

CATHOLIC EDUCATION

A National Conversation

By **Nelly Kelders**, Member Services Director

They came from all over Canada, from Ontario with full funding for Catholic education to provinces that receive no funding. There were more than 400 parents, students, trustees, teachers, principals, superintendents, directors of education, bishops and priests. Their common thread, as they assembled in the nation's capital, Catholic education and its future in Canada.

The participants were there to listen, to reflect, to create new ideas, to challenge one another's thinking, build networks and to plan for the future of Catholic education. This conference hosted by the Canadian Catholic School Trustees' Association on September 26-27, 2008 provided the Catholic community an opportunity to engage in real dialogue and conversation that was focused and participatory in nature.

The theme for the conference was "A sower went out to sow..." Over the next two days the participants would be challenged to be the sowers. In her opening address Sr. Joan Cronin stated, "Some ground is good, some hostile, some indifferent-but the fact that some ground is hostile or indifferent does not absolve us from the mandate to keep sowing."

Real learning takes place in conversation and there were many opportunities to engage in meaningful conversation. Sr. Joan's task was to open the discussion in terms of re-imagining Canadian Catholic education for the 21st century. She noted four major internal challenges facing Catholic schools today:

- strengthening Catholic identity;
- attracting and forming talented, faith-filled educational leaders;
- ensuring academic excellence; and
- financing schools effectively so that they might be accessible to all families who choose them.

Sr. Joan went on to describe the challenges and realities facing the Canadian Catholic Church both internally and in the broader community:

- the most highly educated laity in history;
- a decrease in the number of priests and vowed religious;
- an increase in permanent deacons and professional lay ministers;
- growing cultural diversity in the Church;
- the interfaith, inter-religious dialogue; and
- the struggle of all Catholic institutions to rediscover and redefine what is Catholic about them – the Catholic identity question and the potential of assimilation into the larger culture.



Our students live in a media world, connected by cell phones, the Internet and reality television. They know little about Scripture and church rituals or the good news of Jesus. The need for partnership between home, school and parish is imperative. Sr. Joan suggested that we take a partnership approach, which gives responsibility to the people. Everyone needs to take part and be responsible for the present and the future, to listen to the conversation with "fresh hearts" and to bring our whole Christian heritage into the dialogue to help in the process of ensuring Catholic education for future generations.

Dr. James Orbinski was the next speaker to challenge the thinking of the audience. He has been involved in many global projects and humanitarian emergencies involving *Médecins Sans Frontières/Doctors without Borders (MSF)*, of which he was the international president. Throughout his presentation he described the suffering of children and adults especially in Africa.

Our sense of self and others, he said, is informed by how we see ourselves in relationship to others. We need to value dignity and equity. All things global can also be found locally in our own communities. There are inequities between the rich and the poor countries. Health care is a prime example of how many are excluded from the essential elements of human dignity.

Humanitarianism is about the direct activity to relieve suffering. Empathic understanding of suffering is required but too often,



we see it as separate from ourselves. We are not in solidarity with suffering. Being in solidarity takes suffering seriously, seeks to provoke change, means speaking out clearly and demanding political change. An example Dr. Orbinski gave was the solidarity and clear message doctors sent to the world about the genocide in Rwanda in 1994.

Dr. Orbinski talked about the need to provide access to essential medicines to all of humanity. He indicated that 15 million people die each year from diseases that can be treated but the medicine is not available to those populations in third world countries. HIV/AIDS is fully preventable and treatable but patent protection of drugs has caused the failure to treat all people with equity and humanity. It was through the work of the MSF with organizations and in solidarity with patients that they were able to challenge the pharmaceutical companies. Health interests, he stressed, need to trump the interests of trade. There exists a world of possibilities if we have a clearly articulated goal. It may take a long time to reach the goal but the important thing is to refuse to accept the unacceptable.

During the question and answer period Dr. Orbinski was asked how he maintained his sense of hope. He responded that hope is not something that exists outside of you. It comes from knowing that unless you do something, nothing changes. You have to engage in a practical way, if you see something that is the geneses

of hope. Hope is found in small, insignificant ways. Life yearns after itself. We can all articulate values and see real possibilities.

When asked what we as individuals can do to make a difference he suggested looking at the issues in our communities. We cannot leave our future in the hands of the experts and professional politicians who are not committed to a better future for our communities. We need to become citizen scientists in order to become aware of the issues, not bow to the experts. Dr. Orbinski encouraged us to learn about the problems so that we have the capacity to engage in public debate and can define what we need in our communities. We are in charge of our political destinies; we need to define the issues; and they have to be very concrete.

This was echoed by Kevin Feehan, an Alberta lawyer, who told the audience they must be political. Our rights can be politically destroyed if we are not attentive to what is happening. Kevin passionately defends and promotes Catholic education. He stated,

Catholic education, and in particular publicly-funded Catholic education, is a part of the heart, soul and history of Canada. Its existence contributes to the variety, divergence and strength of education in the country. Its insistence on a Christ-centred, fully permeated Catholic atmosphere, based upon the whole-person development of the child has been fundamental in the evolution and development of Canadian society.

Starting with the arrival of Caboto in Newfoundland in 1497, he outlined the history of Catholic education in the provinces and territories of Canada. He described the various personalities and laws that helped to shape the education system in this country and the compromises that were needed along the way.

