

Catholic Education

Pope on education: serve poor, teach truth

In his recent apostolic visit to the United States the pope's April 17 address to Catholic educators in Washington, D.C. received minimal attention in the media which devoted most of its attention and coverage to Benedict's repeated and heartfelt expressions of regret and shame over persons sexually abused by U.S. clergy. The pope addressed this issue with reporters before Shepherd One landed on the tarmac at Andrews Air Force Base, and he returned to it throughout his visit. Perhaps the most dramatic crystallization of the pope's feelings on the issue was his unscheduled afternoon meeting with the victims of sexual abuse in the chapel of the papal nunciature in Washington, D.C. which immediately preceded his 5 p.m. address at The Catholic University of America and rightfully overshadowed that event.

The pope arrived more or less on time outside Pryzbyla Center at Catholic University. He stepped from his limousine and acknowledged with a shy waive of both hands the hundreds of students who had been awaiting his arrival for several hours under a warm sun with rock music blaring in the background. The festive atmosphere was more typical of the rites of spring than a papal visit.

Benedict indicated to an aide that he would not speak to the students and moved up the stairs past cheering seminar-

ians and into the room where we had been waiting since 3 p.m. to hear his address. I sat between the superintendent of Catholic schools in Buffalo and the president of another university, which indicates the breadth of experience represented by 300 Catholic educators to whom the pope would speak.

The pope spoke from a raised dais flanked by six cardinals in the front and rows of prelates on either side behind the chair from which he read his address. Cardinal Levada managed a wink and hand wave when I caught his eye.

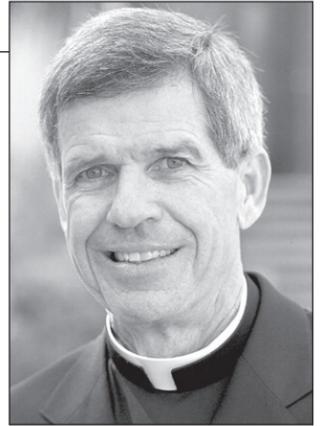
Benedict shared his thoughts on the nature and identity of Catholic education. He affirmed the centrality of education to the Church's mission of proclaiming the Good News and strongly underscored the responsibility of Catholic education to "become an especially powerful instrument of hope" in a culture plagued by moral confusion and the fragmentation of knowledge.

In a particularly timely observation, the pope acknowledged the role that Catholic schools have played in helping immigrants "rise from poverty and take their place in mainstream society." He insisted that U.S. Catholics should do "everything possible" to ensure that Catholic schools "are accessible to people of all social and economic strata." He insisted that no one should be denied the right to a Catholic education "which in turn nurtures the soul of a nation."

Benedict named the major challenge facing Catholic schools, whether primary, secondary or university: maintaining a focus on immigrants and the poor and not allowing financial pressures or preoccupation with status to transform them into academies for a privileged elite.

Pope Benedict's discussion of the nature of Catholic education was rather densely philosophical and theological in orientation. He is clearly not a "sound bite" speaker, but one who thinks deeply and clearly about issues and eschews simple answers for complex subjects. He grounded the Church's involvement in education in the mystery of God and God's desire to make himself known and the correlative "innate desire of all human beings to know the truth." Truth leads to goodness and ultimately to God, who is both.

The pope affirmed the mutuality of faith and reason in



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the quest for truth and goodness which he said drives the Church's involvement "in humanity's struggle to arrive at truth." He observed that faith and reason together help keep public debates "rational, honest and accountable."

The pope indicated that the Catholic identity of a university cannot be reduced simply to the number of Catholics in the institution or the orthodoxy of course content. The Catholicity of a university expresses itself "liturgically, sacramentally, through 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." Thus, the pursuit of justice and environmental responsibility are not "add-ons" in the pope's thinking, but central expressions of the Catholic tradition.

The pope took this talk as an opportunity to "reaffirm the great value of academic freedom . . . to search for the truth wherever careful analysis of evidence leads you." But he also cautioned that academic freedom cannot, in principle, be invoked "to justify positions

that contradict the faith and the teaching of the Church." This balance characterized his entire talk. The pope never degenerated into "black and white" thinking over complex issues but consistently endeavored to strike a fine balance. He was clear and direct in affirming his support for the Catholic universities while not hesitating to challenge Catholic educators to greater fidelity in "living the truth which you propose to your students."

Benedict concluded his reflections by expressing his gratitude and offering his encouragement to Catholic educators. He stressed the importance of education for the life of the Church and society and called for a renewed commitment to serving the poor through education.

While the sex abuse scandal overshadowed the pope's address on Catholic education, his thoughts deserve prayerful reflection and his challenges should inspire and motivate those of us involved in Catholic education at whatever level to redouble our efforts to serve the faith and promote justice.

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