

# + A CATHOLIC PERSPECTIVE

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## Understanding and Cultivating Authentic Community

by Michael R. Saver

***This third monograph in the *Renewing the Promise* series explore “Nurture Community Relationships” the third theme that was identified as part of the *Renewing the Promise* symposium conversation and invites us to focus on the nature and importance of a trusting and collaborative community in our schools.***

### The Centrality of Trust

Education is a relational activity. The strength and quality of relationships established in a school is foundational to learning. Research has consistently shown that in the absence of strong relationships characterized by relational trust, sustained improvement in student achievement and wellbeing, or sustained school improvement, is not possible.<sup>1</sup> Further, the research indicates that it is not just the presence of strong trusting relationships between teachers and students in the classroom that determines success in achievement and wellbeing. It is the presence of those relationships in the adult community as well that is determinant.

“Discipleship, by its very nature, has a communal dimension. And that community of disciples must be characterized by trust and collaboration.”

This should not surprise Catholic educators, who view Jesus’ own teaching ministry as a model for the kind of community we strive for in classrooms, staff rooms, and all interactions in schools and school boards. The long history of Catholic Education attests that its purpose is not simply for the

edification and benefit of the individual, but also in service of Jesus’ own mission to “bring good news to the poor...proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”<sup>2</sup>

“Catholic education must be genuine education — formation of the whole person according to high standards of intellectual, moral and physical excellence. But all of that must be ordered to the formation of genuine disciples of Jesus — people who know him, love him and serve him in mission to the world. That’s what makes Catholic education *Catholic*.”<sup>3</sup> Discipleship, by its very nature, has a communal dimension. And that community of disciples must be characterized by trust and collaboration.

In their 2017 Pastoral Letter *Renewing the Promise*, the Ontario Catholic bishops write that “the work of Catholic schools involves initiating, facilitating and maintaining trusting relationships with and among Catholic educational partners. A sense of respect for the unique expertise and strengths of each, and generous cooperation that acknowledges and celebrates the accomplishments of all is essential to develop the mutual trust that nurtures effective working relationships.”<sup>4</sup>

## Authentic Community

In addition to the educational research that affirms the importance of collaborative teams, the Ontario Ministry of Education policy memorandum (PPM 159) mandates professional collaboration. Catholic educators recognize that this policy is already mandated by adherence to the Gospel. In our faith tradition, all decisions, innovations, difficulties, and celebrations happen in community. Collaboration is not merely a strategy to improve effectiveness; it is a powerful demonstration of our commitment to living and working in community. It is primarily through community that we experience Jesus in an intimate way, calling us to love and to serve.

However, just because we call a gathering of persons in a school or school board ‘a community’, it does not mean that authentic community is present. Because a school is part of a Catholic school board, begins the day with a prayer, and references Jesus or the Pope, it does not automatically guarantee that true community is fully present. Genuine community must be understood, valued and worked on constantly both individually and collectively.

As we examine how to apprehend and cultivate authentic community, we will follow the framework outlined in Monograph #1 in this series. That is, we will explore **Heart** (*what does our heart and soul tell us about this?*), **Head** (*what characterizes a trustworthy community?*), and **Hands** (*what do we need to do to cultivate and nurture such a community in our school or school board?*).

### HEART: What do we long for in an authentic community?

The beginning of love is the will to let those we love be perfectly themselves, the resolution not to twist them to fit our own image.”<sup>5</sup>

As Thomas Merton insightfully noted, all people long for a sense of belonging. We yearn to be known

by name and accepted just as we are. There are no two of us exactly alike, each one endowed with unique gifts and singular potentiality.

Paradoxically, this uniqueness of our being<sup>6</sup> is always held in tension with the reality that we are made for community.<sup>7</sup> The design of Creation is that we humans are strongly linked with one another and with the earth. As much as we may resist it, we are a fundamentally interconnected species.

A genuine community always holds the rights and needs of the individual in a creative tension with the rights and needs of the communal whole. In holding that tension in ways that give life, the recognition

“When we dismiss people out of hand because of their apparent woundedness, we stunt their lives by ignoring their gifts, which are often buried in their wounds. We are all bruised reeds, whether our bruises are visible or not. The compassionate life is the life in which we believe that strength is hidden in weakness and that true community is a fellowship of the weak.”<sup>9</sup>

that “we are all in this together” is balanced by the appreciation that we are not all the same.<sup>8</sup> Note the word appreciation. In genuine community, we don’t just ‘tolerate’ differences. We actively affirm and appreciate them for the richness and depth of understanding they provide.

Further, in an authentic community, members feel both that the work they do in the community has meaning for their lives, as well as having an impact on others. For educators, this is the recognition

that our work on behalf of students is enriching our lives as well as theirs.

Additionally, in an authentic community, members know with clarity what is expected of them, and how to meet their responsibilities. This is an important leadership task — to set clear expectations and to engage the community in strategizing how to meet those expectations. It is difficult to have a true sense of belonging in a community if one is constantly wondering, ‘what am I supposed to do, and how do I do it?’.

