

The Mission of Our Catholic Schools and the Importance of Authentic Witness of Catholic School Educators

Splendid, therefore, and of the highest importance is the vocation of those who help parents in carrying out their duties and act in the name of the community by undertaking a teaching career.
(Gravissimum Educationis, 5)

1. The mission of the Church is to evangelize (cf. Canon 781). The Lord commanded his disciples to go out and make disciples of all nations (Mt. 28:19-20). *For the Church to evangelize is to bring the Good News to all aspects of humanity and, through its influence, to transform it from within, making humanity itself into something new.* (Evangelii Nuntiandi, 18) Parents are the primary educators in the faith, and the Church works with the parents to catechize children through the ministries of the parish and Catholic schools (Evangelii Nuntiandi, 44; cf. Canon 793-794, CCC #2223). In this fundamental ministry of the Church the Catholic school holds not just a special place. The Catholic school is at the heart of the Church (Catholic Schools on the Threshold, 11; cf. 761). Indeed, the Church has stated that to fulfill the mission of evangelization *what is needed is a school.* (Religious Dimension, 41).

2. The very identity of the Catholic school is inextricably linked with the mission given by Christ to His Church. *It is from its Catholic identity that the school derives its original characteristic and its 'structure' as a genuine instrument of the Church, a place of real and specific pastoral ministry.* (Catholic School on the Threshold, 11) The Catholic bishops of the United States echo this description of the Catholic school and its ministry noting:

These Catholic schools afford the fullest and best opportunity to realize the fourfold purpose of Christian education, namely to provide an atmosphere in which the Gospel message is proclaimed, community in Christ is experienced, service to our brothers and sisters is the norm, and thanksgiving and worship of God is cultivated. (Renewing Our Commitment)

3. Bishops, as successors of the apostles, are the chief pastors of the Church who receive at ordination the offices of teaching, sanctifying, and governing. The diocesan bishop is entrusted with the pastoral care of the people of his diocese. This pastoral care includes establishing and maintaining Catholic schools that impart an education imbued with the Christian spirit (canon 802) and grounded in the principles of Catholic doctrine (canon 803,2). Catholic school educators are to cooperate with the bishop and *to support him* in his mission of transmitting, teaching, and guarding the faith. They themselves are to be *outstanding in correct doctrine and integrity of life* (Canon 803, 2). All Catholic school educators are expected to support the Catholic mission as articulated in the Church's teachings and norms *as defined in the Catechism of the Catholic Church.* The school's Catholic identity entails much more than the teaching of religion. It entails the integration of faith and life, reverence for truth, growth in virtue, formation in Christian discipleship, and

commitment to prayer. All educators are to be committed to this identity and to support this mission by word and example.

N.B. “Catholic school educators” refers to those who teach, lead, and guide the students. They include administrators, teachers, campus ministers, counselors, coaches, and moderators. Other staff play an important role in supporting the mission of the Church and our Catholic schools, however, they are not included within the scope of this document. They are bound by the policies of the Employee Personnel Handbook which apply to all employees of the Diocese of Fort Wayne-South Bend.

4. The school environment and curriculum are critical elements of a Catholic school. The U.S. Bishops have written: *Catholic schools provide young people with sound Church teaching through a broad-based curriculum, where faith and culture are intertwined in all areas of the school’s life.* (Renewing Our Commitment) The Church has also taught that *the various school subjects do not present only knowledge to be attained, but also values to be acquired and truths to be discovered. All of which demands an atmosphere characterized by the search for truth, in which competent, convinced and coherent educators, teachers of learning and of life, may be a reflection, albeit imperfect but still vivid, of the one Teacher.* (The Catholic School on the Threshold of the Third Millennium, 14). The Catholic school has a unique educational environment.

The Council, therefore, declared that what makes the Catholic school distinctive is its religious dimension, and that this is to be found in a) the educational climate, b) the personal development of each student, c) the relationship established between culture and the Gospel, d) the illumination of all knowledge with the light of faith. (Religious Dimension, 1).

