

1. What role do Bishops play in Catholic education?

“You may be familiar with a document – probably the last document that came out from the Congregation for Catholic Education – on ‘the identity of the Catholic school for a culture of dialogue’. If you’re not familiar with that, please look it over. It’s very good, it’s very clear on what the expectations of the Church are vis-a-vis Catholic Education. And it does offer, within that, specific responsibilities for all the players, including the Bishops’. So, I found that to be one of the most succinct statements of everything that Canon Law and Church documents say about the responsibilities of the Bishop.

That document summarizes the role of the Bishop - the fundamental role, whether it’s within a publicly-funded system or wherever Catholic schools find themselves - in two ways: discernment and recognition. It belongs to the Bishop – the local Bishop – to say if an institution is Catholic or not. So, in other words, when we’re talking about a Catholic hospital, Catholic school, Catholic institution: it’s Catholic only if the Bishop says it’s Catholic. That is the criteria. If the Bishop says it’s not Catholic, it is no longer Catholic. So, it’s as simple as that.

And yet it’s as complicated as that, because what that means is that the Bishop has to stay in regular partnership, regular dialogue with all the players so that he can exercise the oversight, he can exercise the vigilance that the Church expects the Bishop to exercise.

So, practically speaking, that would mean regular meetings – like what we have today. We’re set up here, structurally, to help support that discerning and recognizing role of the Bishop. Whether or not we can do that more effectively, I think, is probably a good question to be asking ourselves. The dialogue with trustees in his own diocese, the visitation that the Bishop does to a school...what this document I referred to highlights, is that it’s actually a canonical responsibility of the Bishop to visit his schools. Now, I did that for a few years, COVID got in the way, I’d like to get back at it – Bishops love to get into schools.

I do think this would be a good moment for us, together, to take a look at what would actually be a good, effective visitation. When I’ve done one in the past: I go in, and I’m greeted by whoever, led around the school, visit some classrooms, kind of a Q and A with the kids, maybe coffee with the teachers - fine. I think it needs to be a little bit more structured and deliberate than that, and really looking at having serious conversations about matters.

So, the Bishops, as you know, are involved with all the partners in looking at curriculum development, resource development, religious education curriculum in particular. The Bishop has the right to issue edicts for his schools, in terms of making sure that they are Catholic, as the Church expects of him. Now, all that has to somehow marry and work with the publicly-funded system, which generates its own system of conversations, obviously, but the heart of it is: he is the overseer, he is the one who says if a school is Catholic or not, he has to enter in with all the players in process of discernment to ask ‘is this Catholic as the Church expects it to be Catholic’? And, you’ll find in that document it starts to spell out the expectation with regards to teachers. Teachers, not just as professionals, but also as witnesses. Expectations of administration...The document is very good, so, I think in the future that could be a sound and helpful basis for a conversation to ask “how are we doing”?

Now, in any school division, it’s the *local* Bishop that is the authority; it’s the local Bishop who exercises that discernment, recognizing role. So, I am not in a position to go down to the Calgary Diocese and say “such and such a school is Catholic” – that belongs uniquely to the

Bishop of Calgary. Same thing for the other Dioceses. We do, obviously, as Bishops in this province, as well as in other provinces, we want to work in concert, we want to be giving a concerted effort together, we want to have consistent messaging, etc, etc, so, we do meet together, regularly, as the Alberta-Northwest Territories Bishops to discuss a host of issues, including education. But within that system of Alberta-Northwest Territories Bishops we'll appoint liaison Bishops to the various ministries. So, I'm the liaison to healthcare, Bishop of Calgary has typically been the liaison to education. What that means is that our various organizations – CCSSA, ACSTA, and so on – have a Bishop that they can talk to. But the role of that liaison Bishop is to bring whatever those conversations are to his brother Bishops here in Alberta – keeping us informed, getting our input, making sure we are all on the same page. But, for any school division, the authority that you're accountable to in Canon law is your local Bishop."

