

CATHOLIC
EDUCATION:
An Act of Hope

A pastoral letter by
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DIOCESE of
COLUMBUS



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Bishop Fernandes is a member of several USCCB committees, including the Committee on Catholic Education; the Committee on Doctrine; and the Committee on Cultural Diversity in the Church, chairing the Subcommittee for Asian and Pacific Island Affairs. He is also a member of the Board of Trustees for a multitude of organizations, including the Institute for Catholic Liberal Education, The Pontifical College Josephinum, Mount St. Mary's Seminary and School of Theology, and Cristo Rey Columbus.

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Introduction

My Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

When I began my ministry as Bishop, I outlined four priorities for the Diocese: Vocations, Evangelization, Catholic Education and Formation, and Social Outreach. The Diocese of Columbus is experiencing tremendous growth, and our Catholic population has swelled to nearly 500,000 Catholics. In just four years, the Diocese has seen the number of seminarians grow from 17 to 43; ten priests have been ordained and seven more have been incardinated. In each of the last four years, the Diocese has held an Evangelization Summit, which has provided a vision for evangelization.

Pope St. Paul VI wrote: “...evangelizing all people constitutes the essential mission of the Church. This task and mission are particularly urgent because of the expansive, penetrating changes in present-day society. In fact, evangelizing is the Church’s utmost identity. She exists in order to evangelize.”¹

Everything the Catholic Church does, she does to share the Good News of salvation that comes to us in Christ Jesus. The reason Catholic schools exist is to make new disciples and to introduce young people to an encounter with Christ, the Teacher, *par excellence*. Catholic schools are integral to educating the heart in humanity and in the love of Christ. In this letter, I wish to address the vision of Catholic education; the vocation and role of educators; and to offer a framework by which the faithful of the Diocese of Columbus might better understand the mission of Catholic schools, education, and formation.

This pastoral letter should be read in the context of and in conjunction with several other documents: Pope Leo XIV’s Apostolic Letter, “*Drawing New Maps of Hope*,”² the Front Royal Statement,³ which Dr. Adam Dufault, Superintendent of Catholic Schools, and I signed, and finally, *Unapologetically Catholic: A Strategic Vision of Catholic Education in the Diocese of Columbus*, developed by the Office of Catholic Schools.

Why write about Catholic Schools and Education now? Principally, it is because our schools are vital means for evangelizing our young people in an age of secularization with rising attacks against human dignity. Our Catholic schools affirm the dignity of each and every person and offer an environment in which young people and families can find a place to belong. Catholic Schools in our Diocese are roughly at 90% capacity. The Diocese is experiencing such growth that new schools are having to be built and existing schools are expanding. The majority of our schools have waiting lists. The demand for Catholic education will increase with the projected population growth for our region. The Diocese needs to plan for this growth and to do so in a strategic manner and with a clear vision.

Pope Francis said that “we live not so much in an epoch of change as in a change of epoch.”⁴ This change has brought with it certain challenges, identified by Pope Leo in his Apostolic Letter: a crisis in the sense of meaning; fragmentation in education; and educative inequalities. Today, the mission of Catholic education is carried out in a tumultuous political, social, and cultural context. Furthermore, many young people are growing up in an environment of profound isolation. Technology allows us to possess extraordinary access to information, but so many today are often lacking wisdom. Formation is often reduced to information, but without a strong link to truth, to the wisdom necessary for life, and without the profound relationships necessary for the educational endeavor to succeed.

We communicate constantly through the new technologies, yet we struggle to know ourselves, others, or God. There is a great danger in offering education without guiding young people toward a true sense of meaning and purpose in life, of educating the mind without educating the whole person, body and

soul. Some models of education place tremendous pressure on young people to perform and to produce, measuring success based on efficiency and performance rather than interior growth and growth in affective maturity and holiness.

Finally, many young people, due to poverty or the brokenness of the family, do not have access to the quality education and formation offered in Catholic Schools. While in the state of Ohio, laws have broadened access for many families to Catholic Schools, including the new immigrants to our communities, a new spirit of sacrifice and generosity is necessary to make this education even more accessible. Education is “one of the highest forms of Christian charity.”⁵

As a son of immigrants, I benefited greatly from Catholic Schools. Catholic education broadened the horizons for my brothers and for me as we confronted the challenges of the United States. We found in the Church and in our parish school not only a place to learn but also a community to which we could belong. With parents, teachers, religious sisters and priests working together, my brothers and I were able to succeed professionally, but perhaps the greatest sign of success is that we are all practicing the Faith. That is one example of the fruits of Catholic education.

