THE SCHOOL CHAPLAIN AND THE RELIGIOUS LEADERSHIP OF THE SCHOOL.

Introduction.

One of the most essential values that need to be well thought-out in Christian education today at the post primary school level is human rootedness in Christ. Happily enough, it is widely accepted today that education is not simply about the intellectual growth of a person, but it encompasses the emotional, moral, intellectual, and more especially the spiritual dimensions. Thus, for a maturing adolescent in the post-primary school to achieve his/her full potential, every level of the developmental self needs attention. The spiritual and religious dimensions are not to be neglected or sidelined. The spiritual and religious dimensions of every school [Catholic schools] are enshrined in the school mission statement or ethos. Hence, chaplains have inimitable pastoral role in the religious leadership of the School.

The nucleus of this paper is to study the role of School chaplain as a custodian of the ethos of the school. It will begin with a brief introduction to the work, explanation of the concept ‘chaplain’ and ‘school ethos’ and then the role of a chaplain as a custodian of the school ethos. Finally, there will be a conclusion and bibliography.

Chaplain who is he?

The Church’s document *Ecclesiae de Mysterio* explains that chaplain only applies to an ordained minister. ‘It is unlawful for the non-ordained faithful to assume titles such as ‘pastor’, ‘chaplain’, ‘coordinator’, ‘moderator’, or other such similar titles which can confuse their role and that of the pastor, who is always a bishop or priest’.1 The official term in actual use is ‘Co-ordinator of Chaplaincy Service’ and the individual person in the role is referred to as ‘the chaplain’. This is contrary to the Cannon Law. However, in the in May 2004 Chaplaincy document; *Chaplaincy in the Catholic Voluntary Secondary School* describes the co-ordinator of Chaplaincy services as ‘a person of faith’. According to the document, that person may be:

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1 *Instruction, Ecclesiae de Mysterio, Article 3* [Eng. Translation Pauline Books & Media, Boston]. P. 29

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A priest, a Religious or a lay person of the Catholic Faith, committed to the teaching and values of Christ, acting on behalf of the church and the school community while upholding the teaching and moral standards and practices of the Roman Catholic Church, together with the characteristic spirit and founding intention of the school. In addition in the case of a priest or religious the person must be in good standing with his/her diocese/religious order.

This document describes the chaplain as anyone engaged in pastoral activity in hospitals, prisons, schools etc., whether they are lay or religious. Thus, chaplain is the ‘person of faith who, on behalf of the school and church community, accompanies and supports each person on the journey through school. As a faith presence in the school, the chaplain is committed to the values of Christ, and on behalf of the church and school communities, accompanies each person on the journey through life. This type of accompaniment involves professionalism and being professional as a chaplain implies a dedication to spirituality and all the elements of Christian living that nourish and express one’s vocation as a follower of Christ. The work of a chaplain is understood as participating in the care of souls and thus works very closely with the pastoral team.

Dermot. A. Lane used the term chaplain to suggest one who is a key player in the holistic pastoral care. For him ‘chaplain’ simply is ‘someone who provides a kind of ambulance service when things go wrong in the school’. Very important in his contribution is the ideal that chaplains have a positive role to play in developing the full potential of young people extending to physical, psychological, spiritual and religious. In addition, the chaplain has a unique role to play in co-ordinating the pastoral care provided by teachers and the different support systems on offer from the wider community. He went on to observe that young people learn to love by being loved, to trust by being trusted, to value by being valued, and that chaplains have a

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2 May 2004 Chaplaincy document, p. 4.
most important role to play in effecting this holistic development of pupils\(^6\). Luke Monahan summarises this position when he says that a chaplain is a ‘faith presence, committed to the values of Christ and on behalf of the church and school communities, accompanies each person on the journey through life\(^7\). By designating chaplain as a ‘faith presence’ means that chaplain is one who is animated by a close relationship with Christ. Through the strength of this relationship the chaplain, is in a position to become a faith presence for others. This means being with others and paying attention to the quality of being with them. The chaplain, as a faith presence, is open, accepting, respecting, sharing, learning and invitatory\(^8\)

