



**CONGREGATION FOR CATHOLIC EDUCATION  
(for Seminaries and Educational Institutions)**

***THE CATHOLIC SCHOOL  
ON THE THRESHOLD  
OF THE THIRD MILLENNIUM***

***Introduction***

1. On the threshold of the third millennium education faces new challenges which are the result of a new socio-political and cultural context. First and foremost, we have a crisis of values which, in highly developed societies in particular, assumes the form, often exalted by the media, of subjectivism, moral relativism and nihilism. The extreme pluralism pervading contemporary society leads to behaviour patterns which are at times so opposed to one another as to undermine any idea of community identity. Rapid structural changes, profound technical innovations and the globalization of the economy affect human life more and more throughout the world. Rather than prospects of development for all, we witness the widening of the gap between rich and poor, as well as massive migration from underdeveloped to highly-developed countries. The phenomena of multiculturalism and an increasingly multi-ethnic and multi-religious society is at the same time an enrichment and a source of further problems. To this we must add, in countries of long-standing evangelization, a growing marginalization of the Christian faith as a reference point and a source of light for an effective and convincing interpretation of existence.

2. In the specifically educational field, the scope of educational functions has broadened, becoming more complex, more specialized. The sciences of education, which concentrated in the past on the study of the child and teacher-training, have been widened to include the various stages of life, and the different spheres and situations beyond the school. New requirements have given force to the demand for new contents, new capabilities and new educational models besides those followed traditionally. Thus education and schooling become particularly difficult today.

3. Such an outlook calls for courageous renewal on the part of the Catholic school. The precious heritage of the experience gained over the centuries reveals its vitality precisely in the capacity for prudent innovation. And so, now as in the past, the Catholic school must be able to speak for itself effectively and convincingly. It is not merely a question of adaptation, but of missionary thrust, the fundamental duty to evangelize, to go towards men and women wherever they are, so that they may receive the gift of salvation.

4. Accordingly, the Congregation for Catholic Education, during this time of immediate preparation for the great jubilee of the year 2000, and as it celebrates the thirtieth anniversary of the creation of the Schools Office(1) and the twentieth anniversary of *The Catholic School*, published on 19th March 1977, proposes to "focus attention on the nature and distinctive characteristics of a school which would present itself as *Catholic*".(2) It therefore addresses this circular letter to all those who are engaged in Catholic schooling, in order to convey to them a word of encouragement and hope. In particular, by means of the present letter, the Congregation shares their joy for the positive fruits yielded by the Catholic school and their anxiety about the difficulties which it encounters. Furthermore, the teachings of the Second Vatican Council, innumerable interventions of the Holy Father, ordinary and extraordinary Assemblies of the Synod of Bishops, Episcopal Conferences and the pastoral solicitude of diocesan Ordinaries, as well as international Catholic organisations involved in education and schooling, all support our conviction that it is opportune to devote careful attention to certain fundamental characteristics of the Catholic school, which are of great importance if its educational activity is to be effectual in the Church and in society. Such are: *the Catholic*



*school as a place of integral education of the human person through a clear educational project of which Christ is the foundation;(3) its ecclesial and cultural identity; its mission of education as a work of love; its service to society; the traits which should characterize the educating community.*

### **Joys and difficulties**

5. We retrace with satisfaction the positive course of the Catholic school over the past decades. First and foremost, we must recognize the contribution it makes to the evangelizing mission of the Church throughout the world, including those areas in which no other form of pastoral work is possible. Moreover, in spite of numerous obstacles, the Catholic school has continued to share responsibility for the social and cultural development of the different communities and peoples to which it belongs, participating in their joys and hopes, their sufferings and difficulties, their efforts to achieve genuine human and communitarian progress. In this respect, mention must be made of the invaluable services of the Catholic school to the spiritual and material development of less fortunate peoples. It is our duty to express appreciation for the Catholic school's contribution to innovation in the fields of pedagogy and didactics, and the strenuous commitment of so many men and women, especially of all those religious and laity who see their teaching as a mission and true apostolate.(4) Finally, we cannot forget the part played by Catholic schools in organic pastoral work and in pastoral care for the family in particular, emphasizing in this respect their discreet insertion in the educational dynamics between parents and their children and, very especially the unpretentious yet caring and sensitive help offered in those cases, more and more numerous above all in wealthy nations, of families which are "fragile" or have broken up.