When I meet young people and listen to their stories, I hear of their hopes and dreams, their goals, and their highest aspirations. I am reminded of the hopes and dreams that I had fifty years ago. I want to offer that same hope, or really, something better for future generations of Catholics in the Diocese. The educational emergency with which the Church, civil authorities, and families must grapple demands renewed seriousness regarding the mission entrusted to families and educators. At the same time, this “emergency” offers an opportunity for revitalization and a renewed sense of hope.

Pope Leo writes: “Where educational communities allow themselves to be guided by the word of Christ, they do not retreat but are revitalized; they do not build walls, but bridges. They respond with creativity, opening up new possibilities for the transmission of knowledge and meaning in schools... because the Gospel does not grow old but makes “all things new” (Rev 21:5). Each generation hears it as a regenerating novelty. Each generation is responsible for the Gospel and for discovering its seminal and multiplying power.”⁶

Education must resist the temptation toward pessimism and become a true workshop of hope, helping young people discover that their lives possess meaning and purpose. Within a culture that is often marked by confusion and uncertainty, Catholic education must help students recognize and hear God’s presence in the world and respond generously to His call. Catholic education remains one of our greatest reasons for hope. Indeed, educating is “an act of hope and a passion that is renewed because it manifests the promise we see in the future of humanity.”⁷

The Catholic Church has always regarded education as one of her most sacred responsibilities. From the earliest Christian communities to the great universities of Europe to the Catholic schools that continue to form young people throughout our Diocese today, the faithful have understood that the formation of children is inseparable from the mission of evangelization. Catholic schools exist to evangelize. If they do not contribute to this mission or if they undermine this mission, their reason for existence ceases.

What is Education?

Education is an act of hope. In the Christian understanding, it is never merely the transfer of information. It is both a gift and a task. It is a gift, a “labor of love,” handed on from generation to generation, especially through the family, that prepares one for this life and for eternal life. Education encompasses the formation of the heart; it is directed toward the whole person in truth, goodness, and beauty. The educative task involves all of us.

What is education? I believe it is an introduction of the person (made in God’s image and likeness, as a unity of body and soul, endowed with an intellect that the good may be known and free will that it may be chosen) to reality. Education involves the formation of the whole person, spiritual, intellectual, emotional, social and physical; it seeks to form the person to confront the challenges of life. Catholic education helps the person read reality in light of faith and to discern the path that leads to abundance of life. The measure of its success is not efficiency but dignity, justice, the capacity to serve the common good,⁸ and holiness of life. Catholic education is rooted in a fundamental anthropological vision, understanding that we were made by God to love and for love.

An educator is one who, out of love, awakens the desire in another for truth and freedom. This truth is sought together. Freedom is understood as a freedom for excellence not merely from something, a freedom for love rather than a license which seeks its own gratification. The authority of pastors, parents, and teachers is understood as a service of the human person, not a domination and control of another.⁹

What does it mean to educate today? Part of our vocational task to educate is to introduce young people to reality. To educate is to communicate one’s way of relating to reality. There are so many problems which our young people face – the brokenness of the family, drug addiction, a pandemic of loneliness, worsened by widespread use of pornography, and educational systems and methods that do not always serve them. We too must confront these problems which also include a culture of violence, exclusion, secularization and polarization.

In this environment, what is the role of the educator? Education is the communication of the way the educator conceives of and interacts with reality. An educator is a person who is fully engaged in discovering the meaning of the world and the meaning of life. A Catholic educator is one who conveys the Christian proposal to others, especially students, having first verified this proposal within his or her own experience. Rather than simply transmit information, the Catholic educator offers his or her witness to a young person as a means to engage life and its problems.

Pope Benedict XVI wrote: “Being a Christian is not the result of an ethical choice or a lofty idea, it is the result of an encounter with an event or Person, who opens up new horizons and gives our life a decisive direction.”¹⁰

Educators must have this experience, like that of Paul on the road to Damascus, of meeting Jesus, because then the educator will have had the experience of meeting Someone in whom fear had been defeated. Adults must make a journey to see what defeats fear, and, if we do not experience the victory over fear, then we will not be able to communicate this victory of love and beauty to our children.¹¹

God sent His Son so that the disciples could see a man in whom fear was defeated. Jesus did not fear the Scribes and Pharisees. He did not fear the devil who tempted him. He did not fear the Cross. Christ is the

person proposed to our young people, but Catholic educators must first encounter Him personally and be clothed in Him to make a credible proposal to young people.

