

CATHOLIC EDUCATION CONVENTION – 2006
Radiating Hope while being Strategic and Accountable – New Zealand
Catholic Schools Strengthening their Identity and Outcomes

Good afternoon everyone. Naumai Haere Mai, Tena Koutou Katoa
Tihei Mauri Ora
E te Atua, tena koe
E ka Manuhiri, tena koutou
E ka mate
Haere, haere, haere
Te hunga mate ki te hunga mate
Te hunga ora ki te hunga ora

E ka mana,
E ka reo
E ka mata waka
E ka hau e wha
Tena koutou, tena koutou, tena koutou katoa

- Bishops of our New Zealand Church
- Distinguished Guests
- Overseas Guests
- Convention Delegates
- Senior Students

I add my welcome to you along with that of the Board and staff of the New Zealand Catholic Education Office on the occasion of this wonderful New Zealand Catholic education gathering. Thank you for coming and supporting it.

I single out for welcome those guests who have travelled from various countries to be here: The Kingdom of Tonga, the Cook Islands, Fiji, Samoa, the United States of America and Australia. You are most welcome and we hope you have a great time as part of our Convention. We all learn from one another and I'm sure this will occur at this gathering.

The New Zealand Catholic Church now has well over a generation's experience with its schools being part of the State School system. In looking back over the last thirty years our education system has moved from being in a dire situation in 1976, to one now, which exhibits confidence, and strength while striving to continuously improve itself.

Surveying the scene today we see the following:

- 66,000 students in schools
- A network of 240 schools
- 30 Early Childhood Centres
- 5 Tertiary education institutions teaching theology, Religious Education and other Catholic education related courses. Fortunately many of these courses are available 'on line' making their access so much easier for adult students, in particular.

- Academically, our schools are working hard to continuously lift the quality of learning outcomes for their students and are succeeding very well in doing so, as they enhance their achievement levels.

- An increasing number of our schools are being publicly identified as standard setters in various fields and are recognized as such. This is a tribute to their principals, teachers and trustees and makes us all proud of their achievements.

- The special character dimension of the schools is now much better focused on by Boards of Trustees and their staff with the active support and guidance from Diocesan Education Offices.
- Our schools are proud to be identified as Catholic and make no apology for being so. This is an area which continuously requires our focus and hard work as we consciously brand ourselves as religious schools, without any ifs or buts.
- Strategic thinking, planning and professionalism are all more strongly embedded in our mind-sets at the various levels of the education we are involved with.

It is fair to say, overall, our Catholic education system is in a healthy shape as we work towards achieving the 2020 Beacon Plan Goals set for the system by the New Zealand Council of Proprietors of Catholic Integrated Schools in 1998. You all have copies of this guiding framework which is fine-tuned and made publicly available every few years. The fuel to continuously improve what we do is within ourselves: faith, virtue, innovation, vision, positive relationships, skill development, optimism, leadership, intellectual fire-power, enthusiasm, diplomacy, boldness and hard work. Substantial change primarily occurs incrementally when attitudes encompass all of the above categories, while shunning a culture of blame and complaint.

Thank you, most sincerely, for all that you do which is enabling our Catholic education system to not only contribute to the well-being of our Church community, but also to the nation's well-being.

In placing this address to reflect the theme of the Convention, could I share these pearls of wisdom?

- The people's hope is the last to die
- As long as I breathe, I hope, and I hope as long as I breathe
- When hope dies boredom and destruction begins
- Jesus never taught there was a quick and easy way to establish the Kingdom of Heaven
- Indifference and nihilism are manifestations of the lack of hope in peoples' lives.

Today's society needs plenty of understanding, rather than more condemnation. It is easy to focus on war, terrorism, violence, selfishness, greed and so on, which are all a tragic and unfortunate part of our fallen humanity. Rather, we are better off attitudinally embracing the scriptural injunction: "Do not be afraid, I am with you, I have called you by name, you are mine". It is worth keeping in mind that human beings ultimately want to lead lives that are well-rounded, whole and happy. This is achieved in a tangible sense by becoming connected and engaged with others, in some community setting. Our education institutions and parishes are structurally viable ways of doing this.

