

For heads and heart

Falling applications for vacant headships is spurring renewed spiritual formation of lay Catholic educators, especially those tasked with leading the Church's schools in these challenging secular times

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OVER THE LAST 40 years, the Congregation for Catholic Education has from time to time promoted the formation of lay Catholic educators as the influence of priests and religious orders in Catholic schools declined. However, the Church has not really paid much attention to the specific spiritual formation of Catholic head teachers until now.

The 1982 document, *Lay Catholics in Schools*, described the role of lay Catholics in schools as a vocation and an apostolate that needs the support of professional, religious and spiritual formation if it is to form young people with a mission to build up the kingdom of God. The role of the head teacher was still very much in the background. The assumption was that the leadership of Catholic schools, if not most of the teaching, was still in the hands of consecrated people.

In 2007, *Educating Together in Catholic Schools* signalled a shift in approach, saying that "Catholic educators need a 'formation of the heart': they need to be led to that encounter with God in Christ which awakens their love and opens their spirit to others". Yet, there is no reference to what this kind of formation might look like and no reference to the role of leadership.

The first significant reference to the formation of Catholic head teachers appeared in the 2014 *Instrumentum laboris, Educating Today and Tomorrow: A Renewing Passion*. It stated that the role of the head teacher is crucial in order to preserve the Catholic school as a community "animated by the Holy Spirit". For that reason, "particular attention must be devoted to the formation and selection of heads". Addressing a plenary session of the Congregation for Catholic Education in 2014, Pope Francis spoke of the need for "permanent formation" for staff in Catholic schools and recommended that "retreats and spiritual exercises" should be part of any programme.

In 2017, the Bishops of England and Wales agreed that the formation of Catholic head-teachers was now a priority. This was the result of fewer applications for head teacher vacancies and increasing pressure to apply a business model on schools in order to achieve maximum efficiency. At their spring plenary, they stated that "Catholic school leaders and governors play a central role in the spiritual and academic life of their schools. The formation of Catholic school leaders and the

To do

ENSURE opportunities for Catholic educators in their formation of the heart through programmes such as the National School of Formation.

REMEMBER that the role of the head teacher is crucial to preserving the Catholic school as a community.

FOCUS on the formation of all staff – Catholic or not – in order to provide invitational witness to the mission of the Catholic school in the modern world.

exercise of good governance are strategic priorities for Catholic education."

A working party has now been convened by the Catholic Education Service to develop strategies for leadership and it will begin its work this autumn. What will come of this remains to be seen. Meanwhile lay Catholic educators, supported by the Catholic educational charity, EducareM, have not been idle.

In 2010, a representative group of leaders in Catholic education, now known as the Nottingham Group, held a sequence of meetings to address what they saw as the urgent issue of the formation of Catholic head teachers beset by relentless secular pressures. The Catholic Head Teachers' National Retreat and the National School of Formation (NSF) were the outcome of those talks (see *Schools Practice*, 22 July). As a delegate on the first cohort of the NSF, I had a unique opportunity to conduct a small-scale research study on its impact on the delegates and to explore its pedagogical approach and content at close hand.

I interviewed 20 of the delegates, all head teachers from primary and secondary schools across the state and independent sector. The evidence from the interviews suggested that the current supplies of "spiritual capital" – to use Professor Gerald Grace's term – among Catholic head teachers, did not provide ongoing formation or any deepening of their spiritual lives. There was an evident hunger for a "formation of the heart" and the pedagogy and content of the National School of Formation seemed to answer that need.

Rather than the doctrinal instruction suggested by *Lay Catholics in Education*, the

emphasis is on exploration of scripture and Catholic Social Teaching in action. Above all, it is on experiential immersion visits to transformational projects on the margins of society. Visits to these projects had a profound impact on delegates. Following a visit to the Lalley Centre in Salford for people who are destitute, one head teacher re-designed her entire Continuing Professional Development programme to enable every member of staff the opportunity to visit the centre. She said that the feedback forms from this experience are remarkable.

The head teachers I interviewed had an intuitive understanding of the link between these visits and their apostolate in schools. Catholic schools, as part of the mission of the Church, are called to be outward-facing, to form young people in the knowledge, skills and personal qualities which will enable them to build up the kingdom of God, to be "agents of change" who will bring peace and justice to a fractured world. The head teachers who lead Catholic schools will grow in their commitment to this mission by exposure to the faith in action of ordinary people who run projects for the "least of these" in our society – the poor and the precarious, where a transformational encounter with God takes place.

Christopher Richardson, a former Catholic head teacher himself, has conducted doctoral research into the theological dispositions of Catholic head teachers. He concluded that their dominant disposition was "relational", which means "less concern with being faithful to a set of beliefs and more concern with being faithfully in the light of the teaching of Jesus Christ under the guidance of the Church". The head teachers in my research study, like Richardson's, were in a relationship with God in Jesus and other people.

The formation of the heart that will deepen their sense of vocation and discipleship will not be achieved solely by the study of documents – important as that is – but by encounters with Jesus Christ in the poor, and prayerful reflection of how these encounters can have a transformational influence in their schools.

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