

## Mass for Catholic Education Week

[Acts 18:1-8; Psalm 98; John 16:16-20]

The theme for this year's Catholic Education Week is well chosen: "United in Prayer and Grateful for Catholic Schools." Prayer acknowledges our common dependence upon Almighty God and gives voice to our heartfelt plea that He, by His love and mercy, will inspire and bring to accomplishment all that unfolds within our schools for the sake of our beloved students. By prayer, too, we express our gratitude to God. What we have in Catholic education is ultimately God's gift, and the only appropriate response to God's graciousness towards us is thanksgiving. We are, indeed, grateful to God – very grateful – for the gift of Catholic education.

Simultaneously, gratitude must be extended to everyone involved in this beautiful enterprise. Allow me to make reference first of all to the truly heroic efforts of trustees, administrators, teachers, support staff, parents and students during this long period in which our schools are closed due to the pandemic. This is truly remarkable and immensely inspiring. In the name of Alberta's Bishops I express to everyone our deepest thanks. Beyond these present efforts, I also have in mind all the good I have seen in my visits to schools and meetings with trustees, administration and teachers; good that I shall certainly see again whenever we get back to "normal". To everyone I express my heartfelt gratitude and that of my brother Bishops.

Now, implicit in our action of prayer and thanks is a special call of God to each of us. That call is to vigilance. The prayers and activities of Catholic Education Week place in high relief the beautiful fact that Catholic education is a gift. As a gift from God, it is a treasure of which we must be careful stewards and over which we must exercise close watch. The responsibility of vigilance is not something to be taken lightly. Indeed, we have recently seen for ourselves, in the midst of the pandemic, just how vitally important careful vigilance is.

Consider how far we have come over the past two months in our fight against COVID-19. You will recall how, at the outset, we didn't know what this strange disease was, where it originated, how it was transmitted, what protective measures were necessary, and so on. Now, things are different. Caution still abounds, and rightly so, yet the virus and how to cope with it is better understood. Fear and panic have abated and people now are feeling the beginning of hope.

This positive development can be attributed in large part to vigilance, the close and competent vigilance exercised by our medical officials. Over time they have established standards of measure and have closely watched the data to look for trends. Because they came to know what to look for and were painstakingly vigilant, the curve has been flattened and we are beginning a return to some degree of normalcy.

Like our health officers, we in Catholic education also have standards against which we can measure achievements as we exercise watchfulness. Ours, though, are not rooted in medical science; they spring from the Word of God, and in particular from the Word of God Incarnate, Jesus Christ. The name we give to our standards of measure is "marks". Here I am not referring to what appears in a student's evaluation, but the qualities that identify a school as Catholic. There are five, all rooted in Jesus, the Son of God. To be specific, they arise out of seeing Jesus. Allow me to explain that.

In the passage from St. John's Gospel, Jesus is speaking about seeing him. He tells his disciples that soon they will not see him and then a little later they will see him. The immediate context is his imminent return to the Father through the paschal mystery, so in a first sense the "not seeing" refers to his death and the "seeing again" to his resurrection. The first brings sadness and the second joy. There is a broader sense here, too, which we must not miss. To see the Risen Lord is to gaze upon the truth; it is to perceive the reality and power of God's love and the deepest meaning and purpose of human existence. Not to see this can lead only to deep sadness; seeing the truth revealed in the Risen Lord is the source of profound joy.

It is precisely through this contemplation of the truth manifested in Christ that we awaken to the standards or marks that must characterize every school that has our Lord at its centre and bears the name Catholic. To see him who died that all might live is to see the incomparable and unsurpassable dignity of every human being, which is the heart of a genuinely Christian anthropology – Mark 1. The sight of him who rose from the dead makes clear to our vision the meaning of history and thus the specifically Catholic worldview that must animate our schools – Mark 2. To see Christ is to gaze upon the One who gave to his Church the great commission to teach and make disciples, and in this light we see that all curriculum must be infused with the message of Christ and the tenets of the Christian faith – Mark 3. In that same charge, Jesus sent his disciples forth not only as teachers but also as witnesses, from which we arrive at the awareness that a school cannot be Catholic if it is not sustained by authentic Gospel witness – Mark 4. Finally, to see Jesus is to look upon the One who, by his death and resurrection and gift of the Holy Spirit, established the Church as a communion of believers, which prompts us to ensure that a spirituality of communion pervades every Catholic school and educational institution – Mark 5.

These are our standards of measure. From Jesus, we know what to look for. Against these five expectations we monitor trends to ensure that, in every case, we are never less than fully Catholic. This is a call incumbent upon all stakeholders. Yes, Bishops, trustees and superintendents have a particular responsibility in this regard, but Catholic education is so precious, its flourishing so important, that all must share in this duty. As we heard in the passage from *Acts*, St. Paul, the great Apostle who was given a unique responsibility for vigilance by preaching the Word and watching over Christian communities, did not hesitate to draw others to himself that this task might be shared. Similarly, all are invited – teachers, support staff, parents, parishioners, lay associations, even the students themselves – to participate in the call to watch over the gift of Catholic education so as to protect and strengthen it now and in the future.

In this mass we are united in prayer and one in our gratefulness for the gift of Catholic education. May the Lord make us wise stewards and careful overseers. May his vision be ours as we monitor the trends in our schools and measure them against the five marks of our Catholic identity. Through our vigilance, may we see the trend lines not flatten but grow always upward, as the Lord leads our schools to be ever more completely Catholic communities of disciples, who live in the joy of seeing and knowing Christ the Risen Lord.

Most Reverend Richard W. Smith  
St. Joseph's Basilica (livestreamed)  
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