

**The Challenge of Leadership**

**A Pastoral Letter to the Catholic Education Community**

**Assembly of Catholic Bishops of Ontario**

Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

An earlier letter to you spoke of the great challenges and opportunities that lay ahead for the Catholic education community in Ontario. It has been four years since the publication of *This Moment of Promise*, and those challenges and opportunities are still before us.

This is not to say that little of significance has happened in the intervening years. In the course of countless staff meetings, parent-teacher interviews, retreats and days of reflection, local and provincial committee meetings, trustee deliberations, student activities, prayer and liturgical celebrations, and above all, in classrooms across the province, much has been accomplished by all members of our education community working individually and collaboratively on behalf of the Catholic schools.

Yet the most basic challenge "to develop further and to articulate a Catholic philosophy of education for our times" - continues to demand our attention and to require new ways of thinking about our schools and the role of Catholic educators. At this moment in our history as a believing community, the leadership of the Catholic schools is clearly in the hands of lay people. It is in the hands of trustees whose task it is to make plans and decisions for our schools, and in the hands of educators who are asked to shape and deliver the message. For those of you in leadership positions - principals, supervisory officers, and directors of education - the Catholic community presumes and depends on your administrative competence, but also seeks from you leadership and vision beyond that of the professional educator. What is needed is leadership that is rooted in spirituality and calls forth spiritual growth from others.

**AN ENDURING VISION**

When Bill 30 received royal assent on June 24, 1986, and guaranteed the Catholics of Ontario a tax-supported educational system from kindergarten through the Ontario Secondary School Diploma, it pointedly reminded us of the true significance of the Separate School system. The heart and soul of Catholic education is Jesus Christ, and our school system finds its very reason for existence in its communication of the Christian message. The goal of Catholic education is nothing less than a truly holistic formation of persons who will be living witnesses to the faith.

This vision of Catholic education has endured for many years in this province. It is inspired and sustained by an understanding of the Catholic school as a participant in the saving mission of the Church, a mission that is realized in and for the world.

There are great challenges to the living out of this vision in the changing circumstances of our times. We live in a post-Christian culture; conflicting understandings of what it means to be human, and of the purpose and ultimate end of life mark our era. None of us is immune to the effects of individualism, materialism, relativism, and secular humanism.

Beyond the broad social and cultural influences that are often in conflict with our beliefs, there are varying levels of faith development and commitment within our Catholic community. Also, each one of us experiences limitations and the effects of human weakness, for which we are ever in search of God's loving mercy and grace.

If we are to live as Christians today and in the future, and guide the young who are entrusted to us, we must be deeply rooted in God. Our Catholic way of life needs to be understood, not as a half-hearted loyalty to an old-fashioned structure, but as the truth that sets us free (John 8:32). Our faith is a treasured gift to be lived and practiced in gratitude to and love for God - Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier. We are called to be people who marvel at the act of creation that brings us to life in the divine image and likeness, people who stand humble before the mystery of the Incarnation - "the hint half guessed, the gift half understood? We are called to bind ourselves willingly to each other as brothers and sisters, and to reach out in solidarity to those in our midst who are suffering.

Above all, in response to the confusion and contradictions of modern culture, we must not insulate our faith from the real world, confining our God to an hour on Sunday or to personal piety. To do so would be to be unfaithful to ourselves and to our vision of Catholic education. This vision invites each one of us - parents, students, teachers, principals, chaplains, support staff, trustees, clergy, supervisory personnel to work together as a community of believers committed to putting the values of our faith into practice in the daily life of the school, the home, and in all of society.

### **A SHARED MISSION**

Vocation and Mission of the Lay Faithful, the Apostolic Exhortation that followed the 1987 Synod of Bishops, begins with an image of the People of God as labourers in the vineyard of the Lord. Each one of us is called to work in the vineyard. "The vineyard is the whole world, which is to be transformed according to the plan of God in view of the final coming of the Kingdom of God".

This document, together with those of the Second Vatican Council, offers a rich reflection on the dignity, role, and special in-the-world character of the laity. Through the new life of Baptism, lay people share in the total mission of Jesus Christ (I Peter 2:9-10). This mission is realized in the offering they make of themselves and their daily activities, through their witness in word and action, and in their service to Christ, who is present in all. The call to holiness is a universal call, and it is answered and lived out by men and women through their involvement and participation at all levels of society. The vision of Vatican II counts on them to be Church in their milieu - the home, the

market-place, the neighborhood, the work-place, the school - to proclaim the message of the Gospel and to transform the world of everyday life.

