

# **CATHOLIC SCHOOLS AT A CROSSROADS**



**PASTORAL LETTER OF THE BISHOPS OF NSW AND THE ACT**



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# SUMMARY

Catholic education in NSW and ACT is at a crossroads. Changes in enrolment patterns and in our educational and cultural context have radically affected the composition and roles of the Catholic school in recent years.

In this Pastoral Letter the Bishops of New South Wales and the Australian Capital Territory gratefully acknowledge the achievements of Catholic schools in our region and the quality and commitment of school staff. They invite reflection on the implications of our changing educational and cultural context, of the rising proportion of nominally-Catholic and other-than-Catholic enrolments, and of the under-participation of students from poorer families.

They ask all Catholic educational leaders, staff and parents, as well as the broader Catholic community, to join them in recommitting to Catholic schooling in the new situation of the 21st century. And they challenge all those involved to dedicate themselves to ensuring that our schools:

- + are truly Catholic in their identity and life
- + are centres of 'the new evangelisation'
- + enable our students to achieve high levels of 'Catholic religious literacy' and practice
- + are led and staffed by people who will contribute to these goals.

The Bishops identify a number of critical indicators against which progress towards these goals will be measured. Evangelising, forming and otherwise educating our next generation is a task for the whole Church; but the Bishops look especially to those involved in our schools to make the most of what Pope John Paul II called "the sense of adventure" involved in renewing Catholic education. They look with confidence to those educated in our schools to be prominent among the future leaders and disciples of our Church and community.





# PURPOSES OF THIS PASTORAL LETTER

Catholic education is at a crossroads. Changing circumstances have radically affected the composition and role of the Catholic school in recent years.

In this Pastoral Letter the Bishops of New South Wales and the Australian Capital Territory (NSW-ACT) invite Catholic educational leaders, staff and parents, as well as the broader Catholic community, to join with us in reflecting upon the future of Catholic schools in NSW-ACT. We here reaffirm our commitment to Catholic education, while at the same time challenging all those involved to embrace the new evangelisation to which our schools are called in this new century.

The Catholic Bishops of NSW-ACT invite all those involved in Catholic education – our educational leaders and staff, clergy and religious, parents and parish communities – to dedicate themselves to ensuring that our schools:

- + are truly Catholic in their identity and life
- + are centres of ‘the new evangelisation’
- + enable our students to achieve high levels of ‘Catholic religious literacy’
- + are led and staffed by people who will contribute to these goals.



# ACHIEVEMENTS AND POTENTIAL

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The Catholic school system is one of the “jewels in the crown” of the Catholic community in our region, with few parallels overseas. It has provided high-quality education to generations of young Australians and has been a major arm of the Church’s engagement with youth. Through our schools many others have also been positively affected. As the principal pastors of the dioceses of NSW-ACT we wish to acknowledge the achievements of those who have built and served our school system – religious and lay staff, as well as parents and parish communities – and to record the gratitude of the Church for this.

We also acknowledge the significant contribution of successive governments and the wider community to our schools. We are encouraged by the confidence that they have placed in Catholic schools. We believe that trust has been deserved: Catholic schools have contributed to the whole community through educating a significant proportion of its young people, through offering a distinctive vision and values, and through complementing the government school system and enabling choice and diversity in education.

The roles and responsibilities of Catholic schools have changed over the years. Most of the schools were established in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to assist poor families to educate their children and to pass on the Catholic faith and practices in a sometimes hostile social context. By the mid-twentieth century there were high rates of practice of the faith amongst Catholic families, the surrounding culture was largely Christian, and so much of the faith was transmitted outside the school.

In the early twenty-first century we find that demographic and economic change have meant that the poor are no longer over-represented in our schools, although recent migrants and refugees often are. While our school leaders try to ensure that no child is denied enrolment due to inability to pay school fees, we recognise that financial stress and other factors press many Catholic families to look elsewhere for schooling. Many of our young people now have little or no connection with the Church outside their school. Furthermore, many other-than-Catholic families now entrust their children to Catholic schools. Thus, while our schools continue to embrace their traditional responsibility for religious and other education, they now have a different mix of students and less support for their specifically religious mission from outside the school than they had in the past. The surrounding culture and its powerful agents such as the media and new technologies are also commonly less supportive.

Fortunately, our school leaders and staff are highly professional and pastoral, and better resourced than ever before. However, our most experienced staff – many of whom were originally members of, or were trained by, religious orders – are now retiring and need to be replaced.