From the first moment that a student sets foot in a Catholic school, he or she ought to have the impression of entering a new environment, one illumined by the light of faith, and having its own unique characteristics. The Council summed this up by speaking of an environment permeated with the Gospel spirit of love and freedom. In a Catholic school, everyone should be aware of the living presence of Jesus the “Master” who, today as always, is with us in our journey through life as the one genuine “Teacher”, the perfect Man in whom all human values find their fullest perfection. The inspiration of Jesus must be translated from the ideal into the real. The Gospel spirit should be evident in a Christian way of thought and life which permeates all facets of the educational climate. Having crucifixes in the school will remind everyone, teachers and students alike, of this familiar and moving presence of Jesus, the “Master” who gave his most complete and sublime teaching from the cross. (Religious Dimensions, 25)

5. While the school environment and the curriculum are critical for the success of the mission of Catholic schools, essential to this mission of the Catholic school is the authentic

witness of those who teach, lead, and guide the students as educators (Canon 759 and 803.2). While all staff members play an important role in presenting the teaching of the Church and the dignity of the Christian life, the administrators, teachers, campus ministers, counselors, coaches and moderators are central. Their daily work in the classroom and other venues of student life are essential elements in the overall formation that is provided to students. The school is not merely the place for the communication of a particular curriculum in a loving environment, it is also a place where the Christian life is modeled by the educators as individuals and as a community. They not only convey the truth of the Gospel as taught by the Church; they also serve as moral exemplars of living the Christian life when they allow the charity of Christ to shine through them to their students and the school community. *This integration of religious truth and values with the rest of life is brought about in the Catholic school not only by its unique curriculum, but more importantly, by the presence of teachers who express an integrated approach to learning and living in their private and professional lives.* (To Teach as Jesus Did #104) This means that the educators in a Catholic school have the duty to be moral exemplars in their private and professional lives as faith-filled adult Christians, and to give credible witness to the teachings of the Church in faith and morals (Canon 759). This requirement flows across all curricular departments and disciplines and all school-related activities.

6. The Catholic school is a ministry of the Church. *Lay teachers must be profoundly convinced that they share in the sanctifying, and therefore educational mission of the Church...* (Lay Catholics in Schools, 24). It is the teacher building upon the work of parents who can move a child from wondering “who am I?” to “who created me?” and “to whom do I belong, and what is my eternal destiny?” It is the teacher again as coworker with parents who can take a child immersed in secular realities and get him or her to desire to know the true, the good and beautiful, not just in the abstract, but as the one who is the way, the truth and the life (John 14:6). (cf. Pope Francis, *Address to Italian Educators; Evangelii Gaudium*, 167) Indeed, all educators in our Catholic schools are ministers and are rightly associated with this teaching ministry of the Church. They assist the Church in fulfilling her mission to teach and form a new generation of Christian disciples. Since they are privileged participants in this ministry, there are high expectations placed on Catholic school educators to witness before the local community to the faith of the Church, both in the school and outside of it. The Church, in her wisdom, has written extensively on the importance of teachers, regardless of their particular discipline, and of all educators in Catholic schools, to be authentic witnesses of the Gospel.

Teachers must remember that it depends chiefly on them whether the Catholic school achieves its purpose.... [T]hey should bear testimony by their lives and their teaching to the one Teacher, who is Christ. (Gravissimum Educationis, 8).

Prime responsibility for creating this unique Christian school climate rests with the teachers, as individuals and as a community. The religious dimension of the school climate is

expressed through the celebration of Christian values in Word and Sacrament, in individual behavior, in friendly and harmonious interpersonal relationships, and in a ready availability. Through this daily witness, the students will come to appreciate the uniqueness of the environment to which their youth has been entrusted. (Religious Dimension, 25-26)

All who work in our Catholic schools are called to be authentic Christian witnesses. (Religious Dimension, 104).

