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Seminarian Perspectives on Catholic Schools and the New Evangelization

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Recognizing that pastors of parishes with a Catholic school play a vital role in Catholic education, and that the seminarians of today will be the parish pastors of tomorrow, this study sought to provide a better understanding of the perceptions held by Catholic seminarians about parish schools. Fourteen seminary students from 12 seminaries and 14 different dioceses from across the United States participated in focus group interviews to discuss their thoughts and perceptions about parish schools. Themes that emerged from focus group discussions included the reinterpretation of the New Evangelization, the understanding of the value of Catholic schools, mixed feelings about leadership of a parish with a school, lack of preparation for school administration, and minimal preparation specific to Catholic schools. Recommendations include the addition of a focus on Catholic schools in new editions of the Program of Priestly Formation (USCCB, 2006) and changes to seminary curricula.

Keywords: Catholic education, Catholic elementary school, Catholic elementary school pastor, New Evangelization, seminarian, seminary curriculum, seminary formation

Introduction

Pastors of parishes with a Catholic school fulfill a vital role in today's Catholic Church as chief educational leaders of these schools (Dolan, 2010; King, 2013; Schafer, 2013; USCCB, 2005b). In light of the importance of the role of pastor as school leader, the research team conducting this study asked, "How are current seminarians—tomorrow's pastors—being prepared in seminaries across the United States to lead the New Evangelization and provide leadership for parish schools?" This research question is important for three reasons. First, understanding seminary preparation will help dioc-

esan officials, school principals, and parish school teachers better understand the perspective of new priests as these local educators help new priests transition to work in a parish school. Second, the results of this study will provide seminary rectors with information they can use to review their practices and curricula. Lastly, the findings shared in this article are timely because the Committee on Priestly Formation of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops is drafting an updated version of the *Program of Priestly Formation* (USCCB, 2006). This document will guide the formation of future pastors and chief school leaders for decades to come, and this study can help to inform the writers of this important new document about the need to prepare seminarians for school leadership roles.

Literature Review

Catholic schools are uniquely gifted with all that is necessary to provide faith leadership formation for youth (CCE, 1997; DiGiacomo, 2007; Dolan, 2010; Francis, 2013b). For example, Catholic schools encourage young people to critique societal trends and values in light of the Gospel message (CCE, 1997; Cessna, 2013; Cook & Simonds, 2011; DiGiacomo, 2007; Francis, 2013b; Priego, 2013; Simonds, 2009). In the words of the Second Vatican Council (1965), graduates of Catholic schools become “a saving leaven in the human community” (section 8).

Beginning with John Paul II and his announcement of a program he called the New Evangelization, Catholic schools have had to reevaluate how well they were providing faith leadership formation for their students (CCE, 1997; Francis, 2013a; John Paul II, 1997, 1999; USCCB, 2005b). At the same time, Catholic school leaders and members of the Catholic community continued to wrestle with the problematic issue of financing Catholic education (DeFiore, 2011; USCCB, 2005b).

The Pastor as Chief Educational Leader of the School

Today, in light of the New Evangelization and the unanswered questions about how to fund parish schools, pastors of parish schools have a challenging role as chief educational leaders (Schafer, 2013; Weiss, 2007). Pastors must engage in policy making for the school, create a board to help with oversight duties, provide ongoing financial supervision of the school, and lead or provide faith formation programs for faculty who will teach students in the school. While the pastor may delegate the day-to-day operations of the school to the principal, the pastor is the chief administrator of the school

(Schafer, 2013).

The importance of staying on top of school finances was underlined in a survey of 1,042 pastors who had oversight of parish schools (Nuzzi, Frabutt, and Holter, 2008). The pastors who were surveyed reported that operating a parish school required regular and time consuming attention to the financial details involved in operating a school. As noted by Schafer (2013), even when a pastor seeks the help of qualified persons in the parish who can assist him with development efforts, enrollment management, investment, and financial reporting, the pastor is the person who is ultimately responsible for the financial well-being of the school.

