

A CATHOLIC PERSPECTIVE

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The Call to A Joyful Discipleship: A Reflection

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Each year, Catholic educators across the diocese of Hamilton gather to celebrate Catholic education. Dr. Anne Jamieson, Director of Catechesis, delivered the following address at the 12th annual Celebration of Catholic Education, hosted by the Hamilton Wentworth Catholic District School Board on September 18, 2019.

Renewing the Promise reminds us that in Catholic education we have the ability to “invite students, staff and families to joyful discipleship.” What does it mean to ‘have the ability?’¹ It means the potential is there; what we need, we already have.

Today, in Catholic Education, we need to ask ourselves what it means to bring that potential to life — to bring that hope into being for ourselves as individuals but also for ourselves as part of a community, one Body, in Christ.

As a starting point to begin a reflection on joyful disciples, it is helpful to reflect on the examples of joyful discipleship by which you yourself have been blessed. Perhaps it is someone in your workplace, a past mentor, or someone you remember from your own days as a student. As you call that person to mind, think of the words you would use to describe them. Perhaps your list would include words such as generous, humble, loving, transformative, gentle, kind, and courageous. Your list may be different than mine but we all have a sense of what joyful disciples look

like, what they act like, and how it feels to be in their presence.

Now ask yourself, would your colleagues, friends, students, use these words to describe you? Are you

“For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Romans 3:38 – 39)”

the image of a joyful disciple for someone else? This is the very crux of this reflection. Each of us — trustee, teacher, educational assistant, support staff, department head, curriculum leader, chaplaincy leader, director, principal and vice principal — is called to be a joyful disciple. So I invite you to reflect with me on being ‘joyful disciples’ by asking ourselves four essential

questions: Who? How? When? And, Where?

Who?

When we say ‘disciples of Jesus’, we may be tempted to call to mind the men and women of Scripture — the named and unnamed characters of the Gospels and Acts — but ‘disciples’ simply means those who follow whether the first and earliest followers or each of us today. You may recall that great love song of the

“Disciples are followers, not wanderers and not meanderers bumping along with no direction. Followers are those that can see the path, hear the voice, notice the signposts, and recognize the one who goes before us.”

1960s by Peggy March “I Will Follow Him.” The lyrics say,

*I will follow him, follow him wherever he may go,
There isn't an ocean too deep,
A mountain so high it can keep me away...*

The song ends with these words, “nothing can keep him away from me; he is my destiny.”

Who are we called to be in Catholic education? We are called to be those who follow Christ – those who know that He is our destiny. This secular love song echoes the beautiful words of St. Paul to the Romans, “For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.” (Romans 3:38 – 39)

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All of that requires commitment from each of us — to be seekers, to be people who stop often to listen again for his voice: to become more and more knowledgeable of the signs; to be lifelong learners; to enter into an ever increasing prayer life; to avail ourselves of faith growth opportunities in our school boards and dioceses and parishes, our Spiritual Development Days, our formal and less formal learning opportunities and in our teaching of our Religious Education courses. It means a commitment to engage in our own encounter with Christ through the Word of God, through our prayer life, through our care for creation and the vulnerable, and through our participation in the Sacraments so that we can help others to come to *that* encounter too.

Renewing the Promise speaks about joyful

discipleship as something we both invite people to and form people in. This speaks of a process; we are not fully there — none of us individually or corporately are there in perfection. So we are called to be in process with one another.

As leaders in Catholic Education, we are not called to be the ones out front but to recognize Christ before us, beside us, within us, and around us in order to lead the gaze of those entrusted to us to his presence.

So we know the who. We are called to be disciples — followers — baptized — with all the gifts and all the responsibilities that flow from that.

How?

The next question, then, is how? How are we meant to be? And the answer is: joyful.

Joyful is an interesting description because our society often gets joyful confused with happy. ‘Happy’ is a feeling I produce for myself in relation to myself. It is often dependent on the external circumstances of the moment. We are happy because it’s sunny or sad because it’s raining. We are happy for a success at work, and sad when frustrations pile up. ‘Happy’ comes and goes with the wind blowing through my day and so, it is fleeting.

But that is not our understanding of joy. Joy is profound and lasting. Joy resides deep down within us and joy is much more difficult to dislodge.

Jesus assured us, “I have come so that you may have joy and your joy may be complete.” (John 15:11) We learn from St. Paul that joy is a fruit of the Holy Spirit — a visible sign to ourselves and others that God’s Spirit is at work in our lives. In Ontario in October, any of us could see a tree with lovely, ripe, red fruit and identify that it’s an apple tree. The fruit tells us what kind of tree it is. In the same way, we should be able to look at our own lives and the lives of others around us and consider — what kind of life is on display? Is it a life where the fruit of joy is evident? Being joyful disciples is so much more than saying ‘it’s nice to be nice’ or ‘hugs and smiles are contagious’. Being a *joyful* disciple means that we witness to God’s Spirit at work in our lives. Again, St. Paul reminds us, “Do you not know you are God’s temple and God’s

spirit dwells in you?” (1 Cor 3:16) We need to know and others should know by looking at us, that we are where God’s Spirit dwells. Our lives should bear that fruit.

