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# Introduction to the Focus Section: School Leaders and Contemplative Practice

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## Introduction to the Focus Section: School Leaders and Contemplative Practice

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*The Catholic educator has a distinctive evangelizing role within the Catholic school. Contemplative practice, through reflection and witness, has the potential to contribute to creating a faith internship community for students and adults in the school community. This article addresses the distinctive thinking processes contemplative educators use to lead efforts to provide students with lived faith experiences that form their Catholic identity. Contemplative school leaders guide teachers, staff, and parents in their faith formation roles within the faith internship community. The article also presents challenges to contemplative practice and links to the other articles in this focus section.*

Keywords: Leadership, Catholic identity, faith formation, staff development

For the past 20 years, Catholic educators have recognized that the recruitment, formation, and retention of Catholic school leaders and teachers are priorities in efforts to enhance Catholic identity within a Catholic school (Canavan, 2001; Schuttloffel, 2014). In an age when lay leadership is typical within Catholic educational institutions, Catholic school leaders must be able to articulate the school’s commitment to the religious dimension of the school. In some cases, this may require that school leaders demonstrate that their staff members possess (or are developing) the requisite qualities for Catholic educators to carry out the mandates of faith sharing and development (Ciriello, 1996; Jacobs, 1996; Miller, 2005). Catholic school leaders must constantly address the challenge of integrating an educator’s Catholicity as a person of faith into professional practice.

The articles in this focus section explore diverse aspects of Catholic school leadership: decision-making about servicing students with disabilities; problem-solving approaches in different national contexts; and understanding the principal’s role in the New Evangelization. Before turning to these specific responsibilities and challenges of the principalship, this article presents contemplative practice as an overarching leadership model that can help Catholic

school leaders approach all aspects of their work as part of an intentional effort to build what I call a “faith internship community” through which school leaders, teachers, and staff refine their abilities to think like *Catholic* educators—educators who integrate their faith lives seamlessly into their professional practice and model lived faith for students in all aspects of their education.

### **Defining “Faith Internship Community”**

Institutional Catholic identity cannot exist without teachers and staff who embrace their roles as evangelizers (Jacobs, 1996). However, the goal of Catholic schooling is not merely maintaining *institutional* Catholic identity, but also supporting students in developing their own personal Catholic identity. A faith internship community is a Catholic school where students experience a loving community of faith-witnessing adults who provide the students with opportunities to explore and grow toward a mature faith life. As in a professional internship, the student develops knowledge and skills through their experience in the community; what is unique about a faith internship is that it also allows the student to experience the beliefs and practices of the practitioners in their community. This is the expectation of a faith internship: students will be exposed not only to the knowledge base of their faith, but also to a lived faith through their interactions with adult role models.

School leaders, teachers, and other community members all must be invested in creating a faith internship community, as there are often significant challenges that must be overcome in garnering resources and preparing the community for this type of participation. In many cases, teachers and staff within Catholic schools have not been prepared to witness their personal faith in their lessons, connect the faith to a rationale for behavioral expectations for students, or explicitly witness their faith throughout the school day. While some dioceses and schools have effectively addressed the infusion of Catholicity into their diocesan curriculum, oftentimes implementing these curricula is a daunting task for teachers, especially those whose faith education and formation have not provided the content and skills necessary to integrate the tenets of Catholic faith knowledge, beliefs, and practices into their teaching.

The ability to integrate personal faith into professional practice is an implicit requirement of the *National Standards and Benchmarks for Effective Catholic Elementary and Secondary Schools* (Ozar & Weitzel-O’Neill, 2012). This document and its resource materials, also located on their website ([www.](http://www.)

catholicschoolstandards.org), provide support for practitioners to carry out their academic and faith formation missions. However, in addition to knowledge resources such as these, Catholic educators—and particularly Catholic school leaders—need to develop metacognitive approaches to support their decision-making, communication, and interactions with members of the school community. This is where contemplative practice comes in.

Contemplative practice offers one specific model for thinking like a Catholic educator and, ultimately, taking action like a Catholic educator (Schuttloffel, 1999). The next section of this article gives a brief introduction to the components of contemplative practice. Following that introduction, I will explain how a Catholic educator's practice may be impacted by contemplative practice before turning to a discussion of potential challenges in educators' uses of contemplative practice.

