

## The Catholic Education Family September 29, 2017

### Introduction:

Firstly I want to thank you for inviting me to share a few words with you today on the importance of who we are - and what this means to us, to the system, and to the Church community as a whole. I am not a professional educator, I am a preacher and your bishop and it is my responsibility to see that the Catholic faith is preached, practiced and maintain in the diocese given under my charge, that of Thunder Bay. A most important part of that responsibility is shared among my priests, deacons and laity. That laity consists primarily of you - those who teach, administrate and work in our Catholic school system. You know we have 5 systems in our diocese - 4 english and one french system. So there are many of you who assist me, as the bishop, to educate in the faith and to teach our children and students, entrusted to our care, the information they will need be be formed as good Christian citizens in our community.

I wish to thank you for sharing in this work with me, and I want to acknowledge how grateful I am for your work and for your dedication to Catholic education in our diocese. I have a family of many who are involved in Catholic education, both in teaching and in administration, so I hear about and have discussed this often among family and friends.

I also want to thank this administration for helping to make me a part of the system, or at least keeping me connected and informed, where necessary, about developments in education and the challenges that face us each day.

You may be wondering what I am going to say when you look at the title of this presentation: The "Catholic Education Family" - it seems a bit "run of the mill" - or common, and not very enticing. I would like to look at this from my perspective as your bishop and hopefully I can challenge you and all of us - **in new ways** - as we share in Catholic education.

### Catholic:

Listening to the radio the other day, I heard a clip about a school in the United States, started by the Dominican fathers, called most appropriately, St. Dominic's school, which was in a turmoil since the board of this private school wanted to remove some religious statues on the grounds of the school and in the school proper, and many parents were concerned that the school was becoming **LESS CATHOLIC** by these actions of the board. It had almost made national news. The board said it was becoming more inclusive and more respectful for those students who were not Catholic and attending the school. This argument didn't quite fly with the parents - who maintained that the main purpose of the school was to educate the students in a Catholic atmosphere - and the surroundings are a part of this education.

Well, I guess we can hear this argument or logic even used today here in our school systems in Ontario. We do not have **only** Catholic students in our schools and even some of our teachers and administrators might **not** be of the Catholic faith. Is

there a need to **diminish** the Catholic **look** - for accommodation? Do these things offend our non-catholic brothers and sisters?

As the **bishop** I see this as a real **challenge** for us...in maintaining our Catholic identity and visibility in our community and society. I know we are a publicly funded school system, and Catholics are very much a part of the public community. But we are **also** a Catholic system - which was and still is, based on a **faith** component - a faith that parents, I believe want their children to learn, at least to some extent, while in our system of education.

I am also aware that, if I did a survey of parents about what they see as most important in the education system for their children, they will probably **not mention** the Catholic religion as a priority. But this is where I see the **challenge** for us - for **you and me**. The challenge is ours to make **sure** that **WE** recognize that our system is based on a faith foundation, and if we can acknowledge this - we know that our attitude and approach to whatever we are called to do - will have that **perspective**.

Yes, this might not always be an easy task - but if you are a part of the system, if you see your call to be an educator as a **VOCATION**, and if you truly respect and admire what we have in Catholic education, dare I say, even LOVE our system, then you will see the need for everyone to acknowledge this essential fundamental premise..

Catholic education is a **FAITH BASED SYSTEM** and we established it this way, in response to the demands of parents, many years ago, over 150 years ago, who desired this kind of educational system for their children. I liked to think that there are parents today who in some ways desire the same.

Are we **Catholic**? Do we **look** Catholic? Do we **act** Catholic? And this is for everyone - staff, administration, support staff, clergy, **everyone** involved in working in our system for the good of the students in our care.

As the bishop I see this as **an essential** for who we **are** and to help distinguish us from the rest. You might think, well, he is the bishop, he **HAS** to say this. But I am also a product of the system, and I **love** the system, because it helped to form me into the person I am today. Not just to be a priest - but to recognize my **commitment** to others, especially the poor, and for me to see the importance and dignity in each and every human being.

I like to believe that **you feel the same way** about your role in this system and your part in helping to form our young people into responsible, reliable, Christian citizens.

Our **Catholic identity**, which in the past was identified often with the presence of priests and religious sisters in our schools, is **not** the same today. Ever since the Second Vatican Council, where the Church noted the importance of the work of the **lay person** in the church and **as church** today, the challenge of Catholic identity no longer

rests with the priest, or deacon or religious sister, but is part of **who we are - as a community** and as a church **family**.

You play a significant role in all of this. You might say, but bishop, I am **not a strong practicing Catholic**, I don't go to church that often, and I am not sure that I can maintain or support this identity in my work and life. Well, as **Pope Francis** so often notes, the church is **full** of people, there is room for everyone, and we don't all have to be saints to belong. As a matter of fact, we are all more **sinner**s than we are saints! We are all more **weak** than we are strong! And we all need the **support** of one another for it to work and happen properly. If you feel this is too much for you, then maybe our system is not for you! A good and sincere examination and reflection could be in order for us.

