

+ A CATHOLIC PERSPECTIVE

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Shepherding and Serving

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This eighth and final monograph in the Renewing the Promise series invites us to focus on the nature and formation of leadership for Catholic schools.

Who Leads?

“When Jesus saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Then he said to his disciples, “The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore, ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest.”¹

There is a dearth of authentic leadership in the world today. And, there seems to be a lack of understanding about the nature of leadership itself: what kind of leader is needed in these challenging times, and what are the requisite qualities that a strong leader should possess?

Leaders who bluster loudly, foment divisions, have a limited commitment to truth and transparency, and manipulate to self-aggrandize, receive an inordinate amount of media attention. Their machinations serve as a counterfeit for strength in the minds of many. But what constitutes genuine strength in a leader? Who is the leader we are looking for, and hoping for, in Catholic education?

Who leads is a critical question, as leadership originates in the identity and integrity of the person leading. Leadership is not simply the application of particular knowledge or the employment of a learned set of managerial skills. Leadership is a vocation.

For a Catholic educator, it is rooted in spirituality within a specific Christian tradition. It requires a commitment to discernment and ongoing formation — who am I, and how will I live that out in my life and work? It necessitates a recognition that the continuous professional development of knowledge and skills must be accompanied by ongoing spiritual growth and development.

Ultimately, all educational leadership is relational, and involves the application of emotional intelligence, the exercise of personal influence in service of the needs of students, the ability to deal patiently and constructively with conflict, and the courage to maintain integrity while crossing lines of difference.

When understood properly, the metaphor of ‘shepherd’ as an image for a leadership of faithful service to the community provides a powerful invitation for us to choose a way of leading characterized by righteousness, care and compassion.

Vocation and Discernment

“Educational leadership is not simply a career choice; it is a vocation.

The word **vocation** derives from the Latin ‘vocare’

which means ‘to call.’ The term has a rich history within Christianity, describing the core belief that all human beings are uniquely created in the image and likeness of God, each with their own gifts and talents.

While, as the Catechism of the Catholic Church notes, “love is the fundamental and innate vocation of every human being”², Christian tradition understands that love must find expression in a life of service in imitation of Jesus. For each person, that call to service is distinct, and is given in response to the particular gifts and challenges of the individual. As the author Parker Palmer insightfully notes,

“vocation does not come from a voice ‘out there’ calling me to become something I am not. It comes from a voice ‘in here’ calling me to be the person I was born to be, to fulfill the original selfhood given me at birth by God.”³

Not all persons are called to love and serve in the same way. A life of service is rooted in one’s individuality. Thus, it is incumbent upon us to come to know *who we are* by listening with an open heart and mind to those inner promptings of the Spirit calling us to be the person we were born to be.

As we come to know ourselves with courage, clarity and understanding, we also recognize that our giftedness is not just given for our own benefit. We exist in a context in which our unique dispositions and abilities are able to respond to the needs of our world. This requires cultivating the ability to continually self-reflect and prayerfully discern: how does ‘who I am’ intersect with the deep need of my community? Is ‘who I am’ meant to be lived out as a Catholic leader in service to an educational community?

To discern is to undertake an interior search to understand how to appropriately respond to life’s call. It engages head and heart, mind and spirit, with significant life questions in order to carefully contemplate an answer. It is essential for anyone contemplating, or currently engaged in, a formal role as a leader in education to cultivate the ability to discern.

For reflection:

In considering leadership in Catholic education, as I come to understand what it involves (initially, and continuously), in what ways do I discern within me the ability *and* the deep desire to utilize my gifts in this way?

In what ways do I possess the dispositions⁴ to develop and exercise this kind of leadership?

How am I open to the continuous change and growth that will be necessary to become, and sustain being, a Catholic educational leader?

In what ways will engaging in the necessary learning, and applying that learning in a leadership role, help me to become more authentically myself and a more authentic Catholic leader.

These are questions that require us to look beneath ‘the next strategic move on a predetermined career path’ or ‘the politically sensible thing to do’ to engage wholeheartedly with issues of identity, integrity and meaning.

Leadership in Faith

In 2012–13, the Ministry of Education in partnership with the Institute for Educational Leadership released significant revisions to the [2006 Ontario Leadership Framework](#)⁵. Based on Ontario research, and attendant to the reality of publicly funded schools in the province, the Framework is designed to bring a consistency of vision to educational leadership both at the local school and the system level. It promotes a common language and understanding to support leaders in various leadership roles, assisting them to work more collaboratively and to access appropriate professional development in the interest of better serving the needs of students. At the base of the Framework is a section entitled ‘Personal Leadership Resources’. The framework explains “Leaders draw upon personal leadership resources to effectively enact leadership practices.”

It is significant that the personal dimension of leadership serves as the foundation for the leadership

competencies and responsibilities charted above. The personal dimension includes the cognitive, social and psychological domains, all aspects that must be appropriately developed for a leader to be authentic and effective. For Catholic educational leaders, the ethical and spiritual dimensions of leadership must also be recognized and appreciated as equally significant and be subject to comparable efforts to be developed and refined.

