

Set Forth in Faith: With New Ardour and New Expressions for the Youth
Keynote Address, CEAP National Convention 2013

I come from the Diocese of Kabankalan, one of the four dioceses in the island of Negros. Our diocese is made up of 23 parishes (and 6 chaplaincies) with 19 parochial schools and 3 diocesan colleges. Hence in our diocese we have practically as many parochial schools as we have parishes. This is because before the south western part of Negros became what is now the Diocese of Kabankalan, it was a missionary territory of the Columban Fathers, who arrived in Negros in 1950. Through the years wherever they founded mission stations they also built mission schools. Many of these mission stations and schools are located in far-flung mountain areas. For many years, until the advent of the barangay schools, these mission schools, which eventually became our parochial schools, were the only schools in the area.

The Columban missionaries built schools along side with parish churches because they believe that the best way to evangelize the children and young people is through education. In fact, in their original vision statements, our parochial schools are envisioned and defined as “an evangelizing arm of the diocese.”

Dear friends, the theme of our National Convention this year is “Set Forth in Faith: With New Ardour and New Expressions for the Youth.” It does not take much scrutiny to recognize that the theme is taken within the context of the Year of Faith which we are currently celebrating and its concomitant call for New Evangelization.

Year of Faith

By now we are all aware why Pope Benedict XVI proclaimed the Year of Faith and launched the New Evangelization. Taking the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the opening of the Second Vatican Council and the 20th anniversary of the publication of the Catechism of the Catholic Church, the Pope emeritus wanted to address the grave and destructive effects of postmodernism by calling the Church to a renewal and strengthening of the faith. The secularization of human

institutions and human life itself has resulted in putting God out of man's social and personal life. As a consequence man is deprived of life itself since God is the source of all life. "If today the Church proposes a new Year of Faith and a New Evangelization, it is not to honour an anniversary, but because there is more need of it, even more than there was fifty years ago... Recent decades have seen the advance of a spiritual "desertification". In the Council's time it was already possible from a few tragic pages of history to know what a life or a world without God looked like, but now we see it every day around us." (*Homily of Benedict XVI, Opening of the Holy Year*)

It is in this context that I wish to offer some reflections on education as evangelization. The Synod of Bishops on The New Evangelization for the Transmission of the Christian Faith held in October of last year confirms that education is a "constitutive dimension of evangelization." (*Final List of the Propositions, 27*) It challenges Catholic educational institutions to become "agents of evangelization and not just products of evangelization." (*ibid*)

What is education? What is evangelization? How do they relate?

My simple and elemental understanding of education is that it is a process of drawing out (e-ducere) the best in the child, of bringing into actualization his full potential. Through education, the educator assists the child in his growth and total development as a person, accompanying him in his journey towards full maturity until he is ready to take his place in society and fulfil his mission with competence and responsibility.

From the perspective of faith, evangelization does exactly what education aims to do, but with a specific and clear content. Like the educator, the evangelizer assists the person to attain full human development, aware that such maturity is possible only in Christ, the Perfect Man, in whom all human values find their fulfilment and unity. Thus in our Catholic schools, we educate by evangelizing, and we evangelize by educating. Christ is the foundation and central element in Catholic education.

The theme of our convention, “Set Forth in Faith: With New Ardour and New Expressions for the Youth,” is actually a re-phrasing of the definition of New Evangelization, given by Pope John Paul II.

New Evangelization

What is New Evangelization? To help us understand what New Evangelization is, I make use of the documents of the recent Synod of Bishops, particularly the Message and the Final List of the Propositions which Synod Fathers wrote at the end of the Synod.

Their Message opens with the icon of Jesus and the Samaritan woman at the well. This story taken from the gospel of John articulates the essential elements and the basic dynamics of New Evangelization.

New Evangelization starts from our reality, our human condition. No different from the Samaritan woman, we too carry our own empty buckets, “with the hope of finding the fulfillment of the heart’s most profound desire, that which alone could give full meaning to life.” (*Message of the XIII Synod of Bishops, 1*)

In face of this human reality, the Church responds accordingly. “Like Jesus at the well of Sychar, the Church also feels the need to sit beside today’s men and women. She wants to render the Lord present in their lives so that they can encounter him because his Spirit alone is the water that gives true and eternal life.” (*ibid*)

Jesus engages the woman in a conversation that leads her to confront herself. “Only Jesus can read the depths of our heart and reveal the truth about ourselves.” (*ibid*) In doing so, Jesus enables her to recognize him, “He told me everything I have done. Could he possibly be the Messiah?” (*Jn 4:29*) Knowledge of our real self leads us to the knowledge of God. St. Augustine prayed, “Noverim me, noverim te.” Lord, let me know myself that I may know you.