### What is Contemplative Practice?

#### Theoretical Framework Underpinnings

Contemplative practice (Schuttloffel, 1999) is based in a reflective model of leadership practice grounded in metacognition (Flavell, 1977; Van Manen, 1977). In other words, contemplative practice encourages in Catholic school educators a distinctive way *to think about their own thinking* regarding their decision making processes and outcomes. Contemplative practice emphasizes Gospel values, Catholic theology, and Church tradition as the guiding principles upon which a decision is made. These values include faith, hope, love, prudence, temperance, justice, fortitude. Following the Gospel values means living out of the Christian life as exemplified through the beatitudes. Catholic theology is explicated through the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (1994). And Catholic tradition encompasses practices passed down through the years. Some are part of formal doctrine, others are common practices such as prayers and devotions, the corporal and spiritual works of mercy, and the lives of the saints (Groome, 2002). Other traditions may be culturally based and very local in their application (Groome, 2002).

Contemplative practice encourages community building as a means for holistic student development (Schuttloffel, 2008). The character of the educator making the decision is shaped by their Catholic identity with a Catholic worldview (Nash, 1995; Schuttloffel, 1999). While contemplative practice was initially designed for school leaders, its adoption by teachers and other staff is integral for its success. Within contemplative practice, leadership behaviors

might include implementing a transformational vision, creating supportive conditions for learning, participatory governance structures, and community building activities through service (Nelson, 2012; Schuttloffel, 2008). Examples of teacher behaviors include an emphasis on faith across the curriculum, discipline strategies that go beyond behavioral classroom management techniques and faith infusion into daily classroom life. For example, reconciliation within the classroom might include both the requirement for the student to ask forgiveness, but also for the wronged student to give mercy to a classmate. A contemplative teacher recognizes that this is a teachable moment for a lived faith.

Until recently, American Catholic higher education leadership programs focused on the tripartite of competencies deemed essential for school leadership: instructional leadership, managerial leadership and spiritual leadership (Ciriello, 1993, 1994, 1996). After the publication of *National Standards and Benchmarks for Effective Catholic Elementary and Secondary Schools*, there is a confluence of interest in how to develop not only the school leader, but the entire school community. The purpose of contemplative practice is to assist Catholic school educators in their distinctive educational vocation and ministry (Jacobs, 1996). Contemplative practice builds on Sergiovanni's (1992) metaphor for leadership: the heart, the head, and the hand. The substance of this metaphor seeks coherence between an individual leader's worldview and their decision making. The Catholic school leader is challenged to distinguish their rationale for a decision from a sincere school leader in a government school. A Catholic school leader's decision that reflects their vocation within the educational ministry of the Church confirms coherence with the distinctive mission of a Catholic school.

The reflective process advocated by Van Manen (1977) provides another theoretical component of the contemplative model that is both introspective and collaborative. Van Manen proposes that three types of reflection are possible: technical, interpretive and critical. Technical reflection provides a description of *what is going on*. For example, a school leader might choose to think about what happened at a recent parent conference. Interpretive reflection asks the question, *What does our interaction mean?* or, *What message does the parent's behavior send?* or, *What message does my behavior send?* If the parent demonstrated a worldview that contradicts the school's philosophy by saying, "I told Junior to hit him back if he hits you again," it is possible that what the school leader thinks that this is not an appropriate response for a parent. What message does the principal want to send in reaction to the parent's

response? Educational expert? Condescending? What does this interaction mean for future discussions about student behaviors? An examination of the meanings created (what is good parent behavior) or the messages sent (we know what's best for your child), reveal stumbling blocks to creating a faith internship community. Finally, critical reflection requires the school leader to consider their own values, beliefs and philosophy as *they think about why they think the way they do* regarding the parent meeting. Is there ever a situation when it is appropriate for a student to hit another student? How do I interact with individuals who do not hold my views on discipline? How can I embrace this parent as a member of the school community while communicating a Catholic Christian understanding of self-discipline based in Gospel Values?

