

In Support of Catholic Elementary and Secondary Schools

UNITED STATES CATHOLIC CONFERENCE

November 1990

Our Conviction

The year 1997 will mark the twenty-fifth anniversary of our pastoral letter, *To Teach As Jesus Did*. Now, in 1990, seven years before that anniversary, we wish to commit ourselves to certain seven year goals as a sign of our affirmation of the principles laid down in that pastoral. It is our deep conviction that Catholic schools must exist for the good of the Church. Our concern for the importance of Catholic schools is set in the context of the responsibility we have by our episcopal office to ensure total Catholic education in all its phases for all ages.

In 1972 we stated: "Of the educational programs available to the Catholic community, Catholic schools afford the fullest and best opportunity to realize the three-fold purpose [message, community, and service] of Christian education among children and young people" (*To Teach As Jesus Did* [= TT], 101). In our National Catechetical Directory, *Sharing the Light of Faith*, we included worship among the purposes of Christian education, and now speak about the fourfold purpose of Catholic schools (215).

We are encouraged that our statements are reflective of the teachings of our Holy Father, Pope John Paul II, and of the official documents from the Holy See. Speaking to Catholic educators in New Orleans in 1987, the Holy Father said:

The presence of the Church in the field of education is wonderfully manifested in the vast and dynamic network of schools

and educational programs extending from the preschool through the adult years. *The entire ecclesial community*—bishops, priests, religious, the laity—the Church in all her parts, is called to value ever more deeply the importance of this task and mission, and to continue to give it full and enthusiastic support (emphasis in the original) (*Catholic Education: Gift to the Church, Gift to the Nation* [= CE] p. 12).

Further in the same address, the Holy Father said:

As an institution the Catholic school has to be judged extremely favorably if we apply the sound criterion: "You will know them by their deeds" (Mt 7:16)...The heroic sacrifices of generations of Catholic parents in building up and supporting parochial and diocesan schools must never be forgotten. Rising costs may call for new approaches, new forms of partnership and sharing, new uses of financial resources. But I am sure that all concerned will face the challenge of Catholic schools with courage and dedication, and not doubt the value of the sacrifices to be made (CE, p. 15).

In 1977, the Sacred Congregation for Catholic Education wrote that "the Church is absolutely convinced that the educational aims of the Catholic school in the world of today perform an essential and unique service for the Church herself" (*The Catholic School*, 15).

A decade later, the same congregation issued *The Religious Dimension of Education in a Catholic School*. If anything, the congregation in 1988 was more insistent on the role of the

school in the Church: “[T]he Congregation offers enthusiastic encouragement to those dioceses and Religious Congregations who wish to establish new schools. Such things as film clubs and sports groups are not enough; not even classes in catechism instruction are sufficient. What is needed is a school” (41).

In 1983, the bishops of the United States recognized the importance and the role of Catholic education in the formation of Hispanic youth:

Catholic educators in the United States have a long record of excellence and dedication to the instruction and formation of millions of Catholic faithful. Now they must turn their skills to responding to the educational needs of Hispanics (*The Hispanic Presence: Challenge and Commitment*, p. 18).

In 1984, ten of our brother bishops of African American ancestry also wrote about the need for Catholic schools in *What We Have Seen and Heard: A Pastoral Letter on Evangelization from the Black Bishops of the United States*. They reaffirmed that:

Today the Catholic school still represents for many in the Black community, especially in the urban areas, an opportunity for quality education and character development.... The Catholic school has been and remains one of the chief vehicles of evangelization within the Black community. We cannot overemphasize the tremendous importance of parochial schools for the Black community. We even dare to suggest that the efforts made to support them and to insure their continuation are a touchstone of the local Church's sincerity in the evangelization of the Black community (p. 28, St. Anthony Messenger Press).

