

## Capitol Comments:

### Pope Benedict Addresses Educators

By Margaret McGettrick, Director of Education for the Texas Catholic Conference Education Department

On April 17, 2008, His Holiness Benedict XVI addressed about 250 College Presidents, Superintendents and other educators, representing over three million children and students, on the campus of The Catholic University of America. I was privileged to be one of those present as the Pope singled out this important ministry in the Church. As we waited in the Great Room, probably the size of a small parish hall, we business-suited invitees talked among ourselves about the message that we were going to receive. However, regardless of the message, we were all very anxious to meet the messenger.

When he entered the room to a roaring applause the short figure of Benedict XVI exuded the energy of a man much younger than his eighty one years. His healthy bronze coloring and friendly eyes against the backdrop of his white robes enhanced his unique presence in the room. The content and tone of his message was delivered in a manner befitting the intellectual and caring person he is. It was well received by the audience.

Those of us in the room represented a ministry in the American Catholic Church that has undergone many changes in the past forty years. In 1965, Catholic schools enrolled almost 4.4 million students, or 12% of all U.S. students in elementary and secondary grades. At the current time Catholic schools enroll about 2.3 million students. Since 1990, more than 1,300 Catholic schools have closed, mostly in the inner cities.

His Holiness spoke of the sacrifice of many saying that: *"The Catholic Community here has in fact made education one of its highest priorities.....Countless dedicated Religious Sisters, Brothers, and Priests together with selfless parents have, through Catholic schools, helped generations of immigrants to rise from poverty and take their place in mainstream society"*. Unlike many other highly industrialized countries in the world where parents are free to choose a school of their choice regardless of income, parents in the United States are compelled to pay for this right. Likewise, many educators in Catholic schools sacrifice millions of dollars annually to work in our schools for a fraction of what they would earn in public schools.

Benedict XVI went on to speak about the ethos in our Catholic institutions: *"A university or school's Catholic identity is not simply a question of the number of Catholic students. It is a question of conviction – do we really believe that only in the mystery of the Word made flesh does the mystery of man truly become clear (cf. [Gaudium et Spes](#), 22)? Are we ready to commit our entire self – intellect and will, mind and heart – to God? Do we accept the truth Christ reveals? Is the faith tangible in our universities and schools? Is it given fervent expression liturgically, sacramentally, through prayer, acts of charity, a concern for justice, and respect for God's creation? Only in this way do we really bear witness to the meaning of who we are and what we uphold.*

*Clearly, then, Catholic identity is not dependent upon statistics. Neither can it be equated simply with orthodoxy of course content. It demands and inspires much more: namely that each and every aspect of your learning communities reverberates within the ecclesial life of faith. Only in faith can truth become*

*incarnate and reason truly human, capable of directing the will along the path of freedom (cf. [Spe Salvi](#), 23). In this way our institutions make a vital contribution to the mission of the Church and truly serve society. They become places in which God's active presence in human affairs is recognized and in which every young person discovers the joy of entering into Christ's "being for others" (cf. [ibid.](#),28)*

*The Church's primary mission of evangelization, in which educational institutions play a crucial role, is consonant with a nation's fundamental aspiration to develop a society truly worthy of the human person's dignity." When I heard these words it reminded me of the formative education received by Melinda French, now Melinda Gates, when she attended Catholic schools in Dallas. It is obvious that she and her husband, Bill Gates, through their efforts to eradicate disease in third world countries as well as promoting educational opportunities for the disadvantaged in this country, have as their goal to make society truly worthy of a human person's dignity.*

*Pope Benedict then went on to speak about "intellectual charity". "This aspect of charity calls the educator to recognize that the profound responsibility to lead the young to truth is nothing less than an act of love. Indeed, the dignity of education lies in fostering the true perfection and happiness of those to be educated. In practice "intellectual charity" upholds the essential unity of knowledge against the fragmentation which ensues when reason is detached from the pursuit of truth. It guides the young towards the deep satisfaction of exercising freedom in relation to truth, and it strives to articulate the relationship between faith and all aspects of family and civic life. Once their passion for the fullness and unity of truth has been awakened, young people will surely relish the discovery that the question of what they can know opens up the vast adventure of what they ought to do. Here they will experience "in what" and "in whom" it is possible to hope, and be inspired to contribute to society in a way that engenders hope in others."*

With regard to faculty members at Catholic colleges and universities, he reaffirmed the great value of academic freedom and the insistence of faithfulness to the Church. He encouraged teachers in schools to acquire a clear and precise understanding of the specific nature and role of Catholic education and he appealed to the religious to renew their commitment to schools especially in poorer areas.

As he left the room to another wave of applause I felt that I had been in the presence of not only one of the great intellectuals in our Church but of someone who a teacher of humility and holiness. I know that we "students" had truly been touched by him. How lucky we are to have such a shepherd!

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