The vocation to evangelize is shared by all members of the Church. For, as Pope Paul VI wrote in 1975, "... it is unthinkable that a person should accept the Word and give himself to the kingdom without becoming a person who bears witness to it and proclaims it in his turn." Witness and proclamation are not optional activities for a Christian. Evangelization - bringing the Good News to all of humanity - is the essential mission of the Church; in the words of Pope Paul VI, it is "her deepest identity."

The work of Catholic education is a particular and crucial expression of the Church's apostolic mission. In our Separate School system it is primarily lay people who carry the responsibility for the education and formation of children and young people. They share their vocation with Catholic parents, who more and more are encouraged to see the family as the domestic Church, and themselves as apostles and as the primary and irreplaceable educators of their children.

So too, Catholic educators are apostles. The Church depends on your faith, courage and goodness as you serve the young in the vineyard of the Lord.

### **THE ROLE OF ADMINISTRATORS**

Those of you who work as directors of education, supervisory officers, and principals have been given a unique opportunity to influence the whole educational system. Above all, it is your privilege to touch the lives of the people whom you serve in such a way that they are encouraged and inspired to be all that God calls them to be.

We believe that those entrusted with administrative leadership positions in the Catholic schools must be conspicuous for their goodness, sincerity, and attachment to the faith. In other words, they are men and women who demonstrate in practice the very reason for the Catholic school's existence: an integrated Christian maturity, inspired by the Gospel and lived in authentic freedom and commitment.

The range of qualities and competencies demanded of all educational administrators is an impressive one. For Catholic educators, we believe the motivation to develop and nourish these qualities and skills must spring from a deep sense of Christian vocation and mission. Administrative leadership, in this sense, is spiritual leadership, for it is inspired by the love of God and exercised in the spirit of that love.

The role of administrative leaders in the Catholic system, therefore, cannot be reduced to a series of tasks or attitudes. It is, rather, a rich and complex undertaking that defies easy description, in a spirit of dialogue, we offer these initial thoughts. Beyond the many personal qualities that come easily to mind - humility, openness, compassion, trust in others, a deep sense of service and dedication - the leadership of Catholic school administrators should be marked by:

- willingness to accept responsibility from the Catholic community and to exercise leadership within this community;
- a deep commitment to evangelization and life-long faith development;
- a collegial style that seeks to empower staff and students;
- the ability to bring people together and to foster reconciliation when needed;
- persistence in encouraging a communal discernment of the workings of the Holy Spirit;
- sensitivity to the needs and hopes of the families of students;
- commitment to ensuring understanding and cooperation between Church and school;
- openness to collaboration with clergy.

Clearly, there are other items that could be included in this list, and many that are shared responsibilities with other members of the Catholic school community. But administrative leaders have a special obligation to demonstrate in word and action their commitment to the goals of Catholic education and the values for which it stands.

#### **Some Questions for Reflection and Discussion**

- Are Catholic educators prepared to assume a role of spiritual leadership?
- In what ways are attitudes towards leadership shaped by an individual's faith?
- What are the critical dimensions of the spiritual leadership of Catholic educational administrators? How are these developed?
- What is the contribution of a director of education to the spiritual development of staff members? Of a supervisory officer? Of a principal?
- What are the visible signs of spiritual leadership within a school community?
- What is the responsibility of the various Catholic education associations and their executives in preserving and furthering the vision and mission of the Catholic schools?
- What is the relationship of the faith leader of a diocese, the bishop, to the spiritual leaders of the Catholic schools?

#### **A SHARED RESPONSIBILITY FOR LEADERSHIP**

Although this letter highlights the unique leadership role of administrators, it is obvious that the responsibility for ensuring the integrity of Catholic education does not and cannot rest solely on the shoulders of a few individuals, or belong only to certain groups of people with specific administrative duties. Certainly, there is a rich variety of roles and responsibilities within our school system. But even as we acknowledge this diversity, we must also recognize the interdependence of all members of the Catholic education community. We are bound together by a common faith and in a common service.

Leadership of our schools, in this sense, belongs to all. From student to director of education, each person has significant contribution to make:

- in creating a school environment that reflects the value and dignity of each individual;
- in striving to fulfill the responsibilities of his or her role in a conscientious and wholehearted manner;
- in cooperating with one another out of a spirit of mutual respect as sisters and brothers in Christ;
- in recognizing the power of day-to-day personal encounter as a witness to faith;
- in communicating the joy and hope of our Catholic faith.

