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A PERSPECTIVE

ON CATHOLIC SCHOOL LEADERSHIP

February 2010

Whether we examine our vision documents on the role of the Catholic school principal or reflect on our experience, both underscore the critical importance of *faith leadership* if our schools are to remain Catholic. I gladly share the following reflection with Ontario's Catholic school principals and vice-principals.

Mostly, I look to the future, and try to identify the questions and challenges that must be faced by the community of Catholic school leaders. For a moment, though, I want to look backward: the Catholic education project in Ontario must be celebrated.

Recent Ministry standardized test scores suggest that Ontario's Catholic schools offer a very solid education for our students. I believe, too, that our schools are places of daily miracles and touches of grace. For the most part, I feel that it is the commitment and dedication of the Catholic school principal that is the source and inspiration for much of what we celebrate. As administrators, academic leaders and faith animators you deserve the gospel praise: *Well done, good and faithful servants!* Please regard the following reflection both as a symbolic thank you for your dedication and as a help and guideline for your ministry now and into the future.

I structure this essay on leadership in Catholic education in three parts. A first reflection will touch on *the context* in which we find ourselves in 2010; a second reflection proposes *three leadership strategies* that are helpful, indeed necessary, in our contemporary working context; and a third reflection suggests *two essential, personal habits of the soul* needed to minister in 2010 as a Catholic school leader. I focus on what I consider the larger Catholic school leadership questions and issues. I believe they are critically important questions, as opposed to the *urgent* questions that administrators must deal with day in and day out. A great weakness in the seemingly inevitable bureaucracy of Catholic education, endemic to every Catholic school board, is that the urgent takes time and focus away from what is ultimately more important; conserving the enduring gift of Catholic education for future generations. The challenge for the Catholic school leader is to find the way to assure reflection and action on the large important questions, all the while dealing with the urgent administrivia of the day.

UNDERSTANDING OUR CONTEXT

Assumption: Catholic school leaders share with public school leaders the pertinent education issues in our 2010 context: school board elections in November 2010; changes in report cards coming for elementary schools; implementation of full-day kindergarten; the particular goals and annual objectives of each individual board; etc. I propose, however, the following three large but critically important contextual considerations, *challenges*, which affect every Catholic school board in Ontario and consequently, every Catholic school principal. I am talking here, not so much about counting trees but looking at the totality of the forest!

CONTEXT 1

**Acknowledging the Paradigm Shift that has taken place:
“Listen up, people; we have a situation!”**

There is a renewed assault on Ontario’s public Catholic education system. The 2007 provincial election *No to financing faith-based schools option* has provoked new questioning of the entitlement of Catholics to have their publicly financed schools. *No faith group should have public money*. This is the new mantra that has gained currency. Even the United Nations has weighed in that it is unfair for Catholics to have special status, which other faiths do not. Increasingly, there is a public sense that we can do in Ontario (take away the constitutional privilege that guarantees public funding for Catholic schools) what was done in Newfoundland and Quebec. This new public mentality is very worrisome for the Ontario Catholic education community.

Increasingly, postmodern secular reality, the reality both reflected and promoted in the major print and electronic media, sees no place for public funding for Catholic schools. It is a question of *faith vs. secularism*. Secularism maintains that faith and religion are private, personal options. As an extension, it should be unthinkable that one faith tradition should have the privilege Catholics enjoy in their publicly financed schools. We find ourselves on this new playing field. A major shift has taken place in the way a significant segment of the non-Catholic Ontario public now perceives the privilege of Catholic education. This shift in thinking must call us to work at the Catholic education project that we have inherited with more intention and quality. Further, we must be ready to give an account of the privilege we enjoy. We must demonstrate clearly and effectively how our Catholic schools contribute richly to the intellectual, social, cultural and ethical life of the province of Ontario.

CONTEXT 2

Economic and Social Brokenness

The reality of poverty, the loss of jobs and the so-called jobless recovery

An exercise: Consult your local food bank, soup kitchen or St. Vincent de Paul Society and the team that runs the school breakfast program for the colours and contours of the social and economic impact of poverty across Ontario. Nearly 1,300,000

residents of Ontario continue to live in poverty. Forty-three per cent of all poor children in Canada live in Ontario. Many of these children are in our schools. In the church, we have the Catholic social teaching ideal of a preferential option for the poor. The principals in our Catholic schools are challenged, in collaboration with their staffs, to make this ideal a reality in each school.