Catholic education in the new-millennium embraces God's most precious gift to each of us: life. Despite the contradictions displayed daily on our various audio-visual screens, the presence of the Spirit of God who renews the face of the earth is apparent in many forms. Among these signs are: the openness of peoples towards one another; a great stirring of interest in things spiritual, a humility in our attitudes to the earth, the greater attention to human rights issues and alliances involving international collaboration – all signs of hope.

Our educational institutions have the vital task of helping students to create meaning from what they do. Essentially, meaning, identity and spirituality are all interrelated. Educational institutions, particularly our own, have a significant role in providing a framework for students to make sense of the world and their place in it.

Thomas Jefferson was right when he said, *“a nation cannot be ignorant and free”*. In order to live in a free society people require a set of ideas based on the acquisition of virtue, which is fostered at home, school and Church. We accept that Catholic education is a moral endeavour where young people are encouraged to be virtuous by interacting with virtuous people and by being taught about virtue and its acquisition.

Our Catholic approach to living is not simply a reflection of a humanitarian vision, it is primarily based on the experience individuals have with Christ who enables them to generate hope in their lives, to have a zest for living and a love of others, in Pope Benedict’s phrase, having “a heart that sees”.

Each of our educational sites is a teaching community where teachers and students are co-learners. Each individual is full of questions, always yearning, in need of healing and growing in a prayerful culture. Our priests, staff, trustees, parents and everyone associated with our education institutions are in Mark Twain’s view, possibly, “the only Bible people will read.” Given that many of our students have been neither evangelized, nor pre-evangelized, we have to be very conscious of the importance of the culture of our institutions, since it is the religious and social culture that will enable ultimate catechesis to take place and hope to take root in the soul of each student.

As a national network of Catholic education institutions we no longer have any disagreements about the vital importance of placing excellence in all its dimensions at the centre of what we do. We are increasing the voltage of this vitally important concept. I commend you all for the magnificent efforts you are making in this area. We will never be able to put enough creative energy into this fundamental Catholic focus, since excellence in all of its dimensions is at the heart of the Christian message.

The major challenge we face is the same challenge all Catholic institutions face, wherever they exist in the world, that is, to be authentically Catholic in a world which is overtly ambiguous about religion, indifferent or sometimes hostile to it.

We have to be clear that our early childhood centres, our schools and our tertiary institutions, having been established by our Church, are primarily agents of the Catholic community, the People of God. Therefore active collaboration and sharing of strategic intent between their stakeholders, plus their parishes and their Dioceses, is fundamental, if they are to operate effectively.

It makes no sense anymore to use the same thinking that established these educational institutions to create the structures and ways of operating that are needed in today’s very changed circumstances.

Some pivotal societal realities we all face are as follows:

- Blended families and sole parent families are on the increase representing a substantial structural evolution.
- Sundays are full of all sorts of involvements and weekly catch up activities, not leaving much time for worship in the minds and hearts of the majority of the population.
- The rhythm of life is no longer religious, it often is indifferent and secular.
- Our culture is changing by the day with violence, drugs and other factors negatively influencing many individuals.
- The huge amount of national and international news flooding into our homes each day can generate a sense of bewilderment and helplessness.
- Parents often feel overburdened, overstretched and inadequate in their parenting role and look to their child’s education institution for help and guidance.
- Individuals have difficulty in establishing a healthy work-life balance given all the demands on their time and the myriad of choices available to them.

We are a community of restless hearts which are always yearning. Our Catholicism is a broad and diverse Church. One idea all of us are able to strongly agree on, however, is that education is about human encounter. All teaching is about moral endeavour. It is about reclaiming our radical traditions, telling our old stories and creating new ones. This is fundamentally why our education network is so important.

As leaders in our Catholic community, we are the Church, the People of God, who in turn are challenged to be magnanimous, gracious and creative towards those we serve who are immersed in a quickly evolving society.

