

## ***Transformation of one Congregation's charism: a gift to the leadership of their College.***

### **Introduction**

***"Give your servant therefore and understanding mind..."*** (1Kings 3:9)

***"We live in the Church at a privileged moment of the Spirit."***

*(Evangelii Nuntiandi :75(E.N.))*

Catholic schools today face the challenge of how to be truly Catholic. It is not enough to simply provide an alternative form of education. It is not even enough to provide great pastoral care for students, or a single sex education, or a school which caters for struggling students or gifted students. We must provide a situation where we can offer all our students the depth of our Christian heritage and the expanse of our Catholic tradition. We do indeed 'live in a privileged moment of the Spirit.'(E.N. 75) The Holy Spirit sends us to show our students the passionate love God has for them, for God loved them so much that this love had to become incarnate, especially in the life of Jesus of Nazareth. The Holy Spirit sends us to make disciples, not in the narrow sense of the word, but in the sense that our students come to know Jesus and may therefore choose, if we make him attractive enough, to follow him. In order for the leadership of our Catholic schools to pursue this goal we must, like Solomon, ask God for a discerning heart and the gift of wisdom.

Yet we have also received much which assists this task of leadership. These supports, gifts of the Holy Spirit, come as Word of God, Christian life and Catholic Tradition. In many schools these gifts are mediated through a specific lens, the charism of the founding Congregation. This too is a gift of the Spirit and the variety of gifts highlights the diversity and richness which is our heritage.

### **Leadership**

The concept of leadership has always been and continues to be complex. As Duke (1986, p.10) observed, "Leadership seems to be a gestalt phenomenon; greater than the sum of its parts".

To lead within an educational setting, requires that schools face the demands of a rapidly changing world, and the associated increased community expectations. On the one hand, this is often in a climate of uncertainty regarding the future because of endless possibilities for the direction, management and leadership of schools and on the other hand there is a heightened accountability and measurement of achievable goals and outcomes. Such paradox provides opportunities for rich dialogue about the

evolutionary nature of leadership and the foundational vision for schools, specifically, in this context, Catholic schools.

Leaders of Catholic schools are called to lead in a way that promotes a shared meaning and vision about the community that exists for the stakeholders. The school's past, along with present and future orientations, needs to be articulated, communicated, understood and shared by all members of the community to ensure clarity of purpose, sustainability, continuity and authenticity. Beare, Caldwell and Millikan (1989, p.123) believe that "leadership is concerned with gaining commitment to a set of values, statements of 'what ought to be', which then become the heart of the culture of the school."

For a Catholic school such vision grows from Scriptural values, the person of Jesus, the Catholic Tradition, and for many, the charism of the religious Congregation that founded the school.

Leaders of Catholic schools have a unique invitation to not only uphold these virtues, but to provide opportunities to immerse and empower those whom they lead into dialogue, to deeply reflect, and to make connections between their work and the vision and mission of the school. If successful, such efforts give birth to an on-going conversation leading to the evolving nature of the mission of the school. Such a conversation, when authentic, provides for critical evaluation and reflection on the past and present. This will lead to innovation and greater insight into and the evolving nature of the school's core beliefs or "non-negotiables", values and aspirations discerned within the context of the history of the school's story and within the Catholic tradition.

Such leadership is transformative as it provides the motivation and inspiration to move people beyond, calling them to an enhanced commitment, reflective practice, and as Burns (1978, p.20) says this "... transforming leadership ultimately becomes moral in that it raises the level of human conduct and ethical aspirations of both leader and led, and thus has a transforming effect on both." Bennis (1959) described transformational leadership as the; "ability of a person to reach the souls of others in a fashion which raises human consciousness, builds meanings and inspires human intent ....that is the

source of power.” (Dillard, 1995, p 560 in Leithwood, Jantzi, Steinbach,1999, p. 9)

For Thomas Sergiovanni (1990), the transformational or moral leader emerges by emphasizing the symbolic language, ritual, identity and a shared vision leading to a commitment to change for and by all.

Patrick Duigan (1997) believes leaders need to be authentic in their role. The capacity to enhance the quality of relationships within the organization is at the very heart of leadership.

