

New Evangelization and our Catholic Identity September 2017 Trustees

Thinking about this talk to you today, I reflected on my recent visit to Rome, for my **Ad Limina** visit with Pope Francis, and our visit to the different offices of the Vatican. One main office was the **Commission for the New Evangelization**. The archbishop in charge of the commission gave us a lengthy talk about the work of evangelization taking place in and around Rome and how parishes has participated in varies projects and activities to encourage more parish participation of the faithful in church life.

One of the bishops at the meeting asked the Archbishop to please **define** the term “New Evangelization” for us. He looked at us and said - “there is **no NEW** evangelization”. It was a term that Pope John Paul II coined and started to use - and gradually it become a touchstone for ideas like, new involvement in church life, outreach to those who felt alienated from the church, a re-teaching of the faith to already baptized christians and a renewal of their faith life, and also it gave a goal or thrust to new initiatives in the church and parish life.

Evangelization is simply the “preaching and living” of the Gospel message. In other words, it is living our lives based on the principles and teachings and example that Jesus has given us - and that the church teaches us - to be true Christians and witnesses in the world today.

In a sense, we are **all evangelizers** - anyone who claims to know and follow Jesus is an evangelizer. Anyone who is **baptized** and tries to live by their baptismal commitment is an evangelizer. And we do this in a variety of ways. The priest does it by preaching - the bishop by teaching - the lay person by living the message in a secular world that is not always receptive to that message.

As **Catholics** we know that our tradition has been to be rather quiet, subdued, or humble in our faith practice, especially before others. We marvel at how the Jehovah Witnesses go door to door, and how the young Mormon missionaries come to teach us about prayer, even in the midst of rejection and sometimes ridicule from others. We as Catholic don't do this. We are **quiet** about our faith, because we do not want to be seen as forcing our teachings on others or as the term goes, proselytizing.

This quiet and gentle approach however is being **challenged** now by the “new evangelization” issue. This direction is asking us to be **bolder**, and not to be afraid to speak out - as to who we are, and what we believe. It is encouraging us to **stand tall** - in our faith, and to witness more **boldly** to the gospel and its message in our world.

Well this new approach is a bit **scary** for us. It is not what we are used to. It is hardly the way we learned or faith and hardly the way we practice it. Yes there were demonstration of faith in the past. Large rallies, pilgrimages - large events - but they were mostly attended by Catholic people, for Catholic people, where it was safe and comfortable to be together.

Now this new direction is asking us to be bolder in the **world**. To be more visible, not just among Catholics but among all other faiths and religions as well, in our secular world environment. This new direction is challenging us to reflect on **how much** our faith **means** for us - and how willing we are to be a witness to that faith among others.

Some people have welcomed this new direction while others are hesitant in their approach. It could mean that others would criticize us and even ridicule us for our effort, and that is not pleasant. However, the last few Popes, including **Pope Francis**, are promoting this new direction for all Catholic people and for the church as a whole. Pope Francis is asking us and demonstrating to us, that this can be done in a variety of ways. But most appropriately for him, it is done in **humble submission** and in **service** to others. In showing compassion and concern for others in a variety of contexts. And Catholics can do this too!

This is not really a **difficulty** for us, since Catholics have always been taught to be humble and also to be of **service** to others. It is the nature of our Church family. However the challenge is still there for many and in particular for us in our Catholic school system.

We are **hesitant** at times, because this is a bit **uncomfortable**, we sometimes fear we will make mistakes, or lack the knowledge and understanding necessary to defend our Catholic faith in the public forum. No one wants **confrontation**, and we fear this will happen to us if we try to be bolder in our faith expression. I even find it uncomfortable at times.

But the **New Evangelization** is the **new look** and direction for us as Catholics - and it is going to be the **touch stone** for all our works and endeavours into the future. It is a time for us to once again examine our roles as Catholic educators and leaders and maybe have a new look at them and how we exercise these roles in the context of Catholic education.

What does this mean for our **Identity** as a Catholic school system? Well we all know and remember that our identity as a Catholic school system in the past, was recognized primarily by the presence of the religious sisters, and brothers and priests who were part of the initial beginnings of our system some

years ago. We know that this link to our identity has been long gone....and that it is not the same today.

We struggle at times - to even clarify this **identity** - or to **describe** it in terms that can encompass our philosophy for Catholic Education. And unfortunately, we see and often hear of situations where this catholic identity is **diminished** or **clouded** by some of our leaders, whether that be teachers, principals, administration and even clergy. Sometimes priorities are set with no consideration at all - as to the **spiritual foundation** of our system and the **faith** component that is supposed to be present in all our work is sadly lacking.

The **Second Vatican Council** called all of us to a new direction in our faith and our work. Many people hear the words Vatican II - but are still at a loss as to what this means for us. I can imagine that even many people here today might still be a bit confused by the Vatican II changes in our church and faith practice. Some even say it would be good to return to **old methods**....which is impossible in the church today.

But the documents of Vatican II have given us a **new challenge** in particular as laity and clergy. We redefined the meaning of "Church", we made the celebration of Mass and the liturgy more participatory, we opened a door to dialogue and interaction with other faith communities, and we looked at the role of the laity - in the light of the modern world. **Big steps** for a big church. Big challenges for all of us - and yet **exciting** challenges which should really inspire us to action and to new directions and thinking - sometimes thinking "**out of the box**" for solutions and new directions.