Fragmentation of family life; loss of parenting skills among too many

Pity the children! Pity the children who pay the price for parents who cannot work things out or who are so fragile or needy or so economically desperate or materialistic themselves that they cannot or will not care properly and meaningfully for their children. We have some of these children in our schools.

Loss of a systemic moral compass

There is certainly something very true in the prophetic lament of Popes John Paul II and Benedict XVI regarding moral relativism and excessive individualism. These two –isms are certainly operative in our own Ontario society. Catholic schools enjoy a great, great possibility during this moment in history: to help our students, in age appropriate ways, to recognize these moral vacuums and then present to them the gospel alternative.

CONTEXT 3

A fragile church

A church looking for a way to engage the ever-increasing secularization of our culture

2010 is clearly a challenging time in which to live and engage in the ministry of Catholic education. In a number of ways, ours is a fragile church. In contrast to our history in the first part of the 20th century, faith and parish church are no longer at the centre of a Catholic’s mindset or consideration. Many Catholics are educated with degrees from universities and colleges. Some no longer look to the priest or the church to interpret life. There is a plurality of ways of looking at things. Secularism influences some to question and even dismiss much about the church, including certainties and truth. Clearly, a critical look at the history and functioning of the church can be a sign of a mature faith, a faith seeking understanding. Setting aside or dismissing the core creedal beliefs of our faith is another question. This can lead to each person building his/her own truth, a truth often at variance with the Gospel. This makes it very challenging to preach and to teach the word of God and the truth of the Gospel; challenging to preach and teach within the church and even more challenging to propose the faith and the Gospel to a sceptical culture.

Yet, as Catholic Christians, we have a very rich tradition and understanding of the meaning and purpose of life. Our social teaching is grounded in the words and actions of Jesus. The faith of past generations and of millions living today is a sign of a great abundance of grace. This holds true for many Catholic educators across the province. It is a difficult task, but not impossible to

teach and proclaim in the secularized society that is Ontario today. To do so, we need boldness and imagination in large doses and great trust that the Holy Spirit journeys with us. This is our moment in history.

A church reeling from scandal

We also experience the fragility of the church in the clergy abuse question that does not seem to go away. Sexual abuse is clearly an abuse of power. The clergy abuse that has surfaced over the last 25 years and more recently highlighted in the churches of Antigonish, Ireland and Cornwall has undoubtedly wounded the credibility of the church. Certainly, wounded Catholic credibility does not help our work and ministry as Catholic educators.

Tension between small “c” Catholic and large “C” Catholic

Large “C” Catholic is a way of describing Catholics who see participating in Sunday Eucharist and the sacramental life of the church and trying intentionally to live out the Gospel as identifying characteristics, essential to their lives. Small “c” Catholics are those who are baptized but are more loosely affiliated with Eucharist and participation in the life and teaching of the church. Experience tells us that most of the kids in our schools today are children of small “c” Catholics. This is not a criticism; this is the way it is.

The fear, however, concerns how many of our Catholic teachers and perhaps even principals are small “c” Catholics. To preserve the identity and unique mission of the Catholic school, we need a critical mass of large “C” Catholic educators. Do we have them now? Will we have them ten years from now? In 2007 after the last provincial election, Michael Valpy, the political commentator for the *Globe and Mail* wrote, “Give the Catholic school system another ten years!” His idea is that with the increasing secularization of the Catholic population, including students and teachers, we are slowly watering down and compromising the vision and mission that give us strength and purpose.

It may be a “fragile” church, yet because of the message and the person of Jesus whom we proclaim, we have such rich good news to communicate. How does the Catholic school administrator participate in and lead others, especially teachers, in this 2010 proclamation? This is a difficult but critically important and not impossible task!

STRATEGIES FOR LEADERSHIP

#1

Learning to be comfortable in the mess; living with uncertainty

The Holy Spirit calls us to be in the middle of things as things are, not as we would like them to be!

(Gabriel Daly)

Catholic school leaders, take note; this vital piece of theology is a confirmation of your own vocation. Do not yearn to be in some other time or in some other place. The present moment is

ours. This is where we are meant to be. So how do we stickhandle our way effectively and joyfully through, what can be called “the mess” of our present moment? There seems to be no playbook or manual these days. We learn best when we turn to the Holy Spirit within each of us and learn from one another. Look around you. What are the best practices for living in the mess? Who are the colleagues who live out and activate the vision of Catholic education in their schools and who consistently have the competence to see what must be done and the courage to do it? Let us learn from one another.