There is, no doubt, that we have a crisis in the transmission of our faith to the younger generations in a world that is globally connected with a mosaic of competing visions, values and cultures. Within this reality we are faced with reclaiming our heritage, reading the signs of the times and then repackaging the Good News in terms post-modern people understand and resonate with. This is a major challenge which requires blue skies, think tank and focus group approaches in order to determine a way forward. We ought to embrace the reality that our early childhood centres, our schools and our tertiary institutions, today, play a vital role in the evangelizing mission of the Church. They are a privileged environment in which Christian education is carried out. The virtue of hope is fundamentally vital for everyone involved in sorting out answers to this transmission issue. We have heard for a long time that as Catholics we ought to be counter-cultural, which can sometimes be a form of escapism. Could I suggest a better model is one where we actively engage the world, engage those we serve and interact with, since if the Gospel is to be effective, it has to be encultured in our various countries i.e. we are challenged to work with the soil, not sterilize it or throw it out.

The Bishops of the United States of America put it this way: "Through education the Church seeks to prepare its members to proclaim the Good News and to translate this proclamation into action since the Christian vocation is a call to transform oneself and society. With God's help, the education effort of the Church must encompass the twin purposes of personal sanctification and social reform in light of Christian values". (To Teach as Jesus Did).

Collectively, we cannot afford to stake out territory vis-à-vis one another – rather, we need to build on global best practice seeking to be collaborative in promoting the reign of God. It is vital that we are committed to managing agreed upon strategic outcomes and be clear about our Catholic way of seeing the world. Our young people and their families can justifiably lay claim to a proud Catholic heritage and develop a definitive identity. We must seek to promote that heritage and identity, so they can come to better appreciate it and rejoice in it.

No one is pretending that what we are seeking to do is easy, since so many young people and their parents are unconnected or marginally connected with the life of the Church outside of the school and early childhood centre. The task will take all our hope, all our love, all our faith.

We are facing some really tough issues. The public profile of our education institutions is Catholic, yet the view of the institutional Church itself has changed in the understanding of many people who tick the Catholic box in each census. There is no doubt that the motivations parents have in seeking enrolment for their children in an early childhood centre or school, are many and varied and may not include religious education, but most certainly involve values education and a fundamentally Christian-Catholic spiritual and philosophical framework. Other parents are seeking a strong religious faith formation for their youngsters. Clearly there are big challenges in all of this. However, whether we like it or not, the school or early childhood centre is the only experience of the Catholic Church for many families, yet we are unabashed religious and Catholic in what we offer.

With all of these considerations and a lot more, which you are quite familiar with, our education enterprise operates. The question we face is, what are the most effective ways for the Church's educational arm to "go teach" and improve the world, as well as passing on our precious faith in a distinctively Catholic education and community environment.

The Church's preferential option for the poor lays a charge on all of us and deserves strong attention, both locally, regionally and nationally. We must always welcome the poor and marginalized into our midst, look after them and not pay lip service to them.

Catholic educational institutions have to be stand-out institutions where it is plain that those who are part of each school community endeavour to love one another. It is the love of Christ that urges us on and motivates us. This is our strength. We are not neutral – we are places of learning, of wisdom, of faith development, moral development and service. At the same time we are energetic collaborative citizens of our locality and nation.

There is a minority of individuals in our Church who would have us withdraw into isolationism and simply look after the fervent while brushing away the “great unwashed”. This is not a valid Gospel reaction to the realities of the today's world. The Gospel of Jesus, reforms, renews and builds a genuine Christian-Catholic culture where incipient saints can have their roots planted, nurtured and helped grow into strength.

We ought not back away from promoting the fact that getting people to Heaven is part of the Catholic way of seeing the world. Our education institutions belong to the Church's very essence – that is why we put so much energy and resourcing into them. Our education institutions at all levels are an active vital ministry of the Church, not stand alone independent institutions disconnected from the Church's networks. None of us has a monopoly on enlightenment in all of this – we are closely interdependent and need one another.

Rocket science is now able to hurl space craft into the outreaches of the universe and also put people on the moon, therefore it is not an impossible task to bring about the faith outcomes we seek from our schools and parishes. It is those who are crazy enough to think they can change the world that are the ones who do just that. We can think of the many saints who had such an impact, as well as those many individuals who have never been accorded such a saintly title. Maybe we ought to engage in a lot more thinking about what we could do to achieve what we want to, rather than giving into defeatism or simply letting things drift.

