

Breakfast Meeting

Sydney

31 July 2007

Dear Brother Chancellor and Colleagues:

Introduction

Good morning! Thank you, Brother Julian, for your introduction and thank you, Brother Tony, for arranging this “conversation” this morning. The Conference got off to a great beginning yesterday, and the impressive number of delegates and the vibrant interest in Catholic education in Australia and the fourteen other countries present was truly inspiring. Once again, I wish to express my gratitude and that of the Congregation of Catholic Education for your dedicated efforts to ensure that Australia’s Catholic school system can be counted among the very best in the universal Church. I think you all understand “bravi” – maybe it can be translated as “brilliant” – and that is what I would like to say to you this morning: “bravi” for keeping the fire burning; “bravi” for your tireless endeavours to keep your schools both welcoming and authentically Catholic; “bravi” for working so diligently to ensure access to all families who wish a Catholic education for their children; and “bravi” for making a difference to the Church and society in Australia.

When you come from Rome, as I do, the figure of the Apostle Peter is always before you. From my office window I look out over St. Peter’s Square, beyond which is the place of the Apostle’s martyrdom, and from the Congregation’s conference room you can

look up at the window of the study of Peter's Successor, Benedict XVI. In a word, Peter is everywhere at the heart of the Church. And, not surprisingly, Peter has something to say about teaching or education and about leadership. While he is not usually cast in the role of educational leader, to label such is not, I think, off the mark. In order to tease some lessons about our own ministry of educational leadership, I would like to say something about the kind of man he was, and how he went about carrying out his responsibilities as the one chosen by the Lord to be his vicar.

Peter was both a Rock and a Shepherd. At Caesarea Philippi he was made the Church's foundation stone, the Rock upon whom Christ promised to build his community (cf. Mt 16:18-19). Peter stood for something because he confessed Jesus as the Christ, a gift he received not a reward for his merit. The Apostle was tough, impetuous and outspoken almost to a fault. But, with the Lord's help, he was clear about his convictions, about him in whom he believed. After the Resurrection, the shame and timidity of his denial in the courtyard vanished, and he fired back to the authorities a response that has echoed through the centuries and encouraged heroic acts of virtue in face of indescribable adversity: "We must obey God rather than men" (Acts 5:29).

In conversation with the Risen Lord, Peter became a good shepherd: one who was neither frightened nor intimidated but emboldened, ready to give his life for his sheep. Indeed, it was really

because Peter loved Jesus – “yes, Lord, you know that I love you” (cf. Jn 21:15-17) that the Master gave him pastoral charge of the community.¹ “Without this confession of greater love, the Good Shepherd, who gives his life for his sheep, could not entrust his flock to Peter’s pasturing.”² The Apostle’s love for Jesus, then, was the foundation of his special ministry. Because of his greater love for the Lord, more was asked of Peter. In this case, the more tender was to be his care of those confided to his care. Peter was to seek out the lost, lead the sheep on the right path to verdant pastures and nourish them with truth.

Now, if you are like me, you are a little leery of making Peter too much of a model of educational leadership. So much was demanded of him, and the end promised him by Jesus was anything but comforting: when you are old “someone else will dress you and lead you where you do not want to go” (Jn 21:18) – a tough message. But that “someone else” who would lead Peter was the Lord himself. Jesus will always accompany his friend and finally he will honour him by letting the Apostle die as he did: on a cross though, according to tradition, tied upside down. Even if this is not likely to be our end, it gives us something to think about when demands pile up on us, and we might be tempted to compromise our values to escape unscathed

¹ Cf. Paul VI, Homily (29 June 1969): *Insegnamenti di Paolo VI*, 7 (1969), 473: “he [Peter] had the primacy of love for Christ and therefore primacy towards his flock.”

² Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Light of the World* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1993), 298.

from difficult situations.

As for Peter the Pastor, how often do educators at any level think of themselves as shepherds? as shepherds of their colleagues and staffs? of their students? of parents and community organizations? Peter was appointed visible shepherd of the community, the custodian with the highest obligations. According to the New Testament, the image of the shepherd “expresses great authority and responsibility.”³ The good shepherd whom Jesus described (cf. Jn 10:9-16) is one who combines self-sacrificing love with the organizational ability and decision-making power necessary for tending the flock. That good shepherd is the model of the leader, of every leader, including the educational leader.

Now I wish to draw your attention to a trend which deserves your serious attention if your educational shepherding is to be effective and joyful: the commodification of education on a worldwide scale. Confronting this challenge in a way consistent with the values of the Catholic educational tradition will require leaders to have Peter’s rock-like steadfastness (not to say stubbornness!) And his pastoral courage. They, too, will need to be Rocks and Shepherds.

Commodification

In many parts of the world we are witnessing decreasing attention paid to the integral human development of students.

³ Johann Auer, *The Church*, 275.

