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Christopher K. Howe

Bishop McNamara High School

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SPIRITUALITY: IT'S A MATTER OF THE HEART

CHRISTOPHER K. HOWE, O.S.A.

Bishop McNamara High School

The school leader's spirituality flows from and is ever rooted in the heart; that is to say, in principles which are molded in one of the great traditions of the faith. In this article characteristics of gospel spirituality are described and the author incorporates practical examples of how this spirituality is lived within his school.

An old pilgrim was making his way to the Himalaya Mountains in the bitter cold of winter when it began to rain. An innkeeper said to him, "How will you ever get there in this kind of weather, my good man?" The old man answered cheerfully, "My heart got there first, so it's easy for the rest of me to follow" (de Mello, 1988, p. 159). Not a week goes by when the Catholic school administrator is not besieged with yet more clarion calls to introduce new programs, attend to emerging critical issues, and address still another crisis in education. Every one of these problems is termed—and often with ample justification—a priority. Some days climbing the Himalayas would seem a welcome respite from these onslaughts. In these moments and, indeed, at every moment, Catholic school leaders must recall that it was the heart that got them there in the first place.

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* talks about spirituality as a participation in "the personal charism of a witness to God's love" (1994, p. 645). It adds that spiritualities are "indispensable guides for the faithful." Jesus told Nicodemus, "The spirit blows where it wills; you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from, or where it is going" (Jn 3:8). Throughout the history of Christianity, the Holy Spirit has been a creative, dynamic force, animating women and men of diverse personalities and gifts

to be prisms of God's grace in the world. Sts. Augustine, Benedict, Theresa, John of the Cross, and Ignatius serve as examples of witnesses of heroic merit who have bequeathed to the Church ways in which others could enter into deeper communion with God. These represent such a rich variety of spiritual traditions that all personality types are afforded some pattern after which they can model their lives. Thus, Catholic school leaders' spirituality is that manner by which the life of God is nurtured and increased. It is precisely that which returns the leader to the heart of what he or she is about.

This description from the *Catechism* excludes some notions about what comprises spirituality. Some unwittingly equate a sort of bland humanism with legitimate spirituality. These may believe, for example, that enhancing a student's self-esteem is itself a spirituality. All true spiritualities, like the cross of Christ, must encompass vertical as well as horizontal dimensions. In other words, spirituality will, indeed, have an investment in the realities of this world (the horizontal), but it also carries with it a transcendent power (the vertical). Any spirituality that does not cultivate a direct, active, and even intense relationship with God is not worthy of the name.

Whatever the initial motivation in choosing to be in Catholic education, it constituted a call, a vocation. Teaching is neither a job nor a career. It is not primarily a profession. What is the difference between a vocation and a profession? Jungian psychoanalyst Johnson (1998) says, "We may choose a career, but a vocation chooses us" (p. 119). It is God alone, working often mysteriously and sublimely through human agency, who calls educators to minister in Catholic schools and who sustains them through this ministry despite incidents of school violence, despite mounting pressures to remedy more and more of society's ills in the classroom setting, and despite the blame that is placed entirely at teachers' feet for poor academic performance.

The first component of the spirituality of the Catholic school leader, then, may be the conscious awareness and celebration of being entrusted with a gift (i.e., charism), a gift of tremendous beauty and importance, a gift for which an accounting will one day have to be given. Secondly, this sense of giftedness, of vocation, has to be transmitted to the entire faculty. As Jacobs (1996) says:

Catholic teachers and administrators form the visible community of disciples who have been entrusted with the responsibility for educating youth. As educators of both mind and heart, these men and women practice an intricate craft, one requiring them to be responsive to both divine grace and human nature. Through this craft, one very much akin to that of the artisan who weaves diverse strands of materials into a colorful tapestry, Catholic educators work in partnership with God, parents, and their colleagues to bring to maturity the divine image and likeness that God has breathed into each students' [sic] soul. (p. 54)

The spirituality that accepts, exemplifies, and motivates in others this vision of Catholic education is already well-formed.

It behooves the Catholic school leader to study the lives of various masters of the spiritual life and pursue a study of the ones for which he or she feels an affinity. Much could be said about particular spiritualities (e.g., Carmelite), but basic to all Christian spiritualities is the gospel. The heart and soul of a Catholic school is nothing less and nothing other than the good news of Jesus Christ. "Whatever you do, in word or in deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus" (Col 3:17). All Catholic school administrators know that many, perhaps most, parents' primary motivation in enrolling students in their schools is not faith formation. Whatever the parents' motivations, administrators themselves must be clear and unabashed about *their* motivations. For that reason, it is imperative that Catholic school administrators have an active, solid spiritual life; view and evaluate every aspect of the educational process in the light of that life; and boldly proclaim spiritual values to the many publics with which they interact.

