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# Discernment is Disposition

by Robert Birdsell and Kent Hickey

## Abstract:

*Explore the critical role of discernment in Catholic school leadership. While effective discernment methods vary among leaders, all Catholic school leaders must cultivate a discerning disposition free from attachments to popularity, wealth, or power, which impede true discernment. This disposition is nurtured through spiritual practices, especially contemplative prayer; aligning leaders with God's will. The white paper underscores the need for Catholic school leaders and their boards to integrate contemplative practices into their routines, fostering intentional discernment and spiritual integrity. By grounding their decisions in prayer, leaders can navigate challenges with hearts aligned to God, following the example of Jesus Christ, and effectively sustaining the mission of Catholic education.*

A young King Solomon heard the voice of God in the night: "Ask for whatever you want me to give you." Solomon, troubled by the burdens and complexities of his job, asked for a "discerning heart" so he could know right from wrong. This greatly pleased God: "You did not ask for a long life or wealth for yourself, nor have you asked for death for your enemies, but for discernment in administering justice." God did just as Solomon asked and gave him a discerning heart. 1 Kings 3:5-12.

We do not know if God then went on to explain to Solomon how to practice discernment, perhaps using as an example what to do if two mothers came to him

fighting over a baby (1 Kings 3:16-28). If God did offer advice, it was likely along the lines of "you be you." The best "how" when it comes to discernment is what works best for the person practicing it, and this will be different for every leader.

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This certainly holds true for Catholic school leaders. For one kind of leader, creating a pro and con list works best in discernment. For those who process externally, having a trusted partner with whom to think aloud is a better approach. (That's one of the benefits of the president-principal model.) Those who are more internally oriented require the quiet of solitude when practicing discernment.

Still others may prefer to rely upon their imagination, an approach we both learned many years ago at Marquette High from a gifted spiritual director, Fr. Frank Majka SJ: Imagine choosing one way and living in that reality; then imagine what the experience would be like having not made that choice. Reflecting upon both experiences helps point the way to a good decision.

The best way to practice discernment, then, is the way that works best for the individual discerners. But what holds true for all Catholic school leaders, regardless of their preferred methodology, is a commitment to discernment as critical to their leadership; the steadfast belief that every decision is an invitation to let God's will shape our own. That commitment and belief calls every Catholic school leader to continually cultivate a discerning disposition. Methodology—the “how” of discernment—is meaningless without the interior disposition of a discerning heart. Solomon, for example, clearly possessed this disposition, a heart emptied of worldly things (desire for long life, riches, enemies killed off, etc.) and open to much better things (desire for wisdom).

St. Ignatius of Loyola called the desire for worldly things “disordered attachments,” unhealthy tendencies we latch onto that deprive us of interior freedom, including the ability to practice good discernment. Catholic school leaders are certainly susceptible to such attachments, especially so given the tough decisions they must make and the harsh reactions that

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often accompany them. Persistent pressure can reduce even the most promising in our schools into decisions-by-poll-numbers leaders, including those who desire the comfort and safety of being well liked more than the desire to do right. St. Gregory the Great, a sixth century Pope and theologian, described the impact of an unhealthy attachment to popularity in his *Moral Reflections on Job*:

*A weak-minded person is frequently diverted toward pursuing exterior happiness when the breath of popular favor accompanies his good actions. So he gives up his own personal choices, preferring to remain at the mercy of whatever he hears from others. Thus, he rejoices not so much to become but to be called blessed. Eager for praise, he gives up what he had begun to be; and so he is severed from God by the very means by which he appeared to be commendable in God.*

Pursuit of personal popularity is just one of the many attachments that can ensnare Catholic school leaders. God referenced other desires with Solomon: wealth (or at least mixing in wealthy social circles), long (career) life, and slaying enemies (figuratively speaking, of course). But the impact of disordered attachments, regardless of their nature, is the same for all: a sickly disposition incapable of discernment.

St. Augustine, using the example of a container, described the remedy for those plagued by unhealthy attachments in his *Tractates on the First Letter of John*:

*God means to fill each of you with what is good; so cast out what is bad! If he wishes to fill you with honey and you are full of sour wine, where is the honey to go? The vessel must be emptied of its contents and then be cleansed. Yes, it must be cleansed even if you have to work hard*

and scour it. It must be made fit for the new thing, whatever it may be.

