



**8421 - 101 Avenue
Edmonton, Alberta Canada T6A 0L1
Tel. (780) 469-1010 Fax (780) 465-3003**

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Catholic Education: Becoming Salt and Light for the World

In his homily concluding the 17th World Youth Day in Toronto on July 28th, Pope John Paul, drawing upon the gospel imperative, challenged the youth of the world to be “salt” and “light” for the world.

The world you are inheriting is a world which desperately needs a new sense of brotherhood and human solidarity. It is a world which needs to be touched and healed by the beauty and richness of God’s love. It needs witnesses to that love. The world needs salt. It needs you — to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world. Salt is used to preserve and keep. As apostles for the third millennium, your task is to preserve and keep alive the awareness of our Saviour Jesus Christ, especially in the celebration of the Eucharist, the memorial of his saving death and glorious resurrection. You must keep alive the memory of the words of life which he spoke, the marvelous works of mercy and goodness which he performed. You must constantly remind the world of the “power of the Gospel to save.” (Romans 1: 16)

Salt seasons and improves the flavour of food. Following Jesus, you have to chance and improve the “taste” of human history. With your faith, hope and love, with your intelligence, courage and perseverance, you have to humanize the world we live in, in the way that today’s reading from Isaiah indicates: “loose the bonds of injustice ... share your bread with the hungry ... remove the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil ... then your light shall rise in the darkness.” (Isaiah 58: 6-10)

In Catholic education we seek to keep alive the memory of the words of life which Jesus spoke, and the marvelous works of mercy and goodness which Jesus performed.

The heart and soul of Catholic education is following Jesus Christ, and our school system finds its very reason for existence in the communication of the Christian message. The goal of Catholic education is nothing less than a truly holistic formation of persons who will become living witnesses to the faith. This vision of Catholic education is inspired and sustained by an understanding of the Catholic school as a participant in the saving mission of the Church, a mission that is realized in and for the world.

Following Jesus, we must change and improve the “taste” of human history. With our faith, hope and love, and with our intelligence, courage and perseverance, we are called to humanize the world we live in.

As bishops, we are committed to working together with parents, educators, and trustees to ensure the integrity of Catholic education. This responsibility does not and cannot rest solely on the shoulders of a few individuals but is grounded in the interdependence of all members of the Catholic education community.

“Catholic education is inspired by the general principles enunciated by the Second Vatican Council concerning collaboration between the hierarchy and those who work in the apostolate. In consequence of the principle of participation and co-responsibility, the various groupings which constitute the educational community are, according to their several competencies, to be associated in the decision-making concerning the Catholic school and in the application of decisions once taken.” (The Catholic School, Sacred Congregation for Catholic Education 1977, 70)

Together we all face the task of developing schools into communities of faith in which the requirements of good citizenship will be learned in a vital way from the perspective of the message of the Gospel and the teachings of the Church. We are bound together by a common faith and in common service.

In order to realize this mission and instill the virtues of the Catholic community of faith in our youth, we require and employ the same basic principles that are employed in a family. In intimate circles of communion, love, and service we work to foster the virtues and lifestyle that will later serve the common good of our whole society. For this to be effective, a Catholic school, like a family, needs some time and a place for itself. It is a basic requirement if we are to submerge our youth in the culture of the faith.

In light of this mission, we would like to share a few reflections with you on the phenomenon of “shared facilities.” This has become a major issue of concern for Catholic Education in Alberta. During the past four years there has been increasing pressure on Catholic boards to resolve their need for space by negotiating with public school boards to construct one shared school building rather than having each build its own independent, stand-alone schools.

The pressure to build “shared facilities” has led to division within communities, overcrowding in some Catholic Schools, and many meetings with our community members, with government, and with School Boards, public and separate, in an attempt to provide educational space for our children. It is not our intention to close or make non-viable existing public schools. We see ourselves as an integral part of the educational endeavor in Alberta. Nevertheless, we are compelled to stress with the utmost clarity that the sharing of facilities creates grave problems for Catholic education.

Our concern with “shared facilities” does not arise out of any desire to segregate ourselves from the rest of society. When a family raises its children in the separate confines of its own home, it does not reject every other home and every other family. It is merely preparing its own children for the necessary and desirable interaction to come. Our insistence on having our own schools is not a rejection of society, but a preparation for full engagement in it.

In the same way, a separate Catholic school is not a rejection of the culture, but a designated environment of faith formation, which requires its own separate space for the sake of cohesion, unity, and growth. Far from rejecting our pluralistic society, we nurture these young citizens in an atmosphere of faith, so that they can make a unique contribution to that society. The particular contribution they do, in fact, make to our province because of their Catholic education is recognized and valued by our fellow citizens of all faiths.

