

CRITICAL LEADERSHIP CHALLENGE

Spiritual Formation in the Contemporary Context

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The contemporary challenge of forming those in Catholic educational ministries demands concentrated and strategic response. To this end, this article which draws on a presentation at a leadership conference in Sydney, Australia in 2010 is presented to develop and sustain an informed focus on spiritual formation.

This article draws on current research, contextual factors and the significant professional experience of a network of people involved in spiritual formation of staff in Catholic Schools. It offers a context and rationale for the growing focus on spiritual formation at all levels across Australian Catholic dioceses, highlighting guiding principles and best practice. It is hoped this paper will foster further synergy and collaboration nationally and internationally as religious congregations, dioceses and educational authorities discern their response to this contemporary challenge.

Introduction

The concrete living out of a vocation as rich and profound as that of the lay Catholic in a school requires an appropriate formation, both on the professional plane and on the religious plane. Most especially, it requires the educator to have a mature spirituality, expressed in a profound Christian life.

—Congregation for Catholic Education, 1982, n.60.

The need to be true to the core purpose of Catholic schools, through the work and

witness of Catholic school educators, is a pressing contemporary issue (Grace, 2002; Monohan, 2003). The spiritual formation of leaders and teachers has been identified over many years as a priority issue in Catholic education in Australia and internationally (Bezzina, 1994; Cook, 2002; Dance, 1989; Feheny, 1998). The importance of the issue derives from a long standing recognition of the central place of teachers in ensuring the distinctiveness of the Catholic educational vision (American Catholic Bishops, 1976; Congregation for Catholic Education, 1977, 1988, 1998, 2002, 2007; *Ecclesia in Oceania*, 2001). *The Catholic School* (1977), recognised the pervasive and fundamental influence of teachers:

By their witness and their behaviour...teachers are of the first importance to impart a distinctive character to Catholic schools

—Congregation for Catholic Education, 1977, par 78.

The Religious Dimension of Education in a Catholic School (SCCE, 1988) frames education as a dynamic and transformative process. The work of teachers in a Catholic school is vitally linked to the evangelising mission of the church and is concerned with the formation and transformation of human persons (#16). *The Catholic School at the Threshold of a New Millennium* (SCCE, 1998) places education for the promotion and formation of the human person as the centrepiece of the document. (#11) Significantly, this formation occurs through interpersonal relationships within an

educational community that has a theological as well as a sociological foundation. (# 18)

Probing the key elements of what might be most needed in formation for educators today, *Educating Together in the Catholic School* (2007), includes a strong call for formation for educators that is holistic and of the heart rather than solely knowledge based:

Catholic educators need a 'formation of the heart': they need to be led to that encounter with God in Christ which awakens this love and opens their spirits to others, so that their educational commitment becomes a consequence deriving from their faith, a faith which becomes active through love (cf Gal 5:6) (2007, n 25).

Spiritual formation of staff—leaders, teachers, support personnel and central office personnel—is central to the core work and purpose of Catholic schools.

Spirituality and Spiritual Formation

Studies over the last fifteen years have identified key characteristics about spirituality in various contexts that are key in the contemporary understanding of Christian spirituality - it is holistic (Zohar & Marshall, 2000); it is an intrinsic human capacity (Benson et al, 2003; Hill, 2004; Tacey, 2003); it is transcendent (Zinnbauer, Pargament & Scott, 1999) and it is connective. (Rossiter, 2004; Berk, 2001; Castelli, 2000) In anchoring these characteristics to a specifically Christian landscape, the definition of spirituality 'as a way of being in the world in the light of the Mystery at the core of the universe' (Harris 1996, p 75) reflects the wider research and the Christian lens.

Spiritual formation in the Catholic Christian tradition is a dynamic process of growth in the understanding and practice of Christian spirituality. The word formation generally refers to a set of experiences designed to prepare a person or group for a particular purpose. 'Formation', in preference to a word like 'training', is most often used in the context of spiritual development and implies images

of deep learning that involves attitudes, values, commitment to particular life directions as well as knowledge and skills (Gowdie, 2006). Spiritual growth is a lifelong journey and occurs within a 'formation field' (Whelan, 1994) which includes the forming influence of memory, other people and the immediate and wider environment (Bracken, 2004). In the Christian tradition, it is also an inner journey travelled in a partnership between God's spirit and our spirits (Groome, 1998, p 325).

