

FAITH - ROOTED IN CHRIST

REFLECTING ON OUR CALL TO
CATHOLIC EDUCATION



London, March 26, 2003

On January 5, 1844, after a season of trouble in the parishes of the Western District of his diocese, Bishop Michael Power informed Father Patrick O'Dwyer: "I am happy to hear that the people [of London] are coming to a proper sense of Religion and attending their duty more regularly. If they neglected doing so, they would form a solitary exception in this diocese." One aspect of the district, of which Power had considerable concern, was the education of Catholic youth. In the 1840s, only the Windsor area, of what is now the Diocese of London, then the Diocese of Toronto, had formal Catholic separate schools. Catholics in rural areas and small towns sent their children to local common school houses and relied on private religious instruction by the frontier clergy. Within a decade of Power's death in 1847, there would be a new Diocese of London and the welcoming of several religious orders to build a network of schools intended by the pioneer bishop. The foundations laid by Jesuits, Loretto Sisters, and Sisters of Providence would soon be built upon by those orders, whose names have a more familiar ring to the ears of contemporary Londoners-the Sisters of St. Joseph, the Ursulines, Basilians, Christian Brothers, Redemptorists among others. These orders became a living endowment to a network of Catholic schools throughout the diocese, providing Catholics with a holistic alternative for their children, rooted in the Gospel and animated by the Spirit. Theirs was the story of struggle and sacrifice, to sustain a system on meager finances and resources and, at times, within a hostile environment. My own father was not greeted warmly when he canvassed for the establishment of a Catholic school in Wingham in the 1950s.

In the period leading up to the mid 1980s, it was fairly clear to most of the partners, students and supporters of Catholic schools, just exactly who they were, what they shared as a common purpose, and how important this enterprise of Catholic education was to the Catholic community, itself, and how essential the vocation of such schools were to the nurture of future generations of moral, law-abiding, productive, imaginative and honourable citizens of their province and their country. Mandated by the Church as community institutions to educate the intellect, the body, and the soul of the nation's youth, few Catholics questioned the transcendent realities at the heart of the Catholic school. Today, upon reflection, we know full well that our "story" as a system, the history of our 170 year old "enduring gift," is something that we can draw upon for wisdom, understanding, information, and inspiration; but we should be equally aware that embracing this our story is not an excuse to escape our current realities--the signs of our times-- we must avoid the romantic or even desperate temptation to crawl back into the recesses of our story and hope some parts--some more comfortable or comforting arts-- could be recreated. Our times are simply that--they are ours to confront, ours to understand, ours to live, and ours to transform.

And our times have changed--Catholic schools find themselves in a situation unlike anything in the past. In reflecting upon the events and revolutions past thirty years, it is clear that the Catholic educational environment has been dramatically altered --the creation of large school boards, the "professionalization" of teaching, funding completion, equitable funding, the financing of distinctive Catholic curricular profiles, constitutional challenges to denominational schools in Newfoundland--and Quebec, the questioning of human rights due to the exclusion of other religious groups from state-funded schools, the centralization of the Provincial funding through Bill 160, the transformed relationship between parish, home and school, waning church attendance, questions about the number and quality of clergy in Ontario, the contemporary role of the bishops on educational matters, the evidence of lay initiative and lay apathy about schools and faith matters in general and more. And all of this in addition to our rapidly changing social, economic and political world: secularization and the abandonment of traditional religious norms and institutions, a celebration of social, ethnic and spiritual

diversity in the new Ontario and Canada across Canada; medical miracles and potential ethical minefields as we attempt to clone living tissues and perhaps farm human embryos; gender equality; globalization of politics and economic systems; the sexual revolution; the micro chip; globalization; global terror; mass consumer culture; the rise of the transnational corporation; corporate irresponsibility; environmental crisis; global warming; the widening gap between rich and poor - the pace of change alone can take your breath away.

As we meet here this evening, death and destruction rain down on the cities and countryside of Iraq. This war has polarized traditional allies, threatened the health and effectiveness of the United Nations, endangered the lives of thousands of men and women in uniform and millions of civilians, and has created further tension and cleavage between the great faiths of Abraham-Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. When the children of a secular age glimpse at this drama, pitting faith against faith, or seeing creed as yet another rhetorical weapon in the potent arsenal of nationalism, tribalism, and jingoism, is it any wonder why so many youth of today see religion as just another "problem", and another factor contributing to "man's inhumanity to man," or as Jean Vanier has so eloquently stated--religion as another stick with which to beat someone. But Vanier continues to say that religion is not the root problem, "if it were not religion or culture that people used as a stick with which to beat others, they would just use something else." (Becoming Human, 36). How well have we as Christians and supporters of a distinctive Catholic education made a difference in our troubled times?

