



**Southern African Catholic  
Bishops' Conference**

# All God's Children

*Care, concern, and challenge for  
Catholic Education*



**Pastoral Letter and  
Statement on Catholic  
Education**





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### *Pastoral Letter on Catholic Education*

## **Care, concern, and challenge for Catholic Education**

*25 January 2009*

To the Catholic Community, Catholic Schools, Educators, Learners, Supporters and Beneficiaries of Catholic Education

We, the Catholic Bishops of Southern Africa, want to express our deep appreciation for the work people are doing in Catholic schools. As Bishops we give our unequivocal commitment to Catholic schools that are gospel-based, centred on Christ, and which strive to be communities of care, selflessness and sharing.

Schooling has been, and remains, an important part of the mission of the Church. Our schools strive to help everyone, rich and poor, to grow in faith and to integrate faith with experience. Inspired by the gospel, Catholic schools respect the freedom and dignity of every human being and develop the qualities of personal integrity, moral courage and social responsibility that are marks of authentic Christian personality.

Religious Education programmes in Catholic schools set them apart from other schools. Our programmes are based on the gospel and on sound educational principles. We need to ensure that prayer and liturgy remain central in the life of our schools.

Teachers in Catholic schools are called by God to participate in the teaching ministry of Jesus. Their vocation involves vision, conscientious work, professionalism and care for the children entrusted to them. Teachers in our schools witness to the mission of Christ in bringing about a society based on the principles of love, peace, truth and justice. More than this, teachers are called to prepare their learners to be active and responsible members of society who have purpose and meaning in life and who are capable of being agents of social change.

In the past, we have depended on religious congregations and overseas sources to finance our schools. This is no longer the case. South Africa and its neighbours have grown beyond the stage of being missionary countries, and the time has come for us to take on the responsibilities of an established and self-reliant church. Catholic schools should now be able to rely on the lay faithful to rise to this challenge.

We call on all members of the Catholic community to value our schools, and encourage Catholic parents to send their children to Catholic schools. We urge parents to be actively involved in school life, particularly in governing bodies. Parents play a central role in supporting and promoting the vision of education on which our schools are founded. Parishes are natural homes for Catholic schools and we need to re-establish closer links between priests and school communities where the links have been lost.

We are mindful that most Catholic children are not in Catholic schools, and we encourage both teachers and pupils to witness to the values of our faith in the public school system. We need to explore new ways of establishing schools in the future to meet the educational needs of Catholics. Our vision must embrace not only the maintenance and strengthening of the schools we have, but also the establishment of new ones. We invite those Catholics who have chosen the teaching profession to consider seriously the option of working in Catholic schools.

At the start of this school year, we invite Catholics across the region to join us in praying for all those involved in our schools. May this be a good year for pupils, staff, parents and governing body members, as well as the communities in which the schools are located. May God bless our schools so that they may be places of hope.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Buti Tlhagale', with a small cross symbol to the left of the first letter.

Archbishop Buti Tlhagale OMI  
Archbishop of Johannesburg.  
President of the Southern African Catholic Bishops' Conference





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*Southern African Catholic Bishops' Conference  
Pastoral Statement on Catholic Education*

*25 January 2009*

# **All God's Children**

## **Care, concern, and challenge for Catholic Education**

*To Parents, School Governing Bodies and Boards of Governors, Principals,  
Teachers and all who work in Catholic schools.*

### **Gratitude for the past**

Brothers and Sisters in Christ, we write to you today to express our deep appreciation for all you are doing to secure a future of hope and prosperity for the children of our country. We are proud of and grateful for your courage and perseverance, while we are aware of the difficulties you face.

Our children are our treasure, our future and our responsibility. We are all one family and nothing can be more important to us than that they should have the love, security and freedom to become the caring and responsible adults that our country and continent so desperately need. God has entrusted them to us and we all have a role to play in their ongoing formation and progress.

