High School Chaplain: The more I can share, the more effective I can be

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The more I can share, the more effective I can be

Obinna Ifeanyi CSSp

I believe my ministry as Chaplain is very significant. On paper my primary assignment is to be a teacher. I teach two periods each day and do chaplaincy work for one period. Three of us teachers constitute the chaplaincy team. We try to be available at different times. We also have cookies and soft drinks available in the chaplaincy area to make students feel welcome. Occasionally I get lunch for them: in this way, “I can take them out for lunch and a chat.”

Retreats

Grade 9 — The week before the Grade 9s arrive in high school we have a three-day Orientation Camp for them. This time together helps them to get to know one another, to get connected. We celebrate Mass. We put the new students in touch with the history of the school and with the Spiritans who have been part of that history.

A Teaching Mass is also part of the Grade 9 chaplaincy program. School Masses are celebrated in the gym (“The gym? That’s where I play basketball!”). We have received some money from the Spiritans to buy religious banners to hang from ceiling to floor, so as to transform the gym into a sacred space.

Grade 10 — The Grade 10 Retreat has a Christ-centred focus. Their religion textbook Christ and Culture speaks of Christ in a way that relates to teens: Christ is my hero. Although the content is Jesus, I find it is not sufficiently Christ-centred. As followers of Jesus they need a deeper foundation.

In order to align the Grade 10 retreat with this focus on Christ we hope to work with the NET ministries of Canada —
young adult missionaries who proclaim the gospel of Christ to thousands of teens across Canada and the U.S.

Grade 11 — The Grade 11 religion course is based on World Religions as is the retreat with the Scarboro Missions team. The team leaders are two former VICS members Kathy Murtha and Katie Marshall Flaherty. They have developed a very influential retreat for High School students featuring the Golden Rule as understood in each of thirteen world religions.

Grade 12 — In their last year at Neil we introduce the students to a four day Kairos Retreat. It enables them to know better who they are and what they are going to do next. It gives them an opportunity to discuss their life and their future with their fellow students. Many of them have carried some heavy baggage through all four years in High School ... family problems, personal struggles, economic situations.

Fellow students who have had issues with each other only now begin to understand why this was so. They feel bad for not having been more understanding prior to Grade 12. We are happy to give them the gift of discovering themselves and each other before they leave Neil. In my homily at the closing Mass I share my story with them. Their reaction? “Wow! We didn’t know that about you.”

Personal disclosure
The more I can share my life, my faith, my hopes, my discouragements in my homilies, the more effective I can be as a Chaplain. Connecting religion and life, the gospels and life, Jesus and life is what really counts. I tell them my family story, my struggles to be a priest.

Sometimes I ask another teacher to give the homily. He or she tells them how their life has been and how it is now as a teacher. The students see their teachers in a new light. This gives them courage to open up about their own life and share it with others.

One student
This year we discovered that one student and his mother had been living “outside” for many months — no permanent address, sometimes here, sometimes there, looking for a place to stay. He had told only one teacher what he was going through.

When his Mom told me, I asked myself, “How do I get a home for this family, sleeping here this week, someplace else next week?” Here was an opportunity for me as Chaplain to help a family outside of school.

As priest/chaplain my job is to attend to the spiritual problems and issues of the students: “Can I talk to Father about this?”

Other student issues
“You must go to church. You must say your prayers. You must obey.” Back home in Africa that would work, but not here in Canada where teenagers turn off all these religious ‘musts.’ Some of them say, “I am spiritual, but I am not religious.” I disagree with this.

They are open to, but are they connected to God? They are connected to the media, their iPods, their cell phones, their celebrities. To God? No. They struggle with faith and question it: “If I cannot experience it, it does not exist.” My challenge to them is, “Why do you believe all you see on TV?” I try to get them to see the Jesus of history. Jesus really existed — it’s not a story invented by some early Christians.

In many cases, Chaplaincy work is first evangelization — missionary work. Yes, they have been through the full initiation process: Baptism, Reconciliation, Eucharist, Confirmation. But it is like “all this happened to me but I have no connection to it.” I call my work “re-evangelization”: battling to give them a new insight, to reconnect them to their religion.
Teens and family
When they have individual struggles, they want to discuss them with a person to whom they are connected — a teacher, a youth worker, a social worker, a chaplain. Very seldom do they want that person to inform their family, or to report to an agency.