Kevin Feehan ended his presentation discussing the importance of Catholic education being different from that of the public system. He noted that Catholic education administrators have the weighty task of delivering a different education system with a specific Catholic theology, and a curriculum that has a distinct Catholic flavour. He cited several court cases where the point is made that Catholic schools are different.

The Roman Catholic philosophy of education ... is that education is not merely the transmission of knowledge and development of skills but rather the integral formation of the whole person according to a vision of life that is revealed in the Roman Catholic traditions."

(Daly v. Ontario, 1997)

"M.I.H. – Make It Happen!" Wayne Lachapelle, chaplain at Assumption College in Brantford, Ontario ended the first day's sessions with an inspiring presentation on "connecting students to the message of the Gospels through creative community activity." Rather than seeing Catholic education at a crisis point, he sees it as an awesome opportunity. Wayne's storytelling helped to make concrete the messages of the day. He told us how Catholic schools can be different and how the formation of the whole person is key.

We go on and on about the curriculum but Wayne has never heard anyone talk about the curriculum of the Holy Spirit. We need to trust

that the Holy Spirit has a curriculum for our students and for us. We need to give our students those radical moments of opportunity so that they can meet the living Christ right where they are. From these opportunities, the Holy Spirit will be able to jump-start their curriculum. Wayne had the audience reaching for Kleenex as he described a Valentine Day dance he organizes with senior students at two local nursing homes. The video of these teenagers interacting with seniors and the stories about the effect of these visits heightened our awareness of the impact a moment in time can have on the life of a young person. Hearing about and watching the video of the House of Love (Habitat for Humanity) and the journey to Louisiana to volunteer their services in the wake of Hurricane Katrina reminded us of the influence that these activities can have on the formation of young people.



How do we strive to keep our Catholic schools in Canada? This was the question posed by Bishop Paul-André Durocher in his session on Saturday morning. Bishop Durocher is the bishop of the Alexandria-Cornwall diocese and he chairs the education commission of the Ontario Conference of Catholic Bishops.

There are people who are actively seeking to get rid of the Catholic school system in Ontario. We need to take these threats very seriously and be aware of what they are saying. A recent article in a Toronto newspaper listed the arguments for one school system. He stated that injustice occurs when the majority is able to take away the rights of the minority. The Constitution is the foundational base of who we are as a country. We nurture diversity. Bishop Durocher spent a considerable amount of time refuting the arguments of opponents of the Catholic school system.

- The argument that Catholic schools foster division is unfounded. Where is the research that shows that Catholic schools bring division to a community? School spirit is being confused with division. Every school wants to do its best! There is a great deal of diversity in our schools. The Catholic Church is the most diverse institution in the world.
- Catholic education goes against the principles of liberal education because we indoctrinate rather than educate. Nothing could be further from the truth. Pope Benedict said, “Faith without reason is dangerous.” Faith and reason need each other. Faith implies freedom. We have to choose faith. We want to bring students to an intelligent understanding of our faith and invite them to join us. We are about shaping and nurturing autonomous thinkers.
- Supporting two school systems is a duplication of costs. Eighty per cent of the cost of education goes to the salaries of staff. The number of students will remain the same. The worth is much more than the cost. If we believe in the goodness of our students, we should be willing to assume the cost for the good of the community.
- Hiring is discriminatory in the Catholic school system. There are requirements in both systems regarding qualifications, training and formation. Faith-based schools just add one more component. We have to be consistent in our hiring based on what we value.

- Funding Catholic education goes against the trend in Canada. Only three provinces have Catholic publicly-funded education systems. If you have something good, you should celebrate it. You keep it and encourage others to fight for what you have. It is a gift.

• It goes against the United Nations ruling. The people who went to the UN want the same gift as Catholics. They did not go to the UN to get rid of Catholic schools. The Catholic community was too quiet. We need to speak out.

- The majority of people in Ontario do not want Catholic schools. We need to educate the people of Ontario. They do not have all the information. We need to dialogue with people outside our Catholic community to tell them our story because they do not know it.
- There needs to be a separation of Church and state. Pope Benedict said, “The Catholic Church is not interested in theocracy. It is not the work of the Church to lead government; however separation of Church and state does not mean the crushing of religion and silencing of voices in the public square.” Religions have something to contribute to government. The argument about Catholic schools is just the tip of the iceberg. The “iceberg” is the place of religion in society.

The final presentation was a panel of students from across Canada. Amanada Achtman, Zachary McGregor, Kevin O’Shea, Anaëlle Raffray and Rebecca Ryall articulately presented their views on the impact of the Catholic school on their lives. Catholic education provided the opportunity to:

- learn and understand that God is the centre of their lives;
- talk about their faith;
- bridge aboriginal spirituality with Catholic teaching;
- lay the foundation for who they are and who they will be in the future;
- learn about social justice;
- translate experience from school to new experiences in life especially in social justice;
- ask the deeper questions;
- act ethically in their commitment to Catholic values in their vocations;
- know that being a believer is more than believing;
- talk about what strategies and tools they can bring to our schools in the future;
- practice Catholic values through service beyond the school walls; and
- be challenged to go out and be the change we want to see in the world.

Outreach to our students needs to be equal and fair. There is a desire to serve but the opportunities are not always there.

The Canadian Catholic School Trustees’ Association national conversation on Catholic education left us much to consider. It is our responsibility to maintain, nurture and ensure the viable future of Catholic education in Ontario.