

United States Catholic Conference
Teach Them!
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Catholic Church - Education

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TEACH THEM

A Statement of the
Catholic Bishops

United States
Catholic Conference

May 6, 1976

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TEACH THEM

Statement On Catholic Schools

May 6, 1976

I. Jesus commanded His disciples to "go and teach all nations." From a tiny upper room, by the Spirit, He sent them. With fire in their hearts He sent them. To every nation and age He sent them. From those early apostolic days the flame has been passed. In the 200 years of our own nation's history we can point with pride to St. Elizabeth Seton, Blessed John Neumann, to countless families who by their sense of educational mission answered the same call. The disciples of times past did not take Jesus' command lightly, even though they went with light hearts and willing hands into His vineyard the world. In this time and place, we believe no other answer, now or at any future moment, is acceptable for a people who bear within them that same faith. The only worthy response is a wholehearted "yes" to the Lord's command to "go and teach."

As faithful servants responding to His command, we seek to meet the needs of all who hear Jesus' message or may do so. Our 1972 pastoral, *To Teach as Jesus Did*, declared our support for Catholic education in its totality: schools, parish catechetical programs, campus ministry, young adult education, family life education, adult education. That commitment stands. In this statement we are specifically concerned with the Church's educational ministry to children and young people, especially as it is expressed in Catholic schools.

A total of 8.6 million Catholic youth in this country are now enrolled in formal religious education programs, 3.5 million in Catholic schools and 5.1 million in parish catechetical programs. But, as a report published earlier this year shows, 6.6 million (3.4 at the elementary and 3.2 at the secondary level), more than twice the number a decade ago, now are not enrolled in formal religious education programs. In our opinion this is

as much a pastoral problem as an educational one. Its solution will require additional data, thorough research and analysis, responsible decisions and an appropriate program of action.

In the meantime, it is obvious that all persons with a responsibility for the Church's educational ministry—to one degree or another that means all members of the Catholic community—should reach out to these 6.6 million. This suggests some immediate steps: e.g., diocesan and parish censuses; more adult, parent and family education; vigorous recruitment for Catholic schools and parish catechetical programs; more effective use of Catholic and other communications media for evangelization and religious education; completion of the National Catechetical Directory; sensitive dialogue with persons who are critical of some methods of religious education; zealous contact with parents who have abandoned much of the active practice of their faith. Indeed, alienation and lack of interest among some parents may well be reasons why a substantial number of the 6.6 million children and youth are not receiving formal religious education. Coping adequately with this problem will require much time and effort.

Our immediate and continuing concern is to provide the best possible education for children and young people in and out of Catholic schools. With respect to parish catechetical programs, many of the innovations and improvements of recent years deserve to be recognized and put more widely into effect.

As we have said, however, our focus here is primarily upon the schools. We wish to declare our belief in their future, to offer renewed encouragement to all our collaborators in the school apostolate, to call attention to signs of progress and hope, to point to new areas for investigation and action, and to do all this in a spirit of realistic hopefulness.

The remarkably positive response which has greeted *To Teach as Jesus Did* is especially heartening. Actions taken in light of its vision have done much to strengthen the Church's educational ministry. In this response we have discerned the providential working of the Spirit. The pastoral letter continues to afford many reasons for encouragement and confidence.

II. Four years ago we reaffirmed our commitment to Catholic schools; we now do so again. For we hold that "Catholic schools which realize the threefold purpose of Christian education, to teach doctrine, to build community and to serve, are the most effective means available to the Church for the education of children and young people."¹

The integration of religious truth and values with the rest of life, which is possible in these schools, distinguishes them from others. Here the Catholic for whom religious commitment is a matter of central importance finds an appreciation of religion which parallels his or her own. The integration is expressed above all in the lives of the teachers in Catholic schools whose daily witness to the meaning of mature faith and Christian living has a profound impact upon the education and formation of their pupils. On behalf of the entire Church we affirm our debt to these dedicated ministers of education, sisters, brothers, priests and lay people, who teach by what they are.

Our support of Catholic schools is matched by the support of millions of others, those who teach in them, who send their children to them, and who support them morally and financially. The present task seems to be less to win support for the schools than to mobilize the support which already exists.

