

We are Called

**In-Service for Catholic School Board Members, September 29, 2007
Courtesy of Most Reverend Thomas J. Olmsted, Bishop of Phoenix**

Last year, AD 2006, an educational group in England known as the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority told British schools that they will no longer have to teach children right from wrong as a “core value.”

“Right from wrong” is no longer a core value for schools?!! Isn’t it amazing that, five years after 9-11, a significant educational group does not think it matters whether our children know that terrorism is wrong? Or whether it’s right or wrong for kids to tell lies or to cheat on their homework? Or whether racism and abortion and euthanasia are evil? Teaching right from wrong is not a “core value;” really!?!???

In the wake of these views from “educational experts” we can sympathize with Mark Twain who once said, *“I never let my schooling interfere with my education.”*

In an age of relativism, at a time when Islamic extremists have no hesitancy about condemning non-Muslims as infidels and no doubts about denying even their right to life, and in a country where it has been legal for 34 years to kill unborn children and where other intrinsic evils are increasingly being justified and legalized, thanks be to God for Catholic education. And thanks be to God for persons like you who love our children and youth and want them to know right from wrong.

A relativistic age does not believe that objective truth exists. All that we have, relativists contend, are various subjective truths vying with one another: “You have your truth and I have mine. It is all subjective.” Pope Benedict addressed this profound personal and societal crisis, a few weeks ago, on September 8 while he was visiting Austria: *“If truth does not exist for man, then neither can he ultimately distinguish between good and evil. And then the great and wonderful discoveries of science become double-edged: they can open up significant possibilities for good, for the benefit of mankind, but also, as we see only too clearly, they can pose a terrible threat, involving the destruction of man and the world. We need truth.”*

It is no small thing to hold that truth exists. It is a vitally important thing to teach moral principles, to lift up the dignity of each human person and to stand for the rights of all, no matter their religion, their culture or their race. Catholic education does this day in and day out. But of course, we do far more than that. As Pope Benedict wrote in his encyclical, *Deus Caritas est* (#1), *“Being Christian is not the result of an ethical choice or a lofty idea, but the encounter with an event, a person, who gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction.”*

Even more than right from wrong, which we certainly teach and defend, Christianity is about Christ, and about the Father and the Holy Spirit. It is certainly concerned about ethical issues, but it is concerned even more about faith in a personal God, who is a God of love.

How grateful I am to you who treasure our Catholic faith and who are making it possible for our children and youth to know about the Blessed Trinity, about the Incarnation and the Eucharist, and to have their faith nurtured and strengthened. Thank you for serving on our Catholic School Boards, and for supporting our schools in many additional ways. What you are doing for our youth will bear fruit for generations to come. What a great gift it is to provide young people with a liberal arts education rooted in the Gospel of Christ and our rich Catholic heritage.

Today, I have been invited to speak with you on the topic: “*We are called.*” I welcome this opportunity because it allows us to reflect on the highly personal nature of the Catholic faith and Catholic education. Through faith, we know that God speaks to us through Christ, who is the fullness of wisdom and truth. We know, too, that He calls us.

Let us begin our reflection by recalling what it is that God calls us to.

Chapter 12 of the Letter to the Hebrews answers that question, and other similar questions such as, “*What did I get myself into when I was baptized, when I first encountered Christ? What happened when I put faith in Him and committed myself to Him?*”

The Letter to the Hebrews answers these questions by saying first, what did NOT happen at Baptism, and then what did happen (12:18-24). First, “**You have not approached...a blazing fire and gloomy darkness and storm.**” In other words, you and I did not get ourselves into a nightmare! Faith in Christ does not lead to disaster but rather to a future full of hope.

Then, the Letter continues, “**You have approached Mount Zion and the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and countless angels in festal gathering, and the assembly of the firstborn enrolled in heaven, and God the judge of all, and the spirits of the just made perfect, and Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and the sprinkled blood that speaks more eloquently than that of Abel.**”

Since faith goes beyond what we can see with the eyes of our body, Hebrews gives us a series of images to spark our imagination and to deepen our sense of wonder and awe at the call we have received from God.

While we could profitably spend time focusing on all of these images, I suggest we consider just the last one: “**the sprinkled blood that speaks more eloquently than that of Abel.**” What was the blood of Abel?

