



Leadership of a Faith Community

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This paper was the keynote presentation at the Induction Day for new school principals conducted by the Catholic Education Office Melbourne in March 2009.

I have been asked to speak to you today about the role of Leadership in and of a faith community. I am presuming, given that the whole day is meant to be an induction for principals, that you want me to focus particularly on the specific nature of the community you will be asked to lead – that is a faith community – and tease out some of the implications of such a role: the ways, perhaps, in which it might differ from a leadership role in communities which are not faith-based.

My focus then is not on the skills of leadership – management skills, conflict resolution skills, and so forth – but rather on the specific nature of leadership in a faith community. I would like to do this in two stages: first, by looking at the nature of the Catholic school and what this implies for the task of leadership, and secondly by considering that precise nature of Christian leadership.

Let me begin, though, by acknowledging that ‘faith community’ as a phrase probably doesn’t really express the issue all that clearly. After all, you are not being asked to take up a leadership role in a Buddhist community or an Islamic community. You are being asked to take up a leadership role in a Christian community. And even more, you are asked to lead a community which is, and is meant to be, firmly grounded in and expressive of the Catholic tradition of Christianity.

That the community you lead is a Christian community already will ask certain specific things from you. That it is, within that Christian context, a Catholic community will ask further things of you.

I think it is important to say, in this context, that the Christian and Catholic nature of the community you lead, and therefore of your task of leadership, does not depend, in the end, on the percentage of Catholics among the student body or among the staff, although the capacity to be a Catholic school will be directly affected by such factors. Nor does it depend on the Christian and Catholic quality of the lives of the people who make up the school community, although this too is a crucial factor. If you should find yourself leading a Catholic school which has a high proportion of students who aren’t Catholic, you would still be the leader of a Catholic school, an institution which is deeply and profoundly inserted into the work of the local Church. The same is true if you find that a number of your staff are not Catholic, or if you find that the commitment of the majority of your staff, or your students or your families, can only be described as nominal at best. None of these situations could be described as ideal: after all, the Church’s intention in establishing and maintaining schools is that they provide a way for educating our Catholic students in the faith and in a faith community, and this will be achieved only to the extent to which we are able to create a richly Catholic environment in our schools. However, we don’t live in an ideal world. In the end, as a principal in a Catholic school, you lead a community which is rightly called ‘Catholic’ simply because the school has been founded by and is supported by the Church.

The Church of course supports lots of initiatives. It supports parishes, hospitals, refuges, overseas missions, and so on. Each of these activities has its own particular purpose. If we were to take hospitals, for example, we would expect that a Catholic hospital provides the very best in medical care. That it is Catholic should never be and hopefully would never be used as an excuse for offering a second-rate medical care. That a primary function of a Catholic hospital is to care for the spiritual wellbeing of its patients at what is often a very vulnerable time in their lives has never meant that a focus on the spiritual should lead to a down-playing of the physical, or psychological, or social dimension of a person’s wellbeing. After all, hospitals exist to offer medical care.



The same is obviously true of schools. They exist in order to offer the very best education possible. A school that can boast of a wonderful Religious Education program, and dynamic liturgies, and a great relationship with the parish priest, but which is consistently falling behind other schools of a similar type in terms of literacy, or numeracy or other key educational goals is quite simply not a good school, and therefore not a good Catholic school. As principals, as educational leaders, your task is to create a situation within your school community which allows that school to be the best educational institution it can possibly be.

In terms of a Catholic school, however, and this is where the difference lies between Catholic school and other schools, the opposite is also true. A school that can boast of the best and most advanced resources, a highly professional staff, excellent testing results, low class sizes, and so on and so on, but which does not have an innovative, engaging and comprehensive Religious Education program, a well-developed sacramental program, a regular experience of liturgy and prayer, and a good relationship with the local parish and clergy, is quite simply not a good Catholic school.

In saying all of this I think the point I want to make is this: the educational nature of the Catholic school, and the religious nature of the Catholic school, are not two distinct elements which in the best of all worlds co-exist happily together and in the worst of all worlds are in competition with each other for time, resources and commitment on behalf of the principal and the staff. Rather, in the Catholic vision of things, the religious dimension is simply an essential and pervasive element of the educational mission of the school.

This is a very important point and I would like to spell it out a little further.

We often speak about what it is that makes a school Catholic in certain specific terms. We point, for example, to the pastoral care programs we offer, which are aimed at educating the whole person and helping young people deal with all kinds of issues and challenges in their lives. But what school, Catholic or otherwise, would not consciously be trying to do this? I would imagine that the government school down the road from your own school would be greatly offended if it were suggested that they did not care about, and were not trying to respond to, precisely these realities in the lives of their students.

More specifically we might say that our school is based on gospel values or on the teachings of Christ. But when we are asked to explain what this means we say that we value such things as respect for others, generosity, tolerance, commitment to the community, and so forth. What school, Catholic or otherwise, does not value such things. Again, the teachers at the school down the road would be rightly indignant if we were to suggest that their school was value-free.

