



## GUEST EDITORIAL

# Responding to the Changing Times of the 21st Century

Joseph O'Keefe, SJ

In his new book, "The Faithful" (Harvard University Press, 2008, p. 9), historian James O'Toole writes:

*History matters now more than ever, both to American Catholics themselves and the nation in which they live. For Catholics, understanding the successive ages of their church may open them to accepting change that will continue whether they want it or not. The church and its people have never stood still in changing times, and they cannot do so now.*

This edition of *Momentum* offers readers an array of initiatives by which Catholic educators are responding to the changing times of the 21st century. Of course everyone wants renewal but we are all, by nature, somewhat resistant to change. But change we must, and our faith compels us to be bold and daring if we are to sustain the precious contribution that Catholic schools make to the nation.

School reform is a complicated business because schools, by their nature, are always in "momentum." Roland Barth, one of my profes-

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sors when I was a doctoral student at Harvard, remarked that school reform was so difficult because it is "like trying to redesign a 747 while it is in flight."

Dangerous business indeed! What makes the people whose work we discover in these pages remarkable is their ability to be stabilizers and movers at the same time.

Change agents in Catholic schools need the grace of discernment to distinguish, on the one hand, what is essential and unchanging and, on the other hand, what must change and adapt in order to keep the heart of the enterprise vibrant. For any leader, balancing stability and momentum is a crucial skill. Leaders in faith communities also need that skill, but that is not enough. Leaders in Catholic communities can call upon the deep well of spiritual wisdom in the midst of changing times.

In the popular imagination, the Catholic Church is characterized by historical continuity, a reverence for tradition, reluctance to see familiar structures in a new way and a glacial pace of change. But there is something else. We are a people of the Paschal Mystery, which is at the heart of our baptismal reality as the People of God. One of the great graces of that "paschal" spirituality is our ability to let things die when their time comes, so that new life will spring forth.

Since its apex in the mid 1960s, American Catholic education has undergone a lot of death: closing of schools, suppression of parishes, declines in enrollment, problems with recruiting and retaining teachers, stunning demise in the numbers of women and men religious, decreasing rates of Mass attendance,

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and disaffiliation of gen-Xers and millennials from traditional church teaching. Many people have walked away from the Catholic Church; others simply have defected in place, becoming Catholic in name only.

In the midst of all the upheaval we know that, in cooperation with God's grace, something new will be born. And so, we are filled with hope for the future. Along with our paschal spirituality is our commitment to *communio*. Because of this characteristic feature of Catholicism, we are committed to work together across boundaries of parish or diocese, of rich or poor, of urban or suburban or rural, of domestic and international. Our worldview fosters the birth of new forms of collaboration and partnership: educators with social service and healthcare providers, schools with colleges and universities, joint ventures with national associations like NCEA, schools in new forms of partnership with each other. As we face uncertainty and change, none

of us is alone. It is this spirit of *communio*, for example, that prompted Boston College and NCEA to form SPICE (Selected Programs to Improve Catholic Education).

I've often told people outside of the Catholic community that our great strength is our autonomy, the ability to respond creatively at the local level, and that our great weakness is...our autonomy. In the spirit of *communio*, we need to learn from each other's successes and failures; we must replicate best practice. Gone should be the days of reinventing the wheel. For all of us in Catholic education, with eyes wide open, we should put aside fear of the present and the future and, in the spirit of *communio* and paschal spirituality, look to the future, united in hope.

Along with our spiritual tradition, we can take heart from the lessons of our past. I find that many of us look back to the 1950s with nostalgia, a time when schools, churches, novitiates and seminaries were overflow-

ing. But that was just one moment in our history. The 21st century has much in common with earlier eras of our American Catholic history when there were few priests, little institutional infrastructure, hostile civic officials, paltry finances. In each of the five eras of American Catholic history prior to the 21st century (The Priestless Church, The Church in the Democratic Republic, The Immigrant Church, The Church of Catholic Action, The Church of Vatican II), one can find insights from the past that help us face the challenges of the present and the future. Looking back to the future we can learn much about lay leadership, ethnic and racial diversity, church-state struggles and the amazing resilience and flexibility of our ancestors in the faith.

When I read about the insightful and creative projects described in this special theme issue of *Momentum* I take delight that we, like those who have come before us, are not standing still in changing times. ■