

The Identity and Mission of Catholic schools in Evangelization of Asia

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I introduce this panel discussion by focusing on the identity and mission of Catholic schools in the context, areas and priorities of evangelization of Asia.

Asia is a challenging continent for evangelization. Birthplace of diverse religious traditions, embodying deep-rooted religious values, Asia presents a specific challenge for the Catholic Church, faced with the urgency of inculturating the Gospel and evangelizing its cultures, as it seeks with deep respect for these traditions and religions, to engage in sincere dialogue with their followers. Consequently, our Catholic schools too have to deal with the challenge of proclaiming, with a desire to lead others to faith in Christ, without imposing our faith in Christ; balancing respect for other religions, yet reaffirming what we believe about the truth that "Jesus is the Savior of the world".

Asia, home to 60% of the world's population, is marked by wide disparities and stark contrasts. While millions have been lifted out of poverty, millions of others struggle to survive. Corruption is both a cause and a result of poverty, affecting the poorest and the most vulnerable, promoting extreme social inequality, eroding opportunities, increasing marginalization of the disadvantaged and perpetuating injustice. This situation provides a compelling thrust for Catholic schools to focus its priorities on working towards a just society in Asia.

On the other hand, globalization and the media has resulted in Asian societies being confronted with widespread materialism, consumerism and the idolatry of Mammon presenting yet another challenge for Catholic schools who are guided in this by Catholic Social Teaching.

Then we have the challenge of living and witnessing to the gospel in times of persecution and in the face of restrictions of religious freedom, one of the essential human rights, which is threatened in some countries in Asia.

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In many parts in Asia, the Catholic Church also finds itself in the midst of struggles caused by communalist and fundamentalist ideologies. We might seem to be too small, but in responding to the gospel message of reconciliation, Catholic Schools have a special role, as effective agents, in fostering peace and understanding.

In some countries in Asia, Catholic Schools face restrictions, impositions and controls that encroach on the right, to establish and administer schools of their choice, and this can challenge the very core of Catholic Schools.

Catholic schools in some parts of Asia also have to face the image of being wrongly perceived as being part of a "foreign church". Divisions within Christianity are obstacles to giving a credible witness to the gospel and the negative consequences of some Christian sects and cults with fundamentalist ideas, severely obscures the work and witness of the Catholic Church and its schools in the eyes of the public.

We have more than half of the world's youth living in Asia and the Pacific, and this offers an unparalleled opportunity for Catholic Schools to form fully human and fully alive individuals with a Christian conscience, with a group representing half of humanity's future.

Asian Catholics are barely 3% of the Asian population (1% if one does not consider the Philippines) but account for more than 10 percent of the world's Catholics and this Asian Catholic population is growing. The role of Catholic schools is therefore crucial in ensuring that Catholics, despite being tiny minorities, continue to be light to the nation, salt of the earth and leaven in the dough. With an ageing population of priests and religious in more developed parts of the world, along with declining vocations, an opportunity presents itself, as Asian priests and seminarians account for 25% of all new priests and seminarians in the world. This trend requires a focused thrust to ensure that, in promoting vocations, Catholics students are formed with fidelity to the Church and its teachings.

The necessary emphasis on social welfare activities in Asian churches, also pose questions as to whether ours is really a religion or rather a social movement. In this regard, if Christ is not at the heart of a Catholic school, we have nothing to offer that is different from any other school and our efforts would indeed be reduced to social service.

In a pluralistic and globalized society, it is not uncommon to find some Catholic schools tending towards secularization, to the point where their Catholic Identity is compromised. The highest priority therefore, is a regular review, renewal and revitalization

of the Catholic Identity of our schools to ensure that the priority of mission is always the central focus of every Catholic school.

We can highlight seven defining features of identity and mission that determine the Catholicity of our schools. First and foremost, Catholic Education is Catholic Faith Inspired, exposing all students to the inspiration of Jesus Christ, while specially enabling Catholics to grow in knowledge, understanding & appreciation of their faith and preparing them for active, loyal and positive participation and leadership in the Church. Recognizing the uniqueness of each individual, Catholic Education is Personalist, adapting to the level & capabilities of each student who is taught how to learn with enthusiasm by teachers who offer personal guidance & counseling. In providing an Integral education, Catholic Schools, while preparing students academically and paying attention to their physical development; also develop in them Critical Thinking, encourage Creativity, form Emotionally mature persons, impart skills of effective expression; inspire Love & Respect for individuals and the environment; as well as promote an appreciation and love of one's country as well as sane Internationalism. Value Based Education help students model their lives on the teaching of Jesus through prayer, respect for life, practice of self-discipline, sharpening of value judgement and enabling responsible decision-making. Catholic schools are also distinguished by their Collaboration with all stakeholders - parents who are the primary educators of their children; teachers who share a common vision; management that is supportive and accountable for its Catholic identity; students who are marked by a solidarity that transcends differences; Alumni for life-long reinforcement of the ideals and values they were exposed to in school and collaboration with ecclesiastical and civil authorities. Catholic schools are Innovative, engage in on-going self-evaluation, promote professional and spiritual growth of teachers and encourage use of new techniques and technologies to ensure effective learning outcomes. Finally, Catholic Schools are marked by an Education towards a Just Society by forming Christian consciences; by fostering a critical reflection of the unjust situations and structures in which they live; by becoming a voice for the voiceless and by reaching the unreached through a preferential option for the poor and the marginalized.

Such authenticity of a Catholic school, is given life and expression through the vision, faith, enthusiasm, skills and leadership which a Catholic Head brings to the educational

ministry of the Church and given the crucial role they have, selection and on-going formation of Heads of schools must be given high priority.

From the context, areas and priorities regarding evangelization of Asia and the Identity of Catholic Schools, it is clear that Catholic Schools in Asia have an integral role to play and a precious service to render to the Church in its mission of evangelization. The distinctive characteristics of Catholic Education are all underscored by the many opportunities that a Catholic School presents to encounter Jesus. This is possible when Christ is the reason for our schools and when there is no doubt to all who enter a Catholic school that Jesus is the Reason for its existence. Jesus Christ, unseen but ever present; the Model of teachers; the Inspiration of students; the Core of relationships and the Foundation of governance.

This very special and distinct environment can only flow out of Catholic Identity and Mission, makes a Catholic School a place of good news and enables that personal encounter with Jesus who alone has the power to transform and motivate one to exclaim like the Apostles: “We are unable to hide what we have seen and heard” (*Acts 4, 20*) and as a consequence can also lead a person to decide in conscience, to a deeper conversion to Christ. This is the challenge, the priority and the hope of Catholic Schools for evangelization in Asia