As soon as the woman recognizes Jesus, she introduces him to the whole village. The evangelized now becomes an evangelizer.

New Evangelization is the proclamation of Christ to man in the context of his present condition, mindful of the many social, cultural, economic, civil and religious changes that affect him. “It is not a matter of starting again, but of entering into the long path of proclaiming the Gospel with the apostolic courage of Paul who would go so far as to say “Woe to me if I do not preach the Gospel!”” (*Message, 2*) The content of our proclamation remains the same – Christ, who is the same yesterday, today and always. What is needed is an evangelization that is “new in its ardor, in its methods, in its expressions.” (*John Paul II, CELAM 1983*).

(As I said, our theme is a re-phrasing of Pope John Paul II’s now classic definition of New Evangelization: new ardour, new methods and new expression. I just wonder why “new methods” is left out in the formulation of our theme.)

Principles of New Evangelization

In their Message and Final List of the Propositions, the Synod Fathers laid down some basic guiding principles on New Evangelization. I would like to point out particularly three:

First Principle: The foundation of New Evangelization is the personal encounter with Jesus Christ in the Church.

“The work of the New Evangelization consists in presenting once more the beauty and perennial newness of the encounter with Christ to the often distracted and confused heart and mind of the men and women of our time, above all to ourselves.” (*Message, 3*)

Evangelization is the proclamation, not so much of a doctrine or a way of life, as of a person. “What was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we looked upon and touched with our hands concerns the Word of life – for this life was made visible; we have seen it and testify to it and proclaim to you...” (*1 Jn 1:1-2*)

Where can we encounter Christ? The synod tells us that “the Church is the space offered by Christ in history where we can encounter him, because he entrusted to her his Word, the Baptism that makes us God’s children, his Body and his Blood,

the grace of forgiveness of sin above all in the Sacrament of Reconciliation and the experience of communion that reflects the very mystery of the Holy Trinity and the strength of the Spirit that generates charity towards all.” (*Message, 3*)

Second Principle: Conversion is the goal of all evangelization.

The personal encounter with Christ leads the evangelized to a conversion experience and to answer the call to holiness. The invitation to conversion starts with the evangelizer himself. “We firmly believe that we must convert ourselves first to the power of Christ who alone can make all things new, above all, our poor existence. With humility we must recognize that the poverty and weaknesses of Jesus’ disciples, especially of his ministers, weigh on the credibility of the mission.” (*Message, 5*)

Interestingly, the Synod Fathers also speak of pastoral conversion in their Proposition 22.

“The New Evangelization requires personal and communal conversion, new methods of evangelization and renewal of pastoral structures, to be able to move from a pastoral strategy of maintenance to a pastoral position that is truly missionary. The New Evangelization guides us to an authentic pastoral conversion which moves us to attitudes and initiatives which leads to evaluations and changes in the dynamics of pastoral structures which no longer respond to the evangelical demands of the current time.” (*Prop. 22*)

Third Principle: The primary agent of evangelization is the Holy Spirit.

“The primary agent of evangelization is the Holy Spirit, who opens hearts and converts them to God. The experience of encountering the Lord Jesus, made possible by the Spirit, which introduces one into the Trinitarian life, welcomed in a spirit of adoration, supplication and of praise, must be fundamental in every aspect of New Evangelization.” (*Prop. 34*)

It is not we who are to conduct the work of evangelization, but God, as the Pope reminded us: “The first word, the true initiative, the true activity comes from God and only by inserting ourselves in to the divine initiative, only by begging this

divine initiative, will we too be able to become — with him and in him — evangelizers” (*Benedict XVI, 8 October 2012*).

These are the basic guiding principles of New Evangelization as explained by the Synod of Bishops. Are these elements present in our schools? How evangelizing is our educating? What new ardour, new methods and new expressions can we adopt to qualify our education as new evangelization? I do not pretend to be able to answer these questions. That would be too presumptuous. That is your competence and your task. But allow me to point out a few indications from the Synod that may help us in our effort to qualify our Catholic education as New Evangelization.

Catholic Identity

The primary element in New Evangelization is encounter with Christ. Is our school a place where our students can truly say they can meet Christ? The Synod clearly tells us that “the Church is the space offered by Christ in history where we can encounter him.” Is our school truly Catholic? Does it provide our students with an experience of what is being Church?

This brings us to the question of the Catholic identity of our schools. If education is “a constitutive dimension of evangelization,” (*Prop. 27*) thus making our schools “an evangelizing arm of the Church,” the Catholic identity of our educational institutions is all too evident. As the Congregation for Catholic Education clearly articulates, “the ecclesial nature of the Catholic schools... is written in the very heart of its identity as a teaching institution.”

