

## Catholic and Benedictine Education in the 3rd Millennium

It is a great privilege for me to have the opportunity to address you all today. My association with this International Conference and its predecessor at Worth Abbey has been one of the most rewarding experiences in my professional life. I hope it will prove to be so for all of you as well.

I thought I would begin by outlining briefly my own experience of Benedictine education. I am a US citizen, born and raised in what we call the "Mid-West" of the United States. I was educated in Catholic schools for most of my childhood - first under the auspices of the Religious of the Sacred Heart, and then under the Benedictine Abbey of Saint Mary and Saint Louis, which I later joined. As a monk of that Abbey, I have taught 12 - 18 year olds since 1986, and I have served as Headmaster of the School for the past 7 years.

You have already heard something about the "Cunaco group", which was formed shortly after the conclusion of the Worth Conference, and whose goal was to further the work of ICBE 1, by continuing discussions on various topics of concern for Benedictine schools. Two years ago, I was asked by the Group to prepare a discussion on the topic of "Catholic Education in the New Millennium." It is that paper which forms the basis of my remarks to you today.

In preparing for that initial presentation, I came upon a document from the Congregation for Catholic Education, entitled "The Catholic School on the Threshold of the Third Millennium." I found the document to be extremely challenging and insightful, and I felt there were aspects of it that had a lot to say to us who are involved in Benedictine education. For those of you who wish to get the document, it is available in English at [http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/ccatheduc/documents/rc\\_con\\_ccatheduc\\_doc\\_27041998\\_school2000\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/ccatheduc/documents/rc_con_ccatheduc_doc_27041998_school2000_en.html) (I believe that it is also available in other languages.)

While I won't take the time to summarize the entire document, I would like to point out a number of themes that I believe are pertinent to our reflections here. The first concerns the kind of world which our young people face. As the document states:

...we have a crisis of values which, in highly developed societies in particular, assumes the form, often exalted by the media, of subjectivism, moral relativism and nihilism. The extreme pluralism pervading contemporary society leads to behavior patterns which are at times so opposed to one another as to undermine any idea of community identity. Rapid structural changes, profound technical innovations and the globalization of the economy affect human life more and more throughout the world. Rather than prospects of development for all, we witness the widening of the gap between rich and poor, as well as massive migration from underdeveloped to high-developed countries. The phenomena of multiculturalism and an increasingly multi-ethnic and multi-religious

society are at the same time an enrichment and a source of further problems. To this we must add, in countries of long-standing evangelization, a growing marginalization of the Christian faith as a reference point and a source of light for an effective and convincing interpretation of existence. (n. 1)

Clearly, the kind of world which all of us face (regardless of the level of economic or social development) presents extreme challenges. Into this world is placed the Catholic School, and our Benedictine schools form an important segment of the Catholic educational landscape.

The document also recognizes that the whole notion of what 'education' means has changed:

the scope of educational functions has broadened, becoming more complex, more specialized. The sciences of education, which concentrated in the past on the study of the child and teacher-training, have been widened to include the various stages of life, and the different spheres and situations beyond the school. New requirements have given force to the demand for new contents, new capabilities and new educational models besides those followed traditionally. Thus education and schooling become particularly difficult today. (n. 2)

The tone set by these opening paragraphs reflects a distinct change from earlier documents. The challenges listed suggest that all of us in Catholic education are now working under the burden of a real and fundamental breakdown in the cultural supports and values that used to allow Catholic education to flourish. In addition, the change identified in the nature of the educational 'process' challenges us to re-examine and reformulate what we mean by 'Catholic' education. Such a process should take us back to first principles, and allow us to refocus our energies on the basic assumptions that drive the Catholic and Benedictine educational endeavor.

The document proceeds to do just that. It establishes six basic principles around which all Catholic education is centered. They are:

- Evangelization as the primary mission of any and all Catholic schools.
- Catholic education as 'holistic.'
- The ecclesial dimension of the Catholic school.
- Catholic education as a work of love.
- The Catholic school as a work of service to society.
- The faculty of a Catholic school as a 'community.'

I propose to treat each of these themes, and to suggest how we, as Benedictine schools, can make our own unique contribution to them.

## **Evangelization:**

The document makes clear in several places that the key role of the Catholic (and thus Benedictine) school is as an instrument of evangelization for the young people who attend:

...the Catholic school must be able to speak for itself effectively and convincingly. It is not merely a question of adaptation, but of missionary thrust, the fundamental duty to evangelize, to go towards men and women wherever they are, so that they may receive the gift of salvation. (n. 3)

...as John Paul II has written, "the future of the world and of the Church belongs to the younger generation, to those who, born in this century, will reach maturity in the next, the first century of the new millennium"(Tertio Millenio Adveniente, n. 58). Thus the Catholic school should be able to offer young people the means to acquire the knowledge they need in order to find a place in society which is strongly characterized by technical and scientific skill. But at the same time, it should be able, above all, to impart a solid Christian formation. (n. 8)

There is indeed a renewed urgency in this call for all our schools to be places of evangelization, since the supports from the culture and the family, which for so long provided the basis for the formation of young people in the way of Christ, are quickly deteriorating. Thus, the Catholic school is becoming the single most important place where many young people can experience the Gospel.