Why do we and so many others continue to support Catholic schools in the face of many obstacles and burdens, problems not substantially different from those we outlined in our pastoral four years ago? The reasons are compelling. Generally these schools are notably successful educational institutions which offer not only high quality academic programs but also instruction and formation in the beliefs, values and traditions of Catholic Christianity. They are significantly effective in preparing students for life in today's Church and society. They instill in children and young people indispensable discipline of mind and heart. They have a highly positive impact on adult religious behavior.²

Another benefit of Catholic schools deserves mention. They can be a focal point for dedication, energy and generosity of many different members of the Catholic community. This con-

certed focus, however, must not preclude an active participation in other forms of educational and ecclesial ministry. Catholic schools therefore have a rich potential for strengthening the bonds which unite a community.

In a significant way Catholic schools bear witness to the importance of religion in our local civic communities and in our society as a whole. When a sizeable segment of the American people undertakes to build and operate a great system of schools at considerable sacrifice, serious citizens are thereby encouraged to reflect upon the importance of religion in human life. Without Catholic and other church-related schools, spiritual values would find far less support in American society.

It is gratifying and encouraging that *To Teach as Jesus Did* has helped strengthen the Catholic school apostolate. Evidence of this comes from many sources, including the National Catholic Educational Association and many religious communities, which have themselves played a laudable role in "giving form to the vision" of educational ministry embodied in the pastoral. Among the beneficial results arising, at least in part, from that effort are the following.

The identification of Catholic schools as institutions which express the threefold purpose of Catholic education, stated in the Pastoral as to teach, build community and serve, has become more clear. Concrete priorities of the schools consistent with this threefold purpose have been brought into sharper focus.³

Programs for the formation of teachers have been strengthened. There has been increased recognition that all share in the educational ministry, not just those specifically assigned to "teach religion."⁴

The reciprocal relationship of the Catholic school and the community it serves has been recognized and fostered. New ways have been sought and put into effect by which the school can be of even greater direct service to the community.

Increased attention has been given to the need for a total, integrated approach to Catholic education involving schools and other educational programs. Competition and duplication have

been reduced; collaboration and coordination have been increased. Significant in these encouraging developments has been the role played by parish boards of education and parish councils which have enabled the Catholic community in an orderly fashion to identify and respond to the educational needs of the total community. More and more, schools are being recognized and used as resource centers for total parish programs of education.

Positive changes in the instructional program have been carried forward, including greater emphasis on personalized learning which meets the unique needs and capabilities of individual students. Growing attention has been given to education for justice and for authentic human liberation.

Educational planning and the practice of accountability have been encouraged. At the same time a new thrust has emerged in educational administration, emphasizing not only technical skills but the role of the administrator as one who fosters community within both schools and school systems.

Appreciation has increased for the fact that the Catholic school is not simply an institution which offers academic instruction of high quality, but, even more important, is an effective vehicle of total Christian formation. The tendency to emphasize one aspect at the expense of the other has given way to recognition that both are necessary and possible, and indeed are being accomplished in Catholic schools.

In short, much that has happened in the past four years testifies to the fact that the schools not only remain an important part of the Catholic Church in the United States but continue to grow in effectiveness as that is determined by both educational and religious measures. This favorable judgment is strongly reinforced by a recently published report on educational research by the National Opinion Research Center showing that Catholic schools have a significant positive impact on those who attend them and that the Catholic public is highly supportive of them.⁵ In view of all this, our commitment to the schools is clear and undiminished.

The Second Vatican Council asked the Church "to spare no sacrifice" for Catholic schools

which care "for the poor, for those who are without the help and affection of family, and those who do not have the faith."⁶ In many places in the United States the Church's response has been an extremely large human and economic investment in schools whose pupils are, in the main, economically disadvantaged children residing in the poverty areas of large cities. The funding of this large investment has come from the self-sacrifice of the children's parents, support of fellow parishioners and the generosity of contributors to diocesan funds for the subsidy of schools which lack adequate parish support for all educational expenses. This action has been notably productive in the Black community where the Catholic school "has been and remains the strongest point of contact for many Black people with the Catholic Church. . . The Catholic school is a constant witness to the talented and creative potential which Black youth possess and which needs only opportunity and educational nurturing."⁷ Substantially the same may be said of Catholic schools which serve the unique needs of Hispanic and native American children from low income families.

