



GROWING IN WISDOM, AGE, AND GRACE

A Pastoral Letter on Catholic Schools

by Bishop Paul S. Loverde



GROWING IN WISDOM, AGE, AND GRACE

A Pastoral Letter on Catholic Schools by Bishop Paul S. Loverde

As His mission on earth drew to its close, Jesus sent His disciples out with the words, "Go and teach!" (cf. Mt. 28:19). Ever since that moment, the Church has sought to fulfill the Lord's command by educating all people in the saving message of the Gospel, and helping them grow in virtue as the foundation for a good life.

Today, this mission continues through the devotion of parents and other educators who help our children grow, like the young Jesus Himself, in wisdom, age and grace before God and before all (cf. Lk. 2:52). As the bishop of this diocesan church, I express my deep gratitude first to parents, who serve a primary and irreplaceable role in the education and formation of their children. I also thank our more than 3,000 volunteer catechists who help our over 40,000 public school students learn about their faith.

In this pastoral letter, however, I speak most directly to and about our Catholic schools, surely one of the most visible elements of the Church's educational mission. In Catholic schools, we continue the teaching mission of the Lord, and we help our young people grow in wisdom, age and grace.

I grew up in a faith-filled community whose pride and joy was the Catholic school. My parents made many sacrifices in order for me to attend Catholic schools. My love for Catholic education only grew deeper when, before I became a bishop, I spent a number of years teaching in two Catholic high schools. These years allowed me to witness firsthand the transformation of youth who learned about their faith and grew closer to Jesus thanks to their Catholic school education.

By virtue of our baptism, we are joined to Christ in His teaching office. In a special way, this sharing in His teaching mission is lived out in our Catholic schools. Catholic schools are apt instruments of evangelization—they are part and parcel of each parish and the larger community. With you I share the hope that our Catholic schools will bring the good news of Jesus Christ to students, teachers, volunteers, and parents, thereby promoting an authentic outreach to Catholics and non-Catholics alike.

As we begin 2006, our diocesan family of faith stands at a critical juncture where we are striving to make a Catholic education available, affordable and accessible to all Catholic parents and children desirous of such an education. We can be proud of the history

of our Catholic schools in the Diocese of Arlington—growing strong at 44 schools and more than 18,000 students! As one of the fastest-growing dioceses in the country, we seek to meet the needs of our ever-growing Catholic population. To do that, we must make our Catholic schools welcoming centers that invite parents and youth to see how a Catholic education can benefit everyone. I am convinced that there will be greater support for Catholic schools when more people understand their essential worth. I thank those of you who see the value in our schools—especially parents, administrators, teachers, and volunteers; you understand that a Catholic school education can transform our students into successful community leaders and articulate, faithful members of the Church.

The Church's Educational Mission

Our schools play a primary role in worship and service in the life of the parish and of the community. "The Catholic school forms part of the saving mission of the Church, especially for education in the faith...and is not simply an institution which offers an academic instruction of high quality, but, even more importantly, is an effective vehicle of total Christian formation."¹ The Catholic school opens children to an understanding of the universal character of the Church. Pope Paul VI was especially clear in stating that before we Catholics can evangelize, we ourselves must be evangelized. In other words, we must be formed and continue to be reformed and renewed in our Catholic faith. As our children become educated in Catholic schools, they will be drawn deeper into a love of Jesus Christ and recognize the importance of giving service to the Church, the community and those most in need.

The Church "has the duty of proclaiming the way of salvation to all ... and is under the obligation, therefore, to provide for its children an education by virtue of which their whole lives may be inspired by the spirit of Christ."² Students in Catholic schools have the daily opportunity to understand, proclaim and live the Gospel. My hope is that the students in our Catholic schools will grow in the faith that is theirs by baptism. Regular participation in school Masses leads students toward a more meaningful appreciation of the Sunday Liturgy. Students learn about prayer and how to pray in order to develop their own personal relationship with Christ because prayer is the glue that keeps us united in Christ Jesus and through Him to one another.

