

‘Teach them to observe all that I have commanded you.’ (Matthew 28:20)

A Pastoral Letter of the CBCP on the occasion of the
400 Years of Catholic Education in the Philippines

“Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.”
(Matthew 28:19-20)

Dear People of God,

‘Go, make disciples, baptize, teach.’ These are the operative words in the command of Jesus before he left the apostles. From this comes the evangelizing mission of the Church; a mission grounded on the mystery of the Holy Trinity. To the Church is given the power to preach and to teach; a task that has been accepted by the apostles and handed on to the Fathers of the Church, Doctors of the Church, philosophers, theologians & missionaries. The Church faithfully fulfills this *mandate she has received from her divine founder of proclaiming the mystery of salvation to all men and of restoring all things in Christ.*

‘Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations . . . Teach them all I have commanded you.’ These words of Jesus resonate once again as we take stock of 400 years of Catholic Education in the Philippines. In view of this, I invite you, dear brothers and sisters, to a closer look at the evangelizing mission of the church made possible by Catholic Education.

A Brief Survey of Catholic Education in the Philippines

This same occasion allows us to look back on the beginnings of Catholic Education in our country.

- We recall the very first school opened by the Augustinian missionaries in Cebu after their arrival in 1565 and the initiative of the Franciscans to provide primary instruction upon their arrival in 1578.
- We recall Bishop Domingo Salazar, O.P. who in the year 1581 expressed to the King of Spain the need for a college to educate priests which later opened in 1596 as the Jesuit-run College of San Ignacio in Manila. Likewise, Colegio de San Ildefonso in Cebu founded by the Spanish Jesuits in 1598
- We remember the year 1611, 400 years ago, when Archbishop Miguel de Benavides, O.P., and the Dominican Fathers established the University of Santo Tomas; and in 1632, the Colegio de San Juan de Letran both in Intramuros, Manila. We rejoice with UST, the oldest University, in the celebration of its 400 years of continued existence and service in the field of Catholic Education.
- We remember the year 1632, when Colegio de Sta. Isabel, the first women’s college, was opened. This college is now run by the Daughters of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul who arrived in 1862. We remember also how in 1868 they went to Naga City to open a college for girls, and to establish the very first Normal School for Women in the Philippines on September 18, 1872 at the instance of Bishop Francisco Gainza, O.P.
- We remember the year 1859, some 150 years ago, when the Jesuits returned and opened the school called the *Escuela Municipal de Manila* located right across the San Ignacio Church in Intramuros. This was the very first Ateneo campus.
- We remember the year 1862, 150 years ago when the Vincentian Fathers came to the Philippines by virtue of the 1852 Royal Decree of Queen Isabel II of Spain

in order to administer the Conciliar seminaries of Manila, Naga City, Cebu City, Iloilo City and Vigan and to take care of the religious and scientific instruction of the diocesan seminarians and lay students in Colegio Seminarios.

- We remember the year 1904, 107 years ago, when the first Sisters of St. Paul de Chartres opened the first Paulinian school in Dumaguete, Negros Oriental.
- We remember the year 1906, 105 years ago, when the first four German Benedictine sisters and one novice from Tutzing, Germany founded St. Scholastica's College.
- We remember the year 1911, 100 years ago, the Brothers of the Christian Schools, known as La Salle Brothers, opened their first school in the Philippines on General Luna Street in Manila.
- We also remember the beaterios which likewise provided formation and some instruction for girls.
- We look back also 70 years ago, the year 1941, when these Catholic education institutions organized itself into an association called the CEAP (Catholic Educational Association of the Philippines) to be able to collectively respond not only to urgent educational issues but also societal issues. CEAP was born upon the inspiration of Bishop Michael J. O' Doherty with Msgr. Jose Jovellanos as the first President.

Without doubt, Catholic Education in the Philippines has a long and rich history. Many of our heroes and significant personages in the church and country are a proof of this. It is not an exaggeration to say that Catholic Education laid the foundations of education in our country.