2. What to do in the case of a disagreement with the local Bishop?

"I think that's the moment for courageous conversations. The question, finally is: Do you want to be in communion with your Bishop or do you not? And recall, when you're talking about the identity of a Catholic school, the Holy See identifies Five Marks. And one of them has to do with, I forget what the actual wording is, but it touches on 'living out a spirituality of communion'. Well 'communion', in the Catholic tradition, has a very precise definition. It means, first of all, communion with the Bishop. Because that means communion with the whole Apostolic tradition that's represented in the person of the Bishop. So, in no way can any institution consider itself Catholic when there is communion broken with the Bishop - it doesn't work.

Now, the Church also makes the distinction between 'affective' and 'effective' communion. This is something that needs to exist among the Bishops themselves, but it should exist whenever we're talking about structural communion. 'Affective' – we're at the level of affect, relationships, getting along. We want that. But we also want it to be 'effective' – it's gotta work! It has to be such that it is good, effective, collaborative, communal governance of the school, for the sake of assuring, together, the identity – the *Catholic* identity – of the school. So, I'm sure you would say, in every school division, as I can absolutely say in the Edmonton Archdiocese, I've got good relationships with the people who are trustees. We like one another, we get along, it's great. If you didn't have that...that's a problem in itself. Now, how 'effective' is our communion? Well, we've got to keep asking ourselves that, and there's going to be moments, serious issues that could come our way, which will help us to see the answer.. Sometimes these moments can test the 'effective' communion. And if there's a rupture, we should say whoa; that ought to worry us, because of how communion is linked with the identity of the school.

The other thing, a more practical consideration, and you may be far more aware of it than I am: there are people who don't want Catholic schools to exist, and they're going to look for the cracks. They're going to look for those wedges, fractures, and get in there. So, any sense that we are *not* in communion, people can take that and exploit that in ways that we would find very problematic.

[...] When it's pertaining to faith, when it's pertaining to morals, when it's pertaining to Catholic identity, alright, that's where the voice of the Bishop has to be given weight and

followed. Obviously, I'm not going to have an opinion on bussing, or transportation, or the hiring of some kind of firm to take out the garbage, these kinds of things. If I did, you should call me out, right? So, I think we need to be careful about what, actually, we're talking about, and how it impinges upon the identity of the school and the mission of the school."

3. Is it fair to assume bishops will be consistent in interpretation and application (of Catholic faith, morals, identity, etc)?

"I think it's fair to expect it; I'm not always sure it's fair to assume. Sometimes, Bishops, we'll joke among ourselves, it's like we can't agree on the color of an orange or something, right? And when that happens, that is just not helpful, at all, obviously. But there, I think, we need to make other distinctions between, on the one hand the communion of the Bishops on matters of faith, morals, and Church teaching generally, and, on the other, matters of prudential judgment: how the teaching of the Church gets applied in a particular situation. So, the circumstances might lead a Bishop to go in a particular way *in this instance*...even though he is *absolutely* in communion – as he *must* be – with the Bishops and the Pope on matters of faith and morals.

I have to say, in Alberta and Northwest Territories, we work at this. Just so you know, we meet twice a year in-person for two and a half days, and then – just had a chance this morning – we meet once a month over Zoom, just to make sure that we're in constant dialogue...to try to catch issues early, too, and say "where are we on that? what do we think about this" and so on.

One of the questions we had this morning was: how are we going to be dealing with [the] return to the distribution of Holy Communion under the Precious Blood...? Is that going to happen? Is it not? Might that happen this way in your diocese, might it be another way in a different diocese, and so on. So you can see how there might be some practical dimensions where, because of local circumstances, we might take different approaches. Then people say, 'oh, the Bishops aren't united, they're not united'...We are united on fundamental Eucharistic teaching, but within the different spread/range of options available to the Bishops – I mean, legitimate options – we might take different tracks."

4. Are the Bishops being intentional about the parish-home-school connection that is so critical to the Catholic schools (i.e. when contemplating priest assignments to parishes connected with schools, etc)?

