

Catholic Schools-Handing on Our Catholic Faith
September 8, 2003 - Sullivan Middle School
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I am thankful to have this opportunity to speak with you, the parents of children in our Catholic School system. You as parents have a vital role to play in the formation of your children. You entrust your children to our Catholic schools so that they may become the Catholic leaders of tomorrow and grow in what it means to live the Gospel in our world today. When your children were baptized, there was a blessing prayed over the husbands. That blessing was, "You and your wife will be the first teachers of your children in the ways of faith. May you be the best of teachers."

It is precisely from the sacrament of Baptism that we as Catholics have our Catholic schools. We share in the mission of Jesus Christ and live that mission out each day. In the Decree on Catholic Education from the documents on Vatican II, it teaches us that parents have the primary role from the birth of their child forward to hand on their Catholic faith and that our Catholic schools are the best way to do that.

As your bishop, I strongly support Catholic education. I am the product of twelve years of Catholic education from 1956 to 1968. My parents helped with the building of two elementary schools and expansion of two high schools. They continued to give generously throughout their lives through endowments to the various Catholic schools.

I grew up in Los Angeles and the schools I attended were very large. The first Catholic elementary school that I went to had two levels of each grade and then expanded to four levels of each grade. In every classroom there were 50 to 70 students per classroom. I recently came across a picture of my third grade class, and showed it to Father Goering. I said, "This is my third grade class and my third grade teacher, Mrs. Gershenbacher." There were 66 students that she watched over and taught in one classroom. When I shared that with some of the teachers a couple of weeks ago at their in-service, they looked at me like I was crazy - how could one teacher handle 66 students - but it was done in those days and all of us learned.

I went to an all boys' high school and it was a tremendous experience for me. There was faith formation and moral character building and I will always cherish those four years. In 1976 I was ordained a priest. I taught in Catholic schools in Colorado Springs at an all-girls school and a co-ed high school. From 1982 to 1987 I was also pastor of an inner-city school which I helped to expand. In the 1990s I spent five years as Secretary of Catholic Education for the Archdiocese of Denver in which I oversaw all of Catholic education including religious education, sacramental prep, the Newman Centers, family life, and 42 Catholic schools.

I have a love for and a commitment to Catholic education. I have no magic formula for the success of Catholic Schools. There are, though, two elements that I believe make every Catholic school successful. The first element is that a successful Catholic school is

confident of its mission. The mission is given to us by Christ Himself. Jesus Christ is the Way, the Truth, and the Life. It is His gospel and His teaching that we are to hand on. Before He ascends into heaven, in Matthew 28, we hear the great mandate given to His disciples: “Go forth into every nation. Baptize them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Teach them to carry out everything I have commanded you and know that I am with you always.” That great mandate is the call that is given to us as disciples in 2003. Jesus still speaks to us in that Gospel. You as parents have had your children baptized. You now hand on to them the teachings of the Church.

A successful Catholic school is confident in its mission given to it by Christ. Vatican II speaks of that mission, as well as the code of Canon Law and other documents. The Church has, in a special way, the duty and the right of educating, for it has a divine mission of helping all to arrive at the fullness of Christian life. All of our programs must be permeated - the academic, the extracurricular, the sports - with that common mission in order to be successful.

Secondly, when a Catholic school is authentic to its mission, the school will fulfill the deepest desire of parents in sharing with them the handing on of our Catholic faith and the desire for their children to be formed in Christ. You as parents must have that desire to make the sacrifices you make to send your children to Catholic school today. I know my own parents, with the sacrifices that they made to send us to Catholic school and to send both of my sisters to Catholic colleges, had the desire that we be formed in the faith of Jesus Christ.

These two elements, then, make a successful Catholic school: 1) it is authentic to its mission, and 2) when that school is authentic to its mission, the desire of parents is fulfilled.

The mission of our schools summarizes well what it means for our schools to be Catholic. Our mission is “to teach the total person and foster the following of Jesus Christ.” Let us look at that statement for a moment. We know that the total person is body, soul, heart and mind. In faith, every person is made in the image and likeness of God. We hear that in the first book of sacred scripture in Genesis. There is an inherent dignity from the moment of conception in every human being.

