

## **The Mission of Catholic Schools**

The beginning of a new year is often accompanied by two exercises – predictions and resolutions. It's in that spirit that I begin a series of reflections from the Bishops of New England on our Catholic schools.

First, a prediction. This New Year will be a very challenging time for Catholic schools throughout New England. The routine challenges faced by the Catholic schools of our region – rising costs and declining enrollment – will be intensified by the terrible economic environment in which we're living. It's safe to assume that just about all of our Catholic schools will be affected in one way or another, to one degree or another. Without a doubt, a number of schools will merge or close, or be otherwise transformed.

Those directly involved in the Catholic schools ministry – and indeed the entire Catholic community – need to be creative and courageous in supporting schools, but also prudent and realistic in responding to the challenges we face. While we work hard to keep our schools open and do our very best to ensure that Catholic schools are as accessible as possible to our students and their families, especially the underprivileged and underserved, we have to admit that in some cases, it's a goal not completely attainable in our day.

Regardless of the number of schools we maintain, however, it's critically important that we never lose sight of their fundamental mission. Fidelity to mission, I'm convinced, will be one of the key components to successful Catholic schools. And what, exactly is that mission?

In 2005 the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops penned a document entitled, *“Renewing Our Commitment to Catholic Elementary and Secondary Schools in the*

*Third Millennium.*” And in the Introduction of their statement, the Bishops described the purpose of Catholic education: “to provide an atmosphere in which the Gospel is proclaimed, a community in which Christ is experienced, service to our sisters and brothers is the norm, and thanksgiving and worship of our God is cultivated.”

A word about each of those components.

When the Bishops speak of Catholic education “proclaiming the Gospel,” it’s a clear recognition that our schools are a critical part of the foundational mission of the Church. The Church is, by nature, a teaching Church, an evangelizing Church. “Go forth and teach,” Jesus said to His disciples. If our young people graduate from Catholic schools without being inspired by the Gospel, without a firm grasp of the tenets of the Catholic Faith, our schools are failing in their mission.

Next, Catholic schools are to form a community in which Christ is experienced, a clear reference to the Church. In an age of exaggerated individualism, comprised of the “me generation,” encouraging loyalty to any community is a daunting task. And yet Catholics know, instinctively, that from the moment of their baptism they belong to something greater than themselves – the Church, founded by Christ and guided in the truth by the Holy Spirit. In all that they do, Catholic schools should effectively model the wider ecclesial community.

With this faith community as the base of operations, then, Catholic schools are to encourage service to our brothers and sisters, not just as a demonstration during Catholic Schools Week, but as a way of life, “the norm” the Bishops insist. One of the great hallmarks of Catholic education, on every level, is the service provided by students to the Church and the broader community. It can only be hoped that the service the students learn in their youth will remain with them throughout their lives.

And finally, Catholic schools are to cultivate “thanksgiving and worship of our God.” The ultimate purpose of Catholic education then is vertical, not horizontal. While community and service are legitimate goals of Catholic education, it all ends in God “in whom we live and move and have our being.” (Acts, 17:28) As Pope John Paul II reminded us so clearly a few years ago, “The ultimate goal of all Catholic education is salvation in Jesus Christ.”

I began with a New Year’s prediction. It’s appropriate, then, to conclude with a New Year’s resolution. Let the Church – the entire Church – bishops, priests, deacons, religious and laity; those directly involved in Catholic schools and others – resolve to recognize the irreplaceable and enormous value of our schools, and let’s resolve to do all that we can to preserve, support and hand on this important heritage.

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