"[Priest assignments] are very much a localized matter. One of the most important things that a Bishop does is appoint pastors for his people. What we are finding across Canada is that we have become so dependent on priests from other countries, who come with their own expectations and their own experiences of the relationship between a parish priest and his school and so on, which often is very different from their experience here. It's a big, steep learning curve. So, given all that, sometimes, we ourselves, we do our best to get to know the priest before we give him a serious responsibility, but even then, you get to know the priest as

he's living into the reality himself, and over time you realize this wasn't perhaps the best assignment.

So, you don't always have the sufficiency of numbers, to begin with, and then you have a certain skill set at your disposal...now, we could probably do a whole lot better job of working with the receiving community – whether that's the parish, whether that's the school – and say, “here's Father so-and-so, here's his background, here's what you need to know, how can you help welcome him,” these sorts of things.”

5. What should/shouldn't Catholic schools be doing during Pride Month?

“I guess the first thing I would want to say is that it's really critical that we work together in lockstep on this, and offer consistent messaging – consistent, not just that we're saying the same thing, but consistent with our Catholic doctrine; particularly, in this case, our Catholic anthropology: what it means to be a human being.

At the heart of all of this debate and questioning, it seems to me, is the fundamental question of how we love the student. And that's a non-negotiable. Any student that we have in our care must experience welcome, must experience love, because we're people of the Gospel and Jesus died for everyone. And so everyone must – especially in the Catholic school – must feel valued, loved, etc. So that's a fundamental principle that I'm sure we share across the board.

But again, there's a distinction that has to be made between goal and method. We all want to love and honor the student. *How* we do that – that's the methodological question. As Catholics, especially in a Catholic school system that insists upon ‘permeation’, our method must be fully permeated with who we are as Catholic people. One of the difficulties that I often observe in this particular issue as it plays out in our society is that people fail to make that distinction. So, the goal becomes identified with the method. When goal and method are conflated in this way, it often results in this reasoning: we want to love the student who has same-sex attraction, therefore that means we *must* display the Pride flag.

But I think we need to be very, very clear – and anybody that is operating in the Edmonton Archdiocese has heard me say this around our educational tables many times – Pride symbols do not belong in a Catholic school, full stop; we cannot compromise on that.

So, this means we need to be very attentive to ‘what are the ways in which we as Catholics can welcome, surround, and love that particular student, or those particular students. We have our own signs, we have our own symbols. And nothing says love and inclusion and value more than the Cross, which we have on the walls of every classroom, or should, right? And to introduce some other sign is to say that the Cross is insufficient. We cannot be saying that.

We also have the Sacred Heart, which, by the way, is celebrated in June. The Sacred Heart! What's going to say ‘love’ more effectively than that?

I think, too, and again, we just have to be clear on what all these things mean. This goes back to the anthropology question. So, the Pride symbol, as I understand it, symbolizes the whole Pride ‘movement’ that has been developing over decades, and it's come to mean a whole range of things that are counter to our Catholic teaching on what it means to be a human being.

Specifically counter to our teaching on human sexuality, gender, and so on. It's now come to represent not just loving the individual, but also the moral equivalence of gay sex with the sexual act, open to life, within marriage; gay "marriage"; now the whole transgenderism movement, and gender ideology. That's all kind of subsumed in this flag, which itself is taking on different shapes in order to try and bring all of that in. The point is: all of it is directly counter to Catholic anthropology, so we cannot use what, in effect, is an anti-Catholic symbol in a Catholic school. It doesn't make sense. We have our signs, we have our own methods, so we do what we do. I just think we need to be crystal clear on all that."

6. People can overreact to the rainbow symbol (parents upset about rainbow decorations on St. Patrick's Day); should we give a hard no, or is a more nuanced message better?

"There's a couple things there. So, there's the Pride flag, which is the rainbow colours, and there's the rainbow. Now, the rainbow is a Judeo-Christian symbol which has been taken over by this. Now, I would love to find a way, someday, in which to reclaim that symbol for what it is. That might take us a little while, precisely because of what you said: when people see the colours they're going to associate it with Pride and – I think, rightly – raise questions; what's this doing in a Catholic school?