Thus, we cannot but **remember with gratitude** the heroic missionaries who begun the task of education in the faith. Their contribution was not limited to Catholic Education but included even the other sciences and disciplines. We may cite for example their ethnographic and scientific studies, the grammar and catechetical books like the **Doctrina Cristiana** which not only instructed us with the Church doctrines but also preserved our dialects. Such is no mean contribution to our society and culture.

Indeed, *'at great cost and sacrifice our forebears were inspired by the teaching of the Church to establish schools which enriched mankind and responded to the needs of time and place.'* (Ex Corde #65)

The Nature of Christian Education

It is undeniable that today we benefit from these foundations of Christian Education whose aim is *'the **formation of the human person** in the pursuit of his ultimate end and of the good of the societies of which, as man, he is a member, and in whose obligations, as an adult, he will share.'* (Gravissimum Educationis #1).

Christian Education is tasked to *develop harmoniously the persons' physical, moral and intellectual endowments so that they may gradually acquire a mature sense of responsibility in striving endlessly to form their own lives properly and in pursuing true freedom as they surmount the vicissitudes of life with courage and constancy.* (Cf. GE # 1)

Yet, Christian education does not merely strive for the maturing of a human person as just now described, but has as its principal purpose this goal: that the baptized, while they are gradually introduced the knowledge of the mystery of salvation, become ever more aware of the gift of Faith they have received, and that they learn in addition how to worship God the Father in spirit and truth (cf. John 4:23) especially in liturgical action, and

be conformed in their personal lives according to the new man created in justice and holiness of truth (Eph. 4:22-24); also that they develop into perfect manhood, to the mature measure of the fullness of Christ (cf. Eph. 4:13) and strive for the growth of the Mystical Body; moreover, that aware of their calling, they learn not only how to bear witness to the hope that is in them (cf. Peter 3:15) but also how to help in the Christian formation of the world that takes place when natural powers viewed in the full consideration of man redeemed by Christ contribute to the good of the whole society. (GE #2)

Christian Education is not self-seeking. It is not given for the purpose of gaining power but as an aid towards a fuller understanding of, and communion with man, events and things. Knowledge is not to be considered as a means of material prosperity and success, but as a call to serve and to be responsible for others. (Ex Corde Ecclesiae #56)

The Contribution of Catholic Education

From the nature of Christian Education and from what has been done in the course of history, we cannot deny that we have benefited from it. In fact, it is not an exaggeration to say that the establishment of schools in our country has laid the foundations of education in our country. The brief historical survey earlier cited does not speak of all of the four centuries accomplishment of Catholic Education in the Philippines.

It is a happy thing, that the Catholic School is still very much present and felt, not without challenges however. There are about 1300 Catholic schools spread all over the Philippines, offering different levels of education and types of formation.

These schools, while relying mainly on their own resources and efforts, strive to provide decent classrooms and facilities so as to offer quality education even in remote towns and barrios. There are a number of these which have consistently been among the top schools not only in the country but also around the globe. At great cost and without necessarily incurring the government any burden, the Catholic schools recruit, train and sustain their personnel.

Advanced studies and researches are pursued again at the expense of these same schools, thereby contributing to the advancement of society. In fact, Catholic schools have been a major contributor to the professional sector of our country. It is not altogether surprising then that quality education is almost always appended to Catholic schools.

Furthermore, a number of these schools are not exclusive to Catholics, but serve peoples of other faiths; others are dedicated to out of school youths, to the handicapped, to cultural minorities, and those in the periphery.

With the significant shortage of classrooms and teachers in public schools, Catholic schools assist the government in providing education to the rest of the citizens who opt for Catholic education as well as those who cannot be accommodated in public schools. Citizens, in choosing to be educated to Catholic schools, waive as it were their right to a free education, so that others may avail of it. Catholic schools by raising their own resources assist the government in providing employment and saving financial resources.

One can only imagine what if these Catholic schools would close at the same time. Will the government be able to absorb all the students and provide the same quality education many of these schools provide given the present circumstances in public schools?

In the Context of the Local Church

In the context of the local church, the Catholic schools provide a stable and systematic evangelization. It will be remembered that when the threat of domination of other faiths accompanied by movement towards schismatic independence emerged, it was the establishment of parochial schools that became the solution. These schools, especially the seminaries, became the training ground of dedicated Catholics.

