



**Vive Spiritu Fidei**  
*Live by the Spirit of Faith*

## La Salle Academy Publications

Number 7

AUSTRALIAN CATHOLIC  
UNIVERSITY

### **Beyond the school gates**

The distinctiveness  
of the Catholic  
school in an  
increasingly  
pluralist world.

Associate Professor William  
Sultmann AM  
Professor Br David Hall FMS

March 2021



LA SALLE ACADEMY



# Contents

<b>Foreword</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>‘For whom and about what?’</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Inspired by a Gospel imagination</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Education within the ‘public space’</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Recalling the tradition</b>	<b>5</b>
In the beginning	5
A century of religious	5
Beyond the crossroads	6
<b>Constants in context</b>	<b>9</b>
Faith as basis for meaning	9
Learning holistically	11
Community of shared beliefs and values	11
Formation for mission	11
<b>“It’s never over”</b>	<b>12</b>

# Foreword

This year marks two hundred years since the first Catholic school opened in Australia. When the 2021 academic year began close to 800,000 students across Australia entered the gates of a Catholic school – not to mention the numbers enrolled in Catholic higher education providers. We have come a long way since that January day in 1821 when thirty-one students enrolled in the first official Australian Catholic school in Parramatta, NSW. Spanning two centuries, it would be fair to say that Catholic education has helped nurture a more just, tolerant and cohesive Australian society.

Yet, every generation has its challenges and there is no denying that those engaged in Catholic education for the first one hundred and fifty years faced their fare share. With very little government funding until the 1970s, Catholic schools operated on the ‘smell of an oily rag’, relying on the sacrifices and generosity of religious sisters and brothers, clergy and parents.

In recent times Catholic schools have changed considerably. For the first sesquicentenary their purpose was clear; Catholic schools primarily educated Catholic students who had an identifiable place within a broader Catholic “cultural community”. In 2021 this profile and purpose is very different. The Australian Catholic Bishops in their recent pastoral letter on Catholic education, *200 Years*

*Young*, remark: Catholic schools “now have a different mix of students and less support for their specifically religious mission from outside the school than they had in the past.” (p.5)

The plurality that characterises today’s Catholic schools is something to be celebrated. In embracing this reality it is important to attend - as those who established our earliest schools did - to articulating and purposing the mission and vision of Catholic schools. Across the Catholic sector and beyond, there are varying views on the purpose of Catholic schools but we know that unless purpose is clear, realising our mission will be blurred and perhaps, compromised.

In this La Salle publication, *Beyond the School Gates*, Associate Professor Bill Sultmann and Professor Br David Hall offer a discussion paper that is intended to help Catholic school communities understand their purpose in the complex contemporary context in which we find ourselves.

The paper draws on Church documents, literature in the fields of education and theology, and their own rich experience across decades of engagement in Catholic education to present a succinct yet deeply rich paper that we hope will help Catholic schools to continue to be the jewel in the crown for the evangelising mission of the Catholic Church in Australia.



**Fr Anthony Casamento csma**  
**Vice President**

# 'For whom and about what?'

This resource is for those seeking to understand the nature and purpose of the Catholic school in an increasingly pluralist world. It may be useful in staff induction and formation programs, particularly for those new to Catholic education. Also, it has relevance for parents and caregivers, prospective staff, and anyone interested in exploring the Catholic school as a place of choice in education. It is a resource that invites consideration of a story, facilitates conversation and supports engagement. It is a reflection that recognises the 'seismic shifts' in society, Church and education within Australia, and provides a foundation to reflect upon the inspiration, expression and relationships that characterise the mission and identity of the Catholic school.

# Inspired by a Gospel imagination



The Catholic school is informed by and attentive to the person, message and Spirit of Jesus Christ. This is the Gospel imagination that is its cornerstone.

