

Spirituality for RE Coordinators

Talk by Fr Chris Chatteris SJ at workshop on "Spirituality for RE Co-ordinators" 18 June 2009, Mayfair Mercy Convent School

A Coordinator's Life is Terribly Hard

I want to start by telling you something you already know – that the role of the RE coordinator is a tough one. I do this not just to reassure you that I have some understanding of this (some from personal experience) but also to be realistic. If the facts are as unfriendly as they are said to be, what spirituality will actually be effective and helpful? Will centering prayer help? Or *lectio divina*? Or Ignatian imaginative contemplation? Or the recitation of the psalms? What about the spirituality of the hermit? Simon Stylites? How about a little self-flagellation, or perhaps this is included in the work itself?

The central problem is that RE is the Cinderella subject in schools, even Catholic school. Teachers of RE and presumably RE coordinators struggle to be taken seriously. This is not just because our Catholic schools in South Africa are only partly Catholic in terms of both staff and students. I once taught in a Jesuit school in London which had an almost 100% Catholic enrolment. Even here the RE department had to struggle for its corner. I suppose this is just in the nature of academic institutions in which departments tend to compete for resources and timetabling. Ah yes, those were the days – the shifting alliances in the staffroom, science vs arts, commerce vs music, and everyone vs the sports department! But despite this general dynamic, there is no doubt that there are Cinderellas. I mean the maths department is as secure as Fort Knox. So is English. History has to watch out; art and music are always in danger; but RE is the Cinderella of the Cinderellas.

Despite what may be grandly written in the school's mission statement about the Catholic ethos and the importance of Catholic values, when it comes to the crunch schools want good matric results. There's a lot of lip-service. In reality RE is not taken seriously by anyone – students, parents or teachers. If a retreat or day of recollection clashes with a cricket match, the religion of sport wins out over the religion of Christianity. When a space is needed on the timetable for something extra, the RE period often springs to mind first. You know the picture.

It's not a totally bleak picture. The principal is the one who sets the tone in a school and so if he or she takes RE seriously then it will normally be valued and be given enough space and resources.

Then there are those seed-sowing moments – a retreat that goes well, a service on an important occasion, a really good visiting preacher – when something deeper happens. At those moments even RE's disparagers can be helped to see how important the subject is. I can remember one such moment at this school in London. We had a Mass for Remembrance Day and I had to celebrate it. I did some research on a couple of past pupils who died in WW 2, and spoke briefly about them. This seemed to touch a chord with a number of the members of staff. On another occasion I got Therese Vanier, the sister of the celebrated Jean, to talk to the dullest class in the school about her work for people with terminal cancer – a huge impact! I once took a group of them on a visit to Lourdes and it was a real pilgrimage for many of them thanks to the work they had to do with the sick. Then we had an Anglican teacher who became a Catholic and later on left the staff to join a monastery. You have to wait for these things to come around, but of course they would

never happen if the basic ethos of the school was not the kind that would allow them to happen. The image of the sower going out to sow comes to mind though perhaps the RE coordinator is not so much the sower as the one who laboriously prepares the ground.

Spirituality

I have read the Roles and Responsibilities of the RE Coordinator as drawn up in the workshop in Pretoria in May 2009. I must say that this person makes Jesus on a good day seem fairly ordinary. The RE Coordinator has to be a kind of saintly workaholic as far as I can see from this document. There is a huge range of activities, and I am assuming that most RE Coordinators are in other subjects. Indeed there may be an argument for trying to be involved in another subject as this tends to increase the street cred of RE. If you are a respected, professional science teacher and also teach RE this can enhance RE in the eyes of both staff and students.

