



The Holy See

**ADDRESS OF POPE JOHN PAUL II
TO A GROUP OF BISHOPS FROM THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA
ON THEIR «AD LIMINA APOSTOLORUM» VISIT**

Friday, 28 October 1983

Dear Brothers in our Lord Jesus Christ,

1. Once again I am very happy to share an intense experience of ecclesial communion with another group of American Bishops. You come from different regions of the United States and the pastoral situations of your individual local Churches vary greatly. And yet I am sure that in all your Dioceses there is a deep common interest in the topic that I would like to touch on today: *Catholic education*.

The very notion of Catholic education is closely related to the essential mission of the Church, to *communicate* Christ. It is linked to our own episcopal mandate to *teach* - to teach everything that Jesus commanded to be taught (Cfr. *Matth.* 28, 20). And as teachers, we are called to bear witness by word and example to the Christ whom the Church is endeavoring to communicate. Simply put, the aim of Catholic education is to help people “to arrive at the fullness of Christian life” (*Codex Iuris Canonici*, [can. 794, § 1](#)). It is identified with the great ideal of Saint Paul who is not satisfied “until Christ is formed” (*Gal.* 4, 19) in the Galatians; he yearns to see this process completed.

2. The Second Vatican Council presented the aim of all Christian education *in various aspects*, which include “ensuring that the baptized . . . may grow ever more conscious of the gift of faith which they have received; that they may learn to adore God the Father in spirit and in truth (Cfr. *Io.* 4, 23), especially through liturgical worship; and that they may be prepared to lead their personal lives according to a new nature, in justice and holiness of truth (Cfr. *Eph.* 4, 22-24); so that they may reach perfect maturity . . . and make their contribution to the increase of the Mystical Body” (*Gravissimum Educationis*, 2).

These are elements with far-reaching implications; they take into account the fact that *Catholic education is indeed concerned with the whole person*, with his or her eternal destiny and with the common good of society, which the Church herself strives to promote. In practice this requires that the physical, moral and intellectual talents of children and young people should be cared for, so that they may attain a sense of responsibility and the right use of freedom and take an active part in the life of society (Cfr. *Codex Iuris Canonici*, [can. 795](#)).

3. All of these elements have been promoted by Catholic education in your country. Indeed, Catholic education constitutes *a privileged chapter in the history of the Church in America*. Catholic education has been a very effective dimension of evangelization, bringing the Gospel to bear on all facets of life. It has involved different individuals and groups in the education process, and it has succeeded in making generations of people feel part of the ecclesial and social community. Despite limitations and imperfections, Catholic education in America can, under God's grace, be credited to a high degree with forming the splendid Catholic laity of America. Catholic education has itself the foundation for understanding and accepting the teaching of the Second Vatican Council which was a consistent explication and development of principles that the Church has held and taught throughout the centuries. The blessings of the Council were effectively brought to bear on the lives of many because years of generous Catholic education had prepared the way.

Catholic education in your land has also fostered numerous vocations over the years. You yourselves owe a great debt of gratitude to that Catholic education which enabled you to understand and to accept the call of the Lord. Among other contributions of Catholic education is the quality of citizen that you were able to produce: upright men and women that contributed to the well-being of America, and through Christian charity worked to serve all their brothers and sisters. Catholic education has furnished *an excellent witness to the Church's perennial commitment to culture* of every kind. It has exercised a prophetic role - perhaps modestly in individual cases, but overall most effectively - to assist faith to permeate culture. The achievements of Catholic education in America merit our great respect and admiration.

4. There is still, however, a debt of gratitude to be paid, before the witness of history, *to the parents* who have supported a whole system of Catholic education; *to the parishes* that have coordinated and sustained these efforts; *to the Dioceses* that have promoted programs of education and supplemented means of support, especially in poor areas; *to the teachers* - who always included a certain number of generous lay men and women - who through dedication and sacrifice championed the cause of helping young people to reach maturity in Christ. But, above all, gratitude is due *to the religious* for their contribution to Catholic education. In writing last Easter to the Bishops of the United States about Religious life, I stated: "Religious were among your pioneers. They blazed a trail in Catholic education at all levels, helping to create a magnificent educational system from elementary school to university" (IOANNIS PAULI PP. II, *Epistula ad sacros Praesules Foederatarum Civitatum Americae Septentrionalis missa*, 2, die 3 apr. 1983:

Insegnamenti di Giovanni Paolo II, VI/1 [1983] 892).

To women religious is due a very special debt of gratitude for their particular contribution to the field of education. Their authentic educational apostolate was, and is, worthy of the greatest praise. It is an apostolate that requires much self-sacrifice; it is thoroughly human as an expression of religious service: an apostolate that follows closely human and spiritual growth, and accompanies children and young people patiently and lovingly through the problems of youth and the insecurity of adolescence toward Christian maturity. How many married couples of your generation could - and did - point to women religious who influenced their lives and helped them to reach that stage of personal development in which their vocation to married love and parenthood could be realized? And how many priests, brothers and sisters found edification in the witness of sacrificial love exemplified in religious life, and the encouragement necessary for them to embark on the preparation for their own vocation?

5. Major factors in the Catholic education about which we have been speaking include: *the Catholic teacher, Catholic doctrine and the Catholic school.*

While the entire mission of Catholic education is essentially linked to the Church's life of faith and as such forms part of the Bishop's ministry, *the first educators* of individual children are *the parents*. In the new Code of Canon Law the whole treatment of education begins with the word "parents". In the eyes of the Church, and before God, their obligations and rights are unique, as are the sustaining graces they receive in the Sacrament of Marriage. It is this sacrament that "gives to the educational role the dignity and vocation of being really and truly a 'ministry' of the Church" (IOANNIS PAULI PP. II *Familiaris Consortio*, 38). But *all Catholic teachers are invested with great dignity* and are called to be "outstanding in true doctrine and uprightness of life" (*Codex Iuris Canonici*, can. 803, § 2). The whole structural system of Catholic education will have value to the extent that the formation and education given by the teachers conform to the principles of Catholic doctrine.