In *To Teach As Jesus Did*, we called upon parents, educators, and pastors “to ensure

the continuance and improvement of Catholic schools” (119). And we pointed to specific areas of concern: greater fiscal responsibility, quality education for the disadvantaged, and the need to look at alternative models. Much progress has been made. More needs to be done. We encourage our parents and pastors who presently are shouldering the onerous task of educating our youth in Catholic schools. In our day, it is more important than ever that they give their active support to Catholic schools.

We reaffirm our commitment to Catholic schools. We invite the whole Catholic community to address with us these and other issues of concern.

Our Successes and Challenges

In this new decade, there is good news about Catholic schools and there are challenges.

Research has shown that Catholic schools directly impact the future lives of their students. Graduates of Catholic schools are more closely bonded to the Church, more deeply committed to adult religious practices, happier, and more supportive of religious perspectives on women and have more confidence in other people, more benign images of God, and a greater awareness of the responsibility for moral decision making. They give in a committed fashion more contributions to the Catholic Church (National Opinion Research Center [NORC] 1988 General Social Survey).

Research by the United States Department of Education over the last decade has found that Catholic school students consistently outscore students in the public schools in reading, mathematics, and science. They are especially effective in educating minority and low-income students, much more so than the public schools or other private schools (National Assessment of Educational Progress Studies).

There are also some serious challenges facing Catholic schools. Costs have increased 500 percent in the last twenty years, over twice the Consumer Price Index. Fewer than 200 Catholic schools have opened since 1966 and only thirty of those were in the ten largest (arch)dioceses. In the last ten years, the percentage of potential Catholic students attending Catholic schools has dropped from 33 percent for elementary schools to 27 percent and from 22 percent for secondary schools to 19 percent. Much of this decline is due to shifting demographics and would be reversed if parishes and clusters of parishes opened schools where Catholic families now live. In many wealthy suburban areas, some parents perceive that the free public schools are better than Catholic schools, in spite of the research to the contrary. Other parents perceive that the public schools offer their children a broader cultural experience and, as a result, they opt for the public school education.

There are some dioceses that do not have education boards or commissions connected to their schools but, rather, operate with the traditional parish governance structure. There is, therefore, a lack of consistency in the relationship of the Catholic laity to the schools. Dioceses should be encouraged to study patterns of school governance and financial development with the goal of enhancing the role of parents and other interested laity, e.g., alumni, grandparents, and parishioners.

In 1972, we declared that we were well aware of the problems which face Catholic schools in the United States. We also said that we wished "to make our position clear. For our part, as bishops, we reaffirm our conviction that Catholic schools...are the most effective means available to the Church for the education of children and young people." (TT, 118).

Therefore, we called "upon all members of the Catholic community to do everything in their power to maintain and strengthen

Catholic schools" which embrace the fourfold purposes of Catholic education (TT, 118).

We will not waver from that conviction.

Our Future Goals for 1997

By the twenty-fifth anniversary of *To Teach As Jesus Did* in 1997, we commit ourselves unequivocally to the following goals:

1. That Catholic schools will continue to provide high quality education for all their students in a context infused with gospel values.
2. That serious efforts will be made to ensure that Catholic schools are available for Catholic parents who wish to send their children to them.
3. That new initiatives will be launched to secure sufficient financial assistance from both private and public sectors for Catholic parents to exercise this right.
4. That the salaries and benefits of Catholic school teachers and administrators will reflect our teaching as expressed in *Economic Justice for All*.

In order to accomplish these interrelated goals, we commit ourselves to the following initial actions.

Stewardship

We will teach clearly, consistently, and continuously that we are all stewards of the mysteries of God and disciples of Jesus Christ. This will include an understanding that God has given us gifts which are to be shared with others in the practical application of discipleship and stewardship to which all are called. We will invite all Catholics to share in the apostolate of Catholic education, realizing

that financial support is a means of responding to God's call to stewardship.

Development

We commit ourselves to the establishment of diocesan educational development offices or similar initiatives that will be concerned with soliciting funds from other sources and wisely investing the money. These development efforts should include some form of endowment for Catholic schools established in accordance with diocesan guidelines. We would hope that these efforts would be in place by the fall of 1995.