I believe that as Benedictines we are in a unique position to live out in our schools this fundamental principle. The Rule itself is nothing less than a call to live the Gospel in a radical way. Thus, the Rule's opening admonition to the disciple - to "listen with ear of the heart" to the advice of one who "loves you", so that, after perseverance and training, you may "run with sweetness in the way of God's commandments" - is itself a kind of recipe for evangelization. For, as the Rule makes clear in chapter after chapter, the Benedictine way of evangelization (*conversatio*) is the way of example, the way of living and working in community, the way of charity. None of this is uniquely Benedictine, but the Rule and Benedictine spirituality do give us clear guidelines as to the manner in which a Benedictine school might live out this call to evangelize.

## **Catholic Education as 'holistic'**

The document makes clear that the distinct shift, which has occurred in educational pedagogy and philosophy, threatens to undermine the very mission of Catholic education:

The social and cultural context of our time is in danger of obscuring "the educational value of the Catholic school, in which its fundamental reason for existing and the basis of its genuine apostolate is to be found"

(Congregation for catholic education, the Catholic School, n. 3). Indeed, although it is true to say that in recent years there has been an increased interest and a greater sensitivity on the part of public opinion, international organizations and governments with regard to schooling and education, there has also been a noticeable tendency to reduce education to its purely technical and practical aspects. Pedagogy and the sciences of education themselves have appeared to devote greater attention to the study of phenomenology and didactics than to the essence of education as such, centered on deeply meaningful values and vision. The fragmentation of education, the generic character of the values frequently invoked and which obtain ample and easy consensus at the price of a dangerous obscuring of their content, tend to make the school step back into a supposed neutrality, which enervates its educational potential and reflects negatively on the formation of pupils. There is a tendency to forget that education always presupposes and involves a definite concept of man and life. To claim neutrality for schools signifies in practice, more times than not, banning all reference to religion from the cultural and educational field, whereas a correct pedagogical approach ought to be open to the more decisive sphere of ultimate objectives, attending not only to 'how', but also to 'why', overcoming any misunderstanding as regards the claim to neutrality in education, restoring to the educational process the unity which saves it from dispersion amid the meandering of knowledge and acquired facts, and focuses on the human person in his or her integral, transcendent, historical identity. With its educational project inspired by the Gospel, the Catholic school is called to take up this challenge and respond to it in the conviction that "it is only in the mystery of the Word made flesh that the mystery of man truly becomes clear" (Gaudium et Spes, n. 22) (n. 10).

Thus, a Catholic vision of education is about the human person in an encounter with the very mystery of creation and its Creator. It is not merely about abstractions or the attainment of a set of skills which will enable the individual to be a productive member of society. In an age that holds in such high esteem performance on standardized tests and achievement, this is a real challenge, for it is hard to measure one's success in fostering the development of the "whole person."

Yet this is precisely the challenge that our Benedictine schools face. And what better place to face it? In many ways, we Benedictines were pioneers in the whole notion of education, and our long tradition in what one might call "Christian humanism" has much to speak to the current crisis of meaning in the educational world. As one educator once put it to me, "Ability without character is dangerous." The Benedictine way of life is nothing if it is not about character, and thus our Benedictine schools can go a long way to providing a model for this type of holistic "character education."

### **The Ecclesial Nature of the Catholic School**

The document makes a very strong case for understanding the Catholic school as an ecclesial entity:

The ecclesial nature of the Catholic school ... is written in the very heart of its identity as a teaching institution. It is a true and proper ecclesial entity by reason of its educational activity, "in which faith, culture and life are brought into harmony" (Congregation for Catholic Education, Religious Dimension of Education in a Catholic School, n. 34.). Thus it must be strongly emphasized that this ecclesial dimension is not a mere adjunct, but is a proper and specific attribute, a distinctive characteristic which penetrates and informs every moment of its educational activity, a fundamental part of its very identity and the focus of its mission. (n. 11)

It is clear that the Catholic school is to be experienced as at the heart of the Church. Thus, the experience of all members of the School - students, teachers, and parents - should be of the School as an ecclesiola, a manifestation of the church, which is larger and more encompassing than the family (the primary ecclesiola), yet smaller and more direct than the diocese.

While this ecclesial dimension of the Catholic school is integral, and understanding it as such is vital for a renewed awareness of the mission of Catholic schools to evangelize, I perceive that this understanding can lead to a tension, when the school is not directly part of a diocesan or parochial structure. This is particularly true for schools owned and operated under the auspices of a religious order - such as our Benedictine schools.

In fact, I believe that our Benedictine schools are particularly prone to this tension, since our schools often take their identity not so much from the local church as from the resident Benedictine community and from the vision of the Christian life expressed in the Rule.

While it is true that the Rule is a deeply ecclesial document, it is also true that the relationship between a Benedictine community and the local church has historically been a challenge. Our Benedictine schools can be liable to share in that difficulty. As we move forward, this relationship of the Benedictine school with the local church will be an area that will require great attention and sensitivity.

