

**Domenic Xuereb**

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**A seminar presentation in Pastoral Theology on:**

**The transmission of religious charism within the leadership of Catholic schools.**

## **Introduction**

In a sense the challenges associated with the transmission of religious charisms we are seeing now is not new when we look back on history. The passing on of a personal charism was what Jesus did to his disciples. It took time to come to a clear understanding of what his mission meant and a period of uncertainty led to some division and dispute within the communities. This pattern is being revisited today with the decline of religious leadership in schools.

While the notion of a charism is difficult to quantify, for the purpose of this study I am using the term *charism* to mean gifts in the service of church and humanity, a way of being in the world. More specifically, it refers to the service of lay administration of Catholic schools.

## **Witnessing to Christian values by Religious and lay educators**

In Australia we are seeing an increase in the number of Catholic schools that have moved to lay leadership after the withdrawal of religious congregations

from the administrative role.<sup>1</sup> The considered transmission of the founding charism of these schools, I believe, is crucial to helping uniquely identify these schools in their vital role of forming well-rounded young Christians.

Archbishop Bede Polding articulated well the function of Catholic schools when he urged that religion is fundamental to learning if it is to be considered learning.<sup>2</sup>

The basic role of the Catholic school is the same as that of the church – to make Jesus known in word and by our witness so that the “already and not yet” of the reign of God is a reality for the world to see, ie to assist in bringing about the Kingdom of God.<sup>3</sup> Teachers, as educators, and specifically Catholic educators, are engaged in God’s work of education. The principal of a school is the person who best enables this to take shape. S/he puts into place structures to be followed in order to ensure is a real witnessing within the school of the Reign of God. While this finds particular expression through the REC and the RE department, it is still the responsibility of the whole school staff to transmitted it to the students in their care.

One of the features that students look for in their staff is authentic witnessing of their Catholic faith. While this is not exclusively the domain of the religious in schools, these provide tangible expressions to wholehearted prayerful commitment. As the numbers of religious staff decline in schools, this

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<sup>1</sup> Some religious congregations commonly known in Australia and founded in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries include: the Presentation Sisters, Mercy Sisters, Charity Sisters, Holy Faith Sisters, Marist Sisters, Good Samaritan Sisters, Sisters of St Joseph, Loreto Sisters, Brigidine Sisters, Good Shepherd Sisters, Christian Brothers, Patrician Brothers and Marist Brothers (de la Salle Brothers were founded in France in 1680).

<sup>2</sup> The educational process in Catholic schools is best summed up in the words of Archbishop Bede Polding in his talk of 1862:

“Catholics do not believe that the education of a child is like a thing of mechanism that can be put together it by bit, now a morsel of instruction in secular learning – separate parcels. We hold that subject taught, the teacher, and his (her) faith, the role and practice of the school day, all combine to produce results which we Catholics consider to be education... ” (Notes given in class, 13-7, from P O’Farrell, *The Catholic Church Community in History*, 149).

<sup>3</sup> Denis Edwards, “Correcting the Balance: The Holy Spirit and the Church”, *Australian Catholic Record*, 262

witnessing to the faith life of the community has been transferred through the leadership within the school community. As indicated in their role description, principals are spiritual persons who are willing to imbibe the charism of the particular congregation that have run the school and have a genuine desire to see it continue. Along with their administrative responsibilities, principals are also to provide pastoral care as well as direction and vision. This vision is best accomplished through the lens of the culture of religious tradition that has been the founding principle in the school. They continue this as they value the continuation of that tradition. They see it as making a genuine difference to the quality of students that are formed within that tradition or charism. It gives a quantitative and qualitative depth to the education of their students.

All religious congregations share in the mission of Jesus and that of the church in making God known and visible in the world. As such, each has its own distinctive way of “being in the world”. These distinctive features are derived from a variety of sources which include:

- The vision and spirit of the founder and the founding members;
- The social and cultural context of the foundation;
- The embodiment of the founding spirit in the lives of the early members and the institutions they established.

Thus there emerged educational traditions like:

- The Franciscan way
- The Jesuit way
- The Dominican way
- The Mercy (Catherine McCauley) way
- The Presentation (Nagle) way
- The Loreto way
- The Josephite (McKillop) way
- The Ursuline (Angela Merici) way

- The Le Salle way
- The Marist (Chamagne) way
- The Edmund Rice (Christian Brothers) way
- The Partician way.

Each way is underpinned by its own brand of charism or spirituality. Charism, like culture, is not static. It is constantly changing, constantly seeking to bring the founding vision alive in contemporary circumstances. And this is precisely the challenge we are facing regarding our schools today, this transmission of charism as the number of young people choosing to participate in religious life diminishes.

This challenge is met in part by lay people who are bringing fresh vision to the expression of Religious charisms in Australian society and to the church. This is especially true of principals who are setting up new schools and have to establish a tradition within it. In this way, the school communities can become authentic and life giving. Alternately, some religious see this as a call to change our understanding or model of religious life, such as the adoption of ‘temporary vows’ where people commit themselves to community for say 1 to 5 years.

Then there is the understanding by some others that the ministry that some religious were called into being for, that of educating the young, has now become the responsibility of the state (or CEO) and hence they can now ‘fold’ as their job has been completed. They argue that the lack of vocations is the Holy Spirit’s way of saying this. True, but perhaps a more creative way of interpreting this would be to reassess and redirect their ministry towards a social need that is now more pressing and demanding of their readiness to serve God.

## **Where to now?**

How we respond to this challenge in practical terms involves planning, choosing practices and outcomes that are clear and accountable, and this is outside the scope of this essay. Invariably this would entail an experience of dying, of mourning for a familiar way of being, a letting go of a life-time of distinctive and dedicated service. A similar challenge is also facing the clerical model of the Church as it too is challenged by a decline in vocations to the priesthood. Possibly the Holy Spirit is telling us all to reevaluate the model of priesthood and church that can best nurture the modern technical world.

## **Conclusion**

The transmission of the culture of the particular charism, or way of being in the world, is a charism which belongs to the Church and not exclusively to the order. If lack of numbers ‘within the ranks’ prevents this transmission from happening, then this mission can safely be passed on to a new lay administration which can continue to promote the work and mission of the founding Congregation. If the hand of the Spirit is in this, surely the same Spirit will continue to ensure that enough committed and dedicated lay people will continue this work. This will in part depend on the kind of religious education these students and future leaders have received, and also on the support and guidance the remaining Religious can offer to the new generation of schools that will emerge. Keeping in mind the truth that cultural transmission, like education, is caught not taught<sup>4</sup>, will help us develop the school communities into places of true learning, founded on the work of the Religious Congregations. Like their mentors, they too can become a witness to the life of Christ within the believing community.

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<sup>4</sup> Michael Green, “A Future for Charisms in Education: Marist Schools as a Case Study” in *Quality Catholic Schools: Challenges for Leadership as Catholic Education Approaches the Third Millennium* edited by Ross Keane and Dan Riley (Brisbane: Rapid Offset, 1997), 105.

## References

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