

# BUILD BETHLEHEM EVERYWHERE

**A STATEMENT ON CATHOLIC EDUCATION**



2011

Canadian Catholic School Trustees' Association  
Association canadienne des commissaires d'écoles catholiques

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## PRESIDENT'S COMMENTS



The Canadian Catholic School Trustees' Association is pleased to present the sixth printing of this timeless Statement on Catholic Education.

Build Bethlehem Everywhere was first published in 2002 and has since become a very well respected resource for Catholic educators across North America.

What makes a school Catholic? What are the characteristics of a Catholic school graduate? It is our hope that you will find the answers to these questions and more within these pages.

We continue to be thankful for the gifts and the talents of Fr. Erik Riechers, SAC who so generously gave of his time and his talents which brought this book to fruition. Thanks as well to Tom Owens, Dolores Wagner-Owens and Miles Meyers for their inspiring contributions.

On behalf of the Board of Directors of CCSTA, I thank each and every one of you who continue to be inspired and who continue to assist the growth of the very essential ministry of Catholic Education within our Church.

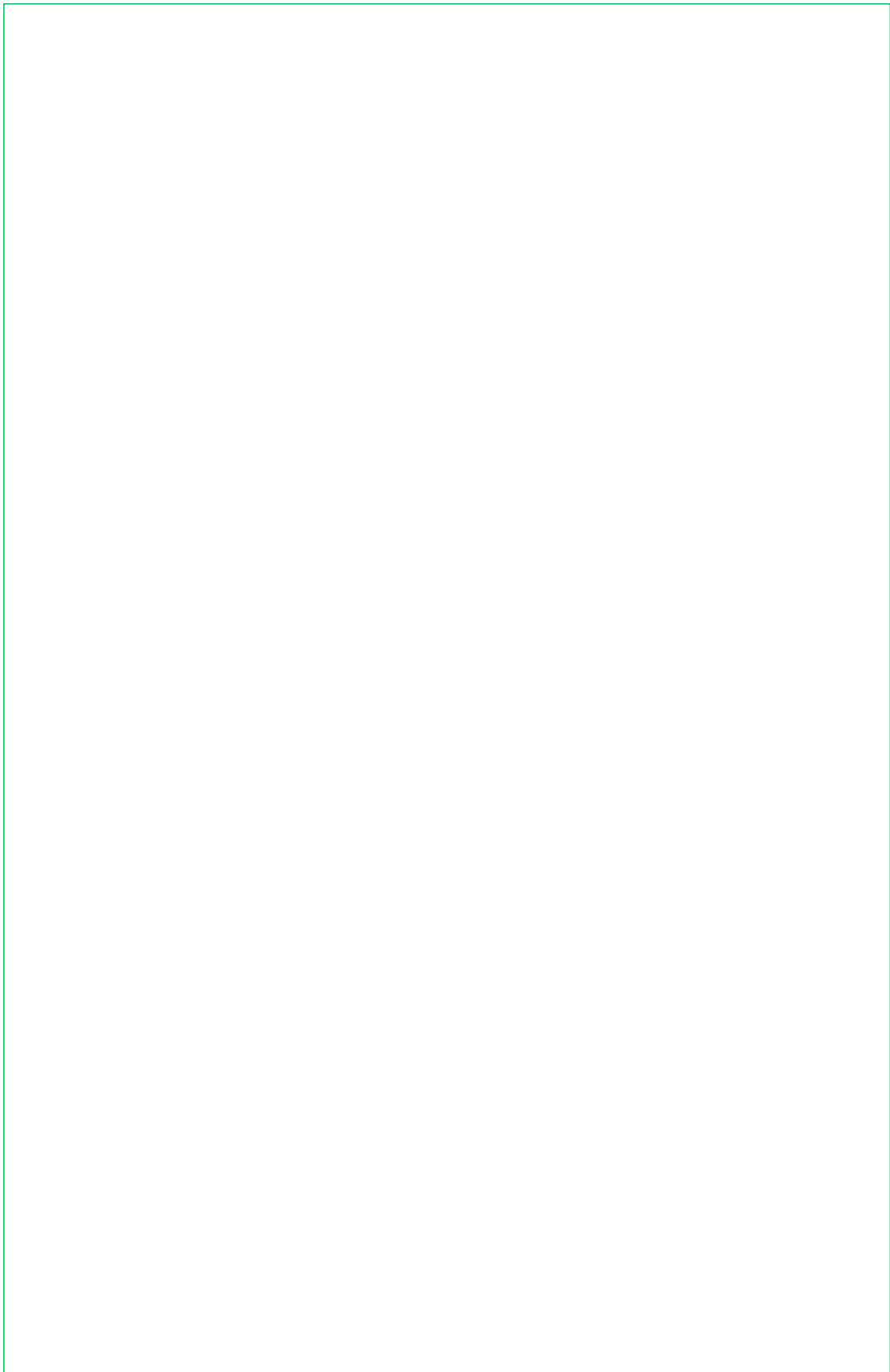
And finally, I thank those CCSTA Directors who came before us and in their wisdom and love for Catholic Education, encouraged the creation of Build Bethlehem Everywhere.

**Paula Peroni**

President

March, 2011





## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS



Rooted in Catholic Tradition, “Build Bethlehem Everywhere” describes simply and clearly the identity and mission of Catholic schools in Canada.

This statement of the Canadian Catholic School Trustees’ Association serves parents, trustees, educators, parish priests and bishops on several levels.



First, the metaphor of Bethlehem inspires the reader with the nativity narrative. The story of Christmas continues to encourage and empower any of the partners in Catholic education who may be tired or discouraged.

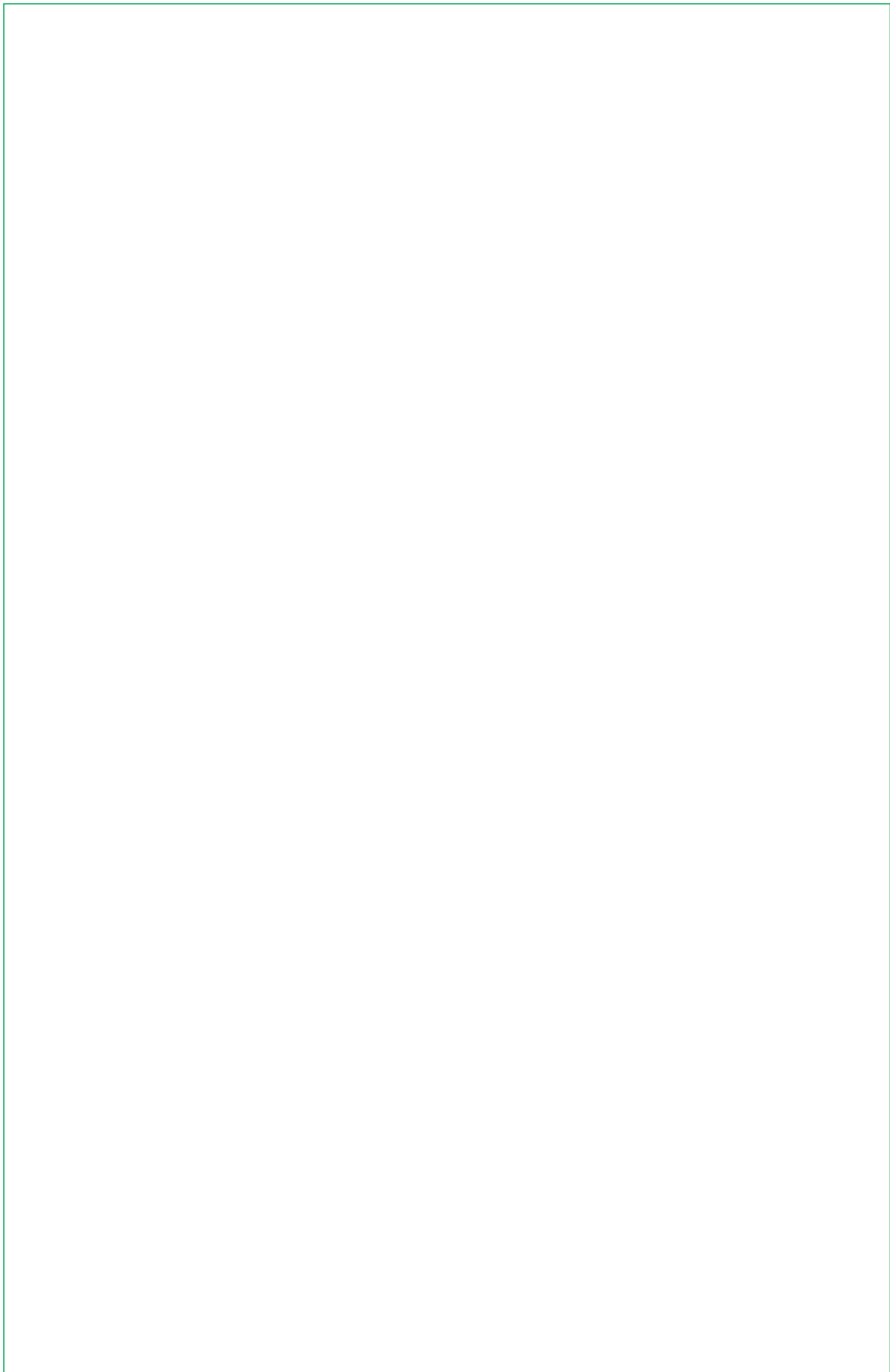
Second, the depth and breadth of this statement provides an abundant source of ideas and information for anyone who is searching for the connection between education and faith. “Build Bethlehem Everywhere” is worthy of serious study by individuals or study groups and offers a substantial contribution to any college course of study.

Third, the Canadian Catholic School Trustees’ Association has formulated this document in a cogent and persuasive rationale for a Catholic school system.

The Identity, Vision and Mission of our Catholic schools is superbly and clearly presented in “Build Bethlehem Everywhere”.

**Most Reverend Richard Grecco**

Episcopal Commission for Christian Education



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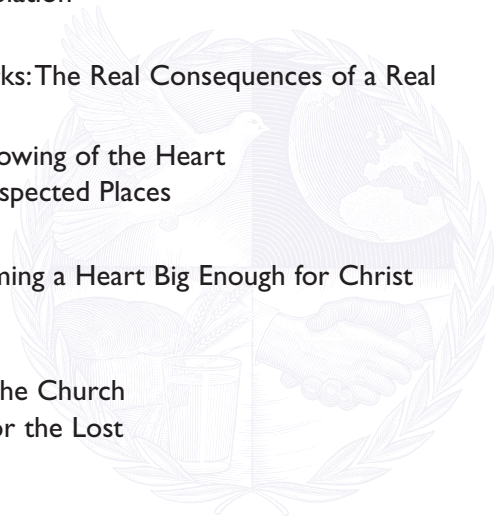
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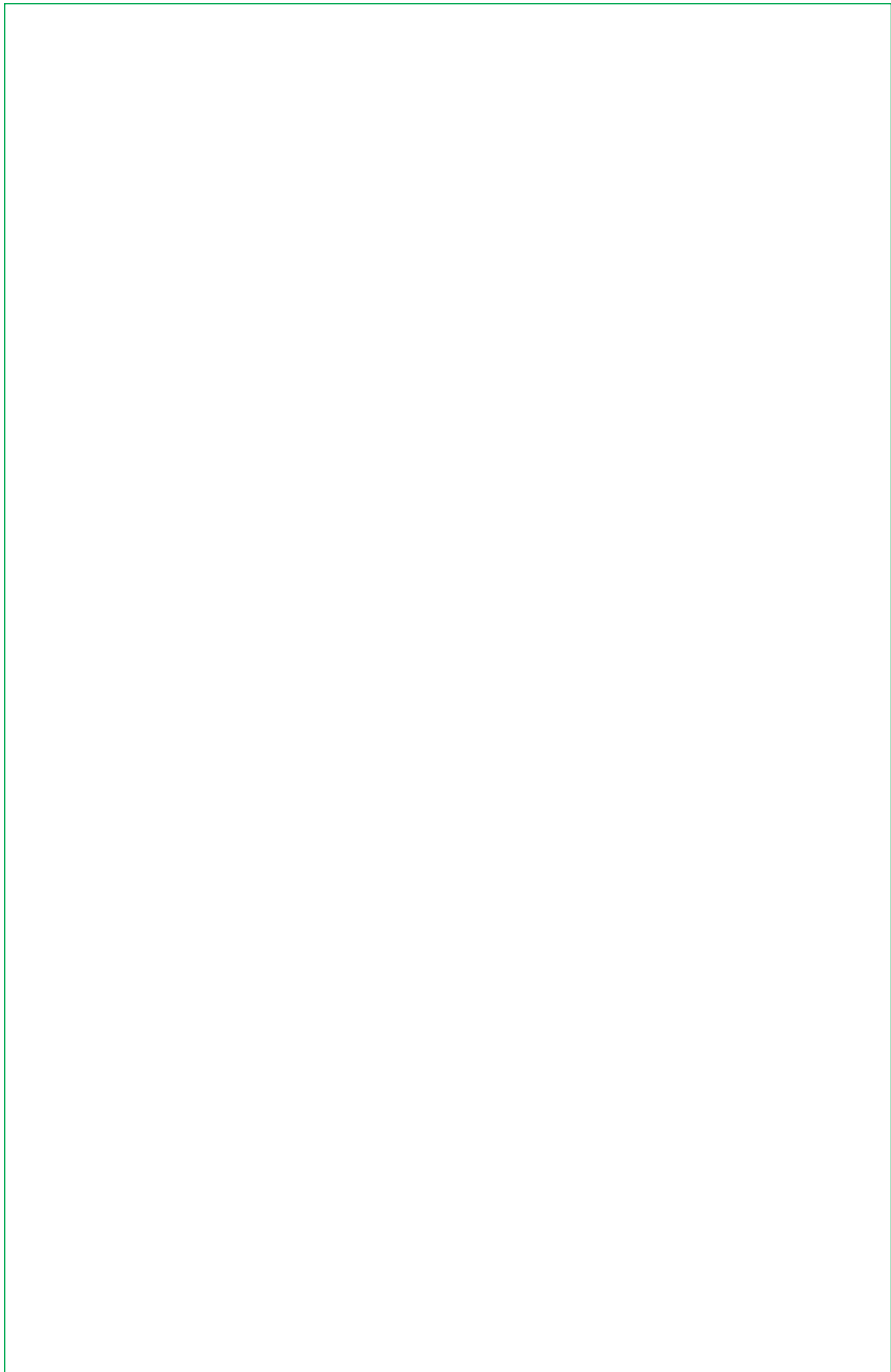
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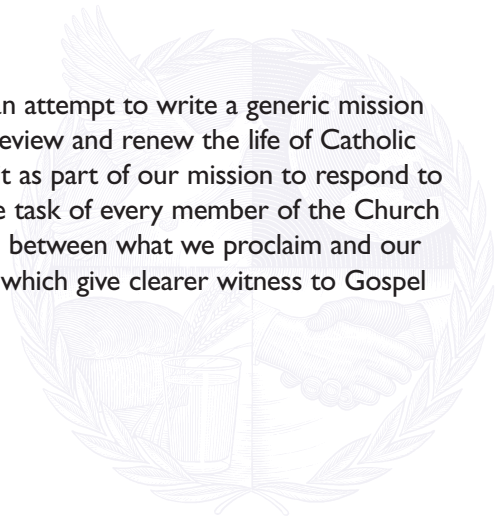