We are deeply grateful to those who have founded, developed and sustained Catholic schools, and to the people who manage and govern them currently. As Bishops we give our unequivocal commitment to Catholic schools that are gospel-based, centred on Christ, and which strive to be communities of care, selflessness and sharing. These schools have maintained a record of service and

educational excellence over many decades, some of them the most challenging in recent history. The schools will be able to continue this tradition into the future, *only* with the committed support of the entire Catholic community.

## The importance of Catholic education

Catholic schools are part of the Church's continuing mission to spread the Good News to every generation. The heart of Catholic education is the person of Christ who urges us to transform society by adopting and promoting his principles and values.<sup>1</sup>

Catholic schools aim to provide happy, safe, open, respectful and challenging environments. Their call is to help children grow into authentic mature human beings who are willing to use their gifts unselfishly for the common good as a witness to Christ being alive in the world today. By educating children holistically in the light of the gospel, Catholic schools work to transform not only the lives of their pupils but also to shape and build the ideals and moral principles of society<sup>2</sup>. We believe that these ideals and principles should not only be taught, but that they must be lived. Catholic schools seek to reflect a distinctive vision of reality based on the life and teachings of Christ<sup>3</sup>. Our schools should promote a spirituality that is vibrant, real, and sustaining in the life of each member of the school community, and should be places where children are safe, loved, affirmed and helped to develop into the best that they can be<sup>4</sup>.

We need also to be mindful that in South Africa we have one of the starkest divides between the poor and the rich in the world. We must not fall into the trap of reinforcing this injustice but must consider the needs of all, and especially the needs of those who were disadvantaged by the previous political system.

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1 *Declaration on Christian Education (Gravissimum Educationis)*, II Vatican Council, Rome, 28 October 1965.

2 *The Catholic School*, Congregation for Catholic Education, Rome, March 1977.

3 Bishop Edward Risi, *Do we as Church want Catholic schools and why?* Paper prepared for the Catholic Schools Proprietors Association, Biennial Meeting, Pretoria, 2007.

4 *The Religious Dimension of the Catholic School*, Congregation for Catholic Education, 1988.





Members of religious congregations have pioneered the provision of education for the most vulnerable children, including the blind, the deaf, and those who experience barriers to learning. After the government, the Church has the largest network of care for people suffering directly or indirectly as a consequence of HIV and AIDS. Many of our schools are hubs of such care. We strongly affirm this ministry of reaching out to children in need<sup>5</sup>.

## Our call

We are made in the image of God and are destined for the fullness of life in his presence both now and in the future: “I came that they may have life, and have it to the full”<sup>6</sup>. Inspired by the gospel, Catholic schools respect the freedom and dignity of every human being and try to develop the qualities of personal integrity, moral courage and social responsibility that are marks of an authentic Christian personality.

Our schools are distinct in the way we promote these values by taking Christ as our model. In the light of his example, we can ask ourselves whether the presence of God and his purpose for humanity are acknowledged in our lives, and whether our schools make a difference in the lives of ordinary people<sup>7</sup>.

Religious Education is at the heart of the curriculum of the Catholic school, and is designed to confirm and deepen understanding of faith. Religious Education should be firmly based on the gospel and on sound educational principles. Such a programme needs to be well resourced and staffed by teachers trained to implement it. A holistic approach develops a language of prayer in which children can express their search for God. Prayer and liturgy lay the foundation for life-long growth in spiritual perspective and hope<sup>8</sup>.

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5 *Populorum progressio (On the Development of Peoples)*, Pope Paul IV, 1967.

6 John 10:10.

7 Archbishop J. Michael Miller, C.S.B. *The Holy See's Teaching On Catholic Schools*, The Catholic University of America, 2005.

8 *The Religious Dimension of the Catholic School*, Congregation for Catholic Education, 1988.

## The need for reflection

Developing the skill of critical reflection is an essential element of the entire school's curriculum. Skilled teachers will find opportunities to integrate faith with experience and help learners to interpret what they learn in the light of faith. Because of their culturally and ethnically diverse membership, Catholic schools can provide an environment in which mutually respectful and enriching relationships can be fostered<sup>9</sup>. In our South African context, it is critical that there be substantial reflection on culture, diversity, racism and prejudice.

