

Fulfilling Our Discipleship Through a Renewed Commitment to Catholic Education

Bishop Michael W. Fisher

My Dear Sisters & Brothers in Christ -

From the earliest days of Christian faith, discipleship has been understood as the obligation to teach others and to share the profound lessons imparted by Jesus to His first disciples. Indeed, the small band of followers in the wake of the death and resurrection of Jesus were confronted with an implausible task - *“to make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you.”* Theirs was a gift not to possess but to share and promote broadly, far beyond their limited context - to lands and people deprived of the benefit of having experienced first-hand the Lord who had called them forth and forever changed their life’s meaning and purpose.

It is this core mission of Christian discipleship that has formed the basis for Catholic education across the decades and centuries, and especially so here in the Diocese of Buffalo. Even now, we have no more definitive explanation of the solemn obligation to educate our young people in the Faith and Traditions of our Church than the seminal document of the Second Vatican Council - Declaration on Christian Education (*Gravissimum Educationis*): *“Since all Christians have become by rebirth of water and the Holy Spirit a new creature so that they should be called and should be children of God, they have a right to a Christian education.”*

“Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

-Matthew 28:19-20



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The Council Fathers further asserted the potential of a faith-infused education to promote the holistic development of young people in such a way that they will be guided and sustained throughout their lives: “*A Christian education does not merely strive for the maturing of a human person as just now described, but has as its principal purpose this goal: that the baptized, while they are gradually introduced to the knowledge of the mystery of salvation, become ever more aware of the gift of Faith they have received, and that they learn in addition how to worship God the Father in spirit and truth...*” Catholic education is, therefore, the gateway through which generations have accessed the fullness of Christian identity and acquire the intellectual, emotional and spiritual resources to navigate life’s inevitable complexities, while also fulfilling their obligations to their communities and society.

Even before the formal establishment of the Diocese of Buffalo in 1847, Father John Nepomucene Neumann, now St. John Neumann, arrived in Buffalo in 1836 and opened the first parochial school as part of the newly established church in Williamsville. At about the same time, he also established a wood-frame building to educate the children of St. Mary Parish in Lancaster. Upon the establishment of the Diocese in 1847, Father John Timon, CM was appointed as the first bishop of Buffalo. It was his constant encouragement to the priests and families of the burgeoning Diocese that they commit to establishing parish schools as part of building their parish communities. With the opening of St. Cecilia in Sheldon in December 1847, the Diocese’s legacy of Catholic education was launched. Relying initially on the Sisters of Charity of Emmitsburgh and the Redemptorist Fathers as the primary educators, Bishop Timon eventually founded some 37

elementary schools, 12 academies that offered elementary and secondary education and 11 other institutions, including orphanages, an “industrial school” for girls, a protectory for boys and an institute for the deaf.

By 1867, Bishop Timon had invited over 11 congregations of women religious to carry on the ministry of Catholic education, in addition to several religious orders of men to assist in the education of young men. Bishop Steven Ryan, appointed to succeed Bishop Timon upon his death in 1868, continued to build on this solid foundation, eventually establishing another 39 parochial schools, 5 private schools and 2 orphanages during his 30-year episcopacy. This remarkable commitment to education continued to flourish throughout the 20th century resulting in the establishment of dozens of elementary and high schools, as well as colleges - defining the Diocese of Buffalo as a recognized leader in Catholic education throughout the nation.

In the current day, it is a painful reality that many of our parish communities throughout Western New York have struggled to maintain the viability of their schools, to attract a sufficient number of students and families to justify their continuance, and also to sustain the livelihoods of the dedicated educators and administrators who are so vital to the delivery of quality Catholic education. These pressures are not incidental and have placed difficult burdens on pastors, school boards, business managers and especially those parents who are determined that their children be educated in a faith-centered context. As we know, our Catholic schools provide much more than access to the traditions and reference points of our Faith. Asserting the larger influence of Catholic schools, the Vatican’s Declaration on Christian Education makes clear:

“Among all educational instruments the school has a special importance. It is designed not only to develop with special care the intellectual faculties but also to form the ability to judge rightly, to hand on the cultural legacy of previous generations, to foster a sense of values, to prepare for professional life.”



