



A CATHOLIC PERSPECTIVE

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Conversion: Turning More and More Toward God in Catholic Education

by Dr. Anne Walsh in Conversation with
Superintendent Cassandra Jack-Caldeira and Luciana Cardarelli of CPCO

*Anne Walsh is an educator and recognized leader in Adult Faith Formation in the Catholic Church in Canada. She was a keynote speaker at our 2023 symposium **On the Way**. In keeping our symposium theme alive, Anne reflects for us on God's mercy. Let us remember we are all... **On the Way!** Anne shares her stories to engage each of us in the conversation.*

In my elementary school days in Catholic education in Newfoundland, a beloved music teacher introduced me to the songs of the 19th century Irish composer Thomas Moore. In his back-story, I learned that Moore had married a beautiful woman who soon faced a disfiguring illness. She feared that what she perceived as ugliness would drive her husband away, but to tell her that this was not possible, Moore wrote a song that contains these words:

*It is not while beauty and youth are thine own,
And thy cheeks unprofaned by a tear,
That the fervour and faith of a soul can be known,
To which time will but make thee more dear!
Oh! the heart, that has truly loved, never forgets,
But as truly loves on to the close;
As the sun-flower turns on her god, when he sets,
The same look which she turned when he rose!*

This song has always stuck with me. Even as a young person, I thought that perhaps it might have more to say to me than the touching story of faithful love lived out in the face of adversity. As if that wasn't enough!

And then I planted my first sunflower. I watched as it grew steadily, day by day toward the sun. I watched as the flower opened up, and I observed how the sun moved through the sky. Each day, the sunflower followed the movement of the sun.

As I reflected on what that bit of knowledge about the sunflower had to say to me, I saw that life is a constant journey of conversion. Like the sunflower, we turn more and more toward the sun, except that it's not the SUN, but the SON. We turn more and more toward Jesus Christ. For us, conversion is not a once in a lifetime event, but a reality that permeates and characterizes all of life. Throughout our entire life, like the sunflower, we are turning more and more toward the Son.

Can you imagine yourself as a sunflower?

Throughout your life, how have you turned more and more toward the SON?

The movement of the sunflower has something to teach for those of us involved in any role in Catholic education. People tend to think of “conversion” as a dramatic, once in a lifetime moment, a moment of sudden insight or change, after which we become something totally different than before.

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However, for those of us who live and move within the Catholic Church and Catholic school system, that moment of conversion in a definitive sense was for us baptism. At that moment, our lives were changed and radically oriented toward Jesus Christ. We know, however, that God is constantly at work within us, and around us, calling us to more — more life, deeper insight, better ways of doing things, better words to give shape to our intent, better ways to show love, better ways to say “I’m sorry.”

In practical terms, what does that mean? I would like to propose that in our Catholic schools, conversion looks like movements or journeys that are constantly ongoing, within individuals and among us as a community of faith. Every time we experience that movement from something to something else, we are in the realm of conversion. It is important to remember that conversion is not our work, but the work of God in and among and around us. Just as the sunflower does not turn of its own volition, but in response to the generous gaze of the sun.

How might we name some of these movements? Conversion might look like the movement:

- From darkness → to light
- From fear → to trust
- From despair → to hope
- From sorrow → to joy
- From conflict → to peace
- From indifference → to love
- From falsehood → to truth
- From exclusion → to inclusion
- From death → to life

Conversion is a dynamic that, often without our conscious awareness, permeates and transforms and vivifies our lives and practice in Catholic education. We are a field of sunflowers, individually and as a community, and it is the Son who is at work with us, among us and around us, constantly calling us to more and more, to life to the full.



Let's Talk...



How have you experienced conversion in your life in Catholic Education?

Leaders Called to Be Witnesses

Many educational policies and recommendations have called for educators to reflect on current practices and outcomes of schooling. *On the Way Principles, Patterns, and Processes for Adult Faith Formation in Catholic Education in Ontario* adds to this discourse. In a data-rich and data driven era, we know that there are varied experiences and opportunities for different groups within our Catholic school systems. Catholic leadership in schools is rooted in our own personal faith journeys. Catholic schools require both ongoing personal and communal conversion – turning to the SON, as Anne says.

While everyone's faith journey is unique and individual, in Catholic Education in Ontario, we must recognize we are also on this journey *together*. System leadership matters. And even where we seem to be on different paths or different points along the path, Dr. Walsh reminds us that the Lord is always among us. It is imperative now, more than ever that system leaders reflect, model and inspire a deepened, personal encounter with Jesus Christ within our Catholic schools. This is hard work. We are inundated with competing, complex and contradictory messages on a daily basis. Our adult faith formation must remain rooted in conversion. In this way, conversion is about sharing experiences, learning from each other, and growing stronger in faith together.

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Adult faith formation in Catholic Education must clearly define us. It is crucial that we prioritize fostering a change of heart, paying particular attention to the phases or points where this change occurs within us. We must always be mindful of ways to accommodate a wide variety of Catholic spiritual practices to nourish our community. Our journey of faith must never cease to bring us closer together toward the Son.



What are some ways that your personal faith journey has influenced your teaching, learning and leadership practices and interactions with students?



What movement have you experienced in your own faith formation experiences that brought you from or out of something and turned you towards something more positive?



Communities of Conversion

For me, the metaphor of the sunflower powerfully captures the essence of ongoing conversion in Catholic education. From baptism, our lives are oriented towards Jesus Christ, initiating continuous spiritual growth. This journey is integral for Ontario's Catholic schools, nurturing students in faith from kindergarten through secondary school. In 2024, Catholic school communities face unprecedented challenges stemming from the global pandemic, geopolitical instability, mental health crises, social inequities, and rapid technological changes. Faith formation for leaders is crucial, providing hope, resilience, and moral guidance amidst uncertainty and change.

I believe Principals and Vice-Principals play pivotal roles in this journey, as we engage in our own faith formation. Like the sunflower's steady turning, we model ongoing conversion. Our commitment to faith formation serves as a beacon for students, families, and staff, permeating life and leadership. As leaders, we help students through stages of personal and spiritual development. Movements from darkness to light, fear to trust, or indifference to love signify God's dynamic work. This ongoing conversion reflects the Catholic commitment to holistic education.

Through daily actions and decisions, we create environments where God's grace is palpable. Our leadership encourages growth in love, justice, and humility, embodying Christ's values - movements of conversion in response to God's grace. Catholic leadership fosters school culture in response to this divine presence, growing in faith, hope, and love. Like sunflowers, we turn towards the Son, embodying equity, justice, and compassion.

In these challenging times, faith formation equips us with spiritual tools to navigate adversity, fostering resilient, compassionate learning communities grounded in Christ's teachings, guiding each towards a deeper relationship with God and a commitment to living out faith.



What might be some implications of thinking of our Catholic Schools as Communities of Conversion?



What might be some ways you nurture an environment where God's grace is evident and embraced by all members of the school community?



How might that be evidenced in the school improvement plan or impact student, staff and families?

Access the webinar discussion between Dr. Walsh, Cassandra Jack-Caldeira and Luciana Cardarelli here:

<https://iceont.ca/two-part-webinar-series-in-conversation-with-dr-anne-walsh/>



References

- i Thomas Moore, Irish Poet 1779-1852, Believe Me, If All those Endearing Young Charms (public domain)

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