While we are proud of our educational achievements, we must not be complacent. While the resources, goodwill and experience in our schools present tremendous opportunities, there are also many challenges today. Not all of our students have been as well served catechetically or pastorally as they might have been. Nor have our schools always been as well supported by families and parishes as they would have wished. As a result the tremendous potential of Catholic education has not always been fully realised. In order to make the most of our opportunities, it will be important for the whole Catholic community, especially those most intimately involved in Catholic education, to re-examine our situation, central goals, and means to those goals.





*The Bishops, on behalf of the Catholic community, gratefully acknowledge the achievements of Catholic education for nearly two centuries in NSW-ACT. We reaffirm our commitment to the task of Catholic schooling in the new situation of the 21st century.*

# TRENDS IN SCHOOLS, PARISHES AND SOCIETY

The Catholic school-aged population of NSW-ACT has grown considerably over the past two decades, as has the number of students in Catholic schools. Demand for Catholic education keeps rising, though much faster in secondary than primary schools. Pre-schools are also appearing on many parish properties, though not normally under the auspices of the Church.

Most of the additional students in our Catholic schools are not Catholics. That other-than-Catholic families should entrust their children to Catholic schools reflects well upon the standards and particular qualities of Catholic schools. Good Catholic schools are good schools. But there has been a fall in the number of Catholic students attending our schools during this period of growth. Half the students of Catholic families are enrolled in State schools, and a growing proportion go to non-Catholic independent schools. In the past two decades the proportion of children in NSW-ACT schools from non-practising Catholic families has risen considerably. Meanwhile other-than-Catholic enrolments have more than doubled from 9% to 20%, and may continue to rise.

Another enrolment trend of particular concern has been the decline in representation in our schools of students from both poorer and wealthier families. Put plainly: poorer Catholic children are increasingly attending State schools, while wealthier Catholic children go to non-Catholic non-government schools. Children from what has come to be known as 'middle Australia' now predominate in our schools. This pattern is not uniform across rural, regional and urban communities or across diocesan (systemic) and Congregational schools, and the reasons for it are complex.

Building upon the heritage of 'mission schools and 'special schools' founded by religious congregations, integration of students into regular Catholic schools is now prevalent. We are pleased that many of our schools have significantly increased their enrolments of Aboriginal students. Likewise the numbers of students with disabilities keep rising. But increasing accessibility for all students remains a significant challenge in some places.

Culture and society affect our schools in more ways than just enrolment patterns. Within the Catholic community fewer people attend Mass; and fewer priests and religious are in service than was previously the case. Recent studies suggest that fewer young people now identify themselves with churches or religions. Society-wide trends such as secularisation, consumerism, family dysfunction and values disorientation also impact upon young people. The schools often have to pick up the pieces in the face of competing pressures from many directions.

Some have proposed that we should resist the pressure of demand for Catholic schooling, and downsize our school system to a scale at which we can choose students and staff who readily embrace the mission of the Catholic school. Alternatively, we can reaffirm our commitment to the essential elements of the Catholic school while recognising, and even embracing, changing enrolment patterns as 'signs of the times' and of a new mission for Catholic education.

The Bishops of NSW-ACT believe that this second course is the better way forward, and we commit ourselves to it.



*We invite all those involved with our Catholic schools to reflect with us on the implications of enrolment trends in NSW-ACT, especially the rising proportion of nominally-Catholic and other-than-Catholic enrolments, and the need to ensure participation by all social strata of our community, especially the poor.*