The deepest longing of the human being, even if he or she is not aware of it, is God. We are made for God. It is programmed into us. The only way that we as human persons - that any human person - will have happiness is if they come to know and love God. We can look at St. Augustine as a prime example. He was one who searched the various philosophies of his day in the mid to late 300s. He went after the licentiousness of his own times. But he was one who in the midst of all of his searching discovered God and in that discovery he said, “My heart was restless until it rested in you.” He discovered the truth that each and every human being is made for God.

God reveals to us how we are to live as human persons in Jesus Christ. In the Second Vatican Council in number 22 of *The Church in the Modern World*, it states, “Christ the Lord, Christ the new Adam, in the very revelation of the mystery of the Father and of His

love, fully reveals man to himself and brings to light his most high calling. It is no wonder, then, that all the truths mentioned so far should find in Christ their source and their most perfect embodiment.” It then goes on to state, “By His incarnation, He, the Son of God, has in a certain way united Himself with each man. He worked with human hands, He taught with a human mind. He acted with a human will, and with a human heart he loved. Born to the Virgin Mary, He has truly been made one of us, like to us in all things except sin.” It is in Christ Jesus and Him alone that we discover what it means to be a human person and how to live our lives as human persons. Only by following Him who is the Way, the Truth, and the Life will we come to understand what it means to be a human being.

My sisters and brothers, that is the call of our Catholic schools. It is to help foster and form your children to follow Christ who is the Way, the Truth, and the Life. I would not be so dedicated to Catholic education if I did not hold that truth, if I did not have that belief. There is no reason for any Catholic school to exist anywhere in the world except to hand on the faith of Jesus Christ and to form young people according to our faith. We are challenged then as a people to look at what it means for us to live our faith today.

In the document on the Vocation and the Mission of the Lay Faithful in the Church and in the World, Pope John Paul II presents a criterion of ecclesiality, of what it means to belong to the Church. It is given particularly to associations of the lay faithful, what it means for them to be in communion and mission with the Church. I have adapted the criteria for the purpose of our Catholic schools. Let me quickly walk through those five elements that help us to live our faith and that are signs of us living our faith.

1. **First, primacy is given to the call of every Christian to holiness.** Each and every one of us must be totally convinced that he or she is called to holiness, to sanctity. We are all called to be modern day saints.

I will never forget when I was studying in Rome. I still have cousins in Sicily and I had gone down to visit one of them. One of their cousins was visiting from Milan. They invited me to come up to Milan which was a short train trip and so I went up there for a weekend. My friend was taking me to churches and showing me various parts of Milan. She would see me when I would go into the Churches kneel down to pray and look at the various works of art within the Church. As we were driving back to her home she looked at me and said, “Do you want to be a saint?” I remember, I was stunned by the question. No one had ever asked me personally, “Do you want to be a saint?” I felt uncomfortable, quite honestly, with the question. I thought, “How could I ever measure up to those who I considered at that time living saints, like Mother Teresa of Calcutta or John Paul II?” and yet when I looked at her I said, “Yes, I do.” That is the call and the vocation of every Christian, of every Catholic, that we are to live the fullness of the Christian life. We are to be instruments of holiness in the Church and in the world. Each and every one of us must give primacy in our lives to the call to holiness, to sanctity.

2. **Second, we have the responsibility of professing our Catholic faith and that means embracing and proclaiming the truth about Jesus Christ, the Church and humanity.** It means that we have the responsibility to know our faith and to live our faith. As I share in the Confirmation homilies that I have given throughout the diocese, each of us, every Catholic home, should have two books. Those two books essential to Catholic homes are, first, the Bible. The Bible helps us to know God's revelation. The second book is the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* which helps us to understand the teachings of Christ and how those teachings are reflected in the Church.

We have a responsibility to profess our Catholic faith and to live it each day. If we do not understand our Catholic faith, how can we ever expect our children to understand it? If we are not living our Catholic faith, how can we ever expect it of our children? Each of us must examine our homes and ask ourselves, "Is our home truly a domestic Church?" That is how Vatican II describes our homes. Are there signs and symbols of our Catholic faith within our homes?