A short and somewhat 'sketchy' scene recorded in the Gospel (John 1: 39-41) describes the followers of John the Baptist as being curious about what Jesus was saying and doing. On one occasion when they saw Jesus pass they followed him, an action which prompted Jesus to ask, "What are you looking for?" Then followed what at first glance was a basic question, "Teacher, where do you live?" The response of Jesus was also surprising as no detail was offered. Rather, an abbreviated and open-ended response was given, "Come and see." The exchange between John's followers and

Jesus was the beginning of a deeper and wider story, one that has now evolved across two millennia.

Beyond the school gates invites the reader to 'come and see' through a short narration of what might be understood, experienced and observed in the Catholic school. It is an invitation into an educational community where learning and teaching are inspired by the Gospel, focus on the whole person, and evidenced in a community where

all are welcome, respected and valued. The invitation goes beyond hearsay, signage, geography, facilities and promotions to permit reflection on what is experienced in the ordinary and the everyday. It is going 'beyond the school gates' to consider educational possibilities, processes, expectations and outcomes that are founded in Spirit and constitute a distinctive identity.

*A place of transformation... where education of all is shaped and reflected in learning success... confident and creative individuals... and being active and informed within community.*

# Education within the 'public space'

The Catholic school in Australia is identified by Commonwealth and State governments as a non-government school. The argument for its operation and development is made on the grounds of choice for parents and caregivers, and justice in the allocation of resources to meet the demands of quality education. However, state and national Catholic commissions reinforce the distinctive character of the Catholic school as a basis for its mission and its engagement with the plurality of its educational and wider community.

How often have we heard a conversation as to what schools are supposed to be about? The following short conversation is one such example. In this instance, the conversation was shared at a significant moment at the end of an awards evening. (*Principal to family members*) "Congratulations on John's achievements, he has done very well." (*Mother in response*) "We are very proud of him, he has worked so hard." (*Father echoing support and being practical*) "But what do

you think he will need in the next five years, now that he is leaving this place?" (*Grandmother being intuitive*) "It's never over is it? We all continue to learn." (*Principal elaborating*) "Our students certainly need to be prepared academically, but that is not all. While with us, they need to be taught, cared for, included, challenged and find meaning. It's their world, their time and their talent and it is our privilege to engage and prepare them for a life beyond the gates."

All schools are called to be good schools and yet each is different. Each engages and serves a local and unique community while being connected to a wider educational and cultural context. The Catholic school is first and foremost a good school and one that is distinctive in its vision and mission. These dimensions resonate in its curriculum, religious dimension, structures, relationships and processes. It is a learning community within the 'public square', a community within a community that holds to a tradition of service and relationship.