## INTRODUCTION

It is the intention of this document on Catholic Education to address all of the Church. All too often, documents of this nature are written for a selective audience within the community of Catholic Education, whether they be teachers, administrators or parents. It is our desire to draw the attention of all the Church to the fact that Catholic Education is part and parcel of the mission of the Church and not just the activity of a select group of people pursuing an elitist form of service to the community. We must address the great and over-arching issues of Catholic Education that touch the lives of all Catholics. Catholic Education is part of the mission of the Church, and all Catholics are co-responsible for that mission by the grace of baptism. Therefore, it is the responsibility of all Catholics to respond to the needs and aspirations of this part of the mission.

This document sets out to describe our Catholic identity such as in the field of education. It is critical that we define our understanding of ourselves, to define our identity. We are not foolish enough to believe that this document can exhaustively describe our identity as a community of Catholic Education. It offers only the contours within which our identity is developed. The search for exhaustive identity is a trap for fools. If a person asks us who we are, could we answer them? We would certainly find it hard to give an exhaustive, once-and-for-all answer. But we could say something basic, something essential. So, too, with communal identity. We cannot say everything exhaustively, but that does not mean that we cannot say anything at all.

This document is also not an attempt to write a generic mission statement. It strives to be a call to review and renew the life of Catholic Education and our commitment to it as part of our mission to respond to the impelling love of Christ. It is the task of every member of the Church to review continually the coherence between what we proclaim and our actual practice, to seek expressions which give clearer witness to Gospel virtues in Catholic Education.



Finally, there have been two major considerations in the style of writing this document.

1. This document seeks to create common ground for all the members of the Church in Canada in the areas of spirituality and formation in Catholic Education.
2. It is meant to be readable and easy to understand. The language should not only be understandable by any and all interested parties who read it, but it is intentionally written to be attractive in its beauty. If the Gospel we speak is saturated with fire and passion, why do the words we write about it and speak about it have to be as dull as dishwater? If we are truly driven by the conviction that Catholic Education is exciting, vibrant and earthy, then boring, dry and abstract descriptions are never a genuine reflection of what we do. May the beauty of the words and passion of the phrases be as much a part of the reflection as the power of the vision they weave.



## – CHAPTER ONE –



### THE PRINCIPLE OF SACRAMENTALITY: A People Who See God in All Things



All the world is suffused with the mystery of God. Therefore, all the world is also capable of revealing the mystery of God. Every search for meaning, truth, clarity and depth is in its own way a part of the human yearning that the mystery of God should communicate itself to us. The God immersed in mystery awakens our hope for encounter. There is a dreadful attitude in us at times that would use the

Mystery as an excuse to quit the search. We say: “Oh well, it is a Mystery”, and then feel we have justified our unwillingness to seek further or our resignation in the face of the daunting task. However, Mystery is not an excuse to fall back on when life is confusing and irritatingly vague. When we encounter Mystery, we find the birthplace of curiosity and wonder. Yet, if any of these experiences of encountering mystery are to touch the lives of men and women whose existence is wrapped in the tangible, historical and visible world, then the principle of sacramentality is required.

The principle of sacramentality is the fundamental conviction that the visible, tangible and historical material of the world around us is capable of revealing the intangible, invisible, and immaterial presence of God. In Catholic Education, we are committed to this search for the mystery of God that can be found revealed in all the world of God’s creation. The principle of sacramentality serves the purpose of helping human beings in their exploration of the mystery of God.

Catholic Education aims to move a new generation to a renewed exploration of the Holy and Mysterious God. Our schools desire to lead children to God, but it is to a God who is surprise, who is delightfully unpredictable in grace and presence, astonishingly creative

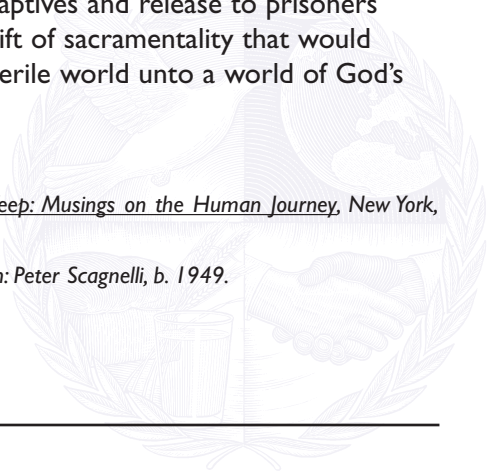
and of a fascinating tenderness. We are guided to a meeting with a God beyond wildest fantasy, but not beyond imagination.

For this reason, Catholic Education prepares the young through the principle of sacramentality. It is our way of refusing to quench the Spirit. The Spirit is the one who leads us to the experience of God. For the Spirit of God breaks open reality for us in such a manner that we might see the many layers and dimensions of what we would otherwise take for granted. The Spirit moves us from superficial surveillance of the swirling scene surrounding us, to the contemplative's "long, loving look at the real"<sup>1</sup>. The "unfailing Light of our Hearts" and the "Breath of God" who comes to "bend the stubborn heart and will, melt the frozen, warm the chill"<sup>2</sup>, does so through illumination. Yet, what the Spirit gives to the human heart in illumination is the capacity for sacramentality.

We are in dire need of sacramentality in our search for God. Sacramentality is not about a sense of fantasy or fairy tale. It is the ability to experience the unlimited, invisible, incomprehensible God of mystery in the limited, tangible, visible world around us. The sacramentality given by the Spirit does not give us visions of the unreal, but rather opens to us the depths of reality, the God-contours of life, the God-possibilities of our daily grind. It enables the ordinary to speak to us of God, and thus makes the ordinary the place where God can be sought. The Spirit's illumination through sacramentality allows bread broken to reveal Christ crucified. Wine and water, oil and fire, stories, songs and symbols all can speak to us of God. It is the Spirit's gift of sacramentality that allows Isaiah to see the possibilities of finding God by bringing "good news to the oppressed, . . . binding up the broken-hearted, . . . proclaiming liberty to captives and release to prisoners" (Isaiah 61, 1). Thus, it is the Spirit's gift of sacramentality that would open for our children a cold and sterile world unto a world of God's warmth, tenderness and mystery.

<sup>1</sup> Walter Burghardt, *Seasons that Laugh or Weep: Musings on the Human Journey*, New York, Paulist Press, 1983, p. 103.

<sup>2</sup> *Veni, Sante Spiritus, 13th Century*. Translation: Peter Scagnelli, b. 1949.



In Catholic Education we are committed to keeping the hearts of our children awake to the fact that we are immersed in the mystery of God. We must keep vigilance for the sake of a heart attuned to mystery. Such a heart avoids the pitfalls by adopting two attitudes. On the one hand it nourishes a tender hopefulness. It expects to hear something more than all that has already been said, therefore it listens. It has the hope of being surprised, therefore it seeks. It has the hope that it will see more than has already been revealed, thus it casts a second glance. The heart immersed in mystery shares the conviction of St. Paul that God has not issued cutbacks in the department of spiritual gifts, strength and grace. So it seeks, everywhere and always.

Therefore, we can look upon troubled children and see more than the sum of past failure. We can discover the deeper, mysterious and often hidden value of a child who is nothing but a bother to those who will not pierce from the shell to the kernel. Thus, Catholic educators are not just teachers of the principle of sacramentality in their words, but in their own experience of it. This everyday witness makes it possible for the children to be a revelation of God to the teachers.

On the other hand, the heart immersed in mystery does not define the mystery it seeks. The hardened and withered hearts all too often try to define the grace they seek like a consumer who rifles through the Christmas catalogue to determine, size, quality, quantity and colour. Thus, it is possible to pray for love and stare at the heavens in frustration while the mystery of God clings to us in a child who clutches our ankles. It is conceivable to ask God to touch our souls and miss the wonder of the all holy mystery in the tenderness of a friend who strokes our cheek in the hour of pain.

Yet, this does not happen for children without guidance. Teachers lead children to mystery by helping them to be alert when they find themselves nodding off because the seeking is more difficult than imagined. They lead children to the mystery of God by helping them look beyond what they have come to take for granted in their friends, families and even in their fears. A child can see a painting, but it takes a teacher to unlock the beauty that is contained within it. The beauty is always present, but is seen for the first time through the eyes

of the guide. Here, the principle of sacramentality is made evident. The teacher does not merely pass on information about what constitutes good art. The teacher leads the child to an experience of beauty.

Simply put, Catholic Education helps a new generation to stand on guard against the hardening of the heart. Disappointment, betrayal and hurt can easily build calluses on the souls of the young. This is often a cynical world in which commercials co-opt the innocence of our youth, and the infirmity of our elders. Yet, that cynical indifference can be extended to places it does not belong. Thus, the cynic can miss the moments where maple trees, playing children, giggling teenagers, bread, wine, oil and fire speak to us of God. Jesus' desire that we should keep awake demands that we make sure that the suddenness of God's arrival, be it at "evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at dawn" (Mk. 13, 35), is not met with the scepticism of having seen it all before, or the suspicion that some deception lays behind it all.

Catholic Education does this for a new generation as Jesus did it for the disciples on the Road to Emmaus. Downcast and broken, they encounter a stranger on the road who listens to every word they have to say, every grief they have suffered, every misery they have endured. Convinced that they have seen it all and understood it all, it takes Jesus to open them up to a whole level of meaning and mystery beyond their obvious conclusions. In Catholic Education we too will keep the dialogue alive with a new generation by helping them to see the mystery of God's presence and action in the world and in their lives, even when they are convinced that there is no more meaning to be found.



## – CHAPTER TWO –



### AFFIRMATION AND CELEBRATION OF LIFE



The Catholic school stands at the unconditional service of the **Trinitarian God**. Flowing from the deep commitment to the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, the Catholic school knows itself called to serve life, to affirm it and celebrate it. The Holy Spirit, who is the Lord and giver of life, prompts the school to be a life-giving place. Jesus Christ, who came to bring us life and life in fullness, motivates us to offer nothing less to our students. The Father, who created all life and affirmed that it was good, is our constant inspiration to affirm all of the divine mystery of life in the next generation. Together with all the Church, we take seriously the baptismal duty of ensuring that “the divine life which God gives [the children] is kept safe from the poison of sin, to grow always stronger in [their] hearts”<sup>3</sup>. “The Church has never yielded in the face of all the violations that the right to life of every human being has received, and continues to receive . . . If, indeed, everyone has the mission and responsibility of acknowledging the personal dignity of every human being and of defending the right to life, some lay faithful are given a particular title to this task: such as parents, teachers, health workers and the many who hold economic and political power”<sup>4</sup>. The Catholic school is called to take its rightful place in the Church as a guardian of life’s wonder and mystery.

