

8421 – 101 Avenue  
Edmonton, AB T6A 0L1  
(780) 469-1010 (780) 465-3003 fax

January 2007



## **A Burning and Shining Lamp:** **The Role of the Teacher in the Catholic School**

**Second in a series of pastoral letters from the  
Bishops of Alberta on Catholic Education**

*“There is another who testifies on my behalf, and I know that testimony to me is true. You sent messengers to John, and he testified to the truth... He was a burning and shining lamp, and you were willing to rejoice for a while in his light.” John 5:32-33,35*

In the fifth chapter of John’s gospel, Jesus speaks of his authority as directly emanating from the Father, and explains that he does not “testify on his own behalf” but has others, notably John the Baptist, who already proclaims the Good News of the kingdom. And who is this “burning and shining lamp?” As he is described in the Gospels, the seemingly wild and disheveled John is not what one would expect as the lamp for Christ. Yet, out of the wilderness, John is called to preach and to point to the Way.

Such is the calling of the Catholic school, and such is the vocation of teachers in a Catholic school. We recognize that teachers encounter many challenges in the student population such as indifference to spiritual values, the lack of practice of the faith, and the lack of religious and moral formation. We, the bishops of Alberta, applaud the essential work that they do to nourish the faith life of their students who are on their journey with the Lord, and who often are much in need of extensive faith formation. For the teachers in our Catholic schools in Alberta, the profession to which they have been called by our Lord may at times seem overwhelming. It is important for us to reflect on this critical vocation of teaching in a Catholic school. We must also keep in mind that our teachers, like all of us, are on a journey of faith, and they must be allowed every opportunity to develop and be formed into “burning and shining lamps” for Christ.

The “fuel” for these lamps can be found in a life of prayer and Christian discipleship, strengthened by the sacraments and guided by the Word of God and by the living faith expressed in our Church’s documents, pastoral letters, and texts on the role of the Catholic teacher. The bishops of Alberta recognize the following as essential:

***The teacher in the Catholic school is a witness for Christ and his Church.***

First and foremost, all teachers in our Catholic schools must be active and articulate witnesses to the One for whom Catholic schools exist – Jesus Christ. This is not the calling of a select group of men and women who provide religious instruction and formation to students. The Church recognizes that all teachers are witnesses to Christ and, therefore, are all “religion” teachers. It is of utmost importance then, that our school boards select Catholic teachers who are best suited to be role models and mentors for our Catholic students- this is vital for the life of a Catholic school.

In some circumstances, it may be necessary to hire teachers to teach in a Catholic school who are not of the Catholic faith. We welcome the expertise and commitment of these teachers, provided that they have an awareness of and respect for the principles, philosophy, and spirit of Catholic education. We would expect that they too would be ambassadors for Christ, but they should not be put into a catechetical role in the school in which they provide direct religious instruction.

***The teacher in the Catholic school knows Christ and his Church***

As a witness for Christ and his Church, the teacher in the Catholic school must be adequately trained for the mission. Catholic school boards in Alberta can help to ensure their teachers have this training through careful hiring practices. At the absolute minimum, teachers hired by Catholic school boards should have two courses in Catholic theology or Catholic religious education. Every Catholic school board should have in place a teacher formation program, either as an internal process, or through the support of graduate programs such as those offered by St. Mary’s University College, St. Joseph’s College, or Newman Theological College. While a solid foundation in theology is important, a complete formation program will involve prayer, service, and participation in the sacraments, especially the Eucharist. This kind of formation will bring teaching staffs into a deeper relationship with Christ, and by their witness, will show students that faith is about knowing Christ, not knowing about Him.

***The teacher in the Catholic school is a model of faith in the Trinity***

The mystery of the Holy Trinity of God is the example *par excellence* of community. Teachers in our schools reflect the model of love and community that is found in the Father, Son and Spirit. They reflect the community of the Trinity in their partnerships with the parents and guardians of their students. Contact with parents should not be restricted to formal interviews focused on academic matters. Frequent and authentic dialogue with parents “will offer to many families the assistance they need in order to

educate their own children properly; and thus fulfill the ‘irreplaceable and inalienable’ function that is theirs. (*Lay Catholics in Schools*; 34)

The teachers help the school itself become a reflection of Trinitarian love and community. Conduct is always much more important than speech. The deeper the involvement that each teacher has in life of the school, the more students will recognize the face of Christ. Teachers must be seen as advocates for justice, both in the world and in the school hallway. They should pray with their students and with their fellow teachers frequently, throughout the day. They should break open the Word of God, and reflect on the Scriptures as a community.

Teachers reflect the communal love of the Trinity in their participation in the Sunday Eucharist at their local parish. This comes not out of external duty or obligation, nor does it come from a sense of guilt. Active participation in Sunday liturgy is the natural outpouring of service and the call of the Eucharistic banquet – it is participation in the life of the Trinity and a foretaste of the Kingdom.

***The teacher in the Catholic school is an advocate for social justice.***

If our Catholic schools are to be places where transformation of the culture will be nourished, teachers will be important motivators of this mission – “to form men and women who will be ready to take their place in society, preparing them in such a way that they will make the kind of social commitment which will enable them to work for the improvement of social structures, making these structures more conformed to the principles of the Gospel.” (*Lay Catholics in Schools*, 19) Every program of study in our current curriculum can be a tool for transforming the culture and forming our young people into compassionate human beings as well as critical thinkers.

***The teacher in the Catholic school is supported by the faith community.***

To be as John the Baptist – a “burning and shining lamp” is a beautiful and challenging call to the teacher in the Catholic school. The lamp can be easily extinguished, however, by discouragement, exhaustion, or a perceived lack of support. We must make every effort as a Church to care for, nurture, and celebrate our teachers. The Catholic parent community has a right to seek the best education for their children; they also have the responsibility to work with teachers in an atmosphere of mutual trust and shared vision. Because our parishes are the centers of the faith life of the community, parish priests, catechetical leaders and, indeed, all members of the parish have a responsibility to work in partnership with our Catholic schools. This partnership will not only deepen the faith life of the children in parish, but will be an outreach to the families who have distanced themselves from the Church for whatever reason. Key to this partnership will be the parish support of the teachers.

We, the bishops of Alberta, call upon the teachers in the Catholic schools of Alberta to be “burning and shining lights”- witnesses for Christ, instructors for the Church, models of faith in the Trinity, and advocates for social justice. We call upon all the faithful to celebrate and support them in their vital ministry and mission.

Most Reverend Thomas Collins  
Archdiocesan Administrator  
Archdiocese of Edmonton

Most Reverend Frederick Henry  
Bishop of Calgary

Reverend Gerard Pettipas CSsR  
Archbishop-Elect of Grouard-McLennan

Very Reverend William Hupalo  
Eparchy Administrator  
Eparchy of Edmonton

Most Reverend Denis Croteau  
Bishop of Mackenzie-Fort Smith

Most Reverend Luc Bouchard  
Bishop of St. Paul