In religious education there is *a new urgency to explain Catholic doctrine*. Many young people of today look to Catholic educators, rightly saying: "You do not have to convince us; just explain well". And we know that, in whatever forum God's word is communicated, it has power to illuminate minds and to touch hearts: "Indeed, God's word is living and effective, sharper than any two-edged sword" (*Hebr. 4, 12*).

6. In the history of your country an extremely effective instrument of Catholic education has been *the Catholic school*. It has contributed immensely to the spreading of God's word and has enabled the faithful "to relate human affairs and activities with religious values in a single living synthesis" (IOANNIS PAULI PP. II *Sapientia Christiana*, 1). In the community formed by the Catholic school, the power of the Gospel has been brought to bear on thought patterns, standards of judgment and norms of behaviour. As an institution the Catholic school has to be judged extremely favourably if

we apply the sound criterion: “You will know them by their deeds” (*Matth. 7, 16*), and again, “You can tell a tree by its fruit” (*Ibid. 7, 20*). It is easy therefore in the cultural environment of the United States to explain the wise exhortation contained in the new Code: “The faithful are to promote Catholic schools, doing everything possible to help in establishing and maintaining them” (*Codex Iuris Canonici, can. 800, § 2*).

Your Catholic school system has long enjoyed *the esteem of the Holy See*. Pius XII at the very beginning of his pontificate wrote to the American Bishops of that time, saying: “It is with good reason then that visitors from other lands admire the organization and system under which your schools of various levels are conducted” (PII XII *Sertum Laetitiae*, 8, die 1 nov. 1939). Years later, Paul VI, in canonizing Mother Seton, felt the need to praise the providence of God who raised up this woman to inaugurate in your country the work of the Catholic school (cf. PAULI VI, *Allocutio Em. mis Patribus atque Praesulibus Americae Septentrionalis Foederatarum Civitatum, qui sollemni Canonizationi interfuerunt Beatae Elisabeth Annae Bayley vid. Seton, die 15 sept. 1975: Insegnamenti di Paolo VI, XIII [1975] 933-934*). And two years later, in canonizing John Neumann, Paul VI spoke of the “relentless energy” with which he promoted the Catholic school system in the United States (PAULI VI, *Homilia die Canonizationis Beati Ioannis Nepomuceni Neumann habita in Petriano foro, die 9 iun. 1977: Insegnamenti di Paolo VI, XV [1977] 614*).

At every level of Catholic education the importance of the Catholic teacher and of Catholic doctrine is felt. At every level, up to and including the university level, there is the need for an *institutional commitment* of the Catholic school to the word of God as proclaimed by the Catholic Church. And this institutional commitment is an expression of the Catholic identity of each Catholic school.

7. *The pastoral leadership of the Bishop is pivotal* in lending support and guidance to the whole cause of Catholic education. It is up to the Bishop, together with his priests, to encourage all Catholic educators to be inspired by the great ideal of communicating Christ. Only the Bishop can set the tone, ensure the priority and effectively present the importance of the cause to the Catholic people.

At the same time, the Bishop’s zeal finds an endless challenge in providing *pastoral care for students*, realizing the special spiritual needs of students engaged in higher studies, inside and outside Catholic institutions, whose progress is very closely linked to the future of society and of the Church herself (Cfr. *Gravissimum Educationis*, 10).

8. A particular dimension of Catholic education, which is at the same time a stage of evangelization, is *the question of catechesis* as it relates to Catholic institutions, as it is performed outside of Catholic schools, and as it is exercised directly by parents. From every viewpoint, catechesis involves “educating the true disciple of Christ by means of a deeper and more systematic knowledge of the person and message of our Lord Jesus Christ” (IOANNIS PAULI PP. II *Catechesi Tradendae*, 19). Especially under this catechetical aspect of imparting Catholic

doctrine in an organic and systematic way, the Catholic school remains a truly relevant instrument at the service of faith, assisting the young to enter into the mystery of Christ. For this reason and for the other reasons already given, I renew *that prophetic appeal of Paul VI* to the American Bishops: “Brethren, we know the difficulties involved in preserving Catholic schools, and the uncertainties of the future. And yet we rely on the help of God and on your own zealous collaboration and untiring efforts, so that the Catholic schools can continue, despite grave obstacles, to fulfill their providential role at the service of genuine Catholic education, and at the service of your country” (PAULI VI, *Allocutio Em. mis Patribus atque Praesulibus Americae Septentrionalis Foederatarum Civitatum, qui sollemni Canonizationi interfuerunt Beatae Elisabeth Annae Bayley vid. Seton, die 15 sept. 1975: Insegnamenti di Paolo VI, XIII [1975] 934*).

9. In all of these things our own ministry at the service of the word depends on *the outpouring of the Holy Spirit*. It is he, venerable and dear Brothers, whom we invoke today, asking him to assist you in your pastoral initiatives and to bring to fruition the efforts of so many dedicated priests, deacons, religious and lay people in the local Churches that you represent. He alone can actually enable us to communicate Christ; indeed, “no one can say: ‘Jesus is Lord’, except in the Holy Spirit” (1 Cor. 12, 3). Only through his action can Christian maturity be ensured and, hence, the aim of all Catholic education attained. As we proclaim the sovereignty of the sanctifying action of the Holy Spirit, let us ask him to submit our ministry totally to his will. And let us ask this grace of docility through the intercession of Mary, beneath whose heart the Word of God became man and was first communicated to the world.

Veni, Sancte Spiritus!

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