Now the presence of Christ remains in the human reality in the Church and in her sacraments. His presence reaches young people now, not only through the clergy but also through parents and educators. The Church is life. The only way to verify whether the Christian proposal is true is to participate in this life.

Authentic Catholic school education proposes that youth participate in life – in relationships with each other; in music and art; in the study of languages, both modern and ancient; in contemplating and apprehending beauty – and in community life through service and liturgical participation. The offering of our own living Tradition, the discovery of the Tradition in history and its impact on civilization, the proposal of our liturgical and musical tradition allows students to share in this life *and* to verify the truth of the Catholic proposal.

Catholic schools in the Diocese of Columbus must rediscover and renew their commitment to the Catholic intellectual tradition. This is becoming more urgent in the age of artificial intelligence. One needs to propose not only that which is Catholic but that which is authentically human. One purpose of Catholic education is to educate our humanity. Disciplines such as grammar, logic, and rhetoric should not be neglected. Indeed, no algorithm can substitute what makes education human: poetry, irony, love, art, imagination, the joy of discovery and even learning from mistakes as an opportunity for growth.¹²

Catholic education must also provoke intellectual curiosity rather than simply provide answers. Educators must lead young people to discover the truth. For example, the Servant of God, Monsignor Luigi Giussani proposes an educational method which is still relevant for today.¹³ The young need to be exposed to a tradition, in our case, the Catholic tradition. At a certain point, young people begin to question whether this tradition corresponds to their desires for the true, good, and beautiful; they need credible witnesses to accompany them in finding the answer to this burning question.

The purpose of education is not to provide the answers or to simply fill the mind with facts; rather, it is to train the mind to ask critical questions, to look at different sides of an argument, and to awaken curiosity.¹⁴ The Catholic intellectual tradition seeks to move from mere knowledge to understanding. Mature adults, with the experience and wisdom of the tradition of the Church, can accompany the young in the journey of discovery to verify the truth of the tradition and its correspondence to the longings of the heart. A risk is involved, because the freedom of the young person needs to be engaged; the risk of freedom could lead them to answer the question negatively and to walk away from the Church and the tradition. Nevertheless, accompanied by credible witnesses, the young person may verify the truth of the tradition and make a decisive choice for Christ and to follow Him as a disciple.

While holding itself to the highest standards of excellence, Catholic education must propose a vision of the world to these same disciples, our students, so that they may understand their dignity as persons in the world. Our Catholic Schools attempt to propose this worldview especially through the incorporation of the Theology of the Body into the curriculum, which helps ground the student in a proper anthropology, while, at the same time, challenging the materialistic worldview proposed by the secular culture to our young people.

Pope St. John Paul II put it this way: “The most destructive untruths about the human person which the twentieth century produced were born of materialistic views of the world and the person. Totalitarian

systems may have foundered, but new forms of materialism have emerged, less ideologically driven and less spectacular in their manifestations perhaps, but nonetheless destructive in their effect on people and on the fabric of society.”¹⁵

This materialistic worldview tends to emphasize doing over being, functionality over and against learning.¹⁶ The pressures to be productive will only increase with the emergence of artificial intelligence. At risk is a loss of the sense of the person who is at the heart of education.

Pope Leo XIV invites us to rethink, in light of the advance of information technologies and artificial intelligence, how we educate, writing: “Many educational systems struggle to keep pace with change and to support the integral development of students. The advance of information technologies and AI is rapidly rendering curricula obsolete that were designed for a different era. Meanwhile, the organization of schools, physical spaces, evaluation methods and the role of teachers themselves must be rethought in order to promote an authentically integral education that addresses every dimension of the person.”¹⁷

In the educational process, beyond technology, students want credible witnesses to accompany them. The beauty of mentoring a student and accompanying a student reflects the beauty of God’s accompaniment of the people of Israel as they fled Egypt or journeyed through the desert. It is the type of accompaniment that Christ showed to the disciples on the road to Emmaus, when they were fleeing from Jerusalem, that is, heading the wrong direction. Beautifully, He turned their despair into hope; their sadness into joy; and they verified through the burning of their hearts and their sharing in the Breaking of the Bread that He was truly Risen!

Accompanied by credible witnesses in a Catholic school, which is an environment “in which faith, culture and life intertwine” and which is an environment in which “the Christian vision permeates every discipline and every interaction,”¹⁸ students begin to follow a path that leads to life. They begin to understand that the Catholic Tradition resonates with their hearts’ desire for the true, the good, and the beautiful, and, therefore, become more likely to follow, that is, to continue the journey of discipleship.