I think therefore that we can take it as a given that every decent teacher in every decent school is committed to the welfare of the children under their care, and that they are all striving to educate the whole person, and prepare each child, as far as possible, to build a happy and successful life for themselves, to contribute to the wellbeing of our society, and, to put it quite simply, be happy.

The thing that makes a Catholic school different is the fundamental conviction that what I would call the 'God-dimension' of our lives is so basic to our ability to build a happy and successful life that an education which fails to have the God dimension woven into the whole educational experience is an education which can only ever be incomplete and which in fact sells our students short. I would then want to spell this out by saying that in our Christian faith the God dimension is inseparable from the person of Christ and Christ is inseparable from the Church, and an active life within the Church. Unfortunately we don't have time for me to develop the theological underpinnings which lead me to make this claim, but it is important for all of us who exercise leadership within the Church, and that is of course exactly what the role of principal in a Catholic school is all about, to understand that this is the foundational principle on which our Catholic school system is built. Only a relationship with God can enable a person to make sense of life and live it fully; only a relationship with Christ can lead us into the richness of a relationship with God; and only life within the Church can enable us to establish



and deepen our relationship with Christ. If this three-fold principle doesn't hold, then the rationale for our Catholic school system quickly begins to unravel.

All of this means that the principal of a Catholic school is asked to see and embrace this fundamental and foundational principle and, within the reality of his or her own school setting, make sure, in all the ways that his or her creativity can conjure up, that this principle informs everything that happens in the school. And let me repeat: this is not an added task alongside all the other things with which a principal must concern him or herself. This is the fundamental mind-set which must underpin and permeate every dimension of the principal's role.

Let me turn now to the second task I have set myself today.

In a way it is so obvious that it hardly needs saying, but I will say it anyway. The exercise of leadership in a Christian community, and therefore in a Catholic school, must be modelled on the example of Jesus. We do, after all, in following the lead of the Gospels, call him 'Master' and 'Teacher' and 'Lord'.

You may have done a great deal of work on various 'leadership styles'. One article I read recently analysed leadership styles under the following headings: authoritative, coercive, associative, democratic, pace-setting and coaching. We might add another to the list, although it is one which usually doesn't appear in scholarly articles on the subject. We could add what we might term, in order to make it sound suitably scholarly and impressive, the Christological style. What this means of course is the style of leadership exercised by Christ.

In the article to which I just referred, each style was explained by means of case studies. The style was able to be understood through examples of people acting according to that style. This is a good approach, so let me do the same.

In the gospel tradition, pretty well every story about Jesus is a story about leadership because he is presented in the Gospels as the leader of his disciples. As I said a moment ago he is presented as Master, as Lord and as Teacher. Indeed, in one of the gospel stories we find him telling his disciples:

You must not allow yourselves to be called Rabbi because you have only one Master and you are all brothers and sisters: you must call no one on earth your father because you have only one Father and he is in heaven. Nor must you allow yourselves to be called teachers, because you have only one Teacher, the Christ (Mark 23: 8–10) (NRSV).

We do continue to call people 'father', of course, and we do continue to call ourselves teachers. The point that Jesus is making, especially as regards teachers, is that if we have this role within the Christian community, and you as principals certainly do, then we have it in what I would call a sacramental sense. That is, it is Christ's teaching role which he shares with us. Within the Christian community of the school we represent Christ; we make him present. This may sound like an extraordinary claim, but it is precisely what we believe about the Church. It is the fundamental vocation of the Church to be the living and effective sign of the ongoing presence of Christ in the world. And therefore, within the community of the Church, anyone who exercises leadership in an official way, as you do, has the vocation, from Christ, to be the living and effective sign of his presence as leader of his community, head of his body. He expresses his leadership of the particular community which is the school in a very special way through you as the principal. It is not exhausted in you of course. The parish priest or the clergy generally also represent this leadership of Christ in a particularly eloquent and significant way, and individual classroom teachers exercise it within the context of their own classrooms. But you, as principal, have a very particular and significant role in this mission of the Church to make Christ present in our world.

What does this mean in practice? Well, let me offer you two 'case-studies' to illustrate the point. They both come from the gospel traditions about the Last Supper.



At the heart of the Last Supper of course is the institution of the Eucharist. Luke's Gospel tells it this way:

Then he took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to them, saying, 'This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me.'

And he did the same with the cup after supper, saying, 'This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood' (Luke 22: 19–20) (NRSV).

We are very used to this story. We hear it repeated every time we celebrate the Eucharist. Our Catholic tradition has helped us, and rightly so, to focus on the reality of this mystery: that the bread and wine become the body and blood of the Lord, and that when we therefore receive Communion we are actually being drawn into an incredibly intimate communion with Christ and therefore with everyone else who is also in communion with him. Our Catholic tradition has also focused our attention on the words 'Do this in memory of me', and helped us to see that in this command Jesus established the sacrament of the Eucharist and also the sacrament of Holy Orders, so that the successors of the apostles, the bishops and priests, will continue to 'do this in memory of me'.