Schools are more and more abandoning the goal of forming the whole person – intellectually, physically, psychologically and spiritually – as part of their mission. The phenomenon of cultural globalization, sometimes called “McDonaldization,” is drawing all societies into a worldwide consumer culture significantly influenced by secularism and materialism. This “transnational popular culture seems to foster a popular ethos charged with materialism, hedonism and hyper-individualism.”⁴ The primacy of the human person in his or her integrity gives way to a one-dimensional viewpoint, the economic. Those who pastor Catholic schools cannot avoid asking the following questions: “What is the image of the human person that globalization proposes and even imposes? What kind of culture does it favour? Does it leave room for the experience of faith and the interior life?”⁵ And especially, is my Catholic school free from the negative influences of globalization or is it an unwitting victim or even co-conspirator?

Unfortunately, considering education principally as an investment in “human capital” or “human resources” provided to clients or consumers is now altogether too common. When

⁴ Mary Ann Glendon, “Meeting the Challenges of Globalization,” in *Globalization and Ethical Concerns*, Proceedings of the Seventh Plenary Session of the Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences, 25-28 April 2001 (Vatican City: Vatican Press, 2001), p. 337.

⁵ John Paul II, Address to the Sixth Public Session of the Pontifical Academies of Theology and of St. Thomas Aquinas (8 November 2001), n. 3: *L’Osservatore Romano*, English-language edition, 50 (12 December 2001), p. 8.

knowledge is a product to be bought and sold in the educational marketplace, then the school becomes just another institution at the service of economic interests.

A market-dominated approach to learning emphasizes technical and professional training over the formation of the whole person, replacing the dispassionate search for truth with the cult of competency. We know that marketing education as merchandise is not why we have given our lives to Catholic schooling.

“Launch out into the deep”

“Put out into deep water” or “Launch out into the deep” is the refrain of John Paul’s apostolic letter published in 2001 to set the Church’s course for the next thousand years “to live the present with enthusiasm and to look forward to the future with confidence.”⁶ As the first decade of the Third Millennium draws to a close, now is the time for us to be inspired by a new energy. We should all feel impelled to undertake concrete initiatives that will further the mission of the Catholic schools and school systems entrusted to our leadership. Certainly the many good seeds sown over the nearly 200 years of Catholic education in Australia, since the establishment of the first Catholic school in Parramatta in 1820, has borne much good fruit. Even so, in the cause of the Kingdom, there is no time either for self-congratulation over the past or for settling into a comfort zone in which the future is set on automatic pilot.

⁶ John Paul II, *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, 1.

More than anyone, you know how much remains to be done. We would be foolish to ignore the challenges, especially to the specifically “Catholic” identity of your schools and to the role they are called to play as the hope for the evangelization of Australia’s youth. More than ever, your determined commitment is needed, a commitment to recall for staff, students, academic colleagues and the public at large that this identity is the source of the Catholic school’s excellence.

Dear colleagues: despite inevitable exhaustion and even occasional disappointment, “cast your nets into the deep” with a renewed passion for serving the Church and society. The Church needs your dedication and your love to be as faithful to your task as Peter was. It also needs you to interpret the “signs of the times” wisely and prudently. In a culture marked by secularism and relativism, so often indifferent to God, your tireless effort is required to test what is truly good for those entrusted to you.

“Do not be afraid” (Lk 5:10)

It can be arduous, laborious and demanding to be an educational leader today. Still, as St. Paul once so perceptively said, “by the grace of God I am what I am” (1 Cor 15:10) . And because of this, there is reason for hope. If the vocation to leadership is a call from God, then we can count on him to abide with us. Those whom the Church entrusts with the awesome responsibility of educational leadership can rightly take comfort in the Lord’s words to Peter: “Do

not be afraid” (Lk 5:10). We need not be afraid of the world and its problems, even those as grave as the threats arising from those who treat education and school as commodities. We should see all of them as providential, challenges to be faced with the boldness and courage of shepherds. “We Christians must not fear spiritual confrontation with a society whose ostentatious intellectual superiority conceals its perplexity before the final existential questions,” the Holy Father recently asserted. “The answers the Church draws from the Gospel of the *Logos* made man have in fact proved effective [for] . . . the past two millennia, and their effectiveness endures.”⁷

While the future is not without shadows, let us not allow difficulties, limited resources or a sense of our own limitations – think of Peter who was anything but a “born saint” – as leaders to interfere with casting out into the deep with trust. Catholic schools are the Church’s precious heritage to be cared for with your shepherd’s love so that they will continue to flourish and bear the abundant fruit that the Lord wills to bring forth from your endeavours.

+J. Michael Miller, CSB

Secretary

Congregation for Catholic Education

⁷ Benedict XVI, Address to the German Bishops on Their *Ad Limina* Visit (10 November 2006): *L’Osservatore Romano*, English-language edition, 49 (29 November 2006), 5.