

PASTORAL LETTER ON CATHOLIC SCHOOLS

By the Catholic Bishops of British Columbia

I. THE MISSION OF THE CATHOLIC SCHOOL

As the Church labours to bring the Gospel to the world of the third millennium, she draws on the rich legacy of faith and service that has guided her mission through the centuries. The apostolate of Catholic education is a treasured part of that tradition.

The Catholic school is integral to the parish, participating in the evangelizing mission of the Church.¹ It provides religious and moral reference points to help students critically evaluate culture in the light of the Gospel and help build a social order enlightened by the truth of Christ's teaching. This light is directed not only to the individual, but also to the community: the work of evangelization addresses persons, families and cultures.

The world in which our schools carry out their mission is marked by an extreme pluralism that often leads to an eclipse of community identity. The subjectivism and moral relativism that accompany this cultural shift has increasingly marginalized faith as a reference point for human life.

In this situation the school performs an important role for the students and families. "The school is a centre in which a specific concept of the world, of [the human person] and of history is developed and conveyed."² "Knowledge set in the context of faith becomes wisdom and life vision."³

"Christ is the foundation of the whole educational enterprise in a Catholic school."⁴ His teaching and life inform the school's identity and characteristics. His sacramental gifts build up the community and prepare its members for a share in the mission to bring His light to every person and situation. "The special character of the Catholic school and the underlying reason for its existence, the reason why Catholic parents should prefer it, is precisely the quality of the religious instruction integrated into the overall education of the students."⁵

II. TEACHING THE WHOLE PERSON

Because "promotion of the human person is the goal of the Catholic school,"⁶ Catholic education goes beyond the technical and practical aspects of schooling to help students integrate every area of knowledge within a Christian vision of the human person. The school recognizes that the physical, emotional, moral and spiritual dimensions of human development must tend to a personal synthesis of faith and life in each student. Growth in these areas prepares students for a life of service, building the Kingdom of God in society.

III. FAITH AND LIFE SHARED IN A COMMUNITY

The Catholic school is a place of ecclesial experience. The New Testament speaks of the Church as *koinonia*, a communion of relationships built through sharing life in Christ. This communion fosters relationships characterized by mutual respect, open communication and the commitment to serve each other's needs. The history of the Church's educational postolate is distinguished by concern for the poor and marginalized members of society. Pope Francis' emphasis on reaching those on the peripheries reflects this core focus of Catholic education.

IV. PARENTS

The parish is a family of families. Through its school, the parish cooperates with parents to support them in their role as the primary educators of their children, especially in the transmission of the faith, and through the school, parents and children are linked to the wider community of the parish. Parents should be involved in the life of the school through participation in councils and committees, as well as regular collaboration with the staff.

V. STAFF

“Teachers and educators fulfill a specific Christian vocation and share an equally specific participation in the mission of the Church.”⁷ Members of the staff are called to model the integration of faith and culture in all the subjects they teach. “Professionalism is marked by, and raised to, a supernatural Christian vocation.”⁸ It is the personal witness of the teacher that will have the greatest impact on the students.

The leadership of the diocesan school community should promote the effectiveness of those who teach by providing ongoing professional development and formation in the Catholic faith.

VI. PASTORS

The pastor is an integral member of the school community, with a specific role in overseeing the religious education curriculum and leading the liturgical life. He has a responsibility to support the formation of teachers in their role as Catholic educators. He should promote Catholic education, especially for those who are poor, deprived of the benefits of family life or otherwise marginalized.

VII. CONCLUSION

St. John Paul II called for evangelization in the third millennium “new in its ardour, methods and expressions.”⁹ Drawing on the rich tradition of the educational apostolate, our schools should continually assess their progress in living out this call to mission. “It is not merely a question of adaptation, but of missionary thrust, the fundamental duty to evangelize.”¹⁰ The gifts and creativity of every member of the community can help our Catholic schools find new and effective ways of evangelizing and forming young people and their families for life and mission in the Church.

Given on the Memorial of St. Charles Borromeo, the Fourth day of November, in the Year of Our Lord, Two Thousand and Sixteen.

+ J. Michael Miller, CSB, *Archbishop of Vancouver*

+ Gary Gordon, *Bishop of Victoria*

+ John Corriveau, OFM Cap, *Bishop of Nelson*

+ Stephen Jensen, *Bishop of Prince George*

+ Joseph Phuong Nguyen, *Bishop of Kamloops*

References

1 Cf. Congregation for Catholic Education, *The Catholic School on the Threshold of the Third Millennium* (28 December 1997), n. 11.

2 Sacred Congregation for Catholic Education, *The Catholic School* (19 March 1977), n. 8.

- 3 Congregation for Catholic Education, *The Catholic School on the Threshold of the Third Millennium* (28 December 1997), n.14.
- 4 Sacred Congregation for Catholic Education, *The Catholic School* (19 March 1977), n. 34.
- 5 Congregation for Catholic Education, *The Religious Dimension of Education in a Catholic School* (7 April 1988), n. 66.
- 6 St. John Paul II, *Address to the National Meeting of the Catholic School in Italy* (24 November 1991).
- 7 Congregation for Catholic Education, *The Catholic School on the Threshold of the Third Millennium* (28 December 1997), n.19.
- 8 Sacred Congregation for Catholic Education, *Lay Catholics in Schools: Witnesses to Faith* (15 October 1982), n. 37.
- 9 St. John Paul II, *Address at the Opening of the 19th Ordinary Plenary Assembly of the Latin American Episcopal Council* (9 March 1983).
- 10 Congregation for Catholic Education, *The Catholic School on the Threshold of the Third Millennium* (28 December 1997), n. 3.