The pastor must also understand the complexity of leadership roles and domains within the Catholic school (Weiss, 2007). If the Catholic school is to be an effective school, the pastor and the principal must work together for the good of the educational mission of the school (Weiss, 2007). If the Catholic school is to serve as an effective means of evangelization, both the pastor and the principal must see evangelization of students and their families as a key purpose of the parish school (Weiss, 2007). However, effective management of the finances of the Catholic school is the engine that drives both the educational and spiritual mission of the school (DeFiore, 2011). Unfortunately, the financial engine driving Catholic education continues to run low on fuel (DeFiore, 2011; USCCB, 2005b).

The Bishops' Mandate to Prepare Pastors for School Leadership

Through their involvement and leadership of parish schools, pastors and associate pastors play a critical role in supporting the efforts of Catholic education in the United States (Dolan, 2010; King, 2013; USCCB, 2005b). The US Conference of Catholic Bishops (2005b) recognized that pastors, priests, and seminarians need help in fulfilling their important role in Catholic education. The Bishops asked Catholic educational leaders to develop new programs to support priests and prepare seminary students for leadership of Catholic schools.

In light of this request by the Bishops for help in developing educational programs for priests and seminarians, the research team conducting this study decided to explore how Catholic seminary students are currently being prepared for future work in parish schools. The research team reasoned that with a better understanding of how seminaries educate their students about Catholic schools, we could then make suggestions about how to help prepare future priests to be leaders of Catholic schools.

Method

In order to understand the current formation process of US seminarians in regards to work in Catholic schools, members of the research team met with 14 seminary students who volunteered to participate in four focus groups. The 14 seminary students were all participating in a summer program. The students were from 14 different dioceses in the United States and were attending 12 different seminaries. All of the students had completed their initial seminary studies in philosophy, and were now completing their final studies in theology.

The four focus groups, facilitated by members of the research team, structured discussion around five open-ended questions:

1. How would you define the New Evangelization?
2. Describe some of the ways your seminary program, up to this point, has helped you to understand the role of the Catholic school and the New Evangelization.
3. If you were assigned as an associate pastor to a parish with a school, how would that make you feel?
4. In your ideal future parish in which you would be the pastor, would there be a parish school?
5. Describe some of the ways your seminary program, up to this point, has prepared you to someday provide leadership for a parish school.

After the focus groups had finished their discussions, each member of the research team individually reviewed field notes and identified key themes that had emerged from the discussion of the five open-ended questions. To ensure the validity of the findings, the research team then met two days after the focus groups were completed to discuss the analysis of what the seminary students had said. After some conversation, the members of the research team reached consensus about the important themes that had emerged from the four focus groups (Creswell and Miller, 2000).

Findings

Analysis of the focus group data resulted in identification of four common themes that cut across all the comments made by the seminarians. Each theme is described in the sections that follow, and clear mapping of each theme directly to comments made by the seminarians is included in each section.

Reinterpretation of The New Evangelization

The seminarians participating in this study had clearly reinterpreted the meaning of the New Evangelization. For this group of 14 seminarians, evangelization was not driven by a new program with defined means and goals. Rather, for these seminarians, evangelization meant using more effective means to communicate the perennial Gospel message. For example, one seminarian explained, “To even say it’s a ‘new language and methods’ overlooks the idea of evangelizing throughout time. It’s the old evangelization in a new context.” Another seminarian suggested that the New Evangelization is a “way of thinking and responding to our faith that feeds our fast-paced society and culture; a way to reconsider the Gospel in light of a new fast-paced and unreflective world breaking through the noise with a message worth hearing.” A third seminarian thought that “The words New Evangelization get thrown around a lot. What we need to do is re-evangelize, making it cool to be Catholic.” A fourth seminarian stated that “Families are not living the Catholic faith. We need to find creative ways to reach the kids.” A fifth seminary student expressed his opinion that “The college seminary was excellent. We developed a community of belonging, and from that community we could reach out to others and develop a relationship with them. We need to go in their door first.”

The seminarians mentioned a number of specific examples of how they saw the Gospel message being effectively shared today. These examples included: Life Teen, Fr. Robert Barron’s Catholicism video series, Catholics Come Home, and videos on You Tube. All of these examples fit with the seminarians’ emphasis on effective means to evangelize rather than a newly defined single program of evangelization.

