

REPORT ON SYMPOSIUM: Ontario Catholic Education November 2006

By Sr. Joan Cronin, g.s.i.c., Institute for Catholic Education



The Institute for Catholic Education (ICE) organized the symposium on Ontario Catholic Education - Navigating through Turbulent Waters. ICE is a provincial office that attempts to hold the centre strong for the Ontario Catholic bishops, parents, teachers, trustees, principals and senior administrators involved in Catholic education in Ontario. The Board of Directors has agreed to hold a province-wide dialogue on Ontario Catholic education every four to six years.

Each generation of Catholics in Ontario has found ways, in the circumstances of their own time:

- to define and be faithful to their Catholic commitment;
- to build cohesive and ordered school communities;
- to educate children effectively, appropriately and humanely;
- to contribute to the common good of society by developing effective citizens.

At this moment in time, we recognize a number of challenges seeking solutions in order to live up to this tradition. These include:

- standardized testing of students and publication of test scores;
- open access to secondary schools and requests for prayer spaces by other groups;
- the admission of non-Catholic children to Catholic elementary schools;
- irregular situations/relationships out of harmony with Catholic Church teachings;
- the efforts of other religious groups to obtain government funding for their schools;
- character education and citizenship initiatives in the light of Catholic moral and social teaching, as expressed in the Ontario Catholic School Graduate Expectations;

- priority and place of religious education in light of the current emphasis on testing, literacy and numeracy;
- the current level and quality of communication between schools and parishes and between boards and dioceses.

Rev. Ron Rolheiser, O.M.I., Canadian author and theologian began the symposium with a look at living Catholicism and maintaining the Catholic identity of our Catholic schools.

A major portion of this symposium was spent in circles of conversation where the partners in Catholic education discussed best practices that serve our challenges at this time in our history.

Participants at the symposium were asked to respond to the question, "What was meaningful for you personally, for your board or for your association?" in order to provide feedback on the symposium. A sample of the responses to this question received from a school board team included:

- time to dialogue with partners from different geographical areas and different backgrounds – all working to share a common vision – wonderful sharing in small groups and in the large group;
- to hear theological perspectives from Rev. Rolheiser;
- enjoyed the conversation circles;
- to be immersed in discussion on Catholic education;
- to understand how important it is to share the success story of Catholic education with the public and realize the gift that has been given must not be taken for granted;
- hearing the message that we must be a people of "compassion" and practice this in our daily lives.

The following are some of the comments received from one of the partner associations:

- It was very useful to have exposure to the 'big' picture.
- Fr. Ron was amazing!
- What does it mean to be Catholic?
- What is the future of our Catholic schools? Is there a future?
- How can we articulate the importance of our Catholic schools?
- The conference opened-up many questions. Our challenge is to figure out the "how".



Fr. Ron Rolheiser, O.M.I.



Gerry Bibby

John Watts



Sr. Joan Cronin

As a follow-up to the symposium, ICE, with the help of the Catholic bishops, teachers, principals, administrators, parents and trustees is launching the *Our Catholic Schools 2006-07 – A Discussion on Ontario’s Catholic Schools & Their Future*. The talks will repeat a similar exercise completed in 2003.

ICE developed a discussion kit that was distributed across the province and used by school boards and others to run public dialogues. Information from these discussions will be compiled to write reports on the status of Catholic education at the local level. The local reports will then be used to develop a provincial report.

The discussion will focus on five general points:

- the distinctiveness of Catholic schools;
- the value of Catholic schools;

- our hopes for Catholic schools;
- the major issues facing Catholic schools now and in the future;
- promoting and protecting Catholic education for the future.

Catholic school communities are urged to extend the conversation beyond the education community, to pastors, religious communities, parishes and Catholic organizations such as the Knights of Columbus and the Catholic Women’s League.

Local Catholic school board communities will summarize their discussions and submit them to the Institute for Catholic Education where a provincial report will be prepared in 2007.

For further information contact:

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