Authenticity is not only a quality of the leader but it is also a product of relationships and interrelationships. The quality of the relationship greatly influences everything else that happens in organizations...Trusting and caring relationships are identified in many studies as central to the development of a culture or climate where values relating to honesty, integrity, fair-mindedness, loyalty, justice, equity, freedom and autonomy are internalized and find expression through everyday practices and procedures. (Duignan & Bhindi: 1997, p.201)

Above all authentic leaders need to acquire a healthy and holy curiosity, not just an orientation to the future, but an openness to the future that engages the senses and brings excitement and expectation amidst the “greyness” and complexities of leadership ( Duigan: 1997, p.19). Incarnating this then becomes the pivotal role of those in senior leadership positions.

For leaders in Catholic schools the styles of leadership employed by key staff are pivotal. Although at times intangible, the way in which a school is led must reflect the key values and principles that underpin the vision and mission of the community. Not only should the particular charism of each school become the mantle by which all decisions are made and enacted, the charism itself needs to be a living charism that is expressed in the actions of the leader and enhanced by those who live it out in the community. The charism needs to be understood, shared and owned by all members of the community. Therefore it is crucial for the principal and her team to learn well from the Congregation before the journey of engaging the school community begins. Naturally, this process of engagement will continue over the years. Once this is achieved effective styles of leadership, methods of management (incorporating procedures, practicalities and policies) and skills in cultivating authentic relationships

with staff, students and parents can be employed with the hope of engaging in authentic dialogue that leads to an embodiment of the charism in a dynamic fashion.

### **Charism and Leadership**

The specific charism of a Religious Congregation or Order is at one level simply the particular gift given by the Holy Spirit to the Founder of a Congregation. This gift is always given for the life and good of the Church and of the whole world to assist in the continual building up of the reign and realm of God in life.

Thus a Catholic school which is founded by a Religious Congregation has the general charism related to being a Catholic school and the particular charism of the Founder of the Congregation. This charism provides the particularity which has the potential to give a school its own distinctiveness within the Catholic tradition. This is the Colleges way of living out the Scriptures, the tradition of the Catholic Church and the charism of Catholic education in a particular way.

The charism of any Congregation is a gift of the Holy Spirit and as such provides the particularity for the Colleges founded by that Religious Congregation. The work of education is essentially the work of the Holy Spirit, the nurturance of the life of God within the students. This life is breathed into them by God at conception and for our Christian students enhanced by Baptism and the other Sacraments. The work of leadership in a Catholic school is deeply theological as well as essentially human and ordinary and pastoral. It is the work of the Holy Spirit, it is a work of grace, a participation in God's creating intention that everything will reflect its maker, that everything will express its essential goodness. (Gen 1: 27.) It is a participation in the transforming work of the Holy Spirit.

Leadership in a Catholic College must be about discerning the promptings of the Holy Spirit in relation to transformation within the educational community. This transformation must contribute to the reign of God and to the common good. These promptings do not come in a vacuum but are the fruit of reflection based upon a familiarity with the world around and the biblical and theological tradition. Leadership in a congregationally founded school will have a special concern for the elements of the particular charism in this discernment.

### **An Example of the Transformation of a Charism.**

The charism given to Fr Theodore Ratisbonne and shared by the Sisters of Our Lady of Sion will be explored to highlight the transformative nature of this charism in the life of the Church, the life of the Sisters and the life of one of their Colleges. In its origins this charism was characterized by a love of the Bible, both Old and New Testaments; a love of the Jewish people expressed in prayer for their conversion to Catholicism; an openness to people of other religious traditions; a family spirit amongst the Sisters and students; a devotion to Mary daughter of Sion; and a commitment to the Church. While the essence of this cluster of characteristics has remained the same, there has also been significant change both in the understanding of how they are to be understood in a changing world and what they mean theologically and practically today. .

The questions for today's paper are focused on the way these changes assist the College, and especially the leadership within the College, to respond to the world around them according to the promptings of the Holy Spirit.