But such discussions inevitably involve the family. When they do, the question arises — how to bring about that involvement? A formal meeting at school is not always the best solution. I would prefer to drive to the family home and sit down together with them. I could also drive a student home if our discussion goes late into the afternoon. But the school board contract doesn’t cover such situations. It doesn’t allow me to visit students at home. But I have to put my conscience into my ministry. Being a Chaplain is not just about being a teacher.

To understand the teenager you must understand the family. There are parents who want their son in a Catholic school, but have no connection to or interest in the church. It’s a struggle.

Priest image
Will they talk to a priest? “I don’t want to share my private stuff with a priest — someone I don’t really know.” Their image of a priest is someone who says Mass in a church. That’s all. But I show up in the school as Father Obinna, who is with them in the classroom as their teacher. Even so, it takes a long time to get something out of them. But when you keep working with them they discover you in a different way and begin to open up. One benefit of being a classroom teacher is that as they get to know you in that role, they trust you and feel able to tell you what they want to say.

Family-school-church triangle
The ideal family-school-church triangle exists on paper, but in reality church has little or no connection with the majority of families. Most Catholic families do not go to church. Church runs away from youth.

None of the seven sacraments is special to high school in the way that First Reconciliation, First Communion and Confirmation are associated with elementary schools. As teenagers there is nothing to make them go to church. Even most of the incoming Grade 9s have not been to church in a long time.

Suppose we left Confirmation to Grade 9 or Grade 10? We would have something in place for High School. Currently as church we have abandoned youth — we have no “connection” to them. We need to structure something for today’s teenagers.

When I teach the seven sacraments I bring in the vestments, the water, wine, oil, hosts, candles, rings used in the various rituals. I divide the class into seven groups each of which works on a particular sacrament and then reenacts it for the class.

We discuss what we have seen and heard. “I’ve been baptized, I’ve been to confession, I’ve received communion, I’ve been confirmed — but I did it because the class was doing it … because my Mom took me there.”

I challenge the Canadian Spiritans
What brought the Spiritans to Toronto? Answer — to open Neil McNeil and become involved in Catholic education. The moment we step away from that, we lose our raison d’etre. We give up the school, we give up Laval House — we give up who we are.

The diocesan priests were ordained for parishes. That leaves the church with a problem in the area of youth. Are we — the church as a whole and religious communities in particular — walking away from one of our responsibilities? Have we finally given up on the schools because of the challenges they present today? In the history of the church religious communities have run so many schools, have really done a great job. The Church used us to evangelize youth. The moment we leave that space it remains unoccupied.

Coming from Nigeria I have a special interest in education. Remember Bishop Shanahan. Because of him and the Spiritans who succeeded him, education is admired, even adored in my country.

So I challenge my fellow Spiritans: “What brought you here? What did you do when you came here sixty years ago? You opened Neil McNeil High School. This is our identity. This is who we are as Spiritans of the TransCanada Province. We give that up — and we give up who we are.”

— Obinna Ifeanyi CSSp

I say a school Mass five or six times a year. After each Mass (or class), if I get one student to say, “Father, what you said today made sense to me” — that’s fine by me. I’m quite happy. Faith is questioned every day in Catholic high schools. They challenge why they have to believe all this “stuff”?

There is the Jesus of history — they know there was this man Jesus Christ who existed way back then; it’s not a story invented by some early Christians But then comes the challenging question — how have his followers lived since then? Where is the Christ of faith today?

Celebrities define their life — teenagers connect with them, wear their T-shirts and emblems — even their rosaries. From time to time religious symbols become fashion statements — a T-shirt with Our Lady on the front, a rosary beads used as a necklace … Some teachers tell them they shouldn’t wear these. I say, “Leave them — and explain what they really are.”

Teaching — profession or vocation?
That was a question put to us in the Faculty of Education. The majority of student teachers answered profession: follow the law, the rules and the buzzer: that’s it, time to leave school, I’m out of here. I gave my opinion: “Teaching is a vocational profession” — a call to work with kids, not just a job that makes money. Many teachers go the extra mile to help a kid. They see teaching as a vocation.