How does it challenge our Identity today? We know that **visible things** like statues, crosses or crucifixes, banners or prayer corners in our classrooms are not enough. They are **important** - but not enough to truly express our identity as Catholic schools. Yes we have prayers, we have school masses and religion classes etc. and hopefully priests do visit our schools and make a link between school and church and family. But is **this** enough? In today's very secular world, these seem rather small examples of our Catholic identity. I am not recommending the elimination of these, but suggesting that **more needs to be done** to manifest our Catholic identity to the world.

What do the public school people think of us? What do the public school teachers and administration think of us? Do they **wonder** what those "Catholics" are doing in their school down the street? They **don't** know us - they find us a bit **strange** in some ways, and the secular media of course does not know us. I recall how they once called World Youth Day - a 'jamboree' for Catholic kids.

Not a term we really use. It was not Boy Scouts or girl guides - but all Catholic youth.

I guess the question we should ask is: “What do we want others to think - when they think of us as **Catholic educators and a Catholic school system?**” We are similar to them, that is true, but we are **MORE**.

We know that we are **FAITH** based, and that we have taken our cue from the parents who over 160 years ago, asked that their children be educated in a Catholic environment so they could learn and know more about the **Catholic faith** and its practices, and they could grow with a **moral value structure** that is consistent with the teachings of Jesus and the bible. This was their desire, and we have been fulfilling that request for parents for over 160 years.

Not without its challenges however. We know in the bible when they speak of the education of Jesus, they say that he grew in “**wisdom and grace**” when he studied and learned under the direction of his parents and teachers.

I like to think that “**wisdom and grace**” can also be a motto for us as educators. What does ‘grace’ mean for us? That is a church word, and we know that it does not just mean ‘gracefully’ - but that grace **connects** us to another reality, that of God.

I guess **wisdom and grace** can remind us that our system of education is different from others and unique because we believe the **Holy Spirit** (God) animates us. What does this **mean?** It means that we believe that somehow God and His Holy Spirit plays a significant **role** in all that we do. Not only in what we do, but in **who** we are. We believe that being “faith based” means being **God centred** and open to the promptings of the Holy Spirit in our entire system.

You might ask. **How** does the Holy Spirit animate my math class? Good question. Not that he makes it easier to learn math - but that in our teachings, in our interaction, in our patience with students, we manifest a type of goodness and **compassion** that is Gospel oriented and Gospel based. A recognition that **each child is unique** and an image of God’s goodness for us - no matter how challenging that might be. And a recognition that the **Holy Spirit** give us the patience and reminds us that we are to help all grow in ‘wisdom and grace’ in our system. That should be a good motto that is placed in each teacher or staff room. Just the words “**Wisdom and Grace**” to remind us of our responsibilities.

The Holy Spirit is our **link** to God. A God of love and grace. A God who accompanies and nurtures, no matter what our image of God is. A God who **cares**.

What again does this mean for us? For our identity and for the new evangelization? Well we know that we are **weak human beings**, and that we strive to be good and saintly in our lives. At least we should try.....But we are not asking for only **saintly** people to be our system animators. We need each **other**, we need the support of each other, we need the **respect** of each other, we need the **encouragement** of each other to act as a **team**, to act as a family with one big task. To help the children in our care grow in "Wisdom and Grace".

We are all a bit **shy** about this. We are all a bit bashful and uncertain about this. But this should not deter us from our goal or task. We live by a certain set of **values and virtues** - that we teach each day. We live our vocation based on these values and virtues **and** these values and virtues keep us in GRACE. That is, they keep us in **touch** with God everywhere - and we are aware of His presence among us no matter what - but especially in difficult times. (foot prints in the sand story).

We are called by Vatican II, by the New Evangelization, to be **strong** in our **identity** and a visible **sign** of it - both in our schools and even outside of them. Can we be a sign of that identity today? The statues, crosses, prayers and religion classes are good but they are **not enough** to mark this identity for us. We need to **live** our identity both in and out of school. Do we have the courage and desire to do so? People must **see** in us - a goodness, a compassion, a caring, an honesty, and a **love** that is visible and demonstrated in all that we do, especially with regards to our children and students.

So what are our **goals**? What do we take from all this reflection on the New Evangelization and our Identity? I would suggest **three simple goals** to animate us:

1. Try to be **bolder** in our witness to the Catholic faith in our everyday lives, no matter what the situation. (It might even be as simple as a daily prayer, or prayer before meals)
2. **Convince** others that Catholicism is not just a religion class but a **way of life** that permeates our living. (Living our teaching is the best way - Pope Paul VI said, people learn from the example of others, **sooner** than from books and formal teaching.)

3. Remember that **prayers**, the sacraments, Mass, communion are **integral** to who we are and how we live - it keeps us **focused** on our identity and our link to Jesus Christ. (It also nourishes us for the task of living and being a good example to others)

If we can at least consider these **three possible directives** or suggestions, then **we** will be a part of the New Evangelization in our schools, and we will help to shape our identity as a Catholic school system **clearly** and for all to see. Are you up to the challenge? As your bishop I will always support you all along the way.....for we share this journey together, and with the Lord's help, we will **never** fail.
God bless you.