Catholic education ultimately is about this quest for God. For this reason, authentically Catholic education could never be, nor should it be, an imitation of its secularized or public peers, because we offer something, or, rather Someone, that is truly decisive for living. Saint Anselm of Canterbury in his *Proslogion* wrote of *fides quaerens intellectum* – faith seeking understanding. This seeking is the “quest,” but he added, “The believer does not seek to understand that he may believe, but he believes that he may understand, for unless he believed he would not understand.”¹⁹

Catholic educators, realizing the importance of witness, should understand that they are “called to a responsibility that goes beyond the work contract: their witness has the same value as their lessons. For this reason, the formation of teachers – scientific, pedagogic, cultural and spiritual – is decisive.”²⁰ For this reason, the Diocese of Columbus has invested heavily in the formation, especially spiritual formation of administrators and teachers. The Catholic Faith is not to be relegated to religion class but must permeate the entire curriculum, the lives of the men and women in our Catholic schools, and the whole educational environment.

Vocations and the School Community

In our Catholic schools, we hope to help students and teachers discover their vocations and to live their respective vocations as a response to the call from God. Each vocation is a gift whose purpose is to build up the Church and to increase the Kingdom of God in the world. Catholic education is a collective endeavor; that is, no one educates alone or in a vacuum; rather, it is a task of the whole community in which teachers, students, families, administrators, and staff, along with pastors converge to generate life and to form new disciples, who will be good citizens and architects of peace.

The Role of the Bishop and the Priests

The chief teacher within the Diocese is the Bishop himself. The Bishop is an authoritative teacher, invested with Christ's own authority.²¹ As the chief teacher, he exercises oversight of the preaching, teaching, catechesis and ministry of the Word within the Diocese.²² Furthermore, he unites with himself the priests (and deacons) as co-workers in the ministry of the Word. The Bishop, along with the priests, are ordained to teach, govern, and sanctify. The Bishop and the priests cannot neglect their teaching office, especially the specific duty of forming teachers and catechists, a work they may fruitfully make their own again.

The Bishop entrusts in a special way his teaching authority to the pastor of the parish, who exercises this authority, along with his parochial vicar(s). The presence of Christ the Teacher in the person of the Pastor should always be welcomed in the Catholic Schools of the Diocese of Columbus. For his part, the Pastor must maintain *and promote* the Catholic culture of the parish school, must maintain the centrality of the Catholic Faith in its integrity, and oversee, in conjunction with his collaborators, the faculty of the school as catechists, following also the norms set forth by the Office of Catholic Schools and Office of Evangelization.

In addition, the Pastor is called to be a visible sign of the Father's love within the school community. Ontologically configured to Christ the High Priest, he must sanctify the community through the celebration of the sacraments, through his preaching, and through his leadership in prayer and presence, exercising spiritual fatherhood and leading the "Family of God," to which the school community belongs, in authentic worship, especially on Sunday.

Finally, the Pastor must also govern or shepherd the people under his care. Nearly all the elementary schools in the Diocese of Columbus are parish schools; therefore, the Pastor is not a mere figurehead, but he is the one responsible for the governance of the school, which is an extension of the evangelizing mission of the parish. He is not asked to be an expert in curriculum or school administration, nor does this imply that he should "micromanage" the life of the school; rather, he directs the human and spiritual formation of his school community, in a manner consistent with the vision articulated by the Bishop, the Office of Catholic Schools, and our Catholic Faith. This means that the Pastor can neither neglect this responsibility nor hand it over entirely to the principal; he is encouraged to work collaboratively with the principal, faculty, and school community, without ever setting aside his role as shepherd.

In the coming years, it is my sincere hope that more priests and seminarians will consider teaching and working in our Catholic schools, which will require not only additional formation but also hard work and patience. They certainly will receive support and encouragement from the Bishop in this noble endeavor. The Catholic school, which at times can be demanding on both time and resources if it is to be successful, also represents a tremendous opportunity to evangelize the young and to make Christ present in their midst.

Nearly all the Catholic High Schools in the Diocese are operated by the Diocese of Columbus and are under the direct governing authority of the Bishop. The exceptions to this remain under the authority of the Bishop for oversight. Governing in imitation of Christ the King and Shepherd involves both dialogue and communion and is exercised within the hierarchical structure of the Church under the shepherding direction of the Bishop and the pastors.

Finally, the presence of priests and religious in our Catholic High Schools, whether as chaplains or teachers, is one way by which the Church, along with the many lay teachers and campus ministers, can accompany young people on their educational and vocational path. Their presence gives witness that the Church does not abandon the young but is ready to listen to their voices and assist them in their discernment of God's plan.