Our system is '**Catholic**' by **nature** and needs to reflect that in every way. This is an important part of our **strength** and an important part of our **uniqueness**. And we all need to recognize and play a part in supporting this from the trustee to the volunteer, from the superintendent to the director, and from the teacher to the support worker. We are all in this **together**, especially **today**, with all the challenges to our system and its existence that seem to be around us each day.....

### **Education:**

**Education** is the second word in the title of this presentation. As I mentioned I am not a formal educator, I have never been to teacher's college etc. But I want to use a phrase that I think **helps us** to put a perspective on the education we hope to give to our students and through our system. You all know, I think, the story of when Jesus thoroughly upset his parents and was lost in the **temple** when he was around **12 years old**. Three days they looked for him in a panic, until they found him with the teachers in the temple, discussing and sharing with them issues of faith.

Mary and Joseph, exhausted and distraught by their search, finally found him to bring him home. And in the Gospel of St. Luke, it says that Jesus when home with them, and was obedient to them, and "**he grew in wisdom and grace**", gaining favour with God and men.

This growing in "**wisdom and grace**" I believe could be a motto or guide for us in our system. Growing in **wisdom** would of course mean growing in the ways and knowledge of the world. Those subjects that each student must learn in order to thrive in our world. Growing in **grace** would mean that **spiritual component** within us - which we feel is nourished and formed in our **faith** life. We know that our system has that special recognition that we form - not just the body and mind and intellect of the person, but also the **spirit** or **spiritual component** of the person.

What is this? We can call it the **soul**, the special link to God, the **animé**, or whatever you like, but we believe that it is an important part of every human being.

Much more than this we cannot explain, just that it is there, and it helps to bring out the compassion, generosity, respect and dignity we recognize in everyone.

He grew in '**wisdom and grace**' - if we think of this each time we teach, or administrate, or interact with one another, knowing that 'wisdom and grace' need to be present, I believe that it will **influence** everything that we do and how we work.

Yes our system is to impart **knowledge** in our students and really in each of us also, as we grow through experience and work. Does **wisdom and grace** play a part for me? Do I see it and recognize it in my work? **Wisdom** - the earthy or worldly side, **Grace** - the holy, or religious and eternal side - the God side.

In sacred scripture, the term **soul** often refers to human life, or the **entire** human person. But soul also refers to the **innermost aspect of mankind**, that which is of his greatest value in a person, that by which someone is most especially in **God's image**: soul signifies the spiritual principle in humankind. The body, made in the image of God, is animated by a spiritual soul.(363-64 CCC)

So - as we share in Catholic education, we know that we form not just the mind and intellect of the person, not just the body - but also the **spiritual** side or component which makes us **truly human and made in the image of God**.

If we can look at **each student**, no matter who they are, or where they are from, whatever background or nationality, and see someone made in the image and likeness of God, then we are looking **through Catholic eyes** in our system and you do **not** have to be a Catholic to do this! And if we recognize that **this person**, who is good and holy, must learn to grow in **wisdom and grace** through my efforts, then we know and appreciate the **Catholic philosophy** of our system. This should prompt us each day in our work - and we should remind ourselves each day of this responsibility. We all have to be reminded.

Each day when I descend the steps of the bishop's house to the kitchen for breakfast, I touch the **foot** of a marble statue in the residence, a statue of the good shepherd. I purchased it in Rome. It is my **daily reminder** to pray to God to be a good bishop and pastor, a good shepherd this day.

We **too** need reminders of who we are, and what we are called to do. A **prayer** can help us along the way. We pray often during disasters, like hurricanes and tragedies, but a **daily prayer, like daily exercise**, can keep us focused on our important task in Catholic education. This is for all of us - from Trustee on down.

## Family:

The third section of this presentation deals with the concept of **family**. Family as a church, family as a community, individual families and **family as a school board**. I am not sure if we have referred to ourselves as a family, in the past, but I think we have. And I would like to take a chapter from **Pope Francis' play book** on the family, and see if we measure up to his expectations.

The Pope, in his long document on the family, dealing with the **joy of love...** gives us some directives that will help us examine ourselves as family. He uses certain **words** and **phrases** that really can be applied to **any type of family**, and I think they are most appropriate for us as a Catholic Education family. One person once mentioned that when they read the Pope's document on the family, they felt that he was **not talking about families, but he was talking TO families**. Let's see if he is talking to us today.

The first characteristic about a loving family is that they are a **welcoming** family. Welcoming is an attitude or characteristic necessary to show the warmth of the Lord. Are we a **welcoming family** in our board? Not just welcoming of new students in our schools, but a sincere **attitude of welcome** to new staff, new administration, new volunteers and new support staff and new **parents**. Do we go out of our way to extend a welcoming gesture of kindness and a sincere gesture of welcome to new people? Welcoming is so **necessary** for our society. We see this in the refugee crisis, we see it in our communities, especially the needy communities, and in the welcoming of people of different cultures and backgrounds, and we know that it is necessary in our education family - for there to be **harmony** and **cooperation** as we work together. **Are we a welcoming community, am I a welcoming person?** Do I extend the hand of friendship - sincerely? This characteristic is essential for any family. Again, do I see myself as a welcoming person?

