

## **Collaboration in Action: The School Leader and the Church Leader**

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#### **Introduction**

“Pope Francis’ black eye tells us a lot about the church today.” This was the headline of the Jesuit magazine, *America*, last September 12, 2017. It further said, “The pope had banged his head on the popemobile’s plexiglass shielding when his driver stopped short. ‘I got bashed,’ Francis told reporters, but he proceeded with his normal schedule, bloodstained cassock and all. It made for quite a visual in the following days. It also provided a powerful metaphor for Pope Francis’ ecclesial and personal style. This seems to be the church Francis wants—a little bruised, a little bloodied, and the better for both.”

The following day, September 13, another headline, this time of a nun, caught the fancy of the world. “Florida nun dons habit, grabs chainsaw to help after Irma.” The news further said that the Florida nun is pitching in on the cleanup efforts following Hurricane Irma by taking a chainsaw to downed trees while dressed in her full habit.

A week later, September 17, we witnessed the breath-taking escape and rescue of Fr. Chito Suganob, who was held in captivity by jihadists in Marawi for more than a hundred days. “I am physically strong and handsome,” he vibrantly announced. His happy countenance showed no traces of the ordeal he has just gone through.

The black-eyed pope. The chainsaw nun. The hostage priest. They are powerful images because they humanize and bring back to reality what is hallowed and consecrated. Seldom do we see a Church leader with a black eye. Seldom do we see a school leader, a principal, with a chainsaw. Seldom do we hear of a priest being abducted. These contemporary icons are more than enough to explain what I was tasked to discuss today – Collaboration in Action: The School Leader and the Church Leader.

In *Evangelii Gaudium* (#49), Pope Francis said, “I prefer a Church which is bruised, hurting and dirty because it has been out on the streets, rather than a Church which is unhealthy from being confined and from clinging to its own security. I do not want a Church concerned with being at the centre and which then ends by being caught up in a web of obsessions and procedures. If something should rightly disturb us and trouble our consciences, it is the fact that so many of our brothers and sisters are living without the strength, light and consolation born of friendship with Jesus Christ, without a community of faith to support them, without meaning and a goal in life. More than by fear of going astray, my hope is that we will be moved by the fear of remaining shut up within structures which give us a false sense of security, within rules which make us harsh judges, within habits which make us feel safe, while at our door people are starving and Jesus does not tire of saying to us: “Give them something to eat” (Mk 6:37).” This is what collaboration means. This is what leadership is all about.

In the most recent document from the Congregation for Catholic Education, “Educating to fraternal humanism - Building a “civilization of love” 50 years after *Populorum progressio*”, released last September 22, 2017, schools are asked to humanize education, that is, to make it a process in which each person can develop his or her own deep-rooted attitudes and vocation, and thus contribute to his or her vocation within the community. It further explains that humanizing education means putting the person at the centre of education, in a framework of relationships that make up a living community, which is interdependent and bound to a common destiny. This is fraternal humanism (EFH, 8).

In the age of AI (artificial intelligence) and Chatbots like Siri (a virtual personal assistant), how do we maintain the centrality of the human person? How do we humanize education if all our transactions and even meaningful conversations are rapidly being digitized? And how will fraternal humanism be possible if the dominant narrative in the global and local culture is moving towards social ostracism, hatred and incivility? And yet, there is no better time than today to call out what is eerily deviant in our world – we have ostensibly lost our humanity. And the challenge is to discover once again that inherent in each one of us, whether we are believers or not, is the basic humanity that we share and a collective destiny that we wish to realize.

Last April 2017, Pope Francis made a historic talk at TED (Technology, Entertainment, Design) Conference Vancouver. In his 18-minute video message, the Holy Father said, “How wonderful would it be if the growth of scientific and technological innovation would come along with more equality and social inclusion. How wonderful would it be, while we discover faraway planets, to rediscover the needs of the brothers and sisters orbiting around us. How wonderful would it be if solidarity, this beautiful and, at times, inconvenient word, were not simply reduced to social work, and became, instead, the default attitude in political, economic and scientific choices, as well as in the relationships among individuals, peoples and countries. Only by educating people to a true solidarity will we be able to overcome

the “culture of waste,” which doesn’t concern only food and goods but, first and foremost, the people who are cast aside by our techno-economic systems which, without even realizing it, are now putting products at their core, instead of people.”

