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9-2020

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Angela T. Moret

Saint Louis University, angela.moret@slu.edu

Ronald R. O'Dwyer S.J.

Saint Louis University, odwyersj@gmail.com

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Repository Citation

Moret, Angela T. and O'Dwyer, Ronald R. S.J., "A Spiritual Vision for Catholic Educator Prep in a Time of Disruption: A Reflective Essay" (2020). *COVID-19 and Catholic Schools*. 7.
https://digitalcommons.lmu.edu/ce_covid/7

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A Spiritual Vision for Catholic Educator Preparation in a Time of Disruption: A Reflective Essay

Angela T. Moret & Ronald R. O'Dwyer, S. J.
Saint Louis University

This essay reflects on the spiritual lessons learned as a Catholic graduate-level teacher prep program guided novice teachers through the first months of the COVID-19 pandemic. We observed the importance of articulating a clear spiritual vision rooted in scripture, history, and personal experience. The guiding spiritual lens has been the Emmaus story which helps us look to the past and to the future as we form and support early-career educators in Catholic schools.

Keywords

Spirituality, teacher formation, COVID-19

And it happened that while they were conversing and debating, Jesus himself drew near and walked with them, but their eyes were prevented from recognizing him.

- Luke 24:15-16

Like the disciples in the Gospel we were caught off guard by an unexpected, turbulent storm. We have realized that we are on the same boat, all of us fragile and disoriented, but at the same time important and needed, all of us called to row together, each of us in need of comforting the other.

- Pope Francis

"We had hoped," they said on the road to Emmaus. Once there was hope, they thought. But even their sense of loss, their longing for the hope, was hope. ... Finally recognizing him, they set their faces toward Jerusalem to tell the others how their hearts were set on fire, not only in the breaking of the bread, but when he revealed to them their past and future glory. It all happened on the road.

- John F. Kavanaugh, S.J.

Our faith invites us to practice Christian attitudes in small matters so that when more significant challenges present themselves we might respond in a Christ-like manner. About six months ago, members of the Billiken Teacher Corps (BTC), all graduate students living in an intentional faith community while teaching in urban Catholic schools, gathered for a fall retreat. Before celebrating the Eucharist on Saturday evening, the group read St. Luke's account of the Emmaus story and then paired up to walk and talk about how God had been present in unexpected events during the last weeks. What we could not realize in the moment was that this retreat activity would provide a spiritual template for how to accompany new Catholic educators in a time of disruption.

We write this reflective essay from the perspective of program administrators, situated in the higher education context, who labor in the vineyard of Catholic educator preparation. Seemingly overnight our novice teachers shifted from in-person instruction while living together in an intentional faith community to facilitating distance learning from their childhood homes. Our question was: How do we model for the teaching fellows what Catholic educators do—and have always done—during uncertain times such as these?

We propose a spiritual vision that can offer guidance for principals, professors, mentors, coaches, and veteran faculty members who support emerging Catholic educators. In light of the experiences of recent months, we have come to rely upon the vast treasury of spiritual tools that our faith offers in times of disruption. Our thesis is simple: We are not starting from nothing; as Catholic educators we can draw inspiration and direction from the scriptures and from the example of our forebears who sought ways to live the Gospel mandate to “teach all nations” according to their context.

Our Context, Project, and Model of Teacher Formation

Inspired by our University's Catholic, Jesuit mission, the BTC trains and supports novice teachers to have a transformative impact in under-resourced Catholic schools in the St. Louis region. The BTC is a member of the University Consortium for Catholic Education (UCCE). The consortium supports similar projects housed at 14 Catholic universities. In total, there are approximately 500 young people studying and teaching in UCCE programs around the country.

The BTC differs from other post-graduate service programs because of our mission's narrow scope. That is, we are about the tasks of recruiting,

training, and supporting the next generation of Catholic educators. During the COVID-19 crisis, our program included 12 teachers who worked in 11 Catholic schools (three high schools, six elementary schools, and two middle schools). All combined, our program served 851 students; the majority live in urban neighborhoods and low-income households. At the time of this article our Archdiocese has announced the closure of three Catholic schools; two of the schools had been our partners over the years.