What distinguishes contemplative practice is integration of these two theoretical underpinnings in that the values, beliefs and philosophical anchors are taken from Gospel values, Church teaching, our Baptismal call to evangelize, and the Catholic Church's intellectual tradition. In addition, the Catholic Christian worldview is rooted in the educator's well-formed Catholic conscience. In sum, contemplative practice is more than merely taking a leadership theory and a reflective practice theory and laying them over a Catholic school and its educators. Contemplative practice requires that an educator's *thinking about their own thinking* exists within an explicit connection to their own personal Catholic identity and their understanding of the vocation of Catholic educator. In essence, contemplative practice is consistent with other descriptions for shaping the Catholic school community (Cook, 2001).

Descriptions of the Catholic educator's contemplative practice presumes there are personal qualities necessary to make decisions regarding children, teachers, and the school community that embody the school's Catholic identity and mission (Jacobs, 1997; Miller, 2006; Schuttloffel, 1999; USCC, 1989; USCC, 1972). Character encompasses these qualities (Nash, 1996). Nash (1996) defines character as the integration of an individual's formative communities, their virtues and their personal life story. The intimate dynamic between these elements forms the beliefs, worldview, and actions that shape an individual's identity and, ultimately, their decision making process. The impact of special communities, life stories, and virtue on creating beliefs, world view, and action demonstrates the character of a Catholic school educator (Schuttloffel, 2013).

Contemplative practice highlights the important role that community plays in the formation of character imbued with a Catholic identity. Contemplative practice attempts to create a faith internship community that infuses the beliefs of the Catholic worldview, religious knowledge and practices, in order to create a Catholic identity within its students and to develop the Catholic witness of its adults. This is the evangelization goal of the Catholic educational ministry. But in reality, this is no small task for Catholic educators. The next section describes what contemplative practice looks like for a Catholic school educator.<sup>1</sup>

### Characteristics of Contemplative Practice

Over the past dozen years I have directed a doctoral program in Catholic educational leadership and policy studies. The variety of intimate conversations that take place during the long hours of a seminar with novice and veteran Catholic educators provides insights into how behaviors by those who embrace contemplative practice differ qualitatively from other educators who might be equally devoted professionally to their students. One of the key topics of conversation is the concept of a faith learning internship. A faith internship takes place in a Catholic school where students, within a loving community of faith-witnessing adults, explore and grow in skills required for a mature faith life. Like any internship, there are knowledge and skills that are disseminated, but there are also experiences with the beliefs of the mentor that influence the intern. This is the expectation of a faith internship: students will be exposed to not only the facts of their faith, but also to a lived faith. Contemplative practice assists educators in creating a school community where faith learning is an integral part of daily life. From sincere discussions with experienced Catholic educators, and my own experiences as a Catholic educator, contemplative practice emerges within the school and the larger faith community as a vehicle to create a faith learning community.

Contemplative practice can be organized into four steps or stages: (a) The educator reflects on their faith practice in order to improve future practice; (b) The educator leads their school community through reflection for the purpose of acknowledging the need for improvement; (c) The educator implements supportive conditions that enrich a faith learning internship; and (d) The educator maintains coherence with the Gospel Values, traditions

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<sup>1</sup> This summary description of contemplative practice was a revision of a previous article: Schuttloffel, M. J. (2013). Contemplative leadership practice: The influences of character on Catholic school leadership. *Catholic Education: A Journal of Inquiry and Practice*, 17(1).

and teaching of the Catholic faith. In reality, these steps are not isolated, but instead are parts of an on-going process for improvement. Each step is examined in greater detail below.

### **Individual Reflection**

Prior to any public stage of implementation of a faith internship, the school leader must reflect privately on their school's faith life and consider how to improve the supportive conditions for the school to function as a faith learning community. This stage could be described as technical reflection, considering questions like: What is going on in my school? Do we have evidence of a lively faith life within the school community?

### **Community reflection**

The contemplative school leader guides reflective conversations with teachers, staff, and parents in advance of implementing the faith internship model. This discussion reveals why a faith internship community should be a priority in their school community. This stage requires gentle evangelization by the school leader as she exposes the weaknesses or shortcomings of their current school environment when considering faith formation. It is entirely possible to be a high-performing Catholic school on other measures (e.g. academic performance or football trophies), while paying little heed to essential faith learning outcomes.

Before the supportive conditions for improvement can be determined, there needs to be agreement among school stakeholders that change is necessary. Change is always difficult. It smacks of negative criticism. However, a contemplative school leader allocates substantial time for reflecting on how best to move the school community along the road to proactive evangelization. The contemplative school leader may publically examine their own past behaviors and priorities in order to make it possible for others to recognize their shortcomings.

