What characteristics do leading educational institutions have in common? Research tells us that effective schools invariably have a strong culture. Shared core values, in turn, are considered the bedrock of a robust school culture. These core values cut to the bare essence of a school's identity, encapsulating what is important to the school and what it stands for.

The opening scene of the movie "Dead Poets Society" illustrates this point well. At prestigious Welton Academy, the first assembly of the school year begins with a parade of banners emblazoned with the school's core values. The headmaster then asks, "Gentlemen, what are the four pillars?" The students stand and answer in resounding unison, "Tradition, Honor, Discipline, Excellence."

Catholic schools that exhibit a distinctive and cohesive school culture often are associated with religious congregations (Cook, 2001). These schools appear to have a sharper focus and clearer purpose because their core values tend to emanate from the charism of the religious congregation. I believe that all Catholic schools, not just religious-order schools, have charisms. I believe that all Catholic schools should conceptualize their core values in terms of charisms to strengthen their distinctive, and distinctively Catholic, identity. Each Catholic school should identify, nurture and promote its unique charism.

WHAT IS A CHARISM?
Charisms are special gifts of the Holy Spirit that characterize an individual or group and that are used to contribute to the common good and glorify God in the church and world. Scripture refers to charisms several times. The Pentecost event stands out as a vivid illustration. Those gathered in the upper room received the gift of tongues from the Holy Spirit to proclaim the Gospel in many languages (Acts 2:1-4). Most of the scriptural references to charisms are attributed to St. Paul. He tells us that there are a variety of spiritual gifts and that each person is given a charism to help build the kingdom of God on earth (1 Cor 12). Charisms mentioned in scripture include knowledge, faith, leadership, hospitality, mercy, service and teaching. What makes these attributes charisms? According to the Catechism of the Catholic Church (1994), gifts of the Holy Spirit become charisms when individuals or groups use their gifts for the good of others (par. 2003). For a thorough discussion of charism, see Donnelly (1999).

HOW DO CHARISMS RELATE TO CATHOLIC SCHOOLS?
In religious orders and church institutions there is likely to be an identifiable charism that members share. This corporate charism helps define the group's corporate identity. For a religious order, this charism oftentimes can be traced to the founder or foundress. Church documents acknowledge that the principle of corporate character applies to Catholic schools as well. The Congregation for Catholic Education (1982) observes: Certain elements will be characteristic of all Catholic schools. But these can be expressed in a variety of ways; often enough, the concrete expression will correspond to the specific charism of the religious institute that founded the school and continues to direct it. Whatever be its origin--diocesan, religious or lay--each Catholic school can preserve its own specific character, spelled out in an educational philosophy, rationale or in its own pedagogy. (par. 39)

The congregation makes it clear that every Catholic school has a special character. Each Catholic school can be a unique expression of Catholicism. Each Catholic school may choose to emphasize a particular aspect of Christ's message. Although charism is mentioned only in reference to religious-order schools, we can infer that any school can derive its special character, distinctive identity and unique expression of Catholicism from a corporate charism. I like to think of a school's unique expression that charism fosters as Catholicism "with a twist."

HOW DO CHARISMS BENEFIT SCHOOLS?
Experts in organizational culture often list specialized language as one of the building blocks of a strong culture,
evolves. In what I call an "emergent charism." That is to say, I believe that a school's charism can emerge as the school articulates our mission to our students, to the community, and to ourselves." Trinity's experience reinforces my belief have to evolve was a matter of fact. Now that Trinity is up and running very successfully, we are refining how we between the announcement of the merger and when Trinity was brought to life. Accepting recognizes the evolutionary nature of his school's identity in its young life. "In our situation, we only had six months its all

HOW TO IDENTIFY CHARISM

The distinctive identity and school culture of religious-order schools most likely arise from the charism of the sponsoring religious congregation and its founder. At Mercy High School in Omaha, Nebraska, students feel such a strong bond with Catherine McAuley, foundress of the Sisters of Mercy, that they commonly refer to her as "our foundress." The highest honor for a Mercy senior is to be chosen by her classmates to portray Catherine McAuley in the annual Mercy Day play.

Some diocesan and parish schools continue to derive their special character from the religious order that founded or staff(ed) the school. For instance, "Sharing the love of the heart of Christ," the motto and life force for St. Rocco Elementary School in Johnston, Rhode Island, reflects the charism of the Apostles of the Sacred Heart of Jesus.

