

The Kimberley Catholic Schools and Evangelization

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Contact Points -

Catholic schools are called on to be instruments of evangelization to their students and community. Especially here in the Kimberley, this carries on a tradition that reaches back to the educational efforts of the very first missionaries. Today, each school is called upon to look at its own unique situation and to come up with a plan for evangelization that suits their community and their students.

The school has a wonderful opportunity to educate children about the faith and most schools respond admirably using the resources available and faithfully dedicating time to Religious Education. Also, the schools take the lead on preparing students for the sacraments and celebrating the sacraments with them when they are ready. In many communities the school's celebration of major Church feasts like Christmas, Easter and Pentecost, while often not occurring on the actual day of the feast, add to not only the children's understanding but also assist the entire community in participating in the feast.

However, the challenges to the schools' evangelization plans are very difficult. As part of the school's evangelization efforts the school is asked to foster a close, experiential, relationship between the student and God. This relational experience is the culmination of the educational efforts of the school but also relies on the teachers modeling to the children their own relational experience with God. As we have seen in earlier examples there is at times a wide cultural gulf between white, mainstream cultural worldviews and black, indigenous worldviews. How then can white teachers lead their Aboriginal students in a relational experience of God? How can teachers bridge the gulf and show their personal relationship with God in a way that makes sense to their students?

First, we take as our starting point the validity of the Gospel for all people and for all times. We believe that the Church, based on scripture and tradition, offers all people the opportunity to meet God and to form a personal relationship with God. We accept this truth by looking at how the Gospel and our traditions have been accepted by so many diverse peoples through so many ages. But, secondly, we also acknowledge that it has been different aspects of faith that have served as the gateway through which different cultures and different historical times have used to enter into belief.

With this said, it is perfectly reasonable to think that the "points of contact", the expressions of the faith that serve as the gateways for cultures to enter into relationship with God, will be different for your Aboriginal students than for your students in mainstream schools. Finding these points of contact will be difficult because many students, like their parents, have tuned out religion from their lives. And when these contact points are found it will also be a challenge for white teachers to model these as the gateway to a relationship with God because they mightn't be the points that the teachers themselves use. In some cases, it may be the elements of the faith that are most difficult for western teachers to internalize that are the very touchstones of faith for their students in a cross cultural situation.

The current state of the Church in the Kimberley, especially in remote communities, is not all that different from that of the Church in the rest of Australia. Some surveys have

noted that on any non-holiday weekend only 15% of baptized Christians attended services. When this occurs in a city of tens of thousands the churches can appear somewhat full but when that same percentage are applied to a parish in a community of 250 people the result is a handful of worshipers in an empty Church. In some remote communities the teachers in attendance may outnumber the locals. Still, we find little comfort in statistics. More to the point, we see students who many times seem to be lost and we believe that a closer relationship with God would be beneficial to them. To find the contact points we must try numerous ways to make faith relevant, to cast a lot of seed broadly so we can see what sprouts. But we don't have to begin blindly. We can use what we know about pre-farming cultures to inform us as to what seed to throw and to observe where there is life in the Church already present to know where to begin to throw it.

Where there is Life –

Ask the positive question not the negative question; ask “what brings the community to Church?” and not “why don't they come to Church?” So, what are the contact points that we can observe now in our communities? The rosary, funerals, public prayer, blessings, ashes, Stations of the Cross, religious plays, art and baptisms are some of the places that we see life in the Church. What these forms of worship have in common is that the entire community can participate and no one is excluded.

The rosary is one of the best examples. You don't have to be a “good” Catholic to come to the rosary; you don't have to be Catholic at all. Rosary doesn't ask if your marriage is right or when you were last in Church. Rosary doesn't ask if you've been smoking or drinking or gambling and doesn't ask that you be entirely sober when you come as long as you remain respectful. Rosary offers everybody the opportunity to lead or respond and often recognizes the elders in the community by giving them prominent roles. The rosary that attracts the most people is focused on one person or intension and is limited in time. Rosary is often home based. Rosary is intergenerational. Rosary is in a physically large space, people can be up close or they can show their presence by being on the outskirts and they can avoid taboo persons by keeping a distance from them. Rosary, and the meal that follows, manifests itself in family kinship roles and helps to maintain those roles with obligatory giving and receiving of food. The rosary is a brief prayer followed by extensive socializing. In many ways the rosary in the Aboriginal context is what Mass in Church is not, but we hope could be.

