



Christ the Teacher

Third Festival Letter of
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BISHOP OF PEORIA

**Third Festival Letter – Diocese of Peoria
Epiphany – Year of Our Lord 2005 Most
Reverend Bishop Daniel R. Jenky, C.S.C**

CHRIST THE TEACHER

The Lord Jesus Christ came into this world to manifest God's love and to teach the fullness of truth. He also sent the disciples out as teachers to announce that same Good News. Today, his Holy Catholic Church continues his teaching mission through the ministries of preaching, evangelization, and education. As the Catholic Diocese of Peoria has just completed a very successful Capital Campaign, *Rooted in Faith*, in support of Catholic education at every level, *for our Children, for our Faith, for our Future*, I thought it would be appropriate to devote this, my *Third Festival Letter*, to the topic Catholic education.

The first Bishop of Peoria, John Lancaster Spalding, established Catholic education as one of the greatest priorities of this local church. In an era when the public schools were effectively Protestant schools and often explicitly hostile to Catholic doctrine and practice, our founding bishop worked tirelessly to establish a network of Catholic grammar schools and high schools across Central Illinois. As a nationally recognized expert in education, he certainly believed that all Catholic schools should strive for academic excellence. He and his collaborators were equally convinced that the foundational purpose of our schools was to teach according to the mind of Christ and to pass on the deposit of faith undiminished to future generations. His flock consisted mostly of the immigrant poor, many of whom were not well educated. Many had not even mastered the English language. These railroad workers, miners, farmers and laborers made enormous sacrifices to establish Catholic schools, often in the face of fierce opposition from their nativist neighbors.

Added to the zeal of the faithful and the determination of their pastors was the life-long sacrifice of consecrated women. It was these religious, vowed to poverty and totally committed to the education of their students, who made Catholic schools possible for generations of believers. The sisters taught, disciplined, comforted, and encouraged the growing progress of the young. How many of us today would be Catholic, much less educated or prepared to take our place in today's world, were it not for the self-sacrificing commitment of these holy women? The Church of today has a clear obligation to honor the heroic sacrifice of the past and not allow our faith-based school system to die or diminish.

Besides gathering the necessary financial resources essential to support today's Catholic schools, religious education, and Newman centers, I believe it is even more vital to be crystal clear about why we make these sacrifices. Our efforts to educate younger students and accompany young adults in higher education must always be understood as an intentional apostolate of the Roman Church. We do not sponsor a private school system; we support a

Catholic school system. Our approach to religious education and moral instruction should never be *Catholic light*, but always Catholic intensive. Catholic doctrine, Catholic ritual, Catholic ethos, and a deliberately Catholic commitment to social justice should dominate all programs. Our moral standards for students, parents, volunteers, teachers, coaches and administrators must always be higher than those of any secular institutions. Jesus Christ should always be publically acknowledged as *The* Teacher in our schools and the Lord of everything we undertake in religious education or college-age ministries. Our efforts for academic excellence, success in sports, friendship, and spirit must always be preeminently grounded in the shared spiritual life, worship, morality, and tradition of this Catholic Diocese.

Being a part of any Catholic ministry is always a free choice. No one is ever compelled to send their children to our schools, work for our institutions, or sacrifice for our ministries. Those who do not believe in what is intentionally distinctive about a Catholic education should certainly look elsewhere for either learning or employment. All involved need to be acting in harmony with what is explicitly Catholic about our institutions. Parents should first be asked to understand and then to consistently support our faith-based approach to learning. What is being taught in our schools about truth, about morality, about our shared obligations to God and neighbor should be deliberately reinforced by good example at home. Sadly, we live in a secular culture that increasingly refuses to impose any limits and seems to have forgotten how to say no. In our religion, however, there is always right and wrong, true and false, good and evil. The growing tendency of some parents not to support school discipline or even to resort to litigation to shield their children from the consequences of their bad choices is utterly illogical. Why be a part of a Catholic school system and not support the values that give it meaning? Whatever others may decide for themselves, our educational apostolates will consistently function in harmony with Catholic teaching and the highest possible moral standards.

The 1960's are long over and in this, the twenty-first century of the Christian era, all our schools, religious education programs, and Newman Centers must, more than ever before, fully embrace the revealed truth of our religion. Wherever necessary, we should decisively put behind us the days of watering down Catholic doctrine or encouraging disobedience to moral imperatives. A religion unable to insist upon its foundational beliefs, especially in its own programs of education and faith formation, has clearly reached a stage of decadence. It would be incapable of maintaining its own identity, as it would be unable to even discipline creedal dissent. Such a church would not and could not claim the time and loyalty of its members. Catholic Christianity, however, must always boldly proclaim the fullness of Divine Revelation.

The Church lives by a clear moral code centered on the teaching of Christ and is unafraid to condemn whatever is sinful and false. The rich doctrinal and spiritual tradition of our Church offers compelling answers to the great questions of human existence. For both the young and the old, an authentic Catholic ethos charges life with meaning and fills the human enterprise with significance. The Universal Church is thus able to inspire the loyalty of its members for the glory of God and service of neighbor. Anything less than absolute fidelity to this vital Catholic tradition would hardly be worth the effort. As a diocese, as a local church, we must all work together to be better educators in the Faith. We must be determined to keep Christ at the center

of all that we do as individuals and as a local church, most especially in our apostolates of education.

For our Children, for our Faith, for our Future, through the rhythms and seasons of the Church Year, may we all live and serve in the boundless mystery of God's great love.

May Saint Mary of the Immaculate Conception and Good Saint of Joseph the Worker, the heavenly patrons of this diocese, pray with us and for us.

And may Almighty God bless you, + the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

+ Daniel R. Jenky C.S.C.

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