# IDENTITY OF THE CATHOLIC SCHOOL

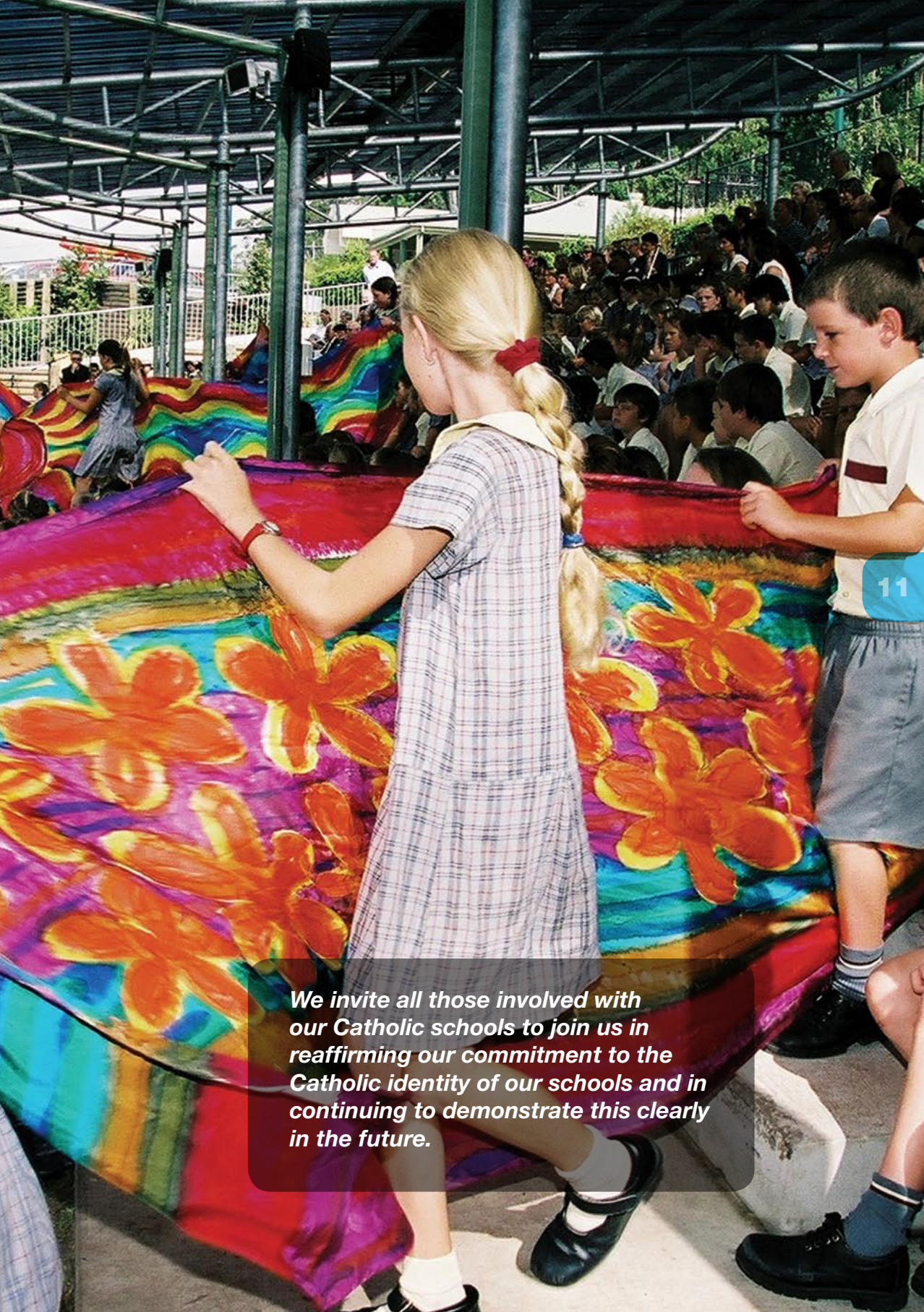
Much has been written in previous Church documents and elsewhere on the identity of the Catholic school and we need not repeat that here. Put simply: the Catholic school is the principal educational arm of Catholic families, parishes and the wider Church for those generally aged under eighteen. It is there to assist parents and parishes in their educational, evangelical and catechetical mission, as well as to help the wider community in its educational and civic service.

It is for this reason that the Church remains committed to ensuring that there is a 'critical mass' of Catholic students in our schools, even though we also readily welcome students from other religious backgrounds. We exhort our school leaders to re-examine how they might maximise enrolment of Catholic students, including those from socio-economic bands and ethnic and special needs groups currently under-represented in their schools. Parish schools should continue to seek out and give preference to the children of their own parishioners, then to other Catholic children especially from the surrounding district, then to other Christian children, before offering any additional available places to children of other religious backgrounds. Regional secondary schools and Congregational schools should apply similar principles.

However, much more is required for a genuinely Catholic school than just a preponderance of students from Catholic families.