So our Coordinator has a lot to do and has also to be a virtuous person. He or she should be 'a committed, enthusiastic and practising Catholic' according to the workshop text. The other striking thing about the description is the variety of personal skills the Coordinator needs. She has to be highly organised, deeply diplomatic, very well versed in the history and ethos of the school as well as conversant with the charism of the religious order that may have founded it. The creativity of the curriculum developer needs to be present as does the discipline of the one providing quality assurance. The Coordinator has to be something of a manager but often without the powers that other managers are given. The coordinator needs to be a liturgist, sometimes a spiritual director, a pastor, a bookkeeper, a librarian, a social worker, an interreligious dialogue pundit and a social activist.

What is 'spirituality'? It occurs to me that you may be wondering. The problem here is that it is often thought of as the unique preserve of priests and religious, and there is some truth in the suggestion that we do tend to keep it to ourselves rather than sharing it with the Church. A brief definition is that spirituality is what keeps me going, gives me mileage. It is those practices, like reading, prayer, meditation, fasting, that keep religious people going. It is arguable that everyone has a spirituality, even non-religious people, but that's another story.

For Catholics there's the whole sacramental side of the Church which is integral to any Catholic spirituality. All the spiritual gurus in Catholicism want us to go to the sacraments, particularly those of penance and the Eucharist. What we as Catholics tend to neglect is the reading of the word of God and the deeper and longer practices of prayer, meditation, retreats which we have. This is because we have traditionally left them to the specialists – the clergy and religious. The laity have therefore been left with devotions, which are good in themselves, but tend to include the idea that the laity can only go so far on the path to holiness. If you are lay you can only do the basic course.

This perspective was challenged by Vatican II and there had always been those who understood that the Church is the laity. For example there is the story of Newman who was asked by a rather stuck-up clergy man: 'Well Mr Newman (I think he was still an Anglican), what do you think of the laity?' To which Newman replied, 'Well, we'd look rather silly without them!'

So we need to find a spirituality for the laity. Well, it's not just because I am a Jesuit that I say that a spirituality of 'finding God in all things' would be generally appropriate to such a person. It is because of the person's position that I say that. He or she is, if the profile is to be believed, going to have to deal with a wide variety of things. A monastic spirituality or a hermit spirituality are unlikely to fit the bill for the typical RE Coordinator. Some form of 'active' or what we might call 'marketplace' or 'apostolic' spirituality is obviously called for. Not that hermits and monks are not active and apostolic. But since the emphasis of their work is on prayer and our Coordinator hasn't got the time to pray as lengthily as hermits, monks and nuns, then we probably need something whose emphasis is out there where mission is happening.

Jesuits make a distinction between 'Jesuit spirituality' and 'Ignatian spirituality'. We remember that he offered his spirituality to laypeople before he founded the Jesuits and wrote our constitutions. And he clearly meant the Spiritual Exercises as a gift to the Church, not as something exclusively for the Jesuits. So Ignatian spirituality is for everyone. So let's look at those dimensions of your work and see whether there is a fit between it and this kind of spirituality.

'Mission' brings to mind an important dimension of the Coordinator's spirituality, namely the need for it to be apostolic. Ignatian spirituality is thoroughly apostolic. Even when St Ignatius of Loyola has you praying in silence for the full 30 days of the Spiritual Exercises and you are deep in contemplation, it is made clear that this withdrawal and silence are only a means to the end of returning to the world of action in order to witness to God made manifest in Jesus Christ. The description of the Coordinator struck me as deeply apostolic. Here is a person who is dealing with every group in the school, from the students to the Principal, with the aim of convincing them of the value of the message of Christ as taught by the Catholic Church. This person has to 'make space' for this message and do so in an extremely busy institution. There is a sense in which the Coordinator is trying to evangelise the institution itself, not just the people in it. He or she has to be constantly looking at the ethos and the structures of the place and how all that goes on in the school affect that ethos – constantly attending to the soil in which the seed is planted.

The job is not for the shrinking violet. I don't say that only extroverts should apply, but certainly it will require someone who can operate out there in the world of people and who can find that life-giving. But the right kind of temperament is not enough. Even extroverts burn out. The Coordinator, like all of us, needs to find what gives him or her mileage. This is especially the case as we get older when the question is how to keep going on a lesser supply of energy.

