



12-1-1998

Responses to the Vatican Document: The Catholic School on the Threshold of the Third Millennium

Thomas J. Tobin

Teresita Kambeitz
Newman Theological College

Dale R. Hoyt
Archdiocese of San Antonio

Patricia Kelly-Stiles
Diocese of Brooklyn

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.lmu.edu/ce>

Recommended Citation

Tobin, T. J., Kambeitz, T., Hoyt, D. R., & Kelly-Stiles, P. (1998). Responses to the Vatican Document: The Catholic School on the Threshold of the Third Millennium. *Journal of Catholic Education*, 2 (2).
<http://dx.doi.org/10.15365/joce.0202122013>

This Focus Section Article is brought to you for free with open access by the School of Education at Digital Commons at Loyola Marymount University and Loyola Law School. It has been accepted for publication in *Journal of Catholic Education* by the journal's editorial board and has been published on the web by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons at Loyola Marymount University and Loyola Law School. For more information about Digital Commons, please contact digitalcommons@lmu.edu. To contact the editorial board of *Journal of Catholic Education*, please email CatholicEdJournal@lmu.edu.

RESPONSES TO VATICAN DOCUMENT: *THE CATHOLIC SCHOOL ON THE THRESHOLD OF THE THIRD MILLENNIUM*

In the last issue, we published the full text of the recent Vatican document on Catholic education, *The Catholic School on the Threshold of the Third Millennium*. To continue thoughtful reflection and scholarly discussion, the editors invited responses to the Vatican document. While each contributor responds from an individual background and experience, the following essays help us to appreciate how the document is being received and interpreted in different settings.

Rev. Ronald J. Nuzzi, Ph.D.

MOST REVEREND THOMAS J. TOBIN
Bishop of Youngstown

As the Church eagerly anticipates the celebration of the Great Jubilee, there are many natural opportunities to pause, step back, and reflect upon our achievements and attitudes, our programs and policies. It should come as no surprise, then, that Catholic schools receive the same scrutiny. Within this historical context the Congregation for Catholic Education has issued its reflection, *The Catholic School On the Threshold of the Third Millennium*.

How does a diocesan bishop, one who presides over a relatively large and vibrant system of schools, read this new document? What does the statement add to the abundant reading material about Catholic education already available?

The specific purpose of this "circular letter" is explained in its introduction:

On the threshold of the third millennium education faces new challenges.... Such an outlook calls for courageous renewal on the part of the Catholic school.... Now as in the past, the Catholic school must be able to speak for itself effectively and convincingly.... (The Congregation for Catholic Education) therefore addresses this circular letter to all those who are engaged in Catholic schooling, in order to convey to them a word of encouragement and hope.

To engage this statement, a couple of hurdles must be cleared. First is the prose that is more obtuse than it need be. Consider the following sentence: "The fragmentation of education, the generic character of the values frequently invoked and which obtain ample and easy consensus at the price of a dangerous obscuring of their content, tend to make the school step back into a supposed neutrality, which enervates its educating potential and reflects negatively on the formation of the pupils." The complex literary style of the document will distance and discourage some of the intended audience.

Second, because the letter is addressed to the Universal Church with a very disparate audience, it suffers from a generic treatment of several very important themes. While many questions are raised, few answers are offered. But perhaps the presentation of the questions is itself a valuable service.

Even with these limitations, however, *The Catholic School on the Threshold of the Third Millennium* is productive reading. It provides substantial food for thought and lifts up a number of significant issues related to Catholic education, issues that will benefit from additional dialogue at a local level.

The document sets forth a list of challenges facing Catholic education today, including: a crisis of values influenced by subjectivism, moral relativism, nihilism, rapid structural changes, profound technical innovations, the globalization of the economy, and "in countries of long-standing evangelization, a growing marginalization of the Christian Faith as a reference point" (Art. 1). In light of these as well as other problems, and to overcome a certain "pedagogical tiredness," Catholic schools are called to embrace a spiritual renewal of their energy and vision.

And what exactly is the content of that vision? The work of the Catholic school begins with a commitment to the fundamental formation of the human person. "The Catholic school sets out to be a school for the human person and of human persons.... This awareness expresses the centrality of the human person in the educational project of the Catholic school" (Art. 9).

