CATHOLIC EDUCATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF THE PHILIPPINES

Homily (Day 1)
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We are living in a very challenging time. The realities on front of Catholic education can easily overwhelm us: the learning difficulties, the functional illiteracy, poverty, stumbling among children, alarming incidents of school violence, declining enrollment in some Catholic schools, increasing regulatory pressures, and changes in the curriculum that challenge our capacity to provide strong faith and values for nation. And sometimes behind all these challenges, there is an even more personal struggle, a path of tiredness and exhaustion. We need to have higher issues about the future of our schools.

We work harder, attend more meetings, prepare more reports, comply with more requirements, and yet sometimes feel that our institutions remain fragile. And perhaps the greatest danger is not simply that our schools will have fewer students or fewer resources in the coming years. The greatest danger, brothers and sisters, I think, is when we lose the fire.

We continue teaching, we continue administering, we continue attending meetings, we continue doing all the things of Catholic education, but somewhere along the way, the fire begins to fade and disappear. And when the fire disappears, our work becomes simply a job rather than a mission. It is precisely in this situation that the Gospel speaks powerfully to us Catholic educators.

Jesus calls his disciples, Jesus gives them power and authority, Jesus sends them, and remarkably he tells them to depend not simply upon their own resources, but upon love. Jesus says, he summoned the twelve and gave them power and authority, and he sent them to proclaim the kingdom of God. Notice the movements.

Jesus calls, Jesus gives power, Jesus sends, the disciples were asked to depend on him, they were asked to proclaim the kingdom of God, and he asks them to leave the results to God. Perhaps this is something Catholic educators need to rediscover today. Because one of our greatest temptations is to believe that everything depends on us.

We have to solve every problem, we have to increase involvement, we have to comply with all the requirements, and eventually we become exhausted and tired. And when exhaustion takes over, fear begins to enter, and we begin to think of the ugly acts that Catholic education survived, did our schools still feel relevant? Can we still reach the generation of young people? The answer of Jesus is not another problem. The answer of Jesus in the Gospel of Philippians is first of all an invitation, come back to me, come back to me.

Jesus tells us, come to me, all who are weary and are burdened, and I will give you rest. So the apostles also experienced fear, confusion, disappointment, and failure, but Jesus called them, empowered them, and sent them. Their fire did not begin simply with enthusiasm.

Their fire began with an encounter with Jesus. Remember the disciples on the road to Emmaus? They were discouraged. They thought that everything was finished.

But after encountering the Lord, they said, were not our hearts burning within us while He spoke to us in the way? That is where the fire begins. Not in another center, not in another stitching shop, not in another accommodation, not in another building. All these things are important, but the fire of Catholic education begins somewhere to burn.

It begins with the one returning to the one who loves us. So for Catholic educators, therefore, if we want our ministry to remain alive and transformative, we must constantly return to Jesus. We must remember why we were called.

We must learn again to struggle hard. We must remain close to our people. We must not allow rejections, failures, declining numbers to extinguish the fire.

And above all, we must continue to proclaim the kingdom of God. And how do we know that the kingdom of God is already at hand? I believe these are the three important individuals that the kingdom of God is a precedent in our Catholic education. These are three important values.

Namely, first**, personal witness**. We are not only teachers. We are not only academic speakers.

We are not only school presidents, principals, deans, superintendents. First and foremost, in Catholic education, we are faithful believers. And therefore, who we are sometimes is more important than what we teach.

Jesus said, you are the light of the world. Our students may forget many of our lectures. They may forget the formulas we taught them.

They may forget examinations. But they will remember the teacher who believed in them. They will remember the administrators who listened.

They will remember the priest or religious who knew their name. And they will remember Catholic educators who showed them compassion when they were struggling. Our young people today are searching not only for knowledge.

They are searching for meaning, purpose, belongingness, attention, and love. Our schools and universities, therefore, must become not only schools of knowledge or employability, but schools of life. A vocational school where they find the purpose of life and work on scholarship.

We prepare our students for employment, yes. But our mission is greater than employability. We form human beings.

We form our consciences. We form disciples. We form followers of Jesus Christ.

The second value that I think is indicated in the detail of God's return: **Interdependence**. Brothers and sisters, you have known for so many decades we witness the tremendous growth of non-Catholic educational institutions in the Philippines.

Schools expanded. Campuses grew. Buildings were constructed. Each institution will shine like its own star. But the situation has changed. Many institutions today experience having the following: Fewer students. Fewer religious personnel. Limited personnel. Limited resources, but more classrooms and departments.

Perhaps God is teaching us something through this diminishment. Perhaps the future is no longer about the individual shining stars, but perhaps the future is about becoming a constellation. St. Paul reminds us, we though many are one body in Christ and in equally parts of one another.

No Catholic school can face these challenges alone. We need one another. Large schools need smaller schools.

Universities need basic education institutions. Administrators need teachers. Schools need parishes. Clergy need teachers. Laypersons need educators. And Catholic educational institutions must learn not simply to compete, but increasingly to collaborate.

A single star can shine brightly, but a constellation can show the way. The third and the last values I think is a good indicator that people of God's account is **mission immersion**. The growth of Catholic education brought us many blessings. Beautiful campuses. Large institutions. Modern facilities and strong academic programs. But that is also a danger. Our buildings can become so big that the poor begin to feel that there is no place for them inside.

Our institutions can become so professional that we become distant from the people you originally called to serve. We can become strangers to the poor. And the poor can become strangers to us.

Jesus did not conduct his ministry from a distance. The Gospel says, “When he saw the crowds he was moving before them because they were troubled and abandoned. Jesus saw the crowds.”

He walked among them. He listened to them. He touched the seat.

He ate with the sinners. He entered people's homes. He knew their sufferings.

Perhaps this is what Catholic education means again today. Go back personally and meet our students. And meet our people.

And meet the parents of our students in our communities. If we want to understand school violence, which is not alarming, we must know the likes of our young people. If we want to understand why students are losing hope, we must listen to their stories.

If we want to educate the poor, we must know the poor. If we want to evangelize young people, we must present where young people actually need their guidance. Mission cannot have them inside offices and inside our buildings.

Mission requires immersion. Mission requires helping others. So that the people we serve will no longer be strangers to us and the big strangers to them.

We have to immerse, embrace, and know them like Jesus did. So, my dear brothers and sisters, the chalice before us are real. But the gospel today does not invite us to surrender in fear.

Instead, Jesus does again what he did to the first disciples. Jesus calls us again. Jesus gives us power and authority again.

Jesus sends us again as Catholic educators. And he asks us to depend on him to proclaim his kingdom and ultimately lead the results in God's hand. So, my dear brothers and sisters to our schools, let us bring these three things to us.

Personal witnessing. Teachers in the gospel. Students in the church.

Institutions. Interdependence. Don't shine alone.

Become a constellation. Mission immersion. Leave our comfort zones and return and listen to our students.

And whatever we become and whenever we become parents, whenever enrollment declines, whenever regulations become difficult, whenever the mission seems overwhelming, let us remember the words of St. Paul : “Do not go slack on feeling. Be fervent in spirit and serve the Lord.”

The future of Catholic education will depend only on how large our campuses are. It will not depend on how advanced our technology becomes. It will not depend only on the many programs we offer.

Ultimately, it will depend on whether the fire of the gospel is still burning within us. So let us return to Jesus. Let him call us again.

Let him empower us again. Let him send us again. And then with hearts burning within us, let us go back to our schools, our teachers, our students, our communities, especially the poor, and keep the fire burning and transforming so that together we become a constellation of hope.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.