

CATHOLIC SCHOOL LAY PRINCIPALSHIP: THE NEGLECTED MINISTRY IN CHURCH DOCUMENTS ON CATHOLIC EDUCATION— AN AUSTRALIAN PERSPECTIVE

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The decline in religious in Australia in the 35 years since the end of the Second Vatican Council has brought an associated withdrawal of religious from the staffs and governance of Catholic schools. Lay women and men have replaced religious principals, but the principalship has not changed sufficiently to accommodate the new life realities of lay people in that role. This article argues that there has been an emerging recognition in Church documents on Catholic education of Catholic education as a ministry of the laity, but such documents are largely silent about the role, ministry, and vocation of lay principals in Catholic schools. The article calls for a statement from the Congregation for Catholic Education on the leadership of lay principals in Catholic schools which acknowledges the importance of this vital emerging lay ministry within the Church and which recognizes that lay people are shaping anew this administrative role, distinct from the quasi-monastic practice of preceding generations of religious principals.

In the wake of the Second Vatican Council's *Declaration on Christian Education* (Abbott, 1967), the Sacred Congregation for Catholic Education issued two documents entitled *The Catholic School* (1977) and *Lay Catholics in Schools: Witnesses to Faith* (1982). Between 1982 and 1988 the Sacred Congregation for Catholic Education (SCCE) became the Congregation for Catholic Education (CCE). The Congregation also issued two documents: *The Religious Dimension of Education in a Catholic School* (1988) and *The Catholic School on the Threshold of the Third Millennium* (1997). These documents wrestle with the nature and purposes of Catholic schools, the theological and scriptural concepts that underpin them, the

essentially religious nature of true education, the roles of lay women and men as Catholic educators, the hopes and dreams for Catholic education, and the clientele of Catholic schools as the enterprise of Catholic education enters the next millennium.

A recent study by Hansen (1999) has revealed that for the five Queensland dioceses (and possibly throughout all Australian dioceses) the years 1975-1988 represented the period during which the majority of religious congregations of women and men who had previously administered Catholic elementary and high schools withdrew, handing over the governance of the schools to lay administration and staffing (McLay, Druery, Murphy, & Shaw, 1982; Tobin, 1987). Thus, despite the transition from religious to laity in Australian Catholic schools having been almost complete by the time *The Religious Dimension of Education in a Catholic School* was published in 1988, the norm of Catholic school principal in this document was still that of a religious principal. The Congregation for Catholic Education has still not issued any significant statement about this key leadership role in Catholic education, which is now almost exclusively a ministry of the laity. It is both timely and necessary that it do so.

Buetow (1988), writing out of a North American context, identifies several key role demands of Catholic school principalship and, in listing the diverse areas in which principals are expected to have expertise, asserts that "principals are first and foremost the master teachers" (p. 258). In fact, the term *principal*, which has become an accepted designation for the top leadership position in a school, is a shortened form of the expression *principal teacher*.

While the Second Vatican Council's *Declaration on Christian Education* (Abbott, 1967) makes no specific statement about Catholic school principalship, its directives to teachers have similar force in their application to principals as principal or master teachers. In line with the overall personalist principles which characterized the reforms of Vatican II, the importance of the teacher, and by implication that of the principal teacher, in this declaration is spoken of in terms of the personal impact that the teacher can make in the life of the Catholic school. It is the teacher who ultimately determines "whether the Catholic school can bring its goals and undertakings to fruition" (Abbott, 1967, p. 646). The realization of the expectations placed on teachers in Catholic schools becomes the responsibility of the principal teacher in a Catholic school. The document identifies training in secular and religious knowledge, appropriate certification, contemporary educational skills, personal witness to Christ in teaching and lifestyle, partnership with parents, personal development education of students with sensitivity to gender differences, service to the wider community and society, and an understanding of teaching as ministry as characteristics of the teacher and therefore of the principal teacher in a Catholic school (Abbott, 1967). Such expectations repre-

sent an ideal type and are presented as qualities to which those working as teachers and administrators in Catholic schools should aspire.

