

# **FIVE KEY CHALLENGES FOR LEADERSHIP IN CATHOLIC SCHOOLS FOR 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY**

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**In an era of rapid social, economic, cultural and religious change, there is a plethora of challenges for leadership in Catholic schools. The advent of the 21<sup>st</sup> century witnessed humankind entering a threshold time replete with opportunities and perils for its future. Challenges and possibilities arise from such movements as, globalization, knowledge explosion, information technology, widening gap between rich and poor, environmental concerns and spiritual quests.**

**Schools are microcosms of society. Schools mirror what is happening in society and their character is shaped by their cultural environment. A contemporary Catholic school is vastly different from a Catholic school 50 years ago in such features as, Catholic identity, technology, curriculum, religiosity, government accountability, ethnic composition and levels of social cohesion. However certain fundamental themes concerning the roles of Catholic schools in church and society remain constant even if manifestations of these themes are modified according to their cultural context and post-Vatican Two church life.**

**This paper has chosen five significant themes for discussion. Obviously there are many other leadership challenges for Catholic schools in the 21<sup>st</sup> century but the limits of the paper restrain any analysis of other issues. The genre of the paper is based on the author's reflections from his considerable experiences with schools in many countries over 40 years of consultancy and fifty years of teaching. The focus of the paper is one of sharing reflections on personal experiences in Catholic schools rather than exploring insights from academic research on Catholic schools.**

**The five key challenges for leadership in Catholic schools for the 21<sup>st</sup> century that have been selected are as follows:**

- Intersection points between compliance issues and authentic Catholic identity;
- The relationship between the Catholic school community and the 'birth-to-death' tradition of Catholic education;
- The theological and philosophical underpinnings of curriculum in Catholic schools;
- Promotion of the concept and experience of work as vocation;
- Self-care for leadership and staff.

### **Challenge One**

#### **MEETING POINTS BETWEEN COMPLIANCE ISSUES AND CATHOLIC IDENTITY**

During the 1970's as a consequence of the infusion of government financial monies into Catholic schools and the evolution of Catholic Education Offices as well as congregational governance, there emerged rising levels of compliance issues, both from government legislative policies and Catholic school authorities. The growing complexity of schools as bureaucratic systems poses serious challenges for the vitality of the 'lifeworld' (Habermas) of faith-based schools. Compliance concerns embrace the whole gamut of school life in such areas as, curriculum, work place health and safety, buildings, financial accountability, diagnostic net testing, strategic planning, reporting, duty of care and public liabilities. Compliance is tied to funding and accountability. The increment of bureaucratic imperatives, important as they are for the viability of schools as learning communities, tends to absorb energies of school personnel. Ethos questions can readily be relegated to the margins of school life consciousness, not through intentional neglect but simply because of the immediacy of system demands.

Ideologies which regard the school as an instrument of the economy reinforce the emphasis in school management on structures and outcomes. In addition to a functional view of school, a pervasive and intrusive culture of consumerism and market forces is an ever-present threat to the religious underpinnings of a Catholic school. In a climate of economic rationalism there is an inducement for schools to be more outer- directed rather than inner- directed. A school that is outer- directed esteems above all, efficiency, public image and management. An inner - directed school in a Christian tradition, while attending to issues of management, insists that core gospel values drive the energies and policies of school life. It is no coincidence that values education has now assumed such prominence for school life in a culture of relativism and breakdown of communal stories.

The identity of faith-based schools in a Catholic tradition was hardly an issue fifty years ago in Australia. Religious with a few dedicated lay people, staffed the schools which were integral to the life of the local parish. The very symbols of the presence of Religious Sisters, Brothers and clergy seemed to epitomize and symbolize what a Catholic school stood for. Traditionally the majority of children enrolling in Catholic schools were drawn from liturgically affiliated Catholics whose values were broadly aligned to the professed values of the church. During the transition era of 1970-1990 when the personnel of Catholic schools became almost exclusively lay, what constituted an authentic Catholic school became a critical question. The disengagement of many Catholics during the last few decades from the worshipping church is well documented (see eg. Hughes and al. 2000). A dominant materialistic social environment is diluting a religious vision of life for many Christians. Increasing enrolments in Catholic schools from an emerging multicultural and multi-faith population reinforce the urgency of clarifying the ethos of a Catholic school. For example, the Catholic Education Commission New South Wales reported that in 2005 one third of all students in Catholic schools in the Canberra-Goulburn diocese were from religions other than Catholic (CEC NSW 2005a) This quest for clarifying identity was further hastened by a widening gap between expectations of stakeholders in Catholic schools such as clergy, school personnel, parents and Catholic education authorities concerning the role and identity of a Catholic school.