But, the statement quickly adds, the Catholic school doesn't exist merely as an alternative to the public school, and its mission is far more profound than "human formation." The document reminds us that "all human values find their fulfillment and unity in Christ" (Art. 9) and thus the ultimate purpose of a Catholic school is essentially related to its ecclesial identity. The

Catholic school is located at the heart of the Church. "This ecclesial dimension is not a mere adjunct, but is a proper and specific attribute, a distinctive characteristic which penetrates and informs every moment of its educational activity" (Art. 11).

The point is made that Catholic schools are not accidental to the mission of the Church, but that they have their place "within the organic pastoral work of the Christian community" (Art. 12). Later in the document we read that "the work of the school is irreplaceable and the investment of human and material resources in the school becomes a prophetic choice" (Art. 21).

This spirit of commitment is an important corrective whenever human and material resources are limited and the school is viewed as not a blessing but rather a burden draining the resources of the local community.

From the perspective of a diocesan bishop, this insistence on the ecclesial nature of a Catholic school is one of the most important themes of the document, for it often falls upon the diocesan bishop, in his daily work, to encourage the Catholicity of the schools entrusted to his pastoral care and to provide the resources necessary for their sustenance.

Another important message of *The Catholic School on the Threshold of the Third Millennium* is its reminder that Catholic schools have as an essential element of their mission a sincere concern for the poor and weak. In an era when attendance at Catholic schools is frequently challenged by rising costs and tuitions, at least in the United States, this is a timely point.

It is a school for all, with special attention to those who are weakest.... In many parts of the world even today material poverty prevents many youths and children from having access to formal education.... In other areas new forms of poverty challenge the Catholic school.... (The Catholic school) can and must find in the context of the old and new forms of poverty that original synthesis of ardour and fervent dedication which is a manifestation of Christ's love for the poor.... (Art. 15)

This stirring mandate presents a critical challenge to bishops and pastors and to all those who are part of the Catholic school community: where to find the political will and temporal resources to provide Catholic education for all of our families, particularly those unable to pay their own way.

The document addresses the question of the relationship between Catholic schools and the society in which they reside, and particularly the government. We read that "Catholic schools, moreover, like state schools, fulfill a public role, for their presence guarantees cultural and educational pluralism and, above all, the freedom and right of families to see that their children receive the sort of education they wish for them." (Art. 16). The Catholic school, therefore, "undertakes a cordial and constructive dialogue with states and civil authorities" (Art. 17). And the statement repeats John

Paul II's entreaty that "in all democratic countries 'concrete steps finally be taken to implement true equality for non-state schools and that it be at the same time respectful of their educational project'" (Art. 17).

In view of the ongoing conversation across our nation about vouchers and other means of public support for private and parochial schools, that suggestion in particular should spark a healthy debate.

Finally, the document addresses a word of encouragement and hope to the members of the "educating community" and stresses its importance, for "this community dimension in the Catholic school is not merely, a sociological category; it has a theological foundation as well" (Art. 18). To teachers, the document says: "Prime responsibility for creating this unique Catholic school climate rests with teachers, as individuals and as a community...for the teacher does not write on inanimate material, but on the very spirits of human beings" (Art. 19). And of course a word to parents, "since it is to them that primary and natural responsibility for their children's education belongs" (Art. 20).

There are other members of the educating community as well. For example, in the context of affirming the ecclesial dimension of Catholic schools, the letter recognizes the valuable contributions of Religious Institutes and stresses that "the presence of consecrated religious within the educating community is indispensable" and "affords pupils a vivid image of the Church" (Art. 13).

It seems to me that the document would have been more complete if similar words had been addressed to pastors of the Church, to bishops and priests, since the work of promoting and supporting Catholic education often falls within their competence.

In summary, the Congregation for Catholic Education has produced a very useful little document that can and should serve as the basis for future study and discussion for all those committed to the incomparable work of our Catholic schools. To achieve its purpose, the letter needs to be shared at the level of the local Church.

The letter fulfills its goal of offering a "word of encouragement and hope" to the educating community. It places the Catholic school squarely within a spiritual, ecclesial, and Christological framework. In so doing it carries on the spirit of the chief teacher of the Church, Pope John Paul II, who, speaking to Catholic educators in 1987, emphasized that "The call to holiness is addressed also to you and to your students.... The ultimate goal of all Catholic education is salvation in Jesus Christ."