The only way our New Zealand Church will face down the negative post-modern challenges it is confronted with, is to actively promote a mutual enrichment of family, parish and school and to do so within a planned, strategic framework.

These three legs of the stool are dependent on each other in order for each to be effective. The family is under pressure, while the school is generally a trusted, professional entity. The parish, the wider Diocese and the national Church have the knowledge, skills, expertise and spiritual dynamism to infuse and support the school and family.

Pope Benedict's recent insightful assertion: “Be true and faithful, but do not alienate people,” is a salient guiding piece of wisdom worth keeping in focus for all three entities. Blame, complaint, excuses, lack of co-operation or a holier than thou attitude have no place in the local for regional Catholic networks, which have to be collaborative to be successful.

The Church's history is full of leaders who first went into their societies attracting individuals to their messages which resonated with people's life experiences. Once connections were established, evangelization and catechesis were then able to gain traction. There is no reason why this approach cannot be reinvigorated today. Many of these types of initiatives are occurring in an increasing number Church-school partnerships found in various parts of the country. These initiatives are to be strongly commended and encouraged. *(A list of examples of these good practices will be provided for those who want it).

Part of the issue we face is, we do not shape-up precisely enough what we want to do and then set about putting superior strategic management plans around what we wish to achieve. While the Church today is struggling with aspects of its life, let us think back over 140 years ago when the Church was hardly a force in Aotearoa. Our forebears then demonstrated deep faith, passion, thinking and planning to build and deliver what we are justly proud of today as heirs to their vision.

At times I think we are too suspicious and too timid in utilizing the best tools the market place has to offer to help implement what our targetted vision is. We cannot stand apart from the world but must seek to embrace and transform it. "Do not be afraid", was Pope John Paul's off repeat theme – this ought to give us encouragement and energize us. Many of our fears are paper tigers so we need to shake them in the light of day.

We need also to be careful in any criticism we make of any other leg of the stool, the parish, the family, or the school, since we often are in a position where we do not know what we don't know about the other. We probably accept that each leg is interlocked and each needs the other two. We all belong to the People of God, the Church. We are all part of the mission of the Church. Therefore, being overtly Catholic means supporting one another by emphasizing prayer, the Eucharist, the community culture of our interactions and the service of others.

The National Review and Development of the Special Character programme now operating successfully in each Diocese, regularly delivers heart warming examples of how schools are successfully and very positively interacting with their families and parishes. It is obviously time for the New Zealand Catholic Education Office to again collect all this good practice and make it known, nationwide, so the inspiration and good practice of others can be used to inspire others who are looking for good ideas to put into effect.

There are times when some of our priests become discouraged in their interaction with their schools. The recent former principal of St Columba's School, Frankton, the late Jan Pratt, helped make celebrities of the priests who served in St Columba's parish. She deeply believed that the Church is the means of salvation and saw priests as a vital part of the Church's mission. Of course she was right. We all have our parts to play in the Church community at whatever level and have to seek out ways to support one another. Clearly, one of us is not as smart as all of us and nobody has a monopoly on enlightenment. Our Church certainly needs more priests to continue their special ministry and therefore it is up to the school community to reach out to the Diocesan community and expose our young people to the privileged role our priests have as God's ministers. The same applies to the nascent lay ministers who are emerging as vital contributors to the Church's life. Clearly enhancing existing national and Diocesan strategies are called for in much the same way the Defence Forces, the professions and other vocational groups are seeking to engage young people to join them through promotional and inspirational strategies.

The emerging phenomenon of 'low flyers' in the global marketplace is a popular development in New Zealand, too. Such a person is generally well-qualified, honest, intelligent but spends their working days in a job which is not too pressured. They have time to do other things, often of an altruistic kind. They choose to be involved in interests that are fulfilling to themselves.

