

Opening Remarks – 2012 CEAP National Convention
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Good afternoon to all the representatives of the CEAP member-schools attending this opening of the 2012 CEAP National Convention today. Speaking before all of you is a daunting task, as I aim to reach out to each and every one of you to bring the message of this convention during this unholy hour. I see a rich diversity present in the room today. I see wide-opened eyes as well as sleepy ones. I also see the commonality that we all possess as Christians and Catholics – first and foremost – and as educators next – hence our collective name as Catholic Educators.

In the next few minutes, I will speak to you about being Catholic Educators in the light of this year's convention theme of "Remember with Gratitude, Renew with Fervour" which rides on the CBCP's Pastoral Letter on the occasion of the 400 years of Catholic education in the Philippines. Definitely, these phrases are so rich in meaning that they become inextricably intertwined, and one cannot be taken without linking it to the other.

Allow me to bring to your attention two symbols that will explain how these phrases are interrelated, the two popular symbols used to represent the Spanish conquest of these islands-- the cross and the sword. Oftentimes, these symbols have been given negative interpretations, with the sword representing the forced subjugation of the local island dwellers through the use of military might; and the cross as the symbol of a religion that

was likewise imposed on those who were forced to embrace it. Today, you are invited to see with fresh eyes what these two symbols represent.

THE CROSS OF OUR FAITH. OUR FAITH IN THE CROSS.

The Pastoral Letter exhorts us to remember with gratitude the pioneering missionaries who braved the high seas and endured all kinds of challenges to bring the Word of Christ to this archipelago, and deeper gratitude to those who established educational institutions as part of the Catholic Church's mission of evangelization. Together with our Bishops, we recognize and express our deep gratitude to the religious orders and congregations of women and men who, through the centuries, have contributed to the evangelical and educational growth of our country. This brief timeline will show how the religious congregations gained a foothold, and eventually, prominence in Catholic education, in many different parts of the Philippines spanning over 400 years. In 1565 the Augustinian missionaries opened a primary school in Cebu followed by the Franciscan order in 1578. The Society of Jesus established College de San Ignacio in Intramuros in 1596 and Colegio de San Ildefonso in Cebu in 1598. The year 1611 saw the establishment of UST by the Dominican order, and later in 1632, they opened Colegio de San Juan de Letran in Intramuros. Colegio de Santa Isabel was founded in 1632 in Manila, which was later on taken over by the Daughters of Charity of St Vincent de Paul in 1862. Upon their return in 1859, the Jesuit order opened Escuela Municipal de Manila. From 1862 to 1868, the Vincentian Fathers and the Daughters of Charity founded conciliar seminaries and schools for girls and a normal school for women, respectively. At the turn of the 20th century, the Sisters of St. Paul de Chartres founded

the first Paulinian school in Dumaguete City in 1904, while the Benedictine nuns from Tutzing, Germany established St. Scholastica's College in Manila in 1906. In 1911, the Brothers of the Christian Schools opened the first La Salle school in Paco.

As Manila was rising from the ashes of the Second World War, 1941 was the year the CEAP was born upon the inspiration of Archbishop Michael J. O'Doherty and which had as its first President, Msgr. Jose Jovellanos.

Today, we likewise extend our sincerest gratitude to all those who served the CEAP over the past 71 years. As a sign of our appreciation and recognition to their contribution to Catholic education, we have invited the former members of the CEAP Board and the Executive Directors who likewise served unselfishly in the past, to attend the National Convention's opening ceremonies. I would like to acknowledge their presence here today. (Stand) I wish to thank in a special way Honorable Bro. Armin Luistro, the Secretary of the Department of Education who has joined us despite his busy schedule. Let us give them all a rousing applause.