Spiritual formation opportunities for those engaged in Catholic education ministries therefore need to facilitate and nurture an encounter with God through communal support and resources provided in a range of ways. The effective structuring and resourcing of spiritual formation that both supports the mission of Catholic education and responds to the contexts of people's lives is a current challenge of Catholic education in Australia.

The Contemporary Context

The contemporary context of the wider culture and the ecclesial milieu presents significant shifts for Catholic school educators and employing authorities. The post-modern secular world has brought with it a sense of fragmentation, and there are those commentators who would say that fragmentation permeates everything. The first kind of fragmentation involves the separation of economic life from the environment. A second kind of fragmentation is social fragmentation. Another kind of fragmentation is within ourselves: we find ourselves disconnected from our bodies and our hearts (Senge, Scharmer, Jaworski, & Flowers 2005, p 190). Joseph Campbell has identified a fourth kind of fragmentation in post-modern culture—a lack of a shared sense of meaning or mythology (Campbell, 1988).

In addition, the links to the cultural world of Catholicism through direct experience has declined. The families attending the Catholic

school are less likely to be connected to the parish or to attend mass regularly. Gen X, those born roughly between 1963-1980 (Holroyd, 2011) are the 'first post-conciliar generation with little knowledge and connection to the cohesive pre-Vatican II Catholic culture with its strong experiential indicators (fasting; benediction; devotional practices', even though their parents, while now increasingly disaffected, have this corporate Catholic memory. Gen Y, those born between 1981 and 1994 (Holroyd, 2011), are the first 'post-church generation' (Rolheiser, 2008)—*children* of children who have not had a childhood imbued with Catholic parish cultural experience. The predominant experience of church is the school, and they bring with them to this community their own perspective and experience of the world (McLaughlin, 2002; Rymarz, 2004).

These defining characteristics of post-modern culture, where belief in meta-narratives is questioned and where people construct their own meaning in an independent and self-reliant manner (Drane, 2000) are apparent in Australian society. The strongly defended egalitarian theme in Australian culture, where one person's position and meaning making has no more importance than another's 'storychoice', provides a robust scaffold for post-modern individualism.

At the same time, research studies suggest that loyalty, community, commitment and spiritual seeking continue to flourish in post-modern Australia—though they are rather expressed in distinctly different ways than in the past.

In addition, the worldwide picture of the general Catholic population has changed. At the beginning of the 20th century, 70% of Catholics were in Europe and North America. At the beginning of the 21st century, 70% is found in the Southern hemisphere, namely in Africa, South America, Asia, Oceania. Rather than the European countries of Poland and Spain being listed among the ten largest Catholic countries we now find the African

nations of Nigeria, Uganda and the Republic of the Congo (Kelly, 2009). Indeed, we now have priests from African and Asian countries assisting in Australian parishes as the number of Australian born priests declines dramatically. At the same time that priest and religious numbers have declined dramatically, so too has church attendance. Only 12% of those who nominate as being Catholic in Australia describe themselves as regular church going Catholics. ('Facts and Figures', 2016)

A very different picture of the staff, families and clergy who make up our Catholic schools and parishes has developed. The work of Catholic education takes place in a different world than even 50 years ago. The very tight and very visible culture of parish and religious life has altered. In Australia today, the presence of members of religious orders of nuns, religious brothers and priests as teachers and administrators in the schools, is less than 1%. (O'Donoghue, 2004, pp. 123-146).

With these shifts come different personal needs and different systemic pressures presently driving a concentrated focus on spiritual formation. These include the challenge of succession planning; the need for intentional formation of a new generation of leaders, and the changing demographic of staff working within Catholic education. Unlike earlier phases of Catholic Education in Australia staff is not generally formed within a religious community or congregation and so able to bring this formation to their work in Catholic education. Where staff are formed through association with religious congregations, the lifestyle and formation context of religious life is not applicable to the everyday lifestyle of our new generation of staff and leaders.

The many competing priorities, shifting agendas and accountabilities in education can easily threaten the broader, long term planning needed to adequately address the spiritual formation of staff in Catholic schools. It is an endeavour requiring prominence in strategic

planning at all levels.