The need to be looking at the ethos and the structures and how the whole setup works (or doesn't), also requires a discerning spirit. To be constantly casting a reflective regard over the school is a work, not just of analysis, but of discernment. Discernment is an activity which requires a delicate balance of the extrovert and introvert functions. We have to engage with the reality of what we want to examine, and then we have to step back and think, reflect and pray. The problem with the word 'discernment' is that it has somehow picked up a large amount of mystifying baggage. It now sounds like some really specialist spiritual process. This I think needs to be challenged.

Discernment is ultimately about making choices in the Lord. When a young person is 'discerning a vocation', he or she has to mull over the pros and cons, listen to what the reps

of the Church have to say, try to hear what God is saying in prayer, and in the end opt. Occasionally total clarity will be given, but normally not, and the person has to make up his or her mind on the basis of where everything seems to be pointing. We do the same in our daily work as servants of the Lord. You have to make choices about the curriculum, the timetable, celebrations, how to deal with people; the list is endless. The discernment process involves a clarifying of the issues, asking advice, mulling over, praying over and then eventually deciding. Not that we can do this about every little thing we do or we'd never do anything. However, it is also true that if we are cultivating an apostolic spirituality, then the background concern to do everything for the good of our apostolate will be there, even in our smaller, daily decisions.

So what do I mean by 'finding god in all things' or 'contemplation in action', which are two phrases of Ignatius of Loyola? A misconception is that this spirituality allows you just to dive into the world of action and it will all somehow come right. This is what we sometimes parody as 'action-man spirituality'. You know the kind of thing. It is often found among priests who rush around doing all kinds of good and can sometimes be quite censorious about people who go on retreat or take time out to pray. These characters will proclaim quite proudly that they never have any time to enjoy such luxuries. If you dig around a little you will often find that they may be quite scared of things like silence and the self-knowledge that it can bring. It's not that they don't have any time for reflection but that they run a mile from it. And we all get a little nervous when love approaches us, especially the love of God!

On the contrary, the spirituality of 'contemplation in action' or 'finding God in all things' does require some time aside in order to develop the reflective dimension which is the vehicle through which the Lord reveals himself in the action. It does require the development of that self-knowledge which is important in all spirituality. It certainly also requires the development of a discerning spirit, which is a sine qua non of the apostle working in a complex setup in which important choices touching on people's lives have to be made.

So this apostolic spirituality is not a question of running around wildly. It is a spirituality which enables one to immerse oneself in the busyness of a school and yet keep one's head clear and retain one's peace of soul. A person will struggle to do that if they don't take some time out to focus on the source of that peace and the source of that discerning clarity. And it is a spirituality which will keep the person going and effectively going (not just surviving) in the work and the demands and the stress of this very demanding job.

And herein lies the great challenge – how to arrange one's life in such a ways that this real, prayerful dimension is integrated into it. It seems to me there has to be a daily dimension, a weekly (sacramental) dimension and a less frequent dimension which might be a day of recollection or a weekend retreat or even something longer. No doubt you are all struggling with this already and may have been struggling for years. The good news here is that the so-called experts, priests and religious who have this form of spirituality, also struggle. But the struggle is inevitable because the way we live involves constant shift and change. We do not live a fixed and monastic way of life, Each day at school is different. There are busy times and less busy times. One year a particular class is a dream to work with; the next they are little devils. We might change schools, and find that life in one is very different from life in another.

And in the midst of all this we have to try and cultivate a spiritual life which enables us to develop a deeper self-awareness and awareness of what is going on around us and how God is at work there.