Innumerable are the products of Catholic schools who have served the country and the church. Still at present, many graduates of Catholic schools serve in different lay ministries in the local churches. A number of them have taken leadership in the parishes and communities.

The schools continue to make their resources, personnel and students of schools readily available to support programs and activities of the diocese. The outreach programs of many a Catholic school lead to the benefit of communities in dioceses and parishes, even to non-Catholics. They are a ready resource in times of calamities and social concerns.

We do not intend to enumerate everything Catholic schools are doing. Yet we can ask: How will the local church be without the Catholic school? *What will the country be without Catholic schools?*

Present-Day Context & Challenges

As we note the contributions of Catholic Education, we also note present realities that challenge and even threaten Catholic Education.

There exists a general perception that Catholic Schools are wealthy or are only for the wealthier social classes. At the mention of Catholic Schools, many would easily think of big universities or schools. This is a phenomenon that is also true in other countries. *In some countries Catholic schools have been obliged to restrict their educational activities to wealthier social classes, thus giving an impression of social and economic discrimination in education. But this occurs only where the State has not weighed the advantages of an alternative presence in their pluralistic society. From such nearsightedness considerable difficulties have arisen for Catholic schools.* (The Catholic School #21)

The truth is, however, even for the CEAP, the biggest educational institution in the country, out of its more than 1300 schools, there are more than 900 small, struggling mission schools spread in different parts of the Philippines, whose teachers work with missionary spirit. Many of these same schools rely on their meager resources as they strive to provide quality education to the marginalized in far flung areas. A number of these, especially in Mindanao, serve students of other faiths.

There is the challenge of the continuing trends of decreasing enrolment and the increasing migration of teachers from private Catholic schools to public schools. The free or low cost of public education and the ever increasing salaries in public schools have a huge impact to Catholic schools. They lose students year after year to public schools and some teachers suddenly leave in the middle of the school year when asked to report for work in the public school where they have pending application.

This is occasioned not only by economic factors, but also by the seeming depreciation of the distinctiveness of Catholic Education. With the increasing secularist and pragmatic mentality, Catholic values are no longer seen as relevant by Catholic families. These economic and cultural factors put many a Catholic School in a dilemma as its survival is threatened.

In the secular and postmodern culture that seems to disregard the need for faith, we are confronted with a society that offers varied and often conflicting ephemeral values. Thus, Pope Benedict has spoken of the *'great "educational*

emergency", the increasing difficulty encountered in transmitting the basic values of life and correct behavior to the new generations, a difficulty that involves both schools and families and, one might say, any other body with educational aims.'

More than ever before, a Catholic school's job is infinitely more difficult, more complex, since this is a time when Christianity demands to be clothed in fresh garments, when all manner of changes have been introduced in the Church and in secular life, and, particularly, when a pluralist mentality dominates and the Christian Gospel is increasingly pushed to the side-lines. (TCS #66)

Sense of Mission

Despite these, the foundational philosophy of Catholic education which is in service of the faith has continued on. While these challenges pose a threat to the existence of some of our schools, they have not lost sight of the vision of Catholic education. They have remained as potent means of quality education where Religion is the core of the curriculum - an effective contribution to the development of other aspects of personality (TCS #19).

Catholic Education strives to remain faithful to its mission of providing complete education which necessarily includes a religious dimension. Religion is an effective contribution to the development of other aspects of a personality in the measure in which it is integrated into general education (TCS #19). Apart from providing an integral and holistic formation, it is one that aims at a dialogue of culture and faith.

The education in the faith which Catholic Education provides, in the words of Pope Benedict, nurtures the soul of a nation. Thus, Catholic Education is beneficial not only for Catholics but for the entire country.

The mission continues. In today's context, we see the signs of hope in the rise of parochial and diocesan schools. Recently, we have more diocesan priests being trained to develop the parochial and diocesan school system. It is not to be forgotten that some of the great founders of religious congregations were diocesan priests. These diocesan priests founded institutes whose life and mission were on Catholic Education. Eventually, some of these schools started by religious congregations or organizations were turned over to the dioceses. Even the first president of the Catholic Educational Association of the Philippines (CEAP), Msgr. Jose Jovellanos, was a diocesan priest.