The Sacred Congregation for Catholic Education's 1977 document *The Catholic School* was the first significant Roman statement on Catholic education to be promulgated after the conclusion of Vatican II. Like Vatican II's *Declaration on Christian Education* of 1965, the 1977 document continued to specify roles and functions of the ideal teacher in a Catholic school. Significant among these were teachers as transmitters through education of the Christian message, exemplars of the integration of culture and faith within their own lives, imitators of Christ, and cooperators with the bishop of the diocese who mandates the school as an "apostolic undertaking" (Sacred Congregation, 1977, #71).

Again, while there is no specific reference to the role of the Catholic school principal teacher, in this document what is said of teachers is also applicable to the principal teacher. There persists in the document an assumption that governance roles in Catholic schools will continue to be the preserve of religious women and men, but it affords emerging recognition to the involvement of lay people in Catholic education as teachers. Evident also is a limited acknowledgement that by 1977 members of religious congregations worldwide were moving out of Catholic schools to other apostolates, and this was cautioned against:

There can be no doubt whatever of the importance of the apostolate of teaching in the total saving mission of the Church (#88)...(and)...The Church herself in particular looks with confidence and trust to religious institutes which have received a special charism of the Holy Spirit and have been most active in the education of the young. May they be faithful to the inspiration of their founders and give their wholehearted support to the apostolic work of education in Catholic schools and not allow themselves to be diverted from this by the attractive invitations to undertake other, often seemingly more effective, apostolates. (Sacred Congregation, 1977, #89)

In April 1975, two years prior to the publication of *The Catholic School*, Queensland Catholic Education commissioned "A Management System Models Study" entitled "Project Catholic 'School,'" which offered a profile of the Catholic school of the future (McLay, Coghlan, Corkeron, & Druery, 1979). "Project Catholic 'School'" did indeed foreshadow the possibility of lay principals in Catholic schools; but on this issue, responses to a questionnaire request to "describe the Catholic school of the future in the worst possible light" (p. 149) are informative. Some respondents indicated that the absence of a significant religious teacher presence, that is, a school with a wholly lay staff and lay principal, would be one of the worst features of a Catholic school of the future (McLay, et al., 1979).

By 1982, 20 years after the opening of Vatican II, the Sacred Congregation for Catholic Education published its second major statement on Catholic education, *Lay Catholics in Schools: Witnesses to Faith*, which focused on the role of the increasing numbers of lay teachers in Catholic schools. One commentator interpreted the document as

an extended reflection on the vocation of the teacher, both in Catholic and public schools. A very positive image of the teacher is presented, with emphasis on the professionalism and spirituality of the teacher. This document makes a significant contribution to the emerging concept of lay ministry. (Kelty, 1994, p. 21)

In this document, the withdrawal of religious from the apostolate of Catholic education was acknowledged as a reality, but expressed as a regret:

The efficacious work that so many different Religious Congregations have traditionally accomplished through teaching activities is greatly esteemed by the Church; and so she can do no less than regret the decline in Religious personnel which has had such a profound effect on Catholic schools, especially in some countries. The Church believes that, for an integral education of children and young people, both Religious and lay Catholics are needed in schools. (Sacred Congregation, 1982, #3)

For the first time in a Roman pronouncement, it is acknowledged in this document that administrative and governance positions in Catholic schools may also become the preserve of lay women and men, for "While the present analysis of the lay Catholic as an educator will concentrate on the role of the teacher, the analysis is applicable to all of the other roles, each according to their own proper activity" (Sacred Congregation, 1982, #15).

Yet, this recognition is equivocal, for later in the document, under the heading, "Entrusting Catholic Schools to the Laity," the following point is made:

To increase the participation of lay Catholic educators is not meant to diminish the importance of those schools directed by Religious Congregations in any way. The unique kind of witness that men and women Religious give in their own teaching centres, whether as individuals or as a community, surely implies that these schools are more necessary than ever in a secularised world. (Sacred Congregation, 1982, #46)

And further, "Lay Catholic educators must be very aware of the real impoverishment that will result if priests and Religious disappear from the Catholic schools, or noticeably decline in number. This is to be avoided as far as is possible" (Sacred Congregation, 1982, #45).