Have we remembered one of the many cruel ironies of the current Middle East war. This year 2003 marks the fortieth anniversary of Blessed Pope John XXIII's magnificent encyclical *Pacem in Terris* (Peace on Earth), wherein he argues forcefully to all people of good will the Christian message of Justice and Peace. The document is rich in its proclamations of human rights, just economic development, international co-operation, and the demand to all persons to serve the common good. One might ask tonight: how well do our schools educate, as is their mandate, a Catholic, Christian perspective on these the signs of the times? This current calamity, this ever changing global village, this

new Ontario, and this new Catholic educational environment should cause us-whether we be in London, Lanark, or New Liskeard--to pause and raise the question: who do we say we are as Catholic educators; what kind of vision can we articulate to ourselves, to those around us-and even to those who may dislike the fact that we have what we have? To what degree can we be confident that the walk that we walk in Catholic education meets the lofty expectations of the talk that we talk? There are many ways in which answers to such questions could be answered-there are books, tapes, mission statements, graduate expectations, vision statements, educational gurus and key note speakers galore. But perhaps the tools to answer such questions have been in front of us all the time, waiting for a moment of grace for us to reach out and claim them again. Finding the right tools can also be problematic-pitting traditionalist Catholics against progressives; liberals against conservatives, legalists against non-legalists, bureaucrats against the uninitiated; the intelligentsia against the common; those who use the Catechism literalistically against those who see it as a gateway to something larger. The list of labels is seemingly endless, because we as humans have such a talent of creating ways of identifying "the other." To tackle the challenges of Catholic education today, we must have the courage and the grace to desist from labeling, and resist the temptation to blame. Instead we must open ourselves to the source of our being.

This past summer, during his welcoming remarks to the World Youth Days in Toronto, Pope John Paul II offered us a template-a vision not only for our schools but for our lives. Drawing upon the analogy of standing by a great lake, in this case Ontario, not Galilee, he reminded us all of our call to discipleship-our vision as sons and daughters of Christ, walking as disciples in the footsteps of the master. Referring to Matthew 5:1-12, John Paul reminded us, "What we have just heard is the Magna Carta of Christianity: the Beatitudes. From His death life has sprung forth. The tomb at Calvary has become the cradle of the new humanity on its journey to true happiness. The Sermon on the Mount marks out the map of this journey. The eight Beatitudes are the road signs that show the way. It is an uphill path but He has walked it before us. It is by walking with Christ that we can achieve joy, true joy."

His words are timely to our conversation-if these beatitudes are the Magna Carta of Christianity-so it should follow that they are the guiding principles-the vision of all that

we do-as Catholics, and as stewards of Catholic education. Nor should we mistake at anytime that Matthew's account of the Beatitudes is more passive, internally-oriented or cerebral than those recounted in Luke's sermon on the plain. In Matthew Jesus teaches us the attributes of the disciple-one who is active in the times, who, as Matthew tells us will be "the salt of the earth and the light of the world." These Beatitudes are the ethical requirements to be a follower of Jesus. This being the case, if our schools are to be schools of this discipleship, how clear is our vision, how well do we aspire to, and make good, the template set for us by the Magna Carta-of-Christianity?

1. Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of God.

In ancient times the spirit was defined as the life force that was manifest in decision making, transforming all in life-society, politics, economics into something more powerful. To what extent have our schools created an environment in which all participants can be truly open to the spirit, and in so doing open to the will of God? Open to the holistic vision of educating the mind, body and soul -the reason for separation? The spirit that animated those who came before us? To what extent is the spirit promoted and embraced as the principal animator not just in our schools-the foundation for all that we do-for our families, our homes, or our communities? To what extent does the spirit take a back seat in our School System to that which is politically expedient, or more economically practical? What is this kingdom of God to which we aspire?

2. Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted

Following the example of Jesus, the disciple is called to compassion-literally to walk with the pain of another. To what extent do our schools model compassion in their classrooms, corridors, in the relations between their partners, or within their community? How well do we place the needs of others before our own, building authentic communities of love? How often do we retreat to models of group egoism, blinded by turf wars, ideological barriers, stubbornness, pharisaism, or self-promotion? reciprocity of gifts and responsibilities? Inclusive language education? Walking with those with whom we disagree? Familiaris consortio, walking with the other-going to the other side?