### **The Change of Continents**

In 1890 seven Sisters of Our Lady of Sion left the Mother House in Paris, sailed from Tilbury Docks in England on the 17<sup>th</sup> January and arrived in Melbourne six weeks later. The day after landing they traveled to Sale in Gippsland, and three days later, on March 4<sup>th</sup> they took on the responsibility for the parish primary school and on 6<sup>th</sup> March opened a girls' secondary school. The Bishop rightly wanted a Catholic education for the girls, the future mothers, of his new diocese. The Sisters had a vision of education based on the characteristics mentioned above. I am not saying that they always lived out this vision perfectly but it shaped the way they went about education even in those early and difficult days. Their vision was not immediately compatible with the context of a farming community which also supported mining in nearby areas. However, they established a College which is described by educator Terry Synon:

“The Sion Sisters has a huge impact on Catholic education within the early Diocese of Sale. Within 15 years they were in charge of three Catholic primary schools and three small convent schools, taking boarders and offering classes at all levels up to Leaving Honours. A wide range of subjects and cultural accoutrements deemed necessary for a successful, cultured young lady of the early 1900's made up the curriculum. The large share of credit for this belonged to Mother Marie Raphaela de Sion. She led a

community of sisters of diverse talents, in an unfamiliar Church and colonial environment.” (Synon 2003, p.117-118)

In this phase it could be said that the Sisters dedication to the needs of the Church was primary and the response of leadership was to provide education for the girls of this new diocese. The other elements of the charism were evident in the willingness of the Sisters to accept non-Catholic students, in the diversity of the curriculum, in the prayer life of the College and the family spirit amongst the Sisters and students.

In 1928 the Sisters opened a College in Box Hill, their only secondary College in the Archdiocese of Melbourne. This was just as the great depression was beginning to take hold. The vision at this time was taken over by the vision of the Church to provide catholic education for all Catholic children in spite of the Governments decision to make education compulsory, secular and free. Survival, educational and economic survival, was the dominant preoccupation because of the Education Act in Victoria in 1872.

Yet always the Sionian aspects of education were given expression. The students heard the news of the wider ‘family’ to which they belonged throughout the world; the Bible was studied through Bible History; prayers were offered by Sisters and students for the conversion of the Jewish people.

Thus the Sisters made the transition to Australia and to the very different life and conditions here. They made not only the journey across the seas but also the journey of transformation necessary to offer leadership in girls’ secondary and parish primary schools in Australia.

### **The change in social and religious views**

Significant social, political and religious change took place after World War11. The changes in society and the accompanying ones in the church led to Vatican 11 within the Catholic Church. The Sisters of Our Lady of Sion assisted in the work towards Nostra Aetate (In our Times), the Document on the Church’s relationship with other Faiths and especially with the Jewish people. (Abbott 1966)

Mother Mary (M.M) Felix was the international Leader of the Sisters of Our Lady of Sion from 1951 until 1964. The Congregation’s self understanding at that time, its *raison d’etre*, had been to pray for the conversion of the Jews, yet the experience of

World War 11 and the attempt by the Nazi's to exterminate European Jewry changed this. Several Sisters had been involved in hiding Jews during the Nazi regime.

M.M.Felix reflected on this reality and came to the realization that the Sisters of Our Lady of Sion did not know the Jewish people even though they had been praying for their conversion to Catholicism for one hundred years. She prayed for wisdom and understanding, she talked to Sisters, then to priests and bishops in France, she talked to scholars and finally she talked to Rabbis and Jewish scholars. Then came Vatican 11 and the Catholic Church which had undergone a similar process of reflection officially changed its teaching about the Jewish people and other Faith traditions.

Thus the core of the Sion charism was transformed by changed social and religious realities and by M.M. Felix's ability to reflect, to dialogue and to discern the promptings of the Holy Spirit for the life of the Congregation and its service of the Church and world, including its involvement in education.

Thus one of the outcomes of Vatican 11 was a very significant change in the Catholic Church's relationship with Judaism. The Roman church was now committed to a relationship which included helping the members of the church know its roots in Judaism and beginning a journey with the Jewish community which was based in respect and reciprocity rather than supersessionism and a desire to convert. This was enormous change for the church and for many Sisters of Our Lady of Sion. Transition to this new reality was the only way for the charism to remain authentic in a changing world and a changing church.

The charism itself had been through very significant transformation while retaining the essential gift of the Holy Spirit given to Fr Theodore.

One may well ask what the characteristics were that assisted this transition in the Sisters' understanding of the expression of their charism in the world of the second half of the twentieth century. These can be summarized as: reflection on the reality of life beyond the convent walls, openness to God's ways, dialogue, and authentic relationships which were both encouraging and at time, confronting.

Why are we telling you all this? This transformation in the life of the Roman church and in the self understanding of the Sisters of Our Lady of Sion has implications for the ongoing transformation of the College which remains under the charism of the

Sisters of Our Lady of Sion. In the Colleges of the Congregation the students stopped the practice of praying for the conversion of the Jews and started learning about Judaism and later they learned about Judaism from Jews themselves, they learnt that the Shoah (Holocaust) had meaning for the Church whose teachings may have contributed to a social environment where such a thing was possible.