Yet the Synod of Bishops also “encourages Catholic educational institutions to do all that is possible to preserve their identity as ecclesial institutions.” (*Prop. 27*) Why? Is there an identity crisis in our Catholic schools? I am sure that the great majority of our Catholic schools endeavour to be faithful to their Catholic identity and orthodox in their evangelizing role. Unfortunately, there are cases where students and parents are confused and scandalized because their school, in the name of academic exercise, holds positions contrary to what the Church officially teaches. I don’t enter into the discussion as this is not the place and time for it,

but the relationship between faith and reason has long and extensively been expounded by the Church. Not only is there no contradiction between faith and reason; both converge on the same reality, the same one Truth.

How Catholic is our school? While we are eager to have our schools assessed by prestigious accrediting agencies to determine their academic standard, should we not be equally concerned about assessing the Catholic authenticity of our institutions? I understand that CEAP is currently working on developing a mechanism to determine standards for the Catholicity of our schools. For this, I congratulate and thank CEAP.

If the encounter with Christ takes place in the Church, it is then essential that our schools live up to their ecclesial identity. Sometime ago, one of our schools revisited and reformulated their Vision-Mission Statement in compliance with one of the requirements for their PAASCU accreditation. When they presented to me their new Vision-Mission Statement (truly, a literary masterpiece), I asked if it was aligned with that of the Diocese. It was not; they had forgotten to take account of the VMS of the diocese.

The school does not exist and function for itself. It is an evangelizing arm of the Church and her mission. It is therefore important for our schools to be closely in touch with the local Church and coordinate with its pastoral direction and programs. After all, the school does not produce graduates for itself. Its task is to prepare the students to take their place and fulfil their mission in the Church and in the world.

The school lives its ecclesial dimension not only when it is closely connected to the local Church, but also when it lives a life of communion and becomes a community. When the school is more than just a corporate entity and lives in an atmosphere of family where relationships among teachers, students, staff, administration, parents and stakeholders are governed by mutual respect and the law of Christ's love, the school becomes an educative community. It becomes a schola-ecclesia and a privileged place for an encounter with Christ. (When this happens, unionism becomes redundant. In a family, the children don't unionize to bring their concerns to their parents.)

Encounter with Christ

Encounter with Christ happens through the Word and the Sacraments. Do our catechetical program and campus ministry effectively lead our young people to a personal encounter with Christ? Do they come to know Christ not only academically as an item in the curriculum but as a person with whom they relate?

This year's 20 May issue of Time magazine features an interesting article on today's youth which it describes as a generation of lazy, entitled narcissists. Referred to as the Me, Me, Me Generation or the millennials, today's young people, according to the article, are products of an education that for decades worked hard on boosting self-esteem. In the end, it created a breed of narcissists.

Let our schools help our students know their true selves and true value through an encounter with Christ that makes them get in touch with their deepest longings. The rich young man in the gospel asked Jesus, "What shall I do to gain eternal life?" Today's youth ask the same question, "What shall I do to live my life to the full? How can I live my life to the max?"

Our new catechesis should be able to provide them with answers as direct as that of Pope Benedict XVI's to the one million youth gathered in Cologne for the World Youth Day, "My dear young people, I know what you seek. You seek happiness. Seek it with all your might for it is your right. But remember, the happiness you seek has a name and a face, Jesus." (*XX World Youth Day, 18 August 2005*)

Conversion

Conversion is the heart of evangelization. The synod reminds us that conversion starts with the evangelizer. The call to conversion is first addressed to us personally as educators and collectively as an educative community.

For months now, the country has been obsessed with the Pork Barrel scandal. We too have joined our voices in condemning such crime of unbelievable proportion. But it would be more helpful if we also take a look at ourselves and review our own way of managing our financial affairs. Are we honest and transparent in our own transactions? Or have we perhaps been influenced ourselves by the culture

of patronage and corruption? Has the lure of profit and commercialism made us succumb to the temptation of commodifying education and turning our schools into lucrative enterprises?

If the culture of corruption in public office and in business is endemic in the Philippines, the only Christian in Asia, should this not disturb us and make us wonder whether we have failed in our mission of Catholic education? While Christianity teaches the highest standards of moral living, it seems that our “pagan” neighbours are more honest and moral than us.

When genuine personal and communal conversion takes place, pastoral conversion follows. As personal and communal conversion brings new ardour in the heart of the evangelizer, pastoral conversion moves the evangelizer to explore new methods and new expressions of evangelizing. Are we ready to move out of familiar and comfortable ways and let go of pastoral structures when they prove to be no longer effective and relevant? Are we willing to move from a pastoral strategy of maintenance to a pastoral position that is daring and innovative?

