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**Catholic Identity and Catholic Excellence in Our Schools**  
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*The following remarks were given by Bishop Robert W. Finn at the Acton Conference on Catholic Education in Napa, California.*

**We have noted** some of the differences between Catholic Schools of generations past and Schools today. We have considered our shortcomings and opportunities.

The challenge of Catholic Schools, particularly concerning Catholic Identity and the Excellence of Catholic teaching and formation, is akin to the challenge of the New Evangelization. That is, we have responsibility for the message of Christ and the mission of His Church in the midst of a hostile culture. Ours is, in many ways, a post-Christian culture. Even among Catholics the fundamentals of the Catholic faith cannot be assumed or taken for granted. Many people are not practicing their faith in an integral manner. Catholics who are baptized might not be living in the state of Sanctifying grace: this includes students, parents, teachers, and other school leaders.

How do we organize and direct a Catholic school in such a way that it fulfills its part in the mission of the Church - rather than merely provide an alternative education in what may be a safer environment? Pope John Paul II, in a 1987 address to Catholic educators in New Orleans, reminds us that "The ultimate goal of all Catholic education is salvation in Jesus Christ." (no.8)

So how do we make progress in this ultimate task and responsibility through the work of the Catholic Schools?

Given the financial challenges of running our Catholic School system, I think it is possible to conclude that unless our schools are something radically different than their best public school counterparts, there is little justification for their existence - at least in light of the heroic sacrifice of the broad Catholic community.

But if our schools are readily and unmistakably identifiable as Catholic schools - and they are successfully working hand in glove with the Church in moving children and their families toward salvation, then they are necessary. If they are conscious instruments for the transformation of the culture in Jesus Christ, then they must continue. They must be more broadly available than they are in many dioceses.

I believe that our schools have to be so undeniably and unabashedly Catholic that they risk being thought of as almost fanatical. Lukewarm will not be enough to distinguish them, and establish a sufficiently attractive niche in the education marketplace. It is not enough for Catholic schools to offer an occasional all school Mass, two penance services a year, Religion three

times a week, and a requirement for Confirmation students to do a service project. It is not enough.

So what are some of the elements and areas to consider to intensify and to make intentional the Catholic identity of our schools? More importantly what must we do if we are serious about getting our students to heaven?

The Declaration on Christian Education from the Second Vatican Council, *Gravissimum Educationis*, assigns the first and primary work of formation of students to parents, but expresses the Church's conviction to provide from its Maternal richness a strong support and collaboration in the institution of the Catholic school. The Council document lays out the principal aims of Catholic education in this way:

"As the baptized person is gradually introduced into the mystery of the knowledge of salvation, he may daily grow more conscious of the gift of faith he has received; that he may learn to adore God the Father in spirit and in truth, especially through liturgical worship; that he may be trained to conduct his personal life in righteousness and in the sanctity of truth, according to his new standard of manhood." (no. 2. translation Abbott)

From the standpoint of the school, then, the first necessary element in the Church's program of education is enthusiastic and faithful school leadership that is inseparably allied to the parent. This leadership should exist at several, if not all, levels: principal, pastor, superintendent, bishop, and school board.

The Principal, in addition to all the professional educational skills required, must be a Catholic leader: one who prays, one who receives the sacraments, (including Reconciliation), one who reads and understands the Pope. He or she has a devotional life and can talk about the saints and the classics of Catholic literature. This person knows the Catechism of the Catholic Church and sees it as the handbook for formation and curriculum.

The Catholic school leader values and holds up the role of parents and families and constantly expects and inspires the active cooperation of parents in their children's education and faith life. They constantly remind parents of their primary role in their child's education. They expect a lot of parents (not just in terms of fundraising) but in sacramental preparation and catechesis, in their child's discipline and homework, in attending Mass (or church services if they are not Catholic) every Sunday with their child. The Principal knows that parents are the first teachers, and that without a continuity between what is taught at school and at home, formation remains incomplete.

Programs for renewal and catechesis are very important for teachers in the Catholic school - all the teachers. For the second year now, in our four Diocesan high schools, teachers are required to participate in an hour of catechesis once a week before school. Our Diocesan catechetics institute teaches the courses on each school site. Formation of Catholic teachers cannot be taken for granted, especially since the decline of the great teaching Orders of Religious. If our schools are to witness a strong Catholic identity, every teacher must know the faith and be formed in holiness.

