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## ENHANCING CATHOLIC IDENTITY: THE GENESIS OF A NATIONAL CONSORTIUM

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*This article describes a new program specifically designed to assist Catholic school administrators. The genesis for this program and the creation of the Consortium for Catholic School Identity which sponsors it are the result of a grant from Our Sunday Visitor Foundation. The Consortium, a diverse team of professional Catholic school educators, is now positioned to offer a unique and innovative series of national seminars to support principals in their efforts to enhance the Catholic identity of their schools.*

Although it is edifying to experience a resurgence of interest in Catholic schools, efforts to maintain and celebrate Catholic identity must remain a priority. That concern encouraged the late Bishop John R. Keating of Arlington to reflect on how Catholic schools could enhance their Catholic climate. His initiative, coupled with the National Catholic Educational Association's (NCEA) ongoing effort to promote Catholic identity, resulted in a grant from Our Sunday Visitor Foundation to fund a national program designed to assist school leaders with this administrative responsibility.

Several organizational meetings were sponsored by the Foundation to discuss this initiative and consider how a program could be created for new and veteran principals. Participants in those brainstorming sessions included Fr. Edmund McDermott of the University of San Francisco; Sr. Maria Ciriello of the University of Portland; Dr. Theodore Wallace of the University of Dayton; Sr. Eymard Gallagher, president of Marymount University in Virginia; Regina Haney of the NCEA; and a number of other experienced school administrators from various dioceses. Their conversations brought out numerous resources including literature, workshops, and

college courses that spoke to the importance of a Catholic environment in our schools. What appeared to be lacking, however, was a comprehensive leadership program for school administrators that specifically addressed the unique identity of their schools.

The culmination of those sharing sessions was the birth of the Consortium for Catholic School Identity. This varied group of Catholic school educators, including university, diocesan, and NCEA representatives, devoted nine months to writing curriculum and producing a seminar-structured program designed to address this leadership niche in our schools' ministry. The Consortium's approach was based on the premise that principals are the key to any school's success. There continues to be a need for cost-effective, convenient, comprehensive school leadership programs which produce a lasting influence on participating administrators.

The Consortium's work eventually materialized as a two-year seminar program titled "Enhancing Our Catholic School Identity." Structured specifically for Catholic K-12 principals, the program's ultimate goal is to enable Catholic school leaders to celebrate and enhance their ability to foster a Catholic identity for their school. Four critical elements were identified as paramount for program success:

- Prayer leadership
- Commitment to Catholic social teaching
- Openness to enhancing one's own knowledge of the Catholic faith
- Skills to provide effective staff development programs

The selection of these four topics evolved from the Consortium's desire to respond to one committee member's challenge: If our school was ever accused of not being Catholic, would there be sufficient evidence to refute such a charge?

Much discussion focused on a definition of the term "Catholic identity." The Consortium adopted the explanation provided in *The Religious Dimension of Education in a Catholic School* (Congregation for Catholic Education, 1988). According to this document, the broad concept of Catholic school identity is understood as follows:

...from the first moment a student sets foot in a Catholic school, he or she ought to have the impression of entering a new environment, one illuminated by the light of faith and having its own unique characteristics...permeated with the Gospel spirit of love and freedom. (p. 3)

Guidance was also gleaned from *Catholic Schools and the Common Good* (Bryk, Lee, & Holland, 1993), which offered the following reflections on shared institutional values:

We represent the only face of Christ for many pupils. The special mission of a Catholic school is to have Christ as the center of all we do in school and to give the pupils in our care opportunities to take part in spiritual growth in a living, worshipping community. (p. 272)

One practical recommendation for defining Catholic identity came from a Consortium member who stated that the continual message our principals need to hear and transmit to their school community is, "What would Jesus do in situations requiring a moral response?"

In fall of 1996, a faith leadership program was developed. Consortium members agreed that what was needed was not a religious retreat for principals but rather an experiential program of two two-day workshops over the course of two years. The seminars should encourage principals, as Covey states, to take time out to sharpen the saw. The first two-day series focuses on prayer leadership and Catholic social teaching.

## **YEAR ONE WORKSHOP ACTIVITIES**

### **DAY ONE**

#### **Prayer Service**

Welcome Video Message: Sr. Lourdes Sheehan of NCEA

Keynote on Prayer Leadership: Video of Monica Hellwig

Group Work (Listing best practices of each individual)

Group Work (Listing top obstacles/needs of each)

Actual Scenarios Presented to Groups for Resolution

Summary of Group Work

Mass (with testimonials on video)

Day One begins with a well-crafted prayer service, "Jesus, the Bread of Life," which immediately creates a focused environment to set the tone for the entire day. To the delight of the Consortium members, many principals have commented on the quality of this prayer service. Then follows a brief welcoming video message by Sr. Lourdes Sheehan of NCEA. A keynote on prayer leadership follows. This keynote presentation suggests that the work of a scholar lends itself to prayer but urges participants not to confine prayer to the private parts of their lives. Catholic identity of schools, the speaker notes, is both individual and communal. In building community, the school leader must find the right touch which prayer provides. At the conclusion of the presentation, participants reflect on the following issues:

- Are we, as school leaders, comfortable in leading others in prayer?
- What opportunities do we create for faculty, students, and parents to pray together?

- Are our teachers expected to include prayer with students daily?
- Is there schoolwide policy on classroom prayer?

The remainder of the first day is devoted to individual time for reflection and group sharing on the best practices each participant uses to enhance a prayerful life at their school. A collection of best practices is distributed to all attendees the following day.