Are we schools who truly teach and practice the grace of walking with the pain of the other or are prepared to embrace unconditionally the whole person?

3. Blessed are the meek, they shall inherit the earth

Jesus was described as gentle and humble of heart" (Mat 11 :28- 30) and promised that those who were the same would inherit the land-in his day, life itself. How well are do our schools teach and practice virtue, unpretentiousness, hospitality, openness, simplicity? What kind of heroes and gods do we extol and, perhaps, model within our schools and the communities that support them? Fame, power, wealth, the cult of the victor? Do our schools model co-operation and the inclusion of all, or have we come to prefer models of competition that elevate of triumph over team work? Or winning above all?

4. Blessed are they who hunger and thirst for righteousness, they shall be filled

Throughout his ministry Jesus lived the prophetic call of the Jubilee-to release the captives, to redistribute wealth, to renew the earth and ourselves. (Luke 4, Isa 58, Isa 61) How well do our schools answer the prophetic call of the Gospel? The call of baptism as prophets, priests, kings? How well have our schools become nurseries and active exponents of our Catholic social teaching? How well have we heard the call to uphold the dignity of each human person, and to serve the common good? To what extent have we made costly compromises to the lure of the market place or the tin gods of fame and power? Are we the disciples who have make a preferential commitment to the poor?

5. Blessed are the merciful, for mercy shall be theirs

As Christ modeled mercy and taught mercy, we are called to do the same. How do our schools model mercy? Have we come to identify mercy as a weakness? Have we instead adopted an ethic of toughness, using the realities of the world or the marketplace as our benchmark? When strands of curricular demands impose so much-have we forgotten our mercy-to the slower, the struggling, those who make mistakes, the misguided? Who is our model: the priest, the levite or the Samaritan? We cannot be led by the lawyers.

6. Blessed are the pure of heart, for they shall see God

The pure of heart are those completely open to God, who share the mind of the Jesus. Do our schools foster an environment for the pure of heart to live and grow? Have we created sacred spaces, for prayer, for our distinctive symbols, for our unique sacred language? Has our language become an empty "Catholic speak" - wonderful to hear, well-rehearsed for the hearer, but rarely witnessed in our behaviour? Have we become experts in "talking the talk," but less adept at "walking the walk?" of discipleship? Are we people of Eucharist in our schools-not only in a liturgical sense, as the focus of our spiritual lives in community? But are we Eucharist to others-the body of Christ, in the world-nourished inside our school communities but ready to go forth and be Eucharist to others?

7. Blessed are the peacemakers, they shall be called children of God

Peace is not just the absence of war; the peacemaker is called to be active in making peace-creating justice and harmony among persons; being artisans of Shalom-those things that build the welfare and rights of people and nations. How well do we model peace in our schools? How well do we model peace among our partners, parents, teachers? Teachers and Principals? Principals and Supervisory Officers? Teachers and Trustees? Have we modeled peace in our triad of Parish-Home-School? If we cannot model justice, how can we aspire to peace?

8. Blessed are those persecuted for righteousness sake, for the theirs is the kingdom of God

The way of the disciple is not easy, but the rewards are great - the reign of God. The prophetic call of our baptism is not an easy one, nor was it for the Prophets of old, who were called upon to do unpleasant and difficult things in the name of God. Moses did not ask for the burning bush and all that it entailed, and Jonah's first response to the "call" was to run away. As Prophets in our own time we can take some consolation in the historic struggle of the prophet to "tell it like it is and suggest how it should be." Are we prepared to stand up to governments when we know that there are policies that run counter to the Gospel? Are we strong enough to resist the temptations of the market

and the false belief that its powers can solve our all problems? Will we take risks and continue to make sacrifices necessary for our schools?

Can we still be inspired by the prophets of our own story - the enduring gift of Catholic education in Ontario? So many questions - yet so many great minds and souls in this room to tackle them. We need not look very far to find the questions that remind of us our vision and purpose as supporters of Catholic education in the Province of Ontario. For 2000 years, the Beatitudes have reminded us the "Cost of Discipleship." Today, we are given the opportunity to return to our roots and ask ourselves, given our own signs of the times, how do we in our great Catholic educational enterprise, how do we in the London District, model this Magna Carta? As Bishop Power might ask "are we coming to a proper sense of Religion and attending our duties?"