It is essential that:

- + leaders and staff understand, and are solidly committed to, the Catholic identity of the school
- + the Religious Education (RE) curriculum is sound, attractive and professionally taught by teachers with appropriate RE qualifications
- + other disciplines also consider the Catholic dimension of their subject areas
- + schools are Eucharistic communities within the parish context where, as far as possible, students regularly take part in Mass and Reconciliation
- + schools continue to be places of prayer, including prayer at assemblies, in classes and in other staff and student meetings, and places where practices are encouraged such as Scripture reflections, the Angelus, Eucharistic adoration and prayerful silences
- + schools are places cultivating a Catholic imagination, where prayer and liturgy are supported by a Catholic visual culture, including crucifixes and pictures of Our Lady and the saints
- + schools are connected to their local parish(es) and diocese, through inviting the periodic presence of the bishop, clergy, religious and parents in the school, and through active collaboration with the wider Catholic community
- + families and parishes support their schools in these important endeavours.



*We invite all those involved with our Catholic schools to join us in reaffirming our commitment to the Catholic identity of our schools and in continuing to demonstrate this clearly in the future.*

# CATHOLIC SCHOOLS AS CENTRES OF 'THE NEW EVANGELISATION'

In his Encyclical on the Church's Mission John Paul II said: "I sense that the moment has come to commit all the Church's energies to a new evangelisation." (*Redemptoris Missio*, 1990) This call was the antiphon of his pontificate as he called the Church to preach the Gospel anew in previously Christian communities which were falling away from the Gospel in the face of secularisation and other cultural change. In his Apostolic Exhortation on Catechesis the Pope explained that the definitive aim of evangelisation "is to put people not only in touch but in communion, in intimacy, with Jesus Christ: only He can lead us to the love of the Father in the Spirit and make us share in the life of the Holy Trinity." (*Catechesi Tradendæ*, 1979) In this John Paul II echoed his predecessors such as Paul VI, whose own Encyclical on Evangelisation in the Modern World, *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (1975), remains a classic on this topic. This emphasis on evangelisation and catechesis has been reiterated by Pope Benedict XVI and by Church leaders around the world.

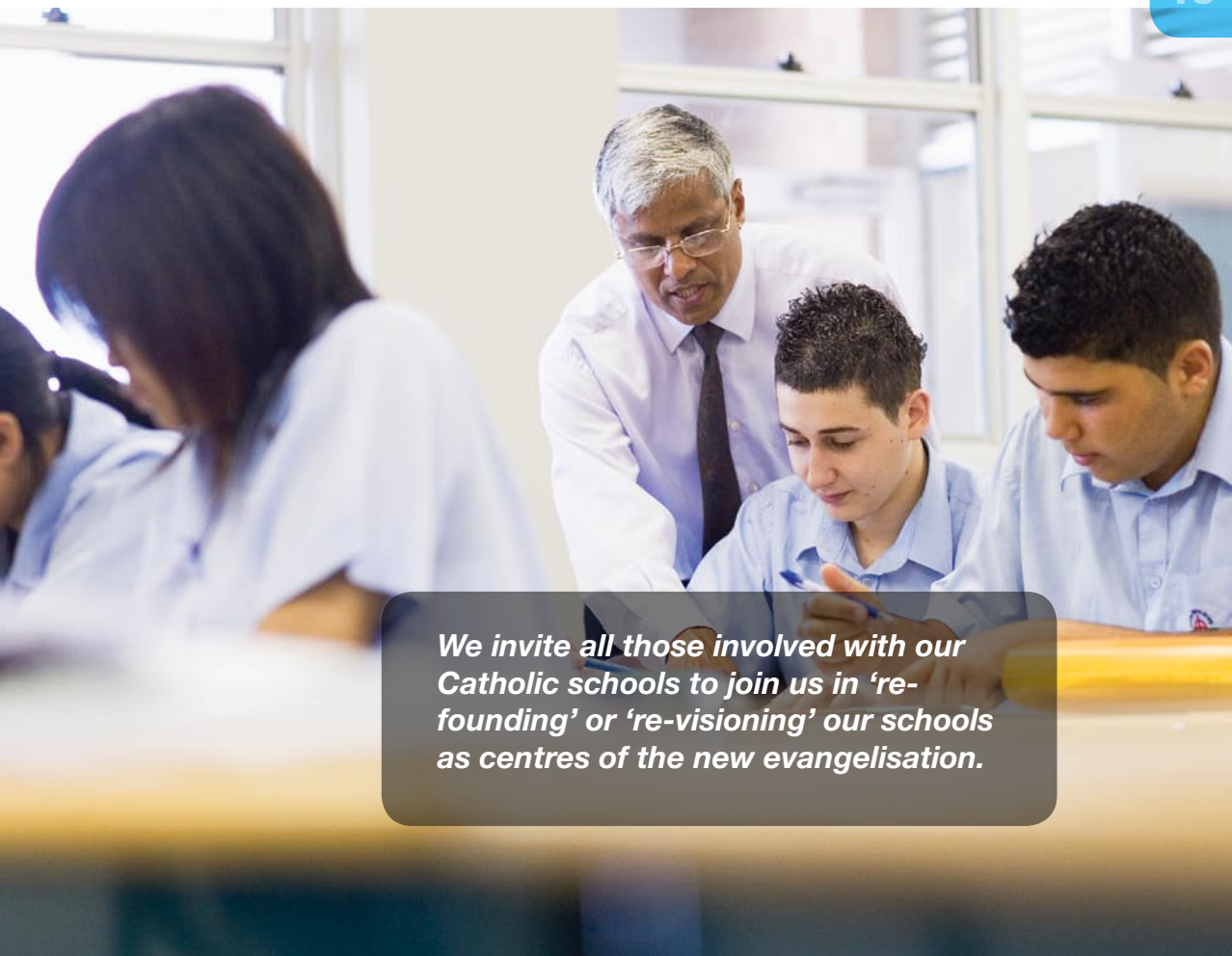
*Evangelisation* means proclaiming the Good News of salvation in Jesus Christ. Its goal is bringing people to faith through a personal encounter with Him. It is to be distinguished from *catechesis*, which involves deepening and instructing that faith already received. In his Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation on Jesus Christ and the Peoples of Oceania, John Paul II noted that:

*Living the life of Jesus Christ implies... a living spirituality and authentic morality, strengthened by the word of God in Scripture and celebrated in the Sacraments of the Church. When Christians live the life of Christ with deeper faith, their hope grows stronger and their charity more radiant. That was the goal of the Synod, and it is the goal of the new evangelisation to which the Spirit is summoning the whole Church... The present generation of Christians is called and sent now to accomplish a new evangelisation among the peoples of Oceania, a fresh proclamation of the enduring truth evoked by the symbol of the Southern Cross. This call to mission poses great challenges, but it also opens new horizons, full of hope and even a sense of adventure. (Ecclesia in Oceania 2001, 8 and 13)*

The 'sense of adventure' inspired by the new evangelisation is all the more urgent in the context of growing numbers of non-practising Catholics, under-catechised Catholics and other-than-Catholic students in our schools. All Christians receive the gift of faith at Baptism, and many others carry "the seeds of faith" within their hearts. But many of them need the Gospel to be proclaimed to them anew. This is not a matter of proselytising or "forcing beliefs down students' throats" – quite the contrary. Genuine faith cannot be imposed: it is freely received or rejected. If we are "up front" about our educational and catechetical goals with any prospective student, teacher or parent, while encouraging students to engage with open hearts and reasoning minds, then we are fully justified in engaging in activities of witness, formation and service.

If Catholic schools are to be centres of the new evangelisation:

- + the life and activity in the school would be the context for a personal encounter with Christ and would promote, and never contradict, the teachings of the Church
- + all those involved in our schools would appreciate their roles in receiving and proclaiming the Good News by word and deed, and by the example of their lives
- + students would participate in RE classes, liturgies, retreats and prayers which are, as far as possible, tailored to their place in the journey of faith, addressing the core of our faith and inviting a response
- + special programs would be developed for students who first enter a Catholic school later than Kindergarten (for instance in Year 7) and may not have received much prior religious education
- + schools would work with their local parish(es) to establish programs for initiating children and young adults into the Church
- + other efforts would be pursued to integrate the activity of our primary and secondary schools with the life of the surrounding parish(es) and diocese, so that our young people are given a sense of belonging to a wider Church beyond their family and school
- + consideration would be given to the desirability of establishing Catholic pre-schools, with catechesis appropriate to this crucial stage in faith formation
- + every effort would be made to engage our students and young teachers in preparations for, participation in and enrichment after major religious events such as World Youth Day
- + families and parishes would back up and support their schools in all these activities.



*We invite all those involved with our Catholic schools to join us in 're-founding' or 're-visioning' our schools as centres of the new evangelisation.*

# PASSING ON CATHOLIC FAITH, LIFE AND CULTURE

Evangelisation is crucial, but not enough. Faith, like a seed newly planted in the soil of the human heart, needs water and light. That is why our schools must deepen and instruct the faith once received. We call this *catechesis* or *religious instruction*. Faith must also be supported by the religious culture of the school so that it will be practised in worship, vocation and action in the world.

