



The Holy See

APOSTOLIC JOURNEY

TO THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA AND CANADA MEETING WITH THE REPRESENTATIVES

OF CATHOLIC ELEMENTARY AND SECONDARY SCHOOLS

AND LEADERS IN RELIGIOUS EDUCATION *ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS JOHN PAUL II* Louisiana

Superdome Stadium, New Orleans

Saturday, 12 September 1987

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

1. I thank all of you for your warm welcome and I praise our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ who gives me this opportunity to meet you, *the representatives of Catholic Elementary and Secondary Schools and leaders in Religious Education*. My first word to you is one of esteem and encouragement: I wish to assure you that I fully appreciate the extraordinary importance of your commitment to Catholic education. I commend you for your concern for the vitality and Catholic identity of the educational centres in which you work, throughout the length and breadth of the United States. I encourage you to continue to fulfil *your special role within the Church and within society* in a spirit of generous responsibility, intelligent creativity and the pursuit of excellence.

2. It is fitting that we should be meeting in this historic city, itself the meeting-point of several rich cultures, where the Capuchin fathers and the Ursuline Sisters founded schools at the very dawn of your emergence as a nation. You are preparing to observe the *200th Anniversary of the signing of the Constitution of the United States*. There is no doubt that the guarantee of religious freedom enshrined in the Bill of Rights has helped make possible the marvellous growth of Catholic education in this country.

Over the years much has been attempted and much has been achieved by Catholics in the United States to make available for their children the best education possible. Much has been done in the specific area of bringing the wealth of our Catholic faith to children and through religious education programs. The presence of the Church in the field of education is wonderfully manifested in the vast and dynamic network of schools and educational programs extending from the preschool through the adult years. *The entire ecclesial community* – bishops, priests, religious, the laity – the

Church in all her parts, *is called to value ever more deeply the importance of this task and mission, and to continue to give, it full and enthusiastic support.* 3. In the beginning and for a long time afterwards, women and men religious bore the chief organizational and teaching responsibilities in Catholic education in this country. As pioneers they met that challenge splendidly and they continue to meet it today. The Church and – I am certain – the nation will forever feel a debt of gratitude towards them. The importance of *the presence of committed religious, and of religious communities, in the educational apostolate has not diminished with time.* It is my heartfelt prayer that the Lord will continue to call many young people to the religious life, and that their witness to the Gospel will remain a central element in Catholic education. 4. In recent years, thousands of *lay people* have come forward as administrators and teachers in the Church's schools and educational programs. By accepting and developing the legacy of Catholic thought and educational experience which they have inherited, they take their place as *full partners in the Church's mission* of educating the whole person and of transmitting the Good News of salvation in Jesus Christ to successive generations of young Americans. Even if they do not "teach religion", their service in a Catholic school or educational program is part of the Church's unceasing endeavour to lead all to profess the truth in love and grow to the full maturity of Christ the head" (*Eph. 4, 15*). I am aware that not all questions relating to the organization, financing and administration of Catholic schools in an increasingly complex society have been resolved to the satisfaction of all. We hope that such matters will be settled with justice and fairness for all. In this regard it is important to proceed in a proper perspective. For a Catholic educator, the Church should not be looked upon merely as an employer. The Church is the Body of Christ, carrying on the mission of the Redeemer throughout history. *It is our privilege to share in that mission, to which we are called by the grace of God and in which we are engaged together.* 5. Permit me, brothers and sisters, to mention briefly something that is of special concern to the Church. I refer to *the rights and duties of parents in the education of their children.* The Second Vatican Council clearly enunciated the Church's position: "Since parents have conferred life on their children, they have a most solemn obligation to educate their offspring. Hence, parents must be acknowledged as the first and foremost educators of their children" (*Gravissimum Educationis*, 3). In comparison with the educational role of all others their role is primary; it is also *irreplaceable and inalienable.* It would be wrong for anyone to attempt to usurp that unique responsibility (Cfr. Ioannis Pauli PP. II *Familiaris Consortio*, 36). Nor should parents in any way be penalized for choosing for their children an education according to their beliefs. Parents need to ensure that their own homes are places where spiritual and moral values are lived. They are right to insist that their children's faith be respected and fostered. As educators you correctly see your role as cooperating with parents in their primary responsibility. Your efforts to involve them in the whole educational process are commendable. This is an area in which pastors and other priests can be especially supportive. To these I wish to say: try to make every effort to ensure that religious education programs and, where possible, parish schools are *an important part of your ministry*, support and encourage teachers, administrators and parents in their work. Few efforts are more important for the present and future well-being of the Church and of the nation than efforts expended in the work of education. 6. *Catholic schools* in the United States have always enjoyed *a reputation for academic*