Daily. Every Christian tries to pray at least briefly in the morning. The traditional Catholic approach has been some form of the Morning Offering. This is an attempt to make sense of everything that I will do and experience during the day in the light of my faith and my love of God in Christ. So I offer it all up to the Lord – 'prayer, works, sufferings and joys' – and I link it all to the rest of the Church through what we call the Pope's intentions. We traditionally try to pray before retiring. Here a traditional practice of a review of the day can be extremely useful. We can do this naturally anyway before we drop off to sleep. But to do it in the presence of God can have the powerful effect of helping us see where God was active in our day. It can also help us understand where we have fallen down and failed to respond to God's grace. The long term good of the daily 'examen' as it is often called, is a higher level of self-awareness and God-awareness. The examen is a powerful little exercise. It doesn't take much time, though it does require a certain discipline. But its fruit can be very marked. We are a religion of the Book and it seems that reading is therefore part and parcel of our faith. Even illiterate Mediaeval Cistercian monks used to listen to the scriptures being read to them in order to nourish their life of prayer. It doesn't take more than a couple of minutes to read the readings of the day, even if I'm not going to Mass. A spiritual book does not have to be read from cover to cover in one go. In fact something broken into conveniently short, reflective sections, is more appropriate for busy people. Again, a snatch of reading each day is a very small investment, but it can have great yields. When we do this it often happens that a word or a phrase sticks with us during the day and mediates the presence of God to us.

Weekly. Nourishment of the sacramental life – the Eucharist. Well, there is the whole question here of how nourishing this is in the actual practicalities of it, no matter that we all believe that 'the Mass is the Mass' (something we say to the students when they tell us that Mass is boring). I have a particular axe to grind here since I taught homiletics for 9 years at Cedara. I believe that preaching and the nourishment that it can give are often badly neglected in the RC Church. People such as yourselves often feel the need for something more than a devotional ferverino. Something a bit more solid – some theology, some spirituality, some practical application to our everyday life. Some good news in other words. But often people do not get this. Preaching can sometimes be positively unhelpful. All I can say here is that I don't think it's necessarily wrong to 'shop around'.

Monthly. This is very ideal, but wouldn't it be nice to be able to organise a quiet day once a month, just to do a little spiritual reading, for example? And incidentally spiritual reading is a most neglected wellspring of the spiritual life. When a person comes to me and says that the spiritual life has dried up I normally suggest some spiritual reading. This basically takes one of two forms – scripture or non-scripture. We always have a bible or missal to hand so it's not difficult to do the former. The latter means a bit more effort – that of going out and either buying or borrowing a book. But such reading, especially if I have some time, can often lead one into prayer. And I think there is a sense in which spiritual reading, if done in the right spirit, is prayer.

Annually. The person trying to develop a serious spiritual life will try to do a retreat annually. Priests and religious have the utter luxury of 5 – 8 days. The layperson often can neither afford the money nor the time. But a weekend, if planned reasonably will in

advance, should be feasible. Obviously this will require the cooperation of family, but for a weekend once a year, that seems to me to be reasonable.

There is a strange paradox about all this. There is a real sense in which the busier I am the more prayer I need. The fact is that schools are incredibly busy places. They are very extrovert places especially in the sense that teachers have to spend several hours a day projecting themselves and engaging with the external world of children, parents, problems. Some people thrive on this, but even the wildest extrovert can burn out without some attention to one's inner life. There is a whole question here about resources for this – whether there is the time and the place for quiet in the institution. Is there a chapel or a prayer room and is that what it's used for, for example?

It seems to me that school and the formation of children is becoming so activity-based these days that one wonders when they ever have time to think and reflect and digest everything. They rush from school to karate or ballet and at the weekends they have other activities. I remember enjoying just climbing a tree or looking at insects or the sky or riding my bike over the veld and I suspect these things were a grace.

So I suspect that we all have our work cut out when it comes to cultivating our own spiritual lives and also helping young people today to cultivate theirs because we live in a world which values frenetic activity and quantitative achievement. The idea of 'wasting time' with God, is not exactly in fashion. However anyone who does this will find that it's time well spent because it infuses the rest of my time with the peace – and paradoxically – energy that come from an awareness of God in my life and in all things.