The call of our age is solidarity and communion, collaboration and connection. Not to do so is tantamount to self-destruction – both of human life and of our common home. The question, therefore, that we need to address first is why have we been failing in our attempts to forge peace and solidarity in the world? Why is social conflict still the main driver of our world instead of social cooperation and unity? Let us try to look for some answers to these global issues in the more tangible context of the school and the parish. The school and parish relation may serve as an instructive ground to explore the issues of conflict and collaboration.

### **A. The Sources of Conflict**

“A symptom suffers most when it doesn’t know where it belongs,” says Ronald Rolheiser, citing James Hillman, the father of archetypal psychology. If we don’t know the roots of conflicts and lack of cooperation, our efforts of solving them may be in vain. We accept that many of the world’s problems remain intractable. There seems to be no clear answers in the horizon. How do we deal with terrorism and radicalization, with religious and civil wars, with climate change, with hunger and poverty? In their sheer magnitude, these problems look insurmountable. But we can begin by tracing the possible causes of these conflicts, break them down into smaller and more manageable units of analysis, and work our way into offering possible explanations.

From the social identity perspective, conflicts arise because of our natural tendency to be loyal to our in-group and derogate the out-group. Once our social identity is activated and made salient, there is an almost automatic reaction to protect it in the face of threats and opposition. We see this happening all the time in the inter-university games. There is an intimate bond with one’s group and a cold, disdainful look at the other side. Although this is all for fun and entertainment, we know that it goes beyond that. In the parish and school leadership, just try activating the gender or congregational identity and you will have a problem. Because of the various social identities that are deeply embedded in our self-concept, we are always engaged in some form of in-group loyalty check to maintain our positive view of ourselves. From the social identity perspective, it is not our fault. It is just the way we are. The challenge is how to overcome our biases and find some common identification points with others. We either minimize the salience of a certain social identity to reach out to the other or strengthen a common bond with the other. This is one way of avoiding conflict and promoting cooperation.

In the realistic group conflict theory, conflicts happen because of the competition for perceived or real scarcity of resources. Human beings have this natural tendency to win over the competitor in acquiring the coveted supplies or assets. We oftentimes engage in zero-sum win or lose games. In the parish and school contexts, we

sometimes feel that we have to win over the other because we only have limited resources and spaces. We think that our loss is their gain or their loss, our gain. We know very well that it is not the case at all. As ecclesial communities, we do not engage in finite zero-sum games. Instead, our mission of proclaiming the Gospel is to engage in “infinite games”, that is, our objective is not to win or lose but to perpetuate the game as long as it is possible. The mission of the school and the parish is not to win over the other. Our objective is to allow each other to continue its mission as much as possible. We don’t play to win. We play to continue playing.

In the context of the workplace (which I think is the more appropriate setting for analyzing the parish and school relationship), the psychologists Art Bell and Brett Hart proposed eight common and potential causes of conflict: conflicting needs, conflicting styles, conflicting perceptions, conflicting goals, conflicting pressures, conflicting roles, different personal values, unpredictable policies.

### 1. Conflicting Needs

With different needs and jostling over limited resources, the parish and the school may find themselves in conflict. Use of time (schedule) and space (rooms), although can easily be resolved, may become a divisive issue.

### 2. Conflicting Styles

Leaders, as well as followers, have different personalities and idiosyncrasies. We differ in genetic predispositions, culture, upbringing, temperament, leadership styles, etc. These individual differences, if not adequately addressed and clarified, are routine sources of conflicts.

### 3. Conflicting Perceptions

Perceptions are powerful. They shape our attitudes: our beliefs, emotional states, and behavioral reactions. “Where you stand, so you see,” one old saying goes. When perceptions become unyielding attitudes, change is hard to come by. Cognition theorists believe that we are cognitive misers. We don’t really process things a lot. If at all we process things, it’s usually to defend our position and prove the other wrong.