It should be our common hope and prayer that Catholic education never loses sight of that compelling vision of faith.

SISTER TERESITA KAMBEITZ

*Head of the Religious Education Program, Newton Theological College,
Edmonton, Alberta, Canada*

This document dated December 28, 1997, was written by the Congregation for Catholic Education in order "to convey a word of encouragement and hope to all those who are engaged in Catholic schooling." The letter is generous in its praise of Catholic schools, acknowledging their contribution in five areas: 1) to the evangelizing mission of the Church throughout the world, including those areas in which no other form of pastoral work is possible; 2) to the social and cultural development of different communities and peoples, participating in their joys and hopes, their sufferings and difficulties; 3) to the spiritual and material development of less fortunate peoples; 4) to innovations in the field of education; and 5) to the pastoral care for the family, especially in the caring and sensitive help offered to families which are fragile or headed by a single parent.

It was a rather pleasant surprise to note the degree to which the document seems to be aware of the difficulties facing Catholic schools today. Outlining a host of political, social, and cultural problems in today's world, it points to the school as a "sensitive meeting point for the problems which besiege this restless end of the millennium." There is comfort in realizing that Vatican officials take note of this.

I particularly welcomed the recognition of the modern dangerous tendency to strive for a "value-neutral" school (Art. 10). In a pluralistic society such as ours, a Catholic school, in an effort to offend no one, may end up standing for nothing. The letter affirms the centrality of Christ in the Catholic school and the heart of Christ's teaching that in his person the fullness of the truth concerning the human person is to be found. This is no small matter: in fact, it speaks to the very essence of the Catholic school.

The strong emphasis placed on the Catholic school as a "genuine instrument of the Church, a place of real and specific pastoral ministry" was also intriguing (Art. 11). In no uncertain terms, the letter insists that parishes and dioceses be sensitized to the necessity of devoting special care to education and schools. I could not help but recall a recent archdiocesan celebration at which the absence of the Catholic schools was very evident.

There is also an insistence in the document that consecrated persons continue to engage in the teaching apostolate. It was pleasing to read words of profound appreciation for the educational work of religious orders and disappointing to see that of the four religious congregations mentioned by name, the only women's order to be named was the Ursulines. Speaking of Catholic schools' characteristic concern for the education of the poor, the letter states:

The girls from poor families that were taught by the Ursuline nuns in the 15th century" (Art. 15), and then goes on to name three male saints who founded educational institutions for boys.

The document expresses regret at the "serious misunderstanding which induces some Religious to abandon the teaching apostolate" (Art. 13) and states that "the presence of consecrated religious within the educating community is indispensable, since 'consecrated persons are able to be especially effective in educational activities'...as an example of the unreserved and gratuitous 'gift' of self to the service of others in the spirit of their religious consecration" (Art. 13). The document goes on to say that the presence of men and women religious, side by side with priests and lay teachers, affords pupils a vivid image of the Church and makes recognition of its riches easier.

While it is gratifying to read such gracious appreciation of the work of religious, I missed reading the recognition that ought to be given to the large numbers of dedicated lay teachers in Catholic schools. Also absent is any recognition of the importance of formation programs for Catholic teachers and administrators. The document seems to assume that Catholic schools, simply by bearing the label "Catholic," are indeed faithful to the ideals of Catholic education. For example, in describing the "new poor" in modern society, the letter goes on to state: "To these new poor the Catholic school turns in a spirit of love" (Art. 15). Does it really?

While fully endorsing the ideals outlined under the heading "The Catholic School at the Service of Society," I am keenly aware of the absolute necessity of providing programs in Catholic school leadership for the aspiring principals and superintendents of Catholic schools, not to mention school trustees. How many of even our most dedicated principals are aware of the implications carried by the claim that "the Catholic school's public role is...as an expression of the reality of the Church" (Art. 16) and that the presence of the Catholic schools "guarantees cultural and educational pluralism" (Art. 16)? Or that in all democratic countries, concrete steps are to be taken to implement true equality for non-state schools?

Without specific formation in Catholic school leadership, administrators may all too easily fall into patterns of thinking and acting more characteristic of the business and industrial world than the Gospel of Jesus Christ. While the document highlights the important roles of teachers and parents, I find it is remarkably silent on the very crucial leadership role of Catholic school administrators.

