WHO AM I AS A CHAPLAIN

Before I began this course, I had some personal views regarding the role of chaplain. From my own background I used to identify a chaplain as a priest or a pastor who would visit regularly and repeatedly a school, hospital, prison, barracks or airport within the confines of his parish, for the purpose of saying mass, hearing confessions, anointing the sick or performing other liturgical and Para-liturgical exercises. He does these in conjunction with the diocesan requirements. Hardly would I have envisaged a layperson being a chaplain. It was absolutely and entirely the work of an ordained minister. I also saw the chaplain as one who would accompany students when they are suffering from a spiritual or psychological trauma, helping them to find acceptance and happiness and discover a way forward amidst such problems and difficulties.

As I participate in this training, I have begun to acquire a deeper awareness as to the role of a chaplain especially in a school setting. Even though my previous assumptions may have been in line with Chaplaincy work, as it was, however today the unique roles of a chaplain continue to evolve. I have now become more attentive to the professional skills that characterize the work of a chaplain such as empathy, listening, caring etc. That is to say, as a chaplain I now see myself as a pastoral carer of students. And since I am an ordained priest, I see myself as having the competence and experience to take up this work. The preparation for functioning as a priest involves preparation for Chaplaincy work.

Accompaniment

During my adolescent years, I received constant care and support from my parents and from a priest chaplain in our school. Their spiritual support and care helped me to remain focused amidst the challenges and struggles of my adolescent time. It is my belief that adolescents in the post primary schools should receive the same holistic attention as they grapple with and search for personal uniqueness and identity; a uniqueness and identity
that is a gift of God that lives in them. Adolescence is a time of self-discovery. Self-discovery is an important part of our Christian growth; and the search for self is the search for the person God created us to be. It is simultaneously the search for the God who created us, the God who dwells in mystery in the very heart and mind of our being.

‘Young people learn to love by being loved, to trust by being trusted, to value by being valued’, and as a chaplain I consider this as the starting point in assisting adolescents in the post primary schools. As I continue to attend the course, I, more deeply grasp and accept the reality that education is not just about intellectual growth, but is a course of action that takes into account the emotional, physical, moral, intellectual, spiritual and religious dimensions of the student as whole. Thus, I have come to believe that if human maturity is to achieve its objective, it cannot ignore the spiritual and religious dimension of life. Every level of a person’s developmental self needs attention. Therefore, there is a need for professional chaplains in the post-primary school to accompany students as they strive to cope and struggle on their journey to become authentically themselves.
Faith Presence

Part of my work as a chaplain is being a ‘faith presence’. By ‘faith presence’ I mean ‘committing myself to the values of Christ on behalf of the church and the school communities, and accompany each student on the journey through life’.\(^1\) Being a ‘faith presence’ means that I will be a person who is animated by a close relationship with Christ, and by the strength of this relationship I will be a unifying focus for the spiritual, academic, social and emotional well being of each student. It also means ‘being with them’ ‘paying attention to the quality of being with them’ being open, accepting, respecting, sharing, learning and invitatory\(^2\). By this I mean, that I am going to adopt a holistic approach that will develop the full potential of each student under my care through integrating spiritual values with life. It will include nurturing, liberating and empowering them so ‘that thy may have life and have it to the full’ [John 10:10].

As a chaplain I hold on to the Dewey philosophy of education, which meets students where they are, assists them to grow so that they are prepared to cope with the various stages of life\(^3\). For this reason, I am responsible to the spiritual and religious needs of the students and staff, while respecting the freedom or the religious and personal convictions of each and every one of them. I supply a service where students and staff can find room, encouragement and opportunities to grow in their human, and personal development, knowledge and faith. As a ‘faith presence’, my special role is shepherding. Psalm 23 has 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 my position as a chaplain has at its core, the aspects of trust and protection, that are essential to any pastoral care system. This will call for the setting up of a place of calm, peace, tranquillity, and renewed strength for the students and staff.

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\(^2\) Ibid; pg 13.

\(^3\) U.M. Collins. Pastoral Care, A Teachers Handbook, p.7.

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Responsibility

Ever since I started this course, I have been teaching and working as a chaplain in Blackrock College, Blackrock. Obviously my responsibilities have been many and varied. My main job is to encourage the Christian community within the College. I do this through running the chapel services, giving my support in various ways as well as seeking to help everyone in the College deepen their faith and learn to appreciate one another. My role is not limited to Christians but to the whole College community. I am available to support each and anyone in whatever situation they are facing. Many students often come to me for support in times of crisis and problems. I always lend a listening ear as they think through important issues in their lives. I am also available to support the staff of the college with their concerns and as far as possible I try to get to know every person in College.

Staff Meetings

As a chaplain I have a special role of attending staff briefings, with a view to contribute on issues, which have moral, spiritual and pastoral implications. I am also available to act as advisor in any academic subject area where there are issues of faith and morals. And I especially work in close relationship with the teachers of the RE department. I also have the responsibility of fostering links with the home parishes of the students. This can involve; inviting and enabling the local priest[s] to take part in liturgical celebrations within the school; also inviting and welcoming priests into the school to meet their young parishioners; Inviting and enabling the local priest[s] to assist with reconciliation services in the school, or to visit classes or speak to groups. In this way the student become aware of liturgical celebrations and other events in their parish [es]. Thus, I can vigorously encourage the participation of both students and staff.

Social Awareness
Further, in cooperation with the pastoral team, the school Principal, the local community and clergy, it is my responsibility to promote social awareness within the school community which include for example; helping to facilitate the St Vincent de Paul society, encouraging students to become actively involved in their own parishes.