Research on student religious thinking and practices have confirmed the worst fears of those who perceive a central role of a Catholic school is to educate and form Catholics in their faith and active participation in the liturgical church. Research on Generation Y in 2006 found that only 19% were actively involved in a church to the extent of attending a religious service once a month or more. Many young people vigorously reject the authority of religious institutions and are fairly indifferent rather than hostile to organized religion (Mason and al. 2006). The theme of religious disengagement will be further developed in discussing the second leadership challenge.

A fundamental question about the identity of a Catholic school emanates from different perceptions about how Christians understand the mission of Jesus. If the mission of Jesus is understood primarily as promoting 'life in abundance' (John 10: 10) and the humanization of society, then the role of the Catholic school may be viewed as conducting the best learning and teaching inspired and shaped by the spirit and values of the gospels, with specific reference to the life and teachings of Jesus. Such a theology is more 'reign of God' focused rather than a church centered theology of mission. Within 'reign of God' theology the role of a Catholic school in its evangelizing mission places more emphasis on a positive school culture impregnated with gospel values rather than specific education in Catholic religious knowledge and sacraments.

If the identity of a Catholic school is more explicitly associated with its ecclesial roots as an arm of the evangelizing church, then this theology of mission gives more focus to education in a Catholic tradition of sacraments, doctrine, spirituality and knowledge of Catholic teachings. Given the complexity of the social and religious pluralism of people in Catholic school communities and respect for multicultural and multi-faith beliefs, the reality of implementing Catholic identity is difficult to promote if the character of the identity assumes explicit commitment by members of the school community to a Catholic culture and religious practices. Proponents of a 'remnant' theology of Catholic schools would propose limiting enrolments to those who profess their Catholic faith and participate in the life of the church.

It would seem that there is a middle way between the two positions described above concerning the identity of a contemporary Catholic school. A middle way acknowledges the essential ecclesial connection of a Catholic school to the wider Catholic community. Teaching and learning are conducted within an inclusive culture where the Good News of the gospel infuses the whole life of the school and a Catholic vision of life is fostered. A middle way honours a pluralism of beliefs in the school provided these beliefs support basic Christian tenets about the human person. The Catholic school also affirms the evangelizing role of the faith community to educate through liturgical celebrations, sacraments, inclusive religious education, ecumenical services and nurturing gospel values in the curriculum. A middle way treads a delicate path of fidelity both to the Catholic school's ecclesial roots and mission and conducting education that is inclusive of all who choose to share a Catholic vision of life through enrolment in Catholic schools.

Leadership in Catholic schools needs to nurture a Catholic vision for education while fulfilling the demands of compliance issues that are imperatives for state funded education. An ever-present danger for leaders is to become absorbed in the incessant demands of the school as a system. Promoting a vital sense of the mission of the school is then relegated to a marginal option for leadership. Such a relegation in priorities for action is not through lack of concern about ethos but through the necessity of coping with the latest management crisis. A Catholic school is not Catholic by its designation but because it conducts teaching and learning within the mission of the church.

*The Catholic school has an ecclesial identity, because it is part of the evangelizing mission of the church. Yet a distinguishing feature of Catholic education is that it is open to all, especially to the poor and weakest in society.*

Walking his way, telling his truth, living his life: 21

## **Challenge Two**

### **RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE CATHOLIC SCHOOL COMMUNITY AND THE 'BIRTH-TO-DEATH' TRADITION OF CATHOLIC EDUCATION**

There is a great deal of confusion between the concept of 'Catholic education' and 'Catholic schools'. It is a common experience of the author to encounter in literature and conferences to note how both terms are used interchangeably to denote Catholic schools as if the term 'Catholic education' was an appropriate designation for 'Catholic schools'.

The term 'Catholic education' refers to the lifelong process of growing into a Christian consciousness and practices of Christian living. The life journey of faith is one spanning birth-to-death, cradle-to-grave and womb-to-tomb. The principal focus of Catholic education has traditionally been education for adults, not for children. Until the recent advent of universal education, especially in western countries during the last 150 years, Catholic education traditionally implied responses to people's unfolding faith journeys. In the early church the catechumenate fulfilled the role of Catholic education. During the Middle Ages, miracle plays, art in churches, monastic education and preaching by mendicant friars helped Christians to better understand and live their beliefs. After the 16<sup>th</sup> century the catechism became a key resource for communicating the faith to adults. There is no suggestion that the various approaches throughout the centuries were necessarily very effective but at least the concept of Catholic education was understood as a lifelong enterprise and basically directed to adult Christians.