Today, Catholic education in the Philippines is a social force that contributes to the formation of persons and of social and economic development. Some of Catholic education's key contributions and accomplishments toward social development and nation-building are:

- 1. Relying mainly on their own resources and efforts in providing schools in many remote towns and barrios which the government couldn't reach, the government

was spared from incurring additional financial burdens to educate the people, thanks to the religious congregations, dioceses and the Catholic Church

- 2. Promoted studies and researches that contribute to the advancement of society are pursued at the expense of many Catholic and diocesan schools
- 3. Catholic schools have been major contributors to the professional sector of the country which serve not only Catholics but also other peoples of faith. Then there are the marginalized in society that benefitted from Catholic education – the handicapped, the out-of-school youth, the cultural minorities and many more who, through their Catholic education, have joined mainstream society as productive citizens
- 4. In the context of the Church, the Catholic schools continue to provide a stable and systematic evangelization, and many of its lay ministers provide leadership in their parishes and communities.
- 5. The Catholic schools have also been custodians and promoters of music, arts and culture; they have been depositories of our rich heritage.
- 6. The Catholic schools have been a generous resource in times of calamities and tragedies.

Catholic education, undoubtedly, is a driving force in nation building. Quoting the Pastoral Letter with the question, *“What will the country be without Catholic schools?”*, this question makes us wonder how it could have been if there were no Catholic schools that shaped and inspired the minds and hearts of millions of Filipinos throughout the centuries. We can only guess. The recent tragedy involving the great flooding of Metro Manila and its underlying provinces has once again proven the indomitable spirit of the

Filipino in lending a helping hand to those in need, even if they themselves needed help. Such a remarkable trait could be traced to the values that were inculcated in the hearts of the Filipino.

Like our predecessors who encountered many myriad challenges in their time as they laid the groundwork for Catholic education to flourish and galvanize Philippine society, we too have our own share of challenges today.

First among these challenges is the general perception that Catholic schools are elitist and only serve the wealthy. The truth is that about 900 out of CEAP's 1,345 member-schools are small, struggling mission schools, some of which are found in the far-flung areas of the country.

The second challenge is the financial viability of the Catholic schools as they see their enrollment dwindle and their teachers migrating to the public school system for higher salary. Although it seems the problem is rooted in economics, the reality is that this challenge is rooted in the shifting values and the negative impact created by increased secularism and pragmatism among the people who do not see Catholic values as relevant to their lives. Instead, many see a Catholic education as a mere passport to a better life because of the higher quality of education these Catholic schools provide.

The third challenge is a growing secular and postmodern mentality and culture that seem to stifle the need for faith and eclipse its relevance to daily life. Thus, value-based

education stands face to face with more technological, scientific and economic considerations.

Pope Benedict recently spoke about the “great educational emergency” as he saw the increasing difficulty in transmitting the basic values of life and correct behavior to the new generations. This challenge involves individuals, families and schools.

As Catholic educators, we need to ask some serious questions about the impact of our educational and evangelical mission in our society, as the Pastoral letter urges us to ask questions, to quote, ***“It is impossible to think of Catholic education as divorced from the Word of God, the Logos. This involves a deep examination of present-day realities in the light of faith. This allows the church to think critically about issues. The Word in prophetic life must criticize and energize.”***

As we know, the dysfunction of our society has a very complex nature, something which cannot be attributed to just a few factors and variables. However, as Catholic educators, we need to be critical and to ask ourselves where we have succeeded, and where we need to improve on in teaching Christian values, and why there is a gap between learning the values we teach our students while in school and with their behavior when they pursue their careers.

FAITH is at the center of Catholic education. This faith holds the promise that our God is here and present, and we are all called to sanctity every second of our lives. As we

journey towards our own sanctity, we likewise hold the hands of our students as they journey toward their own sanctity.

Next year has been proclaimed by Pope Benedict XVI as the Year of Faith, and the second Filipino saint, the catechist Pedro Calungsod, will be canonized this October. The timeliness of all these events, the theme of this convention, and the topics we are discussing during these next few days are not happening by accident, but rather a synchronous experience, which we can all reflect on.

