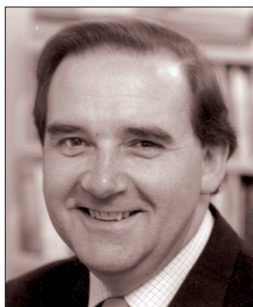


Worldwide Catholic education

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In his much quoted Encyclical, *‘Caritas in Veritate’* 2009, Pope Benedict XVI stressed the importance of universal access to education and of its relation to international cooperation and ideas of greater solidarity in the world. As the Holy Father expressed it: ‘Greater solidarity at the international level is seen in the promotion of greater access to education The term ‘education’ refers not only to classroom teaching and vocational training – both of which are important factors in development – but to the complete formation of the person’ (para 61).

This expresses the fundamental values and commitments that have guided the Catholic education mission worldwide for centuries, but especially as renewed and reanimated by the modern mission document, *The Catholic School*, published by the Sacred Congregation for Catholic Education in 1977.

Today, the Catholic education mission is at the service of nearly 52 million students in more than 200,000 schools and colleges across the world. It is the largest faith-based international educational system, but perhaps because it has not been researched in detail until recently, it is often misunderstood



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and misrepresented by the secular media and by secular critics. To understand this great mission, it is necessary to understand its fundamental principles and commitments and to have some evidence-based knowledge of its achievements (and challenges) in various parts of the world.

Much of what follows in this article is derived from a recently completed research survey published as the *International Handbook of Catholic Education* (2007) in two volumes (copies of which were presented to Pope Benedict in December 2007) or from material published in the new journal, *International Studies in Catholic Education*, launched in March 2009.

A mission for all: Christians, those of other faiths and those of no faith

Following the reforms of the Second Vatican Council (1962–65), the Catholic Church adopted a position of greater openness to, and dialogue with, the wider world and with all persons of good will. In education, this was presented in the messages of *The Catholic School document* (which can be regarded as the foundation charter of Post-Vatican II Catholic education) in these words: ‘In the certainty that the Spirit is at work in every person, the Catholic school offers itself to all, non-Christians included, with all its distinctive aims and means, acknowledging, preserving and promoting the spiritual and moral qualities, the social and cultural values which characterise different civilisations.’ (para. 85).

Contemporary Catholic schools in all parts of the world contain significant numbers of Christians (who are not Catholics) and also students who are Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists and members of other faiths. In other words, Catholic schools are in the service of the world and not simply in the service of the Catholic world. In Africa, the Middle East and Asia this characteristic of ‘openness to others’ is clearly demonstrated.

A mission of ‘preferential option for the poor’

As Jesus Christ called upon his disciples to have a special concern for the poor, the Catholic education mission internationally has attempted to exemplify that commitment, both historically and in the contemporary world. As the 1977 declaration insists: ‘first and foremost the Church offers its educational service to the poor, or those who are deprived of family help and affection, or those who are far from the faith.’ (para. 58).

The first Catholic schools established in nearly every country were founded by religious congregations such as the Jesuits, the Salesians, the Marists, the Christian and De La Salle Brothers, the Benedictines, the Sisters of Notre Dame, the Ursulines, the Dominican Sisters, the Sisters of Mercy, the Sisters of St Paul and many others. These schools were provided for students, free of charge, or at the lowest possible fee. This service to the poor was made possible because of the subsidies which the congregations made available to launch this great philanthropic mission.

One of the biggest challenges now facing Catholic education worldwide is how to maintain this distinctive service as the religious congregations are declining in numbers and as many governments will not make public money available to support the work of the Catholic schools, even when these schools are clearly in the service of the poorest sections of the population.

In his 2009 Encyclical, Pope Benedict drew attention to this, as part of a larger contradiction in the distribution of the goods of the world: 'The worlds wealth is growing in absolute terms, but inequalities are on the increase' (para. 22). The Catholic educational system internationally is attempting to respond to this great challenge to the integrity of its mission. In chapter 33 of the *International Handbook*, Cardinal Telesphore Toppo of India, demonstrates the Church's continued support for the education of the most marginalised sectors of Indian society, In other chapters, relating to the challenges experienced in the USA, Australia, Brazil and Peru, various strategies for action are outlined in trying to maintain the preferential option for the poor in changing circumstances.

A mission of community, solidarity, service and the common good

The international Catholic education mission has an important counter-cultural role in proclaiming those religious, spiritual and human values which may be marginalised in current globalisation processes. These processes can give undue emphasis to individual economic and market interests, to individual achievements, celebrity and 'success', and to individual possessions and personal satisfactions. The counter-cultural mission of Catholic schools has been represented in these terms: 'The Catholic school community is an irreplaceable source of service, not only to the pupils and its other members but also to society. Today ... one sees a world which clamours for solidarity and yet experiences the rise of new forms of individualism ... This is the basis of a Catholic school's educational work. Education is not given for the purposes of gaining power, but as an aid towards a fuller understanding ... Knowledge is not to be considered as a means of material prosperity and success but as a call to serve and to be responsible for others'

(para 56 and 62: 1977).

Catholic schools have a commitment to proclaim to their students that their first priority learning is to acquire a love of God and a love of their universal neighbour and secondly to acquire the knowledge, skills and understandings to give expression to that love in what they do in their adult lives. As Pope Benedict has said: 'The greatest service to development then, is a Christian humanism that enkindles charity and takes its lead from truth, accepting both as a lasting gift from God. Openness to God, makes us open towards our brothers and sisters and towards an understanding of life as a joyful task to be accomplished in a spirit of solidarity.' (para. 78: 2009).

Catholic schools in the world today

The International Handbook of Catholic Education (2007) provides detailed accounts of how these principles of mission are being worked out in practice in the Catholic schools and colleges of Argentina, Australia, Belgium, Brazil, Canada, Chile, China/Hong Kong, England and Wales, Ethiopia, France, Germany, The Holy Land, India, Ireland, Italy, Japan, Kenya, Malawi, Malta, Netherlands, New Zealand, Northern Ireland, Peru, Philippines, Poland, Portugal, Scotland, South Africa, Spain, Thailand, USA, Uruguay and Zambia.

The Christian humanism spoken of by Pope Benedict and mediated through the work of Catholic schools, does not seek to impose itself upon the adults and youth of these societies, but rather to make itself available to them as a means to 'live life to the full'. **E**



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