

Making a Beautiful Symphony

By Don Rait, CPCO President-elect

The following is the text of Don Rait's address to the CPCO AGM as President-elect.



I come from a small town that borders the Hockley Valley. There is a winding road running to the west that takes me to the thriving city of Orangeville. If I travel east, I bump into the town of Beeton. A 10-minute drive north takes me to Alliston and 10 kilometers south places me smack in the middle of nowhere. I live in the middle, in a place some people know as the Holy Land, in the parish of St. James, Colgan. It has been given that name because before 1969 it had produced more priests and religious than any other area of Canada.

Actually I grew up in Toronto and spent both my summers and winters roaming High Park, going to school at St. Vincent de Paul School, and not going to Italian school in the summer at St. Helen's.

What does this have to do with becoming president of CPCO? I guess it is all about framing the situation. Catholic schools are really all I know. One of the critical events that is coming during this next year will help me figure out the answer. Many of us will be involved with a Catholic Leadership Symposium this November. Yes, we have had these before so what makes this one so different?

You may have heard there is now more than a rumbling about the benefits of a one-system approach to education. You may have even heard that the United Nations believes that Ontario's educational system discriminates against other faith-based schools and there has been a strong "suggestion" to correct our ways.

During the last Conservative policy conference a great number of faith-based groups lobbied the Conservative MPPs. Is there a change coming? We know there will be an election in a few years and the drums of "equity" are beginning to beat. The tempo now may be soft but the beat is steady.

As principals and vice-principals in Catholic schools, we will be asked to justify our existence. Laws change. Hard fought for rights have a way of drifting away, especially when money is tight or one's identity is compromised because of apathy, confusion or internal conflict.

So, what makes us different? The ministry creates the expectations. The government controls the money and sets the targets. The Secretariat expounds the findings of the expert panels and promotes or mandates the use of exemplary teaching methods. We all collect our data diligently, analyze it, and apply it. So, what makes us so different? There is the challenge.

Let us switch hats for a moment. In 2002 John Paul II called on those assembled in Toronto for World Youth Day "...to set the hearts of young people aflame and motivate their whole lives." He said, "God is entrusting to you the task... in the building of the civilization of love." We are "the Light of the world" and "Salt of the earth" Pope John Paul spoke of. We are "to be for the world the face of love!" We are "to be for the earth the reflection of Christ's light!"

These words still echo in the halls of our Catholic schools today. Our schools are our Galilee. Every town and city in our province of Ontario that has been graced with a Catholic school has the road to Jericho passing through it.

We are Catholic principals and vice-principals. We are faith builders entrusted with the minds, hearts and souls of children. Our schools are places where, in the words of Martin Luther King Jr., "Even a tiny flame lifts the heavy lid of night's darkness."

We are mountaintop people, filled with hope and vision, ready to rise, ready to stand with great determination, ready to move on to the challenges each new day brings. Our mission is to give to our students the tools that will allow them to carve tunnels of hope into their tomorrows.

During the coming year we will travel many roads. We will come to many crossroads where the intersections may not be that clearly marked. On our journey let us ponder the words of Martin Luther King Jr.: "If we make the right choice we will be able to transform our place in time into a creative psalm of peace. If we make the right choice we will be able to transform the jangling discords of the world into a beautiful symphony."

Thank you for the honour of representing you during this coming year. I will do my best to continue to bring dignity to the role of president just as Paul and Patrick have done so recently and as did Terri, Nelly, Brent, Arlene, Mary-Catherine, Marny and Jim who came before.

Thank you to my friends and colleagues on the Executive Council and my fellow principals from Simcoe Muskoka. As your president, I look forward to working with Lou and the dedicated staff at our CPCO office.

How lucky we are to have an education system where God is our focus. How fortunate we are that each day students and educators come together in communion.

Together let us make a beautiful symphony as we journey with each other - with our teachers, with our students, with our communities and in our Faith.