

CONGREGATION FOR CATHOLIC EDUCATION

***CIRCULAR LETTER
TO THE PRESIDENTS OF BISHOPS' CONFERENCES
ON RELIGIOUS EDUCATION IN SCHOOLS***

Your Eminence/Excellency,

The nature and role of religious education in schools has become the object of debate. In some cases, it is now the object of new civil regulations, which tend to replace religious education with teaching about the religious phenomenon in a multi-denominational sense, or about religious ethics and culture – even in a way that contrasts with the choices and educational aims that parents and the Church intend for the formation of young people.

Therefore, by means of this *Circular Letter* addressed to the Presidents of Bishops' Conferences, this Congregation for Catholic Education deems it necessary to recall some principles that are rooted in Church teaching, as clarification and instruction about the role of schools in the Catholic formation of young people, about the nature and identity of the Catholic school, about religious education in schools, and about the freedom of choice of school and confessional religious education.

I. The role of schools in the Catholic formation of new generations

1. Education today is a complex task, which is made more difficult by rapid social, economic, and cultural changes. Its specific mission remains the integral formation of the human person. Children and young people must be guaranteed the possibility of developing harmoniously their own physical, moral, intellectual and spiritual gifts, and they must also be helped to develop their sense of responsibility, learn the correct use of freedom, and participate actively in social life (cf. c. 795 Code of Canon Law [CIC]; c. 629 Code of Canons for the Eastern Churches [CCEO]). A form of education that ignores or marginalises the moral and religious dimension of the person is a hindrance to full education, because “children and young people have a right to be motivated to appraise moral values with a right conscience, to embrace them with a personal adherence, together with a deeper knowledge and love of God.” That is why the [Second Vatican Council](#) asked and recommended “all those who hold a position of

public authority or who are in charge of education to see to it that youth is never deprived of this sacred right” (Declaration [Gravissimum educationis](#) [GE],1).

2. Such education requires the contribution of many agents of education. Parents, having given life to their children, are their primary and principal educators (cf. [GE](#) 3; John Paul II, Apostolic Exhortation [Familiaris consortio](#) [FC], 22 November 1981, 36; c. 793 CIC; c. 627 CCEO). For that reason, it is the responsibility of Catholic parents to look after the Christian education of their children (c. 226 CIC; c. 627 CCEO). In this primary task, parents need the subsidiary help of civil society and other institutions. Indeed, “the family is the primary, but not the only and exclusive educating community” ([FC](#) 40; cfr [GE](#) 3).

3. “Among all educational instruments the school has a special importance” ([GE](#) 5), as it is “the principal assistance to parents in fulfilling the function of education” (c. 796 § 1 CIC), particularly in order to favour the transmission of culture and education for co-existence. In this educational setting – and in conformity with international legislation and human rights – “the right of parents to choose an education in conformity with their religious faith must be absolutely guaranteed” ([FC](#) 40). Catholic parents “are to entrust their children to those schools which provide a Catholic education” (c. 798 CIC) and, when this is not possible, they must provide for their Catholic education in other ways (cf. *ibidem*).

4. The [Second Vatican Council](#) “reminds parents of the duty that is theirs to arrange and even demand” for their children to be able to receive a moral and religious education “and advance in their Christian formation to a degree that is abreast of their development in secular subjects. Therefore the Church esteems highly those civil authorities and societies which, bearing in mind the pluralism of contemporary society and respecting religious freedom, assist families so that the education of their children can be imparted in all schools according to the individual moral and religious principles of the families” ([GE](#) 7).

To sum up:

– *Education today is a complex, vast, and urgent task. This complexity today risks making us lose what is essential, that is, the formation of the human person in its totality, particularly as regards the religious and spiritual dimension.*

– *Although the work of educating is accomplished by different agents, it is parents who are primarily responsible for education.*

– *This responsibility is exercised also in the right to choose the school that guarantees an education in accordance with one's own religious and moral principles.*

II. Nature and identity of the Catholic school: the right to a Catholic education for families and pupils. Subsidiarity and educational collaboration

5. The Catholic school plays a particular role in education and formation. Many communities and religious congregations have distinguished themselves, and commendably continue to devote themselves to the service of primary and secondary education. Yet the whole Christian community, and particularly the diocesan Ordinary, bear the responsibility “of arranging everything so that all the faithful have a Catholic education” (c. 794 § 2 CIC) and, more precisely, of having “schools which offer an education imbued with a Christian spirit” (c. 802 CIC; cfr c. 635 CCEO).

6. Catholic schools are characterised by the institutional link they keep with the Church hierarchy, which guarantees that the instruction and education be grounded in the principles of the Catholic faith and imparted by teachers of right doctrine and probity of life (cf. c. 803 CIC; cc. 632 e 639 CCEO). In these educational centres – which are open to all who share and respect their educational goals – the atmosphere must be permeated by the evangelical spirit of freedom and charity, which fosters the harmonious development of each one's personality. In this setting, human culture as a whole is harmonised with the message of salvation, so that the pupils gradually acquire a knowledge of the world, life and humanity that is be enlightened by the Gospel (cf. [GE](#) 8; c. 634 § 1 CCEO).

7. In this way, the right of families and pupils to an authentic Catholic education is ensured and, at the same time, the cultural aims – as well as those of human and academic formation of young people – that are characteristic of any school, are fulfilled (cf. c. 634 § 3 CCEO; c. 806 § 2 CIC).