In our Catholic schools, students learn about and practice virtue. They learn to respect the dignity of life in all of its stages, beginning with conception, to recognize that every person is made in the image and likeness of God, and to develop a healthy and well-formed conscience



that enables them to live morally good lives. We live in an age of overwhelming secular materialism, and our children need to be presented with values that really count; they need to be converted so that a real relationship with Jesus can become a lived experience and provide them with a renewed sense of energy and hope. Our Catholic schools nurture our youth by providing daily opportunities to learn about the faith, to grow as the young Jesus did in wisdom, age and grace, and to develop the values and virtues that will enable them to live an authentically Christian life.

Availability, Affordability and Accessibility

We face the fortunate task of building new schools and setting the foundation for future generations. We build because we have a vision of excellence in Catholic formation, academic instruction and outreach to our community. We have opened seven new schools in the past decade alone! That is astounding, considering many other dioceses are faced with the painful reality of closing schools instead of opening new ones. We must continue to recognize the areas of growth in our diocese so that we can ensure that every student who desires a Catholic education receives one. Our abiding commitment to making Catholic school education available and affordable to every Catholic of every cultural background in this diocese is one that requires much focus and sacrifice. Since 1990, the average tuition in both elementary and secondary Catholic schools has more than doubled; while our enrollment has increased 25 percent in the past decade, a handful of our schools have experienced declines in enrollment.

The bishops of the United States reaffirmed in 2005: "Catholic schools are often the Church's most effective contribution to those families who are poor and disadvantaged, especially in poor inner city neighborhoods and rural areas."³ We have to reach out to those who are economically disadvantaged, to afford parents the opportunity to send their children to Catholic schools, places where their children have the best hope to break the cycle of poverty.

Seven of our schools located in a more urban environment, which we refer to as our Metro Schools, have enrollment challenges because of the demographic trends in Northern Virginia—people have moved away from cities and to the suburbs. These schools, although faced with challenges, need to remain open as beacons of hope for parents and students alike. To assist families in meeting the costs of Catholic education, our parishes have established a tuition scholarship fund that has already distributed more than \$1 million a year in needs-based tuition assistance. Thanks to the support from the entire Catholic community, we have funds from our recent capital campaign that will allow our parish schools to give more children the lifelong gift of a Catholic education. It is vital that, as a diocese, we continue to find creative ways to provide scholarship opportunities for students to attend Catholic schools.

Our diocese today is a modern-day microcosm of our legacy as an immigrant Church. Often, the Catholic school is one of the few institutions that welcomes and evangelizes immigrant Catholics—providing them with a connection to their faith in the new country they now call home. My own father, an immigrant Catholic himself, came to realize, along with my mother, that the Church was the one organization that could help immigrants integrate into society. Throughout our diocese, numbers of different wonderfully gifted people bring us their culture and their faith, including large numbers of Vietnamese, Korean, Filipino, Ghanaian and Brazilian Catholics. And the greatest number among them is our own Hispanic sisters and brothers. Our diocese is also home to some of the largest Salvadoran and Vietnamese Catholic communities in the country. This growing diversity is evidenced in our schools, where the number of enrolled minority students has grown from 3,000 in 1995 to nearly 5,000 today.

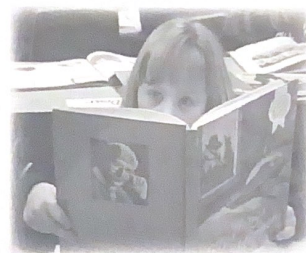
Parents and Educators: To Teach as Jesus

We will falter in our mission if we do not support parents, who are the primary teachers within the “domestic church” of the family. Jesus’ own ministry of teaching is carried on today in the Church through parents, who at the time of their children’s baptism, assume definite responsibilities and make promises for the faith formation of their children. In this day of the Internet and advanced electronic communications, parental responsibility becomes even more necessary and challenging to protect children from harmful or inappropriate media. Catholic schools can assist non-Catholic parents by providing their children with a solid, moral foundation; they can also support Catholic parents in their own baptismal call by offering resources and programs in sacramental preparation. The Parent Teacher Organization (PTO) also aids in this ongoing evangelization by engaging speakers who can offer insights in parenting and spiritual growth for both the parent and the student.