<sup>3</sup> *The Rite of Baptism of Children, CCCB, 1989, p. 80.*

<sup>4</sup> *Christifideles laici, art. 38.*

## ***Life not Survival***

It is, therefore, the constant task of the Catholic school to ensure that we never forget our dignity and reduce our work and ministry to that of functionaries. There is no great mystery as to when we have become task orientated rather than mission-driven. There dawns a day when we settle for survival, rather than life. Worse, there can come a day when we are willing to make that deal for those entrusted to our care. To be on a mission, is to seek life, and life to the full, for yourselves and for the ravaged children of a hard world.

We are committed in the spirit of the great Catholic tradition to more than a mere demonstration of the tasks of living. We are dedicated to the mission of living. To live and to give life is not just to avoid clinical death. To live is to explore wonder, and to give life is to restore the capacity for wonder. Wonder, however, is the first victim of a mentality that is concerned only for survival.

As men and women committed to the mission of the Church, we always remember our dignity. We are not technicians of survival. We are the guardians of life at the gates of wonder. To be alive is to wonder at all that is real. A life incarcerated by ignorance, drug abuse, or neglect can be diminished even further by reducing the marvellous, mysterious expanse of all the cosmos, to the small and sterile world of survival. All men and women are called to relish the vibrant life God has fashioned for them, not just those who are sound of mind and the steady of limb. Vibrant life, however, is not reducible to bare bones basics.

What are the shadows of death for us? If life is more than a matter of biological survival, then death is more than a matter of biological termination. After all, you can be the picture of health, your blood can be clean, your body strong and your future untarnished by the immediate threat of biological termination; but are you fully alive if you can do as you please without being able to relish love, relationship and appreciation? Death and its shadow linger in every experience where life is lost, and not just biologically lost.



Education, service and advocacy can and has led to staggeringly efficient apparatus, the precise conveying of knowledge, able-bodied assistance, and the advancement of the aims of the Catholic school. All of this will help the children to survive. However, left at this, education, service and advocacy will become chillingly cold words. They would speak only about what we are willing to do, but not a syllable about whom we are willing to love. While such words reveal hands in motion and minds in action, they also betray hearts of ice. Words burn with meaning and life to the degree we burn with passion for God and the life He has given to us. Who will release us for life? We profess and teach that our liberator must be the One who was most fully alive himself: Jesus Christ. We celebrate and affirm life in Jesus Christ, the Key of David, who opens to us the gates of heaven by teaching us how we must live. In the resurrection, Christ teaches us that life must not be lived as a flight from death, but as a faith-filled movement toward it. When He stops to deal with the crowds, despite His fatigue, He shows us that personal comfort must be transcended for the sake of others. When He “emptied himself and took the form of a slave” (Phil 2,7), He showed us that the fullness of life lies beyond ego and accumulation.

## ***Teachers of the Unconditional Love of God***

On Jordan’s banks where the Baptist cried, the voice of the God and Father of Jesus Christ is now heard. “You are my Son, the Beloved; with You I am well pleased” (Mk 1, 11). In baptism God speaks the same words to us. You are my child, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased. The Catholic school is the place where we strive to help the young believing these words of revelation.

It is a considerable problem for many young people to come to an appreciation of God’s love for them. The problem begins with the fact that we cannot make ourselves the Beloved. Belovedness is a gift of God’s gracious revelation, but not a by-product of our performance. In the culture of materialism and acquisition, many young people come to believe that it is what they own, purchase or control that makes them lovable. The despair begins with the realization that it cannot be done.

“All of us experience firsthand the sad effects of this blind submission to pure consumerism: in the first place a crass materialism, and at the same time a radical dissatisfaction, because one quickly learns—unless one is shielded from the flood of publicity and the ceaseless and tempting offers of products—that the more one possesses the more one wants, while deeper aspirations remain unsatisfied and perhaps even stifled.”<sup>5</sup> The money and effort are invested, but they do not guarantee that we will be beloved. Afterwards we can get our money back, but not our self-esteem.

In the face of this materialistic conception of life, Catholic Education is an untiring teacher of the beauty of being God’s Beloved Child. We do not make ourselves the Beloved, God does. Before anything is done or accomplished, God takes the initiative in loving us. We testify to the next generation that God loves them beyond their performance. God created us as beings capable of being loved and capable of loving. Yet, God also recognizes our lovable core, loves us, and, in the loving, seeks to set us free for love. God finds us lovable.

Catholic schools know themselves, bound by a sacred duty to celebrate and affirm the belovedness of the children, for their belovedness is close to the heart of God. As such we participate in the work of revelation. In the culture of death we are commissioned by Christ to raise our voices in defence of the sacredness of their life as Beloved sons and daughters of the Father. The voice from heaven says “You are my child, the Beloved” (Mk 1, 11). The chorus of voices around us try to deny it. These voices exert tremendous power over the young. They point out their weakness and never let them forget their failings. In response, we are determined never to let them forget the infinite love and mercy of God.

## ***Sin, Salvation and Self-esteem***

Undoubtedly, many young people suffer from real self-image problems. Just as clear, is the fact that as Catholic educators we are bound by the Word and the Tradition. Our celebration and affirmation

<sup>5</sup> *Sollicitudo rei socialis*, art. 28.

of life does not mean that we shuffle the word “sin” out of the Christian vocabulary to meet the needs of an extremely sensitive generation. The desire to be faithful to the revelation of God, and the yearning to heal the wounded that dwell in our midst are brought into harmony in our teaching tradition.

Sin remains on the Christian agenda, no matter what problems we may have with it. It is certainly not easy to speak of sin today. However, the removal of an honest reflection on sin does not help the healing of a human life. This is precisely the point that the biblical view of sin tries to make. Dealing with sin is part of healing what ails our humanity. In profound fidelity to the Sacred Scripture, we teach our youngest that sin is the breaking or wounding of relationships, and that includes relationships on every level. When it speaks of sin, the Scripture is concerned about our relationship to God, to the created order, to our neighbours, and about our relationship to ourselves. There is no picking and choosing from among them. They must all be kept intact. If one relationship is damaged or diminished, all the others suffer.

God’s concern about sin is rooted in a deep concern about us. Sin marks a deterioration in our relationships, a loss of quality in our living and loving. God has made us for fullness of life, and this is found in the fullness of relationship on all its levels, in all the places where it is lived. God cannot abide the frayed and tattered forms of relationship that sin makes for us, since there is no life to be found in it. Thus, far from being an attack on our self-esteem, God’s inquiry about the state of sin in our lives, His insistence that it be removed, and that we turn away from it, is a mark of the esteem we are held in by the Lord. After all, who worries about poor relationships in those they do not care about in the first place?

If sin is a non-negotiable part of preaching the Good News, then shattered self-image poses a non-negotiable pain that cries out to be healed. It is highly likely that nothing is a greater plague on the personal lives of our children than the loss of self-esteem, and the struggle to win it back. We cannot walk away from this crisis, as if it will disappear of its own accord. For it remains a sad and bitter reality that there are many who have no self-image to correct, because it has been

stripped from them, one degree at a time. Many have been told for a lifetime, that they are dumb, stupid, unworthy, ugly and undesirable. They have been relentlessly pelted with the brutal knowledge that they are unwanted and unloved, an irritation to be borne in suffering, rather than a great love to be wrapped in intimacy.

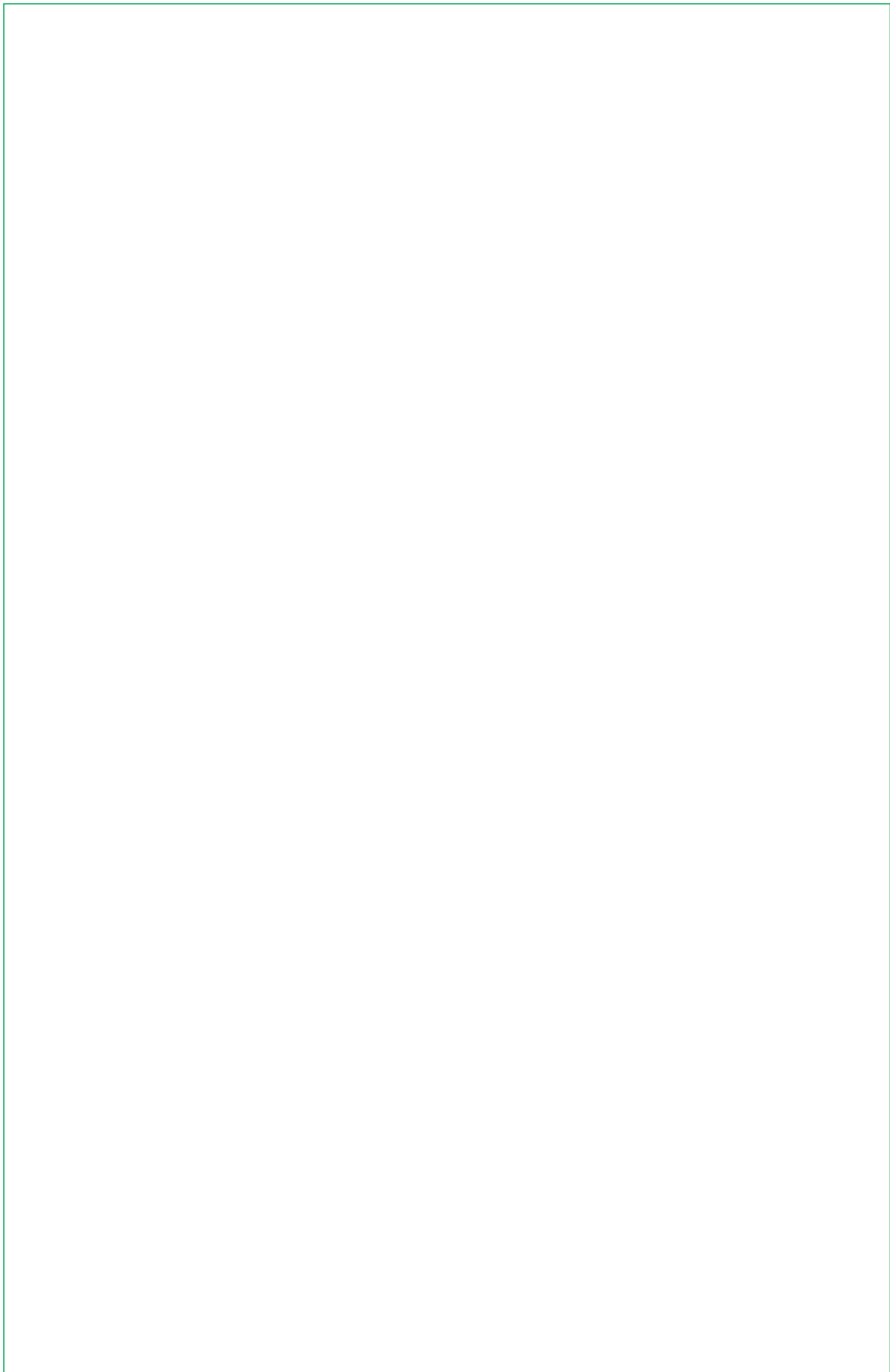
In Catholic Education we do not soften or ignore the problem of sin, nor do we deny the struggles of self-image. Instead, we speak about salvation. Salvation is the constant and dependable gift of Jesus Christ to a people who wish to affirm life and celebrate its beauty. It certainly challenges us to turn away from sin, but it is rooted in the fact that God sees something worth saving. When God offers us salvation, He is revealing a wonderful mystery to us: We are worth every time and trouble to save. Salvation strengthens rather than shatters our self-image as the God's beloved children. It is not meant to make you grovel in misery, but to marvel at the mystery.

As Catholic Educators, we aim to be people who possess three great attributes of a saving spirit, and thus help the children to know the saving reality of our God. First, we nurture a trained eye to find the pearl of great price. What is without value to everyone else is precious to us. With God's eyes we look at what is covered with rust, layered with dust, and encrusted with dirt, and still find the beloved. It is a gift of life. Secondly, we foster a committed heart to choose the pearl we find in our children, just as God does. It is one thing to recognize the precious, but another to choose it. Commitment comes with choosing the pearl before the polishing. God chose us, before sin was removed, because of the great commitment of the divine heart to us. That will suffuse the children with joy. Finally, we strive for a loving will to transform what we have chosen. We settle down to actually make the laborious effort of restoring what we have chosen unto a state of glory. God has that loving will toward us. He not only chooses us, despite appearances, but also lovingly transforms us. Without that loving will in God, we would be recognized as lovable, chosen as the beloved, and then lost to damnation because God would never actually complete the work of saving us.

It is imperative that the Catholic school help the children to know the wonder of our God in the magnificence of salvation. For it is

especially in the revelation of the loving will of God that we know a restoration of self-image. What motivates God to go to all this trouble, when He already knows we are pearls of great price? Simply this! What God has seen before the saving purification, He wants everyone else who yet lacks His trained eye to see. God desires that every man and woman would see the children as He does. Since many cannot pierce through the shells that shield the young, God strips them away. Glory should not be hidden. That is why our God has come to save us. That is why Catholic Education ceaselessly speaks of the gift of salvation to the young. It is a non-negotiable part of our Christian commitment to affirm and celebrate life.