Finally, in an authentic community, members must adopt both a growth mindset and a willingness to forgive and seek forgiveness. This is especially important for community leaders, who model and set the tone in this regard. As Henri Nouwen insightfully

notes, “When we dismiss people out of hand because of their apparent woundedness, we stunt their lives by ignoring their gifts, which are often buried in their wounds. We are all bruised reeds, whether our bruises are visible or not. The compassionate life is the life in which we believe that strength is hidden in weakness and that true community is a fellowship of the weak.”<sup>9</sup>

### Head: What is needed for trust and collaboration to develop in a community?

“No one is saved alone, as an isolated individual, but God attracts us looking at the complex web of relationships that take place in the human community. God enters into this dynamic, this participation in the web of human relationships.”<sup>10</sup>

As Pope Francis notes, human community involves a “complex web of relationships” through which we encounter God and one another. It is difficult to reduce the nature of community to a list of rules or a few simple descriptors.

Having said that, here are **four** well-founded characteristics of relational trust. When these four are valued and present, relational trust is extant as a foundation for authentic community.<sup>11</sup>

To genuinely understand and develop trust, collaboration and community, we need to move beyond utilizing these four as a checklist, and delve deeply into the meaning of each of these characteristics of relational trust. This requires honest self-reflection

and sincere sharing:

- What exactly do each of these characteristics mean, and what is my experience of them?
- How do I feel about each of them?
- What is the gift and skill-set that I bring to each of them, and what particular challenge do they pose for me as a person?

#### Respect

“...all I’m asking is for a little respect...”<sup>12</sup>

Aretha Franklin championed it for successive generations. Respect is one of the Ethical Standards of the Teaching Profession in Ontario. Everyone wants it. And do we genuinely understand what it means to respect and be respected?



**Respect entails the need to acknowledge and uphold one another’s dignity and ideas.**

Certainly, we want others to do this for us. And, nothing that we do or say in community should undercut the inherent character and worth of another person. As well, we need to consider and appreciate the ideas and perspectives of others, even when (especially when) they differ substantially from our own.

However, respect can sometimes be misunderstood as the need to “be nice” to everyone, and as making sure that no one feels “uncomfortable.” In the name of respect, we can sometimes impose an inauthentic

peace on communities, allowing only ideas that the leader or the majority agree on to be voiced. This is not respect, and it does not engender trust or lead to authentic community, although on the seemingly calm surface it may appear to do so. In this kind of faux community, the dignity and ideas of some members are never acknowledged or upheld, and they become an oppressed, and understandably subversive, minority.

Respect demands that the differing experience and ideas of community members be articulated and understood. This inevitably leads to conflict. Conflict naturally and continually arises whenever an idea or perspective is asserted that differs from my own, or from the perspective or experience of the majority or the leader. And growth mindset teaches us that only by engaging with different thinking, by examining and in many cases letting go of held assumptions, can growth and learning actually take place.

Unfortunately, conflict is often dealt with in less than constructive ways — through the assertion of power, ensuring winners and losers; through avoidance that pretends the conflict doesn’t exist; or by forming alliances that lead to intimidation. None of these responses show respect for others. By being willing to enter into conflict constructively, recognizing the value of different experiences and perspectives, and being willing to engage

with and hold the tension of those differences, members of a community can find a way forward that resists the tendency to fight, flight or flock.

Disagreements can and must take place respectfully. This does not mean that a person cannot hold strong opinions, advocate for them passionately, or speak their truth which may lead to discomfort for some. All of these things are necessary in authentic community. To value respect and to be respectful means that we are willing to hear and genuinely consider different ideas and perspectives, and that in advocating for our convictions we do not engage in personal attacks.



**Genuine respect enables us to civilly cross lines of significant difference in community without breaking into factions. In truth, we have much more to learn from people whose thinking or experience is different from our own than from those who will simply reconfirm our assumptions and certainties.**

### Competence and Dependability

“For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. ...Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many.”<sup>13</sup>

For an authentic trustworthy

community, we must believe that everyone is capable of meaningfully contributing, and can be relied upon to do so. St. Paul’s metaphor of the community as a body is helpful in understanding this. As Paul notes, the unity of community does not result from everyone contributing to the same extent, or in the same way. All members must contribute according to their abilities and circumstances. As is the case with student learning, equity of staff contribution does not always mean “exactly the same.”

At the same time, it also does not mean passive observation of the goodwill efforts of others. Each staff member understands that community involves active contribution according to one’s role and responsibilities under the law, and taking into account one’s unique abilities and personal circumstances.

With these caveats in mind, members must believe in the competence and dependability of all community members for a trustworthy community to develop and be maintained.

### Personal Regard

“Jesus, looking at him, loved him...”<sup>14</sup>

In this passage from Mark’s gospel, even as Jesus challenged the rich young man to reconsider his priorities, he offered personal regard. In an educational community, personal regard refers to the care individuals show for other members of the community,

both personally and professionally.