Although there is a long historical tradition of teaching and learning being conducted in schools with an explicit Christian culture, these schools were neither widespread nor accessible to most children. The schools of Charlemagne (9<sup>th</sup> century), cathedral schools of the Middle Ages and schools founded by such people as Angela Merici (Ursulines), Ignatius Loyala (Jesuits) in the 16<sup>th</sup> century were manifestations of a growing awareness of the need to educate children with a Catholic vision of life. During the nineteenth century the emergence of universal

education for children stimulated Catholics to establish a comprehensive network of Catholic schools, especially in countries where governments were hostile to Catholicism. The rapid development of a network of Catholic schools in Australia during the later part of the nineteenth century was largely a response to the avowedly secular nature of the schools established by colonial governments.

The second challenge for leadership is not a semantic one of making theoretical intellectual statements about the best designation for education in a Catholic tradition. To perceive the work of Catholic schools as synonymous with Catholic education is to generate a number of serious problems for any realistic appreciation of roles for Catholic schools. Firstly, to designate Catholic schools as 'Catholic education' is to place unrealistic outcomes for the mission of Catholic schools. These schools can never be understood as being solely responsible for the faith development of children. Secondly, such a designation ignores or marginalises the critical educative role of the parish as a faith community in promoting effective 'birth-to-death' educational services. Many dioceses and parishes have done little in their pastoral planning for creative adult life and faith education. A great majority of Catholic children in Catholic schools have little or no affiliation with their parishes and are bereft of religious inculturation within families and faith communities.

The faith development of children in Catholic schools is severely limited without a corresponding faith development of parents of the children. A Catholic school's mission belongs to a wider ecclesial mission to evangelise. Evangelization of children separate from evangelization of their families is a very daunting task and significantly diminished in effectiveness. It is an ambivalent consolation for Catholic schools to hear that research on effectiveness of Catholic schools shows that for many children the Catholic school is the most significant place where they encounter Christ (McDonald). Catholic schools have become the 'face and place' of the church for most Catholic children. Not only is the research discouraging for those clergy and parish communities who are doing their utmost to reach out to people but such data tends to reinforce a virtually impossible role for Catholic schools as being a major resource in faith formation of children.

### **Challenge Three**

#### **PROMOTING THEOLOGICAL AND PHILOSOPHICAL FOUNDATIONS OF CURRICULUM IN CATHOLIC SCHOOLS**

A third challenge for leadership in Catholic schools for the 21<sup>st</sup> century is to deepen an appreciation among teaching staff of the theological and philosophical underpinnings of curriculum in a Catholic tradition of teaching and learning. There is a broad range of views in the community about the character and focus of school curriculum. Those who espouse a functional ideology of education consider schools as agents of the economy. Other perspectives on curriculum emphasise such outcomes as, citizenship, holistic personal development, competencies, creating a sustainable world, social justice and tolerance in society. During the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the rise of ideologies such as pragmatism, relativism and materialism threaten traditional Christian values and beliefs. Allied with increasing levels of government compliance directives and a marked decline in church participation by Catholics, the enterprise of clarifying the theological and philosophical foundations of the curriculum is a formidable but urgent challenge.

The movement to address this third issue can be perceived by some staff as an imposition of a Catholic cage on the integrity of specific subjects in the curriculum. Given the pluralism of the composition of teaching personnel in the school this challenge is approached with both a profound respect for philosophical diversity and courageous leadership to align the curriculum with core values and beliefs in a Catholic tradition of education. In the experience of the author many teachers have an inherent suspicion of philosophy as being 'too theoretical and not practical' while seemingly blissfully unaware that they subscribe to a philosophy of pragmatism. Every act of teaching and learning is shaped by a philosophy, whether teachers are aware of it or not.

There would seem to be at least four key dimensions in a theological and philosophical tradition of curriculum in Catholic schools. These four dimensions are as follows:



- **Anthropology** – beliefs about the human person
- **Epistemology** – how we know and the experience of knowing in learning and teaching
- **Cosmology** – beliefs about how human beings are to live within the integrity of creation
- **Catholic heritage** – what does the 2000 year old story say about a vision of Catholic education?

