

ADDRESS TO PRIMARY PRINCIPALS - MARCH 2001

Leadership as Ministry

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- (1) In what sense is your leadership a ministry?

The Church's **mission** is to make Christ's gospel present in every aspect of people's lives, and in that way to transform the whole of life.

Ministries are for the purpose of helping the Church to be that kind of community – a living testimony to the difference Christ makes to people's lives.

The Catholic school is part of this community.

- (2) Those who exercise leadership in the Christian community, including the Catholic schools, are meant to embody what the community stands for. People need to see in their leaders what they themselves are called to be. This is how they can know that what they are called to be really is worthwhile, and really is possible.

- (3) It doesn't mean that we, as leaders, have to be finished products who deal with others only out of our strengths; just the opposite: a sense of our own human frailty is precisely what God seems to make best use of. After all, the community we are building is a community where we can all belong because we all need forgiveness.

- (4) This is similar to the way catechesis *names* what is first *embodied* in the ethos of the school:

It is not catechesis alone that makes the school Catholic; on the contrary, a Catholic school makes catechesis possible... The task of catechesis is to put into the words the totality of values present in the school. (Dutch Bishops).

- (5) Another way of saying this is the way Pope Paul VI said it:

Today people listen more willingly to witnesses than to teachers, and if they listen to teachers, it is because they are witnesses. (Letter on Evangelisation, n.41)

- (6) In other words, what you think of Christ, how much he means to you, whether he comes first in your life or is just one among others, shows up in the quality of your leadership, - both for better and for worse:

- (7) Since the teaching mission is not conceived merely as a handing on of knowledge, but as a living witness to fundamental values, the teacher must realise that his/her private life may have an impact on his/her teaching relationship with the young. Insofar as the teacher's situation proves to be in flagrant and declared contradiction with the community's fundamental Christian values, this situation becomes **incompatible** with the exercise of the teaching role within that community. (Belgium Bishops, 1975).

- (8) Your personal relationship with the person of Christ brings about an affinity with him; a certain like-mindedness. That in turn will impact on your students and your staff, somewhat as Jesus himself impacted on the people who got close to him. What they

discovered above all with a sense of deep assurance and wonder and gratitude was that they *mattered to God*. When you matter to God, you *matter*. Realising that you really do matter, is a transforming experience.

- (9) Might we say that the highest goal of Catholic education is to enable children to know that they really do matter - forever. After all, what's the point of an education that teaches them the skills of living if they aren't really sure that living itself is worthwhile? In fact, what you do to equip the children for their domestic, social and economic lives is itself enhanced by their realisation that it's all worthwhile. Your contribution to their worthwhileness doesn't even stop there: as they drink in the meaning of Christian faith they will realise that life is worthwhile even in spite of the things that can happen on a Good Friday. The resulting sense of worthwhileness will permeate every other dimension of their learning experience.
- (10) Obviously, the Catholic character entrusted to you as leaders opens up huge scope for yourselves as people dedicated to the formation of others. You have so much to offer that you couldn't even speak about if you were prevented by the secular clause of the Education Act from speaking about the person who makes all this difference.
- (11) A purely secular education, by expressly excluding the spiritual dimension of reality, excludes the ultimate safeguard against reducing persons to merely market values. (Anglican & Catholic Bishops of NZ, 1992)
- (12) You, too, teach the skills of living – social skills, economic, industrial, technological artistic skills – but you are not limited to these.
- (13) You are not limited to forming people as they are desired by the existing social and economic order, i.e. made in the image of society as it is. What they can learn from you, in as much as you personally embody the Catholic character, will form them as people who can contribute to making a better society.
- (14) The method of education still in use today encourages a narrow individualism... (Schools tend to) allow the formation only of the person desired by the existing social and economic order, i.e. persons made in its image, not new persons, but a copy of persons as they are.

...education demands a renewal of heart, a renewal based on the recognition of sin, both in its individual and its social manifestations. It will inculcate a truly and entirely human way of life in justice, love and simplicity. It will likewise awaken a critical sense, which will lead us to reflect on the society in which we live and on its values; it will make us ready to renounce those values when they cease to promote justice for all. (Bishops' Synod, Rome, 1971)
- (15) These words of the Bishops' Synod point to a connection between what the gospel does and what education does if its purpose is to make our lives more truly human. "Faith", properly understood, is not an add-on to our "real" life. In fact, our openness to God is at the heart of real life. We are not already complete before our relationship with God is included. Our openness to God is what *makes us truly human*.
- (16) Today, more than ever, everyone needs to know what it means to be a human being, a person. Every other question depends on it: all the new questions arising from biotechnology eventually come back to the question: what does it mean to be a human being? Or is *human* whatever we make it? All the social/economic questions also

come back to what it means to be a human being, unless people's social and economic usefulness is all there is! All the questions about freedom, choice, truth, responsibility, personal rights, right and wrong, come back to what it means to be a human being – or are these just whatever the individual thinks, or the majority on the day thinks?

- (17) People won't learn the answer to that fundamental question from their horoscopes, or from TV ads, or from the Treasury, or from the human sciences which merely report on what people are already like.
- (18) In the Judeo-Christian tradition we find the answer to our question by discerning what God is doing in the unfolding of human history, because what God is doing there reveals *what we mean to God*, and what we mean to God is what we most need to know about ourselves.
- (19) As members of the Catholic community and leaders in Catholic schools you have privileged access to the very source from which we can learn what it means to be a human person.
- (20) Your distinctive service to education is a service to *all* people and the whole of society, not just to Catholics.
- (21) Obviously, you are not in your present roles just to duplicate what can be done perfectly well in State schools. If State schools, whom we recognise as our partners, themselves emulate your privileged opportunities, they can go as far as teaching children to love one another; perhaps they might even dare to teach children to love God. But Christian faith is not first of all about our love for God, it's about *God's love for us* – embodied in the life of Christ. Only your Christian faith, and your freedom from the secular clause, can tell the children the most important thing they'll ever know. And your personal relationship with Christ will determine how well you do it.
- (22) That, I suggest, is how you embody what the Catholic school stands for; and that is how your leadership in the Catholic school is a ministry of the Catholic Church.

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Discussion Questions

Discuss

- (1) "People need to see in their leaders what they themselves are called to be" (para. 4).
- (2) The quotation from the Belgium Bishops (para. 9).
- (3) The relationship between the desire to learn and knowing that life itself is worthwhile (para. 11).
- (4) Para. 17 - 22.