As the pandemic began, we sought direction from our Ignatian heritage. St. Ignatius described the experience of his companions as *communitas ad dispersionem*, a community in dispersion. In the early days of COVID-19, an article on this topic by Matthew Carnes, S.J. circulated among Jesuit higher education circles. In it, Father Carnes reminds us:

In spite of the disruptions and separations ... [the first Jesuits] remained intimately connected through the technology of their day—letters, carefully crafted and shared—so that each continued to feel united with all the others. They read and re-read those letters, and they prayed for one another daily. Still one community, still one mission, still one life.

This insight liberated us. It reassured us that the vital aspect of community—which we teach our fellows is a hallmark of Catholic education—could be preserved in a new, physically distanced world. Indeed, if Catholic educators of previous generations had maintained a sense of community in dispersion then so could we. Along the way, we discovered that this was not the first time Saint Louis University students endured a pandemic. In the 1840s, a cholera epidemic threatened the health and safety of our city. Students of that era responded with faith and devotion, and still today our university remembers those times with a statue of the Blessed Mother and the child Jesus that adorns our campus church. Within the context of the BTC program, our fellows live in a former convent where religious women also learned to teach amidst the great societal changes during the 20th century. As the COVID-19 pandemic began, we did our best to retrieve these memories and tether ourselves to them as we crafted a spiritual vision for Catholic teacher preparation in the present context.

Our model of teacher formation stands on three pillars: building an intentional faith community, teaching in under-resourced Catholic schools, and studying in a graduate-level teacher preparation program. We had to reimagine the pillars in this new context and address new challenges arising within each area.

A Community in Dispersion

The fellows spent ten months before the pandemic arrived in our city building an intentional faith community. They shared meals, prayed, reflected, and laughed together. This spring, despite the new distance between community members, there was no question as to *if* the intentional faith community would continue. It was a matter of *how* it would. For eight weeks this spring, we met online, and the praying, the reflecting, and the laughing continued.

As program leaders, we often viewed this time with the fellows as the highlight of the week. Through the sharing of consolations and desolations among the group, we modeled how to turn to our faith for hope and joy in a time that sometimes felt very dark. We kept vision on the horizon of the unique vocation of Catholic educators. We listened. We responded with love and compassion. We reminded the fellows to take time for themselves to recharge after spending the school day on the computer.

As we marched through extended school closures and further social distancing guidelines, and as it became clear that the annual spring retreat would be cancelled, we reimagined the time we would have spent together. The spring retreat became a “Retreat to Go,” a deck of resources that the fellows could page through on their own time over a weekend. Sandwiched between prayers and meditations, it included something to write—a journal prompt on Mary Oliver’s *The Summer Day*, something to read—Pope Francis’s March 27, 2020 *Extraordinary Moment of Prayer*, and something to listen to—“Lullaby” from George Winston’s *Summer* album.

The Billiken Teacher Corps community in dispersion retreated to their own backyards, bedrooms, quiet nooks in their homes, and returned to the group during the weekly Monday check-in to share the fruits of their prayer. To borrow an image from Mark 4:39, “The wind ceased and there was a great calm.”

Teaching All Nations

For generations, Catholic schools have served all types of communities around the globe in different contexts. Journeying together into new frontiers is what Catholic educators have done for centuries. This spring, there was a new solidarity among educators as they moved into the world of virtual distance learning. With little time for planning the transition, the fellows learned quickly to teach remotely. One of the hallmarks of our program—a high level of support for our fellows—could not waver as the fellows navigated new waters and looked at teaching with new eyes.

Instructional coaching continued with tours of Google classrooms or support conversations over the phone. Office hours held virtually became problem solving sessions about what students could realistically learn during the remainder of the semester and how to fairly assess student work. The support team did not claim to be experts in distance learning. However, by listening closely to the fellows' needs as teachers, brainstorming together, and keeping our sights on the greater mission and vision of Catholic education, the fellows journeyed to the end of the 2019-2020 school year, supporting their students.