The Role of the Catholic Educator

The Elementary School Principal and the High School Principal, along with the faculty, are charged with assisting the Bishop and the priests in the evangelizing mission of the Church. Not only do they assist the clergy, but they also assist parents, who remain the primary educators of the Faith for their children. They can never substitute for the parents(s) of the child, understanding, however, that many families are broken and hurting today, and, therefore, the credibility of the Catholic school administrator and teacher is more necessary than ever. The Office of Catholic Schools sets the basic expectations for School Administrators and teachers, not only with respect to professional standards but also with respect to the faith and the understanding of the teacher as a minister in an analogous way.

For her part, the Church has the duty to educate because she has the responsibility of announcing the way of salvation to all people and of communicating the life of Christ, assisting students and families to come to the fullness of this life. The Church is bound as a mother to offer an education to her children to imbue their lives and the community with the spirit of Christ. Much has already been said above about the role of the Catholic educator.

Fundamentally, the Catholic educator is a leader; he or she leads or draws the student out of the "Cave of Plato," from the realm of images and shadows, and introduces the student to the realm of the Good, the True, and the Beautiful. A proper introduction to this reality, understood by the light of faith, trains students to make judgments, to see and judge the world for what it really is. Education is a process of conversion of the way of thinking about and doing things, freeing students to think, judge, and act in accordance with what is true and the One who is Truth itself.

For this, the role of the lay faithful, especially our teachers and administrators, in the educational endeavor is essential. Since administrators and teachers are intimately linked in charity to one another and to their students in a Catholic School, they have a specific responsibility to evangelize. Both by their conduct and their instruction in the classroom, they are called to bear witness to Christ, the Teacher *par excellence*. Pope Paul VI noted that the person "listens more willingly to witnesses than he does to teachers and if he listens to teachers, it is because they are witnesses."²³ The work of teachers and administrators in a Catholic school community is a true and real apostolate and a service to the wider community in the formation of virtuous citizens, whether Catholic or non-Catholic.

The Role and Vocation of Parents and the Catholic School

The Church teaches that parents are the primary educators of their children. Before children enter the classroom, they encounter a model of love and discipleship within their family. The family remains the primary building block for society. The family is the place where authentic education can happen. Failure to strengthen families, which are also broken and fragmented, or to equip families for their collective mission of forming the whole person will hinder the Church's mission of evangelization.

Many Catholics learned the Faith not through formal programs but through ordinary acts of Christian life: parents who prayed, families who attended Mass faithfully, grandparents who taught devotions, fathers and mothers who sacrificed for their children, homes where forgiveness was practiced, and households where children learned that Christ truly mattered. These experiences shape hearts before they form minds. What is learned and modeled at home is brought to our school communities, whether good or evil.

Catholic schools cannot replace the vocation of parents. Instead, they must become trusted partners who strengthen families and assist them in forming children for holiness. Pope Leo teaches us that education is fundamentally about relationships. Children do not grow through information acquisition alone. They grow through encounter, witness, accompaniment, and love. The renewal of Catholic education must begin with the renewal of the relationships that sustain authentic human formation. In the Diocese of Columbus, the aim of Catholic schools is not merely to communicate information but is, rather, the *formation* of the whole person that leads to lifelong discipleship and learning.

The engagement and involvement of parents in the educational endeavor is essential for the success of the Catholic school. No amount of teacher formation or clergy involvement can compensate adequately for the critical role of parents and families. For this reason, throughout the Diocese of Columbus, a movement has begun toward family-based catechesis, because families need to be evangelized and parents need to be equipped for the mission of raising their children in the faith. Each person must accept his or her responsibility; we have a co-responsibility for the education and formation of our young people.

A Framework for Understanding Catholic Schools

Modern society often reduces education to objective measurable outcomes, such as test scores, college preparation, and career success. While these things have value, Christians must ask deeper questions. What happens if students succeed by every worldly measure but fail to discover their vocation and true happiness? What if they become technically skilled but spiritually impoverished? What if they gain skills but never learn wisdom?

In the Diocese of Columbus, the focus of Catholic education cannot be reduced to test scores, college preparation, or the teaching of basic and/or technical skills of varying complexity.²⁴ Catholic schools must offer something more. Catholic education responds to reductionist models of education by insisting that formation must involve the entire human person, not the intellect alone. Our schools must help students understand that their lives are gifts from God and that every talent entrusted to them carries with it a responsibility to serve others and to glorify the Lord.