This stage demands critical reflection that explicates to the school community the philosophical orientation behind the decision to create a faith internship environment. Faith formation is the very reason for the existence of a Catholic school, as Archbishop Miller states, "Christ is not an after-thought or an add-on to Catholic educational philosophy; He is the center and fulcrum of the entire enterprise, the light enlightening every boy and girl who comes into a Catholic school" (2006, p. 24). If Catholic schools do not evangelize, they are not meeting their distinctive purpose.



Oftentimes when change is required, individuals fall into several categories: those who are enthusiastic and have the ability to implement the change, those who oppose or are fearful of change, and those who have not considered that there is need for improvement. Those who support the change may be teachers or parents who have advanced theological training, who have studied contemporary catechetics, or who have a mature personal faith life. Due to their knowledge and experience of lived faith, it is possible that they would eagerly embrace the proposed change in the school's approach to faith formation.

There may be other teachers or parents who are less enthusiastic about the change, perhaps because they feel it is a departure from the characteristics that attracted them to the school, or because they are concerned that such a shift might jeopardize other areas where the school excels. Perhaps they fear the loss of status or worry that they do not have an adequate knowledge base or personal faith commitment to meet the new required teaching and witnessing practices. There may be others who simply have never thought about the school as a faith internship community, and with adequate information and formation, would embrace the evangelizing witness role. Recognizing and responding to individuals who are in different places will require the school leader to practice charity and model Catholic Christian behavior while moving the school community gently forward.

### **Implementation**

The third step requires that the contemplative leader make decisions reflecting the school community's commitment to creating a faith learning community. This requires that the school leader, in conjunction with teachers, staff, and parents, determine how resources—most typically time and money—can be used to prioritize supportive conditions for faith formation. Perhaps resources need to be allocated to the theological education of teachers; or additional minutes during the school day must be designated for the study of the faith, prayer, and service. Some in the school community may raise questions about the implications of using instructional time for faith internship activities. Reflection may indicate that an extension of the school day is required—again, requiring additional resources.

The implementation stage is extremely challenging because reality sets in. It is much easier to rally support for faith formation in principle than it is to make the tough decisions that create supportive conditions necessary for a faith internship experience. The contemplative leader recognizes that while

students are the explicit target of the faith internship, the entire school community will benefit from the supportive faith learning community for their own faith development. To accomplish this cultural shift, a school leader frequently considers formative experiences for parents, many of whom do not have the religious education necessary to recognize the significance of the distinctive environment the school is trying to provide or their role as primary faith educator (Paul VI, 1965).

### **Maintaining Alignment with Gospel Values**

In the fourth stage, the educator maintains coherence with the Gospel values, traditions, and teaching of the Catholic faith. Much like any individual's faith journey, an entire school community's faith journey enriches the evangelizers. The implementation stage engages interpretive reflection making educators aware of the unintended messages they send through actions inconsistent with the witness of a Catholic worldview. Also interpretive reflection allows adult members of the school community to be aware if the messages that they send are in concert with the Catholic faith. The understanding and recognition of the Gospel message is how a lived faith is conveyed and is very important in creating a faith internship community. Coherence between messages and behaviors is the key to a successful faith internship community. Witnessing adults explain how they make decisions referencing their faith and why they ultimately make their choice(s). Through this process students also become contemplative practitioners by acquiring the ability to think about their own thinking and actions through the lens of their Catholic worldview.

### **What Are the Challenges of Contemplative Practice?**

There are several challenges inherent within contemplative practice, including the status of most Catholic educators as lay ministers, gaps in theological knowledge among current school leaders, teachers, and parents, and the tenuous link between parish life and Catholic schools. There is considerable evidence that Catholic school educators desire their vocation to be a contribution to the Church, and thereby meaningful for them and their students. For many Catholic educators, this ministry aspect is what drew them to working in a Catholic school, or at least, why they stayed (Benson & Guerra, 1985; Convey, 2014; Schuttloffel, 2001; Squillini, 2001; Tarr, Ciriello, & Convey, 1993). Although evangelization is the Baptismal call of all Catholic Christians, watching the seed of faith grow is the greatest reward for many who work in the ministry of Catholic education.

