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Back to School Mass 2004
for the
Catholic Education Community
Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception
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My Dear Fellow Teachers,

I figured out that two-thirds of my life I have been in school -- a total of 34 years. That counts Kindergarten and 17 years of high school -- four as a high school student, six as a teacher, seven as an administrator.

The Solemnity of the Assumption -- August 15 -- always makes me think of the end of summer vacation and the beginning of the school year.

While the beginning of a new year was always a mixture of the joyful anticipation and some dread at the prospect of getting back to hard work, . . .when I would start to see the students and my colleagues, the better feelings would always win out and I began to be excited about the new year.



(photo courtesy of *The Catholic Key*) Bishop Finn celebrating Mass with Catholic educators at the Catholic Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception.

I hope you are getting excited. It is a joy to celebrate Holy Mass with you this morning.

According to the first reading's account of Pentecost there was a kind of chaos -- even in this decisive beginning of the Church. The Acts of the Apostles says, "a strong driving wind filled the entire house," there was fire, and the disciples "began to speak in different tongues."

I am, again, reminded of scenes from first days of school: people charging around in all different directions, trying to find where they are supposed to be and how they can get there, bells ringing, sometimes tears, a lot of people talking at once, and feelings of newness and anticipation throughout the entire school.

Just as the Holy Spirit brought order to the chaos and made it possible for each to hear the message of Jesus Christ in their own language, . . .we also invoke the Holy Spirit today, imploring that He direct and coordinate all our efforts and bring things to a unity. We ask him to direct the momentum of our full hearts today and in the days ahead so that He can begin to

form Jesus Christ in our midst.

"As the Father has sent me," Jesus tells His apostles in the Gospel -- "So I send you!" Receive the Holy Spirit.

Indeed, the work of our Catholic schools is about nothing less than seeing and living Jesus Christ in the midst of everything we do in our schools.

Let's not apologize about that. We need our faith. Students deserve to receive their learning in a context of spiritual formation.

We are different from other schools. We have a very specific mission and it is not just for *religion teachers* to fulfill. When Pope John Paul II visited Catholic educators in New Orleans in the early part of his pontificate, he said it simply but clearly, "The goal of all Catholic education is salvation in Jesus Christ."

In the early eighties I was beginning my years of teaching. One spring the NCEA Convention was in St. Louis, and it just so happened that St. Louis was also host at about the same time to host the NEA Convention. One of the stories that had been in the press prior to the NEA convention was about "textbook wars" going on between school districts and some concerned parents.

As the Catholic teachers' convention, we were -- probably at some Mass and homily like this -- hearing the basic tenets of Catholic education: "Parents are the first teachers of their children in the ways of the faith. The role of the Catholic school is to assist the parents in their role."

Meanwhile, headlines from one of the keynote's at NEA emphasized a different message concerning things like the selection of textbooks and reading materials: "Parents need to get out of the way and let us do our job as educators. We are the professionals and we must be able to decide what we will use in the classroom."

Our Catholic schools are different in many ways, beginning with the philosophy that grounds us.

Our schools are "tops" academically. We continue to carry this responsibility well. But, you know and I know that good academics are merely "the cost of admission." No one would consider us -- consider paying the tuition -- if the education wasn't academically sound. It is "a given" that the education in our schools is excellent, and the environment is safe.

That doesn't mean it comes easily, but that we have established -- over many generations -- excellent academics and good discipline as the baseline for our schools.

But make no mistake about it -- we are here to do something much more -- as I have said in my first weeks -- "Our schools must be thoroughly and unashamedly Catholic." What do I mean by this?

Day after day -- every day -- in a way that infiltrates all the teaching and learning that takes place -- we are charged to proclaim a Pentecost message of Jesus Christ with enthusiasm, faithful perseverance and steady determination.

We do it because we are convinced that HE -- Jesus Christ -- is the one and only savior of the world. We obviously can't be squeamish about saying His name lovingly. Someone told me once that it was "unprofessional" to talk this way. For this also, we ask the help of the Holy Spirit.

For if we can get across the message that Jesus Christ is the only way to salvation, we are on the way to helping our students realize that many other things that seem important and necessary are not their salvation. That these superficial things are not worth their worry, their energy.

Jesus Christ reveals to mankind the truth about God and the truth about ourselves as human beings. Our students cannot -- must not -- leave before they meet Him, hear Him, know that He loves them, acknowledge His law in their lives.

It is not always a "feel good" message. Love in Christ is the love of the Cross.

It is the love of complete self-giving. This love is honest. It is chastity. It is sobriety. It is commitment. Love in Christ is realizing that I am loved and redeemed by a Diving and infinite Mercy that calls me to a continuing conversion.

No one must leave our Catholic schools without knowing this through and through. It must be learned in religion class, but also in Math lab and the sports field. This requires an extraordinary commitment from you teachers and principals.

What is the formula for doing this?

The Second Vatican Council's *Declaration on Christian Education, Gravissimum Educationis*, acknowledges that Catholic schools, like any other school true to its purpose, strive mightily for the maturing of the person.

But Catholic schools have another task and mandate: The Catholic school -- according to the Council -- has as its principal purpose this goal:

That the baptized, while they are gradually introduced into the knowledge of the mystery of salvation, become ever more aware of the gift of Faith they have received, and that they learn in addition how to worship God the Father in spirit and truth especially in liturgical action, and be conformed in their personal lives according to the new man created in justice and holiness of truth.