A foundational question for curriculum relates to beliefs about the human person. A Catholic anthropology affirms the essential goodness of our humanity as created in the image and likeness of God (Genesis 1: 26-30). Although our humanity is also flawed (Genesis 3), a Catholic perspective on the human condition is essentially optimistic and honours the dignity of women and men. The advent of Jesus celebrates humanity in a unique and wondrous way through God's identification with human beings, *and the Word was made flesh and lived among us* (John 1:14). People are relational beings by nature and through an esteemed Catholic anthropology are called to live creatively in relationships. Community is an essential feature of being human. Relational living implies a commitment to promote the common good and work for justice and peace. The interconnectedness of all things in creation within a web of life also highlights the ethical dimension of being human.

A second dimension in curriculum for Catholic schools is epistemology. Epistemology is concerned with how we know. A Catholic perspective on epistemology proposes a series of beliefs about knowing. These beliefs are stated as: the gift of rationality holds that intellect has the capacity to seek eternal Truth; the experience of knowing is holistic and not merely a cognitive act; knowing and living should not be separated; wisdom is the fruit of knowing and coming to know is a lifelong enterprise. The rapidity of social change and collapse of certainties highlights the urgency of wisdom as a foundational goal of learning. We have the technical knowledge to lead us into the future but do we possess the wisdom to live creatively in this future? A good Catholic school is a wisdom place where teaching and learning are infused with reflection and discernment.

A third dimension of theological and philosophical underpinnings of curriculum in Catholic schools posits a cosmology whereby humans make choices to live creatively within the integrity of creation. As stewards of creation, people are enjoined to care for God's garden of creation and are obliged to uphold principles and practices of sustainability.

A fourth dimension to the contours of a curriculum in a Catholic school is the experience of being replenished from the wells of wisdom in the 2000 year old story of the mission of the church to *teach all nations* (Matthew 28:19).

Throughout the ages curriculum in faith-based schools in a Christian tradition has experienced a multiplicity of evolutions that have been shaped by diverse cultural mores, philosophies, theologies, levels of human consciousness and educational theories. A host of venerable founders of schools, such as Mary Ward, Ignatius of Loyala, John Baptist de la Salle, Nano Nagle, Edmund Rice, Marcellin Champagnat, Catherine McAuley and Mary MacKillop enrich the worth of Catholic schools through their own charisms and wisdom. Although specific practices in teaching and learning did not always remain faithful to the ideals of gospel values, certain core themes such as the connectedness of all knowledge emanating from God as Eternal Truth remain a common dimension for education in Catholic schools.

Catholic schools, as partners in state and national network of schools, are required to conduct curriculum matters according to specified public frameworks. Within this framework however it is imperative that the teaching staff in Catholic schools are both conversant with foundational beliefs underpinning the curriculum and empowered to engage in teaching and learning that is aligned to these beliefs.

#### **Challenge 4**

##### **PROMOTION OF THE CONCEPT AND EXPERIENCE OF WORK AS VOCATION**

In the prevailing workplace cultural environment, the dominant model of work is often one of a 'job' which has little inherent meaning except as a means to purchase goods and make payments. Both ideologies of capitalism and Marxism

reduce workers to economic units. In societies influenced by these ideologies workers experience a sense of powerlessness within the complexities of modern economic systems in a global world. The unionisation of staffs during the 1970's in Australian Catholic schools impelled Catholic authorities to enter into collective and enterprise bargaining with unions representing staff in various employment situations.

A fourth challenge for leadership in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is to work cooperatively with staff unions to support reasonable union initiatives for better quality education for students and work conditions for staff while enhancing a Christian perspective on work as a cooperative partnership with God for the wellbeing of creation. An entrenched adversarial approach to industrial negotiations is both detrimental to the good of both parties and contrary to gospel values of justice and reconciliation.

In more recent times an understanding of vocation in Catholic culture became confined to a calling to religious and priestly life. However the concept of vocation is an ancient one and has at least three dimensions. Vocation implies 'a calling' (Latin: *vocatus*: a summons or calling), possessing a gift or talent and the talent is to be utilized for the common good. To work with a sense of vocation is to make a commitment to widen the circle of life in creation. Staff members are encouraged to appreciate their work as a vocation and not just employment for financial reward- important as that aspect of their work is. Work as vocation in Catholic schools affirms teaching as a calling to participate in the ongoing evolution of creation through good teaching and learning.

