

A CATHOLIC PERSPECTIVE

Identity and Mission Series | Monograph #2 Spring 2018 | Published by Institute for Catholic Education

A Eucharistic Sensibility

by Richard Olson

Reflections on *Renewing the Promise*: Thoughts and Insights Report

In November 2017, representative stakeholders from the Ontario Catholic educational community, English and French, met to have a conversation. Parents, educators, students, school administrators, superintendents, trustees, bishops, clergy and religious all gathered for a symposium on the mission and purpose of Catholic Education. It was an opportunity to celebrate the gift of publicly-funded Catholic Education in the province of Ontario, but also to acknowledge and name the challenges that beset us and the opportunities that present themselves to us.

In early conversation it became obvious that while the mission and vision of Catholic Education have not changed, our context has.

The cultural context in which Catholic schools serve children and their families is very different than when *This Moment of Promise* was written by the Ontario bishops in 1989.

No longer do our schools primarily serve the children of practicing Catholic families. No longer do we see great numbers of clergy or religious communities teaching or administrating in our schools. The student body in our schools is

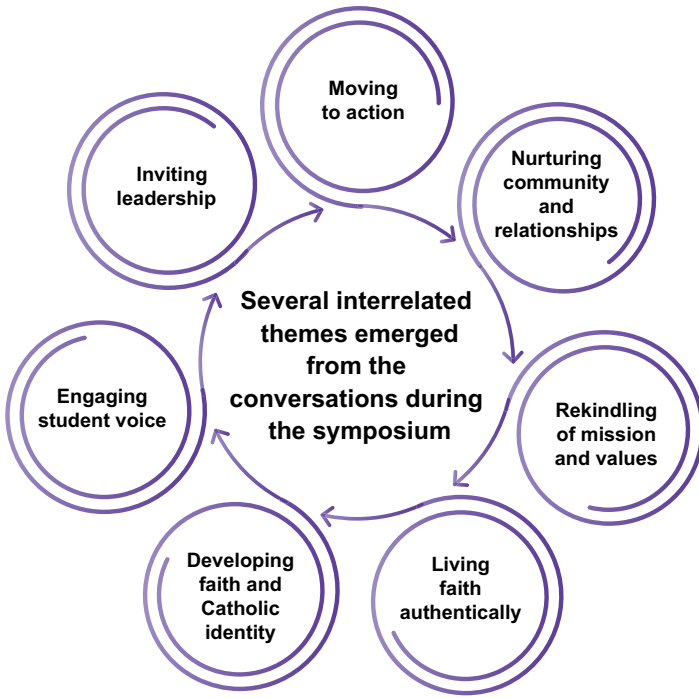
increasingly diverse, as are the families we serve. There has been a consistent movement from homogeneity to heterogeneity. Social media has become omnipresent in a larger societal culture that distrusts religion and religious expression. These examples are not exhaustive, but they do represent the core ways in which our context has changed.

While these changes present challenges to how we minister in Catholic schools, they also present opportunities. With many children coming to school without the knowledge of faith, there is an opportunity to introduce them to Jesus and his gospel. With the decrease in religious vocations, there is an opportunity for a theologically-trained and pastorally

sensitive laity to provide leadership. Increasingly diverse school communities are opportunities for evangelization, ecumenism and interreligious dialogue. Social media is a tool for instantaneous mass communication and, for example, is used by Pope Francis with his messages on Twitter, often as a counter-cultural antidote to loneliness, alienation and despair.



Come to me all you who are weary and burdened and I will give you rest” (Matthew 11:28-30).



Moving to Action

“ We need a common approach that is shared between the parish, home and school. We need everyone in the picture. We have to work together.”

In the conversations at the symposium, the sense of urgency about the need for action was palpable. The Catholic educational community, given its different and shifting context, must minister differently if it hopes to minister effectively in our present age. With this felt need to act was the sense that the parishes and the schools must work more collaboratively and intentionally in serving families. There is a long-standing view that quality Catholic education exists where there is a positive triadic relationship between the home, the parish, and the school. Given that family life is increasingly diverse, often with different faith traditions woven into the tapestry of their daily lives together, there is an opportunity and a necessity for parishes and schools to work alongside each other in finding creative ways to evangelize and catechize.