Most importantly, a gospel spirituality anchors Catholic school leaders in why they do what they do. So often appeals for Catholic schooling are made in terms of academic excellence or community solidarity. As meritorious and valid as these claims are, other "boasts" deserve greater emphasis. When St. Paul talks to the Ephesians (4:14) about teaching "so that we may no longer be infants, tossed by waves and swept along by every wind of teaching arising from human trickery, from...cunning in the interests of deceitful scheming," is it not important that today's youth be challenged to be aware and suspicious of the many "isms" that pervade our culture? Materialism, consumerism, unbridled capitalism, hedonism, all need to be critiqued in the light of the Gospel. The original threat to the faith from public schools that inspired the American bishops to undertake the massive building and staffing of the Catholic school system is no longer present. However, many societal attitudes such as the idea that what you wear determines your worth, that the well-to-do have no obligation in justice to the disadvantaged among us, that pleasure is an end in itself are some of the deceitful schemes and tricks of secular America, of an amoral, practical atheistic society. Br. Séan Sammon (1998), former president of the Conference of Major Superiors of Men (CMSM), has written that a school's mission is evangelization, not private education. He remarks that if there are parents reluctant to send their children to your school because of a fear that "they will come to take the gospel seriously," that would be a good sign (p. 10). Evangelization means proclaiming the good news of Christ and living its truths in our lives. This ought to be our primary appeal.

This "why" carries with it prophetic implications. Americans equate bigger with better and more with marvelous. Possibly the most commonly asked question an administrator is asked is, "How many students are you going to

have next year?" Unfortunately, it is not, "How do you plan to increase the faith, hope, and love of the students you have next year?" Jesus taught, "Seek first the Kingdom of God and God's way of righteousness, and these other things will be given you besides" (Mt 6:33). Pursuing success in the eyes of the world can lead to a compromise of principles. The Lord never expects success; rather, faithfulness is required. We live in a culture of practicality in which morality is perceived as that which will bring about the greatest amount of good for the greatest number of people. This is not Catholic morality which sees formal moral norms as inviolable. Catholic school leaders often cannot accept the culture's criteria of what constitutes development, growth, and goodness.

A truly gospel spirituality will encompass the threefold purpose of Catholic education as outlined by the United States bishops in their 1972 document, *To Teach as Jesus Did*. These are message (*didache*), community (*koinonia*), and service (*diakonia*). Is what we say about Christ the truth? Is what we are about in individual classrooms, within departments, and as an integrative process across departmental or grade-level boundaries ultimately a search for truth? Are our interactions with one another reflective of how that primitive community of faith as described in *Acts* interacted with each other? How do our school structures either promote or mitigate against the building of Christian community? Does the love we profess and live within extend itself to others in concrete acts? It is worthwhile reflecting on these questions "from within," that is, by faculties and school boards and administrative teams evaluating their situation? More telling, however, is how the larger community sees the school, its staff, and its leadership. This can be a threatening exercise, but it is the most validating because it is far too easy for lethargy or defense mechanisms to cloud our judgments.

A "climate check" at this point may be in order. Many readers may dismiss these concepts as idealistic and nice but unworkable. The fact that, as principal, I have put much of what I am saying into practice may indicate that these ideas are not so much unworkable as undesirable. "Principals do influence and shape life within schools in ways that no other single role, personality, or office can" (Jacobs, 1997, p. v). Whatever the personal spirituality of the school leader, its effects will be felt far and wide and will sink deeply into the psyche of the school community. For this reason, Catholic school leaders cannot leave their spiritual development to happenstance or allow it to occupy a secondary position in life.

Although making a school Catholic devolves on the entire staff, it is the school leader whose primary duty is to defend the school's values (DuFour & Eaker, 1992). When conflicts between parents and faculty arise, when arguments take place over budgets, when strategic plans are being formulated, more important than having to make the final decision is the Catholic school leader's calling all parties' attention to the school's mission, purpose, and philosophy.

This presupposes a very different model of leadership than is evidenced in most situations; however, it is a model that is educationally sound and attuned to magisterial pronouncements. The principle of subsidiarity would urge Catholic school leaders to allow authority to be exercised at lower levels of the administrative hierarchy than their offices. Vatican II's call to involve the laity and its spirit to prefer consensus over authoritarianism also argues against a top-down administrative approach. When requests are made to formulate policy, a task force of faculty, parents, and at times even students would submit recommendations for a school board's and/or administrative team's consideration. These formal mechanisms, however, should not exhaust the participatory process. Gatherings that include larger numbers of parents or teachers should be permitted, especially when a particularly difficult issue (e.g., a substance abuse policy) is being deliberated. This process is admittedly time-consuming and not for the faint of heart, but it reveals a spirituality of inclusion, participation, and listening.