Prospering the mission of the Catholic school means interacting faithfully within the structures of the Catholic Church. As Catholics, we know Jesus Christ and we are necessarily connected in the Church. We are connected to families; we are connected to parish life; we are connected

to the Diocese; we are connected to the Universal Church. We are living in the historical and eternal Communion of Saints.

Let us look briefly at these key "connections" which characterize the Catholic school:

Schools have to be connected to the families of their students. There has to be an intentional continuity between school and parents. Strong family rootedness is part of being Catholic: Parents read to their children. Parents pray with their children and take them to Mass every Sunday. Parents know their children's teachers and teachers know their students' families. Parents oversee uniforms and modesty before the child leaves the house, and outside of school as well. They see that their children get food and rest and love, and are not consumed by the internet, video games, television, and other poor substitutes for meaningful human communion. They learn a love and respect for the body, the sanctity of human life, and the joy of purity.

Elementary schools and high schools must be connected to parishes, since, beyond the family, the parish is the fundamental unit of the local Church. Catholic schools - even if they are private - cooperate with the parishes of the students, and see to it that there is reinforcement of the total faith life. The parish supports the mission of Catholic education. The school never tries to draw the student or the family away from the parish but into a deeper involvement in the life of their parish.

Catholic schools (even private Catholic schools) are connected to the Diocese. They support the bishop, and are interested in and committed to the goals and priorities of the local Church. They are connected to the work of other Catholic schools and institutions, and look for ways to be signs of the unity of the local Church.

Every teacher promotes vocations. Students learn to pray for God's guidance in their vocation, and a good number of vocations to priesthood and consecrated life come from the schools.

Catholic schools and educators are connected to the Universal Church. They are convinced of the primacy of the Church's Tradition and magisterial teaching. They are very conscious of their identity as an extension of the worldwide Catholic communion. They express love for the Pope and acknowledge him as the visible sign and cause of our unity as Catholics. All that they teach and undertake flows from the broad embrace of truth championed by the Church and a sense of our dignity, freedom, and responsibility as Children of God.

Students learn to pray in the richness of the Catholic tradition. While they are helped to understand and respect other religious formulas, they are not invited to dabble in practices or prayer techniques of other religions or pseudo-religions. The celebration of the sacraments is the center of worship in Catholic schools. Mass is available as "daily bread." Students learn about the meaning and destructive effects of sin. They are formed in their conscience. They learn right from wrong, and to daily examine their conscience. They have frequent recourse to Confession in order to grow into saints.

In short, the curriculum of formation in the Catholic school is best modeled after and drawn from the Catechism's four pillars: The Profession of Faith, Sacraments, the Moral Life, and Prayer.

Catholic schools sense and highlight their connection to the Communion of Saints and the rich

tradition of teaching and holiness which makes up the pilgrim journey of the People of God. They learn to read and pray the Sacred Scriptures within the heritage of the Fathers of the Church. The devotional life of the school is alive with doctrinally sound hymns and prayers, the frequent meditative recitation of the rosary, the Stations of the Cross, festivals of the particular patrons of parish, school, and Diocese. They enjoy visits to the Blessed Sacrament and periods of Eucharistic Adoration, and Benediction. The school makes intentional use of beautiful authentic religious art and images.

Catholic Schools are connected to the world, because the mission and apostolate of the Church unfolds in the world. Students grow strong as they are formed in the life of the virtues, progressing in each area of beatitude. Deeply aware of their divine filiation as sons and daughters of the Father, they charitably regard each other person with this God-given dignity. They are challenged, and inspired by example to be faithful and generous stewards, and they become leaders in all areas of secular work, in a way which sanctifies themselves and every daily effort.

But in the Catholic schools students must first be formed well in holiness, otherwise instead of being agents for the world's transformation and renewal, they will become worldly and deluded by its false promises.

The work of Catholic education is a vital and inseparable part of the mission of the Church. When, through a renewed and intensified effort to stress Catholic excellence and the Catholic identity of the school, school leaders collaborate with parents in the arduous work of shaping saints for the Kingdom, the greatest dignity and supernatural purpose of Catholic schools will be furthered.