On the 'hard no': I think it's a question of how you say it. More and more I'm convinced that at the level of Catholic leadership we have to be prepared to give a hard no when that must be our answer. But *how* you do it is very important. So, if you're with a group of kids, right, and they are struggling with all these issues, and you just come in and you say 'no, it's not going to happen, see ya later' and close the door, that is not helpful. But how do you say that hard no? Still say it, but in a way that they can receive it, they can hear it, they can still know, at the same time, that the 'no' flows from a prior 'yes' – a 'yes' to them, and to their beauty, but also a 'yes' to Jesus.

Which makes me raise another point: do we trust Jesus when he speaks of what it is to be a human being? Jesus is the Word of God through whom all things were created, including man and woman. He is the Word of God incarnate, and therefore the definitive interpreter of what God has done. And Jesus, as Word incarnate...when they were asking questions about divorce – remember that? – he took humanity back to the beginning: "In the beginning God made them male and female..." So, this is God's desire for us. And, as we hear that, do we trust Jesus? And if we're going in a different direction, in effect we're saying: "You know what? We don't. We trust another answer." Fundamentally, this keeps coming back again, and again, and again: do we trust Revelation as it has been given in Jesus Christ? That's going to lead us, folks, to some hard no's. It's going to lead us to drawing lines in the sand.

But again, what we do and how we do it – so what's the wording that we need so people can hear and receive it? The reception of Revelation, of the Gospel, of the teaching of the Church, is becoming more and more of a challenge today, because people are coming from different starting points than, for example, mine was, growing up in a Catholic house, where you kind of absorb the Catholic ethos and what it is to be Catholic. Many people today, students and teachers alike, don't have that. They've got a different frame of reference, and they're going to interpret whatever we say through their frame of reference; a frame of reference that identifies a

certain aspect of my identity with the whole of my identity, for example. So my orientation becomes *me*. And if you raise a question about my orientation and how I live my life out of that, you're actually challenging all of *me*. Which we're not, but that becomes the interpretation within a certain frame of reference. So, it's a challenge. But as we try to work our way through all of this it's especially incumbent upon Bishops and trustees, together, to understand where the lines need to be drawn. And we're going to be forced, it seems to me, because of pressure both internal and external, to be prepared to name those lines and be prepared to draw them. That's part and parcel of who we are."

7. How should we be using media in Catholic schools?

You've got very sophisticated security systems in your buildings to protect the kids, so that we do not allow in anyone who means harm. But when it comes to voices, messages, and so on, we need also to ask: what are letting in? What are we letting in through speakers that we might invite into our schools? What are we letting in through, for example, conversations in the staffroom? What are we letting in through videos? We can't put ourselves in the position of trying to stop and control everything our kids are exposed to, with their vulnerability to social media - [the problem] is so vast - but we need to do our part by effective monitoring of what comes into the school.

So, I would suggest the first thing we need to be clear on, and strong on, is make sure that our curriculum is consistent with what we believe; make sure our resources in support of the curriculum are consistent with what we believe; make sure teachers teach the curriculum, use only approved resources, and then be very, very attentive to what we let into the classroom through these other vehicles."

8. Given that our schools are publicly-funded, how should we navigate provincial legislation like the Human Rights Acts, etc, that mandate the affirmation of gender identities, other religious beliefs, marital status, etc, that are contrary to our own faith?

Let me just take a 36,000 foot view on this one... It seems to me there are three things where trustees especially – I'm talking about a group of trustees – need to be really, really clear on their accountability. One is to the Education Act, the other is to the Constitution of the country, and the third is to Canon Law. I've talked to a lot of trustees, obviously, and there is a genuine desire to understand Canon Law better, the role of the Bishop better, everything else. So that's great.