The most popular title for Jesus as 'the Teacher' and this title is mentioned 49 times in the gospels. Teaching is one of the primal ministries named by Paul in the church of Corinth (1 Cor.12: 8). Meaningful work gives people a sense of purpose and self-fulfillment. Through work, women and men cooperate with the Divine Spirit to enhance the quality of life of all humankind and all life forms. A commitment to work as vocation moves a person beyond regarding work solely as a means to a financial end towards a deep sense of promoting something good through the education of students for wholesome living. Working from a

vocational perspective exalts the visible daily witness value of staff to let their presence, *shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven* (Mt. 5:16).

Reconciling the industrial and vocational models of work requires a delicate balancing act for leadership as well as being politically smart. Language about 'vocation' may be alien to many staff in an industrial and economical climate but prudent ongoing education for a vocational approach to work will bear fruit. Good leadership works cooperatively with those involved in protecting staff's legitimate interests and concerns. Prophetic leadership in Catholic schools also encourages staff to celebrate their work as a vocation by making a difference in the lives of their students.

#### **Challenge 5:**

#### **SELF-CARE FOR LEADERSHIP AND STAFF**

The most important resource in a Catholic school community is the staff of the school. Schools are encumbered with a multiplicity of roles, many of these roles previously shared by social and community groups such as families, church and community agencies. Teachers face multiple demands on their expertise and energy levels. On any one day a staff member may perform roles as counselor, first-aid provider, teacher, collector of bus fares for excursions, administrator, compiler of statistical information, assembly leader, mediator and behaviour manager, assignment writer for upgrading qualifications and religious leader. These school related roles are in addition to her or his family responsibilities as carer, provider and community citizen.

Staff are experiencing unprecedented pressures for educational reform while trying to cope with the consequences of social fragmentation. Media reportings of disasters and sensational threats to humankind generate a culture of anxiety adding to employment stress issues. Staff members who succumb to excessive stress become dysfunctional as persons, both to their own families and in their school roles. Although many stress induced problems among staff are outside the

realm of remedial leadership responses, it would seem that a vital contemporary challenge for leaders is to attend to their own wellbeing and the wellbeing of staff.

Self-care has many facets. Self-care is not some kind of selfish narcissism but responsible attention to personal growth as a relational being. In the words of Parker Palmer, *Good teaching comes from good people* (1998:13).

Within the limits of this paper, a sample of relevant themes for self-care is stated without elaboration:

- Each staff member (including those in leadership roles) should accept personal responsibility for her or his own self-care. Self-care is not an act of exclusive individualism but a serious commitment to one's wellbeing.
- Self-care embraces an integration of physical, emotional, intellectual, communal and spiritual dimensions of a person's life journey.
- Deepening a sense of purpose in one's life through a sense of fulfilling a vocation affirms personal beliefs about making a difference in the lives of students.
- Times and experiences of intimacy with family and friends are nurtured.
- A circle of caring and supportive friends provides opportunities for fun times and celebrations.
- Through personal and professional services staff acquire helping skills for time and stress management.
- A reflective culture is fostered in school life with provision for Sabbath spaces, relaxation techniques and meditation.
- The development of competencies and passion for good teaching and learning empowers staff to be confident in what they do.

- A vital experience of school as caring community offers a social context for feelings of belonging and being affirmed as people.
- Modification of school policies and structures maximizes opportunities for effective communications, listening and sharing wisdom.
- Peer support groups are constituted and mentoring services are provided.
- Participation in community works for justice and peace leads people into active citizenship.
- As a citizen of creation people celebrate the wonder, mystery and challenge to live creatively within the integrity of the earth community.
- There is a discreet balance between home and school.
- An optimistic view of life radiates hope, dreams and possibilities.

A very significant feature of self-care is living a vibrant spirituality. Spirituality may be described as an awakening to the joy and mystery of being loved by God. Members of the school community who are awakened through the energy of the Spirit, learn to perceive the vagaries of life through eyes of faith and courageously live the paradoxes of being.

The high rate of staff attrition, especially during the first five years of teaching as well as leadership succession problems are warning signs to current Catholic school administrators that the issue of self-care is an urgent question that must be honestly acknowledged.

## **CONCLUSION**

This paper has identified and briefly discussed five contemporary challenges for leadership in Catholic schools for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. These five challenges are currently being considered by Catholic school authorities with varying degrees of

concern. However the question remains as to how effectively are the five challenges named and addressed with appropriate planning and courageous implementation.

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