CATHOLIC EDUCATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF THE PHILIPPINES

Homily (Day 2)
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My dear brother bishops, Bishop Jerry and Bishop Elmer, the revered president of CEAP, Father Karol, and the entire CEAP leadership, beloved brother priests, reverend deacons, fellow educators, brothers and sisters in Christ, thank you for inviting me to CEAP. It is always a joy and an honor to be among fellow educators. Our mass this morning is the Votive Mass of Christ the Teacher.

Hence, it is only proper that we offer this Eucharist for CEAP, as well as for all other schools and universities, associations, and movements, and national and international networks that make up the wondrous educational constellations Pope Leo XIV speaks of in his apostolic letter drawing new maps of hope. In particular, we offer this mass for our beloved teachers, a constellation of stars, though of a humbler and more quiet type, but no less luminous and important as they constitute the main protagonists in this art and mission of educating. Time was when the teacher was one of the two most respected and influential members of the community, the other being the priest.

Perhaps it was because they were then the most educated, if not the only literate persons in the community. I can still remember how highly regarded the teacher was in the 1950s. As a child, I enjoyed a special status among my peers and playmates because I was “anak ni mam”, which happily spared me from being bullied.

My mother had a short stint as teacher in the barrio before she got married to my father. Today, kumusta pong kayo mga kagalanggalang at minamahal naming mga guro? How times have changed. Of course, you are still held highly in esteem and respect.

But we also know how the teaching profession has become more and more difficult and challenging. The recent EDCOM lists many of the difficulties you face today. Many suffer severely from the structural crises, like inadequate salaries, extreme workload, expanding social expectations, and deep financial insecurity.

Communities and parents frequently blame you for the poor academic performance and erratic social behavior of your students, causing you chronic burnout, low morale, and mental health strain. And yet, here you are, still teaching and continuing to engage with your pupils and your students. What keeps you coming back to the classroom? I am sure you all have your particular reasons for staying.

But I also know that many of you remain because of commitment and a deep sense of mission. As a teacher, you are aware that you are entrusted with the most precious thing there is in this world. Life.

Human life. The life of your pupils and your students. As a teacher, you are aware of your calling to mold their minds and hearts, and draw out the best in them, their potentials, so as to prepare them to take their place in society and fulfill their mission in life.

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Yours is the privileged task of bringing to birth and shaping the future of your students, rightly making you their second parent. It is for this reason that we often speak of the teacher as acting in loco parentis, in the place of the parent. Great indeed is your honor as a teacher.

But you are not just any teacher. You are a Catholic teacher. And so greater still is your honor and mission.

For as a Catholic teacher, you are called to act not only in loco parentis, but also in loco Christi, magistri, in place of Christ the teacher. In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus tells his disciples, “Do not let anyone call you teacher, for you have only one teacher, the Christ.” Education is ultimately about life.

It is the process of preparing the child for life. Thus, Jesus rightly claims that he alone is the one teacher, for he alone knows what life is, its ultimate meaning, purpose, and destination. We've heard the Gospel just read.

Jesus revealing to his disciples, My Father's house has many rooms. If they were not so, would I have told you that I am going there to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me, that you also may be there where I am. You know the way to the place where I am going.

Thomas, true to his impulsive character, quickly retorts, “Lord, we don't know where you are going. So how can we know the way?” To which Jesus responds, “I am the way, the truth, and the life.” This declaration aptly articulates what Jesus means when he says that he alone is the one teacher.

Life is a journey. A passing through from this world to the house of the Father. And this is what we just heard in the first reading from Qoheleth.

“Vanity of vanities. All things are vanity. Everything passes.”

We all pass. Interestingly, the theme of our convention is newness of the Catholic education. Newness in Catholic education.

And we just heard from Qoheleth that there is nothing new under the sun. Everything passes. And of course, we know that only one remains.

As he has been yesterday, he is today. And he is always. I am the way, Jesus says.

In our life journey, Jesus does not only guide us by pointing to our destination. He identifies himself as the path itself. Jesus is the way.

As where he tells us, no one knows the son except the father. And no one knows the father except the son. And anyone to whom the son wishes to reveal him.

Have I been with you for so long a time and still you do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the father. So how can you say, show us the father? Do you not believe that I am in the father

and the father is in me? I am the truth. While traditional teachers are seekers and custodians of the truth, they are distinct and stand outside the truth they teach.