We all know from past experience that we cannot give what we do not have. Shared responsibility for the Catholic schools is little more than words without an awareness of the need for personal transformation and attention to our own spiritual growth. Whatever our age and our role, we are called to a process of maturation and integration in our life of faith.

Some of the marks of this life, we believe, are the following: a personal relationship with the Father through his Son, Jesus, in the power of the Holy Spirit who dwells within us; a conscious obedience to God's will as it manifests itself in daily life; a mature grasp of the teaching of the Church; active participation in the life of the Christian community; an awareness of biblical revelation; respect for Church tradition and authority; an option for the poor in our midst; continual hope and optimism for seeing Christ as the way, the truth and the life (cf. John 14:6); a moderate use of the material blessings of life and sensitivity to the genuine needs of others; a critical stance in regard to the modern media; reverence for the environment around us; the desire to be a man or woman for others; a deep conviction that the importance of this life is that it leads to and prepares us for the life to come.

This may seem to be somewhat overwhelming, a rather daunting vocation, and indeed it is. But we need to be convinced of the grace of our calling, and believe that through all our struggles, God is ever at our side. For as St. Paul says so reassuringly, we "can do all things in God who strengthens us" (cf. Philippians 4:13).

### **IN SERVICE TO SOCIETY**

The vision that inspires Catholic education is one that reaches far beyond our own community. Our wholehearted acceptance that God is already with us, working in this world of ours, gives us courage and hope even in the face of what can seem like insurmountable social problems.

In every age, we Catholics are challenged to be a leaven in society as a service to others. We are needed as a full partner in the human quest for greater justice and truer community. Indeed, the longings, the sorrows, and the joys of all our neighbours are also those of our Church and of our Catholic school communities in Ontario. We are rightly expected to be wholehearted participants in the development of society and to embody in our words and actions that for which we stand. The

power of living witness must never be underestimated. For witness is, in the words of Pope Paul VI, "an initial act of evangelization," "a silent proclamation of the Good News."

### **FOR YOU AND WITH YOU**

In this letter, dear brothers and sisters, we make a special appeal to all of you to accept the ongoing challenge of discerning the spirit of leadership in our Catholic education community. We are aware of initiatives in this area undertaken by the various Catholic education associations, and offer support and appreciation for such efforts. We invite all members of the Catholic school community to reflect deeply on the issues we have raised in this letter, and to share your insights with us.

As your bishops, we are so very grateful for all that you do, and want to assist you in any way that we can. You have our prayers, and our commitment to work with you in our common mission for the children and young people in our schools.

The Bishops of Ontario

September 21, 1993

Feast of St. Matthew, Apostle-Evangelist

### **RELATED READING**

- Documents of Vatican II. Walter Abbott and Joseph Gallagher, Eds. America Press, 1966 and 1981. Especially "Decree on the Apostolate of Lay People" and "The Church in the Modern World."
- Lay Catholics in Schools: Witnesses to Faith. The Sacred Congregation for Catholic Education, Rome, 1982.
- On Evangelization in the Modern World. Apostolic Exhortation of Pope Paul VI, St. Paul Books and Media, 1975.
- The Catholic School. The Sacred Congregation for Catholic Education, Rome, 1977.
- This Moment of Promise. A Pastoral Letter on Catholic Education in Ontario. Assembly of Catholic Bishops of Ontario, 1989.
- Vocation and Mission of the Lay Faithful. Post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation of His Holiness, John Paul II. Les Éditions Paulines, 1989.

### **ENDNOTES**

1. This Moment of Promise. A Pastoral Letter on Catholic Education in Ontario. Ontario Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1989, p. 20.
2. Eliot, T.S. The Four Quartets, The Complete Poems and Plays. Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1971, p. 136.
3. Vocation and Mission of the Lay Faithful. Post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation of His Holiness, John Paul II, Les Éditions Paulines, 1989, #1.

4. On Evangelization in the Modern World. Apostolic Exhortation of His Holiness, Paul VI, 1975, #24.
5. On Evangelization in the Modern World, #14.
6. On Evangelization in the Modern World, #21.

[Go to the top of the page.](#)

Assembly of Catholic Bishops of Ontario