

ARCHDIOCESAN PRINCIPALS/PASTORS MEETING

January 13, 2011

Archbishop J. Peter Sartain

Every year as part of the Catechumenate preparing candidates for Baptism, Confirmation, and the Eucharist, our parishes conduct what is called the “Presentations” (in Latin, “Traditiones”) or ritual handing-over to the catechumens of two precious gifts of the Church, the Lord’s Prayer and the Creed. As the rite explains, these two documents have been considered a summary of the Church’s faith and prayer from ancient times. They are treasures so precious that they are handed over carefully, in a liturgical rite, to emphasize their importance

"Tradition" comes from the Latin "traditio," meaning "handing over"; for we are called to "hand over," to "pass along" a precious gift we have received. You and I have been bequeathed a tradition, a vision of life and faith--and we are charged to hand it on with care, as we would a precious family legacy. As I begin this presentation this afternoon, I would like to emphasize that in “handing on” what we have received through Catholic education, we are talking not simply about a set of Catholic values by which we want our children to live. Rather, the Church and all its ministries flow from Christ. It is Christ Jesus we teach, not simply Christian values. It is always our hope and prayer that in Catholic schools everything we do is focused on teaching Jesus Christ and providing our children with a living encounter with Him.

Families pass on what is important to them, what gives them an identity and a sense of purpose. As a generation of principals and pastors called to the mission of Catholic education, you and I share more than a plan devised to ensure efficiency in the accomplishment of our

objectives. We are charged with passing on what is in fact the only valid purpose, the only perfect vision, the only true understanding of life. What is that vision? At its most basic level, we could put it this way: we were made for God. Those of us who memorized the Baltimore Catechism remember that was the first truth we learned about God and about ourselves. God made us for Himself, i.e., He made us for love. And in His love, He gave us what was most precious to Him – His Son, who is now our most precious treasure.

The evangelist John, as he attempted to describe the origin and purpose of the universe in the first chapter of his gospel, put it this way:

Of his fullness
we have all had a share--
love following upon love.
(Jn 1,16)

We have been handed a legacy of faithful love, which has its origin in God and has been enfleshed in human history in Christ Jesus. Generation after generation has shared this life in faith, in acts of love following upon love following upon love. We have all been on the receiving end of that sharing. It is a progression of love that never loses energy since its substance is God Himself. God never ceases to give us His life, His fullness; were He to do so, we would cease to exist. It is as simple as that.

Thus we Catholics believe that the first and most important thing that can be said about human persons is that, made in God's image and likeness, we are spiritual beings. To ignore that truth is to totally misunderstand ourselves, and to use anything else as a starting point for study is to head for a dead end. But having said that, I am not implying that to be teachers in a Catholic school means that in Algebra class we have to look for spiritual truth in mathematical formulas, or that in physics class we fabricate ways of proving how God is seen

in the internal dynamism of the atom, or that in history class show that God was clearly on one side or the other in international politics.

The fact that we are spiritual beings--and that in Catholic schools we hand on a religious tradition--means much more than that. To say that our tradition of faith touches every subject we teach does not mean that we must scrutinize each fact in order to squeeze out, however tenuously, its religious significance. Instead it means we teach our students that all of life bears the thumbprint of God's creative power; so that as they grow older and begin to put facts and figures and theorems to work, they will do so faith-fully, responsibly, cooperatively, morally, and creatively, with a view toward glorifying God and loving their fellow human beings. Simply put, we strive to teach them to see themselves and the world around them as God does. We strive to teach them that Jesus Christ is the center of all we are and do.

What does God see as He looks at His creation? The Book of Genesis tells us that He sees Himself. We were created to be the mirrors of God, His image and likeness. There is a unity and goodness to all that God has created, a unity and goodness we are called to make manifest. Thomas Merton called this unity the "hidden wholeness." You and I are called to hand on a vision of life which will some day help our students comprehend that hidden wholeness, that pervasive presence of God in every place and every person. In today's world that task is increasingly difficult. Nations and peoples seem to be more and more alienated from one another and are involved in various levels of conflict. With understandable awe at the wonder of human ingenuity, science at times ignores its own deeply human implications. For example, who "owns" human eggs fertilized in a dish? What rights do those embryos – human beings – have? What young people are confronted with today is not a hidden wholeness but a very visible brokenness.