## – CHAPTER THREE –



### FAITH THAT REFUSES TO BE DIVORCED FROM LIFE



When we go out to bring the Gospel to the world of our students, we ask ourselves a serious question. What is the essence of what we wish to transmit to the next generation? The answer is actually quite simple: Christian faith. Faith is the deep concern of our Catholic educational communities today. Often that concern has a negative expression. We gripe about the loss of faith among our children and youth, we bemoan the dwindling faith consciousness of the next generation and wring our hands with anxiety about the ever decreasing capacity for faith in modern human hearts.

Yet, as quick as we are to point our collective finger at so many in contemporary society, we are remarkably slow to remember those men and women who found faith a major problem, namely the apostles and the disciples of Jesus. Yet, the Gospel is riddled with references that speak of their smallness of faith, their problems in accepting Jesus and of their falling away from the faith. Jesus speaks hard words of millstone necklaces for those who deliberately walk the way of grievous sin and of unlimited forgiveness for brothers and sisters who elevate our blood pressure, but hardly our minds and hearts. The hard demands of faith laid out by Jesus intimidated the disciples.

Thus, Catholic Education is always faced with a hard reality. The struggle to come to a deep and abiding faith was legitimate for the first generation of disciples and it is legitimate in the parishes, living rooms, schools and offices of the present generation. As Catholic educators we cannot expect an easier time of it than Jesus had with the first group ever to undergo Catholic Education. We are no less obliged to answer the cry for faith in our era than Jesus was in His.

The problem often begins with the word itself. What is faith? What is the reality behind faith? Faith is always a matter of encounter and response. Let us draw from human experience, where the principle of sacramentality is enacted. When we meet people it is possible that we will discover that they are kind, generous, compassionate and trustworthy in our experiences with them. At some point we can then develop faith in them. What happens? We are saying: I have seen something good, true and powerful in you, and now I have faith that you will be these things for me in the future, regardless of the changes in situation, location or time. In leading children to the mystery of God, we guide them to the experience of God that gives meaning, purpose or direction to these moments of their lives. To come to faith is to embrace God as the irreplaceable meaning of life, taking the plunge that allows us to surrender all the rest of our life to God. It is always a question of encounter, experience and response.

All too often we do not draw near to this understanding of faith. Instead we reduce all our talk about faith to speech about propositional truths, or codes of moral and religious behaviour. In the worst case, we end up speaking about faith as if it were the religious version of politically correct language about God. Truths and consequences are very much a part of the faith, but they flow from our encounter with the God who has drawn close to us in Jesus Christ. In Catholic Education we are swift to point out the need for sound teaching, but we also never fail to recognize the admonishment of faith to remember the living experience of Jesus Christ, alive and present in the post-resurrection community, and working actively in the lives of the children entrusted to our care. The foundational purpose of a Catholic faith education is to continually remind a new generation of believers that faith is not a matter of comprehending God, but one of God apprehending us in love. We do not just believe some things, but we have found in God someone to believe in. It is only when we can say to God “I believe in You” that we are capable of linking our fate and destiny to the divine heart. Who of us can commit the fabric of our lives to abstract principles?

The consequence of this is staggering. Rather than rendering an account of the faith, we could end up rendering the account of our faith. In the attempt to teach faith as “the truths we hold” we must never fail



to mention the “Christ to whom we cling”. The task of Catholic Education cannot be considered complete when answers are memorized, forms are followed and obedience is exacted. At best this would lead to knowledge about the consequences of faith, and at worst it would be a mindless religious regurgitation.

Thus, if our knees snap, crackle and pop while we teach children how to genuflect, but there is not even a passing reference to the One behind the tabernacle door, whose infinite love and mercy makes us weak in the knees, we have divorced faith from our life. With gusto we bellow out songs about the God who is for us the fountain of living water, but we also insure that the young do not choke on dusty abstractions. We must not merely rumble through ritual routine, but we must rock with passion. In Catholic Education we are delighted at the fact that we have achieved the articulation of the learned. However, we also have a profound appreciation of the stutter of the lovestruck. It is found in every teacher who has taught faith with passion, in every parent who had no explanation but helped the child understand anyway, and in every minister of the Gospel in our schools whose eloquence of lifestyle outshone their eloquence of speech.

Catholic educators make the spreading of faith a priority, and they adhere to the great wisdom of the Church by following the teaching of *Evangelii Nuntiandi*. The people of our generation prefer witnesses to teachers. Much of what is theologically articulate to us is in fact unintelligible to those who do not yet believe. Our children are not very likely to accept faith as truths imposed upon them from the outside. Authority does not reach that far any more, and never really should have in the past.

Thus, we use a different starting point. We lead the seekers to the experience of the living, dynamic, creative and saving God who has not just captured our minds, but most importantly, our hearts. But that experience has to be found within the human experience of the children, the teachers and the parents. We cannot give to others what we do not possess ourselves.

Human beings are radically limited in their understanding and vision. They cannot imagine the unconditional, illimitable God, even though this all holy mystery God is already present in our human

existence, silent and hidden. It is a knowledge we cannot grasp, but whereby we are grasped. Humans are created with an openness to this mystery. They have experiences of transcendence that move them beyond the narrow confines of finite reality. They are made for mystery, and possess a capacity for the infinite. For example, how could a mere finite creature conceive of anything bigger than the finite? Yet, we can imagine things bigger than we are, beyond our limitation and capacity. We can think and come up with ideas that are not possible for the creature limited by the finite boundaries of existence. How can trees speak to us of beauty, sunrises awaken in us joy and roses move us to tears? They do so through our ability to encounter the transcendent.

Thus, the place we start teaching our children to look for the mystery of God is in the ordinary. For faith does not mean we have to look in the extraordinary. Faith puts squarely before us the deep roots of this life which we would otherwise overlook or shut out. Thus, “the experience of God forms the undertow of daily life”. (Harvey Egan) It means we must challenge our children who take their own experience for granted and prod them to look again at what exists outside of themselves. But we also desire to lead them to take another look at what is within themselves that makes it possible for them to comprehend and interact with the created order. Here is where God is at work in their lives, and it is here that we must bring those who seek. Here we come into contact with Catholic Education’s basic insight into the crisis of faith. It is an insight which motivates all of our catechises and focuses us as teachers of grace. We can offer profound proclamations, ace abstraction and master methodology only to find that if we could not show children where these things touch life, suffering and the anguish of human hearts, people will give us a resounding answer: who cares? For this reason, faith is always more than a course to us, more than a part of the curriculum. It permeates all the school, all of life, and all that is undertaken and lived in Catholic Education.

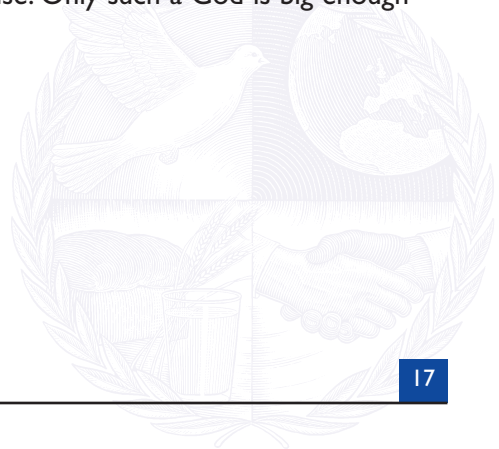
Catholic Education refuses to divorce faith from life. We move from the comfortable anonymity of catechetical formulas to the frightening, exasperating and exhilarating sharing of our experiences of the God behind all our talk. Children are waiting for us to give them a personal introduction to God. This will require a greater awareness in

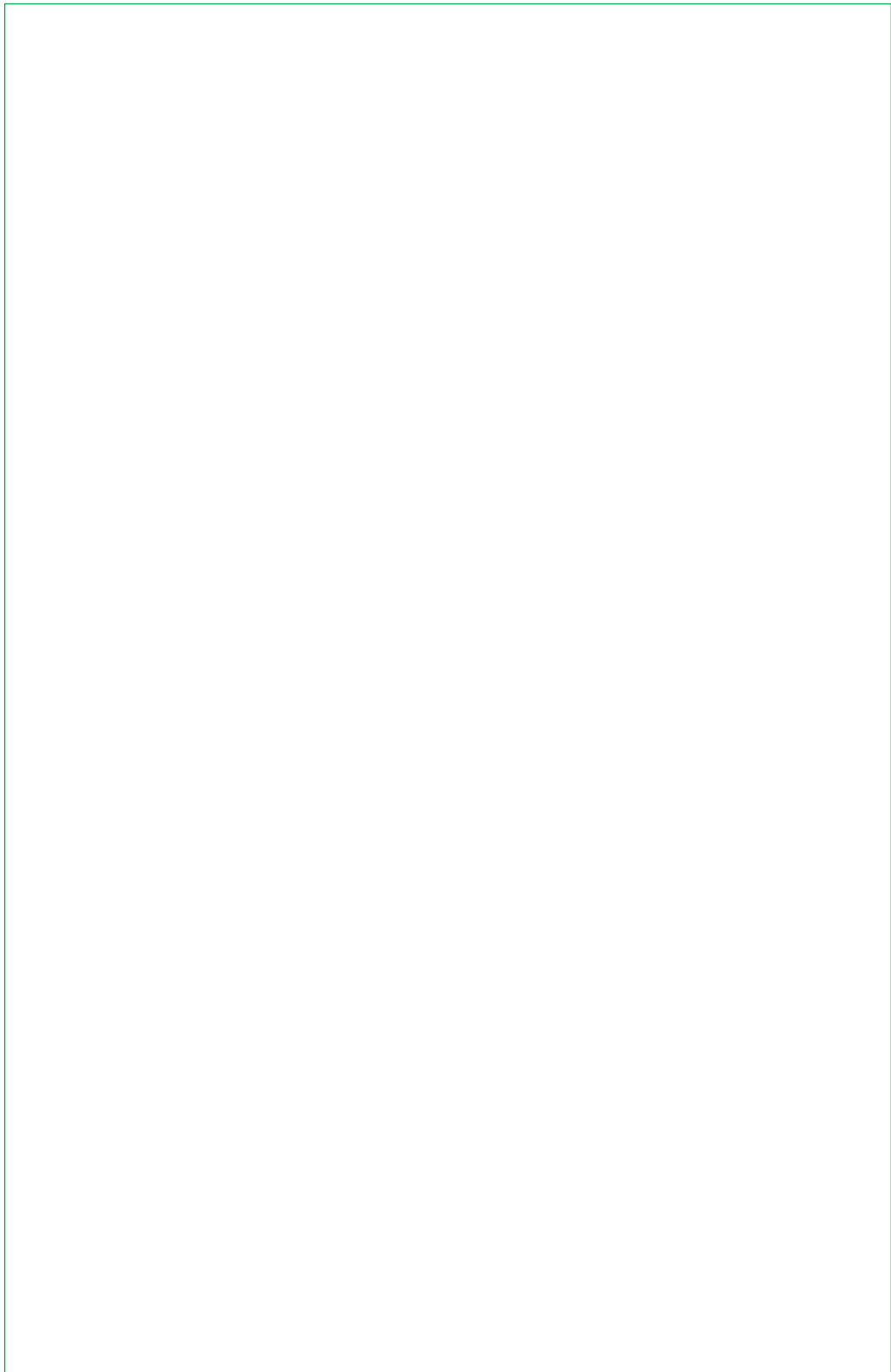
ourselves of the mystery of God and how it is at work. It will mean a renewed willingness to look within human experience for the in-breaking of God, and not just to the experience of others neatly captured in textbooks.

There are serious challenges in all of this. How will we speak to the nations of our experience of God if we hardly ever do this among ourselves? How will we speak personally of the God who touches us if we are unaware of that experience? If among ourselves we use rote formulas and anonymous jargon, how will we communicate the mystery in any other terms to the world?

The cry that issues forth from the hearts of the young is hard to hear: increase our faith. They plead with us to increase their ability to embrace the all holy mystery of God. They desire of us that we increase their capacity to surrender their lives to the transcendence for which we are created. They ask us to increase their power to find the trustworthiness of God in our daily grind, so that they too may take the plunge we call faith.

There is no substitute. In Catholic Education we tell them of the God experienced in our laughter, struggle, joys and fears. To them we must proclaim the wonders of the God who knows the popping of bones and not just of champagne corks, who holds the wheezing pants of the teenage runaway as precious as Gregorian chant, who delights with us in the antics of our children and pulls us tightly to the Great Heart when grief is strong. We must speak of the God who dwells in tents, tenements, trailers, and townhouses with the same frequency as we speak of His presence in our tabernacles. Tell the next generation the Good News of the God who is as familiar with the smell of TV dinners as with the aroma of incense. Only such a God is big enough for us to entrust an entire life.