The second attitude or characteristic the Pope notes is that as a welcoming family we must be able **to listen to one another** - to listen **sincerely** and with empathy. We know that there are **stories** with everyone's life, and sometimes in the sharing of these stories, we **fail to listen attentively** to the other person - because we are **too preoccupied** with ourselves. I know that in my work as the bishop of the diocese, I do my best to take and make the time to authentically listen to people - and their issues and concerns, I am **not** the person who can solve all problems, but by **listening with genuine concern** - I sometimes can help someone find the answers they need for their situations. Listening can be an art form for us. **Listening** - and listening with the **ears of Jesus**, who heard all those who came to him in need, and who felt valued and important because he **listened** to them sincerely and honestly. To listen to others with **compassion** - helps to show the **dignity and respect** you have for them. Some people are better at listening than others (do I dare say that **women** are usually better listeners than men) - but we **all** must do our best for the sake of one another's spiritual health.

A good family is one that **accompanys** others. We welcome, we listen and we **accompany** others in their journey. It might be a senior teacher accompanying a new teacher, a senior administrator accompanying a new superintendent, just as we have older students accompany the younger ones at time for their safety. We **accompany**, to the best of our ability, and we **assure** people that we are there for them in their need. **Pope Francis** used the Church as an example, saying that there is **room** in the church for all families - is there a place in our rooms, staff room, offices, schools, halls, for all? **Welcoming people where they are** in their circumstances and situations - and **assuring** them of support. If we **walk** with them in their need and concern, then they (and even we) can discover paths to **grow**.

Accompanying people is probably one of our **weakest** points as a Christian family. We get so preoccupied with covering all the bases, getting everything done **efficiently** and quickly, we always seems to be in a **hurry**, that we do not take the time to walk with people. Do you think you can do this in your school? In your office? In your board room? I remember **Cardinal LaCroix** speaking to the Catholic Women's League this summer telling them that as **women**, they at times, can be more natural at accompanying than men, and that God has given them **special gifts in their hearts** for this task.

Another characteristic is that of discerning or discernment. This takes us beyond ourselves to the Holy Spirit for **guidance** in helping us discover our direction or our next step. We **listen** to the Word of God, and the **teachings** given to us by His Church, to help us discern where we can accompany others, **what we can do in that journey**, how **far** we can go, and how to make this experience rewarding for everyone. Discernment means some **internal inspection** and **reflection**. We do not have answers for all the problems in the world, but we can **help others to solve some** of their situations through our sincere accompaniment. To discern well, is to **open our hearts to the Spirit of the Lord for guidance**, and this is accomplished through **prayer**. Does prayer play a part at all in my life? Maybe this is an area of true discernment for us if I am called to be a **visible sign** in our Catholic Education Family.

The last thing the Holy Father notes in the attributes of a good family, is the ability to **integrate** or **come together** as a true supportive community. Integration, so that everyone feels welcome, everyone feels a part of the **team** everyone feels linked to a common purpose and common goals. Integration requires **flexibility** and a willingness to **change** in order to be united. We live in a world of constant competition that prompts us to get ahead of everyone, no matter what the cost, and no matter who gets hurt. Unfortunately, that is not the way of a true Christian family. There will always be some **competition**, but it must be linked to **mutual respect, dignity and an appreciation** of each others gifts and talents; linked together for the **good of all**. Instead of envy or jealousy for one another's gifts, it is a recognition that **shared gifts** are gifts for all (as Pope St. John Paul II declared)...and they help to build up **everyone** and to help us all grow in wisdom and grace.....

So the **five characteristics** that Pope Francis places before us today, to help us see how we can be that true family in our system, is to be **welcoming**, to **listen** with sincere empathy, to **accompany**, when we can, to show support and recognition, to **discern** in prayer, to help find our way, and to make sure we do our best to **integrate**, and bring together one another as a team, united in purpose and desire, to fulfill our mission as Catholic educators in our Catholic school system.

I guess the **questions** I can pose at the end of this presentation are these. Do we measure up to the qualities and characteristics necessary to be a **unified strong board** for the good of Catholic Education? Do we see how we can live as a **good family**? And do we see our **goal**, in particular in helping our students, and in effect helping all of us, to grow in **wisdom and grace** due to our efforts and the sharing of the gifts God has given us? I would say they are good questions for us - and I am **confident** that there is so **much goodness** in this place today, among all of **you**, that a positive response is almost certain for each question.

**Thank you** for your time and attention.... I hope this sharing by your bishop - was a helpful moment for everyone..and a bit of a **reflective moment** for all.

**God bless you** for all your good work in Catholic education and thank you once again, for your dedication and commitment to this great and awesome ministry of Catholic Education in Ontario.