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Merylann J. Schuttloffel

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Catholic Identity: The Heart of Catholic Education

Merylann “Mimi” J. Schutloffel
The Catholic University of America, Washington, DC

The challenges facing Catholic schools have been well documented (DeFiore, Convey, & Schutloffel, 2009; Schutloffel, 2007). Changing demographics, barriers to access, weak leadership, a diminished value placed on Catholic schooling, and financial pressures on the family, parish, and diocese are but some of the pressing issues. One of the most hopeful outcomes from this awareness is a renewed commitment from Catholic higher education to serve Catholic pre-K-12 schools. As is often the case, this attention by Catholic higher education to support Catholic K-12 schooling coalesced around an initiative to create a field of Catholic education (Shulman, 2008). While Shulman has a long history as an education researcher, reformer, and advocate for professional teaching practices, he has also argued for the contributions of religious traditions in learning. His comments at the *Carnegie Conversation*—a national convening of Catholic education scholars funded by the Carnegie Foundation and co-coordinated by the University of Notre Dame ACE Program—argued for structuring Catholic education as a distinct discipline to provide direct contact with other academic fields such as teaching, leadership, and human development. He proposed that the scholarly endeavors in the Catholic education discipline would then impact practices within Catholic schools.

While that might seem like an obvious idea to those of us within Catholic education who believe that the field has been around more than 1,500 years, the point can be made that American Catholic educators often maintain an insider’s only perspective. In other words, we might not be fully aware of how those outside of Catholic education perceive us or might benefit from what we know about teaching, learning, and leading. Spurred on by Shulman’s remarks, several research-oriented Catholic universities responded by creating the Catholic Higher Education Collaborative (CHEC). This collaborative is committed to fostering effective partnerships that generate innovative responses to the critical current condition of Catholic schooling. Beginning in 2008, national CHEC conferences were organized by member institutions to energize the movement and begin a national conversation aimed at problem solving. Loyola Marymount University in Los Angeles opened the confer-

ence series with the topic of immigration and the shifting demographics of the American Catholic church affecting Catholic schools. In October 2009, Loyola University Chicago sponsored the next CHEC conference on school leadership, followed by the 2010 conference on academic excellence sponsored jointly by Boston College and Fordham University. Under the leadership of Lorraine Ozar, a key outcome from these conferences has been the [*National Standards and Benchmarks for Effective Catholic Elementary and Secondary Schools*](#) (Ozar & Weitzel-O'Neill, 2012).

Dr. Ozar, who directs the Center for Catholic School Effectiveness at Loyola University Chicago, chaired the task force that developed the *National Standards*. The task force represented multiple stakeholders in Catholic education, including diocesan schools offices, Catholic higher education, textbook publishers, and religious congregations. Each of these constituencies has a long history devoted to supporting Catholic schooling. The product of their combined efforts is notable.

Fall 2011 marked the next CHEC conference, hosted by The Catholic University of America and jointly sponsored by St. John's University in New York. The theme, Catholic identity, was apropos to the national university created by American bishops and dedicated to the ecclesial mission of education. Catholic identity provides the *raison d'être* for Catholic education. According to Church doctrine, the purpose of a Catholic school is to assist parents in their transmission of the faith—to help form an identity that is Catholic within the child. Catholic identity development is at the heart of our role as Catholic educators. Attendees shared in sessions dedicated to a variety of scholarly, personal, policy, and leadership aspects of Catholic identity for educational institutions from preschool through university studies. The following “Focus Section” highlights selected proceedings from the conference, “Our Schools—Our Hope: Reflections on Catholic Identity from the 2011 Catholic Higher Education Collaborative Conference”; and research presented by John J. Convey, “Perceptions of Catholic Identity: Views of Catholic School Administrators and Teachers.”

