Faith is Questioned Everyday

Michael Fellin

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What’s it like teaching in an all-boys high school today?

Michael Fellin: Something really special happens when boys grow together as friends. They develop a different sense of community to what they’d experience in a co-ed school: a great camaraderie and a sense of looking out for the one that’s different, for the little guy. I’ve seen this during the Grade 9 orientation at Camp Olympia, in the one-on-one tutoring, and when students I thought would be “picked on” just weren’t. Is there no bullying? Yes, there is, as everywhere. But I’ve been impressed how on a whole they treat each other remarkably well. Given the diversity of the school community I think that’s really unique. The boys are very proud to be from Neil McNeil. Even those students who aren’t doing particularly well academically think highly of their school.

Everywhere I go today I see an emphasis on the individual and competition. You can’t go to work or to a shopping mall
without feeling that. I’d like to think that Catholic schools promote an alternative set of values: building relationships versus promoting the needs of the individual, offering compassion instead of setting up for competition — values that run somewhat countercultural to our boys’ mainstream lives.

**Frank O’Neill:** When we had the Grade 8 parents and students in here for the Orientation Night we emphasized that we were inviting the boys to attend Neil for an experience and not just for academics. We were inviting them to this school for the sense of community they’d find here. That’s what I stress when I go out to speak to the Grade 8s in their schools: “Yes, we do the academics as well as any other school, but there’s something else here that we’d like you to be part of. We’d like you to tap into the underlying energy rising up from within the school and then hand it on to others.”

**How is that sense of community developed?**

**Michael Fellin:** As an adult it’s hard to instil a sense of community in teenagers if you aren’t in communion with yourself and with other adults. It’s hard to connect if you’re not well connected. We have a lot of good people on staff, who feel connected to each other and to the school. They’re able to offer that same connectedness to the students — something they couldn’t offer if their own lives were scattered. Teenagers pick up on that very quickly. They are looking for authentic people — “congruent” adults who speak and live the same thing. Boys especially attach themselves to such people. They see them in the classroom speaking a certain way, they see them in the hallways acting a particular way; they watch them behind the bench, they listen to their conversations with colleagues. They watch and observe. For boys it’s vital to have consistency. That is part of the Neil foundation laid by the Spiritans. It’s an atmosphere that seeps through the walls here. It becomes something you enter into. And it makes a difference.

**Frank O’Neill:** Among the younger staff now I find the same spirit that was in Neil when I first came here in the mid 1970s. I find it amazing that the current staff has preserved it intact. In fact Neil may be a more cohesive school now than when I first arrived.

**Do you find teaching religion fulfilling — or frustrating?**

**Michael Fellin:** I’ll pick up on a theme that Obinna taught me — there is no greater area of missionary work today than
in our schools. (Fr. Obinna, Nigerian Spiritan, is priest chaplain at Neil McNeil). To work in a place where faith is questioned every day, where it is far from taken for granted, is demanding. Young people, especially boys, are one of today’s toughest clienteles.

When I started teaching I said to myself, “This is a great opportunity — boys are just ripe and I’ll be able to see dramatic change in their lives. As a teacher I’ll make some positive difference. I’ll see kids move from point A to point B very quickly.” I soon realized it doesn’t work that way. Teaching has been an opportunity for me to learn as much as a mission to teach.

These teenagers are unchurched in the traditional sense. Yet they experience community in a different sort of way. Their experience of church, like that of many young teachers in our Catholic schools, is in their high school, not their parish. There is real opportunity here.

Frank O’Neill: I look back on my life and I see it as almost Spirit-directed, Spirit-called: from the fields on the farm to St. Augustine’s Seminary; from there to study theology; then meeting a Holy Ghost seminarian who asked what I was going to do with this theology. I said, “I’ve no idea.” He told me about this school, Neil McNeil. I’d never heard of it. I asked him if the principal needed a religion teacher. He came back and said yes. So I was called to an interview. I ended up in a Spiritan school. I couldn’t believe it.

I would say that teaching any other subject is hard, but teaching religion is easy. I’m not sure what else I would teach. It gives me the energy to teach. If you speak from the Spirit within you, you make contact with the Spirit in the other and draw out that Spirit. When you do that, things happen.