Moreover, society can take note from the Catholic school that it is possible to create true communities out of the common effort of the common good. In the pluralistic society of today, the Catholic school, by maintaining an institutional Christian presence in the academic world, proclaims by its very existence the enriching power of the faith as the answer to the enormous problems which afflict mankind. It is called to render a humble loving service to the Church by ensuring that she is present in the scholastic field for the benefit of the human family.

A Call to a Fervent Renewal

Brothers and Sisters, our grateful recollection of the grace of 400 years of Catholic Education is an opportune time, not to withdraw, but to rediscover once again the original mission of the Catholic schools. The words of Jesus resound once again: *'Go, teach them to observe what I have commanded you.'* It is a time to renew the mission with fervor.

This call for fervent renewal is a challenge to Catholic schools to become the locus of the encounter with Christ. In the school the loving truth of the Gospel must be proclaimed. *It is not only 'informative' but also 'performative', that is creative and life-changing. (Spe Salvi #2).*

This fervent renewal is a rediscovery of the ideals of Jesus. This calls us to make saints of our students. In this regard, the words of the Holy Father are instructive: **Christianity** *"is not a new philosophy or a new form of morality. We are only Christians if we encounter Christ, even if He does not reveal Himself to us as clearly and irresistibly as he did to Paul in making him the Apostle of the Gentiles. We can also encounter Christ in reading Holy Scripture, in prayer, and in the liturgical life of the Church, - touch Christ's heart and feel that Christ touches ours. And it is only in this personal relationship with Christ, in this meeting with the Risen One, that we are truly Christian."* (Pope Benedict XVI)

This renewal means going back to the spirit of the establishment of Catholic education where the synthesis of knowledge, culture and faith are evident. This, in turn, must lead to the production of right and morally upright citizens. This means not only the formation of the mind but of the heart. It is education that provides moral compass which directs them to the proper actions.

The integration of faith and life will help students overcome their individualism and discover, in the light of faith, their specific vocation to live responsibly in a community with others; to commit themselves to serve God in their brethren and to make the world a better place for everyone to live in (TCS #9). It is an intensification of the imperative to reach out and to serve others. Even among Catholic schools, there are many possibilities of helping one another.

This renewal is a challenge to redirect energies towards the transformation the school community into an authentic Christian community where the presence of Jesus is felt and experienced. It is a call to make the positive values of our faith stand out and energize our policies, systems and structures. In another way of speaking, that the gospel be the motive of the school's *modus vivendi et operandi*.

Thus, *'every Catholic educational institution is a place to encounter the living God who in Jesus Christ reveals his transforming love and truth (cf. Spe Salvi, #4). This relationship elicits a desire to grow in the knowledge and understanding of Christ and his teaching. In this way those who meet him are drawn by the very power of the Gospel to lead a new life characterized by all that is beautiful, good, and true; a life of **Christian witness nurtured and strengthened within the community of our Lord's disciples, the Church**.* (Pope Benedict, Meeting with Catholic Educators)

The ecclesial dimension of the task of renewal, –that Catholic Education form people to have a passion for the church and that Catholic Educational institutions think with the church - 'sentire cum ecclesia'. For ultimately, the same institutions are at the service of the church both universal and local.

The Prophetic Dimension of Catholic Education

This renewal, sincerely and fervently done, cannot ignore the prophetic dimension of Catholic Education. It is impossible to think of Catholic Education as divorced from the Word of God, the *Logos*. This involves a deep examination of present-day realities in the light of faith. This allows the church to think critically about issues. The Word in prophetic life must criticize and energize.

Catholic Education enables the educational community to see the world as charged with the power of God. It is transformative. It announces the good news and denounces that which is not life-giving. It seeks to build a culture of peace and love. It challenges anomalous and evil structures. Thus, the Catholic Educational community and its graduates must be witnesses to the power of the Word and should strive to transform society.