These people can be described as happily underemployed and are not slackers. The recent establishment of the Knights of Malta in NZ is an example of such individuals at work. These individuals work together on a project in favour of marginalized groups. This phenomenon is worth looking at closely, since, it is an example of how the signs of the times have been read by looking at possibilities where a human resource could be available to the Church, since such people, Generation X'ers are quality individuals. They could become engaged with us, either in a parish, diocesan or educational setting if we set about enticing them to our networks.

If we do not constantly scan the emerging trends in society and be committed to continuous change we run the risk of losing our cutting edge effectiveness. We are always at our best when we are at our boldest.

There are opportunities and threats to our schools which have to be effectively managed. The most important is of our distinctiveness or point of difference in the market place.

Not only are our faith and values pivotal to this difference, the culture of our schools and the way they interact with their communities and the wider Church and national communities, are of equal importance.

How does your institution, pin point its distinctiveness, objectively, so students and the adult community know by the publications, signs, mood lighting, symbols, inside and outside of the school, that, 'yes', this is a Catholic School? We ought not be other than proud to promote this distinctiveness, since we are obligated to do so through our Integration Agreements, let alone anything else.

Part of strengthening the point of difference is knowing our market, building relationships and connectivity, yet effectively promoting ourselves without being obnoxious.

When being effective our schools are upfront affirming belief in God and the message of Jesus, along with the idea that God's concern is for every human being. This in turn leads on to a service dimension to others. Also, helping young people to explore and nurture their spirituality which focuses on the ultimate meaning and purpose of their life is an education priority in a complex world.

While many of the parents of young people are not closely connected to the wider Church community, there is no doubt that students' religious and social attitudes are influenced by the school and this is important. That is why building a high trust environment between the family, the parish and the school is so vital in the way we run our schools, in particular. Being prepared to learn anytime, anywhere, anyhow is the platform we all need in strengthening these relationships.

In the daily parry and thrust the media presents, we sometimes forget that while Church members get things horribly wrong at times, we are a respected institution which has a very long history of doing good. This is not lost on those whom we work with.

There are many ways in which we are able to influence and teach our students other than in classrooms. One of the wonderful growth areas is the widening array of spiritual and religious activities which teachers promote and organize in conjunction with their Chaplain and parish networks. Part of our education approach has to be opening students' eyes to personal and life possibilities, in fact, looking with new eyes!!

Many a student has come to know Jesus through an experience with a teacher. Einstein asserted, "the most beautiful emotion is to feel the mysterious" i.e. to touch the Divine. All of our teachers are in fact teachers of faith who serve with others, not for others.

Unashamedly loving each student and recognizing their dignity and sacredness as individuals is a profoundly and distinctively Catholic approach to education. Maybe we need to encourage ourselves in believing that faith will play a significant part in turning the world around, because if you want to be trusted you have to trust yourself and in turn trust God. This will only happen if do not claim God exclusively for ourselves.

While faith is taught it is more profoundly caught by individuals who are captivated by those who live their faith. Making use of programmes that assist youngsters to grow in resilience and strengthen their spiritual intelligence is a fundamental dimension of a post-modern Catholic School. Again this is a point of our differentiation, which parents and youngsters themselves, are looking for. Many students today are in the mindset, "engage me or enrage me". Therefore our challenge is, how do we engage young people so that realness of our Catholicism can be shared with them? The answer has to be to intellectually, emotionally and relationally engage them – again there are many schools in the nation doing just this. Good practice can easily become common practice if we are motivated enough to seek better ways of doing our job, if every individual teacher is filled with a passionate drive to connect with our young people.

There are two things we can give our students, roots and wings. This means our school has an unequivocal point of view which is clear and unambiguous. It means that our teachers are competent, inspiring and enthusiastic about their role in the school. Love and service are the essence of our Church and our schools.

We sometimes talk about the 'Catholic mafia' and the influence some individuals have in certain of our cities. If you strip away the negative aspects of the term you are left with an idea akin to the Catholic tribe. Tribes have identity, they brand their difference and are proud of who they are. Could I suggest that our schools are ideal places to teach about the Catholic tribe and to provide experiences of how the tribe operates in the best possible way?