When I was a child, anyone who entered our home always knew it was Catholic. There were no excuses made. There were no excuses made for the Crucifixes that hung in every one of our bedrooms. Even if Jewish friends came over to spend the night, and there were lots of Jewish friends when I was growing up, we did not hide the symbols of our faith. They remained. Whenever they had dinner in our home, the Last Supper was always on the dining room wall. Whenever they walked into the den, the statue of the Sacred Heart was there. No one could enter our home and not know that it was a Catholic home. That is the responsibility that we have of professing and living our Catholic faith.

3. **Third, we are called also to witness to a strong and authentic communion in filial relationship to the Holy Father, to our Pope, and in total adherence to the belief that he is the perpetual and visible center of unity of the universal Church.** That is also true for me as your local bishop.

When I re-read the documents of Vatican II prior to my ordination as a bishop, there was a certain terror and awe that filled me of how the Church understands the role of the bishop, that every bishop is a Vicar of Christ. That is a tremendous responsibility that is entrusted to us, that we become the visible sign of the Head, Bridegroom and Good Shepherd of the Church. We are to reflect Christ and to be, and I quote, "the visible principle and foundation of unity in our particular churches that are entrusted to us." Catholics then are called to witness to that communion, to that relationship that was established in Baptism between all of God's people to be in communion with the Pope and their local bishop.

4. **Fourth, we must have conformity to and participation in the Church's apostolic goals, that is handing on the message of Jesus Christ.** Once again, that message is communicated by the way that we live our lives, not in a forceful way but simply by the way we live as Catholics. Through our example and our actions, we evangelize and sanctify the world. Every group of the lay faithful is

asked to have a zeal that will increase one's love for Christ. We are called to have that zeal in our homes, in our work places, in our neighborhoods, and in our schools. Wherever we are, we must have that zeal for Christ.

- 5. Finally, there is a commitment to a presence in human society itself.** The teachings of Vatican II are very clear on the role of Catholics in human society. Catholics are called to transform human society, to reflect God within human society. There can be no separation between faith and life. Every decision that we make as Catholics must be permeated by our faith in Jesus Christ. **Every decision must be permeated by that faith in Jesus Christ.**

We as Catholics cannot separate faith from life. We must live out our faith each and every day. The documents of Vatican II speak of the lay faithful as the leaven in the world by the witness that they give. That is the call of each and every Christian, of each and every Catholic, to bring the values of the Gospel into society, into the work place. There can be no separation between the secular and the Church. While the secular is autonomous, we must also bring to the secular God Himself. If the secular is ever separated from God, it will become hostile to religion, it will become hostile to the dignity of the human person.

What are the challenges that we as a people face today in the world in which we live in 2003? There are a number of challenges.

- 1. First - the complexity of our society.** We live in an age of information, of busyness, of distraction. We live in an age that is constantly changing. As a child I remember the 1960 presidential election in which Kennedy was elected. My grandmother was still living at the time. She spoke only Sicilian. She was a poor peasant woman who never learned to read or to write. I remember at times trying to teach her how to count. When I look back at it, she must have been awfully frustrated with me as a child, trying to teach her how to read numbers and how to at least print something. I understood enough Sicilian to think I heard what I heard, but I asked my mother. Remember John F. Kennedy spoke about putting a man on the moon.

In conversation with my mother she was saying, "This cannot be possible!" The reason she gave was, "If he tries to put a man on the moon, he is going to punch a hole into the sky and the whole sky will collapse and everything around it." Her world view was one in which it was impossible to travel in the air. She never, ever stepped on an airplane and whenever we would travel from Los Angeles to her family in Cleveland, it was always by train or by car.

I think back to those days and wonder what it would be like for her today with all of the changes that we have seen from the introduction of television, to the computer, to an age in which information travels at lightning speed. We are challenged by the complexity of the society in which we live. We are challenged by the busyness and the distractions that are there.

2. **Second, we live in times in which truth itself is questioned.** We live in times of relativism and subjectivism. We live in times in which each and every person's opinion is held as truth. We live in times in which people say there is no objective truth. And if there is no objective truth, which is a contradiction in itself, then there is no criteria from which we can judge.