It would be naïve to present contemplative practice described in this article as easy or simple behaviors for educators to embrace. Beliefs, values, and personal priorities are deeply entrenched in one's identity and any activity that challenges a person's current worldview is likely to meet some resistance. That said, whenever I describe contemplative practice, many Catholic educators recognize that they do this thinking about their own thinking already (contemplative practice). They already integrate faith into their school's culture (faith internship). They simply did not have a language to describe these activities. Developing theological knowledge among teachers and parents would increase the likelihood that a faith internship could be implemented and that adults would embrace their faith witness role. Educators who are not overwhelmed by the demand to create a curriculum full of vitality within the Catholic intellectual tradition recognize that the infusion of the Catholic worldview cannot be restricted to academics. Classroom management must be infused with Gospel values that young students recognize. And yes, even athletics and extra-curricular activities are venues where the Catholic Christian worldview supports faith learning. Coaches, yearbook, newspaper, and language club advisors each have the opportunity to bring their faith to their interactions with students. The broad spectrum of school life becomes the substance of the faith internship experience.

An implicit assumption of contemplative practice is an explicit faith formation and connection to sacramental and liturgical parish life. A contemplative Catholic school leader views the Catholic school community as a faith formation link to the larger Church. Students, teachers, parents, and all those associated with the school are not on an island disconnected from the universal Church.

Ultimately, contemplative practice challenges everyone in the school community to seek coherence between their beliefs and their behaviors. A theoretical Catholic faith does little to provide students with the tangible witness necessary to claim their own Catholic identity. By seeking coherence between actions and behaviors, the meaning associated with being a Catholic Christian becomes a reality rather than an abstract concept. It *means* something to identify as a Catholic Christian. Students who are educated in a faith internship become acutely aware of what it means to be a Catholic Christian in thinking *and* action. The goals for a faith internship graduate are to live their Catholic faith for their individual salvation, to present an evangelizing witness for others, and finally to serve the world for the common good.

### Examples of Contemplative Practice: Outline of this Focus Section

Each of the articles that follow in this focus section exemplify aspects of contemplative practice by Catholic school leaders. First, “An Investigation of the Attitudes of Catholic School Principals towards the Inclusion of Students with Disabilities,” by Michael Boyle and Claudia Hernandez, surveyed Catholic school principals about their beliefs and attitudes toward including students with disabilities in their schools. This article’s findings illustrate a challenge of contemplative leadership—balancing one’s own beliefs, values, and priorities with the needs of the school. As the article’s findings detail, most of the surveyed principals demonstrated positive attitudes toward including students with disabilities; the research also found significant relationships between principal’s previous experiences with students with disabilities and their willingness to include such students in the school.

Next, “Catholic School Principals’ Decision-Making and Problem-Solving Practices During Times of Change and Uncertainty: A North American Analysis,” by Walter Polka, Peter Litchka, Rosina Mete, and Augustine Ayaga, examines decision-making and problem-solving approaches utilized by Catholic school principals in the US and Canada. This article unpacks how principals balance the multiple demands of their position, including instructional leadership, organizational management, and faith leadership. Through this research, the authors found that principals in the US and Canada use similar practices around decision making and problem solving; for both contexts, they recommend a “refocus on the mission of Catholic education with strong emphasis on moral development to further sustain and advance their [schools’] survival” (p. x). This recommendation is similar to what I have suggested in the present article—a need for contemplative practice focused on thinking like a Catholic educator.

The last two articles in this focus section, both authored by David Spesia, present two pieces of a larger study on the role of Catholic school leaders in enacting the New Evangelization. Like the previous articles in this focus section, these articles provide examples of contemplative practice by school leaders. “Forming Catholic School Principals as Leaders of the New Evangelization” provides an overview of the intellectual and pastoral foundations for the mission of Catholic schools at the service of the Church’s ongoing call for a New Evangelization. Framed within the context of Pope Francis’ *Evangelii Gaudium*, the article also explores the work of contemporary thought leaders on the New Evangelization, and it considers some important implications and applications for the ongoing formation of Catholic school

leaders. “Nurturing a Heart for the New Evangelization: A National Study of Catholic Elementary School Principals in the U.S.” then contributes to this wider discussion by exploring the perceptions of Catholic school principals about the New Evangelization and their own prior and ongoing faith formation.

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