

3-1-2005

Catholic Schools in Contention: Competing Metaphors and Leadership Implications, by John Sullivan

Kathleen Asmar

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.lmu.edu/ce>

Recommended Citation

Asmar, K. (2005). Catholic Schools in Contention: Competing Metaphors and Leadership Implications, by John Sullivan. *Journal of Catholic Education*, 8 (3). <http://dx.doi.org/10.15365/joce.0803112013>

This Book Review is brought to you for free with open access by the School of Education at Digital Commons at Loyola Marymount University and Loyola Law School. It has been accepted for publication in *Catholic Education: A Journal of Inquiry and Practice* by the journal's editorial board and has been published on the web by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons at Loyola Marymount University and Loyola Law School. For more information about Digital Commons, please contact digitalcommons@lmu.edu. To contact the editorial board of *Catholic Education: A Journal of Inquiry and Practice*, please email CatholicEdJournal@lmu.edu.

attempt to interact with and engage Hispanic believers in Hispanic traditions of faith. Those

who still confuse unity with uniformity feel that by speaking Spanish and insisting on our traditions of faith – on the *sensus fidelium* of our particular church – we are being divisive....The greatest difficulty of this type of problem-oriented mentality is...[that] it blinds people from seeing the unique and privileged gift of God that the poor, the marginated [sic], and the foreigner are to the church and society. (p. 73)

Hispanic popular religiosity has much to offer us.

Mestizo Worship is a well-written and affordable collection of writings by internationally renowned scholars who offer the contemporary leader a valuable instrument for understanding Hispanic devotions and their significance to the culture and spirituality of the universal Church. Reading it will enrich our "ministerial call to know and foster the Church's liturgical tradition, celebrate and enhance our people's faith expressions, and, above all, love the community of faith that we serve and accompany in worship" (p. 106).

David J. Sullivan is assistant principal at Madonna del Sasso School in Salinas, California.

CATHOLIC SCHOOLS IN CONTENTION: COMPETING METAPHORS AND LEADERSHIP IMPLICATIONS

JOHN SULLIVAN
VERITAS PUBLICATIONS, 2000
€12.68, 240 pages

Reviewed by Kathleen Asmar

John Sullivan addresses the conflicts that emerge in Catholic education today. The sources of these conflicts surface from both internal and exter-

nal sources, and the author relates these conflicts to the metaphors of, “family, business, Church, political community and academy” (p. ix). Each of these metaphors denotes differing communities with which the school must function either directly, as in the family, or indirectly, as in the political community. Interspersed within these sections are extracts from other authors for illustration and further thought and questions to be used for self reflection and meditation. Sullivan contends that school and school experiences set the stage for how one views the world and the pressures of life. The author states,

School can open many doors for us, both now and for later. It can either boost our confidence in ourselves and in the world, make possible countless opportunities for growth; or it can reinforce our prejudices, damage our self-esteem, cause us to have a fundamental distrust of others and imprison us in narrowness of outlook. (p. x)

Sullivan acknowledges some of the dilemmas facing Catholic schools today, such as various constituencies vying for attention, differing goals and agenda, and changing values in today’s secular society. Sullivan poses several questions pertaining to the purpose of the school’s existence. For instance, is the purpose of the school to strike out against popular culture even if it means taking an unpopular stance? Who should identify the mission of the school – parents, students, teachers, or politicians? While a school should reflect the interests of all stakeholders, when does the aim of the Catholic Church override other viewpoints? Sullivan asserts that there are three dominate versions of Catholic schools: institutions to nurture faith, offer service, and to serve as countercultural forces. The author goes on to state that these versions, while they may coexist within the same school, provide a source of tension. The reviewer agrees and believes that all three purposes can and should be intertwined within the same mission. The primary purpose of a Catholic school should be to nurture the faith of the Catholic students as well as the non-Catholic Christian students, be a source of service to students and nurture a sense of service in those same students, and to protest through thought, word, and deed cultural forces which run counter to Catholic teachings.

