism and the search for immediacy. It is the sense of purpose and meaning that best captures the motivation of young people to anchor partially their drift to greater uncertainty.

19 J Molony, ‘Social Justice in a Secular Society’, op cit, 1
20 H Mackay, Turning Point : Australians Choosing Their Future (Sydney, MacMillan 1999): 174
Australian Catholic University plays a very special role as a public institution in these respects. It conveys and enacts a necessary tension which emanates from the conflict between those whose version of public is ‘all that is Catholic’ and those whose version of public is far wider. It faces and responds to the particular challenge of projecting a caring, Christian set of values, and this is necessarily related to the quality of academic experience. That quality carries benefits to the wide community made up of Catholic and other participants who are not of that belief.

Being a Catholic university is different, and is seen to be different. The public sector for the most part looks for its version of appropriate outcomes of a public secular education. It chooses its reference group and attempts to work accordingly. It is more difficult for a Catholic university: it secures its ‘public’ assistance; and tries to live by an ethos that the system is not entirely comfortable with but nevertheless needs.21

This tension is exaggerated by the fact that the sector is not entirely coherent. Part of it does not know where it is going. Inconsistency which is inherent in individuals also characterises institutions, and universities are no exception. Such inconsistency under another name might mean diversity; and viewed in another way an inconsistent sector is one without overall purpose. The ‘common good’ is the absolute reason why public authority exists,22 and both State and Church mutually serve the common good.

In the university sector, John Dearlove of Sussex University refers to the fact of ‘limp administration of dull, steady state, routines’.23 In Australia, the sector as a whole faces turbulent times that call for radical change when management, bureaucracy and governance can only take universities so far. An overriding ethos that provides purpose and meaning guides a university through turbulent times. This is an additional and special benefit of a public Catholic university.

9. Some Concluding Challenges

Under the guidance of Ex Corde Ecclesiae, a Catholic university forges a distinctive Catholic identity which serves the common good. As others have

21 P W Sheehan, ‘Surviving as a Catholic University’, op cit,

22 J Molony, ‘Social Justice in a Secular Society’, op cit

said, catholicity can neither be legislated nor enforced. It must come from the spirit and there is unique potential in the enrichment provided by being both public and Catholic. It is arguable that being both serves the common good better. Being Catholic, however, arouses public attitudes about what the term ‘Catholic’ really means. In working through these attitudes, biases are often involved and perceptions that are common are still not being recognised for what they really say. The antipathy of certain groups such as academia and the media has been well documented. Although the perceived distinctions between secular and religious may have lessened for some persons, a challenge for the future is to recognise that the secularisation of society is reaching out now to look for some alternative, and a special challenge is to market what others may not yet know how to deliver. Paradoxically, it is the public nature of a public Catholic university that helps it to not constrain any public expression of religious beliefs other than Catholicism.

Catholic identity is forever evolving and it must respond to the particular challenges facing the contemporary Church and not lose sight of the common good. In contemporary terms, the nature of the contributions a Catholic university can make has been redefined by the pressing problems that beset society. These problems are urgent and they provide a Catholic tertiary institution with the opportunity to meet them in highly relevant ways that give flesh to Molony’s notion of social justice in a secular society.

To take one final example, as the world faces the issues of confronting an ageing population, society has to respond to the spiritual needs of older persons who have great difficulties in gaining access to adequate health care, education and work. At the same time, younger persons are restless to find a purpose and meaning for their lives as they become further alienated by the economic and secular imperative. Higher education has a special obligation to enrich both groups and to guide them to find the meaning they have lost.

With this discussion behind us, I ask myself ‘is it really better to be Catholic without having to be public?’ and ‘Is it really better to be public without being Catholic?’ My answer to both these questions is ‘no’. I believe being public and being Catholic at one and the same time is uniquely suited to the

26 Ibid
contemporary challenges of higher education. In a world of mass consumerism, people want to be empowered and a public Catholic University can genuinely make a difference. As I have argued in this article, being public and being Catholic mutually serve the common good and dynamically intersect with respect to the absolute right of us all to be treated ethically and morally with dignity, respect and Christian justice.

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