The conference began with the Holy Eucharist celebrated by His Eminence, Donald Cardinal Wuerl, Archbishop of Washington. Cardinal Wuerl's remarks emphasized his well-known commitment to Catholic education as documented in his pastoral letter, [*Catholic Education: Looking to the future with confidence*](#) (2008). The following morning session opened with insights from two university presidents. First, The Catholic University of America welcomed back Bishop David O'Connell, 14th president and current Bishop of Trenton,

as keynote speaker. Bishop O'Connell was noted for his passionate commitment to strengthening CUA's Catholic identity, often a challenging task. His remarks focused on the fact that the mission of any institution must be consistent with its foundational principles—in our case, Catholic education's purpose is evangelization. Bishop O'Connell reminds us that as Catholics we live in hope, and hope will keep our schools alive.

Next, Donald J. Harrington, C.M., president of St. John's University, spoke to the connection between all levels of Catholic schooling. He shared descriptions of his university's efforts to serve Catholic schools through the Institute for Catholic Schools and its initiatives. President Harrington also reiterated the relationship that exists not only among Catholic educational institutions, but between these and the local Catholic Church. He reinforced to the audience that the graduates of our schools should readily recognize this linkage to the Church from their experiences within our schools.

The three following articles present commentary from panelists: an elementary school principal, a secondary school principal, and a diocesan official. Karen Vogtner gave a rich description of principal practices that create a faith learning community within the Catholic school. Sr. Barbara L. Monsegur, CFMM, presented research on factors that Catholic school leaders must consider to connect Latino families to both our schools and the Church. Most interesting was the relationship between assimilated Latinos and those who remain immersed in their native culture. Sister challenged each Catholic educator to explore their community and become familiar with the various cultures as they represent the future of our schools and local parishes. Thomas W. Burnford, secretary of education for the Archdiocese of Washington, demonstrated how policy content can assist in the communication of Catholic identity. He addressed the four pillars of the archdiocesan educational plan and how these principles undergird policy development. Monsignor John Enzler, director of Catholic Charities in the Archdiocese of Washington, contributed to the panel with remarks related to the integration of Catholic identity in other service agencies present within the Catholic community (Msgr. Enzler's presentation is not included in the proceedings). Well-known and respected curriculum expert Mary Jane Krebbs describes how to integrate Catholic identity across the curriculum. Krebbs' provides a seamless and intentional model of curriculum development built upon Church documents. Her article endeavors to capture her lively presentation about how to create a curriculum that is mission driven.

John J. Convey, noted for his research on Catholic education, presented

findings from a survey of Catholic school administrators and teachers on the meaning of Catholic identity. In his article he uses national data to describe the core concepts and experiences administrators and teachers identify with Catholic identity in their schools. Among the majority of respondents, the school's culture or sense of community was considered the most important component of Catholic identity within their schools. At the conference Len DeFiore contextualized the study's findings within his experiences from numerous strategic planning studies (DeFiore's presentation is not included in the proceedings).

Issues surrounding Catholic identity, including leadership, curriculum, and parent involvement, are prevalent in other national settings. The Catholic Identity Conference hosted several Chilean representatives from the Catholic University of Valparaiso, including their vice-rector (provost). My relationship with our guests developed over a mutual interest in mission integrity for Catholic education at all levels. It was my pleasure to address their conference for Catholic school leaders in January 2012.

My work in Chile is typical of my interest in the international context for Catholic schooling. At the conference I presented my research on Dutch Catholic schooling that focused on the intersection of leadership practice, Catholic identity, and national culture. A future article will elaborate on my larger international study that has explored Catholic school leadership practice in several nations over the past decade (e.g., Australia, England, Belgium). There are numerous themes that were present within Dutch Catholic schooling that I have observed in other nations and are relevant to American Catholic schooling. First is the diminished presence of teaching and leading vowed religious. Because of the dwindling numbers of religious actively present within Catholic schools, current staffs are further removed from direct experience with vowed religious and the significance of their charism. This means that it is less likely current teachers and school leaders will absorb the necessary spiritual formation by osmosis; by its sheer presence in their environment.

An additional contextual complication is that this teaching and leading population has experienced a poor theological knowledge base. They are the product of a softer, less dogmatic, more ecumenical, religious education following Vatican II. Compounding the weak preparation for spiritual leadership is the reality that there are fewer priests in parishes. This allows for less time devoted to the school for the religious education of teachers, parents, and students. Another consequence of this scenario is that there are increased spiritual

leadership demands on principals, many of whom do not feel qualified for this role.

