

Christ, yesterday, today and forever

Conference with Catholic School Board members, Diocese of Phoenix, September 18, 2004

Now that I am over age 55, I am eligible for some senior-citizen discounts. One of our parishes sent me an advertisement for their parish barbecue. The ad read as follows: *“Prices for the dinner are \$6 for half-chicken, \$4 for a quarter chicken, and \$5 for senior citizens.”*

It is an honor for me to share a few thoughts with you who are committed to Catholic education, who love our children and want the best for them now and in the future.

What unites us is the conviction that the best preparation for personal and professional life is a liberal arts education rooted in the Gospel of Christ, and that our young people are enriched by a thoughtful immersion in the Catholic tradition in all its richness and diversity. What most deeply shapes our children and us is our faith in Christ and His Church. Our Catholic Schools are a great means of providing this for our youth.

Let me begin with four words of Jesus spoken in prayer to His Father on the night before He died for us on the Cross.

“Consecrate them in truth.” John 17:17

These words of the Lord show how deeply He longed for His followers to be enlightened by truth, to be shaped by truth, inspired by truth, rooted in truth.

These words show why Catholic education holds a central place in the mission of the Church. And they are linked to Jesus’ last command to His disciples before ascending to heaven. On that occasion He said: **“Go, teach all nations!”** (Matt 28:18)

To be a teacher in Catholic school or to engage in Catholic education as an administrator or to serve as a member of a School Board or School Council is to be caught up in the Church’s obedience to Christ’s command: Go, teach all nations.

This does not mean that we have a bag-full of truths that are easily acquired and handed out at a discount. Nor that we stand at the top of some ivory tower and spout forth pious platitudes for all to applaud. But it does mean that we treasure the truths of faith that have been entrusted to us as gift and mission, and that we take seriously our duty to hand on the truths of faith as faithful stewards of the precious heritage that Catholic Schools and Universities have been cultivating for many hundreds of years.

Humbly conscious that there is so much we do not know, yet deeply grateful for the revealed truths and rich intellectual heritage that has been afforded to us, we are committed to sharing this with our children and young people. We want them also to come to a lively knowledge and profound love for Christ who is **“the way and the truth and the life.”**

Christ, the truth and wisdom of the Father, is the living center of catechesis, the heart of evangelization, the inspiration and strength of all engaged in Catholic education. The primary reason we have Catholic Schools is to form faithful disciples of Jesus Christ. For that is the greatest gift we can give the next generation. We are grateful when a student graduates from one of our Catholic schools and gets a 4-year scholarship to a famous university, but if that student does not treasure his or her relationship with Christ, we are failures. Whether our kids and we believe in Christ or not is a matter of life and death. **“There is not other Name in the whole world by which we can be saved.”** Acts

... And while the Crucified Lord seemed like foolishness to Greeks and a scandal to Jews, He is in fact the wisdom of God and the Redeemer of the world.

Parents, the first teachers

Catholic schools, of course, are not the first teachers of children and youth; parents are. Our Schools assist parents and cooperate with them, but we do not replace them. What must be absent from our schools therefore is any hint of a condescending attitude towards parents. By God's design and through the vocation of marriage, they are better equipped through God's grace than anyone else, and have a greater obligation than anyone else, to provide for the education of their own children.

In this world where original sin is all too evident, there are of course numerous cases of poor parenting, irresponsible shirking of duties by moms or dads. But our schools are wise to avoid the temptation of ever presuming that the parents will not cooperate in the teaching enterprise. Even when it seems to be so, our first duty is to persuade and to assist the parents to fulfill their irreplaceable role. Because, in fact, it is irreplaceable; no one else can be a child's mom or dad. We work with parents and they with our schools to offer the best possible Catholic education for our youth.

4-fold Purpose of Catholic education

Catholic education has four vital components: message, community, service and worship. By incorporating all of these, the whole person is prepared to know, to love and to serve God in this world and to be happy with Him forever in the next. And the whole person of each child or young adult is helped to grow to full maturity and prepared to live successfully and faithfully his or her vocation and mission in life.

Since these four components are so vital to Catholic education, allow to me to comment briefly on each of them, beginning with message.

MESSAGE

Catholic schools provide a liberal arts education that is rooted in the Gospel. They are academically rigorous, handing on the necessary tools for discovering meaning in life and preparing young people to assume roles of leadership in the future of both the Church and society. They are helped to develop a profound and loving relationship with the Person of Jesus and a solid understanding of the basic teachings of our Catholic faith, not just for the sake of knowledge but so as to integrate that faith, together with Christian virtue, into every facet of life.