When Bishop Bergie delivered his final address to the attendees of the symposium, he embedded his

reflections within the gospel narrative of the Road to Emmaus. Before our final celebration of the Eucharist, the bishop used a Eucharistic story to frame and highlight the emergent themes of the symposium. Why?

Since Vatican II and in publication of the Catechism of the Catholic Church, the Eucharist has been referred to as the source and summit of Christian life. Eucharist is the heartbeat of a sacramental Church. It draws the whole community together and then sends it out again. The rhythm of this drawing together and sending forth has been described by theologian and storyteller John Shea as a movement in four parts: gather the folks, tell the story, break the bread and change the world.

Catholic schools follow Shea's pattern of the Eucharist. Every day in our schools, children gather. As they gather, they share with each other the stories of their young lives. Part of the pattern of their day is the breaking of bread, whether in cafeterias or classrooms. With the final bell, children are sent back to their families, and each day a little more whole, a little wiser, even a little bit older than when they arrived. By these small increments of growth, thus is the world changed.

Nurture Community and Relationships

“ Creating a strong relationship between Home, School and Parish. Grassroots promotion. It isn't about being boastful it is about advocating, promoting and evangelizing. Not how we are better, but how we are different.”

Of course one could argue that all schools, whether Catholic or otherwise, follow this pattern of gathering, of telling stories, of sharing meals and then of returning to families at the end of the day. The real difference lies in the intentionality and the specificity with which Catholic schools embrace these four movements. For the Christian, creation itself is transformed with the Incarnation. The agency of God in bringing Jesus, God made flesh, into the center of

ordinary human life is essential. Similarly, Jesus must be at the center of Catholic school life in a manner that is purposeful and specific.

The centrality of the Eucharist in our Catholic tradition is the natural bridge between more purposeful collaboration between schools and parishes in serving families. With Jesus at the center, parishes direct families to the school for education, and our Catholic schools direct families to the local parish for the regular practice of the faith, one that finds its source and summit in the Eucharistic celebration, and in the larger communal and sacramental life of the Church. In this way, the richness of our faith tradition is shared out as invitation and clarity of mission and vision are made manifest. The eucharistic sensibility that animates Catholic school life finds its rhythm, its direction and its purpose in the Eucharistic Feast celebrated in the local parish and in the world-wide Church.

Let us turn our attention to Shea's four-fold pattern that gives vitality to the eucharistic sensibility existent in our Catholic schools, and in so doing, explore how the dominant themes of the Renewing the Promise symposium are found there also.

Gathering

As we gather in our schools we are guided by a ministry of welcome that finds its source in the hospitality of Jesus' words and deeds. "Come to me all you who are weary and burdened and I will give you rest" (Matthew 11:28-30). All occasions of gathering, whether in the morning or for assemblies or for parent nights, must be animated by the warm embrace of hospitality.

Rekindle Mission and Values



The purpose of the school and Church partnership is to inspire the students' love of Christ."

Watch primary students hug their educators as they arrive at morning bell. Watch the excited buzz of teenagers greeting each other at lockers and in

hallways when they return from summer break. Watch assigned student leaders greet visitors to the school with smiles and firm handshakes. And witness the open-armed welcome and sense of joy that is a pre-condition for meaningful liturgy in our schools.

Catholic schools are distinct in the manner in which we gather. We are purposefully guided by the biblical imperative to greet every stranger with warmth. Whether welcoming newcomer families or the local parish pastoral team, we nurture community and relationships when in our gathering we are inspired and motivated by the ministry of hospitality and welcome that finds its source in Jesus' example.

Tell the Story

Additionally, in our Catholic schools the stories we tell are not randomly selected. They are guided by the weekly lectionary and so informed by God's saving action in history. In this story we share, God's agency is revealed in the person of Jesus who reminds us that we are loved more than we could ever hope for or even imagine. In simplest terms, this is the very heart of the good news that is the Gospel.

