



## Called to Serve - And Protect

The potential loss of the Catholic school system in Ontario remains a significant conversation at all levels within our community. Students and parents, teachers and principals, supervisory officers and trustees, at all levels, are well aware of the attention raised in the last provincial election. It is most significant that our Catholic bishops are engaged in these same conversations.

At our annual conference in London we heard two keynote speakers give opposing viewpoints on the threats to Catholic education. Sean Conway, former minister of education under David Peterson, opined that no political party would take on the issue of funding faith-based schools or dismantling the Catholic school system. He also indicated that such an attempt would take a decade or longer to work through the legislature including referenda. One could deduce that such an issue would consume and paralyze the government from dealing with the other needs of the province. At the very least it would divide and polarize the citizenry creating instability in government. Political parties could lose as many seats as they gain.

Archbishop Thomas Collins suggested the need to be vigilant and to prepare. He was not so explicit on political strategies. He was more focused on doing what we can to promote the value of our Catholic schools and to engage our communities through information and collaboration. The archbishop spoke of the commitment of the Ontario bishops to protecting our system and he mentioned current and forthcoming efforts. The audience listened intently to his words and they were invigorated to hear that our bishops would take a leadership role with the community. The recent pastoral letter on Catholic education is the first sign that our bishops are going to be prominent in their efforts.

A few weeks ago Minister Wynne attended the Executive Council meeting and reiterated her ongoing support for the publicly funded system. Her comments were very reassuring and calming for the Executive Council. There was no doubt that she was respectful and sincere in stating her beliefs on this matter that is so critical to our system.

Public service is a constant that holds together our society, our culture and our schools. Unlike stock markets and shareholder reports that rise and fall in predictable cycles, public service has no glamorous indicators of success or signs of impending failure. It is easy to ignore the value of public service – until a need arises that cannot be satisfied with mere money.

Educators are called to public service in this most noble profession. It takes special people to commit their lives to supporting, nurturing and promoting others. In the Catholic school system we follow the example of our Master Teacher, Jesus Christ. Catholic public service is rooted in gospel values. Our models of public service are found in the Old and New Testament and, more importantly, in the daily lives we lead.

In May I witnessed two great examples of Catholic public service. The first venue was the strategic planning session of the Catholic Curriculum Corporation (CCC). Teachers, principals and superintendents from 17 Catholic boards met to plan for the future of the CCC. I was struck by the absolute commitment and passion of these people - all volunteers - who carefully assessed and integrated the needs of the Catholic system in their discussions. The other occasion was the annual coaches' appreciation dinner held by the Toronto Catholic Schools Athletic Association. I saw the same commitment and passion of hundreds of teachers and principals who give their time freely to enhance the school experience for thousands of children.

I am sure that each of you has countless stories of public service in your schools and communities. Take a moment to reflect on these examples and then evaluate how you and your community would survive without them. Then think about your Catholic school and do the same analysis. Sister Joan Cronin has posed these questions since the last Institute for Catholic Education (ICE) Symposium. "What would be lost if you and your teachers were not here tomorrow? What if there was no Catholic school in your community? What would change?"

The Ontario education system is on track for four years of "peace and progress" as noted in the newest vision paper from the Minister of Education. I would suggest to you that the government's laudable goals must not lead us to be complacent about the future of our Catholic school system. Peace cannot be taken for granted. Peace must be nourished and protected. Each of us has a duty to protect our Catholic school system. As Catholic educators, there is no greater public service we can perform.

Another school year has concluded and many colleagues will be retiring. Current trends indicate 12% in most school boards. This represents a significant amount of knowledge and past service. Perhaps the time has come to invite effective ways for maintaining links to these valuable resources. I know that so many of them would like to stay engaged in the system they helped build. Nothing is stopping us from calling them to serve and protect our system in the coming years.