6. The school is undoubtedly a sensitive meeting-point for the problems which beset this restless end of the millennium. The Catholic school is thus confronted with children and young people who experience the difficulties of the present time. Pupils who shun effort, are incapable of self-sacrifice and perseverance and who lack authentic models to guide them, often even in their own families. In an increasing number of instances they are not only indifferent and non-practising, but also totally lacking in religious or moral formation. To this we must add — on the part of numerous pupils and families — a profound apathy where ethical and religious formation is concerned, to the extent that what is in fact required of the Catholic school is a certificate of studies or, at the most, quality instruction and training for employment. The atmosphere we have described produces a certain degree of pedagogical tiredness, which intensifies the ever increasing difficulty of conciliating the role of the teacher with that of the educator in today's context.

7. Among existing difficulties, there are also situations in the political, social and cultural sphere which make it harder or even impossible to attend a Catholic school. The drama of large-scale poverty and hunger in many parts of the world, internal conflicts and civil wars, urban deterioration, the spread of crime in large cities, impede the implementation of projects for formation and education. In other parts of the world, governments themselves put obstacles in the way, when they do not actually prevent the Catholic school from operating, in spite of the progress which has been made as far as attitude, democratic practice and sensitivity to human rights are concerned. Finance is a source of further difficulties, which are felt more acutely in those states in which no government aid is provided for non state schools. This places an almost unbearable financial burden on families choosing not to send their children to state schools and constitutes a serious threat to the survival of the schools themselves. Moreover, such financial strain not only affects the recruiting and stability of teachers, but can also result in the exclusion from Catholic schools of those who cannot afford to pay, leading to a selection according to means which deprives the Catholic school of one of its distinguishing features, which is to be a school for all.



## ***Looking ahead***

8. This overview of the joys and difficulties of the Catholic school, although not pretending to exhaust its entire breadth and depth, does prompt us to reflect on the contribution it can make to the formation of the younger generation on the threshold of the third millennium, recognising, as John Paul II has written, that "the future of the world and of the Church belongs to the *younger generation*, to those who, born in this century, will reach maturity in the next, the first century of the new millennium".(5) Thus the Catholic school should be able to offer young people the means to acquire the knowledge they need in order to find a place in a society which is strongly characterized by technical and scientific skill. But at the same time, it should be able, above all, to impart a solid Christian formation. And for the Catholic school to be a means of education in the modern world, we are convinced that certain fundamental characteristics need to be strengthened.

### *The human person and his or her education*

9. The Catholic school sets out to be a school for the human person and of human persons. "The person of each individual human being, in his or her material and spiritual needs, is at the heart of Christ's teaching: this is why the promotion of the human person is the goal of the Catholic school".(6) This affirmation, stressing man's vital relationship with Christ, reminds us that it is in His person that the fullness of the truth concerning man is to be found. For this reason the Catholic school, in committing itself to the development of the whole man, does so in obedience to the solicitude of the Church, in the awareness that all human values find their fulfilment and unity in Christ.(7) This awareness expresses the centrality of the human person in the educational project of the Catholic school, strengthens its educational endeavour and renders it fit to form strong personalities.

10. The social and cultural context of our time is in danger of obscuring "the educational value of the Catholic school, in which its fundamental reason for existing and the basis of its genuine apostolate is to be found".(8) Indeed, although it is true to say that in recent years there has been an increased interest and a greater sensitivity on the part of public opinion, international organizations and governments with regard to schooling and education, there has also been a noticeable tendency to reduce education to its purely technical and practical aspects. Pedagogy and the sciences of education themselves have appeared to devote greater attention to the study of phenomenology and didactics than to the essence of education as such, centred on deeply meaningful values and vision. The fragmentation of education, the generic character of the values frequently invoked and which obtain ample and easy consensus at the price of a dangerous obscuring of their content, tend to make the school step back into a supposed neutrality, which enervates its educating potential and reflects negatively on the formation of the pupils. There is a tendency to forget that education always presupposes and involves a definite concept of man and life. To claim neutrality for schools signifies in practice, more times than not, banning all reference to religion from the cultural and educational field, whereas a correct pedagogical approach ought to be open to the more decisive sphere of ultimate objectives, attending not only to "how", but also to "why", overcoming any misunderstanding as regards the claim to neutrality in education, restoring to the educational process the unity which saves it from dispersion amid the meandering of knowledge and acquired facts, and focuses on the human person in his or her integral, transcendent, historical identity. With its educational project inspired by the Gospel, the Catholic school is called to take up this challenge and respond to it in the conviction that "it is only in the mystery of the Word made flesh that the mystery of man truly becomes clear".(9)