The document seems to imply that lay Catholics in schools exercise their roles by virtue of their association with and by working alongside priests and religious in the school, and not in their own right. While this document, like its predecessors, does not explicitly prescribe the characteristics and role of a Catholic school lay principal, it makes quite explicit an ideal type Catholic school lay educator and how the role is to be represented:

The lay Catholic educator is a person who exercises a specific mission within the Church by living, in faith, a secular vocation in the communitarian structure of the school: with the best possible professional qualifications, with an apostolic intention inspired by faith, for the integral formation of the human person, in a communication of culture, in an exercise of that pedagogy which will give emphasis to direct and personal contact with students, giving spiritual inspiration to the educational community of which he or she is a member, as well as to the different persons related to the educational community. To this lay person, as a member of this community, the family and the Church entrust the school's educational endeavour. Lay teachers must be profoundly convinced that they share in the sanctifying and therefore educational mission of the Church; they cannot regard themselves as cut off from the ecclesial complex. (Sacred Congregation, 1982, #24)

The 1988 document from the Congregation for Catholic Education, *The Religious Dimension of Education in a Catholic School*, reflected the situation globally in the Church when it asserted that "most Catholic schools are under the direction of Religious Congregations" (#35); but that was certainly not the case in Australian Catholic education by the late 1980s. Most Australian Catholic elementary and high schools by 1988 had almost exclusively lay staffs and the majority of them were administered by lay women and men principals (Tobin, 1987). While in the 1988 document the governance of Catholic schools by religious women and men was still regarded as the norm and lay persons in the role of principal the exception, there was nevertheless a significant concession concerning lay administration of Catholic schools: "The Church, therefore, is willing to give lay people charge of schools that it has established, and (have) the laity themselves establish schools" (Congregation, 1988, #38).

This first overt acknowledgement of the possibility for lay persons to become principals of Catholic schools carried the proviso that "the recognition of the school as a Catholic school is, however, always reserved to the competent ecclesiastical authority" (Congregation, 1988, #38). Thus, 22 years after the end of Vatican II, official Church approval was given for lay women and men to assume the role of principal in Catholic schools.

According to Ryan, Brennan, and Willmet (1996), the document *The Religious Dimension of Education in a Catholic School*

affirms that what makes the Catholic school distinctive is its religious dimension which is found in the educational climate, the personal development of each student, the relationship established between culture and the gospel, and the illumination of all knowledge with the light of faith. (p. iv)

Kelty's (1994) positive appraisal of this document regards it as being "more enlightened than current practice" in contemporary Catholic schools:

After a remarkably realistic discussion on the nature of youth, the document moves into a detailed discussion of school culture in an attempt to locate the religious dimension of education within the life of the school rather than impose it from without. This is followed by a carefully nuanced discussion of the nature of religious education, in which the role of knowledge is related to religious formation. Religious freedom and personal conscience have a high profile in this document.... The document concludes with a discussion of school goals in relation to the personal development of the student. Religious growth is brought to bear on the discussion, which sees the religious as a dimension of the educational process. (pp. 20-21)

While interpreting what qualities are deemed necessary in lay teachers in Catholic schools, none of the three Congregation documents (1977, 1982, 1988) recognizes that the realities of lay peoples' lives differ markedly from the life realities of religious women and men. For example, there is no acknowledgement made of the importance in lay peoples' lives of family, career, security of tenure, superannuation, academic qualifications, industrial awards and the like, all of which are key issues for lay principals (Hansen, 1999) as well as for lay teachers in contemporary Catholic schools.

The fourth and latest document on Catholic education, *The Catholic School on the Threshold of the Third Millennium* (1997) offers all who are involved in Catholic schooling "a word of encouragement and hope" (Congregation, #4). While it is brief, outward looking, optimistic, and realistic in many of its observations (McLaughlin, 1998), it is nevertheless still predicated upon what can only be described as nonsense in relation to Australian Catholic education, that is, "that the presence of consecrated Religious within the educating community is indispensable" (Congregation, 1997, #13). The transition from religious to lay administration and staffing of Catholic schools, especially Catholic elementary schools, on the threshold of the third millennium is all but complete; yet the document makes only passing reference to the presence of lay teachers in Catholic schools and none at all to the reality of lay principals administering Catholic schools. While this document is reassuring for those in Catholic schools who see their work as a form of pastoral ministry, who work to build a sense of Christian community within the school, and who enhance and promote the school's evangelizing role, there is little new in it that specifically recognizes and validates the

essentially lay enterprise that Catholic schooling has become. However, for McLaughlin (1997)

