



PASTORAL LETTER ON CATHOLIC EDUCATION
Catholic Education Week
April 27-May 3, 2008

Introduction

This letter is a statement of my deep personal appreciation for the contribution that Catholic education makes to the lives of so many of our young people. For over 150 years, there has been a great tradition of quality Catholic education in the Archdiocese of Ottawa. It is my firm hope and conviction that we enjoy and celebrate another 150 years.

Importance of Religious Education and Family Life Education

Catholic education provides a special way of bringing the Gospel of Jesus Christ into the lives of more than 68,300 students currently in our French and English Catholic schools. There are so many unique opportunities for our young people to grow in their humanity. I will outline only a few.

From the day that the child enters kindergarten until graduation in grade 12, every student is provided with instruction in faith as a required part of a Catholic education.

Faith seeks understanding. Every day, our students are challenged to explore, question and appreciate the richness of our Catholic faith tradition expressed through the religious education programmes of the Canadian Bishops. Educational guidance in human life, love and sexuality is provided through the *Fully Alive* programme of the Ontario Bishops.

Faith is a response to a loving God given in freedom, from the deepest parts of our humanity. An education in faith provides young people with a religious and spiritual framework that will be available to them for the rest of their lives.

Gospel Values Part of School Life

Catholic education goes far beyond instruction since gospel values are embedded in every aspect of life and culture in a Catholic school. Many people say that they sense something different when they enter a Catholic school. The Gospel of life and love is an everyday reality. We see it in the way that staff and students treat each other with genuine respect. When things do not go well, there are opportunities for forgiveness, healing and redemption.

Catholic education is a profound expression of hope and love. Hope inspires a commitment to the growth of all students whatever their unique needs. Love is lived in respect, compassion and kindness. Love is most vividly expressed when we see our Catholic schools honouring the presence of special needs children, welcoming the children who are new to our country, respecting every person, no matter their faith tradition.

Catholic schools provide a rich and meaningful experience of Christian community, an education of the heart and soul.

Faith in Action

If you were to visit a Catholic school, you would see that:

- Prayer is an integral part of every school day.
- Grade 2 students are provided with instruction that will prepare them for the sacraments of Reconciliation, Eucharist and Confirmation.
- Special needs children are welcomed, involved and befriended.
- High school students undertake a variety of social justice projects that lead them to a special appreciation of the poor and marginalized in society.
- Mass and the Sacrament of Reconciliation are celebrated in meaningful ways.
- Visits from parish priests give students a personal connection to their parishes.
- Teachers gather to engage in prayer and discussion that build their adult faith.
- High school chaplaincy leaders provide ongoing support for a wide variety of faith initiatives.

Excellence of Catholic Education

Catholic teachers are dedicated to providing the best possible instruction in all subject areas. Catholic schools are their own unique manifestations of Christian community, whose primary purpose is to education children in faith and in all other subject areas.

Since each and every child is created and loved by God, each with a unique giftedness and purpose, Catholic teachers are deeply committed to providing the best quality education.

The full human potential of each and every child can only be fully realized through an education that incorporates the spiritual into all aspects of school life.

The Ontario Context

We must never take the sacred gift of our Catholic schools for granted. Many parents have chosen Catholic education for the reasons that I have highlighted above. Public schools provided quality education but have no mandate to integrate religion or spirituality into the process. For Catholic schools, addressing the spiritual development of the child is a requirement, one that is taken on with joy and commitment.

Furthermore, Catholic schools provide a faith-based moral framework to deal with a wide spectrum of life issues including relationships, sexuality, poverty, peace and justice. This framework is integrated into all areas of study.

The future of Catholic schools depends on our appreciation of the distinctiveness of Catholic education, and on our willingness to stand and defend Catholic education should that time come.

Words of Thanks and Blessing

I wish to express my deepest thanks to parents who entrust their children to Catholic schools. Be assured that they are being provided with a quality education that responds to all their needs, including an education in faith, morality and justice.

My deepest thanks also go to the teachers, administrators and staff of our schools: May God continue to bless all your work. You help to bring love, hope and faith into the world, honouring the sacred dignity of all persons, building our Church community and a more just world.

To our students: we call you to a richer and deeper life that you will live through your encounter with the Gospel of Jesus Christ in your families, schools and parishes. Through a Catholic education, we trust that you will become a responsible citizen, a reflective and creative thinker, a caring family member, a discerning believer formed in the Catholic faith community.

A Catholic education will help you to make decisions with an informed moral conscience in the light of gospel values. We hope that you will become the best persons that you can possibly be, living life to the fullest, blessed by our loving God.

May God continue to bless all of our parents, all of our children, all the teachers and school staff, the administrators and trustees of our Catholic schools. May God bless them with faith, hope and love as we journey together in Jesus Christ.

This year Catholic Education Week coincides with the 350th anniversary of the first Catholic school founded by St. Marguerite Bourgeoys in Montreal on April 30, 1658 and the anniversary of the consecration of Catholic schooling to Mary under her title of *Our Lady of Schools*. May our Blessed Mother continue to intercede with her Son for the well-being of Catholic education and the flourishing of our Catholic schools.



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