



The Holy See

**ADDRESS OF THE HOLY FATHER
POPE JOHN PAUL II
TO THE BISHOPS OF THE ECCLESIASTICAL REGIONS
OF CHICAGO, INDIANAPOLIS AND MILWAUKEE (U.S.A.)
ON THEIR "AD LIMINA" VISIT**

30 May 1998

Dear Cardinal George,

Dear Brother Bishops,

1. In the course of this series of *ad Limina* visits, the Bishops of the United States have again borne witness to the keen sense of communion of American Catholics with the Successor of Peter. From the beginning of my Pontificate I have experienced this closeness, and the spiritual and material support of so many of your people. In welcoming you, the Bishops of the ecclesiastical regions of Chicago, Indianapolis and Milwaukee, I express once more to you and to the whole Church in your country my heartfelt gratitude: "God is my witness, whom I serve with my spirit in the Gospel of his Son, that without ceasing I mention you always in my prayers" (Rom 1:9). Continuing the reflection begun with previous groups of Bishops on the renewal of ecclesial life in the light of the Second Vatican Council and in view of the challenge of evangelization which we face on the eve of the next millennium, today I wish to address some aspects of your responsibility for Catholic education.

2. From the earliest days of the American Republic, when Archbishop John Carroll encouraged the teaching vocation of Saint Elizabeth Ann Seton and founded the new nation's first Catholic college, the Church in the United States has been deeply involved in education at every level. For more than two hundred years, Catholic elementary schools, high schools, colleges and universities have been instrumental in educating successive generations of Catholics, and in teaching the truths of the faith, promoting respect for the human person, and developing the moral character of their students. Their academic excellence and success in preparing young people for

life have served the whole of American society.

As we approach the third Christian millennium, the Second Vatican Council's call for generous dedication to the whole enterprise of Catholic education remains to be more fully implemented (cf. *Gravissimum Educationis*, 1). Few areas of Catholic life in the United States need the leadership of the Bishops for their re-affirmation and renewal as much as this one does. Any such renewal requires a clear vision of the Church's educational mission, which in turn cannot be separated from the Lord's mandate to preach the Gospel to all nations. Like other educational institutions, Catholic schools transmit knowledge and promote the human development of their students. However, as the Council emphasized, the Catholic school does something else: "It aims to create for the school community an atmosphere enlivened by the Gospel spirit of freedom and charity. It aims to help the young person in such a way that the development of his or her own personality will be matched by the growth of that new creation which he or she has become by baptism. It strives to relate all human culture eventually to the news of salvation, so that the light of faith will illumine the knowledge which students gradually gain of the world, of life, and of the human family" (*ibid.*, 8). The mission of the Catholic school is the integral formation of students, so that they may be true to their condition as Christ's disciples and as such work effectively for the evangelization of culture and for the common good of society.

3. Catholic education aims not only to communicate facts but also to transmit a coherent, comprehensive vision of life, in the conviction that the truths contained in that vision liberate students in the most profound meaning of human freedom. In its recent document *The Catholic School on the Threshold of the Third Millennium*, the Congregation for Catholic Education drew attention to the importance of communicating knowledge in the context of the Christian vision of the world, of life, of culture and of history: "In the Catholic school there is no separation between time for learning and time for formation, between acquiring notions and growing in wisdom. The various school subjects do not present only knowledge to be attained but also values to be acquired and truths to be discovered" (No. 14).

The greatest challenge to Catholic education in the United States today, and the greatest contribution that authentically Catholic education can make to American culture, is to restore to that culture the conviction that human beings can grasp the truth of things, and in grasping that truth can know their duties to God, to themselves and their neighbors. In meeting that challenge, the Catholic educator will hear an echo of Christ's words: "If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free" (Jn 8:32). The contemporary world urgently needs the service of educational institutions which uphold and teach that truth is "that fundamental value without which freedom, justice and human dignity are extinguished" (*Veritatis Splendor*, No. 4).

To educate in the truth, and for genuine freedom and evangelical love, is at the very heart of the Church's mission. In a cultural climate in which moral norms are often thought to be matters of

personal preference, Catholic schools have a crucial role to play in leading the younger generation to realize that freedom consists above all in being able to respond to the demands of the truth (cf. *Veritatis Splendor*, No. 84). The respect which Catholic elementary and secondary schools enjoy suggests that their commitment to transmitting moral wisdom is meeting a widely-felt cultural need in your country. The example of Bishops and pastors who, with the support of Catholic parents, have persevered in leadership in this field should encourage everyone's efforts to foster new dedication and new growth. The fact that some Dioceses are involved in a program of school building is a significant sign of vitality and a great hope for the future.

4. Almost twenty-five years have passed since your Conference issued *To Teach as Jesus Did*, a document which is still very relevant today. It emphasized the importance of another aspect of Catholic education: "More than any other program of education sponsored by the Church, the Catholic school has the opportunity and obligation to be . . . oriented to Christian service because it helps students acquire skills, virtues and habits of heart and mind required for effective service to others" (No. 106). On the basis of what they see and hear, students should become ever more aware of the dignity of every human person and gradually absorb the key elements of the Church's social doctrine and her concern for the poor. Catholic institutions should continue their tradition of commitment to the education of the poor in spite of the financial burdens involved. In some cases it may be necessary to find ways to share the burden more evenly, so that parishes with schools are not left to shoulder it alone.