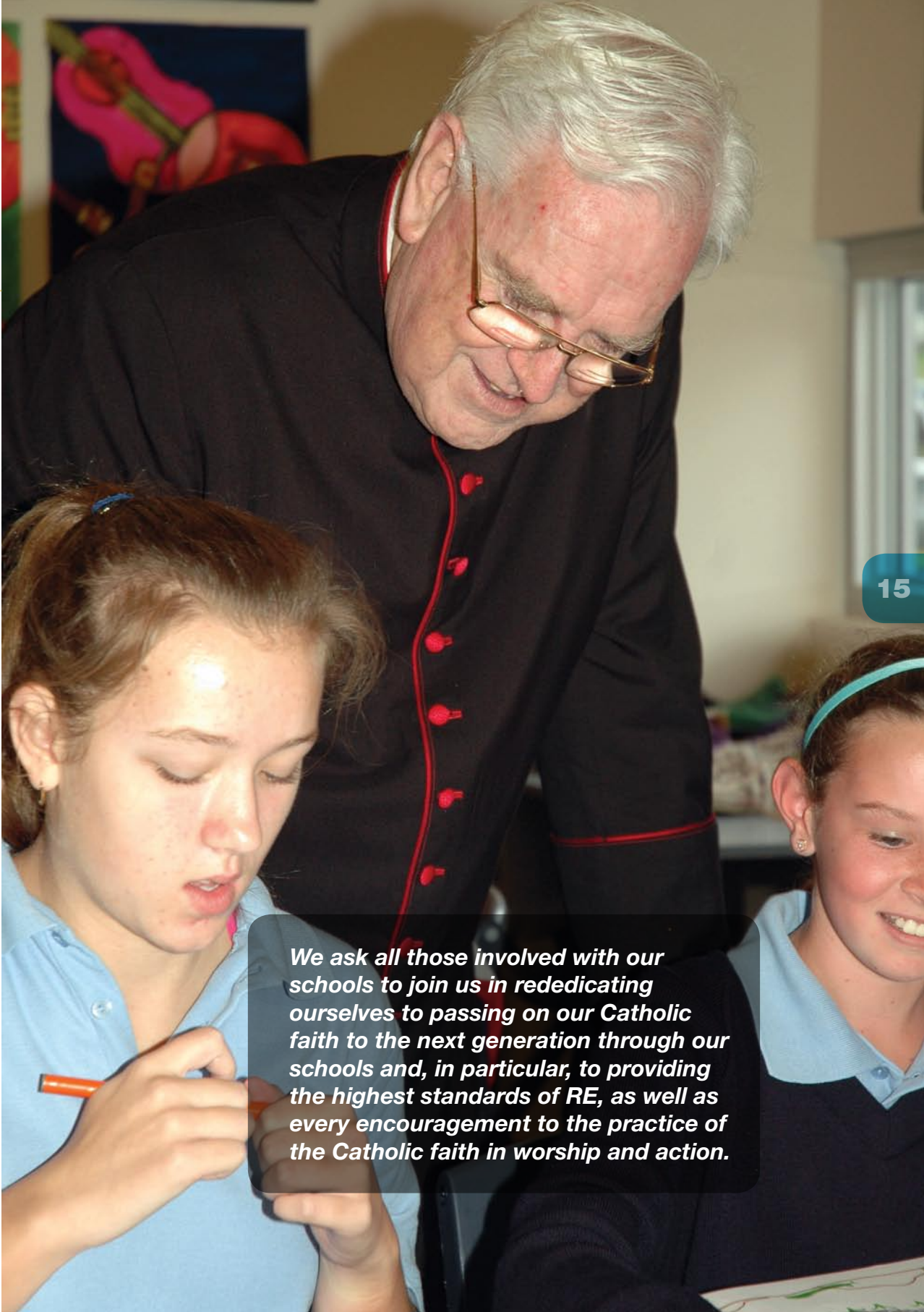
It is sometimes observed that many young people emerge from our schools with insufficient knowledge of the Catholic faith or interest in practising it. Of course seeds of faith may have been planted that will only show forth fruit later in their lives. Nor is this solely the responsibility of the school: society, parishes, families and the young themselves also bear the burden of this trend. The Catholic school is well placed, however, to support young people, teachers and families to grow in their knowledge and love for the Catholic tradition. As some teachers have received limited faith formation themselves, they need particular support and professional development. We commit our Catholic Education Offices and parishes to providing this where possible.