Our Catholic school educators are called to lifelong faith formation. “To teach as Jesus did means calling and equipping all Christians of every age and stage of life to fulfill their baptismal call to holiness in family, Church, and society – their mission to evangelize and transform the world into a caring and more just society. Ongoing faith formation is essential to accomplish this mission.” Those who work in our Catholic schools in the Diocese of Arlington understand their work is not just a career opportunity—it is a vocation, a response to God’s call to teach and evangelize our youth, to guide them in their growth and formation, to assist them in developing their God-given gifts for the benefit of others. I know firsthand that being a teacher in a Catholic school

requires diligent personal academic preparation, a love of children and young people, a willingness to give generously of time and talent in planning and teaching lessons, and a readiness to assist students in developing their own understanding of the faith and their own relationship with Christ through prayer and study. I am especially grateful to all of our teachers for their years of service to our diocese and to our Catholic schools. Our Catholic schools are flourishing, and our future will depend on our educators to sustain high academic standards and continue to instill a spirit of faith and values rooted in Christ.



I am deeply grateful to all of the religious sisters, brothers and laity in our diocese who serve as educators. I sense how powerfully the Lord has used them to affect the lives of countless students by their teaching, their active involvement in the students' growth and learning and their witness to the Lord. I am likewise deeply grateful to the priests who serve as chaplains and instructors in our schools. When I was a Catholic school student, I saw so many wonderfully dedicated laity, brothers, sisters, and priests. The pastor of my childhood parish was truly a modern St. John Vianney in his concern that children learn their faith; our parochial vicar was regularly at the school, and was very close to us, as were the religious sisters. The religious brothers and lay teachers who taught at my high school were gifted educators. All these people played a great role in my becoming a priest because I saw in my teachers examples of great fidelity to the Church and service to people, and I wanted to be a person of that same fidelity and generosity.

Catholic Schools: Places of Service and Discernment

Our students are called to serve—not only in their schools but in their communities as well. Students at every level learn how important it is to reach out to the needs of others in the community. Students in our Catholic schools might provide entertainment during a lunch for seniors in the parish; they might make cards for the elderly and visit nursing homes; or they might participate in clothing and canned food drives at special holidays. Older students volunteer time to prepare food and serve the homeless at area centers such as Christ House. High school students serve in summer work camp programs, tutor underprivileged children or perform other service projects. In our diocese, we have added opportunities to impact the international community because of our proximity to Washington, D.C., the military bases within our diocese and surrounding areas and our multicultural communities. Because of the importance placed upon service in our schools, students in this area are vitally aware of the broader community. Students' activities have ranged from donating time and money in the face of natural disasters, to traveling to Haiti and to our missions in the Dominican Republic to help the poor.

Our Catholic schools are places where students encounter the question, "What does God want me to do?" This is a major question that brings parish communities and Catholic schools together, not only as it is considered throughout a student's years in Catholic schools, but also as it is answered by the subsequent choices that these young people make that influence the adult roles they undertake within parish life. Some are called to the married state; some to the single life; still others who are Catholic may respond to God's call to serve the Church through the priesthood or consecrated life. For those of us who have attended Catholic schools, the roots of our discernment were often found in the years of Catholic school education. Recognizing the value of our Catholic schools and making it known throughout the parish and community often serves as the catalyst to help young people choose their life's vocations.



Our Schools: We All Play a Part

Because of the mission of the Catholic school and its vital role in the formation of children and young people of the parish, all parishioners are called to be stewards of their Catholic school. Members of the parish share a role in continuing the development of the Church through the formation of our youth. As I travel around the diocese, I see parishes where senior citizens work with the school principal to tutor children in reading or math. Our Catholic schools also have benefited from the presence of parishioners who have decided to serve as teachers in our schools. Changing careers or having raised their children, some have made the decision to acquire the academic preparation required for teaching so they can give back to the Church and the Catholic schools what they have earlier received. Support for our schools includes giving donations to the scholarship fund or giving money to endowments to finance the current and future needs of our students and our Catholic schools. We are all members of the Mystical Body, the Church, and are responsible to help each other. Each member of the parish, regardless of age, has a significant role to play in our Catholic schools by sharing resources of time, talent, or treasure.