Finally, participants view a video conveying several testimonials from Catholic principals throughout the country. Their remarks serve as additional insight and confirmation for the importance of prayer leadership from the principal. A liturgy, dinner, and social conclude Day One.

## DAY TWO

Prayer Service

Review & Introduction

Video Keynote on "Catholic Social Justice" by J. Carr & Fr. Kemp

Group Work (Listing best practices of each individual)

Group Work (Listing top obstacles/needs of each)

Actual Scenarios Presented to Groups for Resolution

Summary of Group Work

Video Testimonials of Importance of Catholic Social Justice in our Schools

The second day starts with another thoughtful prayer service, "Called to the Challenge." The facilitator then addresses the group, focusing on *To Teach as Jesus Did*, a document of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops (1972). This commentary reminds principals that the educational mission of the Church embraces three dimensions, one of which is service to the community. The facilitator refers to the document by stating the Church is a servant community in which those who hunger are to be filled; the ignorant taught; the homeless to receive shelter; the sick cared for; the distressed consoled; the oppressed set free—all so that people may more fully realize their human potential and more readily enjoy life with God now and eternally.

The keynote challenges participants to reflect on how the Church's social teachings can be integrated into their educational programs. Integral to the keynote is the Church's belief in the social and sacred dignity of the human person. The keynote presentation is followed by several pertinent questions for the participants' reflection. For example, participants are asked to respond to the following:

- How are social justice concerns translated from your school's mission to your school's practice?

- Do the students have regular, directed opportunities to reflect with their peers about their volunteer experiences?
- Are Catholic social teachings integrated in all curriculum areas of the school?
- Do students and staff work together on justice projects?

The afternoon session includes a repeat of the best practices exercises and closes with a second video highlighting a different group of principals' reflections on social justice issues as they relate to the life of a Catholic school. The facilitator then describes what the participants will receive from the Consortium over the next 12 months and previews the Year Two seminar. The seminar concludes with a prayer service.

## INTERIM ACTIVITIES

An important dimension of the Enhancing Our Catholic School Identity program is the periodic communication the participants receive from the Consortium between the Year One and Year Two seminars. A variety of essays, suggested activities, and other printed materials relating to prayer leadership or Catholic social teachings are sent to the principals monthly. The Consortium is creating a Web site to facilitate this process.

## YEAR TWO ACTIVITIES

### DAY ONE

Purpose and Review of Year One

Prayer Service

Keynote (beginning of Church history through Vatican II)

Question and Answer Period

Pair-Share Process (discuss relevancy of talk)

Group Work (based on readings)

Groups discuss the readings

Groups utilize the template

Groups list their template recommendations

Beginning with a prayer service called "Baptized to New Life," the second year of the program recognizes the critical need to solidify the administrator's knowledge base of the Catholic faith and to apply this knowledge when creating staff development programs to foster Catholic identity. Participants are also reminded that Vatican II urged us to return to our Christian roots as a Church.

In introducing the keynote speaker, the seminar facilitator offers the following commentary:

Who will tell the story of who we are? These next two days together will offer a greater knowledge and a deeper understanding of our historical journey as followers of Christ in the Catholic tradition. Given the awesome challenge and the sacred commission to be the storytellers in our schools, we have been called to tell joyfully the story of who we are. It is a story rich in tradition, powerful in history, and lasting in truth. In order to be that good storyteller, however, we first need to know the story.

The keynote then highlights those events in our Church's history that help the listener understand how we have emerged as a Church in the modern age. Following the keynote, participants discuss the relevance of the presentation through the following questions:

- Are there implications from these messages that affect your leadership?
- How did this information affect your understanding of Church?

Through small and large group interaction, participants analyze the keynote themes and translate their meaning to their own schools. A template designed to facilitate this process highlights the following aspects of school life:

- |                      |                             |
|----------------------|-----------------------------|
| • Mission and Policy | • Community Service         |
| • Governance         | • Parent Involvement        |
| • Finance            | • Student Life              |
| • Staff Development  | • Development and Marketing |
| • Curriculum         | • Administration            |

The primary objective of the activity is to demonstrate how the template can assist principals in helping their staffs establish new practices to enhance the Catholic identity of the school.

Consistent with Year One, the first day concludes with an evening Mass, dinner, and social.

## **DAY TWO**

Prayer Service  
 Distribution of Group Work from Day One  
 Roundtable Discussion  
 Keynote: "We Are Called"  
 Question/Answer Session  
 Summary of the Seminar  
 Evaluation of the Seminar  
 Prayer Service

The second day's theme complements the activities of Day One and focuses on Vatican II Council's call to the Catholic laity to become more involved with Church ministries. The keynote presentation, "We Are Called," reminds participants of this message and discusses how that invitation affects our school communities.

## PROGRAM STATUS

To date, the Consortium has offered this program to school administrators in the Archdioceses of Baltimore and Washington and the Dioceses of Richmond, Wilmington, Arlington, and Springfield (Illinois). For the 1998-99 school year, the program is scheduled to conduct seminars for the Archdiocese of Boston and the Dioceses of Orlando and Lafayette (Indiana). Nine other dioceses are considering this program for their administrators.

With a number of the workshops for the mid-Atlantic (arch)dioceses concluded, there has been an opportunity to solicit feedback from the principals in attendance. Most responses have been supportive, even laudatory. What was particularly gratifying to the Consortium were the commentaries offered by those principals at the beginning of the second year's program when they were asked to reflect on whether the previous year's experience had positively impacted their work. Their response was a resounding "yes." As the development of the program continues, it would be most useful to study the short and long term effects.

## REFERENCES

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