### *The Catholic school at the heart of the Church*



11. The complexity of the modern world makes it all the more necessary to increase awareness of the ecclesial identity of the Catholic school. It is from its Catholic identity that the school derives its original characteristics and its "structure" as a genuine instrument of the Church, a place of real and specific pastoral ministry. The Catholic school participates in the evangelizing mission of the Church and is the privileged environment in which Christian education is carried out. In this way "Catholic schools are at once places of evangelization, of complete formation, of inculturation, of apprenticeship in a lively dialogue between young people of different religions and social backgrounds".(10) The ecclesial nature of the Catholic school, therefore, is written in the very heart of its identity as a teaching institution. It is a true and proper ecclesial entity by reason of its educational activity, "in which faith, culture and life are brought into harmony".(11) Thus it must be strongly emphasized that this ecclesial dimension is not a mere adjunct, but is a proper and specific attribute, a distinctive characteristic which penetrates and informs every moment of its educational activity, a fundamental part of its very identity and the focus of its mission.(12) The fostering of this dimension should be the aim of all those who make up the educating community.

12. By reason of its identity, therefore, the Catholic school is a place of ecclesial experience, which is moulded in the Christian community. However, it should not be forgotten that the school fulfils its vocation to be a genuine experience of Church only if it takes its stand within the organic pastoral work of the Christian community. In a very special way the Catholic school affords the opportunity to meet young people in an environment which favours their Christian formation. Unfortunately, there are instances in which the Catholic school is not perceived as an integral part of organic pastoral work, at times it is considered alien, or very nearly so, to the community. It is urgent, therefore, to sensitize parochial and diocesan communities to the necessity of their devoting special care to education and schools.

13. In the life of the Church, the Catholic school is recognised above all as an expression of those Religious Institutes which, according to their proper charism or specific apostolate, have dedicated themselves generously to education. The present time is not without its difficulties, not only on account of the alarming decrease in numbers, but also of a serious misunderstanding which induces some Religious to abandon the teaching apostolate. In other words, on the one hand the commitment to schooling is separated from pastoral activity, while on the other it is not easy to reconcile concrete activities with the specific demands of religious life. The fertile intuitions of saintly founders and foundresses demonstrate, more radically than any other argumentation, the groundless and precarious nature of such attitudes. We should also remember that the presence of consecrated religious within the educating community is indispensable, since "consecrated persons are able to be especially effective in educational activities";(13) they are an example of the unreserved and gratuitous "gift" of self to the service of others in the spirit of their religious consecration. The presence of men and women religious, side by side with priests and lay teachers, affords pupils "a vivid image of the Church and makes recognition of its riches easier".(14)

#### *Cultural identity of the Catholic school*

14. From the nature of the Catholic school also stems one of the most significant elements of its educational project: the synthesis between culture and faith. Indeed, knowledge set in the context of faith becomes wisdom and life vision. The endeavour to interweave reason and faith, which has become the heart of individual subjects, makes for unity, articulation and coordination, bringing forth within what is learnt in school a Christian vision of the world, of life, of culture and of history. In the Catholic school's educational project there is no separation between time for learning and time for formation, between acquiring notions and growing in wisdom. The various school subjects do not present only knowledge to be attained, but also values to be acquired and truths to be discovered.(15) All of which demands an atmosphere characterized by the search for truth, in which competent, convinced



and coherent educators, teachers of learning and of life, may be a reflection, albeit imperfect but still vivid, of the one Teacher. In this perspective, in the Christian educational project all subjects collaborate, each with its own specific content, to the formation of mature personalities.

*"Care for learning means loving" (Sap 6,17)*

15. In its ecclesial dimension another characteristic of the Catholic school has its root: it is a school for all, with special attention to those who are weakest. In the past, the establishment of the majority of Catholic educational institutions has responded to the needs of the socially and economically disadvantaged. It is no novelty to affirm that Catholic schools have their origin in a deep concern for the education of children and young people left to their own devices and deprived of any form of schooling. In many parts of the world even today material poverty prevents many youths and children from having access to formal education and adequate human and Christian formation. In other areas new forms of poverty challenge the Catholic school. As in the past, it can come up against situations of incomprehension, mistrust and lack of material resources. The girls from poor families that were taught by the Ursuline nuns in the 15th Century, the boys that Saint Joseph of Calasanz saw running and shouting through the streets of Rome, those that De la Salle came across in the villages of France, or those that were offered shelter by Don Bosco, can be found again among those who have lost all sense of meaning in life and lack any type of inspiring ideal, those to whom no values are proposed and who do not know the beauty of faith, who come from families which are broken and incapable of love, often living in situations of material and spiritual poverty, slaves to the new idols of a society, which, not infrequently, promises them only a future of unemployment and marginalization. To these new poor the Catholic school turns in a spirit of love. Spurred on by the aim of offering to all, and especially to the poor and marginalized, the opportunity of an education, of training for a job, of human and Christian formation, it can and must find in the context of the old and new forms of poverty that original synthesis of ardour and fervent dedication which is a manifestation of Christ's love for the poor, the humble, the masses seeking for truth.