But Christian anti-Judaism did lay the groundwork for racial, genocidal anti-Semitism by stigmatizing not only Judaism but Jews themselves for opprobrium and contempt. So the Nazi theories tragically found fertile soil in which to plant the horror of an unprecedented attempt at genocide. (US Bishops. 2001:10)

Today the habit of learning about other Faith traditions is not only a common part of the curriculum of any Sion school but has recently become part of the Curriculum of most Catholic and Christian schools. Our society needs people of different cultures and Faiths to live in harmony. It is on the agenda of societal relationships.

This one small example of the Charism of a Congregation of religious women assisting the transformation of College curriculum to respond to the changing reality of church and world provides an insight into the power of the Holy Spirit working through the particularity of one charism. This has several implications for leadership in relation to the teaching of the Roman Catholic tradition and for the moral and social life of Australia.

### **Transformative Leadership Today**

*“Did not our hearts burn within us while he talked to us on the road.” (Luke 24:32a)*

How then do we as leaders in Catholic schools not only receive the flame that embodies the charism bestowed upon us by the Congregations that founded our schools, but how do we allow this flame to grow, to spread and to give fuel to the minds and hearts of our staff, to ignite passion in our students and to serve to warm and give light and confidence to our parents?

In the final part of this paper we will present possible ways the living out of the charism can be brought to the fore by providing some possible examples for the discussion, discernment and contextualisation by leaders of Catholic schools.

#### **1. Provide opportunities for Reflection.**

It is essential that the leadership of the College take the time to reflect together both on the world around them and the tradition upon which their particular College is built. Today this may include reflecting upon issues such as; the Generation Y studies, the culture of violence in our world, influence of media and rapid technological advances, life in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and the challenges that a multi-faith and multi-cultural society brings. How do the Scriptures invite us to respond to these realities? What wisdom and guidance does our Catholic tradition offer in this regard? Where does the particular charism of this College fit with this world and its challenges? This can be done on the days which leadership teams set aside to reflect together. It requires space and time for such important reflection and articulation.

## **2. Offer authentic relationships and experiences that lead to transformation**

The central focus for the Sisters of Sion since Vatican II has been to engage in Jewish – Christian dialogue. Such dialogue endeavors to encourage greater understanding of “the other”, engendering qualities of mutual respect, knowledge and awareness the aim of which is to build bridges among people and foster acts of reconciliation. For the Sisters such a realization of genuinely valuing and knowing the other came about through the call of M.M Felix when she said; “We do not know the Jews”, consequently directing Sisters to move towards living relationships with the Jewish people as part of their formation. The concept of being in relationship, experiencing the world of “the other” still holds true for the Sisters today. Whilst remaining faithful to their commitment of solidarity with the Jewish people, they are called to widen their horizons and respond to the biblical ideal of welcoming the stranger, opening their hearts to the poor through acts of charity, working for justice, engaging in activities that bring about reconciliation and healing for all people and to bring peace into relationships and to the world we live in.

### **How does Our Lady of Sion College go about transformation?**

How then do we educate our College community to be transformed in a way similar to that described above? The answer lies somewhere in the experiences we provide for the staff, the formation we offer, the environment we engender, the symbols we display and the relationships we nurture.

We have made an on-going commitment to send staff to Jerusalem for one month each year to live along side the Sisters, to experience the world of Israel, to be nourished by Scripture through study and share in the brokenness of the people.

Such an opportunity is likened to an immersion experience. It develops biblical knowledge and reflection, provides a lived encounter of interfaith relationships, an experience of being in a Christian minority situation, and a lived experience within a community of Sisters of Our Lady of Sion and especially a lived experience of Judaism in a place where it is most visible. It also provides an opportunity to engage with Palestinian Moslems and to see the consequences in the lives of Israeli and Palestinian families of the hatred and injustice present in their society and their lives. Other staff members are currently being given the opportunity to participate in a similar experience. This is an important way of providing experience which is the basis for reflection, prayer, discernment and action which enhances the way the College leadership shapes the life of the Collage.