One Omaha, Nebraska, diocesan school, Roncalli Catholic High School, went through a formal process to reestablish ties with the De La Salle Christian Brothers and the Lasallian network of schools. According to Roncalli Principal Curt Feilmeier, "reconnecting with the Lasallian network has given us a renewed sense of identity and solidarity with other schools that share our mission, charism and academic excellence in serving all students who come to us, especially the poor and marginalized."

Schools named after saints and other religious heroes or heroines can base their special identity on the charism of their school's exemplar. One school that is not named after a patron saint adopted one. Believing that its students would identify more easily with a youthful saintly role model, Bishop McGuinness High School in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, had its students elect a school patron. The students chose Blessed Pier Giorgio Frassati, an Italian who lived 1901-1924. An average student and an excellent athlete, Pier Giorgio serves as a role model of hard work, devotion to God, love of neighbor and service to the poor. A famous picture of Pier Giorgio shows him climbing a mountain. Across the back of his shirt, Pier Giorgio wrote the words "toward the top" to encourage those following behind him. Inspired by Pier Giorgio, the students at Bishop McGuinness invoke his name after every prayer and recall his words of encouragement to his friends. "Blessed Pier Giorgio. Pray for us! Where are we going? Toward the Top!"

Skutt Catholic High School, a diocesan high school in Omaha that opened in 1993, bases its charisms on the school's namesakes. The school is named in honor of V.J. and Angela Skutt, prominent civic and religious leaders in the Omaha community who exemplify Christian traits that the school has embraced as its charisms. The school's six charisms are: personal success with integrity and responsibility, fairness to all, care and concern for individuals, service to all those in need of help and healing, loyalty to religious faith, and joy and wonder in the beauty of all God's creation.

School President Rev. James E. Gilg noted, "It's a very Catholic approach to be incarnational and to highlight individuals who live certain ideals of the faith. We try to integrate the charisms of our school's namesakes throughout our school culture and activities in the hope that our students will make these qualities their own."

For consolidated or merged schools, discerning charism may not be a clear-cut proposition. For these schools, the questions become, "Do we adopt one former school's charism? Do we blend charisms? Do we discern a new charism now? Do we discern a new charism later?"

In St. Louis, Missouri, Aquinas-Mercy and Rosary consolidated this year to form Trinity Catholic High School. Aptly named, the new school can trace its roots to the traditions of three religious congregations--Sisters of Mercy, Sisters of St. Joseph and School Sisters of Notre Dame. In discerning the new school's mission and identity, leaders sought to serve unmet local Catholic educational needs. To that end, Trinity established itself as the only comprehensive coed Catholic high school in North County St. Louis. The school considers one of its charisms to be its all-welcoming character.

As a newly consolidated school, the school's identity continues to take shape with time. Principal Kermit Boschert recognizes the evolutionary nature of his school's identity in its young life. "In our situation, we only had six months between the announcement of the merger and when Trinity was brought to life. Accepting that our charism would have to evolve was a matter of fact. Now that Trinity is up and running very successfully, we are refining how we articulate our mission to our students, to the community, and to ourselves." Trinity's experience reinforces my belief in what I call an "emergent charism." That is to say, I believe that a school's charism can emerge as the school evolves.
CHARISM TO THE EXTREME

There is a danger when a school's charism becomes disconnected from the larger Gospel message and Catholic vision. I call this the "dark side" of charism. In a school's efforts to find and nurture its own uniqueness, the school can lose sight of its common mission with other Catholic schools. At the higher education level, I have observed Catholic institutions undertake sophisticated "branding" initiatives for the purpose of positioning and marketing themselves as a particular brand of college or university.

I become concerned when Catholic colleges founded by religious orders, for instance, only refer to themselves in terms of their specific educational tradition. In particular, an institution might identify itself as "Jesuit" instead of "Catholic Jesuit." To me, that way of self-identifying is a problem because it sets Jesuit apart from Catholic. I think it's important to remember that Jesuit is a brand of Catholic.

As each Catholic school at every level discerns and nurtures its special character, it must do so in relation to the larger Gospel message and Catholic vision. In the final analysis, despite each Catholic school's unique charism, all Catholic schools share a common mission and "a clear educational project of which Christ is the foundation" (par. 4).

ADDED MATERIAL

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REFERENCES