Today, for instance, the students were talking about why they should go to church. I gave them an analogy from my own life. I’ve tried to run on the boardwalk all by myself and always faltered. Finally I joined a group to exercise with them at a definite time, consistently. After a year and a half I’m still exercising regularly, whereas when I tried to run on my own I gave up umpteen times. I said to the class, “That says something about why we need church. When people around you are praying, they draw you into it.” I did agree with them that church should be more about discussion and asking questions — “just as you’re doing right now. For many of you this is church right here.” They looked at me and said, “Yes! This is church right here. Yes!”

“What’s the question? Ask the question,” I keep telling them. Now they’re finally getting it. They ask the next question and we go on from there. It’s so important to pick up on their questions, to invite them to ask their question. You can’t get any further if you don’t ask the next question.

The students you teach are unchurched. Are they unbelievers?

Frank O’Neill: Some believe in God, some are not sure, some don’t believe in God. If they don’t believe in God or are not sure, is it because their images of God are Grade 5 images of God? Is that what they’re carrying into Grade 9? If so, it’s too small an image for teenagers. They struggle because they can’t hold on to that image. They have to let it go so that a new image of God can emerge. It may not mean they don’t believe in God. They are in the process of letting go of one image of God and haven’t yet acquired another image.

Michael Fellin: They’re looking to believe in something and someone yet they often look in all the wrong places. They tune in to conflicting things and messages found in popular media. Part of my job is to adjust the frequency. They often imagine God as a parent or as something “out there, somewhere” and can resist believing in that God because of their own parent experience and because of their world of immediacy. Part of becoming a teenager is the desire to be one’s own person. My students want to come to their own understanding of themselves and lay stake to their own identity, in the here and now. When they are guided along this journey with assistance by a caring adult they can “tune in” to the desires of the heart versus the cravings of the world. New dimensions of God can emerge.

Today as their teachers, you journey with them. What happens along the way?

Frank O’Neill: We take up the Sunday readings each week. I try to get them to understand the background. Then I can give some understanding of what Jesus was getting at in a particular situation or story. They begin to hear and see it in a new way. An energizing possibility comes into play — it’s not just “something I have to believe.” They begin to see fresh possibilities

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rather than the same old, same old. They begin to make connections with their own lives. For instance, “I am the vine” really clicked last year. It spoke to them in ways that surprised me.

**Michael Fellin:** I try to get them to dig deeper, to ask questions. They may be taken in by the contemporary culture, but they react very quickly when they see things are not fair and just. They are quite open to the idea that outside forces are at work against how things should be. They get to learn something more about themselves. This can be both challenging and freeing.

**Frank O’Neill:** You’ve got to love these guys and hang in with them. In spite of everything, I do love them. Bit by bit we become more comfortable together. Getting from point A to point B is not the most important thing. What happens along the way matters most. Teaching religion gives you permission to reveal where you are and to go where they are. There isn’t the same pressure to finish everything you’re supposed to finish. If you’re asking them to raise questions along the way, surely you won’t be surprised if you don’t finish the course. I’m a better religion teacher when I don’t feel we have to worry about getting on to the next chapter. We learn something together and that makes all the difference.

To quote another high school religion teacher: “The curriculum is what you teach when they’re not asking questions.”

**Michael Fellin:** It’s hard to dialogue when you think you have all the answers, when you’re not willing to enter into conversation and listen. What turns them off church and religion?

**Frank O’Neill:** They don’t know the people or priests in the parish. Sometimes I think if I was a priest at a Sunday Mass I’d be going up and down the church slapping hands with the children. Human contact is so important to them. Without that they get the feeling they’re not part of this group. A hands-on experience is so important for young people. Otherwise it’s just going through the motions.

I find them eager to take an active part in ritual — lighting an Advent candle, moving through the Stations of the Cross, water rituals. Sitting there passively doesn’t do it for them.

**What would you like them to have gained when they graduate from Neil?**

**Michael Fellin:** My hope is that they experience a sense of brotherhood, that they see themselves as brothers who care for each other.