**School Ethos.**

**Ethos** (θος) (plurals: ethe, ethea) is a Greek word originally meaning 'the place of living' that can be translated into English in different ways. Some possibilities are 'starting point', 'to appear', 'disposition' and from there, 'character'. From the same Greek root originates the word *ethikos* (θικός), meaning 'theory of living', and from there, the modern English word ‘ethics’ is derived.\(^9\) Ethos is a fashionable but nebulous term often employed by organisational theorist, educationists and theologists to describe the distinctive range of values and beliefs, which define the philosophy or atmosphere of an organisation.\(^10\) The concept of ethos could be categorised into two camps; the positivist and the educationalists. The positivist views ethos as something that prescribes social reality. In this sense it is an objective phenomenon, existing independently of the people and social events in an organisation. An organisation possesses an ethos, which can be changed or borrowed to make it more successful.\(^11\) From the educationalist, a school ethos wields a certain amount of power to condition people to think and act in an acceptable manner. It is a means by which individual within organization or school are committed to what is deemed natural, proper and right.

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\(^{6}\) Ibid; pg 8  
\(^{7}\) Ibid; pg 9  
\(^{8}\) Ibid; pg 13.  
\(^{9}\) From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia  
\(^{11}\) Ibid; pg 2
Hence, ethos is regarded as the school aims and goals as set out by the school authorities or the most influential remembers of the school. The ‘ethos’ or put in another way the ‘culture’ of a school has an extensive influence on pupils. It is about the way they do things in the school and why they do those things. It is also about the quality of relationships, pupil’s aspirations and more importantly the way in which the wider community perceives the school. The school’s ethos is derived from its core values and beliefs about its purpose and the aims of education. This values lie at the heart of a school’s vision and mission. It is the processes, activities and rituals of the school; as expressed, for example, in teaching and learning methods, the conduct of pupils and staff, collective worship and assemblies, special occasions, close links with the church and parish.

The values and aims of the school are expressed in the ethos of the school and mission statement. It is laid out in the prospectus, schemes of work, policies and in the everyday language of the pupils. The physical and visible aspects of the school as expressed in the buildings and classrooms; the signs and symbols on display and pupils' dress are all parts of the ethos of the school. One definition of school ethos says that ‘it is the tone, character and quality of a school, specifically its spiritual, moral and aesthetic mood and the quality of the relationships there’.

**Role of a Chaplain In Promoting School Ethos**

Even though chaplain has much to contribute with regard to school ethos, it is worth mentioning that he or she is not to be assumed as sole responsible for it. It is the responsibility of the entire school community because all have some role to play in ensuring fidelity to the school ethos and its creative expressions in the day-to-day life of the school. But the chaplain, nonetheless, takes special care to be a resources person in this matter. Thus, a chaplain in different ways promotes the ethos of the school by fostering and deepening student’s holistic and spiritual growth. Those ways include:

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Accompaniment

Today it is widely accepted that education is not merely about the intellectual growth of a person, but it encompasses the emotional, moral, intellectual, and more especially the spiritual dimensions. Accordingly, school ethos aims to create for school community an atmosphere where pupil achieves full human potentials. The major role of a chaplain is accompanying adolescents in the school who are all still struggling to discover who they are and what life has for them. Because of the huge immense experiences of changes that are so much part of this developmental period, the adolescent is stuck with the endless question of ‘who am I really’? Thus, there is a sense of wondering what the self and life really mean. It is the prime task of a chaplain to foster an atmosphere of spiritual growth. The chaplain helps the adolescent relate his or her deepening sense of personal identity to his or her own lifestyles in a Godlike way.

The adolescent period is a time of intense search for thoroughly self-discovering. A self-discovering that is rooted in a deep trust of selfhood involving acceptance of the treasure of true self one already possess. A chaplain is not just a voice ‘out there’ calling them to become what they are not but a voice within journeying with them to take on the person they were born to be, to fulfil the original selfhood given to them at birth by God\(^\text{14}\).

A faith Presence and Spiritual Mentor;

The chaplain, unlike other pastoral carers, in promoting the ethos of the school the school, has the faith dimension defining his or her professional role. He/ she responds to the spiritual and religious needs of the persons, students and staff, under his or her care, while respecting the freedom or the religious and personal convictions of individual\(^\text{15}\). The chaplain supplies a service where students and staff can find room, encouragement and opportunities to grow in their human, personal development, knowledge and faith. The chaplain provides and taps into existing evangelisation


opportunities for the school community and supports the faith life of its Catholic student body, as well as encouraging those of other traditions and faiths to continue and nurture their own journeys of faith. In view of this, the chaplain ‘use various and imaginative ways to proclaim afresh the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and so inspire faith anew in them.