### 4. Conflicting Goals

We usually have the same goals in the parish and school. More or less, we have similar dreams for the Church. Conflicts occur when we differ in the interpretation and implementation of these same mission, vision and goals. Both entities want to evangelize, but they oftentimes argue how to evangelize.

## 5. Conflicting Pressures

Deadlines and timetables are important for any organization. They help us in putting order in an activity-filled environment. Pressures and targets, however, can sometimes be sources of conflict. Tensions and stressful conditions in the parish and the school may result to strained relationships.

## 6. Conflicting Roles

When roles are not clearly defined and expectations are not clearly set, conflict is the usual result. Blaming and finger pointing becomes a bad habit. One party will not admit to a mistake. The other party will never agree to forgive. In the context of the parish and the school, roles have to be clearly defined to avoid cold shoulders and crying spells.

## 7. Different Personal Values

It is a bit surprising, if not disheartening, that parish and school leaders may have totally different personal values. Both may have been trained holistically (human, spiritual, intellectual, pastoral and community) in their formative years, but they could be advocating contradictory and conflicting values. One could have an “edifice complex” and the other could have, what we may call, a “poverty complex”.

## 8. Unpredictable Policies

Predictability is the hallmark of maturity. Through consistency, people learn how to act properly and perform accordingly. When policies and procedures are erratic and whimsical, conflicts surface and relationships are compromised. When leaders act immaturely and impulsively, expect tensions and adverse sentiments to follow.

## **B. The Role of Leadership**

To resolve conflicts and foster collaboration, leaders have to take on a very important role. The parish leader and the school leader hold the key in promoting a culture of dialogue and cooperation. Education to fraternal humanism is anchored on the development of a culture of dialogue – which is not simply an exchange of views but a real encounter with the other.

Leaders have to be men and women of dialogue and inclusion. They have to integrate these qualities in their ethical framework, values, attitudes and social objectives. They have to be imbued with relational skills and principles of spontaneity, freedom, equality, consistency, peace and the common good. Parish and school leaders, therefore, are asked to become prototypes of everything that we wish our students, parishioners and institutions to be. This is why the leadership role is so crucial and necessary. However, we are aware and we accept that not

everyone lives up to the high ideals of leadership. Leaders fail many times. And we fail big time.

The challenge goes back to the instruction and preparation of church leaders both of the parish and the school. Ironically, we go back to the schools, institutes of formation and the seminary. If we want better leadership, then let us train leaders and not just engage in a generic education of church workers. I say this not to disparage our formation programs but to emphasize the need to sharpen our focus on the leadership aspect of the formation of our candidates and students.

We have many good and kind-hearted people in our different apostolates and ministries. They mean well and they are passionate about the kingdom and the gospel. But not everyone is cut out or prepared to be a leader. So many of our institutions and fields of engagement are suffering because of their leaders. Leaders who are burn out and not aware of it. Leaders who are no longer effective but cannot let go. Leaders who no longer have the creativity to innovate and to be open to change. Leaders who are satisfied with the status quo, on a maintenance mode and just managing the decline of members. Leaders who no longer dare to go out into the deep and go forth on a missionary mode.

And so we ask our church and school leaders, using an infamous saying, “what are you in power for”? Taken positively, this can really be a compelling question. How are we exercising leadership in the Church? How do we understand the role of being a leader? How are we harnessing in a constructive way the power and influence of leadership? The Catholic Bishops’ Conference of the Philippines (CBCP) has declared the year 2018 as the Year of the Clergy and Consecrated Life with the theme, “Renewed Servant-Leaders for the New Evangelization”. This is a good opportunity for all of us to really reflect on church and school leadership and what it is for.

Standard 5 of PCSS (Philippine Catholic Schools Standards) says, “An excellent Catholic school is governed and administered by servant-leaders who are Christian witnesses, professionally qualified, and recognized by competent Church authority.” Benchmark 5.3 states, “School leaders are witnessing Catholics – faithful to the values of the Gospel and teachings of the Catholic Church.”