Most of all, students should be able to recognize authentic human qualities in their teachers. They are teachers of the faith; however, like Christ, they must also be teachers of what it means to be human. This includes culture, but it also includes such things as affection, tact, understanding, serenity of spirit, a balanced judgment, patience in listening to others and prudence in the way they respond, and, finally, availability for personal meetings and conversations with the students. A teacher who has a clear vision of the Christian milieu and lives in accord with it will be able to help young people develop a similar vision, and will give them the inspiration they need to put it into practice. (Religious Dimension, 96)

Perfect schools are the result not so much of good methods as of good teachers, teachers who are thoroughly prepared and well-grounded in the matter they have to teach; who possess the intellectual and moral qualifications required by their important office; who cherish a pure and holy love for the youths confided to them, because they love Jesus Christ and His Church, ... (Divini Illius Magistri)

Lay Catholic educators in schools, whether teachers, directors, administrators, or auxiliary staff, must never have any doubts about the fact that they constitute an element of great hope for the Church. The Church puts its trust in them entrusting them with the task of gradually bringing about an integration of temporal reality with the Gospel, so that the Gospel can thus reach into the lives of all men and women. More particularly, it has entrusted them with the integral human formation and the faith education of young people. (Lay Catholics in Schools: Witnesses to Faith, 81).

By their witness and their behavior teachers are of the first importance to impart a distinctive character to Catholic schools (The Catholic School, 78).

7. In sum, it is clear that the Church highly esteems the vocation of Catholic school educators as vital participants in the Church's mission. They are called to witness to the truth, beauty, and joy of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. They are called, in the words of Pope Francis, to be "missionary disciples" who bear witness to the dignity and sanctity of all human life, to the dignity and sanctity of marriage and family, and to the justice and charity that reflect authentic discipleship.

8. As noted above, Catholic school educators play a crucial role in the Church's mission of evangelization. The first form of evangelization is witness. The Catholic school educator

is to teach by example as well as by words the beauty and joy of life in Christ. This evangelical witness includes fidelity to the teachings of Christ as handed down in the Church. The Catholic school educator seeks to integrate appropriate elements of the Christian faith into the various education disciplines.

9. Catholic school educators are called to embrace the fullness of the life of faith that is given to us in the Church. Accepting the truth that Christ reveals, they commit themselves to witness to that truth in their words and actions. They do not publicly reject the dogmatic or moral teachings and laws of the Catholic Church, nor sow doubt about the truth of the Church's teaching. Their service of truth is a service of love, for Christ and for their students. Their own committed practice of the faith is a strong contribution to the school's fulfilling its specifically Catholic mission.

10. The Gospel of Jesus Christ is the Gospel of life. *The Gospel of life is at the heart of Jesus' message* (Evangelium Vitae 1). Respect for the life and dignity of every human life, from the moment of conception until natural death, is at the heart and core of Catholic moral and social teaching. All Catholic school educators have the responsibility to uphold this teaching in word and practice. They do not engage in, assist, or support abortion, euthanasia, or assisted suicide. They also uphold the dignity of every person, especially of the weak and vulnerable. They are to be convinced and convincing witnesses to the Gospel of life and unconditionally pro-life. As Catholic school educators, they have the sacred duty to form the consciences of their students with regard to the incomparable and inviolable worth of every human life.

11. Guided by the Gospel of life, the Gospel of mercy and love, Catholic school educators are called to be witnesses of justice and charity, embracing the Church's preferential option for the poor, the vulnerable, and the suffering. *Love for others, and in the first place love for the poor, in whom the Church sees Christ himself, is made concrete in the promotion of justice* (Centesimus Annus 58). Catholic school educators are expected to uphold the Church's social teachings, her commitment to social justice, and her mission of charity. The evangelizing mission of the Catholic school, to be embraced by all Catholic school educators, includes the promotion of the Church's social doctrine.

