



“*Learning is a Discovery that Brings Hope.*”

My Dear Friends in Christ

It is with trust in what you are already doing, and with much hope for continued excellence in Catholic schools in the Archdiocese of Melbourne, that I speak to you today. It is, indeed, a Good News story.

Catholic schools in Melbourne, and the Catholic Education Office Melbourne which serves them, are an important part of and give great witness to the mission of the Catholic Church to proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ and the kingdom of God to the entire world. We are part of an extraordinary legacy of Catholic education in this country, one which from the very beginning saw the need to educate the young, and in particular the poor, in a unique way, in our particularly Catholic way. ‘The Catholic way of educating young people places a priority upon the unique and extraordinary value of each child as a child of God, so loved by God that the son of God, Jesus Christ, was prepared to die for each one.’¹

In this pastoral letter you will read about our commitment to learning – where the child is at the heart of our educative mission. It is a Good News story, and it is a vision of hope – one that lifts our sights and expectations to higher things so that each child privileged by a Catholic education will be encouraged to embrace Catholic faith and values as part of our quality education.

The Catholic Church in Australia was distinctive around the world in its commitment to build Catholic schools. Founded initially in this country by lay people, Catholic schools were enriched by many women and men religious who came here during the 19th and 20th centuries. Our work in the Archdiocese today could not have been achieved without the members of religious orders and their dedication, sacrifice and service to the gospel. Although the presence of religious orders in schools has diminished, the mission of the Church in these schools is taken up today by many wonderful lay people. Lay ministry in the Church and particularly in Catholic education has blossomed in the last forty years. This is a witness to the work of the Holy Spirit.

From those humble beginnings, today we are a large organisation serving diverse communities throughout Melbourne. As you know, the Archdiocese of Melbourne is one of the largest Catholic schools sectors in the world. To serve our 329 schools and more than 140,000 students, we are sustained in our efforts by a significant workforce of more than 12000 teaching staff and 4000 support staff. Though we have grown considerably, and parents continue to vote positively by entrusting us with the care of their children, we mustn’t lose sight of those things which gave us purpose and our divine mission to help all to arrive at the fullness of Christian life.

Challenges

Many opportunities confront the Catholic Church and Catholic schools. In challenging times it is timely for us to consider again and re-state those things we stand for. One of the key challenges we face has been identified in *The Catholic School on the Threshold of the Third Millennium* as:

a growing marginalisation of the Christian faith as a reference point and a source of light for an effective and convincing interpretation of existence (n. 1).

¹ Bishop Michael Putney (n.d.), *Vision and Mission: Welcome to Catholic Education in the Diocese of Townsville*, Townsville Catholic Education Office, p. 2



Growing marginalisation of faith is an issue for the Church and for all its agencies. Importantly, Catholic education is well placed to assist in the maintenance and development of a faith framework for young people as they attempt to navigate their pathway in the modern world. The Catholic Church offers leadership in the life of the parish and school, for youth groups and in many other ways.

As the world changes, so too does the context within which Catholic schools exist. Globalisation, economic inequality, the increasing divide between rich and poor, pressures on family life and the moral and ethical demands of living in a modern society are increasingly a part of contemporary living. Local issues also have an impact on schools, students, families and teachers.

I am deeply aware of the complex and diverse challenges facing Catholic schools and young people. It is understandable that the young may well find the world a challenging and at times disquieting place – they are exposed daily to accounts of terrorism, of man-made global warming, of nuclear proliferation, of capitalism's recent troubles. But if we are to avoid the parochialism of the present, we need to equip our young with hope and optimism about themselves and what they can contribute to the world.

So there is no reason to despair in these difficult times, for important and uplifting work is being done in schools. Catholic schools continue to be vibrant contributors to the life of the Church, to the community at large and to families and individuals. Most importantly, our Catholic school is called to be a source of light to those who are embarking on life's journey.

Difficult times can also be a crucible of opportunity. John Paul II, in *Centesimus Annus*¹, reminds us that:

Today more than ever, the Church is aware that her social message will gain credibility more immediately from the witness of actions than as a result of its internal logic and consistency (n. 57).

It is the actions of our teachers and parents in Catholic communities which offer our young people evidence of how to live well as a person of faith even in complex and daunting times. In a very real sense they are not alone. Through the ages people have sought wisdom and we join with them in that search.

