



LEADERSHIP In Our Catholic Schools Today

By **Bishop Fred Colli**, Diocese of Thunder Bay

Excerpts from his address to PQP Part I Candidates in Thunder Bay

We know that the role of the laity has changed in the church, in particular in the past 30 years. We have seen a greater involvement of the lay person in church structures (pastoral councils), in the administration of the sacraments of the church (ministers of communion, readers) and in particular in our schools. The role of the laity, in conjunction with the role of the priest or religious is to be an active witness of our Faith in the world today. In particular, principals in our schools must be that active sign or witness if they are to be effective in their ministry and vocation. This challenge to witness to our faith life is a challenge we are still trying to understand or grasp. Each day, we see how it affects our lives, by the demands that are placed upon us and our response is often varied.

When I was asked to share a few words with you concerning leadership in our Catholic schools today, the word that continually came to mind was the word witness. We all know that to witness to something we need certain attitudes or characteristics. I wish to share with you some of the words of the Lord and my thoughts on how a Catholic school principal can witness to Faith and what is needed for this witness.

Then the wife of Zebedee came to Jesus with her two sons, bowed before him and asked this favour of him. Promise me that these two sons of mine will sit at your right hand and your left when you are king. "You don't know what you are asking for." Jesus answered the sons, "Can you drink the cup of suffering that I am about to drink?" They answered, "We can. We can...we are willing to..."

Mark 10:20-22

Witness: The "W" refers to *willingness* or a will or a desire to accept this challenge to lead. This challenge cannot be forced upon us. We must be willing to undertake this challenge of our own accord. We must accept it wholeheartedly including all its circumstances and ramifications. How willingly do we accept this challenge? An act of the will as defined in our theology is the act of choosing, striving, a purposeful desire, responsible self-determination or resolve. Will is a faculty or power and it can guide us to a deeper loving and to a determined resolve. We must be willing to accept this challenge to be a witness to others of the Faith that we share.

St. Paul said: Do all things without murmuring and arguing, so that you may be blameless and innocent, children of God, without blemish in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, in which you shine like stars in the world.

Letter to the Philippians 2

Witness: The "I" in the word refers to *integrity*. We must be people of integrity if we are to witness to others. Our own lives must be principled according to the norms and teachings of our Catholic faith. Canon Law states that "teachers must be outstanding for their correct doctrine, their witness of Christian Living and pedagogical skill." (C.804). It is this integrity that will shine before the other members of our staff and will prompt them to follow that same example. Integrity in one's life, I believe, speaks also of a surety of one's beliefs and position which is formed on Gospel values.

Jesus said to his disciples – do not let your hearts be troubled, trust in God still and trust in me.

John 14:1

Witness: The "T" in the word, I believe refers to *trust*; a trusting in one's staff or team of teachers. As leaders we are called to work with and among others. The teachers are our team workers and if we cannot trust in them and their talents which we help them discover and develop, then our work would be impossible. It is too great a task for us to undertake on our own. We are in need of a team to work *for and with us*. Our responsibility is to recognize the talents of this team, to help them bring forth these talents, to nurture them and to encourage them. Some members of our team might be more talented than us in some fields, but as leaders we are called to discern these gifts and to trust in them. In my role as a bishop, I am not the most skilled in every aspect of ministry; that would be impossible. My role is not to be better in everything and everyone, but to help lead those who are talented to a greater fulfillment of their potential and to the use of that talent for their good and the common good.

Jesus said: "No one patches up an old coat with a piece of new cloth, for the new patch will shrink and make an even bigger hole in the coat. Nor does anyone pour new wine into old wineskins, for the skins will burst, the wine will be poured

out and the skins will be ruined. Instead, new wine is poured into new wineskins and both will keep in good condition.”