We live in times that are not all that different from the times of Jesus. At his trial Pilate spoke to Him these words: "So you are a King?" Jesus answered: "So you say that I am a king. For this I was born and for this I have come into the world, to be a witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth hears My voice." Pilate said to Him, "What is truth?" Pilate captures well society today, a society that refuses to embrace the truth or to understand the truth that there are objective norms which we must follow and live out. There are objective criteria by which we judge. We as a people must look at this and help our young people to live the truth. It is the great question of our time. We proclaim as a Catholic people that Jesus Christ is the Way, the Truth, and the Life. If we say there is no truth, or question truth, we are questioning revelation itself in Jesus Christ.

3. **A third challenge for us today is the media.** The media is challenging in how it presents religion and faith. When one looks at the statistics on those who work in the media, they are people who are primarily atheistic, who have no belief in God. That makes it difficult because of the many judgments they make, because of the misinformation they have.

Recently CNN was doing a survey of anybody and everybody on celibacy. The question was, "Do you think Catholic priests should be married?" It was a general survey that was just taking the feel of the people. One can already sense within the question the subjectivism of it. There is no teaching on celibacy that the media presents, or the good of celibacy, or the reason for celibacy or even the tradition of celibacy. The question simply is – "Are you for it or against it?" - with no thought, no background, no care about what faith you are or who you are. The media seldom gives us information that is accurate or complete when it comes to Christianity and to our Catholic faith. If we do not know our faith well, how will we ever be critical of the media and what the media says about our faith? Yet most people take what they hear from the media to be gospel truth when it comes to the Catholic Church. It is a tremendous challenge today to address the often negative and misleading influences of the media.

4. **Another challenge that we face is apathy or indifference toward religious formation and religious life within our world.** We must ask ourselves, "Who forms us, the Gospel or the culture? Is it the teaching of Christ which forms my life or the culture in which I live?" There can be no separation for the Christian between faith and life. As I share with the young people in Confirmation, we will be judged. We proclaim each Sunday, that we believe in the judgment of the living and the dead. My sisters and brothers, we as Catholics cannot be indifferent, nor can we separate faith from life and ignore the judgment we will face at the time of death.

We can see that in recent documents of the Church. The teaching of the Church on marriage is clear. It is rooted in the Gospel. The Church has called all Catholics, including Catholic politicians, to recognize the dignity of marriage. There is no room for same-sex unions if we are faithful to God, nor at the same time is there room for anyone to say it is okay to be Catholic and pro-choice.

As Catholics, we must stand for the dignity of human life. We must promote a culture of life. One day we will stand - and every Catholic politician will stand - before God and be judged. What will God say to that person who does not stand up for the dignity of human life? "Which part of My commandment of 'Thou shalt not kill' do you not understand?" We in 2003 have had every scientific evidence which points to the truth that human life begins with the union of a sperm and an ovum in a mother's womb. There is not one of us present here tonight who did not begin that way. As Catholics we cannot be indifferent. We cannot separate our faith from our life. We must walk our faith no matter what the cost and promote a culture of life. We must ask ourselves, "Who forms our hearts and our minds? Who forms our children - the culture or the Gospel of Christ?"

5. **Another challenge we face is that of human sexuality.** In a recent article in Time Magazine, they said that the most significant statements on the meaning of human sexuality for over 200 years have been given by John Paul II. How many of us would have ever thought that we would have seen something like that in Time Magazine or a secular journal? And yet how many of us are aware of the theology of the body which John Paul II has promoted and developed? He has taught clearly the meaning of human sexuality and human life. We have seen within our own society how fractured human sexuality is.

My brothers and sisters, your children are bombarded with a totally wrong message on human sexuality. Just a little over a week ago, one saw the shenanigans of Britney Spears and Madonna. It was outrageous what was shown and what was seen on television and in the newspapers. I ask you as parents, "Would you want your daughter to be Britney Spears or Madonna?" Yet look at the message that your children are getting.

I remember several years ago, a parent - and I am not recommending that you do this - I am recommending that you monitor television - but a friend of mine got so angry by what one of his kids was watching, he picked up the whole TV set and went into the backyard and threw it on the patio much to the chagrin of the children. But he said: "I will no longer have them exposed to those kinds of images."

Human sexuality and the dignity of human sexuality and the human person is all connected. The gift of human sexuality is given to us by God. In the first chapter of Genesis it is clear that man and woman are created for each other, that they are blessed and are told to go forth and to be fruitful and multiply. If one separates

human sexuality from marriage, if one separates the unity of husband and wife from marriage, if one separates the fruitfulness of children from sexual intimacy then one can justify just about anything when it comes to human sexuality. That is why we are in the times in which we are today.