## – CHAPTER FOUR –



### **SCRIPTURE AND TRADITION: The Sources from which Our Daily Faith Life is Fed**



In a complex and often challenging world, Catholic Education prepares every generation that flows through its doors to cherish and give witness to the revelation of the living God. It is our heartfelt desire to introduce them to the Sacred Scripture and to the Tradition as pivotal moments in which God opens himself to the human family, communicating Himself to us. Revelation not only reveals God's words to his people, but Himself. Our commitment to Scripture and Tradition are, therefore, part and parcel of our commitment to aid children in coming to an encounter with the living God.

For Catholic Education, the work of making the Word come alive for the next generation is always a labour of delicate balance. We strive to be faithful to the fullness of what is revealed and respect the legitimate diversity of the Tradition. No facet or aspect of the Gospel is lifted out and treated as if it were the whole message, without reference to the breadth and depth of the faith, for we are servants of the Word, not its masters. On the other hand, we painstakingly mark out the non-negotiables of revelation, thus demonstrating to young believers the utterly dependable anchors of our lives.

Catholic Education is determined to preach the Gospel! As servants of the Word, we are not concerned with personal popularity, ramming through our vision or protecting our way of life. We are keenly aware that our service is rooted in a personal responsibility to God, and that this responsibility is permanent and all important even in the face of the genuine possibility that it will cost us esteem, popularity and an easy ride in our brutally critical and sceptical society.

Herein lies our struggle. We preach a word that is not our own, but which we help others to own fully. We are servants of the Good News, never taking liberties with it. Our teaching and preaching conform to the content and style of Jesus' own word, thus ensuring that we are not harsh, overly demanding, excessively moralizing and filled with self-righteousness. We do not resort to condemnation where Jesus used persuasion. We do not impose discipline and censure where Jesus preferred mercy and compassion.

On the other hand, we preach the Lord who is living water for us, never the Lord of watered-down living. We raise children to the highest ideals of the Gospel. We help them to seek the higher things of the spirit. The biblical saturation of Catholic Education is not merely about biblical information, but a commitment to biblical formation. We break the word open for our children, helping them to apply it to their lives. We open the eyes of a new generation to the meaning and mystery of God's Word, so that they might see all the places in their lives where the word of the printed page wants to become flesh in their actions, behaviour and choices.

## **Who do We Say Jesus is For Us?**

“Who do you say that I am?” (Luke 9, 20). It is the question that keeps us both worried and curious. Parents wonder what their children would say in response to it. Husbands and wives cagily pose the question in camouflaged forms. Lifelong friends live off the answer and even passing acquaintances wish they knew the answer in the heart of the other. In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus himself poses the question and in the process unleashes some painful self-examination for us all.

“One day when Jesus was praying alone, with only the disciples near him, He asked them, ‘Who do the crowds say that I am?’

They answered, 'John the Baptist; but others, Elijah; and still others, that one of the ancient prophets has arisen.' Jesus said to them, 'But who do you say that I am?' Peter answered, 'The Messiah of God.'" (Lk 9, 18-24)

When Jesus asks this question of His disciples, He unleashes a powerful and defining moment in their lives. The same is true when we pose the question in our Catholic schools.

Why insist on an answer to the question in the first place? It is a dreaded moment for us when a person we have known for a long time asks us: who am I for you? The question packs a punch, because it forces us to realize what is at stake, namely, relationship itself. Everything we assume, presume, and take for granted about Jesus is put to the test. The specific, personal form of the question unnerves us, because it does not want to know what great theologians wrote, but what we believe. Metaphysical splendour, textbook accuracy and theological acumen are not enough to answer this question, therefore more must be done to help children in finding the answer. Without knowing who Jesus is, they cannot possibly offer an appropriate, life-giving response to him.

## ***Feeding a Passion for God***

Jesus asks the disciples, "Who do the crowds say that I am?" Immediately a flood of answers gushes forth. That is very much the experience of the modern era as well. Some think of Jesus as a prophet, others as guru, some associated him with the hippies, and others as a political liberator. Yet, whether the answer be John the Baptist or Elijah, the crowds speak from the perspective of the outsider. Their knowledge is objective and analytical. They have gathered data on Jesus, compared it with facts and figures about prophets and drawn cool, logical conclusions. This is the type of knowledge that so appeals to us today; clinical, detached and neutral. No one can question our objectivity, and our opinions are not clouded by emotion or undue attachment.

Catholic Education is not satisfied to give children only that kind of knowledge of Jesus, because it is a disposable knowledge. Such knowledge is not genuinely and completely religious. It matters not one whit whether we possess it or not, for it does not touch our hearts or change our lives. We stand neutral and sovereign above the data. It does not have the power to transform us. So, take it or leave it; it does not really make a difference. People know that Jesus hugs kids, spins a good yarn, doesn't much care for stone tossing spirituality, cares a whole lot about haemorrhaging women, grieving fathers, and anxious centurions, and knows a good wine when He makes it. They might know that He is a prophet, or even that He is the Son of God. The point is, however, that there is no consequence for them. Yet, in Catholic Education we are never content to allow the young to file away these delectable tidbits of biblical information. We pass on a living word to a living people.

### ***Fostering the Fervour of Followers***

Thus, we invite the children God has entrusted to our care to answer the question of the follower with the fervour of the follower, instead of the coolness of the crowd. We strive to open to them a knowledge that flows from the heart of commitment. As disciples of Christ, we invite them to know Christ more deeply, but it is a knowledge unattainable for those who refuse to sally forth from the heartlands of neutrality. If we desire to pass on the fullness of revelation to a new generation of believers, then we must do more than biblical data transferral. There is more at stake than passing on religious facts and figures, dates and quotes. Catholic Education seeks to help children love not only the content of what is revealed to us, but to trust and believe in the One who has revealed it to us.

Many will protest that if knowledge is not cold, calculating and objective, it is biased, unreliable and of lesser value. In fact, it is the other way around. The deepest forms of knowledge are given only to those who will leave the safety of neutral objectivity behind and move into commitment and personal investment. Our fervent answer as the followers of Christ is rooted in depth, not deprivation.



The real deprivation is experienced by those who never leave the realm of cool objectivity, for they are forever denied the pleasure of a fuller knowledge. If we assigned a group of students the task of compiling an exhaustive, biographical account of their teacher's life, they would head out to libraries and the internet and painstakingly gather and tabulate every piece of data about the person in question. Having compiled all this data in several volumes, they would return and place the material before the teacher. After reading it through, the teacher would congratulate the students on their excellent work and concede that now they indeed know a fair bit about their teacher's life. Now the teacher's spouse enters the room and claims that there is still a knowledge about the teacher that has been missed. In the desire for complete thoroughness, the students would then insist on finding that knowledge as well. The spouse would not be reticent to help them come to this knowledge, yet in order to acquire it, they must now abandon the one thing to which they have clung with religious fervour: neutrality. They cannot know the teacher as the spouse does if they refuse to love her as her husband does. They need to be as committed to her as he is to find this knowledge of her, and that will require them to leave behind their neutral inquiry and love her with commitment. This knowledge cannot be had in any other way, for it is forbidden to the non-committed. It will shatter any hope we have of carefully nurtured impartiality.

If children want to know Jesus more deeply, then they too have to love Him, for the deepest knowledge of Jesus cannot be had in any other way. Jesus' question to us is "But who do you say that I am?" He wants to hear the answer of those who are no longer safely nestled in the non-committal. He wants to listen to the responses of those of us who have abandoned a pure objectivity in order to know the Lord through love. Jesus poses the question to us who got up, got out, got down and got dirty with Him. Once we have known Jesus in this way then we will claim that no one who does not know and love Christ as we do can live well.

In the end, it is not just a matter of answering the question posed to us by Jesus, but of the place our heart is when we venture to offer our answer. Is it not in fact our own yearning that Jesus will know us in a way that transcends mere factual information? Perhaps we never

understand this better than the day we meet a kindred spirit. In a world full of people interested in our accomplishments, résumés, track records and trophies, we have been blessed with a friend who is willing to enter deeper than data, who desires to know us so profoundly that he will even enter into the hours of our most harrowing sorrow and suffering. We deem every encounter with the friend as blessing, because we know it is an encounter with love. We know it as love, because Christ does not count the cost of entering into our messy lives, but would count it as loss not to know our life through intimate sharing and abiding commitment.

This is the way Catholic Education responds to the challenge to answer Jesus' question, "But who do you say that I am?" By breaking the word for the young, we help them make a commitment to love that will plunge them into loving discipleship and follow Christ into any situation. By cracking open the fulness of revelation to the children, we lead them to a love that is convinced that not to know Christ's life and love through the most intimate sharing and unwavering commitment is an unbearable loss. Our lifestyle as teachers, parents and clergy is not merely our own response, but the answer we seek to teach others, the experience to which we would lead them. Neutrality is not the issue. We do not even wish to give the impression of cool, clinical detachment. The transferral of religious data is not our objective. We are the men and women of faith who would share a passionate knowledge with the next generation. Therefore, we must never fake neutrality. We are not neutral, and we do not want to be neutral. We never pretend to be anything less than totally in love with the God of Revelation. Any attempt to feign neutrality in our speech of Christ would be an act of infidelity.



## – CHAPTER FIVE –



### **SPIRITUALITY AND WORSHIP: Spirit and Truth Meet Flesh and Reality**



Throughout the course of a child's Catholic Education, there will be a question raised with tireless frequency. Do you live what you believe? If faith is an experience of God, and theology articulates that faith in words, gestures and rituals, then spirituality is the moment in which the words become flesh.

In our spirituality and worship, spirit and truth must become flesh and reality. It is a hallmark of the way Jesus touches His love to our world. When Jesus comes among us in human flesh, God's love for us becomes concrete. The mysterious love of God manifests itself, showing itself in a fashion that is historical, tangible and visible. If we would love one another as Jesus loves us, then our love also needs a little flesh.

This is a demanding task for Catholic Education. It is easy to whisper sweet nothings to the love of your life, but after the sweetness ebbs you often end up with precisely nothing. We teach the young to show one another a fleshed love. If we ask them to fill their days with many words that speak of their love, then we also ask that they let their words become flesh. We guide them in spirituality to let love become concrete. Our teaching and witness prepares them to let love be manifested in the cards they write, the meals they prepare for one another, the flowers they send, the gifts they bestow, the caresses they offer and the tears they wipe away. If it is most certainly true that you can never say "I love you" often enough, it is equally true that you can never demonstrate it often enough. A pop singer once crooned, "Put a little love in your heart." Taking our cue from Jesus, Catholic Education teaches students to put a little flesh in their love.

## **Guiding the Restless Heart**

To gaze across a classroom full of children is to see all the hungers and thirsts that exist in human hearts. Catholic Education seeks to direct these yearnings into healthy Christian avenues. St. Augustine once wrote that it is yearning that gives depth to the heart. It is part of our humanity to experience a deep, inexhaustible yearning for the infinite. This yearning leads us to a deep-seated restlessness with ourselves and our lives. We hunger and thirst, ache and crave for something that surpasses and goes beyond the narrow confines of the small, petty limitations of our daily grind. In Catholic Education we attempt to guide a new generation to the source of four great hungers of the human heart that awaken in us the desire to spiritual living.

## **Touching Love to Loneliness**

The first birthplace of spiritual yearning is loneliness, perhaps the most common human experience of them all. What child does not know its pain? We feel disconnected from the reality around us, alienated from society, the people in it, and our role within it. It does not take much to isolate us, to set us apart from it all. All we need is a sudden loss of employment, a descent into illness or the breaking of a cherished relationship, and we are suddenly deeply alienated from the entire proceedings of the world that swirl around us untouched by our experience. It makes us feel rejected and discarded. One minute we are vitally involved in the life of the world, the next minute we are cast out as worthless. The more pragmatic the culture becomes, the more fearful we become of being banished into the loneliness of being useless.

Here, the yearning of the heart reasserts itself. We yearn for acceptance, companionship and the recognition of our dignity and value. We crave a deep, personal oneness with another, a friendship in the profoundest sense. In other words, **we yearn for a love to**

**reciprocate.** We hunger for intimacy, familiarity and closeness, for a personal touch rather than generic realities. In Christian spirituality, we meet this hunger by introducing the young to a deep love relationship with Jesus Christ, who loves us beyond our pragmatic usefulness, and reveals to us the beauty of being His brothers and sisters, as well as the Beloved of God. The shattering of loneliness comes with our sharing in Christ's mindset and purpose, our entering into His relationships to the Father and the Holy Spirit, and our sharing in His fate and destiny. In deep personal relationship to Christ, we find the fulfilment of our ache for warmth, well-being and gentleness.

For this reason we lead children to the sacraments of the Church, for within these privileged moments of grace they find the presence of Christ they so crave. We bring them into the heart of our liturgy and worship so that they can know and cherish the experience of this warm embrace of God in Christ. Our Eucharistic Celebrations help children to still their ache for a love they can return, for Christ offers his presence to them in the bread and wine, in the assembled believers, in the other sacraments, in the word and in the presider.