Value of Catholic Schools

The seminarians agreed that Catholic schools are valuable for the future of the Church. They reasoned that more time with students over six or eight years in a Catholic school could have a greater impact on faith formation than one or two hours per week spent in parish religious education. Along these lines, one seminarian stated, “I’ve taught both [Catholic grade school religion classes and parish religious education classes], and there is a huge difference between the attitudes and understanding of middle school kids in Catholic school and [those that don’t go to Catholic school]. Catholic schools give a longer time in a Gospel-centered environment.” Another

seminarian shared that “Catholic schools can be a perfect place [for evangelization]. There’s opportunity to follow up and develop, which continues relationships.”

Involvement and Responsibility in Schools

The seminarians expressed enthusiasm about being involved with a Catholic school. They used phrases; such as, “excited to be involved,” “really happy to have the opportunity,” “a ministry of presence,” and “fun” to express how they would feel about working in a parish with a school.

At the same time, the seminary students also expressed some reservations about taking on a leadership role in a Catholic school. One seminarian said, “I might wonder if I had adequate skills, but I would like the opportunity.” Another seminarian noted that he wanted the “fun [of working in a school] without the [administrative] responsibility.”

The most frequently mentioned concern involved school finances. One seminarian reported, “[if the school was] financially stable, with good enrollment...then yes, I’d want a school. Finance is the biggest thing. Support of the community is second. If you have money and support, you’re fine.” Another seminarian stated that he did not want to be the pastor of a parish with a school: “With great respect for Catholic schools, I don’t want the financial and administrative responsibility of a school.” A third seminary student shared that his mentor pastor told him, “The finances of the school are killing me. I wonder at what point we can no longer do it.”

The time factor created by dual responsibilities was also cause for concern. One seminarian explained, “I’ve always envisioned myself as a priest without a school. Being in charge of both [parish and school] is a gargantuan task. I’d rather be the pastor of a parish [without a school] than a parish with a school.”

Notably in the course of our focus group discussions, the idea of free-standing Catholic schools emerged. A freestanding regional Catholic school would need priests to be involved in ministerial roles, but the administrative responsibilities of operating a Catholic school could be taken on by principals and regional school boards. The seminarians thought that Catholic schools not connected to parishes would be a good concept to explore. For example, one seminarian shared, “I believe in Catholic schools, but just not schools in parishes. Have freestanding schools and then the priests can come to the schools to help with pastoral needs.” Another seminarian agreed saying, “I would desire to be assigned to a parish with a school, but my feelings would

be mixed. I would need others to do the administration.” Finally, a third seminarian shared, “I imagine myself as a priest without a school. Doing both parish and school is too much.”

Lack of Preparation for School Responsibilities

Seminarians reported that their seminary preparation included virtually no academic content in the principles, history, purpose, or methods of PK-12 Catholic schools. For example, one seminary student stated, “Seminary has helped us learn about United States culture in general, but we really have not talked about Catholic schools in particular.” A second seminarian described the preparation for working in Catholic schools as, “. . . learn as you go- if any.” Seminarians noted that their primary preparation to work in Catholic schools occurred during practicum courses and field experiences. One seminarian commented that “I saw a good principal and pastor relationship during my pastoral year.” Another seminarian noted that “the ideas presented in class get applied in the pastoral year.” The seminarians suggested the following enhancements to seminary education to better prepare seminary students for ministry in Catholic schools:

- Courses on school administration
- Workshops on the role of the pastor in a Catholic school including how to collaborate with a school principal and staff
- Visits to the Catholic Schools Office to gain understanding of Catholic education at the diocesan level
- Modeling by priests who are effective school leaders
- School experiences, such as teaching, to understand how schools operate
- Pastoral experiences in schools
- Conversations with Catholic school faculty members
- Conversations with pastors of parish schools

Conclusions and Recommendations

The seminarians we interviewed reported being open to involvement in Catholic schools but reluctant to assume the responsibilities connected with leading a parish school. While their openness to school involvement is heartening, their reluctance to serve as pastors of parish schools is reason for concern. Thus, the underlying causes of the seminarians’ reluctance to take on school leadership responsibilities merit examination.