The conclusion of the document states that the work of the school is irreplaceable and that the investment of human and material resources in Catholic schools becomes a prophetic choice. It challenges Catholic schools on the threshold of the third millennium to carry out the mandate given to them in that Pentecost which was the Second Vatican Council, namely, to be

of service in developing the mission of the people of God and to promote dialogue between the Church and the community at large to the advantage of both. Catholic schools are still of vital importance in our times.

DALE R. HOYT

Superintendent of Schools, Archdiocese of San Antonio

Currently education has a tremendous impact on our world, especially in the United States, where ongoing discussions are taking place between government and private schools. Parental choice, school vouchers, computer technology, school uniforms, bond issues, increasing tax hikes, and accountability are just a few that are being discussed and debated. How appropriate it is that the Congregation for Catholic Education recently released the document, *The Catholic School on the Threshold of the Third Millennium*, on the “thirtieth anniversary of the creation of the Schools Office, and the twentieth anniversary of *The Catholic School*, published on 19th March, 1977” (Art. 4).

In reviewing this document based on my schooling and experiences in Catholic schools, three pressing issues emanate from *The Catholic School on the Threshold of the Third Millennium*. The first refers to the understanding of Catholic identity in relationship to the Catholic school. “The Catholic school must be able to speak for itself effectively and convincingly. It is not merely a question of adaptation, but of missionary thrust, the fundamental duty to evangelize, to go toward men and women wherever they are, so that they may receive the gift of salvation” (Art. 3). Acknowledging the fact that evangelization is the heart of our Catholic identity, the document recognizes that we face a crisis due to moral relativism, lack of values caused from media and subjectivism, people incapable of self-sacrifice, and families lacking in their role as the basic faith community.

Evangelization has always been embedded in the mission of our Catholic schools. “Catholic school as a place of integral education of the human person through a clear educational project of which Christ is the foundation; its ecclesial and cultural identity; its mission of education as a work of love; its service to society; the traits which should characterize the education community” (Art. 4).

The second issue raised in the document is the perspective of schooling. The document affirms religious communities who, by their charism, were dedicated to the educational apostolate over the years. I support the recognition that this document gives to those men and women living a “consecrated life” but I am puzzled as to why minimal recognition was given to the *laity*.

Equal recognition should be given for their ministry to the Catholic apostolate as true stewards of the faith.

“The majority of Catholic educational institutions...responded to the needs of the socially and economically disadvantaged” (Art. 15). History has shown that Catholic schools manifest a preferential option for the poor. Catholic schools are challenged to establish just distribution of resources to ensure quality and affordability to the families that we serve. Finances continue to be an ongoing struggle for Catholic schools where public funding is not given for the services we provide. The poor are becoming poorer and the rich, richer—the middle class is diminishing. The document challenges us to become more collaborative in our approach in promoting free choice. “A correct relationship between state and school, not only a Catholic school, is based not so much on institutional relations as on the right of each person to receive a suitable education of their free choice” (Art. 17). We must recognize as a Church that parents, by virtue of their vocation, should have the fundamental right of choice for their child’s education.

The third issue deals with the purpose of Catholic schools. Catholic schools’ threefold message of proclamation of Jesus the Christ, investment in community building, and service to the public provides a theological perspective for the formation of our young people. The document affirms the role of teachers charged with creating a communal spirit that is the heart of Christian formation and provides opportunity for community service. It recognizes parents as the primary educator and encourages them to participate in parent associations. Unfortunately the document gives no directive to bishops and pastors on prioritizing Catholic schools among their ministerial preferences. In order for this ministry to continue successfully into the third millennium, pastoral leadership and support is crucial. Furthermore, Catholic schools should be contributing to the parish life as active participants.

In general, the document *The Catholic School on the Threshold of the Third Millennium* really gives no new insights into the ministry for Catholic schools. Rather, it affirms our history and existence as being of vital importance in today’s global world. It recognizes and endorses that we must strive to seek equitable distribution of funds so parents are free to select the schools of choice for their children without enduring financial sacrifices. The document is a challenge toward continued growth that generates a momentum from all those who share a vested interest in Catholic schools. As we approach Jubilee year 2000, we must not be complacent with what was, but recognize the hope Catholic schools will bring to our future, which now provides the power for the present.