Recognizing that some dioceses may need assistance in establishing and fostering their development efforts, we will open a national development office by January 1992. In addition to its educational efforts, this office will be charged with the responsibility to ensure ethical practices in the Church's development efforts. Furthermore, we challenge our successful business and community leaders to join us in supporting Catholic schools. Recognizing that there are a number of corporations which limit their charitable contributions to national projects, it is our intention to convene a group of diocesan bishops and chief executive officers from the business community to consider funding national efforts on behalf of Catholic schools.

Ensuring Parental Rights

In union with the Holy Father, we have consistently taught that parents are the first and foremost educators of their children. Almost seventy years ago, we assisted the Sisters of the Holy Names of Jesus and Mary to bring suit against one state that sought to encroach on these rights of parents. In *Pierce v. Society of Sisters*, the Supreme Court of the United States recognized that choosing the education most appropriate for the child was both

the right and responsibility of parents. In 1983, in *Mueller v. Allen*, the Court held that states could constitutionally assist parents in defraying the costs associated with those educational choices. The time has come for all citizens of the United States, especially those who govern in their name, to fortify this right and promote this responsibility.

Recognizing that Catholic schools are a significant part of education in the United States, we call on all citizens to join with us in supporting federal and state legislative efforts to provide financial assistance to all parents which will ensure that they can afford to choose the type of schooling they desire for their children. For our part, we are so convinced that the Catholic community needs to enter seriously into both national and state educational discussions that we are taking immediate steps to educate all citizens of the United States about the importance of assuring that all parents have a meaningful choice of schools.

Recognizing the long-term nature of convincing the nation that parents should have not only a choice in selecting educational opportunities for their children, but also financial support to exercise that choice, we are taking immediate steps to accomplish this end.

We support and encourage the formation of diocesan, state, and national organizations of Catholic school parents. To assist in this effort, we will provide, through outside funding obtained by the General Secretary, two million dollars in seed money for a national office, which will provide assistance to diocesan and state groups and found a national parent organization.

Furthermore, from this seed money, we will fund one additional staff position in the Department of Education; the sole responsibility of this person will be to work with diocesan superintendents of schools and parent representatives to establish a national

communications network. We will also fund one additional staff position in the Office of Government Liaison; this person's sole responsibility will be to work on educational issues.

Strategic Plan

Because of our long-term commitment to Catholic schools, we are instructing our Committee on Education to develop a strategic plan for Catholic schools to be presented for our consideration no later than 1995.

Conclusion

We want to acknowledge that today's children and youth are our future. Catholic schools have provided and will continue to provide an excellent total education. In doing so, they have also fostered the improvement of all of education in the United States. Many of the reforms being suggested for public education (school-based management, greater parental involvement, values education, increased homework, more rigorous courses, and even school uniforms) have long been associated with the success of Catholic schools. Our inner city Catholic schools have been especially prominent in providing

quality education for the most disadvantaged to improve their future status in society. Our Church and our nation have been enriched because of the quality of education provided in Catholic schools over the last 300 years. We express our deep and prayerful thanks to the religious, priests, and laity who formed this ministry. Now we are called to sustain and expand this vitally important ministry of the Church.

In December 1989, the Administrative Board of the United States Catholic Conference authorized the General Secretary to convene a special "blue ribbon committee on financing Catholic elementary and secondary schools." Aware of the crisis existing in many parts of the United States in financing Catholic schools, the committee was charged with recommending a new effort to assist bishops as they confront the realities of financing schools. The committee made its report to the USCC Committee on Education, which unanimously approved this statement in June 1990. This present document, *In Support of Catholic Elementary and Secondary Schools*, was approved by the general membership of the United States Catholic Conference on November 21, 1990, and is authorized for publication as a document of the United States Catholic Conference by the undersigned.

Monsignor Robert N. Lynch
General Secretary
NCCB/USCC