

Pope Calls For “Intellectual Charity” Among Educators

by Susan Brinkmann, OCDS

Staff Writer

(April 18, 2008) In an address to more than 200 Catholic educators, Pope Benedict XVI said authentic Catholic education should lead to an encounter with Jesus and any failure to do so leads Catholic institutions to fall short of their Catholic identity.

“First and foremost every Catholic educational institution is a place to encounter the living God who in Jesus Christ reveals his transforming love and truth,” the Pope said during the address, which was held April 17 at the Catholic University of America on April 17.

“A university or school's Catholic identity is not simply a question of the number of Catholic students,” he said.

“It is a question of conviction - do we really believe that only in the mystery of the Word made flesh does the mystery of man truly become clear? Are we ready to commit our entire self - intellect and will, mind and heart - to God? Do we accept the truth Christ reveals? Is the faith tangible in our universities and schools? Is it given fervent expression liturgically, sacramentally, through prayer, acts of charity, a concern for justice, and respect for God's creation?”

Only in this way “do we really bear witness to the meaning of who we are and what we uphold,” the Pope said.

The particular responsibility, for every Catholic educator, “is to evoke among the young the desire for the act of faith, encouraging them to commit themselves to the ecclesial life that follows from this belief,” the Pope instructed.

He also spoke about academic freedom, saying that academic freedom is not true freedom if it becomes disconnected from the truth. “Academic freedom, and indeed, freedom in general is often thought of as an ‘opting out’,” the Pope said. Instead, freedom should be thought of as “an ‘opting in’ - a participation in Being itself,” the Pope said. “Hence authentic freedom can never be attained by turning away from God.”

In a society where secularist ideology drives a wedge between truth and faith, and dismisses any argument not based on material evidence, “the goals of education are inevitably curtailed,” he said. Without any reference to transcendent truth, a slow “lowering of standards occurs,” he explained.

“We observe today a timidity in the face of the category of the good and an aimless pursuit of novelty parading as the realization of freedom. We witness an assumption that every experience is of equal worth and a reluctance to admit imperfection and mistakes. And particularly disturbing, is the reduction of the precious and delicate area of education in sexuality to management of 'risk', bereft of any reference to the beauty of conjugal love.”

Christian educators should respond to this environment with “intellectual charity,” he said.

Being intellectually charitable means guiding “the young towards the deep satisfaction of exercising freedom in relation to truth, and it strives to articulate the relationship between faith and all aspects of family and civic life. Once their passion for the fullness and unity of truth has been awakened, young people will surely relish the discovery that the question of what they can know opens up the vast adventure of what they ought to do,” he said.

The Holy Father also spoke about the debate over religious freedom that has been raging over the last few decades. Academic freedom calls on educators “to search for the truth wherever careful analysis of evidence leads you,” he explained.

Nevertheless, “any appeal to the principle of academic freedom in order to justify positions that contradict the faith and the teaching of the Church would obstruct or even betray the university's identity and mission; a mission at the heart of the Church's *munus docendi* and not somehow autonomous or independent of it,” he said.

Catholic institutions must fulfill their duty and privilege of ensuring that students receive instruction in Catholic doctrine and practice. “This requires that public witness to the way of Christ ...both inside and outside the classroom. Divergence from this vision weakens Catholic identity and, far from advancing freedom, inevitably leads to confusion, whether moral, intellectual or spiritual,” he said.

Patrick Reilly, President of The Cardinal Newman Society, said the Pope’s address offered a clear and profound articulation of Catholic education in the 21st century.

“Pope Benedict called Catholic colleges to educate the whole person, heart, mind and soul, by seeking truth in the light of faith and reason,” he said.

“While there is much to reflect on in Pope Benedict’s speech, those concerned with the crisis in Catholic higher education were provided with two critical signposts on the roadmap for renewal: Catholic colleges must be unwavering in their commitment to Catholic teachings in everything they do, from the classroom to the dorm room; and Academic freedom at a Catholic college must be informed and tempered by the Catholic faith and the teachings of the Church.

“The renewal of Catholic higher education is well underway, and when its history is written, Pope Benedict’s speech today may well be remembered as the tipping point when Catholic colleges finally and irrevocably recommitted themselves to the critical task of authentic Catholic education.”

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