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2018 REA Annual Meeting, Nov 2-4

Searching for Meaning in the Wake of Gun Violence in Schools: One Catholic High School's Response

Abstract:

On March 14th, 2018, the 19th anniversary of massacre at Columbine High School, students across the U.S. walked out of their schools to protest Congress' inaction in response to gun violence. While the walk out was organized to target public schools, some within Catholic school communities felt compelled to respond. This essay explores how one Catholic high school community responded to the March 14th walkout and discusses the role Catholic education plays in helping students to contextualize difficult realities through the lens of Terence H. McLaughlin's distinctive features of Catholic education.

Introduction:

Catholic schools serve an important role in U.S. society. They seek to provide an environment in which young people can flourish in faith, academics, social interactions, fine arts, and athletics. For many students, they provide stability and a place outside of their immediate family where they can find understanding and support. Because of the many roles it fulfills, a Catholic school has a responsibility to its students in times of crisis. In the days that followed the mass shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida there was an outcry from students across the nation for Congressional action. While much attention has been given to how related events were handled in public school settings, little attention has been given to their impact on Catholic schools. This study serves to illustrate one such response.

Methodology

This study takes a qualitative ethnographic approach. An ethnographic study "...involves understanding the social world or culture- the shared behaviors, beliefs and values- of particular groups, typically via immersion in their community."¹ The research process by which information was gathered follows the procedures as detailed by Wilson and included 1. first establishing oneself as a member of the community 2. collecting data (including, "form and content of verbal interaction between participants, form and content of verbal interaction with the researcher, nonverbal behavior, patterns of action and non-action and traces, archival records, artifacts, and documents) and 3. approaching the data through a lens of disciplined subjectivity.² The purpose of this study is therefore two-fold. First, the study aims to provide a "thick description" of the way in which one co-educational Catholic high school in the mid-Atlantic region of the U.S. responded to the reality of gun violence. Second, this study aims to initiate a dialogue on the importance within all Catholic schools of responding to the needs of their

¹ *Qualitative Research Practice: A Guide for Social Science Students* eds. Jane Ritchie, Jane Lewis, Professor of Social Policy Jane Lewis, Carol McNaughton Nicholls, Rachel Ormston (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2014), 13.

² Stephen Wilson. "The Use of Ethnographic Techniques in Educational Research." *Review of Educational Research* Vol. 47, No. 1 (Winter 1977): 245-265.

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communities, especially considering the increasingly complex society in which young people are educated.

Defining terms:

To analyze the events that took at St. Vincent Pallotti High school. It is also necessary to clarify a few important terms which will be drawn upon within this study's analysis. The first of these terms is *Catholic school*. Per the Congregation for Catholic Education, Catholic schools may be defined as, "...educational institutions of whatever type, devoted to the formation of young people at all preuniversity levels, dependent on ecclesiastical authority..."³ This definition is noticeably ambiguous. The definition may reflect the fact that Catholic schools range in size, population, location and charism.⁴

While Catholic schools vary in many ways, McLaughlin identifies three "general features" that characterize Catholic education. These features include: 1. the embodiment of a view about the meaning of human persons and human life 2. an aspiration of holistic influence and 3. religious and moral formation.⁵ McLaughlin argues that these features emerge from a review of the following Catholic educational documents: *Gravissimum educationis*, the *General Catechetical Directory*, *Catechesis Tradendae*, the Congregation for Catholic Education's *The Catholic School*, *Lay Catholics in Schools: Witnesses to Faith*, *The Religious Dimension in a Catholic School: Guidelines for Reflection and Renewal* and the Sacred Congregation for Catholic Education's *Educational Guidance on Human Love: Outlines for sex education*. According the author, the three distinctive features of Catholic education can be viewed in the "...pedagogical, curricular, and institutional processes..." found within Catholic schools.⁶ McLaughlin's attention to the daily practices found among Catholic schools provides a useful lens through which to examine the events that took place at St. Vincent Pallotti High School preceding and including the student walk out on March 14, 2018.

Description of Events

It is February 14, 2018 and seventeen high school students have been murdered at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida.

At St. Vincent Pallotti High School, located in Laurel, Maryland, there is a mixture of emotions as the community learns news of the high school shooting. Saint Vincent Pallotti, or it is affectionately known, "Pallotti," is a co-educational high school, located in the Archdiocese of Washington with a focus on holistic education and a reputation for its familial atmosphere. Its

³ Congregation for Catholic Education. *Religious Dimension of Education in a Catholic School*. In *The Catechetical Documents: A Parish Resource*, edited by Martin Connell, 491-529, no.4.