When using the family as a metaphor for school, Sullivan lists four factors in which a school may aspire to be like a family. Families are mixed in age, families are an enduring community, they are informal communities, and within a family, its members experience acceptance. Within the mixed generational grouping there is opportunity for learning and sharing, just as in a school the students do not only learn from the teachers, but the teachers have endless opportunities to learn from the students.

As an enduring community, the support of the school community should be a mainstay in its students' lives for the time they are in attendance, and in some instances, after they have gone on to other institutions or life experiences. And finally, a school should be a place where one can experience acceptance and a sense of belonging. The Catholic school should be a place of safety where all students and faculty feel free to express opinions and dreams for the future. As a point of reflection, Sullivan asks the reader to meditate on the following question:

One of the features of family life at its best is the degree of trust it facilitates among its members, allowing confidences to be shared without fear of exposure. What are the particular challenges for school leaders with regard to confidentiality regarding students, staff and families? (p. 39)

When comparing schools to businesses, Sullivan considers five aspects of the business world that might be involved in schools: strategic planning and customer service, resource management, the role of market forces, the need for spirituality of work, and the shortcomings of managerialism. This reviewer agrees with the author that all these aspects of business are necessary in today's Catholic schools. The schools must be accountable, not only for the level of academic achievement of its students, but also for the responsible way in which it manages its resources and secures the future for students and families yet to come. The challenge for the principal of a Catholic school is maintaining a balance between keeping Catholic values and competing with secular and private institutions.

The author does a thorough job of illustrating the implications of the school as church. If a school is to be Catholic, there is an explicit obligation to be Catholic. Sullivan states that

it will not be enough for aspiring school leaders to be able to demonstrate their knowledge in relation to pedagogy, the curriculum, administration, the budget, not even the qualities and skills they possess in relation to managing and motivating people, resources and information. (p. 115)

Without an understanding of Catholic theology and its implications for Catholic education, "Catholic principals will find it very difficult to engage, in a spirit of creative fidelity, with the areas of liturgy, social action, ecumenism and interfaith dialogue" (p. 115).

Sullivan defines politics, and explores how politics relate to schools, the areas of school life that mirror politics, and the implications of politics for Catholic school principals. The author explains politics as power, in that politics is the, "promotion of interests, about priorities and decisions and about

the effective implementation of these decisions in any society” (p. 121). Sullivan argues that schools should reflect democratic societies, giving students an opportunity to contribute, be represented, and debate, if they are to function in society as a valuable, contributing adult. Sullivan contends that, “As political leaders, principals should ensure that their leadership is educational: it must permit, invite, encourage and inspire effort, growth, initiative, risk-taking and learning” (p. 122).

Sullivan does an excellent job of describing the responsibilities of Catholic schools in the formation of citizens who work for the common good, listing six points that should be priorities of Catholic school administrators. Principals should “strive for the development of a strong sense of collegiality among their staff”; “favour trust over control” (p. 155); “ensure that their schools are out-ward looking” (p. 156); “maintain a constant and discerning vigilance with regard to the impact of alien ideologies”; “work in partnership with the church” (p. 157), and “never lose sight of those who are meant to be the primary beneficiaries of their leadership, the students” (p. 158).

In the chapter on schools as academy, Sullivan repeatedly returns to the fact that schools are there to educate students. Regardless of distractions, schools are places of learning where students must know that they come first and that their education is of paramount importance. Teachers must challenge students to think critically and creatively and strive to bring forth the spiritual development of the students. The author writes,

A major reason for the existence of Catholic schools is to ensure that the wholeness or integrity of Catholic education is preserved. Central to this wholeness is the principle of the non-separation of sacred and secular in learning and throughout the curriculum....Neither in the person of Christ, nor in the sacramental nature of reality, is there any separation between the divine and the human. (p. 175)

Catholic Schools in Contention is beneficial in that it adds another voice to the discussion of the purpose and mission of Catholic schools. Although not practical for teachers, *Catholic Schools in Contention* provides a source of study and reflection for Catholic school administrators and a sound text for discussion at the postgraduate level. Sullivan succeeds in raising issues of importance that should be part of an intelligent discussion on the topic of the mission of Catholic schools.

Kathleen Asmar is principal of Immaculate Conception School in Laurel, Mississippi.