We think that one obvious reason for their reluctance to see themselves as school leaders is because these seminarians had taken virtually no course

work that would serve as an introduction to Catholic education. The seminarians we interviewed were from 14 different dioceses in the United States and were attending 12 different seminaries. None of them reported having taken any courses on the history, philosophy, or purpose of Catholic education during their seminary training, which indicates that the lack of preparation for leadership of Catholic schools is a consistent missing piece in seminary education as a whole.

Given the seminarians' lack of preparation for school involvement, it is not surprising that they are reluctant to lead parish schools. Feeling unprepared for success as leaders, seminarians perceive the role of pastor of a parish school as a threat to avoid rather than a challenge they can master (Bandura, 1989).

Consistent with the theme of ongoing challenges in school finances highlighted in the literature review, the seminarians astutely demonstrated their understanding of this key reality. Seminarians are picking up on the serious financial troubles within the Catholic school system, and this situation is another reason why they are understandably reluctant to take on the role of chief educational leader in charge of school financial operations.

Given the importance of Catholic schools for the vitality of the Catholic faith (Dolan, 2010; King, 2013; USCCB, 2005b) and the reluctance of the seminarians in this study to take on leadership roles in these schools, it is clear that changes are needed (McKnight, 2011). One change we recommend is that seminaries include content related to the ministry of education, particularly leadership of Catholic schools, within their programs. An initial introduction to the history, philosophy, and purpose of Catholic schools within course work could lead to practical experiences in schools and seminars on school leadership. Review and discussion of key Church documents would be a good place to begin, and could include *The Declaration on Christian Education* from the Second Vatican Council (1965), John Paul II's (1979) *On Catechesis in Our Time, To Teach as Jesus Did* published by the National Conference of Catholic Bishops (1972), *Called and Gifted for the Third Millennium* published by the US Catholic Conference (1995), *The Catholic School on the Threshold of the Third Millennium* published by the Congregation for Catholic Education (CCE, 1997), *Co-Workers in the Vineyard of the Lord* published by the USCCB (2005a), and *Renewing Our Commitment to Catholic Elementary and Secondary Schools in the Third Millennium* published by the USCCB (2005b).

Seminars on school leadership could be provided through partnerships with the National Catholic Educational Association (NCEA) and Catholic Higher Education in Support of P-12 Catholic Schools (CHESCS), a national membership organization committed to supporting Catholic education. Seminars could be provided electronically or at summer institutes.

As noted in the findings section of this article, the seminarians we interviewed wondered out loud if freestanding Catholic schools not juridically or legally connected to a Catholic parish might be a model to consider in some contexts. Therefore, our second recommendation is that the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops and diocesan educational leaders explore this option. If seminary based programs or specialized formation programs for young priests are not put in place to prepare future pastors for school leadership roles, then regional Catholic schools operated by lay boards might be a better model to adopt. Regional Catholic schools may also provide new options to answer the vexing question of how to finance Catholic grade schools.

At the same time, if bishops and diocesan school leaders continue to view parish schools overseen by a pastor as a more effective means of evangelization, then it is critical for US Catholic seminaries to provide adequate preparation for future pastors of parish schools. Excellent and easily accessible resources exist that any seminary professor could include in courses on spiritual development, Church history, and pastoral Theology. Some of these resources have been mentioned already, and we would add these: *Priestly Leadership in Catholic Schools* edited by James King (2015) and published by the National Catholic Educational Association, *A History of United States Catholic Schooling* by Harold Buetow (1986), *Parish School: American Catholic Parochial Education From Colonial Times to the Present* by Timothy Walch (2016), and *Beyond the Catechist's Toolbox* by Joe Paprocki (2013).

Catholic schools are “a most valuable resource” (Francis, 2013b, section 134) for the evangelization and formation of Catholic youth. They are in a unique position to provide leadership formation for youth, share the message of the Gospel with parish communities, and bring parents closer to the Church. However, their success depends on quality leadership from the teachers, principals, and most especially the pastors of parish schools.

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