Consequently, the Framework acknowledges that leadership in Catholic schools and school boards must reflect the boards' articulation of Catholic faith perspectives. While affirming the vision of leadership presented for all Ontario schools, the document recognizes that leadership in Catholic schools must be viewed through the lens of faith, spirituality and a professional culture that makes those schools distinct from other publicly funded schools. Thus, the [Framework](#) is nuanced in two parallel versions, presenting the Core Leadership Capacities at the school and system level using language and concepts particular to "Public" or to Catholic education.

At the heart of this differentiation is the recognition that leadership in Catholic schools is leadership in faith. Leadership in faith is an essential dimension of the vocation of a Catholic educator, and it takes on an even stronger emphasis in the call to school or system leadership. This constitutes a difference from the vocational call of leaders in public schools: not that one is better than the other, but they are distinct.

The differentiated Framework for Catholic School-Level Leadership speaks of a Christ-centred community reflecting the Gospel and Catholic social teachings, where leaders are actively engaged in liturgy, prayer, evangelization and life-long faith development. This is in addition to all of the Ministry requirements common to both frameworks to improve the instructional program and ensure accountability.

As the Assembly of Catholic Bishops of Ontario note in their 2018 Pastoral Letter for Catholic Education, "As school leaders you carry responsibility

for all aspects of your school. In addition to your role managing a safe and efficient learning environment and leading the instructional efforts of your staff, your attention to the spiritual and cultural dimension of a catholic school is an essential part of your mission, and provides inspiration and support for all members of the school community."⁶

To authentically assume responsibility as a leader in faith in a local school or school board community can seem daunting. Leaders are held to high standards, and it may seem that in the absence of a certain perfection in faith, knowledge or moral action that one should not attempt to exercise leadership in Catholic education.

Fortunately, the Gospel stories about Jesus' disciples dramatically reveal that what Jesus sought in those entrusted with leadership was not perfection, but a commitment to live with a combination of courage and humility and an openness to be led by the Spirit.

In his 2018 exhortation "Gaudete et Exsultate" (2018) Pope Francis reminds us of our need for God's grace, and that it is God's presence and action that is the sure source of hope for our world. Through

prayerful discernment, we learn how to cooperate with that grace just as we are, with our strengths and weaknesses, our gifts and our challenges. Pope Francis warns against a kind of self-righteous perfectionism

wherein salvation and holiness get reduced to our own efforts. This notion leads individuals to "feel superior to others because they observe certain rules or remain intransigently faithful to a particular Catholic style" (No. 49).⁷

For Pope Francis, holiness means being yourself. Each of us is meant to discern our path, to become fully who God means us to be, and to live with kindness and mercy.

Fidelity to Formation

While leadership in Catholic education does not in any sense require perfection, it does require a willingness



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to grow and change — to continue to be **formed** into our true self as a person and a leader.

For those preparing for Catholic leadership, or engaged in ongoing learning as leaders, it is not simply a question of completing particular programs to earn a certification or address a knowledge gap, as important as those things are. Catholic educators recognize that growing as a professional involves formation.

Formation is a lifelong process that encourages and enables adults to move to deeper levels of faith understanding and commitment, as well as deepening their sense of identity and vocation. It is a continuous process of growth in the knowledge, skills and values particular to leadership in Catholic schools. As well, it provides opportunities to reflect critically on faith as it applies to the issues of today in the light of Christ's teaching.

Engaging in ongoing formation develops the personal dimensions of leadership that are foundational in the province's Catholic Leadership Framework. Continuously reflecting on and developing emotional intelligence, the ability to seek and model forgiveness and reconciliation, and the willingness to forego judgment to cross lines of difference in community, and to see those differing perspectives as a catalyst for growth, are all examples of ongoing formation as leaders.

On "Shepherding" and Serving as a Catholic Education Leader

Returning to the scripture reference at the beginning of this monograph, in a number of significant passages⁸, the New Testament uses the metaphor of 'shepherd' to describe Jesus and to image leadership in the Christian community. In the 21st century, it is reasonable to wonder how helpful the shepherd metaphor is to us, with most people in Canadian society so completely disconnected from the experience of flocks of sheep and those who tend them. In addition, we recognize that people are

not actually like sheep except in terms of their most basic creaturely condition. The metaphor, useful for a simple agrarian society, may seem of limited benefit

to those entrusted with the complex demands of modern educational leadership.

Yet there were good reasons for Jesus to utilize this metaphor. Understood properly, the wisdom found in the gospel

stories about shepherds as leaders continues to insightfully inform us today.

As we search for that wisdom, it is also important to identify **what we shouldn't adopt** from the stories. Some of the literal details mitigate against healthy conceptions of leadership, and may encourage the development of leadership shadows that have been, and continue to be, all too prevalent. For example, Having a lack of appropriate boundaries to the role: The image of the shepherd as a vigilant guardian of the vulnerable flock has a positive message for leaders that will be explored further below. Unfortunately, this image can also contribute to the mistaken notion that leaders must be responsive and available 24/7.

