

TALES ABOUT THE FUTURE OF CATHOLIC SCHOOLS

The Story of Bob and Cathy

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I LIVE IN A very cold place, Edmonton, Alberta, on the 53rd parallel, the most northerly large city in North America. I got a foretaste of this when I was travelling from the airport to the hotel for my interview for the position I now hold. I remarked to the driver that the roads looked sandy, which I must say really surprised me. She responded that I was right—they put sand on the roads in Edmonton for the long winter. I asked, ‘Why?’ ‘To help melt ice’ was the answer. ‘But don’t you use salt for that?’ Pardon the pun, but the chilling reply was that salt doesn’t work as a melting agent below -24 degrees. In Edmonton there are many, many days below -24^o! Let me put that another way: for many, many days in Edmonton it is actually much warmer in a meat freezer than it is outside!

So you can imagine that in such a climate winter sports are very popular, especially indoor ones. The most popular is ice hockey, in Canada the ‘ice’ is redundant, it’s just called ‘hockey’—I mean, what other type is there? Devotion to hockey is at a very respectable level in Canada, although I should note that it still falls short of the obsessive, almost pathological, interest in AFL in Melbourne. But I digress.

In a land where snow and ice dominate the landscape, one of the big banks in Canada runs a series of television ads which feature the efforts of a man, let’s call him Bob, dedicated to keeping open and maintaining community hockey rinks. (The bank sponsors a program which supports these individuals and so it is hoping, I guess, that you acknowledge what fine corporate citizens they are and do more

business with them). In Edmonton every community has a rink that is available for members to use. But there is a catch, and that is that the rink needs to be overseen. Believe me, growing ice is no problem! However, things like opening and closing the rink, shaving the ice, repairing divots...take time and sustained effort. Also, extra projects which try to make the rink more community friendly are also the responsibility of people like Bob. In the ad, for instance, Bob converts one of the storage rooms into a female changing room so girls can participate in hockey without the bother of coming to the rink dressed to play. Nice touch!

Now what does all of this have to do with Catholic schools? I have done a lot of work over the years with Catholic schools on a number of levels; working with teachers, developing religious education programs, teaching courses for school leaders, *etc. etc.* In that time one thing has become increasingly apparent to me. The point that I want to make here is that I see a fundamental similarity between the fate of community ice rinks and that of Catholic schools. How so? In order to flourish both depend on Bob and others like him.

It is true that some community rinks get by without having a Bob to call on. These rinks have very restricted opening hours, there is a limited range of activities—for example, you can’t play hockey because if the ice isn’t relatively smooth the puck flies everywhere, and you can assume that no one is going to make a special effort to build a ladies change room.

Let’s try to extend this argument to Catholic schools. They can exist, in a fashion, and

provide a basic level of service without Bob and his ilk, but they are operating far below their capacity especially in a culture where there are many alternatives and—to stretch the analogy—average hockey rinks are in hot competition with other options.

In concise terms one of the challenges facing the Church today and in the immediate future in countries such as Australia is one of what economists would call human capital. Any group which cannot point to a significant number of members who are highly committed to it faces a problematic future: without Bob the rink will either close or offer restricted service.

To give one example of this in relation to Catholic schools, consider the case of Kathy. Schools are particularly important for, as Kelly reminds us, ‘the flagship of Catholic commitment to Australian culture has been the enormous institution of church schools’.

Kathy—the Bob of Catholic Schools.

Kathy is married and her children are now adults. She started teaching in Catholic secondary schools in 1969. In her career she has been a Year Level and Religious Education Coordinator and a Deputy Principal. She has also had some time away from schools when her children were young. Over the years Kathy has had a long involvement in her parish...

The list of Kathy’s accomplishments could be extended even further. There are at least two points to note here, leading to a number of pertinent questions that go to the heart of the need for the new evangelization. Firstly, Kathy has been at the forefront of providing leadership and embodying the religious dimensions of Catholic schools. Kathy is a good example of the conviction that Benedict XVI spoke of at his address on Catholic education at Catholic University of American on 17/4/2008:

A university or school’s Catholic identity is not simply a question of the number of Catholic students. It is a question of conviction. Do we



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accept the truth Christ reveals? Is faith tangible in our universities and schools? (Pope Benedict’s address to Catholic Educators on his journey to the United States, 17th April 2008; see www.vatican.va.)

If you were to look closely at the contribution that she makes much of it has an overtly religious tone—teaching and coordinating religious education, organizing liturgies, researching and applying the charism of the founder of the order that established the school, liaising with parishes over sacramental programs, and many other duties.

Secondly, Kathy, and many others like her, will retire in the very near future—it’s now official: the first baby boomers have turned 65! A critical question that this poses is, who is going to replace them? At issue here is not simply a question of personnel. There are many individuals prepared to work in Catholic institutions such as schools and, to use the ubiquitous expression, to ‘support its ethos’.

Let me return for a moment to the bank ad about Bob. The ad shows people dropping off their kids at the rink, thanking Bob for his efforts and even being prepared to chip in on occasion. All of this is important, but it still depends on Bob’s providing a sustaining presence at the rink.

In terms of Catholic schools many teachers and those associated with the school community bring a range of strong human qualities and professional competence to their working lives. They may accurately describe themselves as being spiritual rather than religious—a topic we could say a lot more about.

How many, though, are prepared to create and animate the ethos of the institution instead of just supporting it?

In terms of the work that Kathy does, who is going to teach religious education in a convincing manner; who is going to help prepare liturgies; who is going to help induct new teachers into the school's ethos? On a deeper level, who is going to give embodiment to the beliefs and values that the school proclaims?

The pivotal role played by Kathy arises out of her sense of being a living witness. This is the vital link that makes talk of the Catholic culture of schools come alive and be more than a series of programs or inanimate ideas. Chaput in quite stark terms reminds us of the fate of Catholic institutions if they rely on a sense of culture that is not closely associated with overt personal response:

Catholic culture comes from an active Catholic faith. Unless we truly believe and practice our faith, 'Catholic culture' is just a dead skin of nostalgia and comfortable habits. (Charles J. Chaput *A Light to the Nations: The Meaning and Future of the Catholic Church*, obtained on 1/4/2008 from <http://www.holyspiritinteractive.net/columns/guest/charlesjchaput/alight.asp>)

The human element is an irreplaceable part of the Church's ability to proclaim its message in the third millennium. It is important

not to overstate this argument. Catholic institutions do not need to be made up exclusively of people of strong personal commitment, to be disciples of Christ in the full sense of the term. It is probably not critical that a majority of people show this type of dedicated service—I suppose having too many Bobs could create some problems! The case that is being made here is, ultimately, not a moral one but a pragmatic one; there is a point below which the work of the school in the world is imperilled if it does not have a sufficient number of highly committed individuals to carry this work forward. The exact ratio may differ depending on circumstances, but it does exist. This highly committed group is not in opposition to more loosely affiliated individuals but it is distinct from them, because they are prepared to live out their deepest religious convictions.

One important consequence of this living witness is that Catholic identity and culture come to life not as an abstraction but as a concrete reality.

To conclude, Avery Dulles writing in *Theological Studies* in 1984 commented, 'Christianity even more than the scientific community needs mature believers who have personally appropriated the patrimony and who can transmit it by example and formative influence'.

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