COMMUNITY

Catholic schools offer a healthy antidote to the rampant individualism far too prevalent in western civilization today. Followers of Christ believe that human beings learn best, not in isolation but through dialogue, that we are influenced by the virtuous example of others, and through a united pursuit of truth within a community of scholars.

In a Catholic school, the teachers and the staff, working together and supporting each other, have a special role to play in fostering an intellectual and faith community. They promote Christian moral, spiritual and religious values by their example even more than by their words. Thus, a personal commitment to the faith and to the School's Catholic identity and mission should be determining factors in faculty recruitment. This

is key. Unless the whole community of each school has a clear identity and sense of mission, unless we hire faculty who are committed to that identity and mission, and unless we provide ongoing faculty development for mission, we shall not succeed in having a community that truly prepares our youth to engage the culture as mature disciples of Christ.

SERVICE

Catholic schools consider genuine service to be as important as classroom learning, for we are forming the whole person, not just their minds. We want them to be well educated but also virtuous and eager to serve.

Jesus came not to be served but to serve. The more we learn about Him, and the more we enter into loving communion with Him, the greater will be our eagerness to serve as He did, especially to serve the poor. The Holy Father John Paul II says, *“In every poor person believers see a special image of Jesus. Their presence within the ecclesial and civil communities is a litmus test of the authenticity of our Christian faith.”* We want to be sure that our Catholic schools pass this litmus test.

With regard to training for service, I would encourage us to foster a healthy understanding of Christian stewardship in all of our schools. Christian stewardship is actually another word for Christian discipleship, where everything is seen as a gift of God. Good stewards look upon their time, talent and treasure as gifts which bring with them the opportunity to imitate Christ and to serve their neighbor. They that we need to give in order truly to mature; and the need to give is far more important than giving to a need.

An important part of faithful stewardship is engagement in action for justice, especially for the protection of human life. Students should be helped to understand the key issues of justice and human dignity of our time, and encouraged to participate in Justice and Pro Life activities that protect the dignity of persons and promote the common good.

WORSHIP

A Catholic school sets itself apart from public schools, above all, by its life of “worship”. What cannot be done at all in public schools shines forth prominently in Catholic Schools. Worship is incorporated into the very rhythm of a Catholic school. Prayer seems as natural as breathing. Because the school is truly Catholic, it is intensely Eucharistic. That is why the Year of the Eucharist, which begins in a few weeks and extends until October 2005, holds many graces for us in the Church and especially for our youth. Opportunities for celebrating the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass should be frequent in our Schools, together with opportunities for Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament, for reception of the Sacrament of Confession, and other forms of common and personal prayer.

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

The Role of a Catholic School Board or Council

I shall not attempt to give an exhaustive treatise about the role of a Catholic School Board or Council. I would like only to lift up one primary point that seems

especially important at this time in the history of the Church in America and in the Diocese of Phoenix.

A Catholic School Board and all its members need to commit themselves to supporting the identity and mission of Catholic Schools. We need to know, without a doubt, who we are and where we are going, with God's help. Without a clear identity and sense of mission, we will run around in circles; we may get some good press occasionally, we may even be financially solvent, but in fact we will go nowhere. And our schools will not accomplish their part in the Church's work of evangelization.

The identity and mission of Catholic schools is tied necessarily to the teachings of Jesus Christ as found in the Sacred Scriptures and in the Official Teachings of the Catholic Church. Perhaps it is no accident that the serious decline in the numbers of Catholic schools in the United States coincides with the confusion about Catholic teaching and widespread dissent to HUMANAE VITAE that followed the Second Vatican Council. And perhaps it is no accident that Catholic schools have generally tended to do better across the USA since the publication of the new CATECHISM OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH in 1993 and the encyclical of John Paul II called THE GOSPEL OF LIFE in 1995. When we all understand and support the same identity and mission, we can truly make an impact for good in society.

Some challenges for the future

1. The training and recruitment of Catholic teachers and administrators looms large on the horizon today as a great need and tough challenge. Until 40 years ago, Catholic schools were virtually the domain of men and women religious. They were the principals and superintendents; they were the teachers of religion and of science and math and history and nearly all the secular sciences. Today, less than 5% of our teachers and administrators are Brothers, Sisters of Priests.

This is without a doubt, by God's Providence, the time when the laity must share the primary burden of leadership in administration and teaching in our Catholic Schools. Not that there is no longer a great contribution to be made by men and women religious in Catholic education, for indeed their public witness to the Gospel will always be a great asset and contribution to Catholic education.

The biggest challenge that we face with the predominance of laity serving as teachers and administrators is their theological and spiritual formation. With Religious, this was provided in good quantity and quality throughout many years of formation for lifelong vows; but far less spiritual and theological has been available to the laity.

