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## Upon This Rock

*Leadership for Catholic Schools*

Catholic educators are well familiar with these three words from Matthew 16:18. In this passage Jesus tells Peter that he will build His church upon Peter, the rock. Scholars acknowledge this moment as the inception of the papacy and the beginning step in building the institutional Church in Rome.

Another rock, with which Canadians are familiar, is our island province of Newfoundland. During my recent trip to “the rock”, I was struck by the natural beauty and power of sea and land meeting on the shores of our Atlantic jewel. It caused me to fully appreciate the pride and joy that Newfoundlanders feel about their home. Just outside St. John’s I visited Cape Spear - the most easterly point of Newfoundland and the first place in Canada to experience the beginning of each new day.

Newfoundland holds another meaning for Ontario Catholics. It was the province that lost its publicly funded Catholic school system in 1998 after 11 years of courageous struggle by the province’s Catholic community. It is a compelling story that is best told by those who were there – people like Gerry Fallon, whose article is profiled in this issue of *Principal Connections*.

Over the past eight years the situation in Newfoundland has stood like the lighthouse on the rocks of Cape Spear, as a warning to those who wish to preserve publicly funded Catholic education in Ontario. Indeed, during the Bill 160 protest in the fall of 1997 many of us were concerned about the potential introduction of similar referendum legislation that might jeopardize our minority rights to have our own school system.

Since that time, we have seen the re-election of the Harris government followed by the election of the first McGuinty government. While both leaders have focused on education during their terms, neither has challenged the existence of any of the four publicly funded school systems in Ontario. As Ontario prepares for a provincial election in October 2007, the “question” of publicly funded Catholic schools may well be replaced by a broader question about funding other faith-based schools.

In *This Moment of Promise* (1984) the Ontario Conference of Catholic Bishops supported the funding of other faith-based schools:

*The primacy of parental rights in education is a value which should be realized not only by Catholic parents but also by others. We have publicly committed ourselves to support the concept of the development of alternative schools for people of other faith communities.*

As we support the view of our bishops, we reflect on our leadership role in Catholic high schools that now include significant numbers of non-Catholic students. We consider the admission of elementary students in our remote and rural areas that are struggling to hold on to their communities because of mining and mill closures. Amidst our daily thoughts and concerns, do we have any time and resources left to help the four privately funded Catholic schools in Newfoundland?

Among my numerous memories of Newfoundland is the image of the Inukshuk which has become a very popular desktop sculpture for people in leadership positions. Keynote speaker Sr. Elizabeth Davis pointed out that the Inukshuk can only be built from broken stones. Her message suggested that it takes many people working together to provide guidance and leadership for those who follow.

*This Moment of Promise* speaks clearly about our leadership role:

*As no one else, you who are principals and vice-principals have a unique opportunity to create the character of your school. Your reach extends both into the classroom and into the community. The life, the values, and the feeling of each school derive in large part from your commitment to your staff, to your students, and to the gospel.*

In *Fulfilling the Promise*, we read:

*The range of qualities and competencies demanded of all educational administrators is an impressive one. For Catholic educators, we believe the motivation to develop and nourish these qualities and skills must spring from a deep sense of Christian vocation and mission. Administrative leadership, in this sense, is spiritual leadership, for it is inspired by the love of God and exercised in the spirit of that love.*

As we embark on a new school year, let us be ever mindful of the privilege and prerogative that we have as leaders in Ontario Catholic schools. We enjoy a right that is enshrined in our Constitution, but we must stay awake to the views and challenges that percolate in other communities. Most importantly, we must fulfill our roles with conviction and compassion that sets the tone in each and every one of our schools throughout the year.

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References:

*This Moment of Promise* - <http://www.occb.on.ca/english/promise.html>

*Fulfilling the Promise* - <http://www.occb.on.ca/english/fulfilling.html>