In recent times we have extraordinary examples of communities providing hope to others. When we think of the tragic bushfires in Victoria in 2009 or the recent floods, fires and extreme weather conditions, we have seen hundreds of examples of communities, and in particular some Catholic communities, walking in the way of Jesus, and reaching out to those in need to offer support and care. And in doing so, offering hope. Each of these actions has been a satellite of hope for those in need.

¹John Paul II 1991, *Centesimus Annus* (The Hundredth Anniversary) <www.vatican.va/edocs/ENG0214/_INDEX.HTM>.

One of the signs of the strength of Catholic schools is the constantly increasing number of enrolments. More families are deciding that they want their children to experience and benefit from a Catholic education. In doing so, they express confidence in what a Catholic school stands for and what it delivers when staff and students are motivated by a search for faith, spiritual life and learning. Families are attracted by the educational excellence of our schools as well as the centrality of the life of faith.

I continue to have great confidence in the quality of the education offered by Melbourne Catholic schools. I can say with certainty:

- That we have highly professional staff across a range of disciplines with the appropriate knowledge and skills to ensure our students engage in successful learning and preparation for a life of worth in our community
- That our academic performance in state, national and international arenas continues to be of an exceptional standard
- That we have an expert religious education curriculum in *“To Know Worship and Love”*
- That we have a deep commitment to continuous school improvement strategies which will continue to enrich school life and performance; and
- That we will continue to build the capacity of leaders in the sector through the establishment of the Catholic Leadership Centre to help prepare and nourish leaders within our Catholic Tradition.

My optimism about Catholic schools is based on what I see happening in our primary and secondary schools. They build confidence and above all hope; hope that the educational experience is one that is truly Catholic, striving for excellence.

This Church Year we are called to be people of hope. It is this theme of hope that I want to address.

Hope

“Learning is a discovery that brings hope.”

On a daily basis students are engaged in a multitude of learning experiences, both within and outside the classroom. I am convinced that learning brings hope, because learning is about the search for the truth. Once the truth is discovered, we have a basis for hope.

Learning brings hope. It is a journey of endless possibilities, engaging our students to ask questions about contemporary life. It engenders a hope that is based on the certainty of God’s promise of his love and care for us. This is the Good News of Jesus and his kingdom, which Catholic schools are called to proclaim as part of our mission of evangelisation.

Hope is not some dream based upon wishful thinking. It arises from the certainty of God’s promise, of his love and care for us.

Hope and the Centrality of God

God is active in our world. For Catholics, God is part of our world and our lives and is experienced primarily in His love for us. God’s love for us is recounted over and over again in the scriptures. The Bible presents and unfolds the history of our salvation.



The stories of creation, of Abraham the Father in faith, of Moses the law-giver, all give illustration of what it is that God has done for us. For the people of Israel this culminated in the exodus where the story of the enslavement of the people of Israel is told. God heard the cries of those enslaved and set them free – he led them out of Egypt into the promised land:

I will take you as my people, and I will be your God. You shall know that I am the Lord your God, who has freed you from the burdens of the Egyptians. (Exodus 6: 7)

God is concerned for us. God is near to us. This is the basis of our hope. It is this love and care for us that God has that is beautifully described in the psalm which draws on the metaphor of God as shepherd – a psalm that you are all familiar with. Here we are comforted by God's presence in our lives, by the knowledge that he walks beside us and guides us through troubled times, that he provides nourishment for our journey towards eternal salvation.

In the New Testament many stories help reveal for us who God is. One of the best known is that of the prodigal son in the Gospel of Luke (Chapter 15). It tells of the anguish of a son as he sits in a far away country contemplating his present misery, and remembering how he took his inheritance and abandoned his father. The son decides to go home and ask his father can he be accepted as a servant. The father represents God, who loves his son, forgives him, enables conversion of heart and reconciles the son to himself.

When the father saw his son in the distance he raced out to meet him and welcomed him warmly. Luke records:

But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him. (Luke 15: 20)

This powerful image of a loving and forgiving God, through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus is central to the gospel.

These and other images enable us to know that God loves us unconditionally. He is experienced in our lives as pure gift with his absolute love given in complete freedom. In love God calls us to conversion from sin, and to grow in the fullness of grace and life. Calling on the love and forgiveness will enable us to live life to the full (John 10: 10). It is this certainty about God, and how he loves us that gives us the certainty of hope. Our Christian hope is based upon the love of God.