⁴ Timothy J. Cook. *Architects of Catholic Culture: Designing & Building Catholic Culture in Catholic Schools*. Washington, DC: National Catholic Educational Association, 2001.

⁵ McLaughlin, Terence. Distinctiveness of Catholic Education in "The Contemporary Catholic School: Context, Identity, and Diversity." edited by Brother Terence McLaughlin, Terence H. McLaughlin, Joseph O'Keefe, Bernadette O'Keefe (London: The Falkner Press, 1996) 140-143.

⁶ McLaughlin, 139.

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identity is rooted in the Pallottine tradition and those within the community share a clear vision to form students in faith while also providing high quality college preparatory academics. The co-educational student body is made up of approximately 460 students, including over forty students from international programs. A distinguishing feature of St. Vincent Pallotti is its “Student Union of the Catholic Apostolate:” a group of approximately 50 select students who commit themselves to modeling the values of the school’s founder and volunteer their time to projects of faith development and service to others.

As the faculty, staff and students of St. Vincent Pallotti discuss the recent school violence it is apparent how many of the students are impacted by the tragedy. Many of these students find support from the school’s counselors. The overall atmosphere however, remains saturated with grief, helplessness, and anger in the days that follow. In response, a faculty and staff in-service day is called during which all employees are trained in new techniques for lock down procedures. Simultaneously news of the #Enough! National School Walkout begins to stir among the student body.⁷ Students begin to talk about participating in the walk out protest and uniting their voices with the many other student activists across the nation.

On February 27th, the faculty meet in a forum setting and discuss the best ways to support students who are considering participating in the protests. A few days later the administration at St. Vincent Pallotti calls a faculty meeting to continue the discussion. Emotions at the meeting run high on how to handle the situation. Interestingly, the polarizing political opinions regarding the right to bear arms is noticeably absent from the discussion. Instead, the focus remains on the safety of students. Discussion arises around the best way to balance between empowering students to act, while also adhering to local authorities’ safety guidelines to remain inside during the time of the scheduled protest.

After much conversation and one additional meeting, the administration and faculty come to a consensus. Instead of a walk out, Campus ministry and religion teachers will plan a prayer service during the time of the protest. The prayer service will take place in the school gymnasium and all students will be required to attend. In addition, topics relating to gun violence will be discussed in classrooms throughout the day. The religion department agrees to spend the day’s class examining Catholic social teaching related to violence in society, and exploring ways to create a more inclusive community for all students at Pallotti. The science department plans to examine bullying and mental health issues related to mass shootings. The social studies department decides to discuss public policy proposals under consideration and exploring the arguments for and against each. The English department agrees to help interested students write a persuasive letter to elected officials to express concerns and opinions on public policy.⁸

After the meeting the Principal sends an email detailing the curricular changes to students’ parents and guardians. He also includes in the email is a clear statement of school policy that anyone who chooses to walk out will face disciplinary action.

⁷ The #Enough National School Walkout website describes that the purpose of the protest was to call attention to the inaction of congress on issues relating to gun control. https://www.actionnetwork.org/event_campaigns/enough-national-school-walkout

⁸ It is noteworthy that no English class required students to write a letter to congress. Students who were not motivated to do so were given an alternative writing assignment.

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As news of the plan for March 14th 2018 spreads, many students and several teachers feel that the alternative plan to participating in the walk out protest does not go far enough. They argue that there is room for protest within the school community and that any effort to organize should be student-led. In response to the critiques, the Student Union of the Catholic Apostolate is placed in charge of planning the prayer service.

Finally, March 14th arrives. Prior to the start of the prayer service, several members of the Student Union of the Catholic Apostolate approach the Director of Campus Ministry and express their concerns that the prayer service will not have the same impact as participating in the walk out. They express frustration that participation in the walk out will result in disciplinary action. They reiterate a desire to join their voices with the hundreds of other protesters around the country to send a clear message that gun violence has no place within their school. Nonetheless, the prayer service begins.