In contemporary Australia, for most Catholics, the Catholic school, more than any other Church instrumentality, plays a significant contribution of witnessing to and being the catalyst for the promotion of the Reign of God. For the most part this is being experienced by lay men and women "ministering" to other lay people, an occurrence reminiscent of the New Testament church. (p. 34)

Catholic school principalship generally, and lay principalship in particular, in the Vatican II document on Christian education (Abbott, 1967) and in the four subsequent documents issuing from the Congregation for Catholic Education (1977, 1982, 1988, 1997) is an aspect of Catholic schooling that goes almost entirely unrecognized. Where it is alluded to, it is represented only obliquely amidst a plethora of spiritual and theological jargon. The documents' representation of principalship, where referred to in passing, implies a monastic model of Catholic school principalship. By this is meant that Catholic school principalship was assumed to be the role of a religious sister or brother, who ran the school somewhat akin to the way the monastery or convent functioned. This in turn operated not unlike the way the Church itself was run, with an individual at its head controlling a hierarchically structured organization using a top-down approach. It is the legacy of this shape of Catholic school principalship, shaped as it was by the religious, which does not accommodate the new life realities of its contemporary lay incumbents.

In 1982, the year that the Sacred Congregation for Catholic Education published *Lay Catholics in Schools: Witnesses to Faith*, Queensland Catholic Education published *A Tree by the Waterside* (McLay, et al., 1982). This publication was intended to complement earlier research on issues of "the identity of the Catholic school and the ministry of the Catholic teacher," (p. vii). These issues had emerged both in "Project Catholic 'School'" and at the Second National Catholic Education Conference held in Canberra in May 1980. *A Tree by the Waterside* was intended as a practical guide for building community in Catholic education. This publication acknowledged that a contemporary Catholic school would have a staff that was predominantly lay and often a lay principal as well (McLay, et al., 1982). This prediction was made despite the earlier fear expressed in one part of "Project Catholic 'School'" that such a reality would represent a negative feature of any Catholic school of the future.

In the 20 years between 1975 and 1995, diocesan Catholic Education Offices wrestled with the task of defining the role, duties, necessary qualifications, induction processes, contractual arrangements, and appraisal

processes pertaining to the appointment of lay people as principals in Catholic schools.

In summary, an ideal Catholic school principal was represented as an exemplar and facilitator of faith and love, living a commitment to the Catholic Church through leadership of the Catholic school, which is part of the community of the People of God, the incarnation of Christ in our time. The principal was to have Christ as model and through prayer, reflection, and a deepening of personal spirituality strive to imitate Christ's love, care, and concern for others. As well, the principal had to possess professional competence, charisma to lead and inspire people, and an ability to transmit faith and the Christian message to set the school's tone, establish its patterns of discipline, and inspire its vision. In terms of educational leadership, the Catholic school principal had to be an experienced educator capable of initiating, supporting, motivating, encouraging, and supervising to ensure the educational excellence of the school. As an administrator, the principal had to continually develop communication, organization, delegation, policy formulation, evaluation, and shared decision-making skills.

Further, there was an added expectation, stated thus in one archdiocese's *CEO Policy and Practice* manual: "The principal seeks out ways, in consultation with the local priests, of leading people (parents and pupils) to be more actively involved in their parishes" (Brisbane Catholic Education, 1984, p. 3). Here was a function of principalship that was clearly more ecclesial, evangelizing, and pastoral than educational and which in earlier times would have been assumed to have fallen naturally to religious sister and brother principals of Catholic schools who resided in convents and monasteries adjoining Church, school, and presbytery within the one parish complex. In contemporary Catholic schools where the parish is no longer the hub of a close-knit Catholic subcultural grouping as in the past (Ryan, et al., 1996), this ecclesial requirement of the role would seem to signal some interesting expectations attaching to the role of contemporary Catholic school lay principals.

In diocesan policy documents pertaining to the appointment of lay principals in the mid-1980s, distinctions are made between "Principals by Appointment" and "Principals by Application" (Brisbane, 1984). The former referred to the appointment of religious principals by the major religious superior of the order or congregation, with minimal, if any, consultation with the systemic or parish authorities. Principals by application, on the other hand, clearly referred to lay principal appointments and appeared to be a far more stringent process. This distinction raises obvious questions of equity and it seems that as late as the mid-1980s the religious model of Catholic school principalship was still dominant, with the appointment of a religious as principal being processed in a preferential manner, markedly different from that used to appoint a lay applicant as principal of a Catholic school.