The word of God, handed on through our Catholic Tradition, has much to say to our children and our world. We give witness to God's view of His creation--a view of a living

organism and a human community all created for His love and glory. We lose that vision at our peril.

In his book *The Way of Man*, Martin Buber tells six stories of the Jewish Hasidic tradition in order to examine their relevance for our day. One of my favorites is titled "Resolution."

An hasid of the Rabbi Lublin once decided to try fasting from one Sabbath to the next. Toward the end, on Friday afternoon, he began to suffer such cruel thirst that he thought he would die. He saw a well, went up to it, and prepared to drink. But instantly he realized that because of the one brief hour he had still to endure until his fast was up, he was about to destroy the work of the entire week. He did not drink and went away from the well. Then he was touched by a feeling of pride for having passed this difficult test. When he became aware of it, he said to himself, "Better I go and drink than let my heart fall prey to pride." He went back to the well, but just as he was going to bend down to draw water, he noticed that his thirst had disappeared. When the Sabbath had begun, he entered the teacher's house and told him triumphantly that he had fasted for a whole week. The Rabbi, who knew much more about life than his student, said simply, "Patchwork!"

We may think that is a harsh response to a young student who was just trying to grow in the ways of God. A patchwork quilt, for example, can be a genuinely beautiful work of art. But the Rabbi understood something very important: if we see growth as simply taking up certain personal challenges from time to time, merely doing a series of projects and making new plans, we might end up with an impressive list of accomplishments--but we might also end up with just a bunch of patchwork. Buber says that the opposite of patchwork is "work all of a piece"; you and I might say that the opposite of patchwork is a "seamless garment."

God created us and our world as a seamless garment, a beautiful and living home for love. We ourselves are the ones who ripped the garment to shreds through the centuries, and we are the ones God has asked to cooperate with Him in repairing the garment. But our valiant attempts to do just that, the many exciting accomplishments of science, our advances in

combating disease, all the successes of the human community--these things are just "patchwork" if not held together by God's vision of a unified humanity. Who will hold up to the world the vision of the seamless garment? That is our task as believers, the task of those who will come after us.

The people who always have and always will make a culture great are not those who merely become expert in a field or who merely make a great discovery. Experts and discoverers and inventors are great only insofar as they are responsible and accountable to God and to all of humanity, all of creation. Those who truly make a culture great are the ones who see the larger picture, who make connections and build bridges, who see the human person and the human community as a unified whole, who understand spirituality, responsibility and morality. Many people can come up with great inventions, but who will say: "What does this mean for the human person, the crown of God's creation; what will it mean in the future; is it good and honorable and does it give glory to God?" Great people are those who continue to call the world to responsibility for God's vision of the seamless garment, who will not be satisfied with handing back to God just a piece of patchwork, beautiful as it may seem to be on the surface.

Catholic education is one of our most effective tools for preparing a new generation of Christian citizens who will offer the world the gift of a conscience, a soul, and a vision of peace. Our belief in God's seamless garment has never been more important than it is today. What happens this week in Baghdad or Tucson is just as important for us as what happens in downtown Seattle. Likewise, what happens in Vancouver is important to the people of Forks and Bellingham and Tacoma. We people of God's creation are one, and we were made for love. We cannot forget that fundamental vision. It is our gift to the world. It is also one of the central messages of Catholic education.

What I have said may sound pie-in-the-sky, the stuff of priestly piety. But what does all this mean for you and me, who share the task of educating a new generation? What does the seamless garment mean for us?

First of all, our vision of Catholic education means that we believe in a God who loves us so much that, even though we ripped His seamless world to shreds, He still sent us His Son to teach us again what we had forgotten, to heal what we could not possibly heal on our own. We cannot forget again. In fact, the central focus of our mission as Catholic schools is to witness to this very gift of salvation won for us in Christ Jesus, and to lead our students to a living encounter with Him, one that will sustain them their entire lives.

Next it means that we care for the whole person, body and soul. We see the human person as a unity. It is the soul that makes the body human! We cannot educate the mind without nourishing the soul. If we crush the spirit we prejudice the mind. We realize that what goes on in the classroom and on the football field can build up or tear down our young people, that it will affect their choices and their confidence. Weren't we all affected by both the generous praise and the careless sarcasm of our teachers and coaches?