## ***Touching Forgiveness to Wounded Flesh***

The second cradle of spiritual yearning is our experience of incompleteness. It comes to us in our awareness of sin, which breaks or wounds our relationships with God, creation, our neighbours and ourselves. It comes to us in the recognition of our brokenness that leaves us miserably short of our potential. We know it in our woundedness that generates such pain, hurt and suffering. Our daily lives are pockmarked with anger, argument, disharmony and shattered relationships, even when we work and struggle to achieve the exact opposite.

All this causes a yearning to well up within us, a yearning for healing. We desire that our brokenness may be made whole, our pain may be soothed and our suffering overcome. We want unity. We want to get our act and our lives together. There is in such hours, a throbbing longing for the restoration of loves lost, relationships dis-

carded, and harmony abandoned. Simply put, **we yearn for reconciliation.**

In the way of Catholic Education we help the young to experience the antidote to that yearning, in the God who forgives, in the Church that celebrates reconciliation, in the Eucharist that makes us one, and in the work of justice that seeks to be faithful to the demands of all our relationships.

## ***Touching Wonder to Weariness***

The third place of emergence of our spiritual yearning is our common experience of the grinding ordinariness of life. Banality marks too many of the days of our calendar year. Life appears to be dull, trite and commonplace. There is no flavour to our living and no zest in our loving. Boredom with all that happens leaves us weary and uninterested in a life that appears to be one long re-run. Monotony withers our hearts, as the tiring sameness of home and work lacks a variety and variation that could fire the heart or the imagination. Complacency settles in, as nothing excites us or motivates us any longer. Mediocrity impels us to settle for the status quo, making us willing to settle for inferiority if it is easier to attain.

Strangely enough, in this midst of this seemingly passionless wasteland of the human spirit, we still yearn, and ferociously at that. We yearn for newness, fresh vigour and quality to fill our days. We yearn for excitement and joy. Bored to tears, we yearn for challenges that call forth special effort and profound dedication. Caught in the mundane, we long for a call to an experience that demands all the energy we can muster, all the excellence we can provide, and all surpassing goodness we can bring forth. **We yearn for new life.**

Here, too, Catholic Education offers the way of Christian spirituality. Come to Christ, and He will renew your life through new ways of relating, loving and reaching out. We proudly profess that our relationship to Jesus gives us a new life. He is our vigour and the freshness of our days. No two days are alike in His discipleship. His love arouses our passion and joy. Our special effort to be dedicated to Him challenges us out of monotony. The Holy Spirit invigorates us with gifts

of peace, patience, faithfulness and kindness, all straining to burst forth into vibrant service among God's holy people. As a people of resurrection faith, we live in the same world as all other men and women, just as immersed in the ordinary. Yet, the ordinary is not a prison of discontent for us, for in it we find the new life of Christ suffusing us with joy, and surpassing all the strictures of the mundane. In heartfelt, soul-deep relationship to Christ, you can find a new life that surpasses the old, a life of extraordinary goodness and adventure.

## ***Touching Community to Isolation***

Finally, there is a fourth moment in which spiritual yearning erupts, and it comes in the midst of a human reality to which we fervently cling, namely, our rugged individualism. For some people, individualism would hardly seem the place to experience the birth of yearning. It seems to them the very thing for which we yearn. We all want to be ruggedly independent, make our own choices, choose our own way and be our own man or woman. Yet, there is unspoken yearning that comes alive here, as we realize that a culture that admonishes everyone to go his or her own way, leaves no one to go together. We walk alone. In our world we are fiercely resentful of those who want to cramp our style, and yet we hunger powerfully for solidarity. We live under the motto that we do not need anyone else, until we come to the realization that the culture of rugged individualism does not allow us to have anyone else, approach anyone else, or appeal to anyone else. Here **we yearn for community**.

The spiritual life of Christians offers a solution once more, in the form of the Church. Every Catholic school is already a participation in the mystery of the Church. To live as a man or woman of the Church is a spiritual exercise requiring great discipline. Together, under the guidance of Christ, we forge a place where we learn from one another, rather than lambaste one another. We struggle to complement rather than contradict each other, to enter into dialogue rather than indulge in diatribe. In the spiritual exercise of being a Church, we work toward harmony, and reject harassment, we enjoy diversity without encouraging division, and we always seek to heal rather than hurt the other.

Such is the spiritual exercise demanded of every student in our schools.

These are the hungers of the human heart. To make them the hungers of the Christian heart, we must work to redirect them into the contours of Jesus Christ. Many yearn, but we must lead them to be all lost in wonder, not all worried about pragmatism. We must instil in a new generation the true heart of spirituality, which does not just seek quick answers, but asks greater questions. Christian spirituality is like a work of art. There is a joy in the masterpiece we can create. But there is also a joy all its own in the creating. Since Christ came to bring us joy, and joy in fullness, let there be a new heart in us all which does not merely want to know what the destination of the Kingdom looks like, but is mesmerized by every step of the journey which brings us to its gates.





## – CHAPTER SIX –



### **SOCIAL JUSTICE AND GOOD WORKS: The Real Consequences of a Real Faith**



The Jesuit Fred Kammer wrote a book entitled, *Doing Faithjustice*<sup>6</sup>. The faith he describes here is the faith that does justice. Catholic Education always includes a profound commitment to the work of justice as well, but it is always a justice that flows from the experience of faith.

While love of neighbour is non-negotiable and constitutive for the Gospel believer, it is not the first order of business, and certainly not the only order of business. Jesus starts the ranking of the commandments with “the first is”. And then He mentions our relationship to God. “The second is” goes on to mention the neighbour.

If we find it easy to neglect Christ, to keep the door firmly shut in the face of His insistent knocking, then how difficult will it be to ignore any and every other person? If we can find it within ourselves to ignore the demands of Christ, then wherein will the difficulty lie in ignoring the demands of all our other relationships? Vice versa, if we are opening wide the doors to Christ, paying attention to the quality of our living and loving in relationship to Him, then every other relationship we stand in will richly benefit.

After all, it is possible to work on our interpersonal relationships without worrying about Christ. This is the motto of secular education. “Be good to the ones you love”. You can worry about mothers and fathers, sisters and brothers, colleagues and friends without ever entering into the realm of Christ and His cosmic concern for the world and all its peoples.

<sup>6</sup> Fred Kammer SJ, *Doing Faithjustice: An Introduction to Catholic Social Thought* (New York, Mahwah, N.J. ; Paulist, 1991).

On the other hand, it is impossible to work on your relationship with Jesus Christ without immediately sharing His broad concern about all the other relationships we need to foster and nourish. Our motto is not “Be good to the ones you love”. It is “Be good to the ones God loves”. You can’t cuddle with the Christ and shut out the poor. You can’t draw near to Jesus and draw away from the sick and suffering, the elderly and the ill, and the most vulnerable of the world. Therefore, if we open wide the doors to Christ for a new generation of believers, we automatically open wide the doors to all those Christ loves and cherishes the most, namely, our neighbours.

Some people would argue that Catholic schools are basically only involved in ethical instruction, worrying about making children into good people and not about whether they are religious people. This is an impossibility for true Catholic educators, for our ethics and morals, our kindness and compassion all flow from our experience of Christ, and from no other source.

In Catholic Education we work very hard at teaching the love of neighbour as an inextricable consequence of love of God. We teach Catholicism’s youth to know profoundly what is meant and what it takes to open wide the doors of our heart to another. In corridors and classrooms, we teach them to do whatever is required to let other people enter into their lives. On blackboards and gym floors we teach them to reveal to other children and adults that they would be welcome in the hearts of our people. We show to them in eloquence of speech and eloquence of lifestyle how to give others every reason for wanting to stay in the hearts we open wide to them. If we want a person to enter into our heart’s domain, we open wide the doors through kindness, consideration and compassion, attentive care, and tender love.

On the other hand, if we are determined to keep the vacancy rate of the heart high, we shut the doors. Here, too, we know exactly what to do. Cruelty, neglect, bitterness and unloving attitude shut the doors of our heart, keep the stranger from knocking, and give the unwanted guest every reason to vacate the premises.

In Catholic Education we have sailed forth to teach this Gospel reality to a generation immersed in the culture of greed. It is a wondrous mystery to hear children called to love their neighbour, to move from greed to Gospel giving, from societal selfishness to selfless service. As the modern political discourse deteriorates into one long, uninterrupted and obsessive bout of selfishness and possessiveness, there is still a place where the young can hear the Gospel's message of sacrifice and love.

### ***Preventing the Lethal Narrowing of the Heart***

It is the goal of Catholic Education to use the social teaching of the Church to help young people bend power, reputation and wealth to serve a Gospel purpose. However, it is not always easy to do so. The Gospel warns us of the inherent danger of wealth and might that is not harnessed to serve Christian purpose and discipleship. Instead of aiding the heart to swell until it embraces the world, power and possession will dangerously narrow down that world until it is populated only by one. Thus, Catholic Education is ever vigilant against three dangerous constrictions of our Christian hearts.

Without indulging in a tirade against wealth and privilege, it nonetheless remains a fact that assets can be an affliction for Christian disciples. Without Christ to stand guard at the gate of our heart, they easily cause a *narrowing of vision*.

There are many things that compete for the rich man's eye in the Gospel, just as they compete for ours. The purple, fine linen that covers his body lures his eye away from the sores that cover Lazarus. Distracted by the finely tailored suits paraded before us on fashion's runways, our eyes are unlikely to wander to the rags of the street children. Enveloped with power and possessions, we tend to see them before we see the people who need them more urgently than we do. Unfettered prosperity develops in us a spiritual myopia that creeps up in subtle ways, until one day we see the stain on our imported Persian rug while ignoring the weeping child who soiled it. With so many things

to distract the eye, the eye does not wander to the less appealing. With unbridled power at our command, we are left with no natural places to reflect on the plight of the powerless.

Yet, this does not have to be so. Power and possessions need not blind us to the fate and destiny of the poor, but, on the other hand, they will never naturally sharpen our vision for them either. We help the young to see them for what they are, and not allow them to become the filter through which we see everything and everyone else. If we refuse to heed the warning of Jesus and tame power and possessions to our Christian purpose, they will surely bend us to their purpose, and that purpose does not see the poor. Our natural sight is diminished, our field of vision narrowed, because the material acquisitions and perks of power all compete for our attention. Thus, the solution is not to jettison what credit cards have purchased, but to make sure that Christ rather than the credit card determine what we will look at. We help children to work hard to keep the poor in sight.

The second constriction of the spiritual life that can occur when wealth and power are unchecked with compassion and Gospel fidelity is the *narrowing of concern*. We are all too familiar with the expression “Out of sight, out of mind”. Once we lose sight of the poor, it becomes self-evident that our concern for them shrivels. If money and privilege distract our eye, the mind will follow in hot pursuit.

Without the will to master them, power and possessions tend to generate in us a self-sustaining strategy. They have a haunting power to absorb all our concern and turn all of our care in on them. Our desire for wanting more of everything begins with high-minded and noble motives. We argue that if we had more power or wealth, we would have more to share. Our motto is, “The more we possess, the more we can bestow”. It would be wonderfully, magnificently true, but only if we do not allow the motto to become. “The more we possess, the more we are possessed”. Wealth and power have an uncanny ability to create high motive while we pursue them, but spiritual amnesia toward the poor when they are finally within our grasp.

Once we have wealth, we often lose our concern for Lazarus and his people. That is not because we have no concern at all, but

because we begin to transfer all of our concern to the wealth that fixates us. Once we generate affluence, our concern becomes how to keep it flowing. Once we have a Gold Card, we become concerned with raising the spending limit. Having paid off our mortgages we worry about expanding our homes, not widening our hearts to include the impoverished. The problem is not the loss of concern, but the narrowing of it. Suddenly all our concerns revolve around what we earn, how to keep it coming, keep it safe, keep it for ourselves, and keep it from the tax collector.

Again, a Catholic Education does not teach children a simple condemnation of money, power or possessions. It teaches them Christ's warning against the dangerous assumption that these things will naturally lead us to Christian giving, service and compassion. If we do not form in the children the constant will to make our money and power serve the purpose of Christ, then money and power will enslave us.

Thirdly, Catholic Education strives to combat the *narrowing of response*. We can hardly be stunned at this consequence. Having failed to notice the poor, and then having concern only for the preservation and multiplication of our wealth, it is easy enough to forget that there is a Lazarus waiting at our gate. If all our time, energy and concern are wrapped up in our own lives and creature comforts, then we will not be found wrapping blankets around the shivering homeless on our city streets, wrapping our arms around the children who sob in griefs that are too deep too soon, wrapping our love around the weary, and wrapping our minds around the problems of the puzzled and perturbed. Lazarus will still be waiting. And so will Christ.

Yet, for the children there is something still far worse than this inattentive self-absorption born of our abundance. The narrowing of response, the stifling of our fullest discipleship, restricts not just the frequency with which we answer the cry of the poor, but it reduces the scope of people whom we consider to be the poor. Obsessed with our property and power, we assume that these are the only things people want from us. When the dreaded day dawns when all we want is wealth, property and material goods, we make the unholy assumption that the poor at our gate are as obsessed with them as we are.