Spirituality

If the primary agent of evangelization is the Holy Spirit, it follows that Catholic education is essentially a spiritual affair. For this reason, the Synod “invites all teachers to embrace the leadership which is theirs as baptized disciple of Jesus, giving witness through their vocation as educators.” (*Prop. 27*) Because Catholic education is a vocation and not just a mere profession, formation of the Catholic educator is imperative. Do our schools provide a solid and continuous formation for their teachers, which introduces them to the spirituality of the Catholic educator?

The aim of Catholic education is to accompany the young person in his full maturation in Christ, the Perfect Man. If education endeavours to draw out the best in a person, Catholic education or evangelization does this by bringing to the surface the image of God in the baptized so that his life may shine and reflect the face of Christ. The ultimate goal of evangelization and Catholic education is to assist the student in heeding the universal call to holiness.

I wish to see the day when our Catholic schools will pride themselves not so much for producing topnotchers in the bar or the board exams or for winning the championship in inter-collegiate/university leagues but for producing authentic Christians who live their baptismal consecration and missionary calling, true leaven that transforms society and its culture or, in the vision of Pope John Paul II's word for today's youth - the saints of the new millennium. For this to happen, the Catholic school must provide its students with a roadmap to holiness through a spirituality appropriate for the young.

An Appeal

Before I close, I hope you won't mind if I plug in a commercial. You know how it is with us Filipinos. When one gets an opportunity to be on the air or on TV for whatever reason, he grabs the chance to greet his relatives and friends or to promote a product or his forthcoming show. I am now in front of a powerful group, the biggest and most respected association of schools in the country, and I know it has all the influence and connections with the powers that be.

In the spirit of Pope Francis, who asks us to be less self-referential and to go and reach out to our less fortunate brothers and sisters, I appeal to CEAP to bring the concerns of our parochial schools and the other 900 small parochial and mission schools which make up the majority of Catholic schools in the country.

At the start of my talk, I mentioned that we have 19 parochial schools in our diocese. What I did not mention is that we operate 4 other primary schools in very remote haciendas.

Our student population is decreasing each year because the barangay schools are free. We have a fast turnover of teachers because the pay in public schools is so much higher than ours. With the demand for 60,000 new teachers in the public schools, our faculty is hemorrhaging. I don't know for how long we can keep our parochial schools in existence. What keeps them alive is the dogged persistence of our parents who make extreme sacrifices to send their children to our schools, believing that they are given a better education.

I therefore appeal to CEAP to bring our case to the attention of national government. Education is a fundamental right of every citizen, and it is the duty of government to provide basic education to every child. That is the reason why the pupils and students are free in public schools. They are subsidized by the government with a budget obtained obviously from the taxes of the people. How about the children in private schools, particularly those of our parochial schools? Are they not entitled to the same subsidy? Their parents pay the same taxes as the parents of public school children, don't they?

We know that many of our Asian countries allocate the same education fund to every child, whether he/she is enrolled in a public or a private school. We ask the same treatment with our own school children from the government not as a favour or a privilege, but as a right.

While the logic of the matter is simple, I know that its application is more complex. I am told that it has to do with our Constitutions which is patterned after the American Constitutions which is paranoid when it deals with the concept of separation of Church and State. I appeal to CEAP to take the lead in lobbying our cause with Congress.

Meanwhile, I think there are other possibilities of saving our parochial schools. I suggest that we explore ways of collaboration and partnership with government and other agencies.

Some 30 kilometers from here in the town of Liloan, there is an institution for street children and youth in conflict with the law, the Don Bosco Boys' Home, which used to send its boys to the National High School of the neighboring town of Compostela. With the help of Aboitiz Foundation Incorporated, DBBH was able to build a PhP12 million school building with 6 classrooms complete with laboratories, playground and other school facilities within its compound. A Memorandum of Agreement was forged between DBBH and the government whereby, DBBH provides the school facilities for its resident students and other high school students from the surrounding area, while the Department of Education provides the teachers. A special stipulation is provided that the school

be headed by a Salesian priest, who serves as school principal. In this way the Catholic identity and the specific mission of the institution is safeguarded.

This experience of collaboration among Church, government and civil society may provide an answer to the plight of our parochial schools. It can serve as a model that can be replicated in other private schools. While the public school classrooms are overly crowded (a class of 90 students is common), those of our parochial schools are half empty. And instead of pirating our teachers to the detriment of our schools, cannot the government absorb them as DEPED employees while they continue to teach in our schools? It is a win-win situation for the government and the private educational institution.

Conclusion

Let me conclude by returning to theme of our convention. If indeed we educate by evangelizing and evangelize by educating, it follows that the Church's call today for a New Evangelization echoes a corresponding call for a New Education. If we are convinced of the need and urgency for a New Evangelization, we should likewise be convinced of the need and urgency for a New Education. I think this is the direction where our theme is leading us to. I think this is the challenge for CEAP – to define the kind of New Education that is needed by our Catholic Schools in the Philippines today.

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