A steadily increasing number of economically poor parents are making heroic personal sacrifices to raise funds for the continuation of their Catholic schools. These parents are convinced that Catholic school education affords their children a realistic and hopeful opportunity "to break out of the hellish cycle of poverty,"⁸ and to move into the mainstream of our nation's good living. These schools are therefore serving a critical human need within the context of a complete education which includes religious instruction and guidance.

The challenge confronting the total Catholic community is to approximate the self-sacrifice of poverty belt parents by increasing its contributions to interparochial and diocesan funds for the ongoing and expanded support of schools in need of annual subsidy.

III. To sustain this momentum we endorse developments and trends favorable to the continuation of strong and effective Catholic schools. In this connection we turn now to the challenges and opportunities confronting specific groups involved in educational ministry.

Parents

Parental confidence in Catholic schools, a quiet but eloquent witness reinforced by great personal sacrifice, produces in others an awareness of the importance of Catholic education's ideals and values. This confidence also encourages teachers to be available and open to parents who seek to be meaningfully involved in their children's schooling.

Parent-teacher conferences, home and school associations, lay boards and committees, and teacher-aide programs are making progress because many thoughtful parents participate faithfully in these cooperative efforts to enrich their children's education. The benefits of home and school partnership are so evident that all parents should be made aware of their duty to be full partners with the school. The school administrator who does not recognize the importance of this cooperation may be depriving pupils of one of the unique advantages of Catholic schooling. In this cooperation there is a kind of reciprocal accountability; of school to parent and parent to school. Today's Catholic school is more than a means for safeguarding faith and virtue; it is a center in which parents and teachers, guided by the Holy Spirit, collaborate in giving children a complete Catholic education.

Teachers

The new awareness that all members of the faculty, at least by their example, are an integral part of the process of religious education has brought with it a more conscientious approach to the selecting of teachers and the professional development of staff. Teachers' life style and character are as important as their professional credentials. We commend this trend and urge the development of appropriate ceremonies by which the Church can publicly express its appreciation for their role in the Church's educational ministry.

Teacher-initiated instructional programs are implementing the principles contained in the pastoral. Educational approaches emphasizing doctrine, community and service as central concepts have helped teachers implement methodologies which are responsive to the individual needs of students. Reciprocally the thrust toward personalized learning with emphasis on the total

educational environment makes clear that the atmosphere and relationships in the school are as much the focus of the Catholic school as is the formal religious education class. In other wider applications numerous faculties have used the pastoral in self studies that are having profound, positive effects on the daily experiences of the school.

Administrators

In the area of school administration we note with great satisfaction the growing awareness and acceptance of the twin concepts of accountability and evaluation. This represents a recognition of the school's obligation to serve and be accountable to the Catholic community in relation to the three-fold ideal set forth in the pastoral.

We urge administrators to exercise their gifts of educational leadership by promoting structures and cooperative procedures which will render such accountability and evaluation meaningful and useful to all in the Catholic educational community—parents, teachers and the Catholic community generally. They should exercise their responsibility particularly with reference to the selection, motivation and development of teaching personnel, keeping ever in mind the apostolic goals and character of the Catholic school.

Pastors and the Community

The leadership role of pastors and their associates is a significant factor in the Catholic school apostolate. Through their words, their presence and their support in so many ways they supply a needed leadership to those who look to such commitment as a sign of the importance of their own sacrifices.

Recognition of the pastor's increased importance as a facilitator of community among the professional educational staff of the parish is a positive development. The members of such a total educational team view one another as colleagues in a common work carried on through a variety of approaches.

Pastoral leadership can likewise foster in the Catholic community the realization that Catholic schools in parishes and dioceses can be immense spiritual assets which benefit all and give witness to the faith of the entire community.

Such schools, like all other aspects of the educational ministry, deserve the support of all members of the Catholic community because, directly or indirectly, they serve all. Not to support such schools merely because they do not enroll all the children of the community would, in our opinion, reflect an inaccurate and damaging view of the Church's educational mission.

Community support is manifested also by the presence of the larger community as volunteer staff for the parish educational program and by the witness to that program which these persons give in their contacts with friends and neighbors.

United States Catholic Conference

We ask the Committee on Education and the Department of Education to consider the following steps.