More important than the efficiency of the system is the implication for Catholic school leaders and their spirituality. In a Catholic school there is really no room for an autocrat, for one who micro-manages. For such an individual, the school is a reflection of his or her own ego, a notion that runs contrary to any spirituality of Christianity, for it is contrary to Christ who came to serve and not be served and died as a ransom for the many (Mk 10:45).

What is the role of the school leader in this model? He or she is to shepherd the process. Reminding all segments of the school community of the school's religious and moral roots is one element already mentioned in this shepherding process. It also includes warding off two tendencies that often arise in this model. On the one hand, a particular person or group seeks to exercise hegemony over the process. How many school leaders have allowed a certain valued individual or threatening clique to control the school's agenda with the subsequent erosion of general faculty morale? This is a spirituality gone awry or one that is nonexistent. On the other hand, a tendency toward majority rule can occur. The Church is not a democracy. Policy by popular vote is to be avoided. Not everyone has had the inclination or the ability to study and discuss a matter as thoroughly as a task force or an administration. Neuhaus (1987), while still a Lutheran theologian, commented on the nature of conversation to be used under the rubric of Vatican II: "It is a conversation, like all good conversation, in which not everybody participates with the same authority, intensity or influence. It is a *disciplined* [italics added] conversation in that there are some rules...about who participates and how" (p. 69). Finally, in the unhappy event that a decision or recommendation winds up being contrary to the school's mission or philosophy or at variance with Catholic teaching, this shepherding ministry may require a vetoing function.

Beyond the particular mission and philosophy of the school, leadership demands that the common good hold a singular position in the hierarchy of values. This has become increasingly difficult as consensus on even the most fundamental national values has eroded over the last several years. The popular attitude is “Get what you can for yourself and forget everyone else.” This has spilled over into more than a few schools. This can spell disaster in a Catholic school where competing demands for social justice are at odds. For instance, teachers should be assured a just wage. Students should not be denied a Catholic education solely on the basis of financial need. Further, good stewardship compels the school leader to maintain the school’s physical plant and safeguard the school’s portfolio. Addressing these three competing interests is daunting to say the least and humanly impossible unless all parties—the teacher who wants a raise, the parent squeezed by tuition costs, the diocese concerned about upkeep—are willing to sacrifice a little and understand the others’ perspectives. Only an integrating spirituality can hope to keep these competing interests from turning factious. A school where cooperation replaces conflict, where dialogue eliminates distrust, this is a Christian and Catholic environment.

The school leader should explicate his or her educational platform (i.e., beliefs, values, attitudes) to the school community (Sergiovanni & Starratt, 1988). This should be done from the beginning of his or her administration throughout the school year and throughout his or her tenure. Publicizing an educational platform provides an outstanding way of conveying a spirituality. Obviously, such presentations should never be limited to facts and figures, curriculum, and extracurricular activities. Because a person’s spirituality is a living, dynamic force, the educational leader should not be shy about explaining how his or her platform about the meaning of Catholic education has developed over time. The young monk Thomas Merton had a very different outlook from the older, more seasoned, Thomas Merton. Just as the social sciences talk about stages or phases of development, so too the spiritual life is a continually deepening journey, a slow but sure transformation into living Christs (Nemeck & Coombs, 1987). Explicating an educational platform allows the school leader to demonstrate that he or she is not simply one who caters to political pressures or is capricious or whimsical in his or her approach. Spirituality grounds and centers one’s belief system. Our students may be our instructors in this regard. So popular these days are pins or wristbands imprinted with the letters WWJD (“What would Jesus Do?”). This is a spiritual frame of reference that will never fail the school leader.

How do school leaders develop their spirituality both for themselves and their faculty? Borrowing the Benedictine motto, it boils down to two activities: *ora et labora*, prayer and work, where work in this context means study. Two challenges are attendant on a deep prayer life: time and style. Certainly Catholic school leaders pray regularly. But do they pray constantly? So much

time is spent poring over government regulations, journal articles, internal memoranda. Could not five minutes be found to open the Sacred Scriptures for meditative reading? Methods of prayer may not have advanced from the level of discursive prayer (e.g., memorized, popular prayers like the “Hail Mary”). A deepening spirituality is marked by increasing interiorization of prayer. This includes practices such as the “Jesus Prayer” and contemplation.