It was the blood of a brother killed by a brother, the blood shed when Abel was murdered by Cain, the first homicide in human history. It was the blood of betrayal that cries out for justice. Even though no human being witnessed the murder, God did. And since God cares about right and wrong, He told Cain (Gen 4:10), “**Listen: Your brother’s blood cries out to me from the soil!**”

The “blood of Abel” represents the blood of all innocent persons killed unjustly, throughout human history and still today -- from unborn children killed in their mothers’ womb to the college students murdered by a classmate at Virginia Tech, from the victims of the 9/11 terrorists’ attack to those killed in drive-by shootings. The “blood of Abel,” that is, the blood of the innocent, cries out to God for justice in the face of terrible wrong.

In the Church and in our Catholic Schools, our young people learn about the virtue of justice and engage in action for justice. They learn to identify what is wrong and how to oppose it. They learn how to work for what is right and for the common good. All of this is an integral part of proclaiming the Gospel of Christ.

But cries for justice and actions on behalf of justice are not enough. “**An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth**” may curb some criminal acts but cannot change the heart. We need something more. That is what the Letter to the Hebrews is getting at when it talks about the “**blood [that] speaks more eloquently than the blood of Abel.**”

What speaks more eloquently than cries for justice for the innocent? The Blood of Christ on the Cross, the precious Blood which redeems every victim and even redeems all the guilty, the Blood of Christ that flows over us in Baptism and nourishes us in the Eucharist. The Blood of Christ is more eloquent than all other blood ever shed. This precious Blood redeems both the victim and the guilty. It redeemed both St. Stephen and St. Paul. It is stronger than violence, stronger than sin, more powerful than death. It is the love of Christ poured out as blood that redeems the whole human race.

You and I and our children have discovered this wondrous love; and we are called by God to celebrate it in Sacred Worship. That is why Catholic education is full of hope and confident in God’s love. It ensures that we not only know right from wrong but that we also know the Holy One who can bring an end to what is wrong, and who can transform a wrongdoer into a child of God.

In public schools in America, while acknowledging the good that they do, talk about God is forbidden. In Catholic Schools such talk is expected to happen. More importantly, students are helped to move beyond talk about God to talking with God, learning how to pray and to give the Lord worthy adoration and praise.

Let me say, here, how grateful I am for all our parents and our teachers whose personal commitment to Christ has such a great impact for good on our kids. Faith is not handed on by words alone. Faith in Christ is transmitted by witnesses, by persons who know Christ, love Him and joyfully tell others about Him.

Catholic Schools, especially through prayer and worship, foster a vibrant Christian culture on campus and beyond.

Worship of God, as you know, is one of the four vital components of a Catholic school, along with message, community and service. It might be helpful to take a few moments just to review briefly the other three components of Catholic education. These

three, together with worship, help youth to grow to full maturity in Christ and to live successfully their vocation and mission from God.

MESSAGE

Catholic schools have a message. Children learn right from wrong. They learn about goodness, beauty and truth. They are academically challenged. They are helped to discover meaning in life. They are prepared to assume roles of service and leadership, now and in the future, in both the Church and society. Even more importantly they are helped to develop a loving friendship with Christ.

Pope Benedict reminds us (*Deus Caritas est*, #1) that to come to believe in God's love "*is the fundamental decision of one's life.*" To put faith in God and to trust in His love "*gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction.*"

COMMUNITY

In a society where individualism is exalted, Catholic education stands as a sign of contradiction. Students are expected to love one another. They are taught to play together, to learn together, to work together. This kind of education forms the whole person and helps each child to discover that true freedom is not the license to do whatever one pleases but the ability to put others first, the ability to love.

Human beings learn best, not in isolation but in community, through respectful conversation and mutual enquiry. We are influenced by the virtuous example of others. We mature through a common pursuit of truth and a joint cultivation of goodness and beauty.

Moral and religious values are taught more by example than by their words. That is why personal commitment to the School's Catholic identity and mission need to be determining factors in faculty recruitment and in ongoing faculty development.

SERVICE

Catholic schools form the whole person, not just the mind. Our children learn to be more than bright and articulate; they also learn to be virtuous and eager to serve. This is only right because Jesus came not to be served but to serve. The more we know and love Him, the greater is our eagerness to serve as He did, especially to serve the poor and most vulnerable among us. This is why service projects and pro life activities are an integral part of our schools.

We are called

In closing, let me say how pleased I am with today's theme: "We are Called." To speak of a call is to acknowledge the importance of faith in God. It is because of our faith that we have Catholic Schools. Their importance was underlined by Pope Benedict recently. He said: "*Only where God is seen does life truly begin. Only when we meet the living God in Christ do we know what life is. There is nothing more beautiful than to know Christ, and to speak to others of our friendship with Him.*"