



## **Catholic schools threatened by hostile secularism, says bishop**

BY JOSEPH SINASAC

The Catholic Register

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The threat to the existence of publicly funded Catholic schools in Ontario is a symptom of an even greater and growing hostility to religion in the public square, warns Bishop Paul-André Durocher.

“If we want to save our Catholic schools, what we have to save is the place of religion in Canadian society,” the bishop of Alexandria-Cornwall diocese said Sept. 28.

Durocher was speaking to almost 400 Catholic educators from across Canada during a national conference on Catholic education held here Sept. 25-28 and hosted by the Canadian Catholic School Trustees' Association. His talk focused on the twin themes of “Keeping our Catholic schools” and “Keeping our schools Catholic.”

Durocher, who also chairs the education commission of the Ontario Conference of Catholic Bishops, explained that false notions of the separation of church and state are gaining favour in public opinion. Increasingly, many are beginning to believe this separation means that no religious arguments should be present in public debate and there should be no sign of any religion in any public institutions.

This is a far cry from the origins of the idea of the separation of church and state. In the United States, where the theory was first incorporated into governance, it meant that all religions were free from interference by the state and that no one religion would be favoured above others. In Canada, the idea was never part of our institutional history as church and state often collaborated on the creation of schools and social services. In fact, the first schools in Canada were Catholic schools.

Durocher observed that the new aggressiveness of secularism has become a direct challenge to the existence of publicly funded Catholic schools in Ontario in particular. He warned that a new movement is afoot to build up public approval for getting rid of the Catholic school system.

In fact, the bishop spent a good portion of his speech dissecting the arguments used by opponents of Catholic schools.

“I think we have to take this very seriously,” he said of the movement to eliminate Catholic schools. “It represents the thought of a lot of people out there.”

Durocher argued that the historical compromise that led to the creation of Confederation in 1867 and the protection of minority religious education in the Constitution is still relevant today. Canada's culture is shaped deeply by its Catholic population and is a significant reason why this country is so popular among immigrants today.

“This is about the fundamental values that lie in the kind of community we have,” he said. “What kind of country are we talking about?”

The bishop also pointed out that the Catholic Church in Canada is a model of how to make multiculturalism work. While their critics argue that Catholic schools are intolerant of others, Durocher noted that they actually bring together dozens of different cultural backgrounds into one faith community.

Critics claim that millions of dollars would be saved by combining Ontario's Catholic and public systems. However, this fails to recognize that 80 per cent of the cost of education is absorbed by teachers' salaries, which will remain the same whether there are one or two systems.

He also reminded the audience that Catholics believe strongly in combining faith with reason. "Creationism is not taught in Catholic schools," he said. "We are about shaping and forming autonomous thinkers. Faith implies freedom."

Catholic schools are indeed the focus of evangelization by the church of its younger generation, he said. However, this is ultimately an invitation for young people to experience the love of God and share the Good News.

Durocher said we need to strengthen the Catholic character of our schools by integrating faith into all teaching, by ensuring religious education programs are topnotch, by giving increasing support to school chaplaincy and building up Christian life in all aspects of life in the schools.

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### **Bishops' silence blamed for loss of Quebec Catholic schools**

BY DEBORAH GYAPONG  
Canadian Catholic News  
OTTAWA

The silence of Quebec's Catholic bishops is responsible for the loss of publicly funded Catholic schools in that province, a constitutional lawyer told Catholic school trustees Sept. 26.

"We will lose (Catholic school rights) in Ontario if we're silent," Alberta Lawyer Kevin Feehan warned the almost 400 delegates attending the conference sponsored by the Canadian Catholic School Trustees' Association here Sept. 26-27.

"The majority in a province can determine minority rights," he said, pointing also to the loss of confessional schools in Newfoundland in 1998.

The loss of Catholic education began in Quebec, he said, with a 1982 agreement the bishops made, acceding to the legislation allowing for the creation of linguistically based school boards.

The 1997 constitutional amendment in 1997 officially wiped out religious education rights in the province.

"If the Quebec bishops had said 'No,' we would have had Catholic education in Quebec," said Feehan. "We traded a linguistic right for a denominational right."

Feehan, who has represented Catholic educational interests before the Supreme Court of Canada and various provincial and territorial courts, sounded a hopeful note, however, when he said Catholic

education rights could be regained. They have continued to expand in Ontario, Saskatchewan, Alberta and the North, he said.

“Constitutional rights can be changed politically,” he said, stressing Catholic education rights are “part of the heart, soul and history of Canada.”

“Confederation would not have occurred” without a compromise to “facilitate Catholic education,” he said. It is as old as the first European contact with the northern part of this continent, he said, describing it as one of this country’s “fundamental building blocks.”

Catholic education rights are “part of what makes us who we are,” he said, noting it’s part of what makes Canada different, along with official bilingualism and multiculturalism.

Without the compromise by the Fathers of Confederation in Charlottetown in 1864, he said, “You’d all be Americans.”

Catholic education has a “weighty responsibility” to deliver a distinct, different, “fundamentally opposed” education that is permeated with Catholic theology, philosophy and sociology, he said.

If a school is not “sufficiently Catholic, you have no legal right to exist unless you are different,” he said, citing numerous court decisions that highlight the religious element of a Catholic school that infuses all aspects of the education and not just religion class.

“You are called upon to be the antithesis of the public school system,” he said.

Catholic education is not merely the transmission of knowledge and skills, he said. Instead the Catholic, Christ-centered vision must permeate everything from the playground to the lunchroom, from math and science to religion classes in the integrated formation of the students, he said.

Sr. Joan Cronin, executive director of the Institute for Catholic Education in Toronto, kicked off the conference with an overview of the challenges educators face in addition to the political climate.

Among those challenges: the growth of a highly educated laity; the decrease in priestly and religious vocations; and growing cultural diversity among Catholic students.

Immigration levels and multiculturalism have changed the face of the Catholic Church in Canada quickly, she said, making a Catholic student body that is multicultural, multilingual and, increasingly multi-denominational. In addition, people shop around for parishes, leaving a different level of commitment than in the past to local parishes and schools.

“We’re very aware we’re trying to reach a generation formed in the postmodern world,” she said, pointing to the unwillingness to accept authority about bedrock truths.

Students are more familiar with popular song lyrics and movie scenes than Scripture passages, she said.

Salvation “is often a distant concept,” she said, noting the media world of Internet, DVDs and so on that young people live in.

“If we dare to tell a young person we don’t know how to take a picture with a cell phone we run the risk of looking imbecilic and incompetent, she said.

Cronin said Catholic educators constantly face a challenge between the profession and the vocation, noting that at its core Catholic education is a spiritual project.

“Our Catholic schools are well-placed to call the parish to its mission,” she said, urging better home, school and parish co-operation.

Co-operation is an imperative, she said.

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