There is a divorce of human sexuality from male and female. There is a divorce of human sexuality from marriage by the promotion of promiscuity and thinking that premarital sex is not wrong. And yes, probably the most difficult teaching of all for us to hear is the divorce between human sexuality, marriage and procreation.

The teaching of the Church on contraception is true and when intimacy is separated from procreation, it creates ambiguity in the dignity and in the meaning of human sexuality. If you have not yet read *Humane Vitae*, the teaching on birth control given in 1968 by Pope Paul VI, I ask you to go back and read it. Read what he says about the consequences of a contraceptive mentality. All of them are true today. That document was prophetic in what it said about the breakup of marriage, in what it said about adultery, in what it said about promiscuity, in what it said about the treating of women as objects.

That is an area that all of us need to look at and address today. How are we forming our children? It is a tremendous challenge. I am sure it is a challenge for you as parents to decide what your children will wear, and what they will look at. And men - all of us know - our eyes wander. There is not one man here who cannot say that when he sees a woman, even a young woman, provocatively dressed, his eyes do not wander and his mind does not wander. Is that the way you want your daughters to be treated, as an object? Are you teaching your sons not to treat women in that way? What kind of communication are you as parents giving to your children in the midst of this great challenge?

6. **The sixth area of challenge that we face is that of what it means to persevere in living a disciplined life and a life of sacrifice.** Our young people have so many choices and options, it is easy for them to fly from one thing to another thing and not to obtain the one goal that they most need. We, too, must help them in discipline, in perseverance, and in sacrifice.
7. **Finally, there is today within our society a reduction of education to obtaining a diploma.** Education is seen as training for employment, for getting the best paying job. That type of mentality ignores the dignity of the human person and it misses the authentic vocation of each child. How do we understand education? What is the goal of education? Is it the dignity of the child and the dignity of the human person and learning for the sake of learning? Or is it only training for the best paying job that I can find?

All of these are challenges that we face. I am sure that you could list many more.

What then is our role as educators, as parents, for me as bishop, for the clergy?

1. **First, all of us must have a personal commitment to the mission of Catholic schools.** That mission, as I shared with you, is the handing on of our Catholic faith. It is handing on the truth of Jesus Christ.
2. **Second, we are called to live our Catholic faith, not just to give it lip service but to be committed to Christ Himself.** My heart and my mind must be formed by Christ. As parents, you are the first teachers of your children in the ways of faith. Clergy and Catholic school educators can only reinforce what you are teaching in the home. If your homes are not the “domestic church” then our task is much more difficult.
3. **Third, all of us must work together in forming the one mission of Christ.** Whether we are parent, teacher, administrator or staff, all of us share the same mission. It is important that all forms of dialogue about our Catholic schools be founded on the teaching of Christ Himself. They must be founded in terms of resolving questions or issues through dialogue, and it must be civil dialogue.
4. **Fourth, all of us need to look at how we approach and resolve problems.** Quite honestly, moving from a large city to a smaller city has been challenging for me, primarily because of the knowledge we have of one another. While it is wonderful that we know one another by the smallness, it also at times can lead to gossip, to complaining, to innuendo and to detraction of others. All of us must look at this area within our own lives and how we address and work with others. Why do we talk so much about other people? Our Lord’s words are tough and challenging on that kind of rash judgment. Detraction is stating what may be true about someone to someone else when that person has no right to even know that truth about the other person. Read about it in the Catechism. Our Lord tells us within the Gospel about judgment. “Judge not, that you be not judged. For with the judgment you pronounce you will be judged, and the measure you give will be the measure you get. Why do you see the speck that is in your brother’s eye but do not notice the log that is in your own eye?”

As Catholics, when we address various issues and problems we face, we must ask ourselves the following questions: Am I following the law of God that you shall love your neighbor as yourself? At times when I make rash judgments or gossip about someone else, is it based on fact and truth and does this person have a right to know it? When I make a complaint do I make it directly to the person with whom I am concerned whether it be the teacher, the administrator, or another parent? How do I approach resolving the problem? As Catholics we must resolve problems according to the values of the Gospel, not according to the incivility of society. Gossip and talking about others has no place in a Catholic setting.