Students leaving our schools will be enriched if they feel they belong to the Catholic tribe and are proud to belong to it, the whole 500,000 of us in New Zealand and the 1.2 billion of us, internationally. Catholicism is rich in its diversity and any leader like each one of you has to be aware of and know what the spiritual currents are at any given time, which means leaders have to keep learning about the world.

Catholic identity has a core, it has boundaries which need to be kept strong, since not everything and anything 'goes' in the Catholic tribe. Our teachers and students need to know what we stand for and what our identity is – anything less is short changing them. Minimum expectations deliver minimum results – our approach is the reverse of this.

Maybe a way to strengthen the Catholic tribe concept is for each of our education institutions to formulate a Charter For Parents which is different from the school's prospectus. A charter would simply state what the school commits to deliver for parents and students – its explicitness and simplicity would be its genius and would be warmly welcomed by parents.

All this translates into our schools having a point of view whose message is sound and clear.

If we did this we would strengthen our brand of education and more clearly differentiate ourselves in the market place. It is worth reflecting on that the Catholic education brand is a powerful and respected one, internationally, with over 60million students in schools and other education settings. Migrants to this country know the brand and are quick to seek it out, which is to our advantage.

To make what we have reflected on happen, leadership is the dynamo of change. Fundamentally effective leadership is inspirational. It is about creating empowerment, giving people space and then letting them get on with transforming their lives.

Values drive the way people think and behave. Leaders lead well when they focus on doing what they exhort and promote – seeing becomes believing. Unfortunately, poor leaders drive people away, while leaders who are able to show an exciting way forward will attract like minded confident partners. When individuals are treated with respect and dignity solid progress always occurs.

Leadership today is situational and flexible, while being open to new ideas and opportunities. Oftentimes individuals do not know what they do not know – it is the leader's job to open the doors and let the fresh air flow in.

There are so many aspects to this discussion area we could all profitably engage in – I am sure you will do so. In finishing I would like to touch on one or two topical national issues.

Our school system has grown quite extraordinarily over the last ten years thanks to your efforts and that of thousands of others. Today there are less than twenty Religious employed in our schools, so a quite extraordinary transformation has taken place in those who are now charged with running our schools. The many Religious who are now retired are proud of what you are doing today. THANK YOU for the wonderful job you are doing carrying on the work of running the Catholic School network.

Government is a purposeful and positive partner in working with us and I take this opportunity to thank Ministry of Education Officials for their active support and collaboration – it is an honour to work alongside them.

The national capital works ten year rolling programme for existing schools is putting us under pressure. This list of buildings needing renewal continues to grow and costs rise, while we try to make the income from Attendance Dues cover increasing needs. Please be assured that the Board of NZCEO is actively collaborating with all Proprietors to negotiate ways to obtain further income streams to lessen the cost burden on parents and caregivers. This will take some time to sort out but is actively being worked upon.

The Special Character credentialing scheme which soon be launched. It will be considered in its final form by our Bishops at their October meeting, and will begin to be phased in from the beginning of next year. The scheme will decidedly be helpful in strengthening the identity and Special Character of our schools over the long haul.

Even though we are a nation of 4.2 million people located at the bottom of the world we are both international and national citizens of the global family of nations. Therefore we both take from and contribute to the international Catholic and wider community. This is the structural setting we work in.

St Peter in one of his letters urges us to defend hope – the hope of the resurrection. This is the hope that keeps us on the path ahead and fills us with an openness to the world.

This is plenty of reason for optimism, as we are on a journey of continuous improvement. Tomorrow can be better than today since as long as we breathe we hope - we breathe in and breathe out our powers and energies for living. May we always be standard bearers of hope as we seek to light a path of hope for those we interact with and seek to inspire.

To our Bishops I say a heartfelt thank you for your leadership and active support for our national school system – you are extraordinary in what you do in this regard and we are most not appreciative of this.

To each of you, whatever your role in our education system, THANK YOU for what you do to strengthen and enhance the work of our schools since one of us is never as smart as all of us. THANK YOU.

Finally, we could gather inspiration from the words of Robert Kennedy: “There are those who look at things the way they are and ask why? I dream of things that never were and ask why not?”

Patrick J. Lynch
1.9.06.