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The Transformational Leader in Catholic Schools: A Moral Journey

by Robert Birdsell and Kent Hickey

Wander the halls of most Catholic schools today and you will experience places where past and present collide in fascinating ways. Crucifixes hang above smart boards, morning prayers echo through corridors where students clutch iPads, and students are using AI to explore their Catholic faith. It is more than just a jarring juxtaposition of tradition and modernity. It's symbolic of something running deeper—a quiet revolution happening in Catholic school leadership.

\Where once habits and Roman collars dominated administrative offices, today you're more likely to find leaders sporting business suits and finance-bro three-quarter zip sweaters. But this isn't just a wardrobe change—it's a window into one of the most fascinating leadership transformations in American education, a dramatic shift from schools led primarily by priests, sisters, and brothers to schools almost exclusively led by laypeople.

Lay leadership certainly involves operational management—technology, budgets, curriculum, personnel, etc. —duties that are both expected of administrators and readily accepted as areas of responsibility. But it also includes the even more essential responsibilities of spiritual leader and Catholic tradition caretaker, roles often only begrudgingly accepted within a community for leaders not wearing a collar or habit. That quiet revolution, however, is happening anyway—it must if Catholic schools are to

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survive and thrive. The job of the Catholic school leader is now, and will continue to be, that of the Spiritual CEO.

In our previous two white papers, we described the role of the Spiritual CEO (*An Empty Seat at the Catholic School Table*) and how this role requires constant cultivation of a contemplative inner core (*Discernment is Disposition*). Thankfully, in our experience working with Catholic school leaders through ILEE (the Institute for Leadership and Entrepreneurship in Education), it is clear to us that our best Catholic school educators are embracing spiritual leadership as an essential job duty, and they are taking the steps needed to thrive in this role.

An exceptional leader we know, for example, arrives at school an hour before anyone else, not to catch up on emails (though there are plenty), but to sit in the empty chapel. "Without that quiet time," she shared, "I'd just be another administrator pushing papers." Thomas Merton would have understood. His observation that "We cannot be ourselves unless we know ourselves, and we cannot know ourselves unless we pray" could be pinned to her office wall.

It is exactly that "contemplative in action" approach that helps prepare our best Catholic school educators for another critical role they must play in our schools: Transformational Leader. It is here where the Catholic school leadership transcends operational competency and encompasses change agent, entrepreneur, and inspirational visionary.

Why is this role so essential? Look to Amazon buildings in Seattle for an example: Walls are covered with pictures of old Sears and JC Penney stores. Now imagine the similar messaging that would be communicated by a mural of all the Catholic schools in the U.S. that have closed within the past 25 years. It will just be more of the same if Catholic educators do not embrace the role of transformational leader.

For Catholic school educators—stewards of our tradition and faith leaders of our communities—the transformational leadership role should be viewed as a both/and, not either/or. Let's go back to the image of the crucifix on the wall above a smart board. The most successful leaders do not erect walls that separate our beliefs from the innovations our schools need to thrive; rather, they build bridges that connect one with the other.

What does this bridge-builder look like when it comes to transformational leadership? Monica Sharma, in her book, *Radical Transformational Leadership*, describes a model that could be adapted well for our purposes. A physician and epidemiologist, Dr. Sharma worked for the United Nations for

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more than 30 years on some of our world's thorniest health problems. Through this work she developed a three-part model she calls *"Conscious Full Spectrum Responses,"* a framework designed to "generate enduring results based upon universal values."