*“Sermon on the Mount - Jesus teaching the Beatitudes”,
courtesy of The Jesuit Institute, London*

It is natural to think of previous eras as “simpler times” and more conducive to providing a holistic environment that nurtured young people in the traditions and culture of Catholic faith. Indeed, in the days that distinguished the Diocese as a leader in Catholic education, most every parish maintained a school that created a distinct identity to each parish community, providing a source of generational allegiance and pride. We recall the dedicated religious sisters, brothers and priests whose vocation was synonymous with the obligation to teach, the best of whom left a life-long imprint on the young lives they nurtured, counseled and guided throughout the stages of maturity. We recall the memory and experiences of our parish families coming together in celebration and with a shared determination: school bazaars and parish festivals, fundraising drives, car washes, bake sales and yes, bingo nights - all aimed at maintaining our schools, in support of our educators and, most especially, our students. Then, as now, we understood the competing influences that society imposed on our young people, the challenges they were confronted with in sorting out and discerning options that reflected Christian and Catholic values. Just as today, we wanted the best for them and were determined to equip them with every advantage that the lessons and insights of an educated and active faith imparts.

While it’s certainly true that failures occurred, and that some young lives were ill-served by their experiences of Catholic education, it was the sense of communal obligation and the shared commitment to invigorate the learning process with faith that we must somehow revive and reclaim. Pastors and parish administrators alone are inadequate to the challenge of sustaining a school. It requires the collective determination of the entire community not only to gather and direct the resources - financial and otherwise

- but to prioritize Catholic education as an indispensable ministry that reflects the very essence of what it means to be a community of faith in Jesus Christ and fulfill our obligation to evangelize.

“Catholic schools are at the very heart of the New Evangelization. They are instruments of grace, sacred places where the Gospel comes alive daily—and where children and families encounter (and, not infrequently, re-engage) the faith.”

(Renewing Christian Witness - USCCB).

As such, it cannot be that, when faced with the difficult choices that diminished financial resources pose, closing the school is among the first of budget reducing options. Rather, parish families must come together and summon the full potential of the many gifts and capabilities available to develop new ideas, define new approaches and new solutions to ensure continued access to Catholic education.

The Vatican’s Congregation for Catholic Education aptly emphasized this shared responsibility in its document, *Educating Together in Catholic Schools*: *“In recent years, one of the fruits of the teaching on the Church as communion has been the growing awareness that her members can and must unite their efforts, with a view to cooperation and exchange of gifts, in order to participate more effectively in the Church’s mission. This helps to give a clearer and more complete picture of the Church herself, while rendering more effective the response to the great challenges of our time, thanks to the combined contributions of the various gifts. In this ecclesial context the mission of the Catholic school, lived as a community formed of consecrated persons and lay faithful, assumes a very special meaning and demonstrates a wealth that should be acknowledged and developed.”*

Acknowledging the indelible contribution of our teachers, school administrators, volunteers and all who are devoted to nurturing the minds, emotional well-being and faith of our children is certainly required. But more than mere acknowledgement, they must know of our support and admiration for them, of our immense gratitude and the tremendous respect we have for their very special vocation which so often requires putting the needs of their students first, caring for the concerns of others’ children sometimes even before tending to the needs of their own.

The work of renewal that has preoccupied all the Catholic faithful of our Diocese these past few years will be incomplete unless we define a future of Catholic education that is capable of adapting to the ever-changing realities that together we face. Only with a shared and uncompromising commitment to teach and educate in the language and perspective of faith can we hope to truly fulfill the central requirement of our Christian discipleship.

Together, let us embrace our obligation to the young people of our day - and all those yet to come - to nurture their faith, to support their growth and maturity, and to lead them constantly to the revelation of God’s immense and unconditional love. May we teach always by example, listen intently before we speak, and be willing to be guided by them as much as to guide.

Sincerely in the love of the Lord -



Most Reverend Michael W. Fisher
Bishop of Buffalo