Reflection can help us to recognise the needs of others and to make us willing to respond to them. In the context of the school community, a strong outreach programme, where it exists, bears testimony to the development of a social conscience and provides a structured environment in which learners can alleviate suffering and build bridges of mutual understanding<sup>10</sup>.

## Our values

There is great goodness in the world and in our communities and it is from this goodness that concern and service flow. Sadly, conflict, confusion, and forces that demean the dignity of the human person are also powerful, producing unjust structures, dishonesty, abuse, and suffering. Because of this, it is important that our children have a strong sense of community values so that they can promote the good and resist whatever contributes to the breakdown of community and interpersonal relationships.

Some of our faith-based values include the following:

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9 *The Catholic School on the Threshold of the Third Millennium*, Congregation for Catholic Education, Rome, 1997.

10 *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, 2004.



## *A sense of community*

Children learn through their experience of community: whether in their families, in their schools or in the broader society. Education enables them to enter into their culture and history, its struggles and achievements, and its values and faith. While the State has responsibility for providing educational institutions and resources, the community has the first right and responsibility to educate its children.

The presence of children of other faiths in Catholic schools is an enriching witness to the true meaning of the word *Catholic*<sup>11</sup> and gives teachers an opportunity to give children a firsthand experience of 'the other' in a way that builds mutual respect<sup>12</sup>. The presence of children of other faiths has the potential to break down barriers, build bridges of mutual understanding and reinforce the message that the Church is focussed outwards on life, and is not engrossed solely with its own institutional concerns.

## *The common good*

The demands of social justice and the common good call on our children to live and serve unselfishly. In another sense, our schools are part of the South African national public schools' system which is struggling to achieve standards of educational excellence against overwhelming odds including the damaging inheritance of the past and the alarming passivity of the present. In some sense, we are leaven in the whole simply because our faith recognises the importance of holistic education. We are in a position to share our Catholic work ethic, our commitment and sense of mission, and our concern for 'wholeness'. However, we need to avoid becoming complacent as we have much to learn from others<sup>13</sup>.

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11 Thomas Groome, *What makes us Catholic*, Harper Collins, San Francisco, 2003.

12 *The Catholic School on the Threshold of the Third Millennium*, Congregation for Catholic Education, Rome, 1997.

13 *Looking to the Future: Catholic Schools in South Africa*, Discussion Document, Catholic Schools Proprietors Association, Johannesburg, 2008.

## *Dialogue and integration*

Catholic education tries to integrate the experiences of the child by means of a gradual growth in the capacity to reflect, build courage, and act. The school also consciously provides the opportunity for dialogue with culture as an essential element of living the faith<sup>14</sup>. However, while celebrating the richness of cultural inheritance, we also need to maintain a critical distance that can contest those features that are opposed to the gospel of Christ and to true human growth.

## **Building the future with hope**

We are all aware of how fast the social, economic and political structures of our society are changing. Because of this, the future Catholic schools' network will look very different to what it is now and what it has been in the past<sup>15</sup>. However, we can take courage from Pope Benedict's recent reminder in his encyclical letter *Spe Salvi* that "eternal life is not an imaginary hereafter, but is present wherever God is loved and wherever his love reaches us"<sup>16</sup>.

## *Responsibility for the ownership of the schools*

Religious congregations are reflecting on the future ownership of their schools and are committing energy and resources to building new structures of support. The decision, for example, to hand over ownership to Trusts or other ownership structures springs from the belief that Catholic education is the responsibility of the whole faith community. We recognise that some lay members of the Church are equipped and ready to take on the responsibility of ownership of Catholic schools. This ministry has a prophetic dimension and indicates that the Church in southern Africa has achieved a level of maturity in which lay people can take on responsibility for furthering the mission<sup>17</sup>.

