

A STUDENT'S REFLECTION

2011 Ontario Catholic Education Symposium

Oliva Suppa, Student Trustee
St. Jean de Brebeuf Catholic High School, York CDSB

Good morning everyone. I am so excited and honoured to be here, especially being the first one speaking on this panel! Before I begin, I would like to thank the planning committee for not only inviting me to be a part of the panel of speakers, but for including students so extensively in this symposium. It is a true indication of how Catholic education is about students: students deepening their faith as stewards of Catholicism, working towards their Catholic Graduate Expectations and becoming evangelized, responsible citizens. His Excellency, Bishop Paul-André Durocher truly defined the challenges, which all participants in Catholic education must overcome. What's more, he outlined the steps we need to take to ensure our success. He truly set the tone for the symposium and opened all of our eyes to the reality of 21st century Catholic education.

I would like to start by touching upon the appropriateness of the title of our keynote address *Catholic schools at a crossroads of faith and culture*. Attending a Catholic school is a great gift, but it is also a delicate one. That is because students are surrounded, as was said last night, by a culture that has grown more and more to accept secular idealism. Schools are often reflective of the greater society, which continues to influence our publicly-funded schools, including Catholic schools, to adopt its changing values. We now face a choice: do we embrace modern Western culture, as it stands presently and risk losing our unique identity? Do we turn the other cheek and humbly continue as we have been? Or do we harness our flame to meet the responsibility of new evangelization by reintegrating our Christian roots into society?

Students choose and have always chosen this last option. Being the youngest members of society and the ones currently in the system, we see things that others cannot and can therefore provide valuable input. We students are the hope for progressive, adaptable Catholic education and we hope you look to us for inspiration. Our opinion is important because we are the salt of the earth, the light of the world and we can illuminate our culture.

We were given two tasks. Task number one is to look outwards, to the world's diverse, ever-changing dynamic culture and to contribute to it. However, the daunting question posed to us (and it is daunting indeed, being so young), is how? How do we use what we have learned about our faith to better our culture? How can we help Catholicity affirm its place in society? We have established already that our graduates contribute to society by voting or by taking on social and environmental initiatives and the like. I find that students of today are lighting the way not only for Catholic education, but also for the rest of society by initiating social justice initiatives, expanding their modes of communication and by unselfishly serving their communities. By the grace of God, many students have become inspired by social advocacy on a local or global level, either because they have individual connections to a cause or because of travel abroad. Social justice is a new trend amongst students (a lasting trend indeed); *it is cool to care*.

From the shoes that we wear to the paper we write on, students do not stand for the socially unjust, not here and not anywhere. Students are furthermore applying their *generation y* communication skills to put faith into action: the Internet has connected thousands of Catholic students across Ontario under common passions and goals for service. Service is another component of the lives of young people that can truly make or break their involvement in their faith. Social justice, social media and Christian service are thus among the most effective communicators of faith in today's Catholic education system. They are aspects that can work towards sowing again the seeds of the *mother culture* (Christianity/Catholicism), into the soils of modern culture.

The second task we were given was to look inwards upon ourselves. We are to re-evaluate our current practices, current results and current participants and from there, we are to establish a movement of new evangelization. Looking inwards, I find, is always the hardest thing to do because sometimes it reveals areas needing improvement. Now, when I hear that we are to go forth and evangelize, I realize that we must first ensure that we ourselves are evangelized and eager to spread the light of Catholic education.

Our evangelization is the very foundation of this school system; without it, there would be nothing to work for. So then I ask myself, "Of my peers, who is evangelized?" Off the top of my head, I can think of a small group of dedicated and faithful students that I have encountered, who would surely be up for the task. I also think of another handful of youth that have the potential to be great leaders and evangelizers if given the opportunity and assistance. These are our student leaders and we should be proud of them; they are not the ones I worry about, though. I worry about the students who attend a Catholic school only because they had their baptism at the age of three months or the students who attend that are completely disengaged at school Mass because that is the only time they are exposed to the church setting. Those students need evangelization so that they too may evangelize the beautiful gift of our Catholic education system. Remember, modern culture has a huge impact, especially on impressionable young minds.

Students such as these call for the most inclusive and welcoming environment in which to learn and love Christ. Our students call for inspired teachers who are on fire themselves with the love of God and who can incorporate faith as being an essential companion, regardless of what subject they teach. Our students call for their parishes to become even more present in the school community. They call for their parents to teach them the value in faith from their earliest years through to adolescence. Our students call for their peers to show them their responsibility to Jesus, to make known the *desirable* God. If we can influence the many inspired, talented, faithful students we have in our schools to take the lead in carrying out school events, charities, clubs and prayer services, then we are well on our way to a student population with renewed faith. Then we can let the evangelized light of Christ shine from within and the rest will be easy.

I do believe that we face a call to service, a call to witness the faith, by God Himself. It is a call to our young people, who feel exiled by secularism or assimilated by pop culture to re-ignite the flame of their baptisms and light the way for the rest of society towards a renewed faith in the Lord. It is our young people that are the hope and the future for publicly-funded Catholic education and for the changing world. With the help of all partners in this fight - our parents, teachers, priests, neighbours and friends - the future of Catholic education will be secured and celebrated and we will continue to live out our legacy.