1. Careful study of recent research on Catholic schools, especially as it relates to their progress toward the goals set forth in *To Teach as Jesus Did*. In a special way there is a need for careful identification of the facts, both quantitative and qualitative, concerning the Catholic school's role in educating those who have suffered economic deprivation or experienced discrimination because of racial, cultural or linguistic differences. This will help both to demonstrate the contribution now being made in this way by Catholic schools to American society generally and to foster the formulation of proposals for further steps to maintain and strengthen this commitment, including the possibility of some form of nationwide action.

Professional guidance and assistance are also needed for making realistic predictions of future enrollment and estimates of future costs, notably for teachers' salaries. We will be assisted by documented success reports describing how particular school systems or individual schools have solved problems relating to downward enrollment, soaring expenses, tensions in governance, and disputes about religious instruction. For it is entirely possible that a solution in one diocese or individual school within a diocese can be replicated elsewhere. We hope also for the discovery or development of promising models, instruments and processes to facilitate educational planning at the local level.

2. Development and promotion at all levels, local, diocesan and national, of effective programs of public relations on behalf of Catholic schools.

3. Encouragement for the development and organization of parents, teachers, and other citizens which can articulate the just demands of the nonpublic school community with respect to government aid.

4. Pursuit and publicizing of every appropriate constitutional possibility of public assistance to Catholic and other nonpublic school pupils.

IV. We urge that the entire nation realistically acknowledge the contributions which Catholic and other nonpublic schools make to the total educational enterprise in our country. Although Congress and several state legislatures, reflecting growing public appreciation of this kind, have expressed such recognition in recent years by enacting programs to assist the education of nonpublic school children, it is a deplorable fact that courts have often overturned this legislation for reasons we and others consider tenuous and at times offensive. In doing so, they have inflicted a harsh injustice on supporters of nonpublic schools, increased their burdens, and caused serious suffering to many of them. It is our hope that this situation will be corrected by more perceptive rulings which reflect the authentic American tradition, firmly rooted in our history, concerning Church and state, and which recognize both the needs and rights of nonpublic school students and parents and the best interests of American education generally. We affirm, as Pope Pius XI did some 40 years ago, that "Catholics will never feel, whatever may have been the sacrifices already made, that they have done enough for the support and defense of their schools and for the securing of laws that will do them justice."⁹

V. Last September 15, the day following the canonization of St. Elizabeth Seton, who is celebrated as the foundress of the parochial school system in the United States, Pope Paul VI spoke to some 80 of us concerning his hopes for our country. He spoke among other things of Catholic schools.

"We know the difficulties involved in preserv-

ing the Catholic schools and the uncertainties of the future," he said, "and yet we rely on the help of God and your own zealous collaboration and untiring efforts so that Catholic schools can continue, despite grave obstacles, to fulfill (their) providential role at the service of genuine Catholic education and at the service of your country."

How consistent this is with the first command of Jesus to teach. We receive these words of the Holy Father in the light of the centuries-old tradition of those who have given us so much that we take for granted. Our call now is to all who see with undimmed sight this same apostolic responsibility as their own and will join in carrying out this commitment in the years ahead: the commitment of handing on the faith to the next generation, not merely preserved, but more glorious, more efficacious, more valued by those who in their turn will take up the charge to "go and teach."

¹ *To Teach as Jesus Did* (Washington, D.C.: National Conference of Catholic Bishops, November 1972), #101.

² Andrew M. Greeley, William C. McCready, and Kathleen McCourt, *Catholic Schools in a Declining Church* (Kansas City: Sheed & Ward, Inc. 1976).

³ "To Teach as Jesus Did: Educational Developments since the Pastoral," *Notre Dame Journal of Education* (Vol. 6, No. 3, Fall 1975).

⁴ *Qualities and Competencies of Teaching Religion* (Washington, D.C.: National Catholic Educational Association, 1973).

⁵ Greeley, McCready and McCourt, *ibid.*

⁶ *Declaration on Christian Education*, Vatican Council II, the Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents, #9.

⁷ "The Crisis of Catholic Education in the Black Community," *Special Statement* (National Office for Black Catholics, January 15, 1976).

⁸ Letter of Pope Paul VI to French Social Action Groups meeting in France, July 1st, 1970.

⁹ *Christian Education of Youth*, The Encyclical Letter of His Holiness Pope Pius XI, December 31, 1929, (reprinted by the United States Catholic Conference, Washington, D.C., 1968).