But if joy is more profound and lasting than mere happiness, we must remember that we can experience joy, in a mysterious way even in the midst of suffering and loss. The psalms reassure us and teach us about joy. “The Lord is my strength and my shield; my heart trusts in him, and he helps me. My heart leaps for joy.” says Psalm 28:7. Joy comes from trusting God, from knowing he will support and protect us even in tough times. Psalm 30:11 says “You turned my wailing into dancing; you removed my sackcloth and clothed me with joy.” More than just comfort, God can bring us to joy from the depths of our brokenness. And that good news is not easily contained. It causes us to leap and shout, dance and sing! Joy is not easily contained. Psalm 33:3 tells us, “Sing to him a new song; play skillfully, and shout for joy.”

One of my favourite hymns declares,
*Joyful, joyful, we adore Thee,
 God of glory, Lord of love;
 Hearts unfold like flow’rs before Thee,
 Op’ning to the sun above.
 ...Thou art giving and forgiving,
 Ever blessing, ever blest,
 Wellspring of the joy of living,
 Ocean depth of happy rest!
 Thou our Father, Christ our Brother,
 All who live in love are Thine;
 Teach us how to love each other,
 Lift us to the joy divine.³*

Renewing the Promise encourages us that our call to joyful discipleship is not meant to be an onerous responsibility. “It is not about doing great things but doing small things with great love.”² As we learn together how to love each other, we will be lifted to that joy divine.

So we know who and how we are called to be: disciples who are joyful. We are left to ask ourselves when and where we are called to this witness.

“ These words are essential to our understanding of our call. We cannot simply choose our moment or our moments. We cannot psych ourselves up for the talk at the school assembly but forget our joyful discipleship as we try to find parking in the staff lot. We cannot put on a face of joyful discipleship in the classroom only to shed it for our cynicism, our unforgiveness, or our frustration in the staff room among colleagues. We cannot shine out our joy on the selected few or even selected many while we withhold it from those whom we find difficult to love. We are called to be joyful disciples always and everywhere.”

When and Where?

The answer to the final questions ‘when and where’ comes from the Mass itself: always and everywhere!

At every Eucharist, the priest invites us:

Let us give thanks to the Lord our God.

And we respond: It is right and just.

He echoes our response with this affirmation: It is truly *right and just, our duty and our salvation, always and everywhere, to give you thanks.*

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It is both our duty and our salvation. It *means* that we must because this is what heals and makes us whole. This is how we become the possibility of the encounter with Christ that we are to offer in our schools every day. And this is deeply related to the

“Let us stand shoulder to shoulder to profess our faith. Let us allow God’s Word to be a living word among us. Let us, over and over again, become members of the one Body in Christ.”

Mass. When our joyfulness flows through us, our thanksgiving becomes evident. Our Eucharist, which *means* thanksgiving, becomes the strengthening of our joy.

While the Eucharist is, in the language of our Tradition, both the source and summit of our existence — a foretaste of heaven and where we find our most perfect union with Christ here on Earth — it must be recognized also as an episodic experience. It is Sunday morning or Saturday evening. It may even be daily for some of us but we do not and cannot stay. We enter into it and leave it; each time being sent back out to glorify the Lord by our lives.

So we know where to find church, where the church is on Sunday as we gather for Eucharist, but where are we as Church on Monday?

Throughout our communities, our cities, our province, the baptized are in their workplaces and homes, they are in hospitals and shopping malls, business towers and libraries, driving buses and working their farms. The Church is dispersed.

What a privileged place we have in our Catholic schools where, on Monday and every day, we can continue to gather. We can continue to share the story of what God has done for us. We can continue to share the meal and continue to learn together to be joyful disciples. In our Catholic schools we can continue to walk together out into the world where we glorify God in our many acts of social justice that touch both our local and global communities. This is the

living of “the pattern of the Eucharist” that is meant to both “shape and animate” life in our Catholic schools.⁴

Where so many in our society may feel apart and lost, where levels of loneliness, restlessness, and anxiety, concerns for whether life has meaning and what that meaning might be are on the rise, Catholic schools are a privileged place of gathering. In our Catholic schools, we never walk alone — not the adults, not the children or the young people. We walk *together* in the light of Jesus Christ, by the power of the Holy Spirit towards God our Almighty and merciful Father.

And on this alone, we ought to be able to find our joy no matter what. This is the promise of Psalm 23:

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that even in the valley of the shadow of death we are not alone — our God walks with us.

As we are encouraged to follow this Eucharistic pattern and have it guide and direct our work, let us enter into our thanksgiving every day. Let us remember who and whose we are. Let us stand shoulder to shoulder to profess our faith. Let us allow God’s Word to be a living word among us. Let us, over and over again, become members of the one Body in Christ. And as we are sent out to glorify the Lord by our lives, let us find every opportunity always and everywhere to allow our joyful discipleship — our joy of believing — to be a visible sign of God’s work in us.

References

- 1 *Renewing the Promise*, A Pastoral Letter for Catholic Education, 2018, page 5
- 2 *Renewing the Promise*, A Pastoral Letter for Catholic Education, 2018, page 21
- 3 Author: Henry Van Dyke (1852-1933) (*CBW III*, #5)
- 4 *Renewing the Promise*, A Pastoral Letter for Catholic Education, 2018, page 19

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