A Catholic school is a place where students live a shared experience of faith in God and where they learn the riches of Catholic culture. Taking proper account of the stages of human development, the freedom of individuals, and the rights of parents in the education of their children, Catholic schools must help students to deepen their personal relationship with God and to discover that all things human have their deepest meaning in the person and teaching of Jesus Christ. Prayer and the liturgy, especially the Sacraments of the Eucharist and Penance, should mark the rhythm of a Catholic school's life. Transmitting knowledge about the faith, though essential, is not sufficient. If students in Catholic schools are to gain a genuine experience of the Church, the example of teachers and others responsible for their formation is crucial: the witness of adults in the school community is a vital part of the school's identity.

Numberless religious and lay teachers and other personnel in Catholic schools down the years have shown how their professional competence and commitment are grounded in the spiritual, intellectual and moral values of the Catholic tradition. The Catholic community in the United States and the whole country have been immeasurably blessed through the work of so many dedicated religious in schools in every part of your country. I also know how much you value the dedication of the many lay men and women who, sometimes at great financial sacrifice, are involved in Catholic education because they believe in the mission of Catholic schools. If in some cases there has been an eroding of confidence in the teaching vocation, you must do all you can to restore that trust.

5. Catechesis, either in schools or in parish-based programs, plays a fundamental role in transmitting the faith. The Bishop should encourage catechists to see their work as a vocation: as a privileged sharing in the mission of handing on the faith and accounting for the hope that is in us (cf. 1 Pt 3:15). The Gospel message is the definitive response to the deepest longings of the human heart. Young Catholics have a right to hear the full content of that message in order to come to know Christ, the One who has overcome death and opened the way to salvation. Efforts to renew catechesis must be based on the premise that Christ's teaching, as transmitted in the Church and as authentically interpreted by the Magisterium, has to be presented in all its richness, and the methodologies used have to respond to the nature of the faith as truth received (cf. 1 Cor 15:1). The work you have begun through your Conference to evaluate catechetical texts by the standard of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* will help to ensure the unity and completeness of the faith as it is presented in your Dioceses.

6. The Church's tradition of involvement in universities, which goes back almost a thousand years, quickly took root in the United States. Today Catholic colleges and universities can make an important contribution to the renewal of American higher education. To belong to a university community, as was my privilege during my days as a professor, is to stand at the crossroads of the cultures that have formed the modern world. It is to be a trustee of the wisdom of centuries and a promoter of the creativity that will transmit that wisdom to future generations. At a time when knowledge is often thought to be fragmentary and never absolute, Catholic universities should be expected to uphold the objectivity and coherence of knowledge. Now that the centuries-old conflict between science and faith is fading, Catholic universities should be in the forefront of a new and long-overdue dialogue between the empirical sciences and the truths of faith.

If Catholic universities are to become leaders in the renewal of higher education, they must first have a strong sense of their own Catholic identity. This identity is not established once and for all by an institution's origins, but comes from its living within the Church today and always, speaking from the heart of the Church (*ex corde Ecclesiae*) to the contemporary world. The Catholic identity of a university should be evident in its curriculum, in its faculty, in student activities, and in the quality of its community life. This is no infringement upon the university's nature as a true center of learning, where the truth of the created order is fully respected, but also ultimately illuminated by the light of the new creation in Christ.

The Catholic identity of a university necessarily includes the university's relationship to the local Church and its Bishop. It is sometimes said that a university that acknowledges a responsibility to any community or authority outside the relevant academic professional associations has lost both its independence and its integrity. But this is to detach freedom from its object, which is truth. Catholic universities understand that there is no contradiction between the free and vigorous pursuit of the truth and a "recognition of and an adherence to the teaching authority of the Church in matters of faith and morals" (*Ex Corde Ecclesiae*, No. 27).

7. In safeguarding the Catholic identity of Catholic institutions of higher education, Bishops have a special responsibility in relation to the work of theologians. If, as the whole Catholic tradition testifies, theology is to be done in and for the Church, then the question of theology's relationship to the teaching authority of the Church is not extrinsic — something imposed from outside — but rather intrinsic to theology as an ecclesial science. Theology itself is accountable to those to whom Christ has given responsibility for overseeing the ecclesial community and its stability in the truth. As the discussion on these questions deepens in your country, it must be the Bishops' aim to see that the terms used are genuinely ecclesial in character.

In addition, Bishops should take a personal interest in the work of university chaplaincies, not only in Catholic institutions but also in other colleges and universities where Catholic students are present. Campus ministry offers a notable opportunity to be close to young people at a significant time in their lives: "...the university Chapel is called to be a vital center for promoting the Christian renewal of culture, in respectful and frank dialogue, in a clear and well-grounded perspective (cf. 1 Pt 3:15), in a witness which is open to questioning and capable of convincing" (*Address to the European Congress of University Chaplains*, May 1, 1998, No. 4). Young adults need the service of committed chaplains who can help them, intellectually and spiritually, to attain their full maturity in Christ.

8. Dear Brother Bishops: on the threshold of a new century and a new millennium, the Church continues to proclaim the capacity of human beings to know the truth and to grow into genuine freedom through their acceptance of that truth. In this respect, the Church is the defender of the moral insight on which your country was founded. Your Catholic schools are widely recognized as models for the renewal of American elementary and secondary education. Your Catholic colleges and universities can be leaders in the renewal of American higher education. At a time when the relationship between freedom and moral truth is being debated on a host of issues at every level of society and government, Catholic scholars have the resources to contribute to an intellectual and moral renewal of American culture. As you work to strengthen Catholic education, and as you promote Catholic intellectual life in all its dimensions, may you enjoy the protection of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Seat of Wisdom. On the eve of the Feast of Pentecost, I join you in invoking the gifts of the Holy Spirit upon the Church in the United States. With affection in the Lord, I cordially impart my Apostolic Blessing to you and to the priests, religious and laity of your Dioceses