14 Peter Hunter, *Church Teaching and the Catholic School Leaver*, Catholic Institute of Education, Johannesburg, 2006.

15 Pam Christie, *Complexity in school leadership: What does this mean for Catholic Schools?* Catholic Institute of Education, Johannesburg, 2004.

16 *Spe Salvi (In Hope we are Saved)*, Pope Benedict XVI, Encyclical Letter, Rome, 2007.



## Collaboration

In virtually every message we have sent to the Catholic community since 1993, the call to collaboration has rung loud and clear. Collaboration among all those who have a stake in our schools is essential if they are to have a significant impact on society<sup>18</sup>. One practical example of collaboration concerns the Deeds of Agreement established between the State and *Public Schools on Private Property* which give these schools legal status and a measure of State support; the Deed entitles the schools to retain their Catholic character and ethos. These Deeds have led to the forging of strong links between the owners of the schools and the School Governing Bodies that govern them.

This is a call to you, the lay faithful. We can only look to a future if you, the beneficiaries of 150 years of Catholic education, are willing to step forward and assist in taking both spiritual and practical ownership of the schools. The Catholic education network already provides a comprehensive opportunity for full-time lay ministry in the Church – for teachers, support staff, and governors of the schools. This is a greatly valued and indispensable ministry. The life witness of ministers is by far a more important aspect of Catholic schools than any legal document or Deed.

One of the calls made by the National Schools Congress in 2004 was for schools to share their resources. Many schools are doing this at local level. However, a more organised and coherent system is required to ensure that funds and other resources are distributed more equitably at national level<sup>19</sup>.

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17 *Lay Catholics in Schools: Witnesses to faith*. Congregation for Catholic Education, Rome, 1982.

18 *Partnership for the Common Good: Catholic Education - A Community Serving Humanity*, Catholic Institute of Education, Johannesburg, 1995.

19 *Partnership for the Common Good: Catholic Education - A Community Serving Humanity*, Catholic Institute of Education, Johannesburg, 1995.

### *New calls, new missions*

The needs do not grow less. We are educating for both the alleviation of poverty and for social transformation. In practical terms, the more successful and sustainable the schools are, the more sustainable the Church will be. Because of rising costs, some of our schools have become inaccessible to people who have modest or limited incomes. Some schools will never be sustainable financially; some will always struggle to be so. Provision has to be made for schools that need financial help. Some of these challenges can be met if we work together; they cannot be met if we work in isolation from one another. Together, we can consider new ways of responding to the needs of impoverished Catholic schools. Moreover, our vision for the future should embrace not only the maintenance and strengthening of the schools we have, but also the establishment of new ones<sup>20</sup>.

### *Responsibility and accountability*

Emotional security and productive educational outcomes are the result of caring and disciplined environments in which the educational goals and guidelines are clear. All members of the school community share the responsibility for maintaining the ideals and educational effectiveness of the school; each sector of the school community should be accountable to the degree of their responsibility.

Growing in knowledge and grace, in the ability to communicate and implement ideas, in exercising sound management practices, in the ability to provide competent leadership, are all part of a broad educational process in which more than the pupils are involved. Skills that adults learn through their association with the schools can be implemented in other situations. The knowledge that we are all learners in life should preserve us from complacency and passivity<sup>21</sup>.

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20 Gerald Grace, *Catholic Schools: Mission, Markets and Morality*, RoutledgeFalmer, London, 2002.

21 *Deus caritas est (God is Love)*, Pope Benedict XVI, Encyclical Letter, Rome, 2006.



## *Responding to inequality*

One of the distinguishing marks of Catholic education is its concern for the poor. The government's initiative in establishing 'no fee schools' is welcomed and affirmed, and many of our *Public Schools on Private Property* have benefited from this policy. However, in spite of government assistance to schools that fall into this and other categories, many schools are extremely poor and in need of major infrastructural upgrading as well as basic learning materials and facilities. It is therefore a matter of some disquiet when some well-provided schools seem reluctant to make their resources available to people who genuinely cannot afford to pay for them<sup>22</sup>. It is a joy, in other contexts, to celebrate high levels of sharing, and vibrant service and outreach programmes.