excellence and community service Very often they serve large numbers of poor children and young people, and are attentive to the needs of minority groups. I heartily encourage you to continue to provide quality Catholic education for the poor of all races and national backgrounds, even at the cost of great sacrifice. We cannot doubt that such is part of God's call to the Church in the United States. It is a responsibility that is deeply inscribed in the history of Catholic education in this country. On another occasion, speaking to the bishops of the United States, I mentioned that the Catholic school "has contributed immensely to the spreading of God's word and has enabled the faithful 'to relate human affairs and activities with religious values in a single living synthesis' (Ioannis Pauli PP. II *Sapientia Christiana*, 1). In the community formed by the Catholic school, the power of the Gospel has been brought to bear on thought patterns, standards of judgment and norms of behavior. As institution the Catholic school has to be judged extremely favorably if we apply the sound criterion: 'You will know them by their deeds' (*Matth. 7, 16*), and again, 'You can tell a tree by its fruit' (*Ibid. 7, 20*)" (Ioannis Pauli PP. II *Allocutio ad quosdam episcopos e Civitatibus Foederatis Americae Septemtrionalis occasione oblata "ad limina" visitationis coram admissos*, 6, die 28 oct. 1983: *Insegnamenti di Giovanni Paolo II*, VI, 2 (1983) 890). At this point I cannot fail to praise *the financial sacrifices of American Catholics* as well as the substantial contributions of individual benefactors, foundations, organizations and business to Catholic education in the United States. The heroic sacrifices of generations of Catholic parents in building up and supporting parochial and diocesan schools must never be forgotten. Rising costs may call for new approaches, new forms of partnership and sharing, new uses of financial resources, but I am sure that all concerned will face the challenge of Catholic schools with courage and dedication, and not doubt the value of the sacrifices to be made. 7. But there is another challenge facing all those who are concerned with Catholic education. It is the pressing challenge of clearly identifying *the aims of Catholic education*, and applying proper methods in Catholic elementary and secondary education and religious education programs. It is the challenge of fully understanding the educational enterprise, of properly evaluating its content, and *of transmitting the full truth concerning the human person*, created in God's image and called to life in Christ through the Holy Spirit. The *content of the individual courses* in Catholic education is important both in religious teaching and in all the other subjects that go to make up the total instruction of human persons and to prepare them for their life's work and their eternal destiny. It is fitting that teachers should be constantly challenged by *high professional standards in preparing and teaching their courses*. In regard to the content of religion courses, the essential criterion is fidelity to the teaching of the Church. Educators are likewise in a splendid position to inculcate into young people *right ethical attitudes*. These include attitudes towards material things and their proper use. The whole life style of students will reflect the attitudes that they form during their years of formal education. In these tasks you will find guidance in many documents of the Church. Your own bishops, applying the universal teaching of the Church, have helped point the way for you, notably in their pastoral letter *To Teach As Jesus Did*, and in the National Catechetical Directory. I would also remind you of the Holy See's documents on *The Catholic School* and *Lay Catholics in Schools: Witnesses to Faith*. There we are reminded that it is the school's task to cultivate in students the intellectual, creative and aesthetic faculties of the individual; to develop in