In October 2025, Pope Leo gave an address to Catholic educators on the occasion of the Jubilee of the

World of Education, which I attended along with thirty educators and administrators from the Diocese of Columbus. As an Augustinian, he reflected on four principles, which, I believe, can also be useful for teachers and catechists to keep in mind and which can serve as a useful framework for parents as they shape and form their children: interiority, unity, love, and joy.

Interiority

Addressing students at the Opening of the Jubilee for the World of Education, Pope Leo stressed the need for Catholic education to focus on interiority. That day, the Gospel was taken from Luke (13:10-17), which recounted the story of the woman who was bent over, with a crooked spine. She had suffered in that condition for eighteen years until she encountered Jesus, who touched her life and delivered her from the evil spirit which afflicted her. The Pope suggested that the woman's condition resembled that of ignorance – of being closed in oneself, commenting that “When human beings are incapable of seeing beyond themselves, beyond their own experiences, ideas and convictions, beyond their own projects, then they remain imprisoned, enslaved and incapable of forming mature judgments.”²⁵

Today, young people face this risk. They are always looking at their phones. They are constantly taking selfies or looking at how many views they have on social media. Even as technological connections grow, we see a rise in the pandemic of loneliness, isolation, and mental illness, demonstrated in Jonathan Haidt's book, *The Anxious Generation*²⁶, but which is observed by all of us. Rather than engaging in life and being educated in the things of God or contemplating creation, the young are turned inward. The Holy Father pointed out that “...in reality, many of the things that truly matter in life – we might say, the most fundamental things – do not come from ourselves; we receive them from others. They come to us through our teachers, encounters and life experiences. This is an experience of grace, for it heals us from self-absorption.”²⁷

In this regard, the encounters, life experiences, and education that we receive in the family and school community are critical. Many things can be learned from books, but not love. Our Catholic schools and parishes are concerned not with the exclusive education of the mind but of the whole person – of our humanity – in the teachings of the Lord Jesus, but more precisely in the way of the Lord Jesus – in a whole way of life – in a vision of life. Catholic schools must intentionally create spaces for prayer, contemplation, and encounter with God. Without interiority, formation becomes information, religion becomes content, and education becomes technical rather than transformational. Students must learn not only to perform but to pray; not only to achieve but to listen; not only to speak but to encounter the Lord in silence.

Unity

We live in a polarized and fragmented world. Pope Leo's episcopal motto is *In illo uno unum* – One in the One. Only in Christ do we find true unity. Sharing our knowledge and experience of Christ – sharing the wisdom of our Tradition – is a great act of love. Leaving future generations in ignorance of Christ, the Scriptures and Tradition, the richness of our spiritual and liturgical traditions, is not an act of charity but is an act of cruelty, leaving them to suffer like the woman who was bent over.

Jesus Himself, at the Last Supper, prayed: “That they may be one Father, as you and I are one.” Why? “So that the world may believe that you sent me.” (John 17:20) Here we begin to understand how unity is essentially connected to evangelization. Nevertheless, in the United States, we are experiencing polarization, which sometimes leads to violence. Rightly we prize individual liberty, but freedom

must be connected with both the truth and the common good. In the educational context, this means teaching others to “decenter” themselves and to educate them to the idea of journeying *with others*.

Catholic education proposes a way to help young people see reality as a coherent whole rather than a collection of disconnected experiences. Catholic education uniquely serves this purpose by integrating faith and reason, worship and study, knowledge and virtue. Students should learn that truth is unified because its source is God. They should learn that faith and science are not enemies, that intellectual excellence and holiness belong together, that authentic freedom is found in truth. Catholic schools educate the person in freedom, not merely freedom from something, but freedom *for* something – for excellence, for constructing the culture of life and the civilization of love, for lifting up the lowly, and for rejoicing in the truth with others.

In *Magnifica Humanitas*, Pope Leo noted that “As knowledge becomes increasingly fragmented, it becomes difficult to grasp reality as a whole, to ask profound questions about meaning, or to develop authentic, critical and creative thought. Many educators already report signs of dehumanization, where people may “know many things” but struggle to find direction in their lives, partly due to an inability to connect information with deeper knowledge or maintain a sense of purpose. A genuinely healthy attitude is needed, requiring rhythms that incorporate silence, in-depth study, reading, and judicious analysis, for without these elements inner freedom may be compromised.”²⁸

Love

Quoting Saint Augustine, Pope Leo said: “The love of God is the first commandment; the love of neighbor is the first practice.” It is in the family that we learn to love God and neighbor. It is precisely here that parents can be engaged in teaching children how to love God by teaching them their prayers and catechism; by spending time reading the Bible with their children, as the Scriptures manifest the love God has for His people; and, by modeling love to their children by their words or affection, instead of shouting, arguing, or exhibiting passive-aggressive behavior.