The rosary even has a negative side that encourages participation. As it often is based at family homes and also many times involves respect for the dead. People feel that their absence may be penalized. Missing the rosary can cause friction between families and lead to feelings that the host family have been disrespected or slighted in the community. Often, representatives from every other family are obligated to attend to show respect and solidarity with the host family. Possibly of greater importance is maintaining a good relationship with the deceased. A strong belief in both the benevolent and malicious powers of the dead in the present reality of the living is a common feature in Kimberley Aboriginal communities. Attendance at the rosary gives respect to the dead and calls on their continued benevolent support of the living person praying for them.

School evangelization plans and teachers' RE lesson plans should look for opportunities to expand on these areas that already show signs of life. Emphasis on the religious practices that are all inclusive are important because exclusion is a strong predicate to

shame in Aboriginal culture. This may mean that the school evangelization plans will need to offer as many non-sacramental expressions of faith as it does through the sacraments. This can call for some creative thinking by teachers, many who have been trained that every occasion is to be celebrated with Mass. Plays and pageants, especially before Christmas and Easter often have greater attendance than Church services for those same holidays. Schools then need to see their role as community wide evangelizers in ways that the parish is not and to complement the parish efforts by singling out those contact points that are attractive to the community and best implemented through the school.

The school then becomes an evangelizing agent in the community in a way that is different but compliments the parish. The school can offer more culturally appropriate gateway opportunities to the students and beyond, to the entire community. The school can do this not because the Church is banned from offering them or objects to them but because the school has a relationship with the students and community that is freer and carries less baggage than the Church does in some communities. In some remote areas the school is recognized by the community as a religious entity but is seen to be more neutral ground than the Church. Almost everybody feels comfortable walking into the community school while the same isn't true for the Church.

The hope is that after the gateway has been passed through and the personal relationship with God begun, the student will find the fulfillment of that relationship in the sacraments and worship of the Church. Where the more mainstream student, reflecting the mainstream teacher and the prevailing cultural environment, may find the gateway to a personal relationship with God in more individual ways (reading, private prayer, following the model of teachers or parents) the Aboriginal child in the context of the remote community is more likely to find the contact point in a communal expression of faith. Sadly, the present reality is that the Church's sacraments, which optimally should be the best communal expression of faith, don't fulfill that role because so many feel that they are excluded from them because of drug and alcohol use, irregular marriages, or any other of a myriad of reasons. Together, the school and parish, through emphasis on these more communal and inclusive religious expressions through plays, pageants, creating and displaying art, blessings, public prayer like the rosary, honouring and remembering the dead and celebrating holy places in the community can hope to begin in our students a relationship with God that will be carried through to a sacramental expression.

Teachers, who may feel more comfortable in more solitary expressions of faith, need to try to extend themselves to more communal expressions so as to model them for their students. Also, the elements of faith that most connect with the local community, like death rituals and the communion of the saints as a present reality (spirits), may also be the elements of the faith that teachers from a western background are least comfortable with. Those who are not used to communal expressions of faith may find these practices embarrassing and shy away from them. However, the inverse is commonly true for Aboriginal students where the more singular and alone they are in an expression of faith the more uncomfortable they are.

Points of Disconnect –

In many communities, mainstream and remote, going to Church is something a child rarely does with parents, more often does with grandparents but most often does with teachers. School masses are, in both communities, the primary way that children

experience the sacraments with some children never having attended Church outside of a school setting. The sacraments, especially the celebration of the Eucharist, remain, in our Church, the highest form of worship and personal contact with God that we can have. But, if in the remote aboriginal community we see that the contact point with the divine isn't Mass, then we need to offer both the starting point and the goal; the place where our students can first have a contact point with God while still showing them the summit of our faith contained in the Eucharist.

In Aboriginal communities we have seen how cultural worldview can be a strong influence in the way people form their beliefs and religious practices. When that worldview is more immediate and less long term or when the worldview does not see an easy correlation between present causes and future effects then the points of contact with religion will be very different from someone who sees a strong cause and effect relation and is comfortable thinking of in terms of future events. Culture and historical eras have always been a strong influence on how people approach faith. How people see themselves, how they see their world and how they base our relationships must be huge influences on how they see God and enter into relationship with him.

Much of what historically has been emphasized in the western expression of Christianity is very future orientated. We center our belief on the future coming of Christ and with his coming a future redemption of humanity and all creation. Individually, we focus on our personal future judgment and see a very strong correlation between of present actions for good or for evil and our future reward or punishment in the life to come. We believe that we can change our behavior through conversion using both God's grace and our personal will. Much the same way that western culture sees time so we see the spiritual life, as an arrow climbing higher to the spiritual heights of salvation and heaven.