Located in the center of the gym is a single podium lit from above and surrounded by four-hundred and thirty-eight candles. “These candles represent the four-hundred and thirty-eight victims of gun violence in schools since 2012,” explains a female student in the opening prayer. The student body sits facing the podium in chairs and bleachers located on the far side of the gym. The dreary March weather lends itself to the atmosphere, and students sit in near darkness as the prayer service continues.

Three students, chosen from among their peers, take turns speaking at the podium and offering their perspective on the issue of gun violence and its impact on high school students. The first student offers a personal anecdote describing his experience of watching a friend become involved in gang violence. The second student describes frustration with the political climate and the third student offers a faith perspective, drawing from the teachings of the Catholic Church. Students then read from the book of Jeremiah and the Gospel of John. A final student approaches the podium and shares an excerpt from Pope Francis’ *Nonviolence: A Style of Politics for Peace*.⁹

At 10:00 am, the time of the nationally scheduled walk out, the names of the 17 victims are read aloud. After each name is read a student tolls a bell and a moment of silence follows. While each name is read, a member of the Student Union of the Catholic Apostolate rises from within their seats. They are followed by other students and after all seventeen victims’ names are read, the students who have stood up walk out of the gymnasium. About fifty additional members of the student body follow them to the exit. A few faculty and staff members trail the group and follow the protesters to an outdoor courtyard. Student protesters gather in a circle. They join hands, hug, pray, and cry. As their prayers conclude students also discuss the possibility of disciplinary action.

Inside the prayer service continues for those community members that remain. One of members of the Student Union of the Catholic Apostolate sings a gospel meditation hymn and the service concludes with the prayer of St. Francis. After the students have finished, the Principal addresses the community and articulates the importance of educating oneself to create meaningful change in society.

⁹ While students wrote their own speeches, and chose the general format of the prayer service, they were supported by the staff in the office of Campus Ministry.

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Meanwhile, the students in the courtyard are brought into the chapel to meet with the administration. The Principal and members of the administration use the opportunity to conduct a meaningful discussion. Students are surprised to find that the administration is commending them for their bravery and conviction. For breaking school rules however, all student protesters must serve one in-school lunch detention.

The walkout has ended. Interestingly however, several students' activism continues. In the weeks that follow, Pallotti's students mail their letters to congress. They make a banner expressing their love and support for the community at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School and a few students travel to Parkland, Florida to hand-delivered the banner. Two members of the Student Union of the Catholic Apostolate spend the following weeks researching the victims and creating a memorial within the foyers of the building.

Analysis

The following section examines the role administration and staff at Pallotti played in helping its students to contextualize gun violence. McLaughlin's distinctive features of Catholic education are used as a lens for examining the specific response of administration and faculty and brought into dialogue with the teachings and guidance of the Catholic Church pertaining to Catholic schools' religious education programs and overall mission.

The embodiment of a view about the meaning of human persons and of human life

McLaughlin's first distinctive feature of Catholic education, "the embodiment of a view about the meaning of human persons and of human life," refers to shared goal among Catholic schools to assist pupils to achieve a synthesis of faith culture and their lived experience.¹⁰ Pallotti exemplified this distinctive feature of Catholic education in two important ways. First, evidence of the utmost value on human life is reflected in the immediacy of the administration's response to safety protocols. Efforts to review lockdown procedures and retrain its employees occurred within days of the news of Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School. During the training the administrative leaders made a concerted effort to insure faculty felt prepared to respond and could then pass on any changes to the student body.

Second, the school was responsive to the mental health of students. Those who were identified as at risk were immediately referred to trained school counselor and provided with proper support. McLaughlin argues that "...every system of education teaches (implicitly or explicitly) a philosophy of man."¹¹ Throughout all the chaos surrounding the tragedy, the Catholic philosophy that life itself is valuable and of God's creation was at the origin of all responses.¹²

¹⁰ Sacred Congregation for Catholic Education. *The Catholic School*. 1977. http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/ccatheduc/documents/rc_con_catheduc_doc_19770319_catholic-school_en.html (accessed June 17, 2018).no. 37; Congregation for Catholic Education. "Religious Dimension of Education in a Catholic School." In *The Catechetical Documents: A Parish Resource*, edited by Martin Connell, 491-529. Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 1996, no. 34

¹¹ McLaughlin, 140.

¹² John, Paul II. *The Gospel of Life: Evangelium Vitae*. New York: Random House, 1995.