We spend years in our Catholic schools to teach children that Lazarus is sitting at our gate. He is the elderly parent who wants to communicate with the children who have faxes, cell phones, beepers, pagers and E-Mail, but no time to spare. Lazarus is the child who seeks reassurance from mother and father, but gets a raise in her allowance instead. Lazarus is in the people who would gladly let us keep our cash if only they could have a taste of our compassion, and who would like us to open wide our hearts, not just our wallets. There sit at our gates the poor who want us to give alms from the surplus of presence rather than alms from the surplus of profit. Lazarus still waits at our gate. We can fill his pockets, his stomach, his closet, and his hands only to leave his heart and soul empty. Our narrow needs and greeds are not necessarily obsessions that are shared by the poor. Thus, to our chagrin and astonishment, we can give the Lazarus we know a share of everything we have coveted, and still find him still waiting restlessly at our gates.

### ***To Seek Christ in the Unsuspected Places***

It is conventional wisdom that great things come from the great men and women of the era, and that you will find them in all the fashionable places. Children are taught that from the youngest days onward. Therefore, they are easily convinced that the halls they must walk should be places where money talks, and status symbols abound, where cashmere and caviar are commonplace, and money is said to be no obstacle, but is the only real topic of interest and conversation.

Wisdom, however, is reworked when the wise men discover the Christ they crave in a stable, born of bloodlines without any blue in them, and consorting with peasant types. Should we wish to find Jesus in our lives, we must teach the next generation to follow the star to poverty.

The Sacred Scripture often speaks of the poor as being of particular concern to God. He hears the cry of the poor, and raises them from the dust. Yet, in the Great Tradition, poverty is not just destined for alleviation, but for revelation. The true God-seeker sees

the countenance of Christ etched into the faces and figures of the poor. Matthew tells us that what we do and neglect to do for the least of the brothers and sisters, we have done or neglected to do for Jesus (cf. Mt 25, 31-46). The great corpus of Catholic social teaching instructs us to see in the poor not mere objects of pity, problems to be solved, or charity to be administered, but the hungry, parched and poor Christ. Our Canadian bishops tell us to “do justice” so that Christ might not be missed merely because he is cloaked in economic deprivation. Tolstoy, that giant among Christian story-tellers, repeats the lesson in his famous tale of *Martin the Cobbler*, where the shoemaker does good deeds for the poor and then recognizes that Christ is all of the poor he has met. Martin of Tours cuts his Roman cavalry cloak in two for a beggar on the roadside, and then marvels in his dream as his wool warms our Lord. Following a wisdom that stretches from John Chrysostom to Dom Helder Camara we must teach children to have the Christian wherewithal to seek the Christ in poverty.

There is a second certainty we shatter for children when we teach them justice. They are brought up with the cultural wisdom that states that security is everything. Once again, wisdom needs reworking, if the hunt is on for the Christ. Jesus is found, alright, but it is in jeopardy that they find Him. Here is one exposed to all the dangerous elements that can be mustered by the environment and by the human race. No secret service agents keep a nervous eye on the child. Barely born, he is already so hated by Herod, who would use his guests to hunt down the Messiah, disguising his intentions as homage when his heart is set on homicide.

Our own ceaseless quest for the Christ must take us to those in jeopardy, for He can be found there. The powerless are in jeopardy, for they suffer the consequences of the course of history set by the power brokers of the land. The simple soldiers are in jeopardy, as they are tossed before cannonades to the accolades of those who do not know their names. Children are in jeopardy, for they are seen and not heard, even when they are the first victims of every war and embargo, or when they swell the ranks of the street people. Adolescents are in jeopardy, when they are more familiar with police, pimps, and prostitutes than their parents. Women are in jeopardy when their blood runs cold before the beating, and whose blood runs down their

faces after the battering. The mission of Catholic Education is to ensure that the fate of all these men and women is known to the young, and that their desire to love them as Christ did is known to those whose existence is jeopardized.

Finally, our social teaching advises the young to seek Christ in obscurity. Here, too, conventional wisdom has not served them, or us, well. Messiahs are supposed to be found in the spotlight's glare, among their adoring public, and hobnobbing with the beautiful people. Wisdom needs reworking if it must lead us to the place where God can be found in Christ. Look in obscurity. So simple a directive, and so hard a chore. It does not even come naturally to biblical folk. Jerusalem is the city where the action is happening, but Bethlehem is the city of His coming. Hay does not constitute the normal bedding material for kings. Magdalena thinks it cannot be Christ, because He looks like the gardener. When the wedding libations run out, Cana's hosts turn to the mother, and not her boy, for advice. Even when authoritative words that cudgel conscience and soothe sin-ravaged hearts are spoken, they just don't cut it when they fall from the lips of a carpenter's son whose family you have known for years.

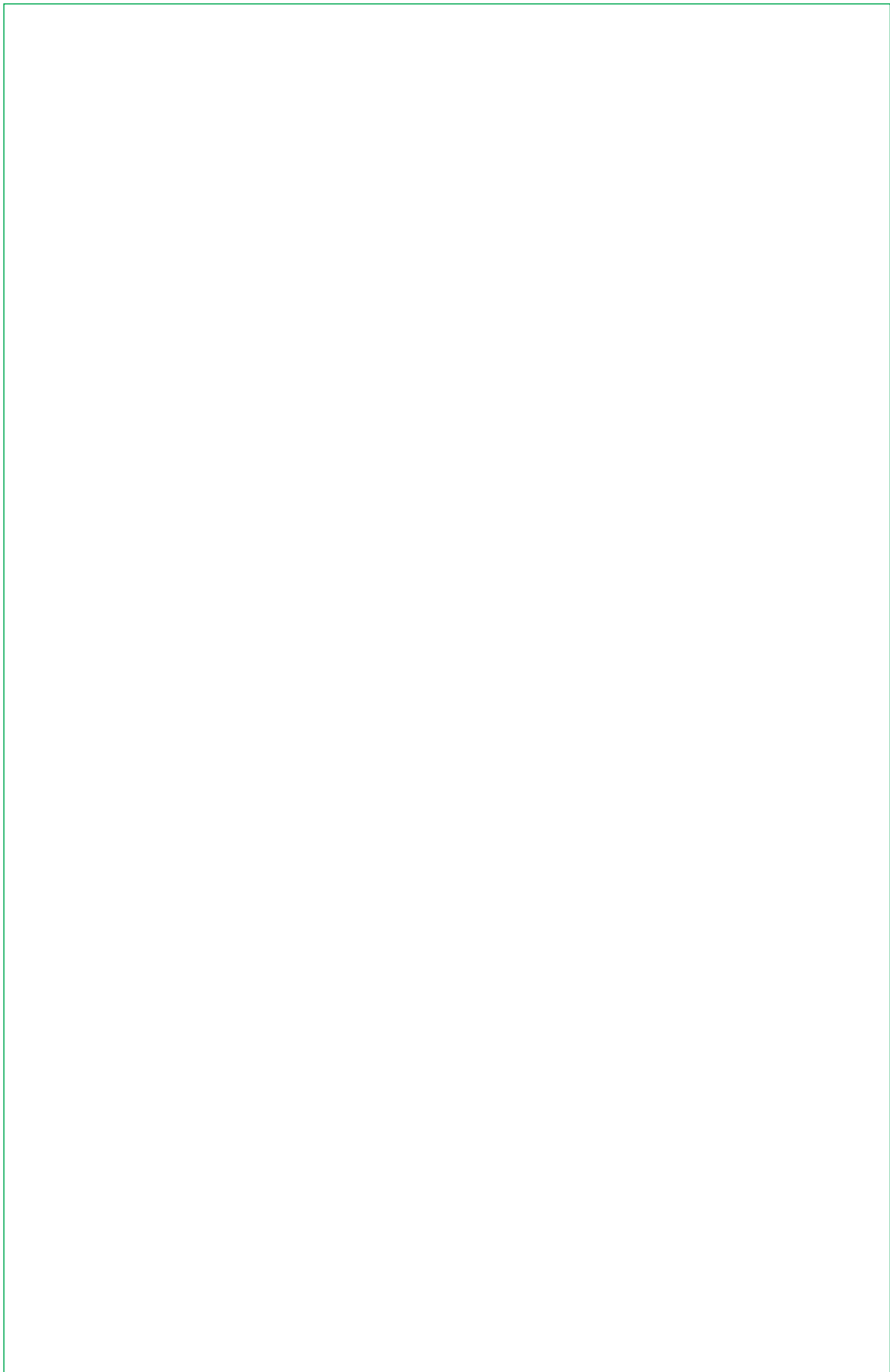
It also does not come naturally to us. That is why we must train and teach children to become faithful and just. The obscure is what it is precisely because we do not pay attention to it. Yet, obscurity is where we spend our days. The hordes of fans that come out to see mega stars perform are made up of people who themselves live in obscurity. The workers who grind out a living, the parents who rear children, the dying of the elders, and the crying of our bereaved, all occur in the obscurity of daily labour and toil. They are so customary, that no one notices. Yet, if we would find the Christ, the bland, uneventful and monotonous landscape of obscurity must merit our attention.

The just are still among us. Catholic Education relishes and seizes the opportunity to help our children befriend men and women of justice. Jean Vanier, given a chance to bask in vice-regal pomp and pageantry, instead seeks Christ in the obscurity of living among the most forgotten of God's revered people, the mentally challenged. Henri Nouwen scoured the tradition and composed great tomes of Christian



erudition, only to find his ambition and fame had obscured the Christ. When he joined forces with Vanier, it was in the obscurity of his new life and his new friends at the L'Arche community at Daybreak in which he found the Christ. Cardinal Leger left episcopal power to find Christ in Cameroon's lepers. Dorothy Day found Jesus in the drudgery of the labouring classes, Sr. Thea Bowman found Him in the anonymity of black skin in white society, and Helene Prejean found Him in a dead man walking. In Catholic Education we open up the hearts of our students to find Christ in thousands of places that society and culture will not go, but where Christ most assuredly can be found.





## – CHAPTER SEVEN –



### CHURCH AND CATHOLICITY: Forming a Heart Big Enough for Christ



Gathered together in Catholic Education, we ceaselessly seek the virtues that will allow us to “tell the next generation” (Ps. 48, 13-14) the Good News of Jesus Christ. In that process, we can never fail to ask the question of modernity, inquiring of the lineage born of faith whether or not we have updated our Gospel message to make it open to the modern world. Inculturation, a word that has often been narrowly applied to liturgy and ritual, asks us whether we are bringing the Gospel values to the culture, whether we have made the Gospel experience of the Catholic family relevant to the world that surrounds us.

There are four major areas in which Catholic Education is open and relevant to the world, both in the yesteryear of our history and in the present day situation.

#### ***Inclusivity***

The work of Catholic Education is always linked to inclusivity. Our Catholic Schools have practised inclusivity throughout their history. We have worked diligently to include the laity in the family of the Church. We include the destitute in the family of caring, the ignorant in the family of learning, the sick in the family of healing. We desire to teach all the children that pass through our doors that they are not forgotten, that they are not expunged from the communal memory of our people or purged from the communal register of our hearts.

In this instance, Catholic Education strives to hear the human

cry to belong. Today that cry has not fundamentally changed, save for the fact that it has grown louder and more anguished. The answer of Catholic schools is to shatter a world of exclusivity with an inclusive presence. It is an incredibly easy thing to state who does not belong: the AIDS sufferer, the single parent, the illiterate, the learning disabled, or even youth in general. The spirit and spirituality of Catholic Education does not merely acknowledge that the world includes these people and many more like them. It insists that they be included in our world of grace and presence.

## **Collaboration**

At the heart of the Gospel's vision of the Church stands an uncommon desire and ability to collaborate. Catholic Education itself is a fruitful expression of this desire to bring together the many talents and treasures of parents and priests, of the little ones and the learned ones, of the simple and the sophisticated. In the spirit of the Second Vatican Council, our commitment to Catholic Education always entails a willingness to collaborate with everyone for the sake of the Gospel.

Collaboration is our expression of love to the aching world around us. Our concrete way of collaboration is one way of writing in the flesh and blood of our teachers, parents, trustees and staff the message of *Gaudium et Spes* which proclaims the Church's willingness to collaborate with all men and women of good will to attain the legitimate aspirations which dwell in the hearts of all humans.

In a world of jealously guarded prerogatives and privileges, we aim to give a new answer in the form of genuine collaboration that goes beyond mercenary considerations. We want to teach the next generation how to practise collaboration in and with the Church, long before a vocations crisis forces our hand, long before pragmatic realities, numbers and statistics make anything less than collaboration impracticable. Our collaboration shatters the unhealthy spirit of competition that pervades the Church of our day. In a world where it seems that it is the most important thing to walk away a winner, Catholic Education insists that it is the most important thing to leave every table together and in love with one another.