Just as westerners have centered their religious expression on the aspects of Christianity that most fits their worldview, these same aspects can be seen as the parts of faith that are less attractive to a pre-agricultural worldview. The farmer wishes to climb the ladder of faith to ever higher spiritual heights finally reaching a future heaven where good will be rewarded. It's a strong possibility that the hunter-gatherer doesn't emphasize that same cause and effect relationship and is much more interested in God's presence now than the future presence of God in heaven. As the farmer chants "Christ has died, Christ has risen, Christ will come again" and link the historical presence of Christ in the past and in the future and see a balanced symmetry of progression to the ultimate end of time the pre-agricultural believer prays "as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, world without end" and centers his faith in the constancy of God.

Lastly, it's important that we take a moment to consider the theology and spirituality of earlier evangelizers and see what influence that has had on the local community and your students in fostering a personal relationship with God. Some observers of the Church in the Kimberley have noted that in the first decade of 1900, when the first mission schools and dormitories were being established and there was a major push of missionary activity beyond Beagle Bay and Broome, a strong focus was placed in the worldwide Church on catechism and children receiving Eucharist by then Pope Pius X. The age at which children received the sacrament of reconciliation and first communion was significantly lowered at that time. Pope Pius X also encouraged an often reluctant Church to receive the Eucharist weekly, which before that time was not common, and stipulated that only mortal sin made a person unprepared to receive the Eucharist. His decrees were meant to address a popular misconception that a very high level of

personal sanctity was necessary before a Catholic could receive Eucharist and that receiving the Eucharist in a less worthy state compounded the effects of sin. It was also the belief that such a level of sacramental preparedness could only come directly after confession of sins and penance.

These papal statements were made to counter act the last vestiges of Jansenism, a discredited yet strangely popular theological movement that emphasized the unworthy and deprived state of humanity. Pius X wanted to open reception of the Eucharist to as many of the faithful as possible and as often as possible to reverse the common notion of that time that most people were unable to approach the sacraments of the Church because of their failure to maintain a state of grace. Jansenism is still echoing through some parts of the Kimberley where many people feel that they are unworthy of receiving the sacraments of the Church. In some communities it is a widely held belief that cursing and foul language, drinking, gambling or smoking marijuana disqualify a person from receiving Eucharist.

Conclusion –

I was once asked while visiting outside the Kimberley if my parish had a Catholic school, cryptically I answered that it was more like the school had a parish. The lived reality in many parts of the Kimberley is that the school has much more contact with a wider number of people in the community than the parish does. It is also often the fact that some people feel freer to approach the school than to approach the parish. There is no one single reason for this reality but rather it is a combination of historical, cultural and sociological factors.

The schools' evangelization efforts are often the vanguard of the Church's contact with the indigenous people in remote communities. The school can be seen as the primary evangelizer not only of the children but also of the entire community. Hopefully the school makes the religious connection that is then carried forward and deepened in the context of the parish. It is therefore essential that the schools' evangelization plans include the kinds of class and school activities that are culturally more accessible to the students and reach out beyond the classroom into the community. To do this, schools need to look for the bright spots in the current faith life of the community and to try to replicate the elements that make them come alive. Also, the schools can use their understanding of Aboriginal culture to highlight the elements of the faith that are most accessible to the local community.

An essential element of any evangelization plan is the living witness of the faith made by the teachers of the school. By modeling their personal relationship with God to their students, the teachers are giving an example of faith that goes far beyond the catechetical syllabus. However, in the Kimberley, this comes with an added challenge as teachers are called upon to model aspects of the faith that are more culturally open to their students than possibly they themselves are comfortable with. Moving beyond themselves, teachers are called to explore and add to the depths of their relationship with God so that they can be evangelizing agents for their students and the community they have been sent to serve. Emphasizing the points of connection between the scripture and tradition of the Church and Aboriginal culture is the first stage of evangelization and are essential even when they may not be the most favoured points of connection from the cultural perspective of the teachers.

The reality is often that the school has a parish. Therefore, a good partnership between the parish and school is crucial. In other places and in other times the parish would lead the evangelization efforts and the school would try to play a complementary role but in many Kimberley communities at this time it is the school that is the contact point with the people in ways that the parish no longer is. Working in close collaboration with the school, the pastoral team of the parish adds expertise in planning and assistance in execution of the school's evangelization plan. Then, hopefully, the parish will be present and prepared to nurture the faith within the people that was discovered through the schools evangelization efforts.