The establishment of the Mission Team composed of the two Deputy Principals, two younger staff members and the Mission Co-ordinator who is a Sister of Sion who works in the College one day a week, has provided opportunities for a deepened understanding of the charism leading to vibrant and interactive discussion. Such dialogue has heightened the organic nature of the charism and provided an invitation to begin to interpret it within the context of a school setting. This team, as did M.M. Felix mentioned above, reflects on the life of the College and society, prays the Scriptures together and both learns about the charism and explores ways of continuing to make it more alive in the life of the College.

We articulate the charism through the Mission statement of the school providing opportunities for the educational community to evaluate policies, publications and practices. The Mission statement also is a pathway by which parents and students in particular can begin to learn about the charism and its implications for the school.

As leaders we attempt to provide meaning and purpose to the routines of school as a way of connecting staff and students and providing them with a sense of belonging to a community through the enhancement of authentic relationships. Thus in the ordinariness of school life we can provide enriching and transformative opportunities for individuals. This rippling effect has the capacity to change the community for the better.

Explicit examples of this for staff are shown through mentoring programs, charism induction of new staff and regular professional development opportunities in areas of faith, identity, Catholicity. Staff formation opportunities are also a priority. For

students, the introduction of an affirmation program that recognizes outstanding contributions to the community specifically reflects the spirit of Sion in the ordinariness of the everyday routine, curriculum initiatives that explicitly teach students about the story of the Sion Family. This in turn brings to life an authentic relationship that engages the heart leading to ownership of the charism and desire to live it and interpret it.

We display the story of the Sisters and the spirit of the charism through works of art, symbols and rituals. For example; we ensure Scripture is the basis of our prayer for both staff and students. We select artwork that reflects Sionian values; we participate in actions for reconciliation and peace. We endeavour to use language that is inclusive and respectful of “the other”. We acknowledge significant Christian, Jewish and Moslem Days of worship and Holy Days. Such expressions tap into the sensate and awaken the conscience giving rise for further opportunities of transformation.

### **The Challenges**

The challenges remain even as the vision burns in the minds and hearts of the leadership in a college.

The most important and ongoing responsibility and challenge is to assist the staff in their own ongoing transformation as disciples and as committed and competent teachers in a Catholic school. It must be recognised that staff enter the school with a variety of experience, knowledge, preconceptions and self awareness. Shared meaning can be difficult to attain. The regular movement of staff means that this is a never ending task. The challenge is to assist the formation of sufficient staff to allow for ongoing formation, both formal and informal, by staff themselves. This does not negate the importance of studies and experiences beyond the College community.

Related to this need is the reality that some staff are disconnected, disengaged or disempowered by the Church for a variety of reasons and yet it is within the context of the Tradition of the Church that the charism of the Congregations rest. This requires a healing pastoral community which can support these staff members and at the same time call them forward.

Another challenge in relation to the charism of a Congregation can be obtaining the information. Much of the history and understanding of the charism is not well documented by the Congregation and therefore the challenge is to constantly find

further information and appropriate stories to deepen the knowledge of the leaders and indeed all staff and students.

As leaders how do we keep the charism alive? It needs to be organic. What skills do we need to be formed in us and our staff to begin the process of interpreting and shaping the charism for our students today? With the demands of leading educational organisations how do we balance the day to day management issues with issues of vision and governance?

### **Conclusion**

The charisms of the founding Congregations provide a wonderful particularity to the way a College enters into the good news of Jesus and the whole biblical and religious tradition of the Church. This is a precious gift of the Holy Spirit and a source of life and energy for the leadership within the particular College.

Charisms need to be understood anew for today. This process of re-interpretation brings about a corresponding transformation in the leadership team and the leadership they offer.

The Charism of the Sisters of Our Lady of Sion continues to provide the particularity for the College which bears its name. This charism is complex and includes a cluster of characteristics which are all part of the wider church: Jewish Christian Relations, Inter Faith relations generally, biblical study and spirituality, work for justice and peace. These are issues of today and for which we need wise and transformative leadership in our College and which continues to call the leadership team itself to be transformed.

These core values must be owned by the leaders of the College, shared with the staff so that they, in their turn, empower our students to be carriers of the flame, pilgrims on the journey and young people who know of God's passionate love for them.

This is a challenging charism which has much to offer a secondary college for girls in 2007. Our society needs to face the challenges of a culturally and religiously diverse society. The change in the way the Sisters moved from prayer for the conversion of Jews to engagement and dialogue offers a paradigm for the process of transformation which is offered by charisms of Religious Congregations.



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