Young people in our schools and their families deserve no less than the fullness of “the faith that comes to us from the apostles”. (*Eucharistic Prayer I*) Therefore enthusiasm for social justice, ecology, the charism of the founder or some particular school initiative must always be situated within the broader context of Catholic faith and morals. It must never eclipse the building of a relationship with Jesus Christ and his Church. No student should leave our Catholic schools without knowing the essentials of Catholic teaching as found in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* and its *Compendium*, and all catechetical programs and RE texts should build upon these.

If Catholic schools are to succeed in passing on the Catholic faith to the next generation:

- + schools will have as their goal the formation of Christian disciples, with appropriate world view, character and behaviour
- + RE curriculum, methodologies, texts and other resources will be chosen to ensure that by the end of their schooling students know the core teachings of our faith, our Scriptures, history and tradition (‘Catholic religious literacy’) and how these are to be lived in the world
- + in particular, students will be brought to a knowledge and, as far as possible, love of the person, life and teachings of Christ and of the Trinitarian God of Love
- + students will also be brought to a knowledge and love of the People of God, the Church, who join them in their pilgrimage through life and support them through the Word of God and the Sacraments
- + students will be prepared for the challenges to their faith that may come while still at school or after they have left school
- + RE classes will therefore be given priority with regard to the school curriculum, time and space allocation and the choice and recognition of staff
- + there will be demonstrations of Catholic religious literacy through appropriate assessment and religious activities
- + our schools will also seek to involve parents and families in the process of evangelising and catechising their children, seeking in the process also to educate those families in the faith.





*We ask all those involved with our schools to join us in rededicating ourselves to passing on our Catholic faith to the next generation through our schools and, in particular, to providing the highest standards of RE, as well as every encouragement to the practice of the Catholic faith in worship and action.*

# LEADING AND STAFFING OUR SCHOOLS IN THIS NEW ERA

There are many reasons why the Church remains concerned to ensure that there is a 'critical mass' of Catholic leaders and staff in our schools – although we also welcome appropriately qualified staff who are committed Christians or followers of other religions. These staff members, though not Catholic, generously work to support our mission. No-one doubts that the faith and practice of the leaders and staff in a Catholic school significantly affect the students and the character of the education offered.

If Catholic schools are to succeed in the mission articulated above it will be essential that:

- + all those appointed as Principals, Assistant Principals and Religious Education Co-ordinators (RECs) are faithful Catholics who are ready to embrace the mission of the Catholic school today and to lead and inspire their staff and parents accordingly
- + as far as possible only practising and knowledgeable Catholics are charged with the task of teaching RE in our schools
- + all teachers are committed to the mission of the school and teach and live in accordance with the teachings of the Church
- + while fully supporting existing leaders and staff in our Catholic schools, we identify and form a new generation of leaders and teachers who are deeply committed to the goals of Catholic education
- + vocations to the priesthood, religious life and Christian marriage are actively promoted in our schools
- + Catholic tertiary institutions and those providing inservice and other support are thoroughly informed of the identity and mission of the Catholic school and effective in providing our leaders and staff with the knowledge and skills they need.

The formation of our Catholic school leaders and teachers is crucial for the achievement of the goals of this Pastoral Letter. We thank our present leaders and teachers for their professionalism and generous commitment to Catholic education and to our young people.

We also look with great confidence to the next generation of staff: the challenge is how best to form them. Some will be prepared in secular institutions and will require additional formation when entering the Catholic system. Many will be prepared in Catholic tertiary institutions. The Bishops of NSW-ACT propose to investigate the range of options for forming Catholic school leaders and teachers for the future, and to examine the 'fit' between the needs of our schools and the present programs of teacher education, inservicing and professional development. In particular, we will examine the means developed by these institutions to foster the Catholic faith, knowledge and practice of future teachers. In the meantime we invite all institutions engaged in the formation of Catholic teachers to examine their programs in the light of the goals expressed in this Pastoral Letter.



*We invite all those involved in Catholic education to join us in choosing and supporting leaders and staff for our schools who will effectively embrace the mission articulated in this Pastoral Letter. Particular attention must be given to succession planning, leadership formation and the preparation of Catholic teachers.*

# CRITICAL INDICATORS OF PROGRESS

In this Pastoral Letter we have raised matters for reflection and highlighted challenges for all of us involved in Catholic schools in this new century. To achieve the goals articulated will require the focus and energy of our schools, families, parishes and the wider Church.

