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Catholic Schools in the United States are “the pearl of great price.” That was the conviction that Pope Pius XII conveyed to a group of American bishops during their trip to Rome in the late 1950’s. That conviction is equally valid today. Catholic schools in the United States have been an integral part of the Church’s pastoral life and ministry since the nineteenth century and must remain so. Indeed it has been stated with justification that Catholic schools are the most effective way of passing on the knowledge of the Catholic faith to our young people.

The American bishops at the First Plenary Council of Baltimore in 1852 directed that every parish was to have a Catholic school. That pastoral plan was never fully implemented or achieved. Yet across the United States, numerous parishes built and opened Catholic schools that have educated tens of thousands of children to be active members of the Church and to be responsible citizens of our great nation. To be sure, the vibrancy and vitality of the Church in the United States can be attributed in large measure to the effectiveness of our Catholic schools.

What is the purpose or goal of a Catholic school? His Holiness, Pope Benedict XVI succinctly answered this question when he addressed a gathering of Catholic educators at The Catholic University of America during his pastoral visit to the United States in April, 2008. The pontiff said, “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.” In a Catholic school, all dimensions of education are understood and presented in light of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. The purpose of a Catholic school is not primarily to provide a better education than that which is offered in a public school. Everyone wants all students, whether they enroll in Catholic, private or public schools, to receive an excellent education. The goal of a Catholic school is to offer its students a different kind of education, one rooted in and imbued with the perennial wisdom about the human person, a wisdom that derives from the Catholic Church’s tradition of faith and morals. A Catholic school education seeks to educate not only the mind with a love for the truth but also to touch the hearts and form the consciences of its students with a desire and commitment to pursue what is good, right and just.

Catholic schools have always presented a financial challenge to our parishes and dioceses. In these unstable economic times, the financial challenge has become even more acute. In 2005, we American bishops issued a salient document on the value of Catholic school education entitled “Renewing Our Commitment to Catholic Elementary

and Secondary Schools in the Third Millennium.” In that document, we bishops acknowledged gratefully the immense contribution that Catholic schools have made to the Catholic Church in the United States. Our document also pointed out that the financial support of our Catholic schools cannot rest only on the shoulders of those parents and families whose children attend a Catholic school. Catholic school education is an integral part of the Church’s mission of proclaiming the Gospel of Christ and teaching the saving truths of our Catholic faith. Hence, it is incumbent on all Catholics in a diocese to support financially this crucial educational ministry.

For the last twenty years, a number of studies have been conducted by groups and individuals interested in the general condition of education in the United States. Several of these studies have cited and unequivocally praised the effectiveness of Catholic schools in providing an excellent education for their students. The academic excellence of our Catholic school relies on several factors. The competence and dedication of our teachers, the overwhelming majority of whom are lay people, contribute significantly to our schools’ success. Our educators see teaching not only as a profession but as a ministry. Often at great financial sacrifice, these talented women and men commit themselves daily to helping their students grow in knowledge and virtue.

Catholic schools also provide a disciplined setting where a community of fellow learners can be supported and fostered. The involvement of the parents and family members of our students also contributes to promoting a united effort to support our students in their quest to develop the life of the mind.

During the last forty years, the type of students who enter our Catholic schools has dramatically changed. In the past, the student body of a typical parish school was made up of Catholic youngsters from that particular parish. This is no longer the case. Today our Catholic schools reflect the rapidly growing diversity of our American society. Our students are no longer all Catholics. In some of our inner city schools that serve an area that is predominantly African-American or Asian, the percentage of non-Catholic students is quite high.

This demographic reality can serve to highlight the importance of the evangelizing mission of the Catholic Church. Students in a Catholic school are daily introduced to the person of Jesus Christ and the doctrinal, moral and social teachings of His Church. Occasionally a bishop or a pastor of a Catholic school with a significant number of non-Catholic students will be asked, “Why does the diocese or the parish spend all this money to educate children who are not Catholic?” The reply of Cardinal James Hickey, the late Archbishop of Washington, D.C. to such a question remains very insightful. The cardinal retorted, “The Catholic Church educates students in the inner city not because the students are Catholics but because we are Catholics.”

School choice is a topic that demands the immediate attention of the Catholic community in the United States. The choice of parents to select the type of education that is best suited for their children is a fundamental right. The state has a concomitant responsibility to guarantee that such a right can be reasonably exercised. The fact is, however, that if parents choose to send their child to a Catholic school, they can expect to receive no financial support from the state. This situation is unacceptable and in fact, unjust. The racial and religious diversity of our Catholic schools argues forcefully for some type of state approved financial assistance. Graduates of our Catholic schools become part of the work force of our society and bring a solid work ethic and a sense of right and wrong to their employment. Moreover, a recent report issued by the National Catholic Education Association (NCEA) last January, 2009 found that Catholic schools save our nation over \$1.9 billion each year, just in operational costs. It is questionable whether our American public school system would want to assume this substantial sum of money if our Catholic schools were forced to close because of perilous finances.

Sadly the closings of Catholic schools, especially in our inner city and urban neighborhoods, continue. However, there are sections of the United States where Catholic schools are reopening or being built. In the Diocese of Memphis, supported by \$15 million donated mostly from the public sector, Bishop J. Terry Steib was able to open a number of "Jubilee Schools". The academic results that these schools have already achieved are remarkable. Across the nation, surveys of Catholic schools report that 99% of Catholic high school students graduate and 80% of them go on to college. This statistic is one of which the Catholic school community can be justifiably proud.

The story of the quality and success of our Catholic schools in the United States should be told often and to as many people, especially parents, who will listen. At the heart of the story is the commitment of our Catholic schools to teach as Jesus did, that is, to teach with an authority that comes from the truth about the dignity of the human person who is made in the image and likeness of God.

What Pope Pius XII stated years ago about Catholic schools is as true today as it was in the past and will be in the future: "Catholic schools in the United States are the pearl of great price."

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Bishop of Worcester