This hope provides Catholic schools with their distinctiveness and strength

It is precisely in the Gospel of Christ, taking root in the minds and lives of the faithful, that the Catholic school finds its definition as it comes to terms with the cultural conditions of the times. (*The Catholic School*, n. 9)

Put simply, one of the major functions of the Catholic school is to bring this understanding of faith to the lives of people and to bring people to the dimensions of faith. This dialogue of faith and life brings God into individual lives and is central to the life of a Catholic school.

It is through the explorations of faith through reason and scripture and by prayerful reflection that students in Catholic schools come to know God. Schools help students explore faith, develop reason and discover the messages of the scriptures.

Reflections on Being a Catholic School

In this section of my pastoral letter I want to reflect on key points about the nature and purpose of Catholic Education and how the Church perceives her role. This type of reflection is regularly undertaken in schools. I also want to highlight some Church teachings and documents as references for later reflection. I'd like to raise a few questions and highlight some of the critical sections for our reflections.

What is the Church in education called to do and become?

The Church is called to proclaim the Good News of salvation to "the ends of the earth". It is challenged by the Good News to become an instrument of salvation for the world. Here the Church provides a service to schools and to the broader community of the world. The Church guides us on how to exercise this mission which belongs to all the baptised.

Church and schools are ecclesial partners working towards the same ends, with the same people, and guided by the same principles. Catholic schools are not the complete church, but are part of church. For many families schools are often a ritual place of contact with the church.

The document, *Lay Catholics in Schools: Witness to Faith* (n. 38) addresses the question of the distinctive features of a Catholic school. We need to look to the enlivening of the 'gospel spirit of freedom and charity' and our understanding of human culture and what it means to be distinctively Catholic. Christ is the model for all human endeavour. In Catholic schools we share the 'salvific mission' of the Church and through education in faith help our young people understand how their own growth and individuality will express the promise made at baptism and the hope of salvation.

What is Catholic Schooling?

Catholic schooling is the meeting place of culture and the gospel. The school constructs a critical dialogue between culture and the gospel. The lives of staff, students and families explore the world in which they live in the light of the gospel. Our life can be based upon reason and faith. Catholic schooling provides a "light to the world".

In this privileged setting teachers have the greatest impact and the mission of the Church is most evident.

Lay Catholics in Schools: Witnesses to Faith (n. 12) presents an outline of the essential role of the Catholic school reminding us that we must give careful attention to the following:

- to develop in students the intellectual, creative, and aesthetic faculties of the human person
- to give them the ability to make correct use of their judgement and will
- to promote in them a sense of values; to encourage just attitudes and prudent behaviour



- to introduce them to the cultural legacy handed down from previous generations
- to prepare them for professional life, and
- to encourage the friendly interchange among students of diverse cultures and backgrounds that will lead to mutual understanding.

The Catholic School on the Threshold of the Third Millennium (n. 14) offers a dynamic summary of the role of the Catholic school in facing the challenge of the synthesis between culture and faith in education. Knowledge is acquired within the context of faith and leads to a deeper wisdom and vision of life. This integration of faith and learning enables students to possess a Christian vision of the world, of life and of their future. Critically, we do not separate learning from human formation – they occur interdependently so that our students may acquire knowledge with a lens sharpened by values. Where students are engaged in a search for truth, guided by committed educators, they may come to understand deeper truths and grow in both knowledge and human formation. Jesus Christ is our model and guide.

What is the role of the staff in Catholic Education in Australia?

Gifted staff are central to the success of the school both for educational outcomes and religious character. The quality of all that happens is a direct result of the work of the parish priest and staff and their relationships with families and the parish.

Teachers have responsibility as professional educators and key contributors to the evangelising mission of the Church. Working in a Catholic school is a vocation to the call of God. This is achieved in academic subjects, the day to day life of the school, its religious practices and rituals, and in pastoral care.

In *Lay Catholics in Schools: Witnesses to Faith (n. 16)* we are given some advice on what this means in practice. Teachers accept the responsibility to share in the formation of the young. Our secular world requires educators to be trained in specific disciplines; educators who help to form human persons will similarly engage in learning for this undertaking. Teaching practice goes beyond transmission to the essence of formation and requires professional preparation. Where teachers accept this responsibility, they are engaged in the fundamental communication of truth – which itself is transformed into a unique participation in the prophetic mission of Jesus Christ.

What does it mean when we state that Catholic schools are places of learning?