students the ability to make correct use of their judgment, will and affectivity; to promote in them a sense of values; to encourage just attitudes and prudent behaviour; to introduce them to the cultural patrimony handed down from previous generations; to prepare them for their working lives, and to encourage the friendly interchange among students of diverse cultures and backgrounds that will lead to mutual understanding and love. 8. *The ultimate goal of all Catholic education is salvation in Jesus Christ.* Catholic educators effectively work for the coming of Christ's Kingdom; this work includes transmitting clearly and in full the message of salvation, which elicits the response of faith. In faith we know God, and the hidden purpose of his will (Cfr. *Eph.* 1, 9). In faith we truly come to know ourselves. *By sharing our faith we communicate a complete vision of the whole of reality and a commitment to truth and goodness.* This vision and this commitment draw the strands of life into a purposeful pattern. By enriching your student's lives with the fullness of Christ's message and by inviting them to accept with all their hearts Christ's work, which is the Church, you promote most effectively their integral human development and you help them to build a community of faith, hope and love. This Christian message is the more urgent for those young ones who come from broken homes and who, often with only one parent to encourage them, must draw support and direction from their teachers in school. In your apostolate of helping to bring Christ's message into the lives of your students, the whole Church supports you and stands with you. The Synod of Bishops, in particular, has recognized the importance of your task and the difficulties you face. For these reasons it has called for concerted efforts to compose a universal catechism. This project will not eliminate the great challenge of a need for creativity in methodology, nor will it minimize the continued need for the enculturation of the Gospel, but it will assist all the local Churches in effectively presenting in its integrity the content of Catholic teaching. In the Church in America, an important part of the truly *glorious chapter of Catholic education* has been the transmitting of Christ's message through *religious education programs* designed for children and young people outside Catholic schools. For this too I give thanks to God, recalling all those who throughout the history of this nation have so generously collaborated in this "work of faith and labour of love" (1 *Thess.* 1, 3). 9. *Community is at the heart of all Catholic education*, not simply as a concept to be taught, but as a reality to be lived. In its deepest Christian sense community is a sharing in the life of the Blessed Trinity. Your students will learn to understand and appreciate the value of community *as they experience love, trust and loyalty in your schools and educational programs*, and as they learn to treat all persons as brothers and sisters created by God and redeemed by Christ. Help them to grasp this sense of community by active participation in the life of the parish and the diocese and especially by receiving the Sacraments of Penance and the Eucharist. The Second Vatican Council explicitly includes learning to adore God in spirit and in truth among the aims of all Christian education (Cfr. *Gravissimum Educationis*, 2). A sense of community implies *openness to the wider community*. Often, today, Catholic education takes place in changing neighbourhoods; it requires respect for cultural diversity, love for those of different ethnic backgrounds, service to those in needs without discrimination. Help your students to see themselves as members of the universal Church and the world community. Help them to understand the implications of justice and mercy. Foster in your students *a social consciousness* which will move them to meet the needs of their neighbours, and

to discern and seek to remove the sources of injustice in society. No human anxiety or sorrow should leave the disciples of Jesus Christ indifferent. 10. The world needs more than just social reformers. It needs saints. Holiness is not the privilege of a few; it is a gift offered to all. *The call to holiness is addressed also to you and to your students* To doubt this is to misjudge Christ's intentions: for "each of us has received God's favour in the measure in which Christ bestowed it" (*Eph.* 4, 7). Brothers and sisters: take Jesus Christ the Teacher as the model of your service, as your guide and source of strength. He himself has told us: "*You address me as 'Teacher' and 'Lord', and fittingly enough, for that is what I am*" (*Io.* 13, 13-14). He taught in word and deed, and his teaching cannot be separated from his life and being. In the Apostolic Exhortation on Catechesis I stated: "The whole of Christ's life was a continual teaching: his silences, his miracles, his gestures, his prayer, his love for people, his special affection for the little and the poor, his acceptance of the total sacrifice on the Cross for the redemption of the world, and his Resurrection... Hence for Christians the crucifix is one of the most sublime and popular images of Christ the Teacher" (Ioannis Pauli PP.II *Catechesi Tradendae*, 9). 11. Dear friends: Jesus shares with you his teaching ministry. Only in close communion with him can you respond adequately. This is my hope, this is my prayer: *that you will be totally open to Christ*, that he will give you an ever greater love for your students and an ever stronger commitment to your vocation as Catholic educators. If you continue to be faithful to this ministry today, as you have been in the past, you will be doing much in shaping a peaceful, just and hope filled world for the future. *Yours is a great gift to the Church, a great gift to your nation.*

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