Where I'm not always convinced is where – and correct me if I'm wrong, please – is where...do trustees understand their authority, their role, vis-a-vis the Constitution? What I mean is this. In the Constitution – number 93 is the relevant section – it says that 'no provincial law can negatively impact the denominational rights of Catholic schools'. The wording's probably a bit different, but that's the heart of it. And what I've observed a couple of times is that, when a provincial government introduces legislation that, in fact, would seek to push us, as Catholic schools, to do what is actually detrimental to our Catholic identity, what I'll often hear is

‘well, it’s the law now, and we have to do it’. What I’m waiting to hear is, ‘this law is actually, when you look at it, contrary to the Constitution.’ And rather than ‘we have to follow this’, we should be asking ‘why aren’t we fighting this’? Why aren’t we pushing back?

So, whether it’s human rights legislation, whether it’s other legislation pertaining to education, I think the first thing we need to be prepared to say is: does this push us in a direction that takes us to be other than who we are? And if it does, we push back and we fight. Otherwise our rights will just keep getting chipped away, and chipped away, and chipped away, and all of a sudden we’re no different from anybody else.

As I understand the history of jurisprudence, including cases taken over the years as high as the Supreme Court, the courts have been very clear in upholding Catholic school denominational rights. Anytime we’ve fought, school rights have been upheld – provided that we’re Catholic, provided that we’re different. The understanding being, ‘if you really are indistinguishable from a public system, why would we be upholding your rights?’

So, I think...the broader 36,000 foot view answer to that question has to provide the context and background, so when we get into the weeds of human rights or other legislation, we are prepared to take a very close look at the issue and ask ‘can we accept it and still be who we are?’ or ‘do we need to push back?’”

9. Are there pieces of public policy and laws that we should *not* attempt to reconcile with our existence as Catholic organizations, and instead constructively confront them?

“Yep. And not be afraid to do so.”

10. What potential implications do you believe a more confrontational approach may have on the commitment within the political environment to Catholic education?

“Oh, I think you’d find that it would test it, depending on who you’re talking to, right? I think we already know that in the – again, you’re closer to this than I am, but I hear anecdotally – that in the bureaucracy within the Ministry of Education there are already people who want to see us go away. For sure. At the end of the day, though, I think that our responsibility is to the students, to the parents who chose the Catholic education, and to the Church, to be who we say we are. And if [at] times that means pushing back, then we push back.

Now, that also means making sure that – and again, you’re more involved in this than I am – that we’re establishing those good relationships with our partners in the Ministry of Education, or public schools, so we can have those open and honest conversations, and that people can hear directly from us – from you, from me – exactly what we mean and don’t mean, rather than have them interpret what they think we mean via the media conduits or others sources. [...]

You probably have your finger on the pulse – the legislative pulse – more than I do. Here’s what’s coming, here’s what’s worrying us. Just, early on, pick up the phone, say ‘we’re worried about this, how might this work’? We’ve got a lot of smart people in the Catholic community, whether it’s trustees’ or the superintendents’ Association, whether it’s just our

parishioners out there. A lot of people. Bring these minds together. What's the issue, what isn't the issue, what are we going to do about it. Bring me in as appropriate – sometimes it's not appropriate to bring the Bishop in, and sometimes it is. Have a sit down with the Premier, or someone, whatever that may be. Just have those good open channels of communication.

11. How are demographic trends in Canada going to impact Catholic education going forward, and how should we adapt to those trends?

“Well, I think we probably already have some early indicators of how we're going to deal with it. So, in the city, where the Catholic population is – right now – strong enough that you can have mostly Catholic youth in Catholic schools...that's likely to become more and more of a challenge, as you say, with the demographic trends and so on. But it's already a reality in the rural communities, where you don't have 'all Catholics' among the students in the schools. So there's where I think it would be good to have a dialogue among ourselves and say 'what are you doing in this instance to make sure that this still is *authentically* Catholic education that we are delivering when the whole 'student population is not Catholic'...?' I think there's already a lot of learning that's been happening in the province on that and what does that suggest to us about what we might need to do better...differently...in order to be prepared for these other trends that are coming at us.”

12. Pronouns: can Catholic schools allow staff and students to change their pronouns or indicate them in a manner that would imply gender fluidity (i.e. in their email signature)?