Our own time is ripe for this understanding. We do not collaborate because all the other options are closed for the moment. The laity will not be sent packing when the vocations flow back into the houses of formation. The young laity we teach and form are not expendable gap-fillers. Instead, we see in all people the divine image engraved by the Spirit. If inclusivity answers the cry to belong, then collaboration answers the cry to be needed and respected. In a world where people want to be loved and appreciated for who they are and not just for what they can provide, accomplish and achieve, the charism of Catholic Education says “We refuse to use you. We refuse to strip-mine your soul for our own ends and then discard you when your pragmatic usefulness to us is over.” Collaboration is thus an evocative experience for all those who are crying out for a greater co-responsibility for the world and the church, and it is a provocative experience for those who abdicate any sense of co-responsibility for the brothers and sisters God has entrusted to their care.

## ***A non-polarizing love for the Church***

In Catholic Education we also strive to teach a remarkable non-polarizing love for the church in a time when polarization is rampant. Amidst all the groups claiming exclusive rights, we refuse to pick and choose from among them. We teach every generation to refuse to allow the bitter disappointment to dictate to them the answer of polarization. In the wilderness experience, people think that they are left with no choice but bitterness. Our commitment to our children includes the teaching of what Christ knew when He was driven into the desert; disappointment is an emotion; bitterness is a choice.

The application is obvious to our own day. In the mid-seventies Karl Rahner wrote in his book *The Shape of the Church to Come*, that the church was a community of group-formation and polarization. In the midst of tremendous angers, we are called to be a people who do not simply join the simmering masses, but who would restore

communion where polarization is king. We too will experience a great deal of the disappointment and even the anger that pulsates in the Church. There are a great many issues of enduring pain to be confronted. What we must avoid in the spirit of genuine Catholic Education is that we become one more lobby group in a church already overly saturated with them. In the face of the cry for women's rights in the Church and the world, greater ecumenical openness, continued liturgical reform, wider theological plurality and the call for authority to become softer or more rigid, the task of Catholic Education is not to pick and chose our way through this minefield, to throw in our lot with any one of these groups. It is to bring them together, to seek the good in all of them, to be critical of all of them and to love all of them into communion.

## ***The Fundamental Option for the Lost***

There is a great deal of talk today about the fundamental option for the poor. In fact, what is needed is a fundamental option for the lost.

A Catholic school does not just deal with the materially poor. It also deals with the intellectually poor who need our schools to find an education that can break the cycle of despair. We care for the spiritually poor, who need to hear the Word of God broken for them so that they might return from the wasteland to the spiritual homeland of the human heart, Christ Jesus. In the materially poor, the spiritually poor and the intellectually poor Catholic Education sees one common characteristic: here are the people who are lost to God and need to be called home.

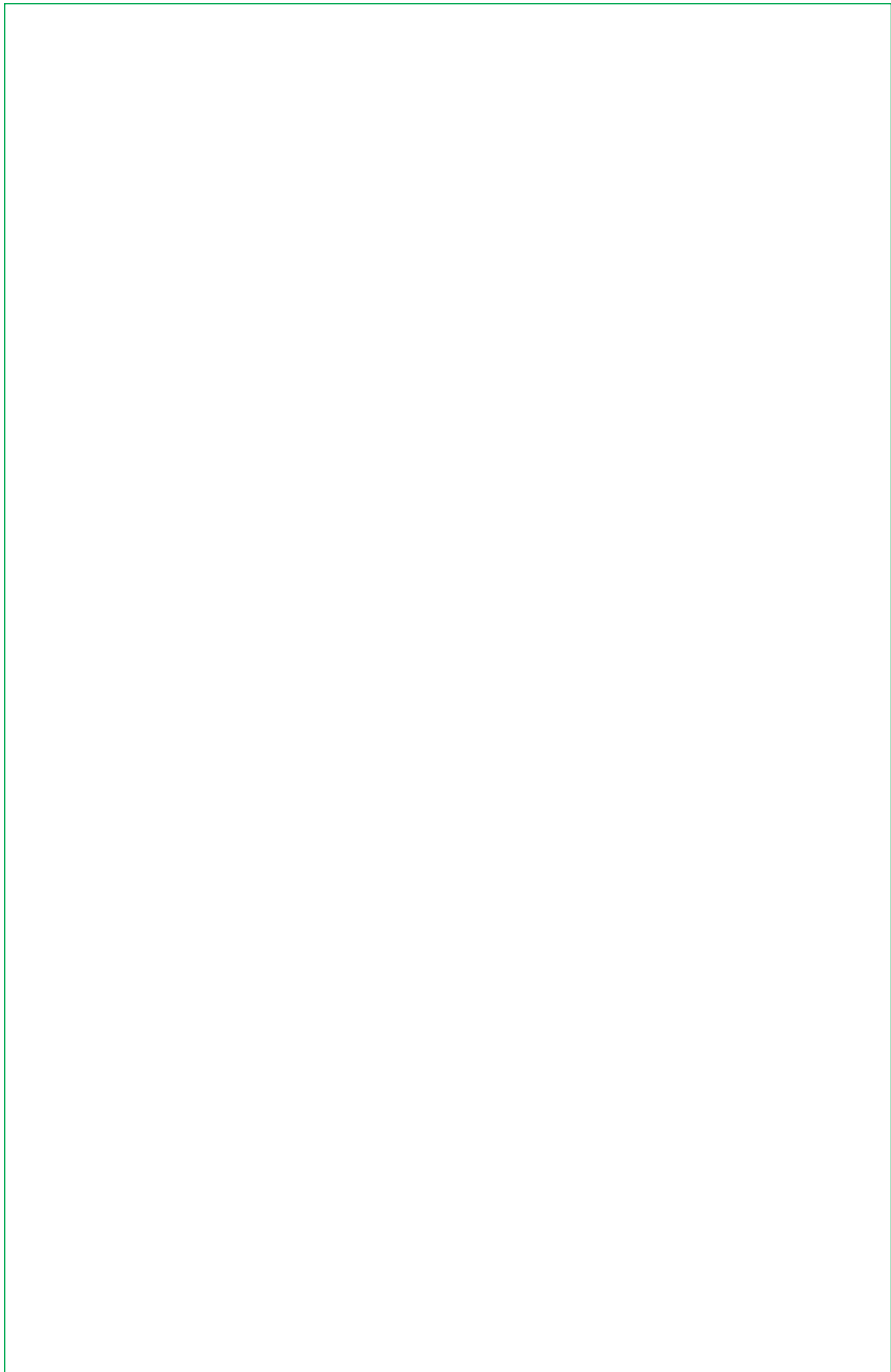
Catholic Education is profoundly committed to the new evangelization of the next generation. It is our desire to spread faith and rekindle love, as those who have no faith and know no love are indeed the lost.

All around us we can hear the cry of the lost. In our Catholic schools, just like the shepherd of the Gospel, we go looking for them, even if it means leaving the ninety-nine behind. Our fidelity demands we

follow suit. We need to seek out the lost in evangelization, not merely secure the ranks of the already faithful. We need to search every highway and byway, and not merely circle the wagons in an attempt to shore up what is left and cut our loses.

As Catholic Educators we have a fundamental option for the lost. This is a relevant and modern response to the world, for it understands one of modernity's greatest problems. We often assume that the worst of all possible scenarios is to be lost. We know, in fact, that this is not true. The worst of all possible scenarios is to be lost, and to realize that no one is coming to look for you. The aim of our Catholic schools in being together to evangelize must always be to ensure that no matter how lost our youth may have become, as long as we have breath to draw, we will never stop looking for them.







## CONCLUSION



Now that we have come to the end of our reflections, we need to make use of a final opportunity to hear an encouraging word. In the mystery of Christmas there is a deep revelation of what all of Catholic Education aims to be and to do. In the end, we must pause to be reminded of the blessing that the birth of Christ means for Catholic Education.

### (I)

First, we are reminded how we all come to God. We come like every other person who is present in Bethlehem, namely, weak and unprepared. It is one of the striking characteristics of the nativity scene. You can scour it all you like, but you will never find a fully prepared person in it, no matter how hard you try. There are no Pharisees, Sadducees or other religious experts at the scene. You have Mary, who was surprised by the angel's greeting. You have Joseph who had contemplated quietly dismissing her to save them both the shame of a child out of wedlock. There are shepherds flocking toward Bethlehem, who are part of the great masses of the religiously unwashed. The magi show up, and these foreign non-believers are not even supposed to know about the coming of the Messiah, let alone appear at his birthplace.



Like every figure of the first Christmas night, every one of us gathered together in the ministry of Catholic Education comes to God in the same way. We come weak. We want to be more ready for God, more prayerful, more religious, or more virtuous, but it is not nearly as good as what we hope for. We are resolved to come to schools, parishes and homes with greater love, peace and harmony in our hearts, but are still

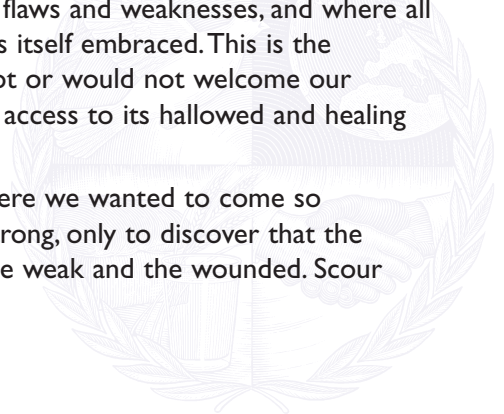
scarred by many angers and divisions that burden us badly. There are wounds between the beloved of our lives and us. Some of us wish we were more healed, and others wish we had healed more often. There are men and women here who are determined that their hearts will ache less from their losses, and that their eyes will be less swollen from weeping. In all likelihood, all men and women engaged in Catholic Education have arrived in its vineyards with more worry and weariness than they wanted to bring. We have come like the original cast of characters. We have come weak. And this is a source of sadness to us.

## (II)

Yet, this source of sadness is in actual fact the birthplace of our greatest gladness. It is undeniably true that Christmas reminds us that we all come before the Lord as the weak and the wounded. What is easily forgotten in the course of our daily toil is the second blessed reminder Christmas offers us, namely, what the weak and wounded find when they enter into God's presence. We discover the perfection of God's love.

However, the surprise of Bethlehem is not that God's love is perfect. The surprise is in discovering wherein the perfection of God's love for us lies. When we speak of God's perfect love, we speak of a love that has no blemish, no flaw, and no weakness and is tarnished in no way. God's love is described in the grandest and most beautiful language that human tongues can muster. It is resplendent, majestic, infinite, incomprehensible, and inexhaustible. Yet, in Bethlehem of Judea, every person gathered in the stable was stunned to discover that God's love is perfect because it welcomes the one thing it does not possess by its own nature, namely, weakness. Bethlehem is the place where we are welcomed with our blemishes, flaws and weaknesses, and where all that is tarnished within us still finds itself embraced. This is the perfection of love, for if it could not or would not welcome our weakness, we could never find any access to its hallowed and healing presence.

Bethlehem is the place where we wanted to come so desperately as the clean and the strong, only to discover that the invitation has been made out to the weak and the wounded. Scour



again the manger scene, and you will note that the clean and the strong are nowhere to be seen.

What makes Catholic Education holy and divine is the living memory that God welcomes our weakness. The baby of Bethlehem, who is the all-powerful and ever-living Lord of all creation and history, is himself weak and helpless. Jesus is utterly vulnerable to the whims of nature and human frailty. He has come to meet us in the place we are most likely to be found. He meets us in our weakness. And in doing this for us, the smile of the infant Christ is the way in which God whispers to us every year on the winds of the most fabled winter night, "I understand, and still you are most warmly welcome!" It is a whisper echoed in every corridor of our schools.

### (III)

It is thus that we come to a third and defining moment of Christmas. For in that silent night, that holy night, in which our weakness is welcomed, we are reminded of the third blessing that flows from Christ's birth. Christmas gives us a commandment. We must create places where God can be encountered as the one who welcomes our weakness. Therefore, go forth and build Bethlehem everywhere. Again, it is a commandment taken up by Catholic Education.

In every place where men and women have grown despondent because they believe their weakness precludes them from love, community, mercy and home, we need to build Bethlehem. Beleaguered parents must do this for their children. For when their children don't make them proud, parents can still make them welcome. That is how Bethlehem is built.

To those who have forged marriages and friendships now under duress, we cry out, "Build Bethlehem again". For where spouses and friends have betrayed us, wounded us, dismayed and disappointed us, and we sit down to coffee with them, reconcile our differences, forgive each other our transgressions, and join hands in friendship and love, Bethlehem is built.



To those who have the sick and suffering with them, we teach them a way to hold their hands and help them to know that they are welcome to our time, our love and our concern. Where tears hold sway, we wipe them from the reddened cheeks of those whose hearts have turned to water in the throes of deep grief. That is how Bethlehem will be built.

If their religious life has been less vigorous than it should be, we call them back to a people, a God and a Church that will welcome their weakness. We would delight in building a bigger Bethlehem with them.

In Catholic Education it is our ageless desire in Christ to let no person be held at bay from the love of God because they fear their weakness will find no welcome. It is also our greatest care that none are separated from the love of Christ, because we failed to build a Bethlehem that could welcome their weakness. In this sense, every school we have ever built must become Bethlehem.