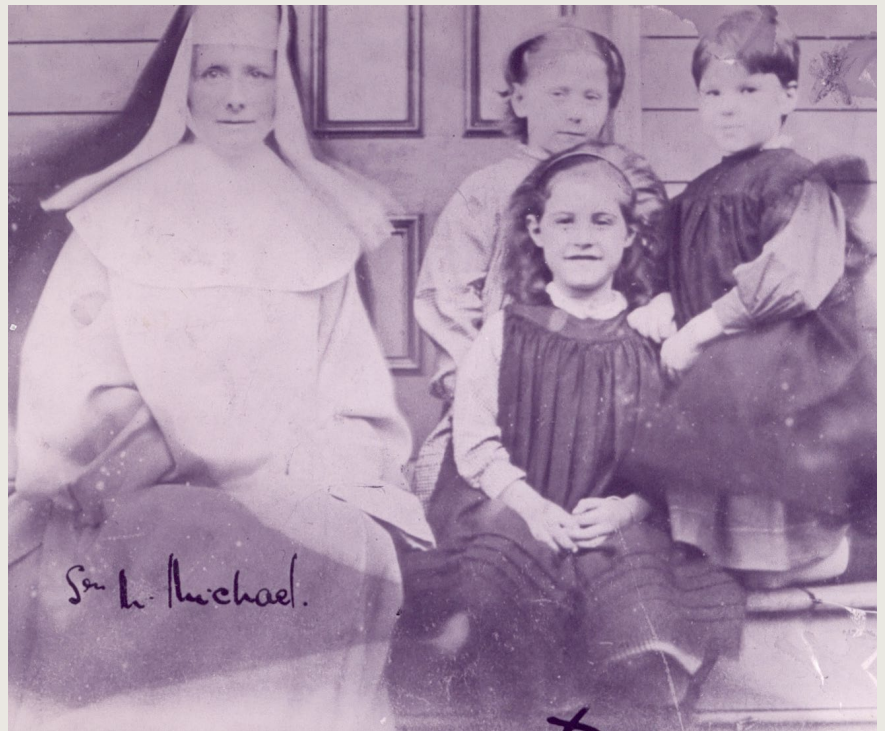
# Recalling the tradition

The Catholic school in Australia has emerged from humble beginnings to become an established educational service. Its story is a history in three stages across three centuries. It is a story as colourful as the colonial history that nurtured it. It evolved from a fledgling community's desire for liberation and meaning informed by the Catholic faith, was strengthened through the generosity and commitment of parents, clergy and religious, and today is seen in a multiplicity of educational services grounded in a living tradition serving a wider community.

## IN THE BEGINNING

The arrival of the first fleet in 1788 saw the commencement of settlement and the beginning of the Catholic faith in Australia. As about one quarter of the prisoner exiles were of Irish origin, the Catholic population, like the wider community of convicts, commenced in misery and degradation. The first Catholic arrivals were largely peasants, some speaking only Gaelic, and possessing nominal faith. It was not until 1820 when two priests, Joseph Therry and Philip Conolly, arrived in Sydney, that the Catholic faith gained some formal cohesion and pastoral presence. Other priests followed and, some fifteen years later, the first bishop was appointed, a Benedictine, John Bede Polding (1794 – 1877).

Education was first viewed as a practical means for civilising the population and reducing crime and disorder. It was initially provided within the context of the Anglican Church but was later expanded through the 1836 *Church and School Act* that permitted some equality among the main religious denominations. In the wake of this Act, some government funding of schools followed and the previously established Catholic community schools at Parramatta and Sydney received financial support. This was the start of the denominational school



