

## TEACHING AS MINISTRY: A NEW PERSPECTIVE

"Let it be clear, then, in all your relations with the children who are entrusted to you that you look upon yourself as a minister of God, acting with a sincere and true zeal, accepting with much patience the difficulties you have to suffer..." (*Meditations for the Time of Retreat*, 9,1).

Some consider teaching a profession which demands skills, training, and knowledge of subject matter; others consider teaching an art, a skill developed through experience, observation, careful attention, and practice. It is both of these, but more as well. Teaching, within our Christian tradition, is a ministry, a gift given for the service of others. Henri Nouwen describes ministry as "the ongoing attempt to put one's own search for God, with all the moments of pain and joy, despair and hope, at the disposal of those who want to join this search but do not know how". Teaching as ministry is a way of caring and helping.

As ministry, teaching shares in each of the traditional ministries of the Church: *didache*, *leiturgia*, *koinonia*, *kerygma*, and *diakonia*.

*Didache* is the ministry of teaching the Word, revealing the "good news" to all who will listen. The teacher is called to speak the message of Jesus, a message that proclaims that each person is made in God's image and therefore has worth, has dignity, has freedom, is worthy of love, can grow, can love. The teacher touches the heart of his student when he reveals to the student that the "good news" is about him personally. The teacher accomplishes this when learning occurs and the student realizes that he has the potential to know something new; the student can sense growth at those moments of special insight. So too the teacher accomplishes this when he leads the student to recognize that his life can make a difference through some act of service. When the

teacher acknowledges the uniqueness of the student, affirms his insight, recognizes him as worthy of his time and attention, that teacher is touching the heart; it is in the heart that the "good news" is experienced. That teacher who serves as God's human instrument to reveal God's message of abiding and personal love is indeed a minister of grace.

*Leiturgia* is the ministry of praying for and with others. The teacher is called to pray for and with his students. By bringing his students in prayer before God, the teacher makes a profession of faith that it is God who accomplishes good for and in the young people entrusted to his care; ultimately, God will bring those students to fullness of life. Likewise, the teacher prays with his students. More than ever, young people need the witness of someone who lives in the presence of God and calls that to mind frequently. When the teacher can share faith, can share praise, thanksgiving, worship, can stand in awe and wonder with his students before a God who transcends all yet who is so intimately present, that teacher ministers to those entrusted to his care.

*koinonia* is the ministry of community-building. The teacher is called to "be with" his students, to be a focus for unity, to be in communion. One aspect of this ministry is to welcome the student; the teacher is called to be a host, to create a hospitable space so that the student can feel at home in his presence, feel safe enough to approach him in time of difficulty and need. A second aspect of this is to listen. The teacher is called to hear what the student has to say, both in word and in silence. Each student has a unique story which aches to be heard; sometimes students speak their stories in silence, in actions and behaviors that are not attended to. The teacher who is a keen listener to the hurts and cries of the young that cannot find words is a true minister. A third aspect is to wait; the teacher is called to spend long hours with students as they seek out for themselves the meaning of life in general and their lives in particular. The teacher patiently accompanies the student as he grows and discovers and learns at his own pace; to force one's own way upon another is to violate the sacredness of another

er's journey. The teacher spends much time waiting. A final aspect of this ministry is partnership; the teacher is called to be a mutual learner. Students also have insights and a certain wisdom that confounds the "wise" of this world. Real teaching and learning is the mutual discovery of ideas, a sharing of knowledge so that both can see with new eyes.

*Kerygma* is the ministry of proclamation. This is a prophetic ministry; it calls the teacher to "speak up". The teacher must speak up to institutions and people on behalf of the young. Having engaged his students in conversation, he is aware of their need and advocates for them before the power brokers of the world. As such, he is called to challenge those things which might inhibit a student's growth or deprive a student of his God-given rights. Furthermore, the teacher is called to offer opportunities for the young to speak on their own behalf to each other and to institutions. The teacher who creates a climate in which students can engage in open, honest, and respectful discussions, who develops within his students a literacy in both word and symbol, who helps students to frame questions, who empowers students with the ability to be critical thinkers, who teaches students how to read the signs of the times, that teacher is engaged in a dangerous but needed ministry.

*Diakonia* is the ministry of service. The teacher is called to reach out to and serve those entrusted to his care. Following the example of the Master Teacher, Jesus, the teacher must bow before his disciples and wash their feet. This foot washing demands a humility that recognizes the great worth of those served; it calls forth the willingness to

be vulnerable, to acknowledge mistakes, to forgive and allow oneself to be forgiven, to love both the attractive and the unattractive, the hopefilled and the despairing, the bright and the slow. Kneeling at the feet of another is the ultimate call to generosity, zeal, and giving without limit. However, the teacher must likewise challenge his students to follow his example and to wash one another's feet. The teacher must help his students to see that each person's gifts are for the service of others; students must be attentive to the needs of a world which so desperately looks for people of ideals, vision, and the willingness and ability to bring these to some reality.

Teaching, therefore, is a ministry. It is a ministry to the gifts of the young, a life-giving ministry which attends to the emerging creative edge of a young person's life. It calls the teacher to affirm the gifts of the young, to recognize and acknowledge the beauty of God so uniquely revealed in each student. Furthermore, it is a ministry of transformation. The teacher is called to help students turn their attention from their own, self-centered needs to the needs of the world, to challenge students to transform their apathy and powerlessness in the face of the world's suffering to compassion and solidarity. Teaching is a holy and sacred calling; surely, it is a ministry of grace, for the teacher is called to be God's special ambassador and co-worker in the building of the Kingdom.

**Brother Frederick MUELLER**  
Catholic School Office  
1, Cathedral Square  
PROVIDENCE, R.I. 02903  
U.S.A.