PATRICIA KELLY-STILES

Superintendent of Schools, Diocese of Brooklyn

While on my summer vacation, I read *The Catholic School on the Threshold of the Third Millennium* with a sense of anticipation. One generally seeks refreshment and renewal while on vacation, and it was in that spirit that I turned to this recent document from the Congregation for Catholic Education. I was rewarded.

Though the document succinctly outlines the myriad of daunting challenges facing Catholic schools, it also acknowledges the positive contributions these schools have made to the mission of the Church and for the common good. It is always refreshing to one who has spent over a quarter of a century ministering in Catholic schools to read such an affirmation of these universal efforts. The extraordinary work of the Spirit can be overlooked in the ordinary rhythm and routine of each passing school year.

The document calls for "courageous renewal" of Catholic schools as the Church prepares for the third millennium. Given the rapid pace of change and the complexity of our times, it is fitting that Catholic school educators are called upon to renew and expand their capacity to share the Good News. The blueprint for this renewal effort, moreover, should be rooted in the Gospel principles that have guided the teaching ministry of the Church since its inception.

Catholic schools must continue their vitally important role in the mission of the Church. To do this, however, we must not only carry on our Catholic traditions, we must recreate them within this courageous renewal effort as we encounter our ethnically and racially diverse students and their families.

We are reminded that the mission of the Catholic school is the integration of faith, culture, and life within a unique school climate infused with a Gospel spirit of freedom and love (Congregation for Catholic Education, 1988). Bear in mind, however, that just as education is not value neutral, neither is it culturally neutral. Freire (1994) points out that transformative education involves the recognition of two cultures, that of the teacher and that of the student, and the realization that it is incumbent upon the teacher to bridge the gap between the two.

Research demonstrates that Catholic school teachers see their work as ministry and accept the significant responsibility to teach and model values for all their students (Kushner & Helbling, 1995). It is due to their dedication to this teaching ministry that they can create that unique sense of care and love essential to the Catholic school climate. This climate, in turn, is essential to the school's success in forming and transforming students and in achieving that sense of harmony between faith, culture, and life.

Those who minister in Catholic schools in urban centers across our country frequently encounter the poor and the marginalized in the significant number of minority students enrolled in these schools. It is in those personal encounters, in the relationship established between teacher and student within the context of the school community, that one witnesses the moral act of teaching at its best. As the Catholic school teachers strive not only to teach Gospel values but also to live them more and more authentically, they are better able to recognize the "cultural capital" inherent in the racial and ethnic identities of their students. This recognition is foundational to the student's personal dignity and sense of well being (Carger, 1996; Irvine & Foster, 1996). It is clear that "teachers possess the power to create the conditions that can help students learn a great deal—or keep them from learning much at all" (Palmer, 1998, p. 6).

With much of the success of Catholic schools resting upon the effectiveness of the classroom teacher, the careful selection of teaching personnel and their ongoing spiritual and professional development are of paramount importance. How will the Church choose to marshal its resources to attract and retain qualified teachers, most of whom are lay women and men, as our schools enter the third millennium?

It is my hope that *Catholic Schools on the Threshold of the Third Millennium* will stimulate this necessary discussion and stir the imagination and will of the practitioners in the educational ministry of the Church at large. Our Catholic schools are the most effective means of catechizing and evangelizing the youth of our nation, our hope for the future. Let the dialogue of renewal of our schools for the third millennium begin so that our schools, in the person of the Catholic school teacher, will be able to effectively share the light of faith with future generations.

REFERENCES

- Carger, C. (1996). *Of borders and dreams: A Mexican-American experience of urban education*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Congregation for Catholic Education (1988). *The religious dimensions of education in a Catholic school: Guidelines for reflection and renewal*. Rome: Author.
- Freire, P. (1994). *Pedagogy of hope: Reliving pedagogy of the oppressed* (R. R. Barr, Trans). New York: Continuum Publishing Co.
- Kushner, R., & Helbling, M. (1995). *The people who work there: The report of the Catholic elementary school teacher survey*. Washington, DC: National Catholic Educational Association.
- Irvine, J. J., & Foster, M. (Eds.). (1996). *Growing up African American in Catholic schools*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Palmer, P. (1998). *The courage to teach: Exploring the inner landscape of a teacher's life*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Copyright of *Catholic Education: A Journal of Inquiry & Practice* is the property of Catholic Education: A Journal of Inquiry & Practice and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.