In more recent times, our study of the Scriptures has also helped us to see that this command of Christ goes beyond the instruction to the apostles to continue the celebration of the Eucharist. It is also an instruction to them, to their successors, and to the whole Church, to 'remember' Jesus. In the Jewish tradition this means to make a past event real and active in the present, by doing with our lives what he did with his: that is, to make of our lives a total gift, even to the point of death if necessary, for the sake of others, so that others might have life. Jesus gives expression to the reality that he is the Lord of the Church, the Master of his disciples, the leader of his community, by giving his life away for their sake. He asks his disciples to do the same, and therefore, in a particular way, asks those who would exercise leadership in his name to do the same.

We find an echo of this in the passage in Matthew's Gospel, in which Jesus instructs his disciples precisely about what leadership among them must mean:

But Jesus called them to him and said, 'You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. It will not be so among you; but whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be your slave; just as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many' (Matthew 20: 25–28) (NRSV).

The leader must be the servant, the master must be the slave, the school principal in a Catholic school must be the one who is prepared to give everything for the sake of those he or she is called to lead.

The second story, the second case-study I want to offer you, also comes from the account of the Last Supper, but this time from John's Gospel. It is the story of the washing of the feet:

Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going to God, got up from the table, took off his outer robe, and tied a towel around himself. Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel that was tied around him.

He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, 'Lord, are you going to wash my feet?' Jesus answered, 'You do not know now what I am doing, but later you will understand.' Peter said to him, 'You will never wash my feet.' Jesus answered, 'Unless I wash you, you have no share with me.' Simon Peter said to him, 'Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head!' Jesus said to him, 'One who has bathed does not need to wash, except for the feet, but is entirely clean. And you are clean, though not all of you.' For he knew who was to betray him; for this reason he said, 'Not all of you are clean.'



After he had washed their feet, had put on his robe, and had returned to the table, he said to them, 'Do you know what I have done to you? You call me Teacher and Lord – and you are right, for that is what I am. So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you. Very truly, I tell you, servants are not greater than their master, nor are messengers greater than the one who sent them. If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them' (John 13: 3–17) (NRSV).

The foot-washing is another example of something that happens regularly throughout the Gospels: Jesus turns accepted practice and accepted wisdom upside down. It is a good reminder to us to be very wary of basing our attitudes and our practice on the accepted wisdom of our day – even the accepted principles of how school leadership is to be exercised. The accepted wisdom may have very little to do with the wisdom of the Gospels.

We could spend a long time analysing this story, and it would be richly rewarding for you as principals to do so. In the little time we have, however, let me simply make these points:

Firstly, Jesus performs a service for his disciples which, in the context of his time, is humiliating and de-basing. It is the service of a slave in a world where slaves counted for nothing. We probably can't imagine the amazement and even repugnance of the disciples when they see Jesus getting down on his hands and knees in front of them, although Peter's reaction gives us some kind of clue as to their horror at what they are witnessing. To put it mildly, Jesus does not stand on his rightful dignity as the Master of his disciples. Indeed he says as much when he speaks to the disciples after he has washed their feet.

This then is the second point I would make. Jesus says explicitly to those who will be the leaders of his community once he has returned to his Father: 'If I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you.'

It is important to see here that Jesus is not just telling his disciples that, as leaders of the community of disciples, they must be at the service of the community. He is telling them that the kind of service they are called to offer is one in which their own dignity, their own honour, their sense of their own importance, their presumed right to be treated with respect, must all give way to the fundamental task of being the servant of the community.

If you put the two stories, the two case-studies, together, you end up with this: Christian leadership, modelled on the example of Jesus, will be characterised by humble and self-effacing service, and by a willingness to break our bodies and spill our blood, to give everything, in other words, even to the point of a total giving of ourselves, so that those we serve might have the fullness of life.

Let me conclude by suggesting that, as school principals, as leaders within your Christian communities, you might take either or both of these stories as icons of your vocation.

Sieger Köder, a German priest and artist, has produced some very evocative images of the gospel stories, including the two scenes from the Last Supper that we have been discussing. In both cases, we find ourselves looking at the scene over Jesus' shoulder. This means that we do not see him face to face. But we do in fact see his face because it is reflected in the wine in the chalice in the scene of the Institution of the Eucharist, and it is also reflected in the bowl of water which he is using to wash his disciples' feet. As I look at these beautiful works of art they say to me, among other things, that people will see the face of Jesus when his Church embodies in its own life his giving of himself in the Eucharist and his giving of himself in his humble service of others. As you set out on the journey of your life as principals in the Catholic education system, I can only hope and encourage you to see in Jesus the model for your own ministry.