Moreover, the fact that we are whole persons also means that the God-given faculties I use to pay attention to a question in math or grammar are the same faculties I use to give attention to God in prayer. God did not make us patchwork! Thus the way we relate to our students affects their whole persons, not just their minds.

Next, our Catholic educational vision means that we strive to offer our students efforts that are all "of a piece." As parents, principals and pastors we know how tempting it can be to take short cuts, to simply get by, to offer our children less than that of which we are capable. But they deserve more. And if they are to see a vision of a seamless garment marked by our enthusiasm and dedication, we must give them our entire selves, and not in a patchwork way.

In a book titled *The Insecurity of Freedom* (p. 237), Hassidic scholar Abraham Joshua Heschel (d. 1972) wrote this about teachers:

Everything depends on the person who stands in the front of the classroom. The teacher is not an automatic fountain from which intellectual beverages may be obtained. He is either a witness or a stranger. To guide a pupil into the Promised Land, he must have been there himself. When asking himself: Do I stand for what I teach? Do I believe what I say? he must be able to answer in the affirmative.

What we need more than anything else is not *textbooks* but *textpeople*. It is the personality of the teacher which is the text that the pupils read; the text that they will never forget.

What else does it mean that our philosophy of education is a seamless garment, "of a piece?"

It means that we offer values to live by in an increasingly valueless world. We teach human respect in a culture that entertains itself with sex and violence. We nourish the souls of children who are growing up in a world which casually ignores the soul and over-indulges the body. We offer God's peace to children who live in the shadow of war. Some years ago, I was on a panel discussing the AIDS crisis, and my task was to speak about it from the Catholic perspective. The person who preceded me on the panel made a distinction between what was considered "ideal"--i.e., "moral"--and what was actually "realistic." Such a distinction is both flawed and destructive. In fact, there is nothing more realistic than true morality. We offer our students a set of Christian values they can live by.

Next, our vision of Catholic education means that none of us, individually or as a school, is an island. One of the most destructive threats to our Catholic identity is any attitude that one school, or a certain part of town, or a certain kind of people, is better than another; or that Parish Religious Education Programs and students are second-class citizens compared to Catholic school students. If we want to crush the spirit of Catholic education, we can

compare and complain and gossip and promote unchristian rivalries. We know that such competition exists, and where it exists it hurts us all.

None of us makes a move without affecting the rest. As St. Paul wrote, when one member of the Body of Christ suffers, all suffer; when one is full of joy, all share the joy. We are not islands unto ourselves. We are a living, breathing family. We are a school family and a parish family; but we are also an archdiocesan family. Pope Benedict has appointed me father of this family. Catholic theology teaches that I am the first teacher of the Archdiocese of Seattle, and thus anyone who teaches as part of the Church in this archdiocese is actually helping me accomplish the teaching mandate I have been given by the universal Church. That's why we have an archdiocesan office of education and why I will take an active interest in our schools. That's also why every attempt to make a school or a classroom an island unto itself obscures the unity the bishop is called to foster and hurts all other schools and religious education programs. The Archdiocese is "all of a piece"; we resist the temptation to make it into "patchwork."

Our Catholic vision of education cherishes advances in science as further evidence of God's creative power. But we do not believe that just because something is possible, it is therefore also good. We offer a conscience, a call to responsibility, a constant challenge to see how new knowledge is woven into God's seamless garment. God already knows all the new things we are discovering about His creation; as we learn them, do we not also have the responsibility to ask Him how they fit together?

St. Paul taught the Christians at Corinth that, in a sense, the more gifted people are, the more they need to focus on love. Our Catholic educational vision offers a reminder of the primacy of humble love and compassion in a very gifted world.

In a word, the vision which animates Catholic education is one which seeks nothing more than to weave God's thread of unity and peace in a world created by God for love. You

and I are called to accept that clear and simple vision and put it into practice. We are God's family, who believe the message of salvation given to us by His Son; we make it our own and teach our children to live it in lives of loving service; and we believe that all of life is created to give glory to God. Who will tell our children about God's seamless garment if we do not?