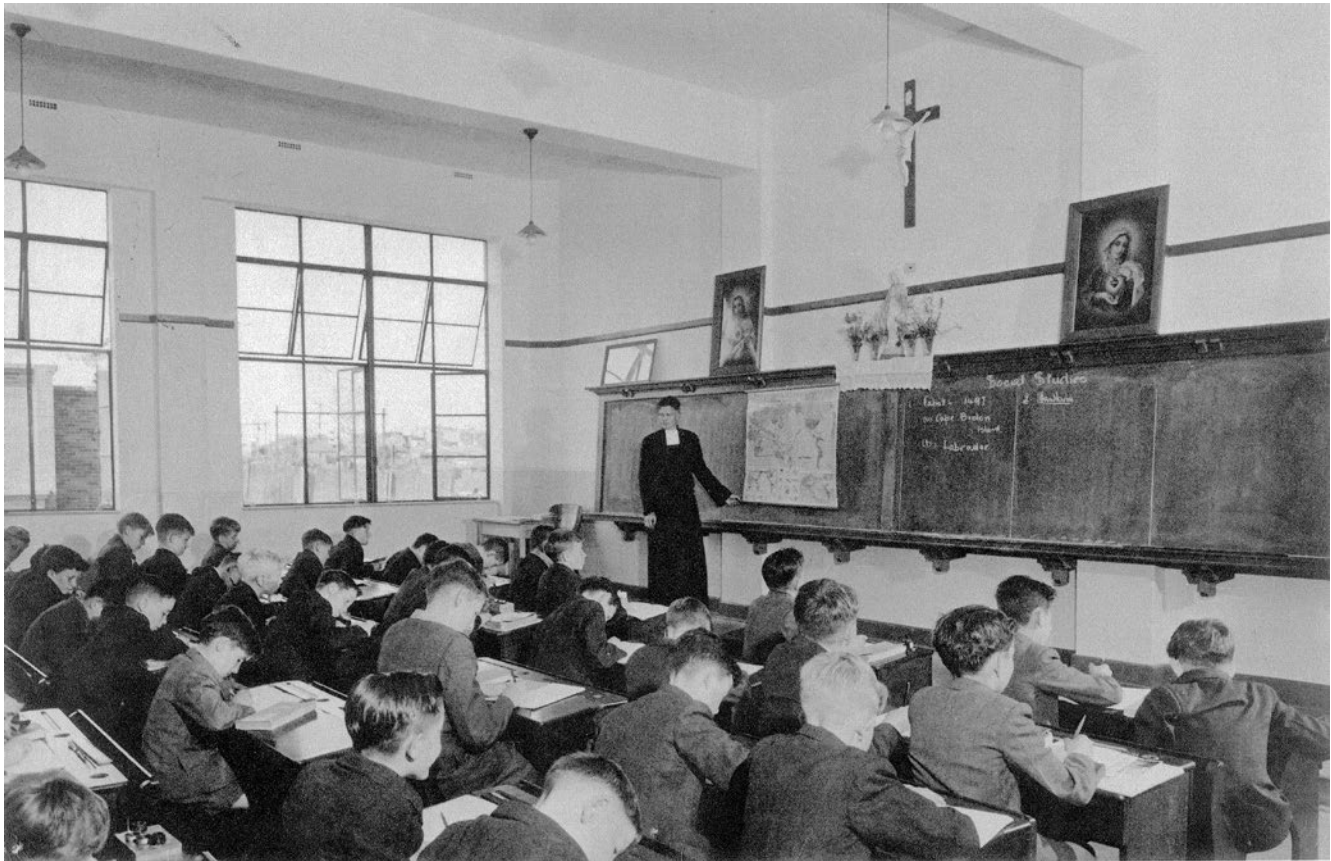
era which was to continue for decades. It was a period when education was centred on a social priority to liberate people within a rapidly changing, challenging and expanding community. Educational experiences were informed by faith traditions that held a view of the individual, family and local community that sought educational outcomes beyond the material and functional.

Over time, the experience of the *Church and School Act* demonstrated inefficiencies and became increasingly expensive. Moreover, as the population increased and spread, the press for a more general and universal system was advanced. This was resisted initially by civil and Church authorities intent upon retaining their distinctiveness within an era of growth. However, the policy of denominational schools changed with the 1850 *Australian Colonies Government Act* which authorised colonies to make their own

Constitutions and take responsibility for education within their newly established communities. This decision heralded the beginning of government and non-government systems of education. While all systems operated within the one community, each was characterised by the faith groups and communities they served and their distinctive mission and associated governance and leadership relationships.

## A CENTURY OF RELIGIOUS

The financial support for denominational faith-based schools was removed and replaced by free, secular and compulsory education across the states. Thereafter, the survival and expansion of Catholic schools relied on the commitment and efforts of three groups: clergy who made parishes the centre of Catholic life and spearheaded the establishment and maintenance of Catholic schools;



the generous and heroic work of religious priests, brothers and sisters who staffed these schools, and the cooperation and support of the Catholic population. The outcomes of these combined efforts are legendary. Building programs were accelerated, the presence of Religious Orders gained momentum, and the links between home, school and parish were strengthened.

The second century of Catholic schooling was one of emancipating Catholics to assume responsible social roles within a social milieu that was perceived as potentially hostile, sectarian and bigoted. It was also a time when Religious Orders witnessed a preferential option for the most disadvantaged. In this culture of service and outreach, Catholic schools experienced substantial enrolment growth and gained credibility in metropolitan, remote and regional centres. However, with the pressure of numbers and the accompanying demands to keep pace with facilities provision, resourcing and staffing, the challenges for Catholic schools eventually reached a crisis point. The frustration was evidenced in the Goulburn strike of 1962 where Catholic schools were

closed temporarily and students were enrolled in local government schools. The action served to reinforce the contribution of Catholic schools to the wider community and the need for government recognition and support. If Catholic schooling was to continue and address the expectations of quality within the wider educational environment, then more direct government assistance was a priority.