#2

Embracing collegiality

Administering the Catholic school project is too large for any one person.

The “conversation imperative” is necessary today for leading and governing. Talking together and analyzing and strategizing; depending on the experience and insights of others; a Catholic school staff must become a team to meet the many different challenges encountered while working together at fulfilling the unique mission of the Catholic school as well as addressing the life situations of students.

#3

Sustaining Catholic identity

The increasing secularization of society raises many questions regarding Catholic identity.

How do we understand the term Catholic in 2010? Are Catholic schools and Catholic educators in 2010 living off the heritage, the faith of past generations, without assuming ownership of vocation and mission and personal Catholic faith commitment? When we say Catholic school, what weight does that descriptive Catholic carry? How does a staff understand the mission of their Catholic school? A Catholic school may have a majority of secularized Catholic students, a number of non-Catholics and some Catholic teachers (possibly in some schools, worryingly, the majority of the staff) who seem to be not too concerned or interested in embracing their vocation as ministry or participating in the Catholic mission of the school? Is there a critical mass of convinced Catholic educators sufficient to sustain the Catholic identity of the school?

Ontario’s public school system is an excellent education system. For Catholic leaders the abiding question should always be, “What is the difference between *them and us*?” (Not that we are better than they are). How do we do things differently? Certainly, the historical and political story of Catholic education in Ontario makes clear that *there has been and should be a difference*. Public schools deliver education in secular terms. That means of course, in curriculum and leadership style, in counselling and coaching etc. Catholic schools deliver education in the context of a Catholic faith community. For leaders in Catholic schools, three questions: Is the Catholic thing, the *res catolica*, the Catholic difference obvious? Is it effective? Is it worked at over and over again?

PERSONAL RESOURCES TWO "HABITS OF THE SOUL"

#1

Recovering a theology of vocation for principal, teacher and student

Vocation refers to the sense in our soul that we are living our lives in response to an invitation from the Lord to use our talents and gifts in a professional way to help build God's kingdom on earth. In the church, the term is unfortunately sometimes used in a very restricted sense, and so, for example, we bemoan the fact that we have so few priests and religious. Yet, at the same time, we should be rejoicing in the awesome potential we have in the baptismal priesthood of the laity.

This is especially true in Catholic education, where the vocation of the Catholic educator is even more specified as it indicates a role one plays in the mission and ministry of the church. For the principal, the faith leader of the Catholic school, developing and fostering this "habit of the soul" should be a priority; often reflecting on one's own vocation, and then animating and tending to the baptismal vocation of the Catholic educators on staff. They, in turn, are called to gently foster awareness each student should have of her or his own unique vocation.

#2

Working at interiority under the rubric of: "You can't give what you don't have yourself."

We are talking about some key questions touching on Catholic school leadership in 2010. Clearly, faith in Jesus and participation

in the sacramental and gospel life of the Catholic Christian community are central to Catholic school leaders. Therefore, it is not at all out of bounds to refer to spirituality and to the spiritual life of the Catholic administrator.

Now, you cannot have spirituality, if you do not have a sense of your inner self. The inner self is where you are most at home with yourself. It is the very core of your being. It is in the inner self where the Holy Spirit awaits to give us consolation and healing, meaning and direction. The conversation and relationship with Jesus take place most profoundly in the inner self. However, to go to the inner self, we need quiet; we need personal time alone; we need moments of doing nothing but being still in God's presence; and we need to do this regularly.

This enriches greatly one's own personal life and Christian life. It has huge implications for one's ministry as the faith leader of a Catholic school. Any faith development experience the Catholic school principal organizes for his or her teachers is immeasurably strengthened by how one models a commitment to interiority. Catholic education is *education of the soul*. In the often too numerous demands, the noise, the craziness and the distractions of contemporary culture, principals and teachers are called to help students discover their own souls and cultivate their own inner selves. This spiritual dimension of education becomes all that more important and necessary today given the fragility of most family life. Unless principals and teachers are comfortable themselves, inhabiting and spending time in their own inner selves, it will be next to impossible for principals to foster the spiritual life of their teachers, or in turn, for teachers to foster the spiritual life of their students.

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