Servant-leadership as a model for leadership in the Church has a very long history beginning with our Lord Jesus himself. The model is quite popular even in the corporate sphere. The litmus test really is in the integration of the model to one’s leadership style and system of values. There seems to be a gap between the ideal and the actual. In a socio-pastoral survey done last 2003 in the Archdiocese of Manila, the priests and religious were found to be enjoying a tremendous amount of security in terms of material sufficiency, economic, social as well as emotional needs. In contrast the data on material poverty and families experiencing physical and emotional hungers were literally reaching a trend of national emergency.

It is not of course my intention to say that we should all live in destitution. The point that I just wish to bring up is the gap between our comfortable life and the miserable life of our people. Clearly this is not the ideal situation for servant-leadership. The study also noted that the lay people found the response and engagement of the clergy and religious to the myriads of problems of our society to be inadequate. This in spite of the many social action programs and activities that we conduct every year. The question then remains, are we elitist-leaders or servant-leaders?

### **C. The Imperative of Collaboration**

Servant-leaders serve before they can lead and they lead by serving. They think of others first before themselves. To be a servant-leader one readily stoops down and washes the feet of others. To be a servant-leader, one is not afraid to smell like the sheep, to protect the sheep when they are being slaughtered, and to lay down one's life for the sheep. To be a servant-leader, one is always ready to suffer and to die, if this means life and hope for others. In the words of Simon Sinek, a popular motivational speaker, "Leaders eat last."

#### *From I to Thou*

This brings us to a key element of collaboration, the readiness to die to the "I" or the ego. More often than not, the stubborn "I" (the ego) blocks the way to better relationships and fruitful collaborations. No wonder then that the first requirement of Jesus in order to follow Him is to deny yourself and only then can you take up the cross of leadership. Fr. Richard Rohr, OFM, says that your egoic false self is who you *think* you are, but your thinking does not make it true. He goes on to say further, "If you do not let go of your false self at the right time and in the right way, you remain stuck, trapped, and addicted. Unfortunately, many people reach old age still entrenched in their egoic operating system." The first act of collaboration is to loosen our tight grip of our egocentric operating system, our *iOS* and to open ourselves to an encounter and relationship with the other not in a functional way but in a relational way. We cannot hide behind our titles and roles all the time. The *I* should meet a *Thou* and not an *It*. We are called to an encounter and relationship of persons and not just of functions.

#### *From I to We*

Another important element of collaboration is to accommodate the *We* in our self-concept. We have every right to our personal styles and ways of doing things. But this is not absolute. We always live in the context of relationships and communities. In fact, there is never a point in our life that we can truly say that we don't need others or that we are not required to deal with them. Whether we like it or not, whether we are ready or not, the other will keep on, using the words of Pope Francis, orbiting in our universe. In Filipino psychology, the core of our values is not *ako* (I) but *kapwa* (shared inner self). Our sense of self is never individualistic. It is always a shared sense of self. Benchmark 3.3 of PCSS reminds us, "The school

collaborates and partners with the families and laity to foster the service for life and the common good.” We are never lone rangers in the ministry. The *I* always have a *we*.

### *From Them to Us*

Categories and labels are disruptive of relationships. *Kayo kasi ganyan. Kami kasi ganito*. In-groups and out-groups notwithstanding, we have to find a common identity that works in real life. Our tribal instincts can be very powerful. But we have to find ways to prevent these implicit thought processes to direct our decisions and consciously look for the common ground and the common good.

Standard 1 of PCSS refers to our common Catholic Identity and Mission: “An excellent Catholic school is animated and driven by a philosophy, vision, mission and core values that embrace and preserve its Catholic identity.” Benchmark 1.4 recommends that the pastoral directions of the local and universal Church be integrated in the school’s plans, programs and activities. This means that we already have a common identity that we can build up and fortify. We just need to de-emphasize our other identities no matter how close they are to our hearts. And this would be quite a struggle for some.