12. The mission of the Catholic school includes the proclamation of God's plan for marriage and the family, the vital and fundamental cell of society. Catholic school educators are to embrace and uphold the truth about marriage as *a lifelong partnership of the whole of life, of mutual and exclusive fidelity, established by mutual consent between a man and a woman, and ordered toward the good of the spouses and the procreation of offspring* (Marriage: Love and Life in the Divine Plan, p.7). Marriage is the foundation of the family. Respecting and upholding this teaching in their words and behavior, Catholic school educators are not to publicly promote or support so-called "same-sex marriages", adultery, or other offenses against the truth and dignity of marriage as taught by the

Catholic Church. Their witness to this truth requires that they not enter into relationships which contradict this teaching.

13. Catholic school educators are required to respect and uphold the Church's teaching that sexuality is ordered to the conjugal love of man and woman. Their witness to the truth about human sexuality in the divine plan, intimately connected to the truth about respect for human life, requires that they not publicly promote, support, or engage in artificial insemination, in-vitro fertilization, or surrogate parenthood. It also includes the commitment to the Church's teachings on the vocation and virtue of chastity and the rejection of offenses against chastity, such as fornication and pornography. Catholic school educators are called to accept with respect, compassion, and sensitivity persons with homosexual tendencies as well as their call to live chaste lives. They are to uphold the Church's respect for all persons and the truth about the divine plan for human sexuality as taught by the Catholic Church. They are also to uphold the truth that God's creation of every human being as male or female is part of the person's unchangeable nature and cannot be manipulated at will.

14. Catholic school educators are to avoid any form of scandal that compromises or thwarts the Catholic mission of the school. They must take care that they not be counter-witnesses to the Gospel by publicly rejecting authentic Church teaching in their words or in their conduct. They are not to belong to organizations or participate in activities that are incompatible with their vocation as Catholic school educators.

15. The accomplishment of the noble mission of Catholic education, the integral formation of our children and young people, would not be fulfilled without committed Catholic school educators and their example of missionary discipleship, their strong and loving witness to Christ and His Gospel, and their fidelity to Christ's Body, the Church.

The achievement of this specific aim of the Catholic school depends not so much on subject matter or methodology as on the people who work there. The extent to which the Christian message is transmitted through education depends to a very great extent on the teachers. The integration of culture and faith is mediated by the other integration of faith and life in the person of the teacher. The nobility of the task to which teachers are called demands that, in imitation of Christ, the only Teacher, they reveal the Christian message not only by word but also by every gesture of their behavior. This is what makes the difference between a school whose education is permeated by the Christian spirit and one in which religion is only regarded as an academic subject like any other (The Catholic School, 43).

16. In a culture of increasing secularism, relativism, and materialism, Catholic schools are needed more than ever. Faithful and excellent educators are indispensable to the fulfillment of our mission. The ministry of Catholic school educators is a holy one. They

can draw inspiration from the holy example of great Catholic school educators who have gone before us, including those who have been canonized: Saint Elizabeth Ann Seton, Saint Mother Theodore Guerin, Saint John Bosco, and Saint Marcellin Champagnat. They are to draw strength from a life of prayer and from the graces of the sacraments. The closer they are to the Lord, the better they are able to share and witness to others the joy of the encounter and friendship with Him. Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI exhorted Catholic educators with these words:

Bear witness to hope. Nourish your witness with prayer. Account for the hope that characterizes your lives (cf. 1 Pet 3:15) by living the truth which you propose to your students. Help them to know and love the One you have encountered, whose truth and goodness you have experienced with joy. With Saint Augustine, let us say: "we who speak and you who listen acknowledge ourselves as fellow disciples of a single teacher (Sermons, 23:2).

THIS DOCUMENT WAS PROMULGATED BY THE MOST REVEREND KEVIN C. RHOADES, BISHOP OF FORT WAYNE-SOUTH BEND, ON MAY 1, 2016, THE SIXTH SUNDAY OF EASTER DURING THE JUBILEE YEAR OF MERCY.

NOTES

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