Within a relatively short period, the national government provided alleviation in the form of science and library facilities. As well, the financial burden of fees was addressed partially through the establishment of the Schools Commission and the adoption of government funding based on needs, a strategy particularly relevant to small, remote and rural parish-based schools. Further support for Catholic schools came with the establishment of Catholic Education Offices and their leadership in a range of integrated services to advance school mission and identity. Leadership formation, curriculum, resource distribution, policy, professional learning and employment and financial systems commensurate with community norms soon followed.

### BEYOND THE CROSSROADS

The beginnings of the third century of Catholic schooling in Australia, post 1970, have exhibited continuing renewal. The growth in cultural pluralism, the influence of secularism and the decline in religious affiliations and faith practice have combined to signal the need for new ways of understanding and engaging a wider community in the practice of Catholic Education. This is commonly referred to as re-contextualisation of identity within a pluralistic, multi-faith, aspirational and connected community. It is a process of drawing from the tradition and interpreting the Gospel in new and different ways that offer meaning and give life to all.

*The Second Ecumenical Council of the Catholic Church (Vatican II, 1962 – 1965)* heralded shifts in meaning and mission of an unprecedented nature for Catholic schools. The Council's *Declaration on Christian Education* confirmed education as foundational to life and living and reinforced the importance of the education of the whole person in light of the Gospel while recognising the school's role in partnership with parents and caregivers. Catholic schools were







challenged to draw from the living Spirit of the Gospel and the traditions of the Church while respecting and being responsive to the social and cultural needs and priorities of their communities.

Foundational to the new era for the Catholic school was the expansion of the traditional models of Catholic schooling which emancipated Catholics socially (*liberating model*) and promoted family and parish-based connections (*familial model*) to a model more engaged with the wider community and open to all who would share its values (*community service model*). The Catholic school is therefore an excellent educational community, a place where diversity is embraced, service outreach is encouraged and dialogue facilitates inclusion. This continuous renewal in vision and mission is to entail more than a process of accommodation as to what might work in 'changing times'. Rather, the Catholic school is being asked to renew itself in ways that reflect the tradition, being flexible and responsive to the present and providing quality educational experiences within and for a changing world. Faith tradition is foundational, informing educational purpose, curriculum processes, cultural

practices and structural relationships. Educating the whole person is affirmed as a means of recognising the dignity and wholeness of each person as a child of God. Inclusive practices are based on respectful dialogue within a community and gives expression to expectations.

The Bishops of New South Wales and the Australian Capital Territory articulated the experience of continuing change within the Catholic schools of Australia as a crossroads: a situation where demonstrable changes are apparent and new pathways needed to be considered and established. The choice of 'crossroads' as an image highlighted a sense of journey and the need to accommodate new directions in ways that recognise foundations in faith, quality service delivery and community priorities and accountability. The challenge, therefore, lies in identifying constants that provide a strong foundation for continuity and development in a new context. As with the Church more generally, Catholic schools are called to be open to new possibilities, while drawing from their own traditions when engaging in respectful dialogue with their own communities.

# Constants in context

Since Vatican II, Church literature on the Catholic school has provided a stream of reflections on the expression of vision, mission and identity across time, geography, cultures and social change. Within the La Salle Academy of the Australian Catholic University, four continuing constants in this literature were identified as significant ways for understanding the dynamic and responsive character of the Catholic school. Naming the constants as Faith, Learning, Community and Formation, these ever-present hallmarks might otherwise be nominated as vision, mission and identity, with formation as integral to the interpretation and sustainability of each.