In any community, it is natural that we are closer to some people than to others. This results from many things: shared interests, similarity in background or culture, or simply from that mysterious connection we call “chemistry”. Personal regard does not in any way negate this, or imply that we need to be “bosom buddies” with everyone we work with.

At the same time, our concern for other members in an authentic community must move beyond selfish utilitarianism. We don’t only care about our friends, those we like and those who can do something for us.



**Personal regard is demonstrated by being genuinely concerned about others — not simply about the work they do, but about them as persons. When they are sick, when they grieve, when they are struggling, members of the community rally their support. It is often precisely in these kinds of challenging circumstances that the true nature of community emerges.**

### Integrity

“We should be such as we appear and appear such as we are.”<sup>15</sup> Integrity has to do with authenticity, that we strive for consistency between our actions and our words. Phrases like “she walks the talk” and “what you see is what

you get — with him, there are no hidden agendas” attempt to describe people who possess integrity. The presence of integrity in members of a community engenders trust.

The discipline of daily self-reflection, and the regular interaction with formal and informal mentors or spiritual directors who possess strong listening skills, as well as the ability to ask good, open questions, helps significantly in the task, as Parker Palmer terms it, of ‘aligning our soul with our role.’

For educators to have integrity, it also means that we always give priority to our mission. The needs of students — their intellectual, physical, emotional, social and spiritual growth and development — must always come first in our decision making.

### **HANDS: What do we need to do to develop authentic community?**

“We have all known the long loneliness, and we have found that the answer is community.”<sup>16</sup>

By exploring what an authentic community feels like and looks like, we are already explicating those things we should do to develop, enhance and sustain a caring and trusting professional community in our schools. To enable places where that ‘long loneliness’ may find some measure of healing, we need to create safe and

brave spaces<sup>17</sup> in our schools — spaces safe enough for individuals to be fully present, to speak honestly and to engage with things that can be difficult, uncomfortable and lead to a conflict of perspectives. At the same time, those spaces must be brave enough that these different perspectives can (indeed **must**) surface, and that community members are able to be self-reflective and open-minded about those differences, holding the tensions creatively so that growth, learning and new directions may emerge. It is a space more characterized by courage than comfort.

Communities need to engage their members in the creation of the conditions that facilitate this kind of space. Often, this includes the establishment of a set of communal guidelines or touchstones<sup>18</sup> that describe ‘how we will be with one another’. This involves more than simply publishing a predetermined list of rules. Community members need to deeply engage with concepts like presence, respect, engaging with conflict with civility, and the role of deep listening, silence and ‘pause’ when difficulties emerge. Working together on ways to understand and embody these is not the prelude to community. It actually assists in its creation.

### **A Source of Hope for the Future**

The presence of authentic trustworthy community, as we have explored it here, is the direct

antithesis of the polarization and distrust that we witness increasing in our society. It is not easy to stand against the forces of cynicism and division, and to build community. It continually requires us to look at ourselves honestly and with humility, to engage with others across lines of difference, and to be willing to learn and unlearn.

**“ Yet, the possibility of this kind of community is a sure source of hope for the future, that with the grace of God we can choose a different way of being together — the kind of community that our hearts long for, our heads know is possible, and our hands are capable of building.**

As challenging as it is to create, we are not alone. As Jesus assured his followers at the Last Supper, and continues to assure his followers today: “The Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you. Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. ...Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.”<sup>19</sup>

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4. Assembly of Catholic Bishops of Ontario, *Renewing The Promise* (page 9)
5. Thomas Merton, *No Man is an Island*, 1955
6. Isaiah 43:1; Psalm 139:13
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8. For a full exploration of this, see Parker J. Palmer. *Healing the Heart of Democracy*, Jossey-Bass, 2011 (pages 43–45)
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14. Mark 10:21
15. *Venerable Mary Ward*, 1585-1645
16. Dorothy Day, *The Long Loneliness*
17. For more on this concept, see "From Safe to Brave Space: A New Way to Frame Dialogue Around Diversity and Social Justice," Brian Arao and Kristi Clemens; from *The Art of Effective Facilitation*. 2013 (pages 135–150)
18. For an examples of community touchstones, see <http://www.couragerenewal.org/touchstones/>
19. John 14: 26-27

## Monograph Series — Renewing the Promise

Issue	Series	Renewing the Promise Theme	Monograph Title
1	Winter 2018	Framework	<i>Heart, Head, Hands: A Framework for Considering Contemporary Issues in Catholic Education</i>
2	Fall 2018	Moving to Action	<i>Let the Gospels Lead the Way</i>
3	Fall 2018	Nurture Community Relationships	<i>Understanding and Cultivating Authentic Community</i>
4	Fall 2018	Rekindle Mission and Values	<i>Inspiring Students to Love God More</i>
5	Fall 2018	Develop Faith and Catholic Identity	<i>Developing Faith and Identity in Our School Community</i>
6	Winter 2019	Live Faith	<i>The Hope In Our Hearts</i>
7	Spring 2019	Engage Student Voice	<i>Courage on the Journey</i>
8	Spring 2019	Encourage and Nurture Leadership	<i>Shepherding and Serving</i>

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