The best treatment—the most effective way to scour out sour attachments to make room for a sweeter disposition—requires living in a space that is primarily spiritual in nature. We are made in God's image, clay shaped by God's own hands. Our sacred identity is who we are and that takes precedence over what we do.

Teilhard de Chardin captured this truth: "We are not human beings having a spiritual experience. We are spiritual beings having a human experience." Catholic school leaders are first and foremost spiritual beings. While, thankfully, there is daily sustenance that can be derived from school experiences (especially with colleagues and students), that is not enough. What spiritual beings need most is the nourishment that comes from contemplative prayer. And that is the only path to a discerning disposition.

Herni Nouwen said, "Through contemplative prayer we can keep ourselves from being pulled from one urgent issue to another and from becoming strangers to our own heart and God's heart." Jumping around from one issue to another is exactly what a Catholic



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school leader's job can devolve into, and the danger of living in this reality—"becoming strangers to our own heart and God's heart"—is a very real one. For Nouwen, there was only one solution: "Through the discipline of contemplative prayer, Christian leaders have to learn again and again to listen to the voice of love and to find there the wisdom and courage to address whatever issue presents itself to them." (*In the Name of Jesus*, pp. 42-45)

We can also look to Jesus for guidance: "But Jesus often withdrew to lonely places and prayed." (Luke 5:16) Jesus lived in tension, misunderstanding, conflict, and, ultimately, violence. The spiritual being personified, Jesus endured the hardest of

human experiences as a contemplative; he was consistently, fervently prayerful because he had to be. Surely, what worked so well for Jesus could also work for Catholic school leaders.

Yet, it is the cultivation of an intentional, meaningful prayer life that so many Catholic school leaders simply do not do—usually, and ironically, because they believe themselves to be too busy. But that is exactly what Catholic school leaders need:

- † Set aside one day each month to go, like Jesus, to a quiet place to pray
- † Read spiritual books
- † Practice *Lectio Divina* with the Bible
- † Meet with a spiritual director
- † Commit to at least one spiritual retreat every year
- † And, most importantly, pray at least 30 minutes a day

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It is also necessary for Catholic school boards to embrace contemplative practices if they are to be discerning bodies. In recent years there have been numerous implosions at Catholic schools throughout the country that emitted the stink of sour wine, often due to misguided practices by boards and/or their chairs. Much of this is systemic, so certainly prayer will not cure all ills. But no school board can be healthy without prayer:

- † Begin every meeting in the school chapel with meaningful contemplative prayer (instead of reciting a rote prayer to check off an agenda item)
- † Hold annual spiritual retreats (no business allowed)
- † Celebrate Mass together
- † Approach every decision of consequence with intentional discernment practices

Catholic school boards should feel and function differently from other boards. Rightfully so—it is God’s work.



Finally, let’s acknowledge that, while contemplative prayer does nurture a discerning disposition for Catholic school leaders, it is not a magic pill that makes troubles disappear, wards off harsh comments posted by keyboard warriors, or grants leaders the superpower of being “practically perfect

in every way” (the Mary Poppins expectation that is now so pervasive at schools). Saint Gregory the Great explained why none of these matters:

*But sometimes a soul firmly strives for righteousness and yet is beset by men’s ridicule. He does what is admirable, but he gets only mockery. He might have gone out of himself because of man’s praise; he returns to himself when repelled by their abuse. Finding no resting-place without, he cleaves more intensely to God within. All his hope is fixed on his Creator, and amid all the ridicule and abuse he invokes his interior witness alone. One who is afflicted in this way grows closer to God the more he turns away from human popularity. He straightway pours himself out in prayer, and, pressured from without, he is refined with a more perfect purity to penetrate what is within.*

As a spiritual being having a very human administrator experience, contemplative Catholic school leaders who earnestly, faithfully practice discernment are of the very best and most needed kind for our schools.

The work is not easy work, but much consolation can come from knowing how much confidence God has in the leaders who are doing it: “Be who God meant you to be and you will set the world on fire.” St. Catherine of Siena.



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This is an excerpt from *A Brigher Future for Catholic Schools: Innovation and Opportunity* to be published by NCEA in the fall of 2024 as well as the second white paper in a series for Catholic School Leaders.

**Download the first white paper and other resources about spiritual leadership** at [www.CatholicVirtual.com/SpiritualLeadership](http://www.CatholicVirtual.com/SpiritualLeadership)



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