We are blest to have a new appreciation of the universal call to holiness and promising initiatives, both formally and informally, to offer religious formation for laypersons. More needs to be done to make these available to our teachers and administrators, and to those preparing to serve in Catholic schools in the future. It would seem wise as well to give extra time and resources to the on-going religious formation of our lay staff and teachers, looking continually for the best ways to help them deepen their understanding of the Catholic faith.

2. Another serious challenge that we face is the provision of Religion and theology texts that are in full conformity with the new Catechism of the Catholic Faith. Thanks be to God, we are making great progress in meeting this challenge. At the present

time, there are many good religion texts for all our primary grades. At the High School level, however, the number is far lower than ideal, even though it is gradually increasing.

Why would religion textbooks matter to this bishop of Phoenix? It matters because we live in an era in the Church, and also in our American culture, where dissent to Church teaching receives lots of publicity. Books are even written that hail dissent as a great service to the Church. But dissent runs directly contrary to the inner dynamic nature of faith.

The CATECHISM OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH defines faith in this way (#150): *“Faith is first of all a personal adherence of man to God. At the same time, and inseparably, it is a free assent to the whole truth that God has revealed. As personal adherence to God and assent to His truth, Christian faith differs from our faith in any human person. It is right and just to entrust oneself wholly to God and to believe absolutely what He says.”* CCC #1814 goes on to explain: *“Faith is the theological virtue by which we believe in God and believe all that He has said and revealed to us, and that Holy Church proposes for our belief, because He is truth itself.”*

For the first thirty years after the Second Vatican Council, confusion and dissent were widespread in the Church. During those years there occurred a dramatic decrease in vocations, a horrific rise in sexual abuse by members of the clergy, and a sharp decline in the number of Catholic Schools. The fruits of dissent are all too evident. While the modernistic, media driven, popular culture may never agree, our 2000 – year history as a Church bears witness to the fruitfulness of fidelity to the teachings of Christ in the Church. This tradition we uphold and build on in our Catholic Schools. For this reason, I propose that we require that we require religion texts in all our theology and religion classes in our grade schools and high schools, texts which are fully in compliance with the Catechism of the Catholic Church. It is a challenge that can be met and needs to be met.

3. One final challenge I want to mention is that of making Catholic schools available and accessible for all our young people, including the poor and disadvantages. 44% of those under 10 years of age in America are Hispanic. The numbers, I would guess, are even higher in Arizona. Catholic families with larger numbers of children tend to be poor or middle class. Our Catholic schools of the past, and still today, have cut across all ethnic and economic classes. In other words, they have been truly Catholic. Present trends look worrisome in this regard, as tuition costs rise in many Catholic schools across the country.

How to address this great challenge? Neither I nor any one person can claim to have all the answers in this regard. But together it can be addressed successfully, I am sure. And surely one part of the answer will be found in a correct understanding of Christian Stewardship among all of our Catholic faithful. Many places across the USA are beginning as well to find assistance from businesses and foundations, which recognize the huge contribution made to the larger society by Catholic schools. And certainly we need to have ongoing efforts of development in our schools and parishes. But I would contend that all these other efforts will fail unless they are understood with the perspective of Christian stewardship. St. Paul writes: **“We are stewards of the mysteries of God, and the first requirement of a steward is that he prove himself trustworthy.”**

Stewardship is truly Christian discipleship in action. Stewardship begins with gratitude, built on a keen awareness that all I have is a gift, and the greatest gift is faith in Christ and His forgiveness. To be a good steward, I must come to see my time as a gift, and generously give the best of my time to those God has asked me to love, especially spouse and family. Once we become good stewards of time, in the home and with God, we will naturally begin to want to be good stewards of our talents and our resources.

Those of you who serve on Catholic Schools Boards are being generous stewards of your time and talent. What an excellent example of stewardship. Most of our teachers and administrators in our Catholic Schools are generous stewards of their time and talents, often making real sacrifices gladly to serve in a Catholic schools when by the world's standards they could be doing much better elsewhere—by that is meant making much more money elsewhere.

Good stewards recognize we have a need to give, because we are made in the image of God. And God the Father is always giving His Son to us in love, and God the Son is always giving Himself to His Father and to us in love. That is why the Cross and the Eucharist move us so deeply and underlie all stewardship. No words more clearly speak of stewardship than these: **“This is my Body given up for you... This is my Blood poured out for you for the remission of sin.”** Thank you for listening. Thank you for serving. Thank you for sharing with me a vibrant commitment to our Catholic schools.