We have received the gift of baptism and share in the responsibility to fulfill Christ's final command to "go out and teach" (cf. Mt. 28:19). Our schools are a vital part of this evangelization among educators, students, parents, and our wider communities. I am grateful to my brother priests who recognize the need to communicate to parishioners the importance of supporting our Catholic schools. The Catholic school, as an integral part of the parish community, shares in the mission to spread the good news of Jesus Christ, and benefits from parish resources to accomplish this task. The parish benefits from the presence of the Catholic school, and the school, in turn, benefits from

the presence and involvement of its clergy and all parishioners. Since the educational goals of the Catholic school are rooted in Christian principles, "the school as a whole is inserted into the evangelical function of the Church. It assists and promotes faith education."⁵

We face the continual challenge of connecting our faith to the world around us, especially in a society that is often so alarmingly secular. Catholic education benefits the entire community, providing a Christian education to Catholic and non-Catholic students alike. Our 44 Catholic schools offer over \$200 million in taxpayer savings per year. Catholic school students perform well on standard testing. One hundred percent graduate from our Catholic high schools. More than 96 percent of our students go on to post-secondary education. We can be proud of our students in the Diocese of Arlington Catholic schools. They are young men and women who, formed in body, mind and soul, contribute to this great country, this community and our Church. I am grateful to so many of you who have helped our students—you have given so generously of your time, talent and treasure to advance the teaching mission of the Church. May we continue to partner together as we grow in wisdom, age and grace.

Closing Prayer

Lord Jesus, we ask you to bless all those involved in Catholic school education. Give our clergy and school administrators the courage and wisdom to lead our schools, to serve you as faithful witnesses and to uphold our mission to lead others to you. Give our educators who are willing to embrace this vocation of service the grace to teach and guide those entrusted to them with integrity and joyful enthusiasm. Give us the resources that we need to continue to offer programs of academic excellence, rooted in You and faithful to Your teachings, for all those who seek a Catholic school education. Give our parents the graces needed to be united with you and to guide their children to seek you with a sincere heart. Give our students an appreciation of the gift of a Catholic school education, keep them faithful and ready to challenge our culture because of the formation they have received. Finally, give all of our parishioners a deeper awareness of our universal call to holiness and our responsibility to lead others to seek and find you, especially through sharing in the work and mission of our Catholic schools. We ask your Holy Mother's prayerful intercession so that through, with, and in You, we too may "encourage and teach with patience" (II Tim. 4:2) and grow in wisdom, age and grace before God and before all (cf. Luke 2:52).



References

Congregation for Catholic Education, *The Religious Dimension of Education in a Catholic School: Guidelines for Reflection and Renewal* (Washington, DC: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1988).

Keating, Bishop J. R., *A Pastoral Letter on Catholic Schools* (Arlington, VA: Diocese of Arlington, 1990).

Lumen Gentium (1964) in A. Flannery, O.P. (ed), *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents* (Northport, NY: Costello Publishing, 1981).

Paul VI, Pope, *Declaration on Christian education* (Boston: Daughters of St. Paul, 1965).

Evangelii Nuntiandi (Boston: Daughters of St. Paul, 1975).

United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *To Teach as Jesus Did* (Boston: Daughters of St. Paul, 1972).

Our Hearts Were Burning Within Us (Washington, DC: USCCB, 1999).

National Directory for Catechesis (Washington, DC: USCCB, 2005).

Renewing our Commitment to Catholic Elementary and Secondary Schools in the New Millennium (Washington, DC: 2005).

(Endnotes)

1 *National Directory for Catechesis*, p.230.

2 *Declaration on Christian Education*, No. 8.

3 *Renewing our Commitment to Catholic Elementary and Secondary Schools in the New Millennium*, p. 4.

4 *Our Hearts Were Burning Within Us*, p. 14.

5 *The Religious Dimension of Education in a Catholic Schools*, No. 69.