Many Catholic parents of today are unable to afford the fees of some independent schools; even more parents have no ability to pay fees at all. This means that not all Catholics are able to benefit from our rich tradition, and this creates an inequality among us that it is our obligation to overcome<sup>23</sup>. Wealthier schools need to be generous in sharing what they have with others; to be satisfied with less so that the needy can have more. We also need to be self-critical about how much we have been influenced by the prosperity-driven values of the society in which we live<sup>24</sup>.

## **Building relationships, building capacity**

Parishes are natural homes for Catholic schools and we need to re-establish dialogue between priest and school communities in cases where it has been lost. Collaboration provides a context for the development of youth movements in which young members of our communities can find a safe space to explore, experiment, share and learn.

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22 *Learning for Living: A Catholic Contribution to the Culture of Learning and Teaching in South Africa*, Catholic Institute of Education, Johannesburg, 1998.

23 Donal Dorr, *Option for the Poor: A Hundred Years of Vatican Social Teaching*, Maryknoll, New York, 1992.

24 *One Vision, One Future, One Voice: 2nd National Catholic Schools Congress*, Catholic Institute of Education, Johannesburg, 2004.

## Our calls

Parents have a critical role to play in creating a secure and nurturing environment in which children can grow in the knowledge of their faith and in the practice of the virtues and moral tenets of the gospel. They should be no less active in supporting Catholic schools since these build on the children's early formation<sup>25</sup>. The Catholic network is committed to providing the training needed for full participation in the life of the school. Programmes include training in school governance, Catholic ethos, pastoral care and financial management.

In considering where to send their children to school, some parents tend to be swayed by the educational facilities offered, more than by the school's ability to provide the formation needed for purposeful, morally aware and responsible adulthood. Parents who value Catholic formation, often have to make substantial sacrifices to attain their ideals and the Church is very grateful for their support.

In the past, we have been able to depend on religious congregations and overseas sources of funds to finance the schools. This is no longer the case. South Africa and its neighbours have grown beyond being missionary countries, and the time has come for us to take on the responsibilities of an established and self-reliant church.

Catholic teachers are called by God to participate in the teaching ministry of Jesus. Their vocation involves conscientious work, professionalism, care, love and a breadth of vision that embraces the educational and spiritual needs of the children entrusted to them. More than this, teachers are called to prepare their learners to be active and responsible members of society, to become people who have purpose and meaning in life and who are capable of being agents of social change. We call on those Catholics who have chosen the teaching profession to consider seriously the option of working in the Catholic schools network<sup>26</sup>.

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<sup>25</sup> Code of Canon Law, Rome, 1983.

<sup>26</sup> *Educating Together in Catholic Schools: A Shared Mission between Consecrated Persons and the Lay Faithful*. Congregation for Catholic Education, Rome, 2007.





## Conclusion

Our world is in transition. People are struggling to understand and implement the principles of democracy, to make allowances for cultural differences, to overcome feelings of insecurity, and to address an ever-widening poor-rich gap. While honouring the past with joy for its achievements and with contrition for its injustices, we are called to meet the present with courage and confidence. In a time of rapid change, it is important to have a clear vision of why we continue to support Catholic schools<sup>27</sup>. It is also critical that we discern together as a community where we need to direct our energies in this changing context. We pray that Our Lady will be with you and all of God's children as we look to the future.

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27 *Faith in the System*, Department for Children, Schools and Families, London, 2007.



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### Discussion questions

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- *What new insights and challenges does this document present to your school?*
- *How does the Catholic faith perspective affect your understanding of the children you teach and how you teach them?*
- *What practical steps can your school take to ensure that it promotes reflection and critical thinking?*
- *What can your school do to deepen its own understanding of its religious heritage?*
- *Which spiritual practices in your school might nurture people so that they can become more fully human?*
- *What practical steps can your school take to make it more accessible to poor families?*
- *How can your Catholic school share with other schools in your neighbourhood?*





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