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Earl, Sister P. H.(2008) *Faith Formation of the Laity in Catholic Schools: The Influence of Virtues and Spirituality Seminars*. Charlotte, North Carolina: Information Age Publishing.

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You can't give what you don't have.

A strong recurring theme in Sr Patricia Helene Earl's *Faith Formation of the Laity in Catholic Schools* is that "You can't give what you don't have". And what many Catholic school teachers don't have nowadays is a deep understanding of their faith and the practices of the Catholic Church. How has this come about?

As Sr Patricia points out, in the 1950s some 95% of staff in Catholic parochial schools in the USA were religious: ordained priests, nuns or brothers. By the late 1990s, that statistic had been turned on its head. Now 95% of the staff are lay people, and many of those who actually attended Catholic schools did not receive their faith education from a teacher part of a religious order. Add to that the fact that many teachers in Catholic schools are not Catholics themselves, and the problem of developing the faith lives of the

About the Author

Sr Patricia Helene Earl is well-known among American Catholic educators, having held a variety of leadership roles in more than 35 years of work in Catholic education. She coordinates Marymount University's Catholic School Leadership program.



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children in these schools becomes even more problematic. There is an “...increasing number of teachers who are coming to our Catholic schools for the first time, without ever having attended a Catholic schools as a student. Many of these teachers not only need to be taught the church teachings or doctrine, but also need to understand the purpose and identity of a Catholic school” (p16). That’s not to say that lay people cannot be just as faith-filled and knowledgeable about Catholicism as a member of a religious order, but what they don’t have is the formation in faith provided to a novice; the steeping in the charism of a particular order.

Faith Formation of the Laity in Catholic Schools is a qualitative study of the effects on fifteen elementary school teachers of the virtues and spirituality seminars that Sr Patricia has conducted in the Arlington Diocese in Virginia, USA. The book is in three main parts: a background to the problem or need for these seminars; a description of the seminars themselves; and the effect on the personal life and teaching of the seminar participants.

The seminars for teachers in Catholic schools described here by Sr Patricia have two topics: virtues and spirituality, and are designed to go some way to redress the perceived deficit of religious knowledge and personal spirituality that was previously seen in those teachers who were members of religious orders.

The push in American schools for character education, or virtues education (p. 14), is mirrored in Australia (where this writer lives) as “values education.” One colleague of mine has spoken of the advantage of working in a Catholic school, where the faith on which the school is built allows us to teach values in an authentic way. There is a clear, definable reason for doing what we do. The virtues to which Sr Patricia refers are those defined by the Catholic Church as “(an) habitual and firm disposition to do good”. They comprise such qualities as prudence, justice and temperance, faith, hope and charity, and the gifts of the Holy Spirit, wisdom, understanding, counsel, fortitude, knowledge, piety, and fear of the Lord. Sr Patricia writes in her book of how some teachers having worked through her seminars have established a ‘virtue of the month’ or similar program in their schools, where a particular virtue is explicitly taught, modeled and rewarded. By aligning those theological virtues with the values generally accepted as the essence of goodness in a democratic society, Sr Patricia’s seminars become useful for any teacher in faith-based educational setting.

A decision to take on the direct teaching of virtues in a school community gives that school a wonderful opportunity to develop the Catholic “climate” of the school. This “...should be

noticed as soon as one enters a Catholic school”, and is the “...underlying reality in which the student’s experiences of learning and living achieve their coherence and their deepest meaning” (p. 188). This program of virtue and spirituality seminars provides a very real opportunity for Catholic schools to develop this sense of lived Catholicism.

Her spirituality seminars serve a slightly different purpose: to deepen the personal faith of attendees, and to assist then with the development of faith education in schools. As one of the teachers who attended Sr Patricia’s seminars said, “You can teach it. You can preach it. But if you’re not living it and the children aren’t seeing it in you, it’s not the same” (p. 162). Another (p. 189) talks of not using religious concepts outside of Religion classes, but with the understanding she achieved through the seminar, feeling better able to teach religious ideas by living them out throughout the school’s curriculum.

The book is concluded with a summary of areas for further research: the effect of the seminars on the life and teaching practices of secondary school teachers, on male teachers, and teachers with a Catholic school experience themselves as a student compared to those without such an experience.

About the Reviewer

Damien Morgan (Dip Prim Teach, B.Ed, M.Ed) is the Deputy Principal Junior School at Our Lady of the Southern Cross College, in Dalby, Queensland, Australia. OLSCC is a P-12 Catholic School with its roots in the Mercy and Edmund Rice traditions. Damien has been a teacher and administrator in Catholic primary schools in the Ballarat and Toowoomba Dioceses for more than 30 years. He has a deep interest in the "Catholicity" of schools, and in the use of information technologies in the classroom. Away from school he is a husband and father (of three) and enjoys a wide range of music, watches too much television, and is an obsessed fan of Australian football.

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