Of significance as well was the distinction made between personal and professional qualities required for Catholic school principalship. In the past, religious by virtue alone of being religious and the lifestyle and values which they stood for and modeled were regarded as being professionally adequate to lead a Catholic school community. By comparison, a lay person being considered for the position of principal of a contemporary Catholic school was required to possess or be in the process of possessing at the time of appointment:

- registration or eligibility for registration with a Board of Teacher Education
- academic qualifications in education at the masters level
- recent teaching or administration experience in schools
- leadership in curriculum development
- promotion and encouragement skills in a variety of teaching techniques and strategies
- creativity, initiative, and planning expertise
- ability to recognize learning difficulties accurately and to adjust programs and methods to benefit individual pupils, including the gifted
- ability to organize and promote professional development of self and members of the school community

The list of expectations for Catholic school principalship notwithstanding, by far the majority of criteria demanded for the appointment of a lay person to principalship of a Catholic school in the early 1990s were still more ecclesial and spiritual in nature than educational (Anderson, 1980; Chambers, 1978; Cook, 1989; Doherty, 1988; Drahmman, 1980; Hater, 1979; Himes, 1988; Kearney, 1984; Mueller, 1986; Parker, 1993; Pistone, 1990).

The emphasis was clearly on qualifications and experience in the spiritual domain rather than educational concerns, undoubtedly because of the concerns which surfaced in "Project Catholic 'School'" (McLay et al., 1979). Concern that the Catholicity of Catholic schools be ensured and maintained intensified with the increasing rate of withdrawal of religious from Catholic schools in the period 1971-1985.

Throughout the 1990s, Diocesan Education Offices throughout Australia expanded the components of the role of Catholic school principal and represented it with greater sophistication. By the mid-1990s, local diocesan documentation on the role of Catholic school principal at last evidences a presumption of lay rather than religious applicants for the position of Catholic school elementary principal, with one document asserting that

The criteria reflect the need for those aspirants (to positions of senior management in Catholic schools) to bring a balance of knowledge and experience gained in a variety of ways in a range of situations to these positions....

Changes which have been made reflect the fact that aspirants to senior management positions now bring different knowledge, qualifications, and experience. (Brisbane Catholic Education, 1995, p. 2)

In summary, a review of Church and diocesan literature on Catholic school principalship from 1965 to 1995 represents the role up to 1988 as pre-eminently the preserve of religious sisters, brothers, and priests. The 1988 Congregation document *The Religious Dimension of Education in a Catholic School* conditionally conceded the role of principal and the task of establishing Catholic schools to lay people, though little was specified about how the role needed to change to accommodate lay people in it. Change in the universal Catholic Church occurs slowly; and in a number of the national and local Churches, such as at grassroots Catholicism in Australia, the transition from religious to lay staffing and governance of Catholic schools had begun within six years of the close of the Second Vatican Council. It was almost complete by 1985, three years before Rome formally acknowledged that it was occurring. Once lay staff and administrators of Catholic schools became the norm, the emerging documentation of the 1980s and 1990s on Catholic school lay principalship emphasizes the ecclesial, spiritual, and pastoral dimensions of the role, with educational concerns relegated to significant but lesser importance. This trend would seem to have emerged in response to concerns about retaining the Catholicity of Catholic schools which previously, by the very presence of religious women and men in them, would rightly or wrongly have been assumed. It is only in the most recent local diocesan publications that other dimensions and components of the role of Catholic school lay principal are specified and developed.

The lay principal's leadership of a contemporary Catholic school is now such a key one in a changing Catholicism that it demands recognition and promotion. While much is being done at the diocesan level to further define, explore, and reshape the role, much is yet to be done (Hansen, 1999); and an unequivocal statement on this important ministry within the Church from the Congregation for Catholic Education would be timely. It must be disheartening for contemporary Catholic school lay principals, when encouraged by their employing authorities to become familiar with the content of these key documents to better inform their teaching and administrative practice in Catholic schools, to find their own leadership roles largely invisible in these seminal documents on Catholic education.

At the start of a new millennium, a statement on lay principals in Catholic schools would be welcome recognition of a role that has until now been largely neglected or only reluctantly acknowledged as a vital and essentially lay ministry within the Church.

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