Instead, Jesus claims to be the ultimate reality and source from which all true understanding flows. Jesus is the way, the truth. I am the life.

The limitation of human teachers is that they are unable to capacitate their pupils with the power to fulfill what is taught. By declaring himself as the life, Jesus fulfills his role as teacher by imparting the spiritual vitality necessary to absorb and live out his teachings. Jesus is the life.

I came that they may have life and have it more abundantly. Education is about life. It prepares for life.

How badly we need the one true teacher today when people, old, young and even children seem to have lost not only the meaning of life but its very value. A few months ago, I presided the most difficult and painful mass in my life. It was the funeral mass of a 16-year-old student who committed suicide.

Before the mass, I met with the parents. It was such an awkward meeting. For some minutes, no one knew what to say until the mother broke down.

“Bishop, our son was a good boy. Really. Many times, he would not eat his baon because he would share it with his classmates who had none.”

She went on to say how very helpful, thoughtful and generous he was at home and in school. I did not know what to say until I remembered a verse from Matthew 25. And I said, *“Ma’am, we don't really know what happened to your son. Only God knows. And so let us leave him in His hands.”*

What I know is that at the end of our life we are judged only by one criterion: I was hungry and you gave me to eat. I was thirsty and you gave me to drink. Come, you are blessed by my Father.

Inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. The parents eventually learned when they opened his cell phone that unfortunately he entered into a web, a game app where he was

dictated how to proceed from one grade to another. After some points came, he was told to proceed until the last step which was to throw himself from his sixth-floor building.

True, to be a teacher today has never been as challenging and daunting. With the kind of students we have, just think of the recent series of campus violence. Yet, while your students may be your greatest concern, fragile and vulnerable as they are in a world so complex and confused, in a society so cruel and secularized, they too are your great source of hope and inspiration.

And this is inspired by Pope Leo in that apostolic letter that we mentioned where he says, young people ask for depth. They need spaces of silence, discernment and dialogue with their conscience

and with God. In April of last year, I was in Rome and found myself concelebrating the funeral mass of Pope Francis.

I was then with a group of some of our priests and lay people from the diocese, originally intending to attend the canonization of Carlo Acutis. But then, just a week before, the Holy Father died. And so we found ourselves concelebrating at his funeral.

The wait is long, and you know very well, those of you that experienced joining these masses because of security concerns, so we had to wait an hour or two before the mass already in place. I was there seated with more than 750 concelebrating bishops. And while I was there, I spoke with those beside me.

One was the, or is the executive bishop of London. And so I congratulated him because just a few days before, I read an article saying that now there are more Anglicans than Catholics in the whole of UK. And so I congratulated him for the extraordinary search of conversions to the Church.

And asked him why. He gave me two reasons. The Eucharist and the young people.

He believed, speaking about the young people, he said that Gen Z, or the new generation, have been born in the digital world and have learned to navigate in this world and are less vulnerable to deception as the former generation, the millennials. They're more discriminating and they are more aware of disinformation, fake news and so forth. They don't readily buy the idea of truth, personal or whatever.

And they are fed up of floating and temporizing. They want to anchor their life on something solid and stable. And they find no institution as solid and consistent as the Catholic Church.

You are Peter and upon this rock I will build my church. Of course we know of similar situations in the U.S. itself and in Europe. In Sweden, the youth conduct an annual survey of great influencers in the digital world.

Last year, the award influencer of the year went to, guess who? Jesus Christ. And to think that Sweden is among the most secularized societies in the world. Today's youth seek depth.

They search for what is truly meaningful and real. Pope Benedict powerfully articulates this quest in his address during the World Youth Day in Cologne: *"My dear young people, I know what you seek. You seek happiness. Seek it with all your might. For it is your right. But remember that the happiness you seek has a face and a name. Jesus Christ. Christ is the answer to the deepest yearning of every young person and of every person for that matter."*

He is the way, the truth and the life. And what he asks of you, dear Catholic teachers, is that you take his place. He asks you to be his voice so that listening to you, whether in the classroom or out, your students may hear the truth.

He asks you above all to be his face so that seeing you and how you live, they may know the way to life. Indeed, the familiar words of Pope Paul VI continues to apply today: *"Modern man listens more willingly to witnesses than to teachers, and if he does listen to teachers, it is because they are witnesses."*

Let us not forget that as Catholic teachers, we are called not only to take the place of parents, but the place of Christ, the teacher himself. May our lives be such that we too can say and sincerely say to our students, I am the way, the truth and the life.