To educate our youth in the context of the Gospel a certain distinct educational environment is needed. Catholic schools are places where the whole ethos and learning environment — the syllabus, curriculum and the total life of the school — are permeated with our faith. School buildings are blessed and dedicated as special places where study, prayer, and faith celebrations are an integral part of school life. Religious symbols and artifacts are displayed in each classroom, in the halls, and in signage both inside and outside the building. These are regularly used as teaching opportunities. Often there is a dedicated chapel in a Catholic school, and the Blessed Sacrament is reserved there. The shared faith life of the school permeates every part of the building and every activity that happens within and around it. Anything that detracts from this permeation, such as a “shared facility” situation, leads to the loss of something vital to Catholic education.

The Catholic community of Alberta must be allowed to continue the time-honoured and constitutionally-protected tradition of forming and educating our children in an environment we foster and fashion. Together we must continue to state clearly our position that “shared facilities” are not acceptable to the Catholic community.

There are many opportunities for ecumenical co-operation with people of diverse faith traditions. The “shared facilities” approach is not one of them. Ecumenism is based upon a conversion of hearts and upon prayer which will also lead to the necessary purification of past memories. With the grace of the Holy Spirit, Christians, inspired by love, by the power of the truth, and by a sincere desire for mutual forgiveness and reconciliation, are called to re-examine together their painful past and to inspire in everyone a renewed willingness to proclaim the Gospel. This mission is clearly outside the mandate of public schools.

From childhood, all of us are taught that sharing is good, and there are many creative ways in which distinct school systems, or distinct stand-alone neighbouring schools, can share resources so as to assist each other as they go about the mission of education in their own very different ways. There might on occasion be some situations in which there is a good reason for negotiating the construction of a community recreation facility alongside the school if the recreational facility is independently owned and managed, and does not contravene the Facilities Covenant of the Alberta Catholic School Trustees’ Association.

It is not true creative sharing, however, when two schools with significantly different educational philosophies are simply attached to one another, in a mechanical way, in the hope that this will somehow automatically produce added convenience or economic benefit. This uncreative strategy may look like sharing, but there is little real benefit to be gained from it. Furthermore, such arrangements not only impede the ability of a Catholic school to have the distinct environment which is needed for Catholic education, but also set the stage for the future merging of the two intertwined entities, at which point Catholic education ceases. This would be a loss to the Catholic community, but also to our wider society.

Canadian society continues to define itself as one in which community values (linguistic, cultural and religious) are to be respected rather than denied. We have staked our hope as a nation on the possibility of strengthening the common social fabric by safeguarding the distinctive quality of each thread within it. One such thread is the preservation of a vibrant Catholic education system, not just for our good but for the good of our whole society.

Catholic education creates a real hope for the future when we teach the next generation the mystery of the Body of Christ, where all members are important for the body's well being, and where the body brings together the members into a life-giving unity. The rise of nationalism and war around the globe demands such a unity — a unity that respects legitimate diversity and recognizes the God-given freedom and dignity of each human being, whatever their race, colour, or creed.

Real hope for the world is created when we form our youth in the spiritual principles of justice and of respect for all human life. Environmental crises plague us, yet we form real hope when we imbue our youth with the Biblical standard of a people who know themselves to be called by name as stewards of creation.

Our ongoing commitment to the development of Catholic education is one of our greatest contributions to the common fabric of society. By reinforcing this distinctive thread of what is best in our Church community, far from closing in on ourselves, we release formidable energies for the benefit of society, so that we may help each other to grow wiser, and to harmonize personal rights with the other requirements of social living in the world.

We conclude our reflections on Catholic education and shared facilities, with the prayer of John Paul II:

O Lord Jesus Christ, keep (our) young people in your love. Let them hear your voice and believe what you say, for you alone have the words of life. Teach them how to profess their faith, bestow their love, and impart their hope to others. Make them convincing witnesses to your Gospel in a world so much in need of your saving grace. Make them the new people of the Beatitudes, that they may be

the salt of the earth and the light of the world at the beginning of the Third Christian Millennium! Mary, Mother of the Church, protect and guide these young men and women of the Twenty-first Century. Keep us all close to your maternal heart. Amen.

+ Thomas Collins

Thomas Collins
Archbishop of Edmonton

Arthé Guimond

Arthé Guimond
Archbishop of Grouard-McLennan

+ Frederick Henry

Frederick Henry
Bishop of Calgary

+ Lawrence Huculak

Lawrence Huculak, OSBM
Bishop of Edmonton Eparchy

Luc Bouchard

Luc Bouchard
Bishop of St. Paul