It is the Gospel that frames how we share stories with each other. The leaders in our schools and the educators who receive the stories of children must do so with an awareness of the larger biblical narrative that the Christian community immerses itself in — not just every Sunday — but every day. Faith leaders like principals in Catholic schools help tell the story of the school through the lens of the biblical narrative. Teachers, Early Childhood Educators, and Educational Assistants help children make connections between the big story of the Christian community and their own lives.

The path to an authentic expression of faith is illuminated by the gospel and the person of Jesus whom we meet there. In our Catholic schools, how often do staff witness to the presence of Jesus in their lives and the difference that it makes to their sense of joy and wonder in the world? The more that educators make connections between the stories of the bible, their own stories and the story of the school community, the more children will find God in

Christ Jesus active in their lives and the lives of their families.

Live Faith Authentically



Need to be faithful to our core — live the gospel in our daily lives. Make the correlation of the gospel to our lives; walk our talk and invite others to do so.”

Catholic schools convey a eucharistic sensibility that joins the larger Christian narrative of salvation history to the personal and communal narratives of their students.

Breaking Bread

Similarly, we bring a eucharistic sensibility to how we break bread in our school lunchrooms, classrooms, cafeterias and staff rooms. All human beings are social consumers who need food and long for communion with others and with divine mystery. In the Christian narrative, Jesus gives Himself to His friends and to the world as bread and wine. There is a mysterious intimacy in a shared meal, especially when it is framed, as it is in our Catholic schools, with a prayer like Grace Before Meals: bless us Lord; bless the gift of food we share; we acknowledge that it comes from your abundant goodness through Jesus the Christ.

In our Catholic context sharing a prayer precedes sharing a meal. We recognize God’s presence in all that we receive, especially in our daily bread. The two disciples on the road to Emmaus were not able to recognize Jesus until He broke bread with them. In faith, we confess that Jesus is truly present in the Blessed Sacrament and — by extension of that same faith — that every meal we are given is not earned as merit but received as gift.

There is tremendous power in teaching this to children. The need to eat every day unites the human family. The awareness that each meal is a gift to be celebrated deepens the communion between persons, elevates respect for the stewardship of the Earth and its resources, and accentuates the

goodness of God. The fact that a shared meal is at the centre of our sacramental faith focuses our actions and leads us to knowledge of how healing works.

Our Catholic schools, as extensions of the evangelizing mission of the Church, approach all opportunities to break bread as moments of grace. Christians do not eat with each other without Jesus present. This is ultimately expressed in the celebration of the Eucharist, but that same sensibility of thanksgiving animates all shared meals between peers, friends, colleagues — even strangers.

Live Faith Authentically



We believe it’s important for all stakeholders in Catholic education to have opportunity to develop their faith. We cannot teach what we do not know or are not confident in.”

Jesus taught us that a table is also an altar of sacrifice where we acknowledge our willingness to give ourselves over to the service of others. At Mass, before the Eucharistic prayer, the priest invites us to pray with him that his sacrifice and ours may be acceptable to God. In sharing meals with children, in offering grace, we help them understand that a loving response to the goodness of God is welcome and appropriate.

The more we acknowledge that every meal is an opportunity to express gratitude, the more we pledge service and enter more deeply into communion with Jesus and our neighbours. The way we break bread together in Catholic schools makes us distinctive. In fact, in the lexicon of Catholic/Christian identity, we are formed in the faith whenever we break bread together because it is always acknowledged as an experience of grace rather than an award of merit.

Change the World

Finally, at the conclusion of each school day, we send children home to their families with the conviction that if they have been nourished in the context of loving relational learning, then the world will be a better place, a more peaceful one, one that responds with love to the gift of growth — mind, body, spirit — that Catholic education offers. We are not naïve in this. We are made hopeful by the gift of faith.