An aspiration to holistic influence

McLaughlin's second distinctive feature of Catholic education, an aspiration to holistic influence refers to how Catholic education seeks to offer, "...a kind of integral formation in which there is a synthesis of culture and faith; an integration of all the different aspects of human knowledge through the subjects taught in the light of the Gospel."¹³ The organic nature in which the various academic departments responded to address the complexity of gun violence within their classrooms is consistent with McLaughlin's description. In this instance, what made the collaboration between so many different individual teachers and departments possible under such circumstances was what Dawson refers to as "a unified Christian vision."¹⁴ If administrators and faculty were not able to put political differences aside and work toward a solution that would educate and empower students on the topic, the entire effort would have faltered. This cooperation also reflects a unique character of the Catholic school, which per Dawson is responsible to society at large to "exert a transformative influence through culture."¹⁵

In a related vein, McLaughlin argues that teachers are essential to cultivating a holistic influence. "A teacher who is full of Christian wisdom, well prepared in his own subject, does more than convey the sense of what he is teaching to his pupils... he guides his pupils beyond his mere words the heart of total Truth."¹⁶ In the days leading up to March 14th, no description more accurately describes the faculty at Pallotti. These teachers put in additional hours after school discussing aspects of the news with their students and preparing themselves to teach new content related to the tragedy. For many of these teachers, the topic was personal and important and clearly reflected the need to find Christ amid the chaos.

Religious and Moral Formation

McLaughlin's final feature of distinctive Catholic education is religious and moral formation. He describes "Catholic education seeks to bring about a distinctive and moral formation of students. This formation is extending beyond the transmission of beliefs to the shaping of religious and moral personhood and character."¹⁷ He elaborates on this, pointing out that the overall goal of catechesis is to help form mature apostles; individuals who can participate fully in the spiritual, sacramental and liturgical aspects of the faith.¹⁸

There are a few important examples in which religious and moral formation are exemplified at Pallotti. First, in the initial choice of administration and faculty to contextualize the events within a larger Catholic framework. Throughout the weeks leading up to the walk out, those involved in the discussions focused on providing students with a mature understanding of

¹³ McLaughlin, 141.

¹⁴ McLaughlin, 142.

¹⁵ Christopher Dawson. *The Crisis of Western Education* (Sheed and Ward, New York, NY: 1961): 133.

¹⁶ McLaughlin, 142.

¹⁷ McLaughlin, 143.

¹⁸ McLaughlin, 144.

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the events and how to respond to social injustice in a way that is both consistent with Catholic teaching and effective. While many faculty members contributed to this effort, those naturally at the forefront were the religion teachers. During religion class, all religion teachers followed a similar format: they began with a conversation related to previously held assumptions of gun violence, showed a video of a man claiming to have contemplated a mass shooting, performed a short catechesis on Catholic social teaching, discussed the impact of bullying, and concluded with prayer. This approach reflected a clear focus within the department to cultivate compassionate understanding while also empowering students to make the sorts of changes in their own behavior that might improve the overall school culture.

A second example of religious and moral formation can be seen within the administration and faculty's decision to empower student leaders to conduct the prayer service and lead the walk out. Creating spaces where students could lead prayer and express their feelings while also being supported was a crucial aspect of how events unfolded. While students responded in many ways to the crisis, the fact that prayer was at the center of the events in both the gymnasium and the courtyard indicates that Pallotti's students view prayer as an important part of their social action and an appropriate response to gun violence in the world.

While this analysis has focused on how the distinctive features of Catholic education were modeled by Pallotti in its effort to respond to gun violence, that is not to say that the approach was flawless. Like any other educational institution, the day of the walk out, Pallotti's administration, teachers, and students faced many obstacles throughout the day and were challenged by the event. Overall, however, the day was a success- not because it was perfect- but because it succeeded in raising awareness, discussion, and inciting action among its students. March 14, 2018 will forever be remembered as a painful, difficult and glorious day at St. Vincent Pallotti High school because it was then that Christ could be clearly be seen within it.

Conclusion

This study may have important implications for those in the field of Catholic education because of the increasingly complex society in which U.S. Catholic schools find themselves. If Dawson's assertion that is the responsibility of Catholic educational institutions to improve the culture in which they function, then instances of gun violence are only one of the many injustices that must be addressed by modern Catholic educators. It is only through honestly assessing the modern culture that those who dedicate themselves to Catholic Schools can begin to formulate meaningful responses to the moral crisis and injustices that its students encounter.

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