The Second Vatican Council declared that the Catholic school has a distinctive religious dimension, and that this is to be found in a) the educational climate, b) the personal development of each student, c) the relationship established between culture and the Gospel, d) the illumination of all knowledge with the light of faith. (RDE n. 1)

The goal is ambitious – it seeks to bring into harmony faith, culture and life. Education supports the evangelising mission of the Church and contributes to the continuity of the Church through the moral formation of the young. The Catholic school contributes much and above all, as the Holy Father says, it succeeds when it guides men and women to human and Christian perfection and, at the same time, helps them to become mature in their faith. For those who believe in Christ, these are two facets of a single reality.

How does a Catholic school understand by the principle of the dignity of the human person?

The Church has much to offer humanity in Catholic schooling. It seeks to help young people come to an understanding of the human person. The Book of Genesis tells us that we are “made in the image and likeness of God”. It is from this that the dignity of the human person is perceived and, in turn, is grounded in the Church’s understanding of God. This dignity is common to all and it is this commonality that is the basis of community.

In *The Catholic Schools on the Threshold of the Third Millennium* (n. 9) we learn that the Catholic school sets out to be a school for the human person and of human persons. This is why the promotion of the human person is the essential goal of the Catholic school. Such a commitment affirms that each person’s vital relationship is with Jesus Christ – and it is through Him that we can uncover the truth of what it means to be human. The Catholic school seeks to express the centrality of the human person.

How do Catholic schools reach out to the community?

One of the central strengths of education is that schools through education, moral formation and values education contribute to the common good and civic life. Those who are privileged to have education are invited to use that knowledge and formation to help in the overall transformation of the world. This is an intensely human project and responds to the call of Jesus Christ to bring about His kingdom on earth.

Catholic schools have varied models of reaching out to the community. Historically the religious orders who founded the majority of schools in the Archdiocese established schools precisely as their outreach to those in most need. The orders reflected this in their tradition and charisms.

In *The Catholic School*, we are reminded of the call from every part of the world for a more just society and the role that we can play in contributing to this goal. We have wonderful examples in our schools where this is more than the teaching of justice, where we see school communities engaged in practices which seek to ameliorate the injustices and inequalities we witness in our local communities. Importantly, we see a deep expression of seeking to look after the needs of the poor and the marginalised, often those who are deprived of family support or those who are far from faith. I am heartened when I see schools engaged in activities that improve the social and economic conditions of their local community.

Conclusion

Finally I return to the theme of hope, its place in the Church and its importance for schools. Those of us who undertake the special ministry of working with the young are indeed privileged, despite some of the challenges and responsibilities that this work implies.

But this work is not simply about working to achieve academic outcomes, it is about preparing our youth for a life of worth beyond school, one where faith guides them in the world and how they work for the benefit of all.



St Bernard of Clairvaux captured the essence of our educative mission:

Some seek knowledge for the sake of knowledge: that is curiosity; others seek knowledge that they may themselves be known: that is vanity; but there are still others who seek knowledge in order to serve and edify others, and that is charity.

But, finally, it was Pope Benedict XVI who called upon the world to grasp hold of the hope that is offered:

Let us say once again: we need the greater and lesser hopes that keep us going day by day. But these are not enough without the great hope, which must surpass everything else. This great hope can only be God, who encompasses the whole of reality and who can bestow upon us what we, by ourselves, cannot attain. The fact that it comes to us as a gift is actually part of hope. God is the foundation of hope: not any god, but the God who has a human face and who has loved us to the end, each one of us and humanity in its entirety. His Kingdom is not an imaginary hereafter, situated in a future that will never arrive; his Kingdom is present wherever he is loved and wherever his love reaches us. His love alone gives us the possibility of soberly persevering day by day, without ceasing to be spurred on by hope, in a world which by its very nature is imperfect. His love is at the same time our guarantee of the existence of what we only vaguely sense and which nevertheless, in our deepest self, we await: a life that is "truly" life. (*Spe Salvi* n. 31)

+ *Denis J. Hart*

ARCHBISHOP OF MELBOURNE

References

Schools and families can access detailed information for reflection and discussion about the nature and purpose of Catholic schools. I provide a list for your further investigation:

The Declaration on Christian Education (1964) – Second Vatican Council
<http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decl_19651028_gravissimum-educationis_en.html>.

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<http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/ccatheduc/documents/rc_con_ccatheduc_doc_19770319_catholic-school_en.html>.

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<http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/ccatheduc/documents/rc_con_ccatheduc_doc_19821015_lay-catholics_en.html>.

The Religious Dimension of Education in a Catholic School (RDE) (1988) – The Congregation for Catholic Education <http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/ccatheduc/documents/rc_con_ccatheduc_doc_19880407_catholic-school_en.html>.

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