“I had a parent speak to me – and this happened a few years ago in a Catholic school – where her eight year-old daughter was encouraged by the teacher in a Catholic school, saying you've got to decide whether you are a boy or girl or not. Now, you don't do that in *any* school, as far as I'm concerned, least of all Catholic, and that teacher should have been fired, if that's true. So, yes, there is the very important consideration of dealing with minors. I think that's a great point you raise: you don't [allow minors to choose their gender].

But, let's also keep in mind generally what we're talking about here - this question of pronouns is linked with what's called 'gender ideology'. This is diametrically opposed to Catholic anthropology. Pope Francis – I don't know if you've been following him – he is death on this, and he keeps bringing it up, again and again and again, even to the point of saying one time that gender ideology is one of the clearest expressions of the work of the evil one right now. So, that's pretty serious stuff.

Gender ideology...separates the concept of gender from biological sex. Gender ideology says that the body is inconsequential; it's entirely malleable such that I can change it, I can reshape it, I can do whatever I want to support my desires. Gender ideology reduces the human being to mind and spirit, and the body is inconsequential. Catholic anthropology speaks of the organic, inseparable unity of body and soul. It's who we are. And so there are two sexes, or two genders: male and female. That's it. There's not this range of 50-plus genders that Facebook is

going to claim that there are. Gender has now become something of a definition that has no boundaries. This is not Catholic.

Pronouns are related to that. So, if I'm deciding to designate my pronoun for clarity at the end of a signature, what that says is that I am somehow able to decide for myself, determine for myself, what my gender is, quite apart from my bodily reality. That's not Catholic. So, email signatures in no way should have pronouns after them in brackets, because that is just one expression of the gender ideology which is really taking hold in so many areas.

I hope I'm not offending or hurting anybody when I say these things. But I think we just need to be really clear what fits in a Catholic school system and what doesn't, and gender ideology *doesn't*."

13. Is a 'growth mindset' (i.e. more and more schools, more students, etc) at odds with authentic Catholicity in our schools?

"You know, my mind goes back to Pope Benedict XVI – long before he was Pope – and he could see the way that a lot of these trends were unfolding. And he could foresee the Catholic Church actually getting smaller and smaller and smaller along the line of authenticity. Because...to your [earlier] point... the number of Catholics keeps diminishing, diminishing... it could be people just voting with their feet and saying: 'You know what? This isn't me. I can't see myself as a...'. Well, okay, but this remains what the Church is. This remains who we are. The pressures *not* to be Christian today are so enormous and very persuasive, right? Very persuasive. So we ought not to be surprised to see people leave.

Within the school system, we need to be attentive to these trends, especially when they place before us the need to choose between size and authenticity. Clearly authenticity has to win the day, otherwise we're dealing with false advertising, right? So, it's an interesting dynamic we're going to have to deal with."

14. How should Catholic school divisions go about shared facility arrangements?

"Well, all I can do is share an example. This was Red Deer...the school at Sylvan Lake being contemplated. So, what they did, they got in touch with me, and I said 'put out on paper for me what exactly you're dealing with, how in this reality are you going to make sure that the fundamental principles that we've hammered out at the ACSTA level for years are going to be honored, and just spell it all out for me, and compare that to what you've done in similar situations. And so, we entered into a dialogue, and...I checked with some of the other Bishops, and I said: yeah, I think I can sign off on that.

I think – especially in our rural areas, where there's such different pressures, right? We want to get a Catholic school...funding for it...it's got to be some sort of partnership with the public... There's ways to do it, we're learning. I think we've been learning, living into this answer for a few years. There has to be some clear separations, that's for sure, but there's ways to do it.

So I think the key thing is dialogue with the Bishop, dialogue with the trustees...see if we can work it."

15. The government likes these kinds of facility-sharing partnerships, but do these facility partnerships sometimes work like a 'Trojan horse' (i.e. after the agreement is implemented then Crucifixes or Catholic liturgy space are found to be offensive, discriminatory, etc)?

"I think very often our default is to presume good will. Good will may not be there. And some may use a shared facility as a way in, in getting rid of a Catholic school. And when we're aware of that then we need to dig in our heels and say 'sorry'."