Learning from Credible Models

As students themselves, the fellows not only taught from a distance, but also learned from a distance as their graduate courses shifted to online platforms. Their professors modeled receptivity to change. Syllabi were quickly adapted and deadlines shifted, allowing for more flexibility in meeting them. Compassion and empathy for what their students were newly experiencing permeated conversations. Watching these credible educational models jump feet first into this new way of teaching was a lesson in and of itself for the first and second-year fellows.

Key Lessons

Companions on the Journey Are Essential

Program leaders in the UCCE reached out to each other for support in shepherding their fellows through the bumps in the road. Bi-annual in-person meetings turned into bi-weekly virtual sessions aimed at sharing resources and ideas in order to support new teachers in the classroom. The group brainstormed strategies to continue building faith communities among the fellows despite the distance. Together, these leaders looked ahead to crafting health and safety policies for the fellows once they are able to reunite in the summer or fall. These programmatic discussions took place in a context of prayer and spiritual leadership, leading to a deeper collaboration which will hopefully remain intact once the pandemic has passed.

Students are the Best Teachers

The BTC motto, "Teach Me", took on a new meaning as we navigated the beginning of the pandemic. We had to learn from the teaching fellows. They posed thought-provoking questions and we did not always have the answers.

They knew their students and families better than we did. They were directly experiencing this new way of teaching. So, we learned to support them in creating their own solutions. The fellows reminded us to communicate the facts and information we did know. They taught us that providing routine and consistency was important, especially in a time of prolonged crisis. They asked that we be available. By acknowledging the grief they felt because of a fizzled end to the school year, they illuminated the human component in our vocation as educators. They modeled for us how to share hope and to more carefully listen with our hearts. Most of all, they were patient with us.

Receptivity is a Key Spiritual Posture in These Days of Constant Change

As we look towards schools reopening in a new way, the flexibility we learned, practiced, and developed over the past months will continue to serve us all well. Again, we are entering new waters; class sizes and room set-ups will change, dress codes will include masks, and teachers will toggle between in-person and virtual learning. What will be asked of us is continued flexibility. What we can pray for is the grace of receptivity, that is, an openness to learning how to live in a space of unknowns. We continue to pray for the grace to receive this present moment and articulate a spiritual vision for a hope-filled future which prioritizes light over darkness.

The Past can Show us a Way Forward

Our Christian history offers us a treasury of stories, heroines, and prayers that can guide us on this path. In our BTC context, we discovered a vision of spiritual leadership that drew inspiration from the experience of the first Jesuits who maintained community despite dispersion; we told the tales of the SLU students in the 1840s who prayed and performed acts of charity during the cholera epidemic; we did our best to cultivate an attitude of receptivity modeled on the tireless witness of the women religious on whose shoulders all Catholic educators stand. Most significantly, we harkened back to where this project all began—the teaching ministry of Jesus. We embraced Pope Francis' call to “row together” as we redoubled our efforts to help one another deepen our familiarity with God and in so doing pattern our lives on the example of Christ the Teacher.

Conclusion

At the fall retreat, when our teaching fellows read and enacted the Emmaus story, they rehearsed the spiritual vision that we propose in this reflection. Their experience foreshadowed what the Jesuit philosopher and preacher John Kavanaugh observed about Christ's Emmaus encounter with the disciples, "...he revealed to them their past and future glory. It all happened on the road." Let it not be lost on us that we first experienced the pandemic during the church's holiest of times—Lent, Holy Week, and Easter. Perhaps we are more like the disciples than we realize, walking while trying to put the pieces back together. And as the Emmaus story teaches, the first Christians were able to move from fear to newness of life by remembering how Christ is present, even when at first glance they failed to notice. As once for the disciples so now for us, in the calm moments of life and during times of disruption, Catholic educators of every generation are invited to encounter the risen Christ "on the way." We do this by reflecting on our present context using the scriptures and eyes of faith. We can pray for guidance and the grace of receptivity on the new path. We can also draw inspiration from Catholic educators who articulated a spiritual vision according to their time and circumstance: we look to the past so that we can remember into the future. Only by walking the journey ourselves can we model the way for others.