Healthy leaders understand and maintain suitable boundaries to their roles, ensuring that accessibility and responsiveness are appropriate, but do not impinge on their personal health and well-being. Effective leaders have balanced, full and meaningful lives.

- **Assuming a stance of 'the lone leader against the wolves':** Again, the image of the vigilant shepherd can illustrate dedication and care. But it can be misconstrued and lead an educational leader to assume a combative stance of 'me against the world.'

Lone leaders in history frequently end as despots, separated from their communities and concerned more about power than the needs of the people they are called to serve. It is incumbent on healthy leaders to remain deeply connected to their communities, as well as to mentors, and colleagues who can support



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them in discerning how to best maintain those connections.

- ***Adopting the belief that those being led do not contribute to the leadership task:***

For obvious reasons, sheep do not participate in decision making. Members of human communities do. Every educator is by definition a leader even if they do not hold a formal leadership role in the school or school district. It is important for leaders to recognize the important contributions of their colleagues, even when those contributions seem challenging. In a similar way, parents and students have important roles to play supporting the leader in her/his daily management of the community.

The Gospel image of leader as shepherd also lays bare aspects of community leadership that Jesus intends us to understand and emulate. For example,

- ***Leadership must be rooted in compassion.***

To have compassion ('to feel or suffer with') is to allow one's self to understand on a deep existential level the

experience of another person, especially someone who is suffering.

Compassion is the foundation of charity, and especially of working for justice. It is by allowing

one's self to stand in solidarity with those who are struggling or excluded that a leader can animate a community to positive change.

- ***There is a selfless dimension to true leadership, a dedication to those entrusted to our care. The shepherd must "know" those being led ("I know my sheep, and mine know me").*** Leadership is not for the faint of heart. While not neglecting the need for balance and boundaries discussed above, it must be recognized and explicitly affirmed that educational leadership requires much of those who answer its call. It requires a willingness to move beyond the needs and desires of self to consider and address

the needs and will of the community.

And, one can only know those needs and desires by getting to genuinely know that community. This entails spending time, deeply listening, observing and connecting personally. This must happen broadly within the community, and not just with a cadre of colleagues, parents or students with whom the leader shares a natural affinity. This also requires a measure of humility and vulnerability on the part of the leader. Pope Francis notes that human community involves a complex web of relationships through which we encounter God and one another. To genuinely come to know others requires a commensurate willingness to be known by others.

- ***Leadership is inclusive, and consistently demonstrates a preferential option for the poor, and those on the margins. ("the shepherd leaves the ninety-nine to search for the one").*** In Luke 15:1–7, Jesus uses the parable of the lost sheep to present a particularly challenging message for leaders: no one should

be abandoned. The shepherd in this parable goes to extraordinary lengths to find the lost sheep and reintegrate it into the flock.

In challenging times in communities, it can seem expedient to simply

remove a difficult member. Jesus challenges Catholic leaders to recognize that this can never be an acceptable solution except in the most egregious of circumstances. Even then, hope is appropriate. When individuals are 'lost', it is often through circumstance and adversity, rather than through choice. Attentive leaders strive to maintain hope that relationships strained or severed can be restored and ensure that the inherent dignity of the other is always recognized and honoured.

An Invitation to Discern:

"My sheep hear My Voice, and I know them, and they follow Me". God continues to call exemplary

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educators to a leadership for service, characterized by care, compassion and integrity. Exemplary educators continue to prayerfully reflect and discern whether they are called to service in this way.

How is this vision of leadership speaking to you about your life and your work as an educator? How is it inviting you to personal and professional growth, and to action? How does this vision of leadership

invite us to work together to develop and transform our educational communities, and the systems and organizations that support them?

The students served by Catholic education deserve nothing less than our considered and wholehearted response. Is this call to leadership for you?

References

- 1 Matthew 9: 36-38 NRSV.
- 2 *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2392, quoting St. John Paul II in *Familiaris consortio*
- 3 Parker J. Palmer. *Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the Voice of Vocation*, p.10. The concept of vocation is explored extensively in chapters 1 and 2.
- 4 Dispositions are guided by beliefs and attitudes related to values such as caring, fairness, honesty, responsibility and social justice.
- 5 <https://www.education-leadership-ontario.ca/en/resources/ontario-leadership-framework-olf>
- 6 *Renewing the Promise*, A Pastoral Letter for Catholic Education. ACBO. 2018. p. 19
- 7 For an explication of this point, see “Pope Francis’ new exhortation warns against modern problems caused by ancient heresies”, Kevin Ahern, *America*, April 9 2018. and “Top five takeaways from ‘Gaudete et Exsultate’”, James Martin, *America*, April 9, 2018
- 8 For example, Mt 18:13-15; Mt. 25:31-46; Luke 15:1–7; John 10:7–17; John 21:15–17; 1 Peter 5:1- 4.

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