### **Suggestions and Recommendations**

The parish and the school are both ecclesial communities – forms of being Church and in fact, essential ways of being Church. Their ethos, culture, operational values, mission and vision are the same though expressed in different contexts. It is therefore vital to design concrete and sustainable plans of collaboration in action.

1. Reduce tension by neutralizing Bell and Hart’s 8 causes of conflict.

Collaboration does not just happen. We have to set the conditions that enable it to flourish. It’s like taking care of a vineyard or a garden. We identify and communicate our needs. We acknowledge and respect differences in personality, styles and values. We don’t rely on perceptions. We try to validate. We clarify goals, directions, policies and roles. We don’t allow pressures to poison our relationships.

2. Cultivating a culture of encounter and fellowship

Cardinal Chito Tagle was once asked how to resolve the persistent conflict between parish priests and school heads. He did not propose a grand program or intervention. He simply said, “It’s all about relationship.” I couldn’t agree more. If people know how to relate well and are emotionally stable and mature enough, all shall be well and all things shall be well. To nurture a loving and healthy relationship, more positive experiences of fellowship and friendship have to be initiated and facilitated.

### 3. Communion in mission for the new evangelization

Before we are administrators or managers, we are missionary disciples. We were summoned and sent by Jesus. Without him, we scatter and we lose our purpose. To be witnesses of Jesus, we have to transcend our differences and become the living good news of unity and peace, collaboration and cooperation. Standard 3 of PCSS clearly states, "An excellent Catholic school is impelled by a mission to proclaim, give witness, and transmit the Christian faith with new methods, new expressions, and new fervor towards a transformed society and a new way of being Church." The mission is much bigger than anyone of us. Let us not allow our petty differences to obstruct the urgency and primacy of the mission.

### 4. Consultation at every stage: planning, implementation, evaluation

The interface between the school and the parish has to be made regular if not frequent. At every stage of common projects and activities, communication is open and suggestions are deliberated. As Pope Francis said, "We are all in the same boat and headed to the same port (EG, 99)!" We make sure that no one is left behind.

### 5. One Heart for Service of Charity

Strength in numbers. Stronger together. We often hear these words in sports and politics. But we can also apply it in our social outreach and services. Instead of separate programs and activities, the parish and the school may decide to connect their efforts and resources. Stronger together. For the students and the youth of the parish, this is a good opportunity to interact, build friendship and mutual cooperation. Instead of fighting over limited resources, the parish and the school may help each other in creating a more dynamic and high impact social action program that would benefit not just the school but also the parish community.

The list is by no means exhaustive. The idea is for the parish and the school to have more interactions and occasions to be together and work together. All of these, of course, rely on the school and parish leaders. They have a crucial decision to make. Shall *I* remain an *I* or the *I* can be transformed to a *We*? That, my friends, is the question.

Let me end with, "A Teacher's Paraphrase of 1 Corinthians, Chapter 13" by Fr. Ron Nuzzi.

If I could explain everything perfectly to my students, but did not love each one of them, I might as well be talking to an empty room. If I could find all the answers to educational problems and did not love, my efforts would be futile. If I could buy every kind of educational aid and sacrificed to do so, but did not have love for my students, it would be a complete waste.

Love is patient when it is necessary to repeat a concept over and over to a student who is having difficulty. Love is kind when an irate parent accuses and berates other teachers or me.

Love is not jealous when the other teacher has an entire class of well-behaved and extremely intelligent children while mine are not so great. Love is not proud or boastful when my students improve greatly and really want to come to my class.

Love is willing to yield my schedule and plans to fit in with the needs of others. Love does not scream at my class when they misbehave, but seeks to help them understand the importance of self-discipline.

Love does not broadcast all of my students' problems and misdeeds to those in the lounge. Love keeps trying even when it seems a student will never understand long division or the difference between an adverb and an adjective.

Teaching methods, bulletin boards, textbooks, yes, even computers, will eventually be discarded, but love is everlasting. These three things I have learned through teaching: endurance, patience and love. And the greatest of these is love.