*The Catholic school at the service of society*

16. The school cannot be considered separately from other educational institutions and administered as an entity apart, but must be related to the world of politics, economy, culture and society as a whole. For her part the Catholic school must be firmly resolved to take the new cultural situation in her stride and, by her refusal to accept unquestioningly educational projects which are merely partial, be an example and stimulus for other educational institutions, in the forefront of ecclesial community's concern for education. In this way the Catholic school's public role is clearly perceived. It has not come into being as a private initiative, but as an expression of the reality of the Church, having by its very nature a public character. It fulfils a service of public usefulness and, although clearly and decidedly configured in the perspective of the Catholic faith, is not reserved to Catholics only, but is open to all those who appreciate and share its qualified educational project. This dimension of openness becomes particularly evident in countries in which Christians are not in the majority or developing countries, where Catholic schools have always promoted civil progress and human development without discrimination of any kind.(16) Catholic schools, moreover, like state schools, fulfil a public role, for their presence guarantees cultural and educational pluralism and, above all, the freedom and right of families to see that their children receive the sort of education they wish for them.(17)

17. The Catholic school, therefore, undertakes a cordial and constructive dialogue with states and civil authorities. Such dialogue and collaboration must be based on mutual respect, on the reciprocal recognition of each other's role and on a common service to mankind. To



achieve this end, the Catholic school willingly occupies its place within the school system of the different countries and in the legislation of the individual states, when the latter respect the fundamental rights of the human person, starting with respect for life and religious freedom. A correct relationship between state and school, not only a Catholic school, is based not so much on institutional relations as on the right of each person to receive a suitable education of their free choice. This right is acknowledged according to the principle of subsidiarity.(18) For "The public authority, therefore, whose duty it is to protect and defend the liberty of the citizens, is bound according to the principle of distributive justice to ensure that public subsidies are so allocated that parents are truly free to select schools for their children in accordance with their conscience".(19) In the framework not only of the formal proclamation, but also in the effective exercise of this fundamental human right, in some countries there exists the crucial problem of the juridical and financial recognition of non-state schools. We share John Paul II's earnest hope, expressed yet again recently, that in all democratic countries "concrete steps finally be taken to implement true equality for non-state schools and that it be at the same time respectful of their educational project".(20)

### *Climate of the educating community*

18. Before concluding, we should like to dwell briefly on the climate and role of the educating community, which is constituted by the interaction and collaboration of its various components: students, parents, teachers, directors and non-teaching staff.(21) Attention is rightly given to the importance of the relations existing between all those who make up the educating community. During childhood and adolescence a student needs to experience personal relations with outstanding educators, and what is taught has greater influence on the student's formation when placed in a context of personal involvement, genuine reciprocity, coherence of attitudes, life-styles and day to day behaviour. While respecting individual roles, the community dimension should be fostered, since it is one of the most enriching developments for the contemporary school.(22) It is also helpful to bear in mind, in harmony with the Second Vatican Council,(23) that this community dimension in the Catholic school is not a merely sociological category; it has a theological foundation as well. The educating community, taken as a whole, is thus called to further the objective of a school as a place of complete formation through interpersonal relations.

19. In the Catholic school, "prime responsibility for creating this unique Christian school climate rests with the teachers, as individuals and as a community".(24) Teaching has an extraordinary moral depth and is one of man's most excellent and creative activities, for the teacher does not write on inanimate material, but on the very spirits of human beings. The personal relations between the teacher and the students, therefore, assume an enormous importance and are not limited simply to giving and taking. Moreover, we must remember that teachers and educators fulfil a specific Christian vocation and share an equally specific participation in the mission of the Church, to the extent that "it depends chiefly on them whether the Catholic school achieves its purpose".(25)

20. Parents have a particularly important part to play in the educating community, since it is to them that primary and natural responsibility for their children's education belongs. Unfortunately in our day there is a widespread tendency to delegate this unique role. Therefore it is necessary to foster initiatives which encourage commitment, but which provide at the same time the right sort of concrete support which the family needs and which involve it in the Catholic school's educational project.(26) The constant aim of the school therefore, should be contact and dialogue with the pupils' families, which should also be encouraged through the promotion of parents' associations, in order to clarify with their indispensable collaboration that personalised approach which is needed for an educational project to be efficacious.