How will we know if we have achieved or are at least making progress towards these goals? Each of the Bishops of NSW-ACT undertakes, with the help of our Catholic Education Offices, our Congregational school leaders and other interested parties, to continue to identify and articulate specific markers of progress towards the goals outlined in this Letter and to monitor and measure progress against such markers.

These might include:

- + the Catholic purpose of the school is clearly stated in each school's Mission Statement
- + all Principals, Assistant Principals and RECs are practising Catholics who understand and profess the Catholic faith, model it in their own lives, and can teach it effectively
- + progress towards an increase in the proportion of school staff – and especially of RE teachers – who are practising and knowledgeable Catholics
- + at application and appointment to a new position, and on other appropriate occasions, leaders and staff are reminded of the Catholic identity and mission of the school and of the expectation that they will commit themselves to that mission
- + progress towards an increase in the proportion of students in our schools who are Catholic
- + at application for enrolment, at admission, and on other appropriate occasions, parents and students are reminded of the Catholic identity and mission of the school and of the expectation that they will assist in that mission
- + the presence of distinctively Catholic symbols and practices as part of the daily life of the school
- + efforts to connect with Catholic families and to maximise their participation in Catholic schools
- + the provision, in conjunction with local parish(es) and diocese, of programs for students wishing to join the Catholic Church
- + continued development and deployment of curriculum, methodologies and resources such as texts which promote high levels of Catholic religious literacy
- + co-curricular activities aimed at further evangelising and catechising students and otherwise nourishing their spiritual life (eg retreats, Project Compassion, St Vincent de Paul groups)
- + systematic external assessment of Catholic religious literacy
- + maximum involvement by students and younger staff in religious events such as World Youth Days
- + progress toward significantly increased attendance at Sunday Mass, and deeper involvement in the life of the local Church by students and ex-students
- + progress towards an increase in the proportion of students in our schools who are from poorer families.

We have also recently commissioned the Catholic Education Commission, New South Wales to investigate the desirability and feasibility of establishing Catholic pre-schools – including questions such as demand, governance and staffing – and ways of increasing enrolment of Catholic children in Catholic schools. We further encourage the Commission, our Directors of Catholic Education and Congregational school authorities to continue to monitor, advise and reflect upon enrolment trends in Catholic schools.



*The Bishops of NSW-ACT request diocesan Directors of Catholic Education and Congregational school authorities to address these and any other critical indicators identified by their local Bishop and report progress annually to him.*

# THE ADVENTURE OF CATHOLIC SCHOOLING IN THE 21ST CENTURY

The Church looks to her young people with confidence as future leaders and disciples. Their education and formation are therefore crucial. Catholic schools have reached a critical moment in their history. Changes in educational and cultural context and in enrolment patterns provide new challenges and opportunities. As the Bishops of New South Wales and the Australian Capital Territory we invite educational leaders, teachers and parents, as well as the broader Catholic community, to join us in reflecting upon the issues in this Pastoral Letter and recommitting to the adventure of Catholic schooling in our new century.

Evangelising, forming and otherwise educating our next generation is not the task of our schools alone: it requires a common effort from all our families, parishes and agencies. Nevertheless we look to those involved in our schools to ensure that their very significant resources achieve, as far as possible, what the Catholic community rightly expects: young men and women of character and faith whose individual gifts are nurtured to their highest potential so that they can contribute effectively to Church, society and culture.

Great things have already been achieved in our Catholic schools and are being achieved daily; greater things are still possible, and indeed required, as together we forge the way ahead.

*Issued by the Bishops of New South Wales and the Australian Capital Territory on 8 August 2007, the Feast of Blessed Mary MacKillop, Founder and Patron of many Australian Catholic schools.*





# THE SIGNATORIES

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+ A. Abikaram

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David L. Walker

+ DAVID L WALKER  
Bishop of Broken Bay







**Catholic education in NSW and ACT is at a crossroads. Changes in enrolment patterns and in our educational and cultural context have radically affected the composition and roles of the Catholic school in recent years.**

**In this Pastoral Letter the Bishops of NSW and the ACT invite reflection on the implications of our changing educational and cultural context, of the rising proportion of nominally-Catholic and other-than-Catholic enrolments, and of the under-participation of students from poorer families. They ask Catholic educational leaders, staff and parents, as well as the broader Catholic community, to join them in recommitting to Catholic schooling in the 21st century.**