As the primary educators of their children, parents can teach their children to be engaged in the life of the Church and demonstrate the primacy of charity through volunteerism, especially through the assistance of the poor, who are not merely an object of our charity but who also teach us how to rely on Divine Providence. Regular charitable work helps young people to escape from the dominant patterns of narcissism, going outside of themselves to make an authentic gift of self.

Without substituting for the role of parents, school communities can create a culture which is supportive of the initiatives of parents in the practice of charity – in teaching love of God and neighbor. Similarly, our Catholic schools are uniquely positioned to provide opportunities to support parents, especially in offering service to the poor and needy, so that students may put faith in action and concretely live the Social Doctrine of the Church.

The Catholic Faith cannot remain merely at the level of ideas; rather, it must impact our humanity and the lives of others. The Holy Father puts it succinctly: “Sharing knowledge is not enough for teaching: love is needed. Only then will knowledge be beneficial to those who receive it, in itself and above all, for the charity it conveys. Teaching should never be separated from love.”²⁹ Students remember teachers who cared for them. They remember coaches who challenged them. They remember adults who saw them not as problems to solve but as persons to be loved. The educator’s vocation is fundamentally relational. Every Catholic teacher is called not merely to teach a subject but to love students into deeper truth. Children flourish when they know they are seen, valued, and accompanied.

Joy

The Holy Father remarked that “true teachers educate with a smile, and their goal is to awaken smiles in the depths of their students’ souls.” Instruction in religion is unlike a course that one would take in school or university; it is instruction in a way of life. When the faith is presented as “rules” or a series of teachings, it is not well-received, or, at least, it does not touch or awaken the soul. When it is presented with severity and judgment, it does not attract. Parents, as educators of their children, along with teachers and catechists, ought to radiate the joy of being loved by the Lord.

This joy has its origin in the spousal love with which Jesus, the Bridegroom, loves the Church. Love and joy are closely related. It is not enough to share knowledge. When we think about young people today and their fragility, we recognize a pandemic of loneliness and mental illness. There are many silent cries for help, which often go unheard. With all our technological advances, including the development of artificial intelligence, there is a risk that education grows cold and technical, far removed from the awe and wonder evoked by the loving and creative hand of God.

The risk of an ever more “rules-oriented” and “technical” education is that it will further isolate young people, distancing education and formation from the authentically human encounter of people – parent and child, teacher and student, lifelong Catholic and convert – who are loved infinitely by the Lord. The educational endeavor described by St. Augustine is a “flame to melt our souls together, and out of many to make but one.”³⁰ Catholic schools should be places where students encounter this joy. In a world often marked by fear and isolation, joyful Christian witness may be among the most powerful forms of evangelization available to the Church and our Diocese.

A Strategic Vision for Renewal

In response to the changed and developing landscape of education, the Diocese of Columbus offers *Unapologetically Catholic: A Strategic Vision for the Future of Catholic Education in the Diocese of Columbus*.

Inspired by the Church’s educational tradition and informed by Pope Leo’s call to draw “new maps of hope,” the vision offers a framework for renewing Catholic culture, strengthening families, forming educators, and helping our schools become places where children encounter Jesus Christ and see Him as the center of everything that we do. Our Diocese needs authentic Catholic education that forms successful graduates ready to engage the world, but who are also seeking holiness as future saints. The Diocese also wishes to support educators and parents in their pursuit of holiness.

The vision proposes goals and priorities that will renew Catholic education throughout our Diocese. It envisions schools where academic excellence and spiritual formation are inseparable and which are led by educators who understand themselves as witnesses as much as instructors. Our schools should be places where students are challenged intellectually while being formed morally and spiritually. The accompanying vision document is not just a plan for schools; it is a shared language and pathway for all who participate in the educational mission of the Church.

A Shared Responsibility

The responsibility for this renewal of Catholic education cannot belong just to individual schools or to the diocesan offices. It requires the participation of the entire Catholic community, including parents, pastors, parish communities, alumni, and educators. Ultimately, Catholic education succeeds when children encounter Jesus Christ and come to understand themselves as beloved sons and daughters of God.