Are you familiar with the shrine of Santiago (St. James) de Compostela? It is one of the most ancient pilgrimage destinations in Europe, and the collection of routes which lead there is referred to as “El Camino de Santiago,” “The Way of St. James.” Interestingly, the popular Spanish term for the Milky Way is “El Camino de Santiago” because a medieval legend suggested that it was formed from dust raised by pilgrims making their way to Compostela (which itself means “field of stars”), and because the countless stars of the Milky Way resemble the candles carried by those same pilgrims. I think these images are instructive for us in Catholic education. You and I, reflections of Jesus Christ, are sent by the Lord to be his light in darkness, the candles that guide the way and mark creation’s procession to God. **Catholic schools reflect the light of Christ in a powerful way: they place a candle in children’s hands, and then God lights it with his Son. Catholic schools guard the light because we know it is only by His light that children will learn the truth.**

I cannot emphasize this point enough. I must be honest with you and say that I am disappointed when in speaking of Catholic schools we emphasize solely how they promote and teach “Christian values.” That is certainly true, of course, and if we don’t do that we are failing miserably at the mission of Catholic education. I will admit to you that I worry when we speak of the importance of “diversity” in our schools, when that means moral diversity. We have a

responsibility to teach and inculcate in our children the sound principles of Catholic moral teaching – as I said earlier, moral principles they can live by. But having said that, it is more important to emphasize that we teach Christian values *because we proclaim Christ*. In other words, faith in Christ and discipleship have very real, very sound, very life-giving moral implications – indeed, moral *demands*. We proclaim Christ himself, the very Lord of Life, the One through whom all things were created, who sustains all things, who has redeemed all things, and who is the destiny for which all of us came into being, the way, the truth, the life. Faith gives life and fulfills life because Jesus Christ is life. Catholic schools give life because they lead children to Christ the Teacher. Literally introduced to *Him* first at home and then in Catholic schools, children begin a life-long relationship with Christ in the Church; He will be an unfailing Teacher and Guide, in every situation and every circumstance, year after year, for the rest of their lives.

We must never forget: Jesus Christ is the reason there are Catholic Schools. He is our Light, the Light of the World. We are his reflections.

In *Renewing our Commitment to Catholic Elementary and Secondary Schools in the Third Millennium*, we bishops wrote:

“...Catholic Schools afford the fullest and best opportunity to realize the fourfold purpose of Christian education, namely to provide an atmosphere in which the Gospel message is proclaimed, community in Christ is experienced, service to our sisters and brothers is the norm, and thanksgiving and worship of our God is cultivated” (p. 2).

You may recall that the conclusion of the final report of The Notre Dame Task Force

on Catholic Education (“Making God Known, Loved, and Served”) included the following statements:

“The rise of evangelical Christian schools shows that other Christian communities have learned what many Catholics have forgotten or are willing to ignore – that there is no substitute for spending 35 hours each week in an educational environment permeated by faith and Gospel values.” I agree wholeheartedly – but with apologies to Notre Dame, I would amend that bold statement as follows: There is no substitute for spending 35 hours each week in an educational environment permeated by Jesus Christ.

Catholic schools are uniquely poised and uniquely capable of ensuring that the faith is handed on in its entirety and as an integral whole. There is no substitute for an educational environment infused with the presence of Christ.

Speaking to Catholic Educators in April, 2008, Pope Benedict XVI said, “This unique encounter [God and the individual human person] is sustained within our Christian community; the one who seeks the truth becomes the one who lives by faith. It can be described as a move from ‘I’ to ‘we,’ leading the individual to be numbered among God’s people.”

We must be about moving from ‘I’ to ‘we’: each of us has concerns about our parish, our school. But we must have concern for “our” parishes and “our” schools.

We carry the light who is Christ. **Catholic schools place a candle in children’s hands, and then God lights it with his Son.**

When all is said and done, there is a very simple – and crucial – way that we should look

at the mission of Catholic Schools. Many schools have this statement posted prominently in their hallways (and I hope your school does):

“Be it known to all who enter here that Christ is the reason for this school. He is the unseen but ever-present teacher in the classroom. He is the model of its faculty and the inspiration of its students.”

It is Christ, in the Holy Spirit, who accomplishes the Father’s mission of bringing all creation into unity, which is nothing less than communion with the Trinity, God’s own life. And by proclaiming and living our faith in Him, we cooperate with that mission.