The following extract from Cardinal Daly’s homily at the CCMS conference in 1989 summarises the school ethos of St Elizabeth:

   St Elizabeth’s aims to create for the school community an atmosphere enlivened by the gospel values of freedom and charity…It strives to relate all human culture ultimately to the news of salvation so that the light of faith will illumine the knowledge which the pupils gradually acquired of the world and of life and mankind [CCMS, 1989:10]

The chaplain as a faith presence represents and symbolises this commitment to its mission to young people in the post primary. He or she exercises a leadership and prophetic ministry by always reminding the school community of its Christian purpose and encouraging its members to give expression to discipleship in ways that are fruitful, encouraging and life giving for others.

As a faith presence, the chaplain has the special role of shepherding. Psalm 23 is a wonderful description of this: ‘He lets me rest in fields of green and leads me to quiet pools of fresh water; he gives new strength; he guides me in the right paths, as he has promised’. Therefore the position of chaplain has at its core, the aspects of trust and protection and the aim is to enable the setting up of a place of calm, peace, tranquillity, to build up, energise and strengthen the faith of the people in the school. Collins describes this as ‘a commitment to be aware of the needs of others, a commitment to respond to those needs in a way that will be life-enhancing for all’.

**Witnessing to and Proclaiming the Word**


17 Ibid; p6

Chaplains are called to proclaim the Gospel, not only with their words but also with their lives. Such of a life of faith, integrity and fidelity is a powerful evangelical witness to the Lord Jesus and his life-giving teaching\(^\text{19}\). The chaplains also make themselves available to assist other members of staff in dealing with theological/spiritual/pastoral issues for students as these arise in the school\(^\text{20}\). With regard to this, Fr Luiz Ruscillo observed that ‘a central role for the Chaplaincy, in conjunction with the Senior Management Team/Leadership Group, is to witness to the Spirit of the Gospel which should permeate all aspects of the life of the school community’\(^\text{21}\). Fr Luiz went on to say that this special role of the chaplain in promoting the ethos of the school includes that:

- The chaplain attends staff briefings, and speaks on issues, which have moral, spiritual and pastoral implications.
- The chaplain is available to act as advisor in any academic subject area where there are issues of faith and morals.
- The chaplain works in close relationship with the teachers of the RE department. Although he/she is not a member of the department nor of any other department unless he or she has teaching duties.

Young people do not spring into being as full-grown adults. Instead the combination of genes, family, experiences and school contribute to forming the adult. Therefore it is imperative that the school ethos is made to ensure that school is an enriching faith experience for them. Chaplain has a lot to contribute in this regard.

**Creating a sense of belonging in the school.**

The chaplain has great flexibility and so great responsibility in his or her role while working with students, parents, the local parish and the broader community, creating a more integrated human community and nurturing a sense of belonging. The chaplain is the only staff member within the school with the freedom to do this. Other positions of home school community liaison officer [HSCLO] and school completion programme officer [SCPO] are tied to very specific job descriptions. The counsellor works on the issue of the problem, the chaplain works on connecting the student with

\(^{19}\) Ibid; p7  
\(^{20}\) Ibid;p7  
\(^{21}\) Chaplaincy in Catholic Secondary Schools. Pg. 12.  
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others, nature and God and back to the self with a healthier integrated mind, body and spirit.

**Social awareness**

Consequently, the chaplain in cooperation with the pastoral team, the school Principal, the local community and clergy, promotes social awareness within the school community eg. Organising weekly meetings for the St Vincent de Paul society, encouraging students to get actively involved in their own parishes are two of the many possible ways to do this.

**Liturgical Ministry.**

The May 2004 Chaplaincy Document clearly states that the chaplain ‘will ensure the provision of liturgical and para-liturgical celebrations in the school with particular reference to the centrality of the Eucharist’

This means that in promoting the school ethos the chaplain has the role of providing for the celebration of the Eucharist throughout the school year, both with the whole school community and with smaller groupings. He/she also provides for the celebration of non-Eucharistic liturgies with the school community that are appropriate to specific occasions, special seasons and feasts of the Church’s liturgical year. He or she initiates liturgies in response to special needs in the school community, success, tragedy, exams, bereavement, staff INSET and so on.