## **FAITH AS BASIS FOR MEANING**

The vision of the Catholic school is centred in the person and message of Jesus as the Christ. Christian Scripture interprets Jesus as the ultimate disclosure of God in human history, and it is in his life and Spirit (Romans, 8:9) that Christians come to believe in and understand the essence of what it means to be fully human. The central message of Jesus is that the Kingdom of God is already active but not fully realised in the world, transforming aspects of human existence and bringing about liberation, fullness and meaning for life and living. The invitation of Christ is to be children of God, to be fellow creators with him in the work of God. Catholic schooling is inspired by this vision; by

a tradition embedded in a spirituality of engagement; by a prophetic mission; by leadership which is instrumental, witness based and integrated within ministry as a commissioned and recognised action within the life of the Church. It is a vision of faith that celebrates, teaches, serves, builds community and engages new horizons inspired by a living Gospel.





## LEARNING HOLISTICALLY

Learning and teaching in the Catholic school, founded on the Spirit of Christ, seeks the wholeness of the individual and community and is marked by Gospel values and meaningful relationships. The experience of curriculum in this light is responsive, liberating and integrated. It is learning and teaching with a believing disposition which is relevant, informed, resilient, open and consistent. It engages the Spirit of Christ in the informal and formal curriculum, the religious life of the school, and the processes and structures which constitute an identity. This identity facilitates deep learning that respects developmental stages, encourages agency and equity of students and staff, and applies creative pedagogies which empower students to know, be, relate and contribute to an abundant world. It is transformational in that it views education as more than the acquisition of knowledge and skills. It is education that embraces the integration of the Spirit in life, a search for truth which includes the scientific, historical and aesthetic. This search engages the relationship of faith with reason; science with mystery and, the integration of faith, life and culture in ways that view education as formative, developmental, life-giving and life-enabling. It is a holistic educational experience which promotes the attainment of wisdom and its application to life and living.

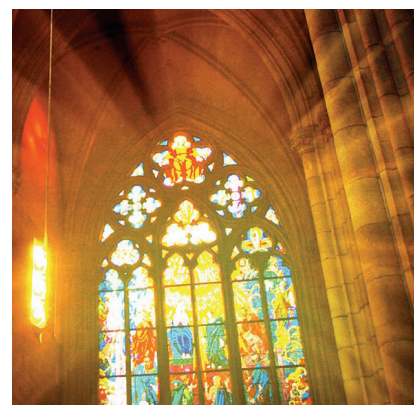
## COMMUNITY OF SHARED BELIEFS AND VALUES

The Catholic school is a place of welcome and inclusion. It is founded on shared beliefs and values which shape purpose, processes and outcomes. It draws upon its traditions and recognises the complexity and needs of its unique social reality. This is community engagement which influences the choice and delivery of curriculum. At the same time, the school responds to the expectations of the professionals that constitute it and the vision and mission of its governing authority. It does this through respectful dialogue; creating a culture of exchange to inform and be formed in ways that advance the mission of God in the world. It is a culture that goes beyond the exchange of views to include sharing within an ethical framework that incorporates freedom and dignity and generates a grammar of dialogue that builds bridges and finds answers to challenges.



## FORMATION FOR MISSION

The Catholic school educator walks with, listens to, interprets and models for young people and community the richness of an educational experience informed by the Gospel. This is a ministry supported through formation which shapes 'being' and 'becoming' and applies outcomes in personal, relational, professional and communal ways. It is preparation for sharing a Gospel imagination through teaching and learning. It is engaging religion in private and public forums, premised on openness and dialogue, and relevant to context, variable types of commitment, invitation and intention. It involves engagement with a faith inheritance which facilitates knowledge, commitment and behaviours that enable personal transformation. It is shaped by an ethical perspective where truth, justice, love and peace are enriched through encounters grounded in faith. It is the experience of transformation in going beyond the encounter to know more, be more and so do more within the mission, life and culture of the Catholic school.



*A place to care...  
where all are invited,  
respected and loved...*

# "It's never over"

The reflection of a grandmother shared at the outset of this discussion was prophetic. Education is 'never over', nor is it focused only on the individual. The question posed by a visiting dignitary to high school graduates focuses the concept. "Now that you have had the experience of education, what are you going to do?" The not so veiled question was certainly about continuing education, but it is also about making a difference in the world, understood and realised in the person of Jesus Christ. It is about making a difference where the Kingdom of God is awakened in self, others and creation.