Matthew 9:16-18

Witness: The “N” in the word refers to *newness* and the newness of our times. It is inadequate to say our school environment has just changed. In many ways it is almost entirely new. Openness to that newness and not being afraid of it, even if it means a new definition of our role as principals and leaders, should be what characterizes our witness. We see the new environment today with different students from all walks of life and economic and social situations. We no longer have an elite clientele in our schools. We see new teachers, with new ideas and new perceptions. We see new administrators who propose changes in the structure and programs of schools. And we see new governments who constantly challenge us to re-examine who we are and where our priorities lie, with new laws, regulations and budgets. What characterizes a good witness in this situation is an *adaptability* or a *maturity* to adjust for the good of the student and the system to new ideas and methods and to do so with enthusiasm and openness.

Jesus called the twelve disciples together and gave them power and authority to drive out all demons and to cure diseases. Then he sent them out to preach the kingdom of God... and the disciples left and traveled through all the villages, preaching the Good News and healing people everywhere.

Luke 9:1-7

Witness: The “E” of the word, refers to *evangelization* or the gospel call. What does this mean for us? I believe it is synonymous with leadership in our Catholic schools. The Gospel or Good News is the message of our life. How do we evangelize? In effect this evangelization is *making Christ present to others*; to our staffs, our students and anyone with whom we come in contact. Evangelization is proclaiming the Gospel not as something secret and personal, but as something that brings meaning to our lives and affects our entire life-style. This is best accomplished through our understanding of the Scriptures or through the development of a good spiritual life; a life prayer and understanding of the gospel message. A message that is familiar to us, through our study, our reading and our prayer. As Catholics we have long neglected the Bible and its lessons. As Catholic leaders, it is only through a familiarity with these lessons that we will be able to live lives modeled on the values the Scriptures present to us.

Jesus said to his disciples, “Take this all of you and eat, this is my body, and this is my blood, which will be given up for you. Do this in memory of me and I will give you living bread and living water...”

Witness: The first “S” in the word refers to something essential to all Catholic leadership. In order to evangelize we must be nourished and supported. That nourishment and support comes in a great way from the *Sacraments* of our church. I cannot see how a Catholic principal can be a true Catholic witness or leader without the sustenance of the Sacraments in their lives. You might argue that we have excellent non-catholic principals and teachers and that is true. Most probably they

are of fine and reputable character and integrity. These are essential for all leadership. But a *Catholic* leader, by one’s very membership in the Catholic faith community is called to be *more* of a witness and therefore needs to be nourished in order to respond to the challenge of leadership in our world. The very Eucharist which is the core and essential stronghold of our faith community is a necessary *food* for all good Catholic leadership, for all people of the faith community; lay or cleric. That is precisely why we started this gathering sharing the most important food we have, the Eucharist.

And during the supper, he got up from the table, took off his outer robe, and tied a towel around himself. Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash his disciples feet... Jesus asked, “Do you know what I have done to you?”

(John13: 4-13)

Witness: The final “S” in the word witness refers to *service*. I was told that as a bishop you are called to lead others. But if our leadership or shepherding is to be true, it must be highlighted in *service to others* after the model of Christ the Lord himself. That does not mean *subservience* to others, but in *service to others*. Service means direction, guidance and an openness to listen to criticism ourselves. Service is the key in proper Catholic leadership. We see this in the example of the Pope. We might disagree or even argue with some of his teachings or feel uncomfortable or uneasy, with the rules that guide us as Catholics, but his role is to guide the Church in service to humankind. Any parent understands this concept, since they have been called to guide their children and they recognize the type of service and commitment that is theirs. Can we give service in the image of Christ? If I gave you a bowl, a pitcher of warm water and a towel, would you willingly wash the feet of someone in this room right now? Service is to give definition to our leadership role in the school and church today.

To recap, we are called to be witnesses of our Faith. To bear witness as a true leader we must be willing to do so; we must lead lives of integrity; we must work as team builders, trusting, recognizing and nurturing talents in others; we must be open to the newness of our age and be able to adapt in maturity to new directions; we must see evangelization or the gospel message as the root of our vocation; we must be nourished by the sacraments of life, especially the Eucharist; and we must be servants of one another as the Lord demonstrated in His life. Embracing all of this, we will be a witness and a good Catholic leader.

What tools are we given to develop these leadership qualities in our school? The tools are many and easily obtainable.