## **Conclusion**

21. The Holy Father has pointed out in a meaningful expression how "man is the primary and fundamental way for the Church, the way traced out by Christ himself".(27) This way cannot, then, be foreign to those who evangelize. Travelling along it, they will experience the challenge of education in all its urgency. Thus it follows that the work of the school is irreplaceable and the investment of human and material resources in the school becomes a prophetic choice. On the threshold of the third millennium we perceive the full strength of the mandate which the Church handed down to the Catholic school in that "Pentecost" which was the Second Vatican Council: "Since the Catholic school can be of such service in developing the mission of the

People of God and in promoting dialogue between the Church and the community at large to the advantage of both, it is still of vital importance even in our times".(28)

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**Pio Card. Laghi**  
*Prefect*

**José Saraiva Martins**  
*Tit. Archbishop of Tuburnica*  
*Secretary*

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(1) The Sacred Congregation for Catholic Education was the new name given to the Sacred Congregation for Seminaries and Universities by the Apostolic Constitution *Regimini ecclesiae universae*, which was published on 15 August 1967 and in force as from 1 March 1968 (AAS, LIX [1967] pp. 885-928). The Congregation now comprised a third section, the Schools Office, intended "to develop further" the fundamental principles of education, especially in schools (cfr. II Vatican Council, Declaration on Christian Education *Gravissimum educationis*, Preface).

(2) S. Congregation for Catholic Education, *The Catholic School*, n. 2.

(3) Cfr. S. Congregation for Catholic Education, *The Catholic School*, n. 34.

(4) Cfr. II Vatican Council, Declaration on Christian Education *Gravissimum educationis*, n. 8.

(5) John Paul II, Apostolic Letter *Tertio Millennio Adveniente*, n. 58.

(6) Cfr. John Paul II, *Address to the I National Meeting of the Catholic School in Italy*, in "L'Osservatore Romano", 24 November 1991, p. 4.

(7) Cfr. S. Congregation for Catholic Education, *The Catholic School*, n. 35.

(8) S. Congregation for Catholic Education, *The Catholic School*, n. 3.



(9) II Vatican Council, Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World *Gaudium et Spes*, n. 22.

(10) John Paul II, Apostolic Exhortation *Ecclesia in Africa*, n. 102.

(11) Congregation for Catholic Education, *Religious Dimension of Education in a Catholic school*, n. 34.

(12) Cfr. Congregation for Catholic Education, *Religious Dimension of Education in a Catholic school*, n. 33.

(13) John Paul II, Apostolic Exhortation *Vita Consecrata*, n. 96.

(14) John Paul II, Apostolic Exhortation *Christifideles Laici*, n. 62.

(15) Cfr. S. Congregation for Catholic Education, *The Catholic School*, n. 39.

(16) Cfr. II Vatican Council, Declaration on Christian Education *Gravissimum educationis*, n. 9.

(17) Cfr. Holy See, *Charter of Rights of the Family*, art. 5.

(18) Cfr. John Paul II, Apostolic Exhortation *Familiaris consortio*, n. 40; cfr. Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Instruction *Libertatis conscientia*, n. 94.

(19) II Vatican Council, Declaration on Christian Education *Gravissimum educationis*, n. 6.

(20) John Paul II, *Letter to the Superior General of the Piarists*, in "L'Osservatore Romano", 28 June 1997, p. 5.

(21) Cfr. S. Congregation for Catholic Education, *Lay Catholics in Schools: Witnesses to Faith*, n. 22.

(22) Cfr. *Ibid.*

(23) Cfr. II Vatican Council, Declaration on Christian Education *Gravissimum educationis*, n. 8.

(24) Congregation for Catholic Education, *Religious Dimension of Education in a Catholic school*, n. 26.

(25) Cfr. II Vatican Council, Declaration on Christian Education *Gravissimum educationis*, n. 8.

(26) Cfr. John Paul II, Apostolic Exhortation *Familiaris consortio*, n. 40.

(27) Cfr. John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Redemptor hominis*, n. 14.

(28) II Vatican Council, Declaration on Christian Education *Gravissimum educationis*, n. 8.