**Liturgy**

I also ensure the provision of liturgical and Para-liturgical celebrations in the school with particular reference to the centrality of the Eucharist. This means that it is my role as a chaplain to provide for the celebration of the Eucharist throughout the school year, both with the whole school community and with smaller groupings. I also provide 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. This includes initiating liturgies in response to special needs in the school community; success, tragedy, exams, bereavement, staff INSET and so on. It entails the co-operation of students and teachers. And in all this the school policy is considered.

**Building Community.**

The Irish society today is a multicultural society; thus schools, especially Schools like Blackrock College, bring together a very diverse group of people. These groups of people include: people from different faith, ethnic, cultural and linguistic backgrounds; people of all social classes; and people with a broad spectrum of intellectual, physical, and emotional needs and abilities. Bridging and building community within the school is an essential part of my work as a chaplain.

**Crisis Policy.**

As a chaplain, I have a key role to play in preparing the ‘crises response policy’ for the school, which is essential to have in place in times of sudden death or suicide of a student, staff member, parent, past students or members of the school community. In the case of the death of a pupil, past pupil or member of staff, I would generally be the person to liaise with the priest, and would arrange to have the school involved in the funeral mass.

**Confidentiality**
Confidentiality is a major part of my work as a chaplain. The individual’s right to confidentiality must be respected. I am bound by confidentiality at all times except when a person’s life is in danger, and then I am to inform the necessary authorities. In these later cases the School Chaplain’s Association Guidelines for Chaplains, states that the person with whom the chaplain should confer should be the Principal, his/her Deputy-Principal or Careers and Guidance Counsellor as appropriate or required. In the case of a child protection concern, I will liaise with the designated child protection person within the school.

**Prayer**

The prayer life of the school community is also my responsibility as a chaplain. I provide daily prayer in the school and prepare and lead the prayers for special gatherings of the school community. As stated, I have a special duty in the school with regard to the celebration of the sacraments. Making sure that Sacrament of Reconciliation is available to the students and staff in an appropriate manner, perhaps monthly or seasonally.

**Retreat**

It is also my special duty as a chaplain to organise retreats for the school. These include: the provision of days of retreat for all student year groups and the provision of a staff recollection day each year. I am to be a pastoral resource for the students and the staff in need of counselling for whatever reason. In the case of bereavement, this may include organising bereavement groups in the school or assisting the individual to find appropriate grief counselling.

I found Blackrock College ‘mission statement’ suitable and favourable to the work of a chaplain. The College ethos aims to provide an environment in which; ‘faith is nurtured; students can develop their full potential; personal responsibility is promoted; students are prepared for an appropriate career; students are made aware of their cultural heritage; parental collaboration is promoted and encouraged’. This ethos infact, summarises my work as a chaplain. I am very grateful to the school authorities, the President, Principal,

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4 School Chaplains’ Association, Guidelines for Chaplains, p.2.

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RE Staff member, and members of the pastoral team for their good support and encouragement. The students are also quite open and friendly toward me. They are docile and want to hear me speaking from a different cultural perspective. Their intriguing and stimulating questions add to my insights. The students are quite bright in academics, and even though they can sometimes be very passionate about rugby ball, they are also inclined to religious affairs.

I had a case of a student who explained in a religion class in one of the Schools I had my pastoral placements that he was an atheist. In religion classes, the said student took naps or was indifferent or occasionally antagonistic. He was not even ready to share his story with any one. In fact he was closed to himself. On two occasions I made attempt to have a chat with him after religion class but it were not successful. Either he was rushing to go to the next lesson or was not ready to pay attention to me. Upon reflection on how to approach him, I thought that I would first find a way to make him feel at his ease with me before I would talk with him. Fortunately, in one of the classes before Christmas break, while teaching the class, I used the word ‘eschatology’ one student then asked for the meaning of ‘eschatology’. In the process of explaining it as ‘events after life’ or ‘the world to come’ the concepts of heaven and hell appeared. To my greatest surprise the group asked me ‘Do you believe in the reality of heaven? In which I replied with strong emphasis ‘Yes’. And then I asked them ‘and what about you, do you believe? Attention was shifted to the student who earlier declared himself to be an atheist. They were indirectly involving him to defend his position as atheist. Upon looking at him he was shy and seemingly depressed. I felt the group wanted to embarrass or ridicule him, so I quickly came to his rescue and diffused the tension by saying that ‘It is not as if he does not believe, but I think he has a lot of questions and unresolved doubts that are personal to him which could happen to any-body at anytime. ‘Do not be surprise if his faith is stronger than ours in the future.’ With this I felt a sense of relief from his face while the lesson was going. After the lesson, as others were rushing out for the next lesson, it caught my attention that he was delaying going out unlike before. While I was still packing my belongings together he approached me, all the rest of the students had left the
class. He told me he was delighted with what happened. And I asked him why?, he answered ‘what you said is the case’ ‘I have a lot of unresolved problems about the reality of God; ‘How can I continue to have faith and trust in the one who does not seem to hear my prayers? But I asked him ‘Do you pray that your own will be done or God’s will? The Dialogue continued from the class to the door of staff room.

But what is interesting is that this student is now feeling at home discussing religious matters. He seems to be very active and vibrant in the Religion classes now. I think he is gradually becoming interested. He stops any-place he sees me to interact with me merely about the Christian faith. I learnt a lot from this. I thought it was the positive attitude I adopted towards his situation that made him becomes open to speak and share his life’s story with me. He sensed that I understood his situation and could confide on me. I am optimistic that he will eventually become positive towards religion.

In conclusion, therefore, it is imperative to state that my role as a chaplain is of great importance. It is an essential component in the structure of the school; it is not an added extra. It is very instrumental in helping the adolescents cherish and live the values of Christ. In the footsteps of Christ, I look forward to meeting students in their everyday situations, walking with them, and inviting them to holistic maturity and a fuller life in Christ.

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