

LUX EDMUNDI: REFLECTION: FEBRUARY - LENT, 2016

School principals in Ireland consider instructional leadership to be one of their most important responsibilities. It seems that many of them would be prepared to delegate - and, even, to surrender - other responsibilities, especially administrative responsibilities, in order to have more time to focus on the development of teaching and learning in the school.

There is, of course, one responsibility that a principal of a school may not relinquish, *viz.*, leadership in protecting and promoting the ethos, the characteristic spirit, of the school, "ethical leadership". Under Education Act 1998, it falls to the patron of a recognised school in the Republic of Ireland to establish, where practicable, a board of management to manage the school on behalf of the patron. A board, once established, has a statutory obligation to uphold, and to be accountable to the patron for so upholding, the characteristic spirit – the ethos – of the school. The principal is appointed by the board to manage the school day-to-day on its behalf and is accountable to the board for so doing. The principal is, as it were, the executive agent of the board on the ground. As such, the principal is obliged to ensure that the school is conducted in accordance with the characteristic spirit, the ethos, which the board is bound to uphold on behalf of the patron and which, in turn, the principal is bound to uphold on behalf of the board,

It is, of course, absolutely essential to the "ethical" identity of a school that *all* personnel understand and accept that each has an obligation to uphold the characteristic spirit of that school and, at the very least, to do nothing that counters or otherwise undermines it. That said, both because in any organisation, what is the duty of all can so easily become the responsibility of none, and because empirical research amply demonstrates that the success of any in-school initiative requires the support of the principal, it is essential that principals recognise and acknowledge that the duty of "ethical leadership" in the school is theirs. In discharging this fundamental duty, the principal will, avail of all resources to hand, including the expertise of "specialist" colleagues, but, whilst, like any other function, this too may be "distributed" in its discharge, as far as the day-to-day actualisation of the ethos of the school is concerned, the buck stops with the principal.

The principal of a school under Catholic patronage is obliged to protect and promote its Catholic ethos and to guide and direct the school community in its service. This "ethical leadership" is, in fact, a *sine qua non* of the effective management of that school, of the preservation of its identity and integrity, precisely *qua* Catholic. It is, again, imperative for its Catholicity that the ethos, the characteristic spirit, of any Catholic school be considered the responsibility of all who work in that school. It is equally imperative, however, that principals recognise that the duty of making the Catholic ethos "happen" on the ground, as it were, is theirs.

Lent is a time of *metanoia*, of repentance, of conversion, a time of turning again towards God, of making Him the centre and the circumference of our lives. It is a time of renewal, moral, religious and spiritual, personal and professional. It is a time when, led by the Holy Spirit, we go out into the desert, into those bits of us that are "god-less" or not as "godly" as they should be. There, with Christ, we confront our demons, examine ourselves in the searing light of Truth, and, by God's grace, struggle to amend whatever we must amend in order to grow in charity, in the love of God above all for his own sake and of the neighbour as ourselves for the love of God. In this context, may all who are called by Providence to give "ethical leadership" in Catholic schools have the light to see, and the strength to do, what God now asks of them in that exact regard.