5. **A fifth area that we are called to reflect upon as parents is the discipline of our children.** Your role is tremendously difficult today because of the things that your children are bombarded with. The support system does not exist today that existed 50 years ago. I remember when I was in elementary school, if I ever got

called to the principal's office, my parents would immediately side with the principal or the teacher.

I remember in first grade - in 1956 - there were 50 students in the classroom and you can imagine 50 first graders. The teacher was in full habit. She was having a horrible time with us. Finally she got so frustrated she looked at us and said, "All of you put your coats on right now. I am going to call the police and have you all taken to jail." Needless to say we were terrified. The crying began and we all listened.

Meanwhile Sister went out of the classroom to the next classroom and asked the teacher, Sister Mary Columbanus, to put on a record with sirens. We were much too short to look out the windows. All we heard were the sirens and our wailing became even louder. She told us: "Get your coats on now and be quiet." Then all of us began to ask her: "Isn't there something we can do?" and she said, "Let me go out and talk to the policeman. He's out there." She then came back to the classroom and said, "The policeman said if you children behave and don't talk any more and listen to me then he won't take you to jail." We said: "Fine, Sister" and sat down and she never had a problem with us again.

But how many parents would support that today? Certainly that may not have been the best way to go about it, but all of us behaved. All of us were good. I found out on the day of my ordination that the sister who was teaching us never had a college education. She was 19 years old, right out of high school, from Ireland. I thought, "No wonder she was so lost. She was a child herself."

As Catholics we must all be on the same page with discipline. The use of drugs, the use of alcohol, bullying, and name calling have no place in our Catholic schools. As parents, as teachers, and administrators we must help our young people to understand that there are certain behaviors that are totally unacceptable and we must support one another in that. There is no place in our schools for young people whose families do not support the values of saying "no" to drugs, "no" to alcohol, "no" to bullying, "no" to name calling, "no" to gossip, or whatever it may be. We must have the heart and mind of Christ. St. Paul tells us that the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self control. All of us must support that discipline with our children.

I remember a tragic occurrence when I was in my second assignment. I saw a group of seventh graders trying to punch holes in tires. One of the cars happened to be mine and I was not real pleased with it. They did not realize that we could watch from the window in the rectory. I went out on the playground and called all of the kids back into the classroom. It was kind of like the first grade experience. All of them stopped. There were over 200 kids out on the playground and when they heard me yell and say: "Get back inside!" all of them went inside.

Four students admitted what they had done immediately. There was one young man who did not come forward. He lied. The other four students said that he was punching the tires with them. I had the principal call the parents and spoke with the parents about it. That one student, though, who everyone knew was punching tires, would not admit it, nor

would his mother support the students. I was only a parochial vicar at the time but when I spoke with the mother - and she was not happy with me - I said to her, "You have a choice. I saw with my own eyes your son trying to punch holes in our tires. Your son has lied. The other kids who were with him also saw him and there were others. You have a choice to either help your son understand that his behavior has consequences and to learn to tell the truth or to remove your son from the school." The tragedy is she chose to remove her son from school. I often wonder what happened to that young man, what lessons were taught, and what he learned. I still pray for him today. Discipline and the support of one another in discipline is essential.

In closing I want to say that I believe our Catholic schools are a tremendous sign of hope for the society in which we live. It is a sign of hope for me as Bishop that you as parents are so deeply committed to our Catholic schools, to the handing on of our Catholic faith. You are committed to the proclamation of the Gospel and of Christ. My prayer for you is that you will embrace the mission more fully and completely, that you will work together with staff, with teachers, with administrators, in building a better Catholic school. That means all of us responding together to the call to holiness, to living the Gospel of Jesus Christ, to living the teachings of our Church, and being faithful to them. And, yes, there is a cost to it in today's society. It is no different than the cost of what Jesus experienced. He experienced joy, but He also experienced the Cross. Both are there for us today. My prayer for all of you as parents is that the prayer that was prayed over the fathers at Baptism will be fulfilled in your midst, that you will be the first teachers of your children in the ways of faith and that you will be the best teachers of all.

Thank you.