For the chaplain the planning of the liturgy for the school year is something that entails the co-operation of students and teachers, school policy also must be considered. The chaplain works in conjunction with the Religious teachers whose knowledge of the students will help in discerning the student’s gifts be they in , reading, art or music. Making the students feel that this is their own liturgy is of enormous importance.

**Bridge Building.**

The Irish society today is a multicultural society; thus schools, especially in the urban areas, bring together a very diverse group of people. These groups of people include: people from different faith, ethnic, cultural and linguistic background; people of all social classes, and people with a broad spectrum of intellectual, physical, and

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22 May 2004 Chaplaincy Document, p. 5.
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emotional needs and abilities. Bridging and building community within the school is
an essential part of the work of chaplain and in developing a true Catholic education.

Bereavement Support

**Crisis response policy**

The chaplain also plays a key role in preparing the ‘crisis response policy’ for the
school, which is essential to have in place in times of sudden death or suicide of a
student or staff member or members of the school community. Also, ‘the chaplain is
called to respond to the unexpected, the unpredictable, the unplanned and the
unstructured’.

The chaplain plays a very big role in the area of bereavement support within the
school. In the case of the death of a pupil, past pupil or member of staff, the chaplain
would generally be the person to liaise with the priest, and would arrange to have
school involvement in the funeral mass.

**Prayer**

The prayer life of the school community is the overall responsibility of the chaplain.
The chaplain has this particular role of leadership; he or she provides daily prayer in
the school and prepares and leads the prayers for special gatherings of the school
community.

**The Sacraments**

The chaplain has the special duty in the school with regard to the celebration of the
sacraments. He/she arranges for the Sacrament of Reconciliation to be available to the
students and staff in an appropriate manner, perhaps monthly or seasonally. He/she
arranges for the preparation and reception of First Holy Communion and
Confirmation for the students who have not received the sacraments.

**Retreats**

It is also the special duty of the chaplain to organise retreats for the school. These
should include; the provisions of days of retreat for all year groups; and for staff the,
provision of a staff recollection day each year.

**Counselling**

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23 L. Monahan, C. Renehan, the chaplain, A faith presence in the School community, p. 17
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The chaplain is also generally available as a pastoral resource to the students and the staff in need of counselling for whatever reasons. In the case of bereavement, this may include organising bereavement groups in the school or assisting the individual to find appropriate grief counselling.

Counselling by the chaplain plays a major part in the school and sometimes is his/her greatest time constraints and demands the greatest effort. The type of problems presented to the chaplain, are similar to those presented to any other counsellor. The skills that the chaplain possesses extend to the helping role of the chaplain and pastoral counselling. The chaplain brings professionalism and is expected to work within the limits of all counselling situations. Pastoral counselling is used in an informal situation within the school and offers a supportive role for the whole school community.

**Planning of Special Ethos Programme for Students.**
The chaplain through the consent of the principal develops a series of classroom resources that may be used by teachers in order to discuss and familiarise students with the school ethos. This programme could be cross-curricular, finding obvious connections with social, personal and Health Education [SPHE]; Civic, social and political Education [CSPE]; Religion, English, History, Geography.

**School Ethos Day**
The chaplain also through the consent of the principal could hold a range of ethos related events such as; poster competitions, prayer service, talks to parents and staff, special school prayer to start each class, and using assemblies to talk about the school ethos. The chaplain could also use symbols, drawings, and posters depicting the ethos to decorate the building and school environment as the school environment is a significant indicator of the atmosphere of the school.

**Staff Liturgy.**
The key implementations of the school’s values I suppose are the staff. It is essential that the ethos be communicated to them so that they can creatively interact with it as they work with the students. Thus chaplain could make the ethos the focus of an annual staff liturgy. The chaplain could also invite speaker or a person who has a good insight into the area of ethos, or who has a special appreciation of the school’s
particular ethos. This could be –a past-pupil, teacher, religious, parent- to address staff or the student or the parents association.

**Conclusion**

Upon reflection, the chaplain in second level education has the great responsibility of promoting the school ethos. He or she does this through his or her religious and spiritual commitments in the school. The role of a chaplain is encapsulated in the mission statement or the school ethos. Their role is based on an educational philosophy in which faith, culture and life are brought into harmony. A chaplain does not work outside the ethos of the school. His or her role as a chaplain is within the ambit of the school mission statement. Largely as custodians of a set of standards or otherwise known as ethos, chaplain preserve, defend and helps in transmitting the ethos of the school through his or her professional role.

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