Again, we find that the Eucharistic Liturgy is a bridge to explore how we might empower Catholic graduates to serve more intentionally. At the conclusion of Mass we are sent forth with the injunction to animate the Gospel with our lives. The experience of gathering, sharing stories and a meal with Jesus at the centre strengthens us and missions us for service. This same pattern lived out in the context of any student's journey through Catholic education encourages an appetite for service to others. The more they are aware of the gifts they have been given in Christ Jesus, the more they will respond in gratitude to the needs of others: locally, nationally and globally.

Consider the Ontario Catholic School Graduate Expectations (OCSGE) that we publish, profess and hold up as the goal of our faith-based educational system. By virtue of our students' experience in Catholic schools they are consecrated (literally, set apart) to go out and serve the world. Their culminating activity is to strive to love God and neighbour, to serve and to heal, as a concrete witness to the faith that they have received and confessed.

Engage Student Voice



Ask the kids — engage student voice!
Students will engage if their voice is heard.”

At the Renewing the Promise symposium, the theme of engaging student voice was prominent. Students were part of the conversation; they were engaged in the conversation; and often they led

the conversation! All participants recognized the importance of listening to what students have to say, and then to discover with the students how to actualize their goals and dreams for their families, their communities, and the world. The seed bed for genuine listening and engaging is established when students arrive to our schools and are warmly welcomed. Jean Vanier reminds us that a felt sense of belonging precedes the capacity to give and receive love. Then, as educators are able to listen attentively to the stories students tell, and help them feel the presence of God in their lives through the larger story of salvation history, students will find voice for their desire to respond lovingly in gratitude for all that they have been freely given. During table conversation at the symposium, many students offered powerful witness about their experiences and opportunities to live out their faith in concrete ways. They spoke passionately about the need for charity and justice, locally and globally, but they also acknowledged the voices of diverse students who populated their home schools and whose voices may not have been heard yet.

Our students understand the connection between being heard and being active in service. They have a keen sense of justice and deep desire to heal the world. The level of their engagement is directly proportional to the degree to which they feel heard. And the degree to which they feel heard is the degree to which they feel loved. In Catholic education, we cannot mission students for service without allowing all of their voices to be heard.

At present, Catholic schools are fertile soil beds of evangelization because families continue to entrust their children to our care. The gift of Catholic education behooves us to explore, in depth and with detail, how the pattern of the Eucharist animates our schools and makes them distinct. With the power of the Eucharist as our bridge, we can more effectively work with our parish partners to introduce the person of Jesus into the life of each child we serve.

Leadership

“How do we encourage authentic leadership and for those leaders to step forward? It is important to continue to support and sustain the leaders we currently have while engaging new ones.”

To summarize, Catholic schools are animated by a eucharistic sensibility that welcomes all as we gather; that connects the agency of God to the story of each child and staff person; that nourishes both with bread and with the promise of the intimacy for which each of us longs; that gratitude for being embraced and welcomed and taught and challenged leads to a generative love that wants to return the kindness, that desires to serve others.

As time passes, the leadership in our Catholic schools also changes. How do we ensure that the charisms of great leaders of the past will be passed along to our new emerging leaders?

“Catholic education must remain committed to the essential work of forming leaders in our faith tradition for the future. Our apostolic faith is built on the witness of those who have experienced the Risen Christ in their lives and who have shared that truth in the way they live: close to Jesus, receiving the Eucharist, engaged in parish life, serving their families and those most in need. We need such leaders if we are to ensure that our Catholic schools are genuinely to be communities that build and nurture relationships, capable of accompanying and engaging with those within the community, and ultimately giving witness to the joy of the Gospel. Careful attention must be given to support the formation of such leaders.”

Our leadership programs should be guided by the desire to form Catholic educators with a eucharistic sensibility, for in its four-fold pattern of gathering, telling stories, breaking bread and changing the world we find ourselves dialed in to the source and summit of Christian life. The more we nurture a eucharistic sensibility in our Catholic leaders, the more our Catholic school communities participate in the evangelizing mission of the Church. The more our staff and students encounter the person of Jesus in daily school life, the more they will be directed to active parish life in the sacraments of the Church.

Published by:



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