The Catholic Bishops of British Columbia

Pastoral Letter on Catholic Schools

I. The Mission of the Catholic School

As Mother and Teacher, the Church labours to bring the Gospel to the world in every age and continually 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 this tradition. It is essential to the Church's "identity and mission."[1]

"Catholic schools, which always strive to join their work of education with the explicit proclamation of the Gospel, are a most valuable resource for the evangelization of culture."[2] They are integral to the parish, participating in the Church's evangelizing mission.[3] They provide religious and moral reference points to assist students to critically evaluate culture in the light of the Gospel and contribute to building 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 unhealthy individualism that often leads to an eclipse of community identity. The subjectivism and moral relativism that accompany this cultural shift have increasingly marginalized faith as a reference point for human life. Due to advancing secularization, Catholic schools find themselves in a missionary situation, which calls them to bear witness through a community and life clearly inspired by the Gospel.[4]

In this new reality, the school performs an important role for 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."[5] "Knowledge set in the context of faith becomes wisdom and life vision."[6]

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[1] Congregation for Catholic Education, The Identity of the Catholic School for a Culture of Dialogue (25 January 2022), n. 10.
[2] Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium* (24 November 2013), n. 134.
[3] Cf. Congregation for Catholic Education, *The Catholic School on the Threshold of the Third Millennium* (28 December 1997), n. 11.
[4] Congregation for Catholic Education, *The Identity of the Catholic School for a Culture of Dialogue* (25 January 2022), n. 28.
[5] Sacred Congregation for Catholic Education, *The Catholic School* (19 March 1977), n. 8.
[6] Congregation for Catholic Education, *The Catholic School on the Threshold of the Third Millennium* (28 December 1997), n. 14.

"Christ is the foundation of the whole educational enterprise in a Catholic school."[7] 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."[8]

II. Teaching the Whole Person

Because "promotion of the human person is the goal of the Catholic school,"[9] 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 through a culture of dialogue and the commitment to serve each other's needs. Throughout history, the Church's educational mission has been distinguished by its unwavering concern for the poor and marginalized, reflecting the Gospel's call to compassion and justice. In this spirit, all members of the school community are called to recognize, respect and actively bear witness to the school's Catholic identity.

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 transmitting the faith.[10] Through the school, parents and children are

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[7] Sacred Congregation for Catholic Education, *The Catholic School* (19 March 1977), n. 34.

[8] Congregation for Catholic Education, *The Religious Dimension of Education in a Catholic School* (7 April 1988), n. 66.

[9] St. John Paul II, Address to the National Meeting of the Catholic School in Italy (24 November 1991).

[10] Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, *Gravissimum Educationis* (28 October 1965), n. 3.

linked to the broader community of the parish. Parents should be involved in the life of the school by participating in councils and committees, as well as by regularly collaborating with the staff.

V. Staff

"Teachers and educators fulfil a specific Christian vocation and share an equally specific participation in the mission of the Church."[11] Staff members are called to model the integration of faith and culture in all the subjects they teach. Their responsibility extends "to the moral, spiritual and social aspects of life."[12] "Professionalism is marked by, and raised to, a supernatural Christian vocation."[13] It is the teachers' personal witness that will have the most significant impact on the students. They are to inspire others "by their evident love of Christ, their witness of sound devotion and their commitment to that Christian wisdom which integrates faith and life, intellectual passion and reverence for the splendour of truth both human and divine."[14]

The leadership of the 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 is responsible for supporting 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."[15] Drawing on the rich tradition of the educational apostolate, our schools should continually assess their progress in living out this call

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[11] Congregation for Catholic Education, *The Catholic School on the Threshold of the Third Millennium* (28 December 1997), n. 19.
[12] Francis, *Fratelli Tutti* (3 October 2020), n. 114.
[13] Sacred Congregation for Catholic Education, *Lay Catholics in Schools: Witnesses to Faith* (15 October 1982), n. 37.
[14] Benedict XVI, *Ad Limina* Address (5 May 2012).
[15] St. John Paul II, Address at the Opening of the 19th Ordinary Plenary Assembly of the Latin American Episcopal Conference (9 March 1983).

to mission. "It is not merely a question of adaptation, but of missionary thrust, the fundamental duty to evangelize."[16] Catholic schools "constitute a very valid contribution to the evangelization of culture."[17] The gifts and creativity of every community member help our Catholic schools find new and effective ways of evangelizing and forming young people and their families for life and the Church's evangelizing mission.

Given on the Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary, the 8th day of December, in the Year of Our Lord, Two Thousand and Twenty-five.

The Catholic Bishops of British Columbia

✠ Most Rev. Richard W. Smith, Archbishop of Vancouver
✠ Most Rev. Gary Gordon, Bishop of Victoria
✠ Most Rev. Stephen Jensen, Bishop of Prince George
✠ Most Rev. Gregory Bittman, Bishop of Nelson
✠ Most Rev. Joseph Phuong Nguyen, Bishop of Kamloops
✠ Most Rev. Michael Kwiatkowski, Ukrainian Catholic Bishop of New Westminster

[16] Congregation for Catholic Education, *The Catholic School on the Threshold of the Third Millennium* (28 December 1997), n. 3.
[17] Congregation for Catholic Education, *The Identity of the Catholic School for a Culture of Dialogue* (25 January 2022), n. 95.