THE SWORD – OUR RENEWED FERVOUR AS EDUCATORS

In the Pastoral Letter from the CBCP on the occasion of 400 years of Catholic education in the Philippines, our bishops urge us to renew and reinvigorate our sense of mission in the midst of the many challenges we all face as Catholic educators. Catholic schools should not merely be places of intellectual growth but more importantly of the transformation or inner conversion of persons.

We must also seek new, creative and effective ways to transmit the faith in a society that is digitized, pluralistic, secular, postmodern and globalized.

We have to continue forming consciences, in teaching social justice and championing social transformation.

We are encouraged to engage in social, scientific and technological research; to help discover the root causes of contemporary problems especially those that concern the dignity of human life, promotion of justice for all, and the protection of nature. (*cf. PCP II, Art. # 107*)

Finally, Catholic schools are encouraged be at the forefront of Educational Reform, i.e., to work in partnership with government and other sectors so that we may contribute to genuine reform in the country such as K-12 and the Typology- and Outcomes- based Quality Assurance Framework.

While challenges are usually deemed as obstacles in achieving goals, these can also be seen as stepping-stones toward growth and progress. Challenges are like pieces in a puzzle begging to be part of the solution.

We know these challenges we face today. However, more than the economic, social, cultural and spiritual challenges mentioned earlier, the biggest challenge we face today is our own personal conversion and the transformation of our institutions as well.

Change is always difficult for it is not easy to come out of our comfort zones where we oftentimes feel safest and most secure. With the willingness to change, we will need the strength of the sword of fervor in renewing our institutions and ourselves. While this sword of change carries the two bladed sides of fervor and renewal, the challenge to Catholic education also has two edges – of being prophetic and transformative.

The Pastoral Letter points out, that “the Word in prophetic life must criticize and energize.” Oftentimes, we encounter those who question our faith, our thinking, our behavior, our organization. Are we threatened by these, or do we seize the opportunity to listen and learn from them? Sandra Carroll of the Australian Catholic University wrote *“Christian educators taking up this challenge need a clear vision of the gospel message as it relates to social structures and methods to assist students to analyze, in light of the gospel vision, the social, cultural and political forces that are acting upon us.”* Our role of educators, in other words, is to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world, and we are challenged to be consistent as credible witnesses to the teachings of Jesus among our students.

The next challenge for Catholic education is to be transformative. We all know that transformation is a process that involves the cycle of life and death – the dying to the old so that rebirth into the new is possible. This being the case, Catholic education, to become transformative, must first examine itself and thereafter reinvent itself to be more effective as an instrument in establishing the Kingdom of God on earth. There is a call, therefore, to look at the impact of Catholic education in our society, and measure the results against the vision that we aim to achieve.

There are many ways and means to transform Catholic education. In this day and age of virtual realities, for example, we can look at how technology can bridge the gaps in the learning and doing of our students. While we may not be with them all the time to address their needs for values clarification, we can use our resources to reach out to

them. One resource that we can use is our websites. These websites are very useful in providing relevant and up-to-date information to the academic community as well as to its visitors. These websites can be transformed into bridges of understanding and learning, not just for intellectual pursuits but also for individual spiritual growth and communal transformation. We can engage our Campus Ministries to spearhead this section in our websites and make them interactive and interesting, for the Word of God must rise above the clutter and noise of materialism to reach and touch the hearts and minds of our students. Turn around technology and the social networks, from instruments of excessive materialism and pragmatism, to roaring engines of evangelization and Catholic education in our school communities.

In conclusion, I offer this quote from the Pastoral Letter to serve as our guide in the next few days: *“Let us set forth in faith knowing that in the last analysis success in any venture does not come from trust in our own solutions but from the trust in Jesus who allowed Himself to be called Teacher.”*

A meaningful and prayerful experience awaits us. Thank you and welcome to the 2012 CEAP National Convention.