

Programs of Christian Service in Catholic Secondary Schools

It is very important to realise that the Catholic identity of our schools is not exclusively related to religious instruction and the integration of academic studies into a unified whole. The Catholic school has a single Christian vision, an integrated concept of what makes a fully authentic and mature human being. The educational process is not confined to the curriculum, nor to the academic, technical, artistic and sporting achievements of the school. The Catholic school should be seen as offering the possibility not only of exploring the mystery which God is, but also of demonstrating the Gospel in action. It must be consistent throughout and in every aspect reflect the Christian faith, which is its soul, its inspiration and its justification.

Cardinal Basil Hume
The Future for Catholic Schools

Introduction

Service-learning has become a key concept in contemporary education. Whether on a college, secondary or primary school level, service-learning programs have become part of the ordinary course of American education. Along with “character education”, it has served as an engine in educational reform efforts throughout the nation. Across the board, service-learning programs are aimed at providing deeper links between students, schools and their local communities, as well as providing for better learning outcomes and preparing students for careers and the workplace.¹

None of this comes as a surprise to Catholic educators. Programs of service in Catholic schools are at the very heart of the exploration of the mystery of God and a vibrant reflection of the commitment Catholic education has made to living the Gospel. Character formation is at the very heart of Catholic school pedagogy and the *raison d’être* of Catholic education. As the Second Vatican Council decreed, Catholic education exists to make the believer’s faith “living, conscious and active.”² There is no doubt that well-designed, well-run programs of Christian service are an indispensable element in the successful accomplishment of Catholic education’s mission. In the words of the U.S. Bishops, “Catholic school students should be introduced gradually to the idea and practice of Christian service. In early years, efforts to instill a sense of mission and concern for others help lay a foundation for later service projects, as does study of the lives of the saints and outstanding contemporaries.”³

It is therefore essential to establish some guidelines for such service programs.

Identity

Our commitment to service flows directly from our baptismal commitment. Therefore, we should clearly identify our service programs as *Christian*. This is to be preferred to “community service.” Likewise, the *school affiliation* of our students should be clear and

¹ For an excellent survey of materials concerning service-learning, see the web-site for the National Service-Learning Clearinghouse at www.servicelearning.org.

² *Christus Dominus*, #14.

³ *Sharing the Light*, #232.

unambiguous when they are engaged in service activities that serve as part of their program of studies.

Structure

There are a variety of ways to structure Christian service programs within a school community.

School-sponsored service activities such as clothing or food drives can be effective in creating a shared vision and sense of purpose within the school community, as well as fostering a tangible sense of belonging to a community for whom service is a priority. Such activities should be *public* and *well-organized* so as to ensure maximum participation and identification with the school's undertaking.

There are ***service-based organizations and clubs***, some of which have a clear religious identity (e.g., Habitat for Humanity) and some that do not (e.g., Rotary International's Interact clubs). These service-based clubs can serve an important function within the school community and provide students with excellent opportunities for service within their school and local community, as well as the wider community. Likewise, service trips on weekends or during school breaks can serve a similar purpose. Such organizations and clubs require *moderators* to provide adult supervision. They should also have *clear criteria for membership*, as well as easily obtained *information* concerning the organization, club or activity's structure, purpose, etc. The voluntary association of students, faculty and parents with such activities and the enthusiasm they generate can be a catalyst in establishing the habit of service within a given school.

Curriculum-based programs generally take on two forms: service as an elective or course requirement within the Religious Studies curriculum or completion of a service program outside the Religious Studies curriculum as a condition for graduation. In both forms, *formal evaluation* is a key component of the program. There must be a designated person who will evaluate the student's performance and verify the completion of his or her service commitment. This may be structured in a variety of ways, e.g., a classroom teacher, department chair, administrator, campus minister, chaplain or service director. Such programs may have a service component as a course requirement or actually be structured with the service experience as the core component of the course. They may also be non-course based and reflective simply of the school community's Christian mission and witness. Such programs are, by their nature, both cross-disciplinary in terms of curriculum and a force for integration within a given school community and its curriculum. The focus becomes less exclusive and more inclusive as the Christian service-learning component of the school curriculum is not confined to the course offerings of a single academic department. Such programs require a concentrated collaborative effort within the school community in order to function, e.g., reflection leaders/readers, placement site visitors, etc. Often there is a single program director or a designated team that administers the program.

The identification and creation of partnerships with *appropriate service sites and agencies* is a crucial element in the success of service programs. If Christian service is to be meaningful and well-managed, it is of the utmost importance that the school develop ongoing relationships with quality placements. Students should be provided with a list of prospective placements and new placements should always be scrutinized before being added to a school's placement pool. A few guidelines are absolutely necessary:

- Sites should be non-profit & engaged in activities that are not contrary to Catholic teaching.
- A contact person/supervisor must be provided for each student at a given placement.
- Students must be under adult supervision at all times.
- Students must receive proper orientation to the task(s) they will be undertaking.
- Students must keep a time sheet & supervisors provide an evaluation of the student's performance.

A special preference should be given to placements that are Catholic (e.g., Catholic schools, day care, social service agencies) and/or reflect Christian values and principles.

Finally, *reflection* upon service is a key element in the success of the service experience and the learning it produces. Theological reflection – that is, reflection in the light of the Gospel and the Church's teaching - is essential to the formative mission of Christian service in Catholic schools.

Reflection can be structured in a variety of ways to accommodate the particular needs of a given service program. Small-group or classroom discussion, journaling and reflection essays on given topics are only a few of the methods of reflection available to those evaluating student participation in service programs in Catholic schools.⁴ Structured reflection activities are an integral component in fostering an active and vital faith in students. Developing a sense of service as part of one's ongoing affiliation with the school community, as well as providing students with the tools necessary to discern the presence of God in their every day lives, is an essential element in any Christian service program associated with a Catholic school.

Schools as Communities of Service

Perhaps the key element in creating a culture of service within our school communities is to foster an active sense of the Church as Servant. As the U.S. Bishops put it, "The Church is a servant community in which those who hunger are to be filled; the ignorant are to be taught; the homeless to receive shelter; the sick cared for; the distressed consoled; the oppressed set free - all so that men may more fully realize their human potential and more readily enjoy life with God now and eternally."⁵ A vibrant sense of

⁴ See, for example, the Christian Service Program at St. Paul's High School featured in the NCEA's annual Conversations in Excellence (**Integrating the Social Teaching of the Church into Schools**, 2000, 16-18) or "Christian Service" at www.fordhamprep.org.

⁵ **To Teach as Jesus Did**, #28.

the school as a vehicle for the Church's mission is an important element in the health of school-based Christian service programs. This requires a commitment on the part of the school community to recognize and affirm student and faculty participation in service programs.

The ability to generate this kind of enthusiasm for service to others in the name of Christ must be at the core of the efforts in our schools to foster within our students a sense of their Christian vocation. As the U.S. Bishops recognized, "One measure of a school's success is its ability to foster a sense of vocation, of eagerness to live out the basic baptismal commitment to service, whether this is done as a lay person, religious, deacon, or priest."⁶ There can be no more eloquent witness or testimony to faith than simply "doing unto others" in the name of Christ. It is in the lived, experienced and reflected upon service to others that our students truly learn who it is that is their neighbor and what it is to be transformed through loving that neighbor.

⁶ **Sharing the Light of Faith**, #232.