One component of the framework is to critically examine the immediate causes of problems and to apply technical solutions (with "technical" defined broadly). The second component digs deeper: create systems and new patterns that engender a shift in cultural norms. Third: "Source our inner capacities and universal values to solve problems as we shift culture and systems—being a transformational steward and leader..." (107)

The three universal values Dr. Sharma highlights could be taken right out of the Catholic charism playbook: fairness (the Golden Rule), dignity (sanctity of the person), and compassion (the lived example of Jesus Christ). Humans are bonded by these values; they exist in our being. When we separate ourselves from universal values when addressing problems and envisioning change, we separate ourselves from principled leadership. For Dr. Sharma, a transformational leader is first and foremost a principled game changer. (152)

Principled game changer—that is exactly what transformational leadership in the Catholic education ecosystem should look like. Sounds simple, but, as Catholic school leaders know, being a principled game changer is a challenging thing, especially so because it requires a huge reservoir of moral courage to draw from each day. That is another point Dr. Sharma emphasizes in her framework, one that our best Catholic educators would readily embrace: "Being a principled game-changer implies having the courage to create new patterns. Courage is not the absence of fear or despair...Courage is our capacity to speak up and move ahead in spite of despair or fear." (154)

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> – Monica Sharma

What does courage look like in Catholic schools today? In our age of metrics and market demands, it takes a particular kind of bravery to value beginning your day in contemplative silence instead of immediately jumping into emails. It also requires courage to be both deeply Catholic and genuinely engaged with the modern world, simultaneously anchored in tradition and "being among the people" (Henri Nouwen). This is a quality that reminds us of what sociologist James Davison Hunter calls "faithful presence," a characteristic we have encountered in the dozens of leaders across the country we have come to know through our work at ILEE.

It also takes moral courage to remain committed to mission when faced with the thousand small decisions that can slowly erode a school's Catholic identity. Should we drop mandatory Mass attendance to boost enrollment? Should we soften our stance on controversial social issues to appeal to a broader demographic? Will admissions suffer if we stop using standardized exams that penalize applicants

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from low-income families who can't afford test prep? Do we insist that board meetings begin in the chapel with contemplative prayer even if that cuts into "official" business? These aren't just administrative choices—they are moral crossroads.

An exceptional President we've worked with starts each day greeting students at the school's entrance with, "Good morning, Saints!" He knows every name, every story. But what's more remarkable is how he navigates the complex moral terrain of modern education. When faced with a student struggling with identity issues, he demonstrated what David Brooks' calls "compassionate orthodoxy"—holding firm to Catholic teaching while ensuring the student felt loved and supported. This is moral courage in action—not the dramatic kind that makes headlines, but the quiet, daily kind that shapes lives.

That's what really intrigues us about this quiet revolution happening in our schools: The most transformational Catholic school leaders we've met are not just managing institutions—they're cultivating what philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre would call "communities of virtue." They understand that excellence in math and science matters deeply, but so does the formation of character, and the nurturing of souls. In emphasizing what Dorothy Day called "love expressed through community," what our wisest leaders are doing is reimagining the ancient wisdom of how to live in a community of faith while immersed in modern challenges.

Catholic school policy manuals, for example, should look and operate more like the 1,500-year-old Rule of Benedict as guidelines for living in Christian community than a corporate HR manual. The Benedictine rule to "listen with the ear of your heart" can and should be a framework for everything from strategic planning to conflict resolution. That ancient wisdom, formulated at a time of cultural upheaval not dissimilar to our own, speaks to us if we will listen. It's a both/and approach in an either/or world.

Looking ahead, the future of Catholic education will likely depend on leaders who can balance what seem like contradictions: being both spiritually grounded and professionally savvy, both guardians of tradition and agents of innovation. Or in the words of St. Catherine of Siena, "Be who God meant you to be and you will set the world on fire." In our age of institutional decline and moral uncertainty, these words carry a particular urgency.

The transformation of Catholic school leadership, however, isn't just about who's in charge—it is about how we understand leadership itself. These Spiritual CEOs are pioneering a model that combines moral courage with professional excellence, contemplative practice with active engagement. In doing so, they are not just preserving institutions. They're showing us

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what moral leadership can look like in an age that desperately needs it.

And perhaps that's the most important lesson here: In watching these leaders navigate their challenging terrain with moral courage and graceful determination, we glimpse something essential about leadership itself—that it's ultimately about serving something larger than ourselves, about having the courage to stand firm in our convictions while remaining open to the world we serve. In our fractured age, that's a lesson worth learning, whether you're running a Catholic school or any other institution that aims to make a difference in the world.

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