The question, 'Where to now?' is also applicable to the role of the Catholic school as a face and place of Church within and in service of community. Aligning with tradition, Catholic schools of the 21st century are called to promote the wholeness of people; the intellectual, physical, social, emotional, moral, spiritual and aesthetic development and wellbeing of young Australians. They do this through their educational vision, mission and identity which are founded in Faith, Learning, Community and Formation. Faith provides the beliefs and values that shape and pervade all schooling experiences; Learning engages the development of wisdom through the liberating contributions of technology, pedagogy, content and knowledge; Community is founded upon relationships, stewardship, outreach and inclusion and Formation

supports the integration of faith, life and culture within a community of authentic practice.

Engagement with the Catholic school is unique for each person. Literature, conversation, observation, participation and media coverage all play a role in encouraging first steps in this encounter. However, the uniqueness of each Catholic school community will give rise to differing emphases, charisms or specific gifts to the community it serves. This is its identity. While every Catholic school can be considered different, each will be identified by the interaction of the constants that demonstrate its contribution to and influence from the learning community while at the same time being integrated within the broader mission of the Church. This is renewal within and beyond its gates. In this sense, 'beyond the gates' is the goal to enter and appreciate an existing community, as much as the endeavour of this community to be outwardly engaged. The gates open both ways.

Evangelists Matthew (7:24-27) and Luke (6:48-49) contrast buildings that are founded on rock and sand, and, in times of rain, flood and wind are tested. The implication for the Catholic school is that its foundation is secure when it is centred on Jesus Christ, through the Spirit. It is a vision that is sacred in origin, magnificent in intention and profound in application. It is a source of joy and hope, an experience of 'light and leaven' with those it serves. It is a

community where the Spirit of Christ dwells, a community that is challenged to become a sign and instrument of God in the world. The invitation into this community is to go 'beyond the school gates' and so experience its foundations in a living dynamic Gospel which inspires.

The Catholic school is

- a place of **care**: where all are invited, respected and loved
- a place of **relationship**: where people know, share and learn together in harmony
- a place of **learning**: where students, teachers and families journey in learning inspired by Christ
- a place of **service**: where learning empowers self in service of others and the world; and
- a place of **transformation**: where education of all is shaped and reflected in learning success, confident and creative individuals and being active and informed within the community.

This reflection complements the motivations, service, insights and experiences of legions of educators who have given generously to the mission of the Catholic school. While it serves as a means for reflection and does not presume completeness, the hope is that the experience of the reflection allows the reader to return to the beginning and so know more fully a privileged and special place.





**Associate Professor William (Bill) Sultmann** is a teacher, psychologist, theologian and administrator with executive and governance roles in education, health and welfare sectors across 40 years. Qualifications span arts, education, psychology, and leadership with research doctorates in educational psychology and pastoral theology. Fellowships exist within education and management professional bodies. His current position is Associate Professor and Director of Catholic School Identity and Mission within ACU with responsibilities as Deputy Dean within the La Salle Academy. Continuing interests are with professional writing and governance participation in not-for-profit boards in support of mission, nationally and internationally.



**Professor Br David Hall** is the foundation Dean of the La Salle Academy at ACU. La Salle has responsibility for programs that the university offers in the areas of educational leadership, faith formation and religious education and works across the Faculty of Education and Arts and Faculty of Theology and Philosophy. Professor Br Hall came to this position after 30 years in Catholic education where he held positions as teacher, head of mission and religious education, principal and systems administrator. In addition to his duties as Dean of La Salle, he teaches in the Master of Educational Leadership and is involved in the governance of Australian Catholic schools. Among his range of international engagements, Professor Br Hall designed and led a Catholic school leaders' program across 22 countries in Africa.



**Vive Spiritu Fidei**  
*Live by the Spirit of Faith*