Catholic school leaders across nations are preoccupied with the encroachment of accountability, government protocols, and the general rationalization of education. Clearly global trends in education, as in other areas of life, are quickly communicated through today's technologies and are often embraced without deep consideration of potential consequences. Catholic school leaders struggle to seek a balance between the positive and negative external influences on their schools.

Catholic school leaders are confronted by a technological-secular-consumerist culture that is universal to those under 35 in every part of the world. Gommers and Hermans's (2003) research findings raise questions that resonate with research on millennial Catholics in the United States (D'Antonio, Davidson, Hoge, & Gautier, 2007) and other recent studies on religious practice in young adults (Smith & Denton, 2005). Generational differences in their understanding of religious identity highlight complex challenges about the future leadership for Catholic schools, and potentially the Catholic Church. Teachers and future school leaders will rise from the millennial ranks. One emphasis of my international study has been on the influence of national culture on Catholic identity.

My construct of contemplative practice presumes not only an understanding of the Church's theology, teaching, and Gospel values, but that the leader embraces these beliefs and practices into their daily life. This often leads to a profound tension between contemporary culture and lived experiences. Capturing the complexity of these interactive elements within an individual's identity synchronizes with discussions of character within the contemplative practice model.

The contemplative practice model that I have proposed for Catholic school leaders is a multifaceted integration of reflection and leader decision making (Schuttloffel, 1999). One prerequisite for contemplative practice is the leader's character. Character is shaped by experiences within the multiple communities where a school leader lives. Character is also built on the virtuous living that I would expect to see anchored within the Catholic identity of the person. The dynamic of virtue and community culture together create a school leader's story. But after more than 10 years of observing school leader decision making outside the United States, it has become clear to me that a school leader's understanding of Catholic identity is not predictable or based on a universal belief. In fact, in a secular society, what it means to be Catholic is fluid and

often not connected to dogmatic definitions or organized church participation. These debates, which are very much present within the American Catholic Church, are having an impact in how we think about the purpose for Catholic schools.

History also matters. American Catholic school leaders work within a history that includes many immigrant groups who came to this nation intentionally for religious freedom. American Catholics value the separation of church and state that protects religious practice; often absent in their native countries. In addition, there is a deep patriotism within American Catholicism that resonates with the national culture. Interestingly, Catholic identity for an American Catholic is perceived from the outside as more pious, more committed, and more institutional, perhaps a reflection of our historic priority for religious freedom.

My research was built on assumptions about an implicit connection between contemplative practice, school leader character, and Catholic identity anchored within the institutional Catholic Church. The exact nature of the impact of special communities, life stories, and virtue on creating beliefs, worldview, and action demonstrates the often intangible quality of leadership for any organization. A national community culture plays an important role in shaping the character of a school leader and ultimately his or her ability to create a faith learning community within their school. This reality emphasizes the importance of preparing Catholic school leaders for the distinctive nature of their role. A future journal article will present more expansively my study of contemplative practice that includes research from multiple nations within the international Catholic educational context.

As Pope Benedict XVI stated during his address at The Catholic University of America in 2008: “Education is integral to the mission of the Church to proclaim the Good News. First and foremost every Catholic educational institution is a place to encounter the living God who in Jesus Christ reveals his transforming love and truth” (cf. *Spe Salvi*, 4). The conference on Catholic identity made clear both the importance and the challenge to shape a faith community within an educational institution. The conversation, commentary, and experiences of the conference affirmed capabilities and commitment to meet the challenge. I hope you also find these summary proceedings inspirational for the mission.

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Merylann "Mimi" J. Schuttloffel, PhD is associate professor of education and chair of the Department of Education at The Catholic University of America, Washington, DC. She is director of the Catholic Leadership and Policy Studies doctoral program and a fellow at the Institute for Policy Research and Catholic Studies. Correspondence for this article should be sent to Dr. Mimi Schuttloffel at Schuttloffel@cua.edu.