It is now common for faculties to have an annual retreat. Because school boards offer advice and direction to a school’s leadership, extending similar retreat experiences and assisting board members to grow in their spiritual lives is essential. Nevertheless, one day will not suffice. At my school, classes begin an hour later than usual on Tuesday. During that hour we hold meetings and engage in staff development. The first Tuesday of the month, though, is dedicated to prayer. We pray as a community of faith and invite speakers to educate us about the nature of Catholic education and the spiritual life. Voluntary gatherings of faculty members could assemble to listen to the day’s lectionary readings and discuss their relevance. This sort of exercise requires no clergy member or in-depth knowledge of ritual or liturgy. There is widespread strong desire for quiet, personal retreat time (Edwards, 1998). What a generous, forceful, and concrete statement of support for developing the spiritual life it would be for a school to allow faculty members to spend a day at a local retreat center—perhaps during the Lenten season—without having to use a contractual personal day.

How is spirituality proclaimed in the classroom? At the one extreme are certain schools who see every moment of every subject in the curriculum as a direct venue for indoctrination. Either God or the devil is explicitly manifested on every page of a novel, in every scientific theorem, in every historical epoch. Secularism, at the other end of the spectrum, compartmentalizes all thought. Faith, truth, virtue, justice, morality: these are strictly the domain of a religion class. For a Catholic school, the search for truth is paramount. We do not simply load bits of discrete data into the minds of students. Instead, we develop in them the capacity to take data and move through the various stages of abstraction until they arrive at truth. In finding that, they simultaneously find God. Specifically:

- Do the math and science teachers, as the intricacies of the atom or DNA are explained, as the vastness and complexity of the galaxies are pondered, as logical thought is developed, lead students to wonder as did the Psalmist, “How varied are your works, Lord! In wisdom you have wrought them all” (Ps. 104:24)?
- Does the foreign language teacher, in addition to verb tenses and as an insight into particular cultures, emphasize that “God made from one the whole human race to dwell on the entire surface of the earth” (Acts 17:26)? Do students learn to pray as well as read and speak in the language?

- As the body is strengthened and care for it is encouraged in health and physical education class, do students know that it is because each of them is made “in [God’s] image, after [God’s] likeness” (Gn 1:26), and is a “temple of God” (1 Cor 3:16)?
- Is history class merely a chronology of events or does it promote understanding of causes? Or, as for the Israelites of old, does it reveal God’s providential guidance?
- Are literature and the fine arts solely another mode of self-expression, or do they communicate our deepest longings, what is closest in us to the Divine? Are major works of art with religious themes discussed?

These topics are presented not as indoctrination but as explorations conducted in respectful and loving dialogue between teacher and students. In a most crucial dynamic, these sorts of questions are posed to students to help them think critically and abstractly.

Magisterial statements are unequivocal about parents’ primary role in the education of their offspring; nonetheless, this right is not absolute. The United States Catholic Bishops (1967) observed: “Being truly apostolic, Catholic school teachers desire to develop environmental conditions which will help their pupils measure up to high standards of Christian conduct taught in the classroom. They therefore have an interest in their pupils’ homes and neighborhoods” (p. 95).

Spirituality must go to the heart of the matter, the lived reality of young people. We cannot avoid problems of single-parent families, pregnancy and abortion, discrimination and exploitation. A federal study confirms what most of us in education already intuited. Those under 18 are smoking, drinking, and using drugs at an increasing pace (Wolf, 1998). When a Catholic school leader has a coherent spiritual life, answers to these troubling issues are often simple but rarely easy. That is to say, the moral course of action is very often apparent, but putting it into practice will come at a price. It is a spirituality that suffers. Instead of positing problems solely with the family, we are called to work with our families to confront the plague of illicit alcohol use and drugs.

For those who sense that an idyllic picture is being painted, be assured that opposition will be experienced. Through spirituality, Catholic school leaders move their institutions toward growth and development in faith, hope, and love. It returns us to the heart of the matter. Some pain and opposition are inevitable. Certain mindsets and operating principles will have to be changed, but perhaps that is the price to be paid for improvement. If the goals are worth it and if persistence does not fail us, we too will go “from glory to glory” (2 Cor 3:18).

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Christopher Howe, O.S.A., has ministered in Catholic education for over ten years. He holds a bachelor's degree from Villanova University and a master of arts in education administration from Lewis University, Romeoville, IL. He has served on administrative teams at two schools and is in his second year as principal. Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Christopher Howe, O.S.A., 550 W. Brookmont Blvd., Kankakee, IL 60901 or chowe@sat-a-link.com.

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