Catholic education as prophetic means consecration to the cause of truth. The present age is in urgent need of this kind of disinterested service, namely of

proclaiming the meaning of truth, that fundamental value without which freedom, justice and human dignity are extinguished. (Ex Corde Ecclesiae #4)

This means assiduous search for the truth and fidelity to the same truth. This is a bold aspiration in the present time, *'for it is typical of the incoherence of modernity that it can harbor contradictions. On the one hand it dehumanizes, on the other it defies.'* This prophetic dimension of education highlights the necessity for *'dialogue between faith and reason. Faith devoid of reason risk becoming superstition and blind prejudice. Reason inattentive to faith risks solipsism, self-absorption, detachment from reality.'* (Pope Benedict XVI)

Finally, this prophetic dimension includes a deep appreciation of the Catholic tradition particularly in the field of education. It is a retrieval of the sense of mission and inspiration from many great men and women, saints, who have transformed societies, countries because of their zeal for education and formation of the human person. They, imbued by the gospel and motivated by the charity of Christ, transformed communities, nations, even continents.

From these we draw inspiration, as we are called to revisit the significant role of Catholic Education in our country. This, at the same time, gives us a sense of pride of being Catholics, a pride tempered by the humble recognition that it is the Lord who accomplishes things through us.

Set Forth with Faith!

Dear Brothers and Sisters, we wish once again to quote the assuring words of Jesus: *'Lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.'* These words provide hope for Catholic Education in the Philippines as it **sets forth towards the future with faith.**

The frontiers of science and technology are vast. The society and the globe are rapidly changing. We and the young are faced with the digital age, information explosion, relativism, consumerism, and destructive exaltation or profanation of the body and of sexuality and all their implications. We are constantly barraged by varying and contradicting views of progress. These may eventually lead to fragmentation and dissipation of the spirit of the young. Such fragmentation, will consequently lead to the weakening of the soul of a nation.

While the future seems uncertain, Catholic Education in the Philippines, assured by the Lord Jesus, sets forth with faith. It will continue to proclaim the good news of Jesus in this fast-changing world in season or out of season. Authentic progress cannot risk the human person. *While scientific and technological discoveries create an enormous economic and industrial growth, but they also inescapably require the correspondingly necessary search for meaning in order to guarantee that the new discoveries be used for the authentic good of individuals and of human society as a whole (Ex Corde #7).* Catholic Education, faithful to the social teaching of the Church, will continue to strive towards total human development.

The task of Catholic Education is vast and seemingly daunting but it is not simply a concern of one sector. It is in fact a collaborative duty of all the members of the church and of the community. Thus, we, your bishops, appreciative and supportive of Catholic Education, express our gratitude to those who support Catholic education.

We thank the **government**, as we pray that it may find ways to support private education. We appreciate the sense of mission of **teachers** as we hope that they will continue to see their profession as a call to the fullness of life. We thank **parents** for their partnership and collaboration. We thank the **alumni** for their loyalty and support to their alma mater. We thank the **administrators** of schools and **Catholic Educational associations** for the tireless service in Catholic Education.

We thank you **pupils and students**. You are not simply recipients of Catholic Education. You shape Catholic Education. Participate fully and take the most advantage of the formation that is given to you, always bearing in mind that the end goal of Catholic Education is being conformed to Jesus, the great Teacher.

Conclusion

Dear **faithful**, thank you for your prayers. We ask you to continue to pray and support Catholic Education in all its forms. May we all, borrowing the words of Blessed John Paul II, *'ardently search for truth, unselfishly transmit it to the young and to all those learning to think rigorously, so as to act rightly and to serve humanity better.'* (Cf. ECE #2)

In closing, we re-affirm the validity and the necessity of our Catholic Schools *for what will the Philippines be without Catholic schools?*

Brothers and Sisters, we **remember with gratitude** all those who worked for Catholic Education for more than 400 years; we **renew with fervor** our commitment to the continuing task of the Supreme Teacher; and assured by the same Lord Jesus, we look towards the future filled with hope and we **set forth in faith** knowing that *in the last analysis success in any venture does not come from trust in our own solutions but from the trust in Jesus who allowed Himself to be called Teacher (TCS#93) and who exhorts us "Teach them to observe all that I have commanded you."*

We sincerely wish all those involved in the task of Catholic Education our sincere prayers as we impart our Episcopal blessings.

For the Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines

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