Practice Wisdom

The following principles are offered as ways of strengthening the impact of spiritual formation in school communities. There is a need for:

- positioning of spiritual formation close to strategic leadership and professional learning within Catholic Education so that spiritual formation is seen as having the same status as leadership development in curriculum or pedagogy, and as a critical pathway within leadership development programs;
- system level support and financial resourcing for spiritual formation and renewal of teachers, for example, strategic resourcing directed to spiritual formation to fund appropriate teacher release and consultancy for quality experiences;
- spiritual formation programs to be substantial and holistic experiences engaging head, heart and hands, while articulating with recognised degree courses—without losing the experiential dimension;
- involvement of the leaders of Catholic Education in spiritual formation to inspire and 'model the way';
- programs that develop teachers to co-lead spiritual formation and animate others within school communities - these would be structured programs allow personal development, confidence and capacity building
- differentiated experiences since life experience and career stages of teachers suggest tailoring programs that more closely meet needs;
- whole school approach with staff teams participating in various experiences, with collaboration and co-leadership being enabled within the school;
- development of models of companioning and accompaniment in spiritual formation

with emphasis on listening and dialogue. It can also be especially relevant at points of career transition;

- Spiritual formation experiences are underpinned by trust-building protocols or boundary markers since trust within groups is critical for open communication and growth.

Facilitation Approach/Strategies

Across the dioceses various programs and styles of events are operating, and a range of groups are targeted. There are, however, similarities in the practices which are used by facilitators and planners. In describing this practice wisdom that has emerged, the research of Bracken (2004), Davidson (2006), Varkar (2010) and Gowdie (2011), as well as the stories and rich experiences of practitioners in this network from across Australia, have been helpful.

Those who facilitate staff spirituality sessions are educators who have extended their knowledge of theology and scripture and who have attended to their own journey. In designing and presenting sessions they use an increasing range of strategies that draw on pedagogy, experience and creativity. Themes and content draw on Scripture and Theology and are grounded in the life experience of the participants. Opportunities for creative expression invite participants to reflect, identify significant ideas and create a memento that they take back to their work place.

The reflection experiences do not rely on the input alone of the facilitator but also involve the participants and encourage their contributions. A group of twenty participants is ideal to cultivate a sense of belonging and community. Where numbers are larger, techniques are used to form smaller teams within the whole group. Personal sharing is encouraged through storytelling in dyads or group sessions and protocols operate to respect personal boundaries.

Overall an atmosphere of hospitality is fostered through provision of meals, drinks, snacks in a physically comfortable environment, away from the everyday professional environment. Facilitators and/or Catholic Education Office Staff take an active role as hosts to welcome, include and develop communication and trust.

Informed by theologies and pedagogies that affirm the varieties of ways that adults learn and experience God, sessions include options for physical experiences in the outdoors and/or reflective, kinaesthetic activities.

Guiding Principles for Effective Spiritual Formation

1. Spiritual formation involves the autonomous choice of the person and this must be respected.

2. Within the Catholic Christian context, spiritual formation draws on the rich traditions of the Church and prepares individuals for deeper relationship with God.

3. Spiritual formation involves companionship—of the self; of each other and of the community. Processes reflect principles of spiritual direction as well as adult learning and change facilitation.

4. Spiritual formation content and processes are grounded in contemporary scholarship in theology and scripture.

5. Spiritual formation is invitational at each step within an experience/ program, respectful of individual needs and differences.

6. Spiritual formation ought be connective

to the vocational (professional) context of individuals (e.g., classroom teacher, principal).

7. Spiritual formation occurs in both targeted ways and through the formative environment of the school and the formal opportunities provided through the Catholic Education system. Both complement each other and both are essential for sustainability and continuing growth.

8. Spiritual formation requires both 'chronos time' and 'kairos time' - real time away to facilitate the capacity to learn to live 'presence'.

9. Formation is predicated on a positive anthropology of the human being with an integrated understanding of the mind, body and spirit.

Conclusion

These insights are the result of the shared passion and intentional dialogue of the National Network for Formation of Australian Catholic Educators (FACE). This organisation includes key leaders in formation across Australian Catholic Education diocesan systems, religious institutes and independent providers working within the field of formation. It has been in operation for the past ten years to support good practice and genuine collegiality in the field of faith and spiritual formation. In this spirit of collegiality, commitment and generosity other practitioners are encouraged to continue to build on these reflections and respond collaboratively to the contemporary challenge of spiritual formation for the staff of Catholic education.

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Spiritual direction explores a deeper relationship with the spiritual aspect of being human. Simply put, spiritual direction is helping people tell their sacred stories everyday....

Spiritual direction helps us learn how to live in peace, with compassion, promoting justice, as humble servants of that which lies beyond all names.

—Liz Budd Ellmann