-- *Gravissimum Educationis. No. 2*

Let's look at the four basic elements of this mandate.

1. **The students must be "introduced into the knowledge of the mystery of salvation."**

They must learn their faith -- the Roman Catholic faith. Our students must be taught diligently, carefully, comprehensively and faithfully about the Catholic religion. Like science or history or mathematics, well taught. They need first to know all the basics, through and through -- forward and backward.

This is Catechism. It is like the "times tables" -- the building blocks we must have to get started.

So, we teach all of the Catholic prayers. We must present carefully all the propositions of the Creed, all that has been handed on to us about the Holy Trinity: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, our Blessed Mother, the meaning and mission of the Church and her hierarchy, . . .Pope and Bishops, clergy, religious, lay people.

We have to be willing to teach what the Church teaches about death, judgment, heaven, and, yes, even hell. These are our holy traditions. These are like our precious family customs.

Even more though, they are elements of a supernatural culture: sacramentals, holy days, the significance of the furnishings in church, holy Christian art and the tradition of Catholic music. Let us learn Church history and the lives of the saints, the encyclicals and the documents of Vatican II. The ten commandments, the precepts of the Church, the meaning of the sacraments, and all of their elements -- what they are, how they are celebrated, and why they are so vital to our lives.

2. **Next, according to Vatican II, a Catholic education is a means for students to "become ever more aware of the gift of Faith they have received."**

It is not enough to learn the prayers. Students must learn to pray! And, they must pray! This supernatural faith -- which our Lord taught could move mountains -- will be their standard equipment -- the "weapon of choice" for getting through life.

We have to teach them by word and example how to use Faith -- live Faith.

In education, we teach our students how to solve problems -- that is important and fitting. There will come a time when scientific knowledge and clever words will not cut it. There will come a time when no amount of money or worldly success will relieve our students' agonies. The paper diploma alone -- which they could receive from any school -- will not be sufficient preparation for life.

We have to give them a knowledge of. . .and a vital access to supernatural faith, and hope and love. We will have to have spent hours helping them to discover this faith in their hearts, teaching them what it takes to live it, how to protect it from the world, and from the false notions and dead ends that lead us away from a life of faith.

We must tell them how this supernatural grace can be restored when we have lost it. And -- like all important lessons and disciplines -- we have to practice, practice, practice!

3. **Let me say this about the third point: that these students of ours must "learn. . . how to worship God the Father in spirit and truth, especially in liturgical action."**

This worship in spirit and truth is most powerfully exercised through an authentic celebration of the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass. And, let it be authentic. Trust the inherent pure power of the Sacred Liturgy as the Church prescribes it. What we are entering into -- after all -- is nothing less than the dying and rising of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

There are, of course, many other aspects of the Church's liturgy that must be taught

and lived. Another that needs intense remedial work in our culture is the Sacrament of Reconciliation. Frequent confession must become a habit for our students that they carry into their adult lives. It is difficult to teach this value if we are not, ourselves, using the sacrament frequently.

With the parents, we must stress the serious obligation to participate in Mass every Sunday and Holy Day. Families must be helped to accept their responsibility to come, when possible, together to Sunday Mass and to come to confession. Jesus established these sacraments in the Church as the frequent and ordinary means to holiness.

As we enter -- in October -- into the Year of the Holy Eucharist -- let every school look for ways to renew and deepen our students knowledge and love of this "Holy and Living Sacrifice," from which the Church draws her life.

4. **Point four of *Gravissimum Educationis* says that students are to "be conformed in their personal lives according to the new man created in justice and holiness of truth."**

Nothing less than this is true: Catholic schools are supposed to make saints out of their students. That is what "salvation in Jesus Christ" means -- getting into heaven!

We must be involved in the work of teaching our students moral truths, right and wrong, to avoid evil, but also to do good: to cultivate the life of the virtues and construct -- in the very midst of a culture of death -- a civilization of life.

Conscience formation is the most important ingredient in this effort. The Magisterium of the Church must be our guide, because, quite frankly, there are too many subjective -- silly -- ways to answer the question, "What would Jesus do?"

We live in an age of relativism where respect for life, the true meaning of marriage, and the evils of materialism and sexual gratification are twisted and glorified, not only in the media, but even among so-called "professed believers."

There are objective truths. There is right and wrong. Holy Mother Church is our mother who loves us, and she knows best.

Catholic schools must be places where these moral truths are taught without variation and without ambiguity for the sake of souls and salvation.

So, what am I saying?

In addition to an academic education and human education that is "second to none," Catholic schools exist to help parents give their children:

- 1) **Sound, thorough catechesis**
- 2) **Deep living faith**
- 3) **Authentic worship: the reverent celebration of Mass and frequent confession**
- 4) **The moral law of Christ as imparted by the Church, for the formation of souls**

We have to do these four things because the parents are obliged to do these four things. Parents and teachers must be collaborators in the work of making our children saints. Neither

side can afford to let the other down.

So -- ready or not -- the Feast of the Assumption is this weekend. Mary, our Hope, Seat of Wisdom, pray for us! It's time for school again. Let us put the Holy Spirit in charge.