In *Magnifica Humanitas*, Pope Leo writes: “School is the place where new generations can learn to seek and love the truth, to reflect on the meaning of life and to recognize the dignity of every person. For this reason, many parents, who want their children to grow in the capacity to form relationships, develop critical thinking skills, and embrace solid values, place great expectations on schools as valuable partners in their children’s education.”³¹

Most importantly, Catholic education succeeds when schools are places where future saints are formed. Education is directed toward sanctity. Pope Benedict XVI reminded us, “What God wants most of all for each one of you is that you should become holy.”³² This remains the ultimate aim of all our educational efforts, and we must persevere through any and all challenges to it. We must work with trust in the Lord, believing that education remains one of the Church’s most powerful instruments for evangelization. My prayer is that our schools are places where faith is deepened and where children discover the joy that comes from living in friendship with the Lord.

Entrusting all those with the sacred responsibility of forming our children and all our Catholic Schools in the Diocese of Columbus to Our Lady, Seat of Wisdom, I am

Sincerely yours in Christ,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Earl K. Fernandes". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Most Reverend Earl K. Fernandes
Bishop of Columbus

1 August 2026
Memorial of St. Alphonsus Liguori,
Bishop and Doctor of the Church

Endnotes:

- ¹ Paul VI, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 8 December 1975, 14
- ² Leo XIV, Apostolic Letter *Drawing New Maps of Hope*, 27 October 2025
- ³ Front-Royal-Statement.pdf
- ⁴ Francis, Christmas Greetings to the Roman Curia, 21 December 2019
- ⁵ Leo XIV, Apostolic Exhortation *Dilexi te*, 4 October 2025, 68
- ⁶ Leo XIV, *Drawing New Maps of Hope*, 1.1
- ⁷ Ibid., 3.2
- ⁸ Ibid., 4.2
- ⁹ Cf. Ibid., 4.3
- ¹⁰ Benedict XVI, Encyclical Letter *Deus Caritas Est*, 25 December 2005, 1
- ¹¹ Julián Carrón, *Education: Communicating One's Self* (New York: Human Adventure Books, 2019), 56.
- ¹² Leo XIV, *Drawing New Maps of Hope*, 9.2
- ¹³ Luigi Giussani, *The Risk of Education*, 2nd ed. (Montreal: McGill Queen's University Press), 2019, esp. 25-65
- ¹⁴ H. Peterson, J. Steiner, E. Fernandes, "Awakening Curiosity," in "Here New Life Begins: Proceedings of the New York Encounter 2025" (New York: Human Adventure Books), 2025, 143-163.
- ¹⁵ John Paul II, "Address to the Ambassador of New Zealand to the Holy See," 25 May 2000
- ¹⁶ Michael Hanby, "Quaerere Deum: What is Education and Why is it Catholic?" *Communio* 52 (Summer 2025), 226-244, at 229
- ¹⁷ Leo XIV, Encyclical Letter *Magnifica Humanitas*, 15 May 2026, 145
- ¹⁸ Leo XIV, *Drawing New Maps of Hope*, 5.2
- ¹⁹ Anselm of Canterbury, Proslogion, I.
- ²⁰ Ibid.
- ²¹ Congregation for Bishops, *Successores Apostolorum*, 22 February 2004, 119
- ²² Ibid. 123.
- ²³ Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 41
- ²⁴ A critique of this approach to education is offered by David Steiner in *A Nation at Thought: Restoring Wisdom in America's Public Schools*, Rowman Littlefield, 2023
- ²⁵ Leo XIV, Homily, Mass with students from the Pontifical Universities, 27 October 2025
- ²⁶ Jonathan Haidt, *The Anxious Generation: How the Great Rewiring of Childhood is causing an Epidemic of Mental Illness*, Penguin Press, 2024. Cf. www.anxiousgeneration.com
- ²⁷ Leo XIV, Homily, Mass with students from the Pontifical Universities, 27 October 2025
- ²⁸ Leo XIV, *Magnifica Humanitas*, 146
- ²⁹ Leo XIV, Address to Educators on the occasion of the Jubilee of The World of Education, 31 October 2025
- ³⁰ Augustine, *Confessions* IV, 8, 13
- ³¹ Leo XIV, *Magnifica Humanitas*, 143.
- ³² Benedict XVI, Address to Students at St. Mary's University College, Twickenham, 17 September 2010.

All photos not attributed are courtesy of The Office of Catholic Schools, Diocese of Columbus

For the full text of Bishop Fernandes'
Catholic Education: An Act of Hope
Dr. Adam Dufault's *Unapologetically Catholic: A Strategic Vision for*
the Future of Catholic Education in the Diocese of Columbus
Pope Leo XIV's *Drawing New Maps of Hope*
and *The Front Royal Statement: Seven Cardinal Principles of Catholic*
Primary and Secondary Education

please visit the link or scan the QR code below
columbuscatholic.org/catholic-education-an-act-of-hope