You must have a Bible to know God’s word and there must be a familiarity with its message and its lessons. Knowledge of the Scriptures is essential for evangelization. Many Catholics do not even own a Bible, let alone read one once in a while. How many of us here, have ever taken a course on the Scriptures? We encourage Grade 4 students to read the Good News books we give them and to learn the stories, but have we lost that encouragement in our lives? We must ask ourselves, do we see the values that the Scriptures present to us or are we too heavily tempted by the values of this world in all its commercialism?

You must have a *Catechism of the Catholic Church* to know the teachings of our Faith. This is the book that complements the Bible. It helps us to better understand the true teachings of our Church, without having them clouded by the interpretation of someone else. It is an essential tool for Catholic leadership today and is just as essential as the latest curriculum adaptations, ministry documents or meeting proposals.

You must have a *link* to a parish community in order to understand the concept of church as presented by the Second Vatican Council and in order to be nourished and given an opportunity to *minister* in other ways. Through the church community, we grow in our understanding of *universality and acceptance* of others and see more closely the link that binds us through our baptismal faith commitment. In ministry we learn the true meaning of *service to others* in the name of Christ.

To be a good Catholic leader today, you must have a *devotion* to Christ and the Eucharist and you must be nourished by these Sacraments in order to develop a faith life. It is that *spiritual life*, which will teach you how to be sensitive to the needs of others and it will teach you concern for others in a deep and caring way. A spiritual or prayer life is not just a component of the life of a priest or religious sister but is proper to each and every Christian. It usually begins at the Sunday Eucharist in our parishes.

A tool necessary for leadership is an *awareness* to our changing times and roles in the educational system. Being in touch with new methods, ideas and directions is all a part of continued education and a mind set that things can be done differently than in the past and that these new ideas might even be better than the older methods.

Love for one's work is a key ingredient for good leadership. You should see your work in the teaching or administration field as a *vocation* and not merely a job. A vocation, as the Latin word implies, means a calling from God. It does not make you a saint to respond to this call; however, it does bring some sense of contentment and fulfillment to your life in this world which can be a "valley of tears" for us.

Finally, the virtue of *patience* coupled with a *generous concern* for young people and people in general will assist the Catholic leader to be a fine witness in our world today. Personalities vary and people are different as we know. Thanks to the Lord we are not all the same, but are all unique in a unique world. We must be patient and accepting of others with a concern that reaches out to them, even before we consider our own needs. This concern is modeled after Christ who reached out to the sinners, the marginalized and the unwanted. We can find those in our schools, both among staff and students. Christ reached out to the difficult and the unruly. As he did, so should we. This gift of patience and concern alone can change our entire understanding of our leadership role.

In conclusion I must say that I am not an educator in the strict sense of the term as you are principals and directors. I am more a preacher as you can see. But I am boldly going to respond with what I feel are challenging remarks.

I believe that if one or more of the skills that I have shared with you today are seriously missing in a Catholic leader, then the chances

of being a faithful and successful witness of Catholicism in our world would be rather difficult if not impossible. Today, we are being challenged to declare our difference from the other school systems. We are different and we are seeking to better define that difference in our curriculum, structures and environments. This will mean very little if that difference is not seen in the leadership that our Catholic principals demonstrate in their vocation. That difference must be seen in our attitudes towards our work or our vocation. That difference must be seen in our interpersonal relationships with one another. That difference must be seen in our witness to Catholic faith in our lifestyles. That difference must be seen in the model we present to staff and students.

Fr. Jim Mulligan in his book about Catholic education and teachers notes that there are three kinds of teachers in our Catholic systems: those for whom teaching is a true vocation; those for whom teaching is a mere job; and those who are somewhere in between those extremities.

If for you it is a vocation, then I encourage you to continue to strive to even higher ideals in your leadership. If for you it is merely a job, with no desire to strive higher or witness to a greater good, then you do us a disservice in the Catholic system. If for you it is somewhere in between, where I am sure most of us are, then we strive to be better models and witnesses because that is the meaning of education and leadership. We strive also to help bring others to a higher level with us.

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