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## Critical Fidelity and Catholic School Leadership in Jordan

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*Introduction-* John Sullivan's paper "Critical Fidelity and Catholic School Leadership" will be included in the work by Springer entitled *Faith Based Learning, Teaching & Leadership*, to be published in (2013). Principally, the article calls for *Unity in Diversity: we are one in faith but different in culture and vision. We are One in Christ but different in minds and hearts. Let's be Catholic, universal principal and locally applied.* I believe that the article makes many valid observations that speak to actuality of Catholic School leadership particularly in my native country of Jordan.

A critical analysis of fidelity to Church Teaching in the context of Catholic School leadership is of countless value. Usually the issues surrounding adherence to the dogmatic teachings of the Church by those in educational leadership have been taboo. One is simply not allowed to study, evaluate, analyze, or criticize the faith tradition. In the oriental and Semitic mentality we are Homo religious which means that in theory we believe everything said by the religious authorities, Christian and Islamic, is true. (Magister dixit, Master said).

This attitude came to be as a result of Religious education, adherence to the Catechism and the leading role in the community of the Parish priest. The parish priest was the teacher, leader and minister and was responsible for the decisions that must be made in a Catholic institution. This pre-council Vatican II mentality of rigid adherence to authority is ingrained in the minds of many of our Catholic Leaders as well as the laity.

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# Critical Fidelity and Catholic School Leadership in Jordan

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## I. INTRODUCTION

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This attitude came to be as a result of Religious education, adherence to the Catechism and the leading role in the community of the Parish priest. The parish priest was the teacher, leader and minister and was responsible for the decisions that must be made in a Catholic institution. This pre-council Vatican II mentality of rigid adherence to authority is ingrained in the minds of many of our Catholic Leaders as well as the laity.

Rigidity and static thinking lacks the dynamism required for life: of ideas, of institutions, of people. Technology has cracked open the world of today. Thoughts and ideas run through our society like the currents of a river keeping it alive and fertile. Catholic faith with its long held traditions, laws, rules, pronouncements and clear polices remains constant. However- critical analysis of those traditions, laws etc. in the context of the free flowing society in which we live must be possible if the Church is to remain relevant.

Catholic educational institutions will benefit from such critical analysis and the resultant implications. Such flexibility, open discussion and criticism can lead

to improvement and development. That said there is no call to jettison Church Teaching and Tradition. On the contrary, there is a need for a better understanding of the Magisterium on the part of those in Educational leadership. Catholic leaders are thirsty for a better grounding in Catholic Teaching precisely so that they can adopt and adapt new trends, methods, experiences and skills within their own culture and context. Being critical doesn't necessarily mean a lack of fidelity rather it points to the tension that is at the heart and essence of education in general and most particularly catholic education.

For believers, there is a natural tension in performing a critique of the church's mission and vision. On the one side there is a traditional and clerical way of thinking and in the other side secular but faithful leaders with theological backgrounds. An urgent transformation and Metanoia (conversion in Greek) is needed on both sides. The local church needs to be open to the ways of the new world and the lay Catholic leaders need to embrace a solid theological background to properly witness Christ in the world. As our Blessed Pope John Paul the II said: *"We are not the sum of our weaknesses and failures; we are the sum of the Father's love for us and our real capacity to become the image of His Son Jesus"*.

Critical thinking in the area of education, whether in Catholic, or non-Catholic contexts, is meant to be a bridge, and not a creator of tension. The critiques are not directed to the essence of the mission of the Catholic Church, nor at the sacred and holy teachings and preaching, but rather related to the pronouncements and polices of the Church's leaders. It is not so much a negative as a positive where in lay people can be more fully involved. Lay Catholic leaders in Jordan are well prepared academically and socially, but feel that they lack the deep theological understanding necessary for proper engagement with the Church. They are good Catholics but they feel weakly prepared when it comes to the theological demands of the faith. The call by Vatican II for aggiornamento (bringing up to date) of the Church can only be accomplished if the leaders of the Church both lay and clerical have the proper grounding in theological dimensions, educational methods and theories of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Included also must be spiritual nourishment and proper formation to be as Christ: King (leader), prophet (teacher) and Priest (sacrament).

Modeling fidelity has nothing to do with inquiries and research. If the traditional ways and methods are held above any comment or criticism there is no opportunity for growth and development in the area of Catholic education. However- fidelity has everything to do with the Catholic Educational Project which must reflect and model its values and promote its ethos. Catholic leaders are expected to ensure that faith forms their choices and practices and that fidelity to the mission is purposefully integrated in to the project improvised as one goes along.

My experience as a parish priest in addition to being an educator has taught me that there are institutional aspects incorporated into the implementation of the school mission that can hinder rather than advance its vision. At these times true loyalty to the institution would be exhibited by questioning rather than blind adherence allowing inspiration and improvement.

As leaders of Catholic schools we are required to arbitrate between our faith traditions and the educational environment. The threat to the institution lies in favoring one side over the other rather than seeking equilibrium. Faith traditions and contemporary cultures should not be contradictory but complementary. As decision makers we need not only think with the church but for the church in order to boost and expand its role in the communities.

*Thinking with and thinking for* the church can be sources of tension. As leaders we need to be sensitive to the demands and the dynamic of the church's teachings (in which manner they are received, interpreted and lived by people). There are those who accept the teaching of the Church unquestionably (although fewer and fewer) making it the responsibility of Catholic leadership to be careful when placing strictures so that the faithful are not placed in an impossible position of being unable to live in society. As leaders we have the responsibility to form bounds between the contemporary culture requirements, practices and ways of thinking. Rarely will we find a community without clashes and disagreements and the possibility exists that settlements attained could be outside the mind of the Church. In this case pastoral necessity dictates that catholic leaders work towards broadening their horizon for study and research.

The Catholic Church should not be static, but dynamic. The Church must assume the role of teacher and student. The Catholic Church is the mother of the Catholic school; it needs to stand by its key working principles, as well act as a bridge between *what is* and *what should be*. The Church exists in the lives of human beings, the world of reality and so must be eminently practical bringing together theory and practice. For that to happen the faith and religious traditions should get up from their isolation and open themselves to public examination; otherwise they will cease to be relevant in

people's lives. Leadership must understand that the changes that come with keeping the institution relevant is sacred work and is rightly to be undertaken.

Educators and educational leadership is of the very essence of Catholicism. It is the true job of the Church to reframe, reinterpret, and assess in order to formulate imaginative, creative, appropriate, effective and workable solutions that advance the institution. Catholic school leadership must be given the opportunity to be critically faithful. A relationship of trust could replace the tension that currently exists leading to a mutually beneficial climate of cooperation.

The Catholic leader of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries must be aware of the new role expected of him. Catholic schools are facing enculturation leading to diminished effectiveness as centers of the faith. Catholic leaders who cannot speak critically and knowledgeably about the faith will be ill equipped to manage the current demands and challenges of modern life. Undeniably tension between the church and the culture will increase and affect the implementation of the Church's mission. Catholic leaders need to open the doors and develop reformed models that can be followed. They need to be free to adapt their work to the needs of society so that current and future generation will grow in the faith under their leadership.

In sum, I believe that Catholic School leaders should model fidelity to the faith tradition. They must go about their work from within the context of a properly understood theological tradition.