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The Parent and the Catholic School

First in a series of pastoral letters from the Bishops of Alberta on Catholic Education

"After three days they found Jesus in the temple, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking questions." Luke 2:46

Luke's account of the child Jesus in the Temple is one of the few Gospel glimpses into the life of the Holy Family. We cannot help but feel the anxiety of Mary and Joseph as they search for their lost child, and their relief when they find him.

The account is not, however, a tale of a missing child. Indeed, what Mary treasures in her heart after being re-united with Jesus is that he found his way to the house of his Father. Now he leads all his disciples, including his earthly parents, to his heavenly Father.

We, the bishops of Alberta, invite you to treasure the gift of our Alberta Catholic schools. Their mission is to assist you in your great vocation as parents of nurturing the faith life of your children, so that they may follow the pathway to their heavenly Father.

We offer for your consideration five fundamental principles regarding the role of the Catholic parent in the faith life of the child, and regarding the relationship that Catholic parents should foster with our Catholic schools.

1. The Catholic parent is the primary faith educator of the child.

As the rite of baptism makes clear, you the parents are the first teachers of your children in the ways of faith. No other person or institution can take your place. Teachers in Catholic schools can assist you, but they can never transmit the faith as it is found in the lived experience of the family.

Faith, born in the family, must be nurtured in the classroom. As the first teachers of their children, parents should realize that the lived experience of faith must include regular participation in the Sacraments, especially Sunday Mass. Without continual nourishment, the faith life of the entire family will remain weak or dormant. When parents and children attend Mass together, and talk to each other about the experience, the faith life of the family flourishes and strengthens.

The family, as the "first church" of children, must be prayerful. When prayer is part of family ritual, it becomes the central "curriculum" of faith education in the family. Blessings at meals, bedtime prayers, and reading the Bible together are all important ways in which parents can help their children grow in faith.

2. All Catholic parents have a right to Catholic education for their children.

When Alberta became a province of Canada in 1905, minority education rights were established. For Catholics, this means that fully funded public education is available to them. Think of it: since the founding of our province, Catholic education has been part of the Alberta identity. Throughout our history Catholic schools have prospered, providing our children with a full academic instruction infused with spiritual formation and Gospel teaching. It is essential that Catholic parents support Catholic education, and be ever vigilant in protecting the constitutional right to it.

3. It is the duty of Catholic parents to entrust the education of their children to Catholic schools wherever it is possible.

We believe that Catholic schools should always be the first choice for Catholic parents.

Catholic Schools strive to provide excellence in education, and variety in course offerings. Sometimes, however, there may be situations where the Catholic schools cannot provide every learning opportunity that parents desire for their children. In such cases, Catholic parents who consider sending their children to secular schools when a Catholic school is readily available must consider the seriousness of such a decision.

4. Catholic Parents must be attentive to the faith education that the Catholic school provides.

Every child in a Catholic school must receive religious instruction, and parents should work with schools to ensure that their children are receiving ample catechetical instruction. Whether catechesis is presented in school, at home, or in the parish, only resources approved by the local bishop are to be used.

Parents should talk with their children about what they are learning in their catechetical classes, and at parent-teacher interviews they should discuss religious instruction. Each school should invite parents to liturgical celebrations at school. Parents should expect that religious instruction be given the same attention as all other academic pursuits. They also have a right to expect that the faith life of the school community be considered to be at least as important as its academic, athletic or social life.

5. Catholic parents must be actively involved in the school life of their children.

Parents should support Catholic schools to the best of their ability. In Catholic schools, as in any school, they are primary partners in every school venture. They should make every effort to attend school functions, especially liturgical celebrations.

Cooperate with the school in the education of your children. Open dialogue and communication with the school community is vital. Be aware of the proper channels of communication in your school system. This ensures a healthy relationship between home and school

Parents should actively participate in school councils. Fundraising and social event planning must be secondary to matters of faith education and formation. Concern for nurturing the faith of the children makes a Catholic school council distinctive.

We hope that you ponder deeply these five principles underlying the role of parents in Catholic education, and we encourage you to seek out other parents and caregivers, teachers, principals and trustees and discuss these matters with them. Treasure the gift of Catholic education with which you have been blessed, so that the Catholic school may more effectively assist you in your mission of nurturing the faith of the children God has entrusted to you.

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Archbishop of Edmonton

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