### **Catholic Education as a Work of Love**

The document makes clear that a primary impetus for Catholic education throughout history has been to reach out in love to care for those in need. In this regard, we as Benedictines have a special opportunity to make this outreach of love manifest in our Schools. I need only remind you of that famous passage from chapter 72:

This then is the good zeal which monks must foster with fervent love: they should each try to be the first to show respect to the other (Rom 12:10),

supporting with the greatest patience one another's weaknesses of body or behavior, and earnestly competing in obedience to one another. No one is to pursue what he judges better for himself, but instead, what he judges better for someone else. To their fellow monks they show the pure love of brothers; to God, loving fear; to their abbot, unfeigned and humble love. (RB 72:3-10)

If the whole thrust of the Rule's appeal to the disciple is rooted in the "Master's" love for the disciple, and his desire that the disciple "have life and the fullness of days", then the basic thrust of the Benedictine school should be the same: We run schools because we care for children, and we want them to know true happiness -we know from our own experience that such happiness can only come if they have a genuine encounter with the Risen Lord, rooted in real compassion and love for everyone in the community that makes up the school.

Our love for the children should lead us to be particularly attentive (as the Rule itself admonishes the Abbot to be) to the poor and the marginalized in our schools. Though each school finds itself in a unique situation, we all have such poor ones in our midst, and in serving them, Christ is more especially served.

### **The Catholic School in Service to Society**

By virtue of its ecclesial nature, the Catholic school is related to society. It is an expression of the reality of the Church, so it must relate in a constructive and meaningful way to the society in which the Church finds itself - as the Church itself does.

Just as the unique position our schools find themselves in relation to the local church posed its own set of challenges, so too does this principle. We must resist the notion of seeing our schools as a "private initiative", and in this regard it may be unhelpful for us to place our schools under the notion of a "work" of the monastery. Rather, if we see our Schools as an extension of the Benedictine community itself, then it is easier to place the schools in their proper ecclesial context - this then governs the school's relations with society more clearly.

Perhaps another way to look at the whole challenge of our schools' relations with society is in terms of hospitality. The Rule makes very clear that the monastic community is very strongly related to the locality in which it finds itself, and had a serious obligation with respect to meeting the needs of the local populace. Benedictine communities through the ages have taken this social dimension of their mission very seriously. If we view our schools not as a 'work', but as 'hospitality' - with all the richness of meaning and value the Rule places on the term - we might get a better sense of the importance of our relations to the local society.

### **The Faculty of a Catholic School as a "Community"**

In 1977, The Congregation for Catholic Education said the following:

The achievement of [the aim of integrating faith and culture] of the Catholic School depends not so much on subject matter or methodology as on the people who work there. The extent to which the Christian message is transmitted through education depends to a very great extent on the teachers. The integration of culture and faith is mediated by the other integration of faith and life in the person of the teacher. The nobility of the task to which teachers are called demands that, in imitation of Christ, the only Teacher, they reveal the Christian message not only by word but also by every gesture of their behavior. This is what makes the difference between a school whose education is permeated by the Christian spirit and one in which religion is only regarded as an academic subject like any other.

If this central role of the teacher is true, then for a Catholic school to manifest its ecclesial nature properly, all its members (and especially its teachers) must be formed into a faith-community. I believe that this is absolutely essential for the survival and prospering of our schools - it is also our greatest challenge. In many cases, our teachers come from a variety of backgrounds, and may or may not share our enthusiasm or commitment to the evangelical mission of the school. Yet, it may not always be possible to fill our staff positions with like-minded individuals.

Often our parents, too, have mixed motives for sending their children to our schools, and they are at times not entirely enthusiastic about the Mission of the school as regards their child's spiritual formation. So, we are presented with a situation where some, or even many, of the very people who are most important in the task of forming our children in the way Christ, themselves need their own formation in basic spiritual fundamentals.

I believe the Rule has some guidance in this matter. It seems to envision a community where not everyone is at the same level spiritually. It makes allowances for the weak, for backsliders, for the slow. The only thing it seems not to tolerate is the obstinate and prideful refusal to admit one's mistake, one's wrongdoing, or one's weakness.

Perhaps the same vision might apply to our schools. What is crucial is that as many individuals as possible be open to their own evangelization, their own growth in the Spirit, their own conversatio. It matters not so much at what level everyone is, but only whether everyone is making some small step forward. Then, as the Gospel parable shows us, those who are open in this way can become a leaven in the school, and begin the subtle transformation of the whole community.

## **Conclusion**

The challenge for us, then, is to flesh out how these themes are to be expressed in each of our Benedictine schools. How can the Rule and Benedictine spirituality contribute

insights into the working out of these vital elements of Catholic education in the new Millennium? And, ultimately, how can we as Benedictine educators, provide the Church with a model for facing the unique challenges which our age presents?

I have tried to outline just a few ways in which we might be able to do that. But there is much more work to do. I hope that, in the days to come, we might further this conversation just a little, and bring home to our individual schools some greater insight into the resources which our Benedictine tradition can bring to bear, as we face the challenge of evangelizing and educating the young people of our age.

Thank you.

Fr. Gregory Mohrman, OSB