



## What Formation for today's Church Leaders?

Recently I heard that at a meeting of Catholic CEOs, in response to a question as to whether a particular CEO would be using the e-Conference on *Jesus the Christ* for staff formation, she answered, “ we do our formation on [our founder], why would we want to do anything on Jesus?”

Formation of Leaders for the Church today is a key focus for every sector of the Catholic Church – diocese, parish, education, health & aged care and social services.

This need has been exacerbated by the reduction in the number of religious, which means that lay people are more and more in positions of governance and operational leadership in every sector of the Church.

So the question is, 'what sort of formation is needed for these leaders'? I know someone doing a PhD on the topic, so while there could be much to say I will give a more succinct and simple answer, but one I believe is a reasonable guide.

Up to this time we lay people have largely outsourced holiness and spiritual leadership. We saw religious and priests as the holy people. We supported them and saw ourselves as mostly helpers. That gave a majority of practicing lay Catholics the understanding that they didn't really need to develop their spiritual lives. They could do very little more than the minimum of going to Church on Sundays and holy days. Over time even that has become optional for many, even those in senior leadership positions in Catholic organisations.

My understanding is that this minimalist approach is a recipe for disaster. First and foremost it is a disaster for the spiritual life of the person. If the spiritual life is not fed, it will die. A minimalist approach will help make the Christian life unfulfilling and meaningless, and the person will end up drifting away from their faith. Secondly, every leader in a Catholic organisation needs to be evangelising: building a Christian community, creating disciples and reaching out in mission through service, faith sharing and working for justice and creation. You can't do that if you yourself aren't on a real and credible (though still imperfect!) Christian journey.

I often read documents which commend priests and religious who are those in the Church who give their “whole lives” to God. Though I understand that the vow of chastity is a huge sacrifice, we need to understand that Jesus actually asks every person to give their whole life to God. Jesus asks every person to “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind”; and, 'Love your neighbour as yourself’ (Luke 10: 27). There are no discounts for being a lay person!

What we need to understand is to truly love God and love your neighbour is extremely difficult. For lay people to live that out, the formal and intensive formation which was once the province of religious needs to be the norm, as much as possible, for every lay person. Leaders need far more formation again. I understand there is a Centre of Catholic Leadership opening in Melbourne in 2012 to serve leaders in every sector through education and formation. This is both welcome and overdue.

In the Catholic education sector you must be a committed practicing Catholic to be in a key leadership position. But at last week's ACU conference on Educational Leadership the answer was clear, only going to Mass each week is actually vastly inadequate formation. Church leaders in education need far more formation and support as well as the Eucharist. They need the knowledge, skills and personal relationship with God and others which would enable them to be the spiritual leaders of their communities. And at a time where many in those communities will be not practicing or not Catholics, that task has never been more challenging.

Recently the Board of a social service provider I know was told by the leader of its sponsoring religious congregation that the new CEO did not need to be a practicing Catholic. In education, the CEO (principal) and even lesser leadership staff need to be practicing Catholics and have further extensive formal formation. Is that saying that Church organisations outside education are second rate in their Catholicity, or a lesser means of evangelisation? If anything sectors such as social services are more challenging in the spiritual demands of their evangelising mission, and therefore need the most fully formed leaders.

If formal and comprehensive, initial and ongoing formation was and is necessary for leaders of a Church organisations who are religious, why would it be that lay people need anything less? So if we need a general guide for Formation, let's look to the rich legacy of religious life as the future norm for lay Church leaders.

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