8. Aware of how difficult this is today, it is to be hoped that the school and the family will be in harmony as regards the process of education and as regards the individual's formation. This will avoid tensions or rifts in the goals of education. Hence, close and active collaboration among parents, teachers and school authorities is needed. In this

regards, it is appropriate to encourage means of parents' participation in school life: associations, meetings, etc. (cf. c. 796 § 2 CIC; c. 639 CCEO).

9. The freedom of parents, associations, and intermediate institutions – as well as the Church hierarchy itself – to promote schools of Catholic identity, constitutes an exercise of the principle of subsidiarity. This principle excludes any “kind of school monopoly, for this is opposed to the native rights of the human person, to the development and spread of culture, to the peaceful association of citizens and to the pluralism that exists today in ever so many societies” ([GE 6](#)).

To sum up:

– The Catholic school is truly an ecclesial subject because of its teaching activity, in which faith, culture, and life unite in harmony.

– It is open to all who want to share its educational goal inspired by Christian principles.

– The Catholic school is an expression of the ecclesial community, and its Catholicity is guaranteed by the competent authorities (Ordinary of the place).

– It ensures Catholic parents' freedom of choice and it is an expression of school pluralism.

– The principle of subsidiarity regulates collaboration between the family and the various institutions deputised to educate.

III. Religious education in schools

a) Nature and aims

10. A concept of the human person being open to the transcendent necessarily includes the element of religious education in schools: it is an aspect of the right to education (cf. c. 799 CIC). Without religious education, pupils would be deprived of an essential element of their formation and personal development, which helps them attain a vital harmony between faith and culture. Moral formation and religious education also foster the development of personal and social responsibility and the

other civic virtues; they represent, therefore, an important contribution to the common good of society.

11. In a pluralistic society, the right to religious freedom requires both the assurance of the presence of religious education in schools and the guarantee that such education be in accordance with parents' convictions. The [Second Vatican Council](#) reminds us: "Parents have the right to determine, in accordance with their own religious beliefs, the kind of religious education that their children are to receive [...]". The right of parents are violated, if their children are forced to attend lessons or instructions which are not in agreement with their religious beliefs, or if a single system of education, from which all religious formation is excluded, is imposed upon all" (Declaration [Dignitatis humanae](#) [DH] 5; cf. c. 799 CIC; Holy See, [Charter of the rights of the family](#), 24 November 1983, art. 5, c-d). This statement finds confirmation in the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (art. 26) and in many other declarations and conventions of the international community.

12. The marginalization of religious education in schools is equivalent to assuming – at least in practice – an ideological position that can lead pupils into error or do them a disservice. Moreover, if religious education is limited to a presentation of the different religions, in a comparative and “neutral” way, it creates confusion or generates religious relativism or indifferentism. In this respect, Pope [John Paul II](#) explained: “The question of Catholic education includes [...] religious education in the more general milieu of school, whether it be Catholic or State-run. The families of believers have the right to such education; they must have the guarantee that the State school – precisely because it is open to all – not only will not put their children's faith in peril, but will rather complete their integral formation with appropriate religious education. This principle must be included within the concept of religious freedom and of the truly democratic State, which as such – that is, in obedience to its deepest and truest nature – puts itself at the service of the citizens, of all citizens, in respect for their rights and their religious convictions” (*Speech to the Cardinals and collaborators of the Roman Curia*, 28 June 1984, unofficial translation).

13. Based on what has been said, it is clear that teaching the Catholic religion has its own specific nature vis-à-vis other school subjects. In fact, as the Second Vatican Council explains, “Government therefore ought indeed to take account of the religious life of the citizenry and show it favor, since the function of government is to make provision for the common welfare. However, it would clearly transgress the limits set

to its power, were it to presume to command or inhibit acts that are religious” (DH 3). For these reasons, it is for the Church to establish the authentic contents of Catholic religious education in schools. This guarantees, for both parents and the pupils themselves, that the education presented as Catholic is indeed authentic.

14. The Church identifies this task as its own, *ratione materiae*, and claims it for its own competence, regardless of the nature of the school (State-run or non-State-run, Catholic or non-Catholic) in which such teaching is given. Therefore, “The Catholic religious instruction and education which are imparted in any schools whatsoever are subject to the authority of the Church [···]. It is for the conference of bishops to issue general norms about this field of action and for the diocesan bishop to regulate and watch over it” (c. 804 § 1 CIC; cf. also, c. 636 CCEO).

b) Religious education in Catholic schools

15. Religious education in Catholic schools identifies the educational goals of such schools. In fact, “the special character of the Catholic school, the underlying reason for it, the reason why Catholic parents should prefer it, is precisely the quality of the religious instruction integrated into the education of the pupils” (John Paul II, Apostolic Exhortation *Catechesi tradendae*, 16 October 1979, 69).

16. In Catholic schools, as everywhere else, the religious freedom of non-Catholic pupils must be respected. This clearly does not affect the right/duty of the Church “in [its] public teaching and witness to [its] faith, whether by the spoken or by the written word”, taking into account that “in spreading religious faith and in introducing religious practices everyone ought at all times to refrain from any manner of action which might seem to carry a hint of coercion or of a kind of persuasion that would be dishonorable or unworthy” (DH 4).

c) Catholic religious education from the point of view of culture, and its relationship with catechesis

17. Religious education in schools fits into the evangelising mission of the Church. It is different from, and complementary to, parish catechesis and other activities such as family Christian education or initiatives of ongoing formation of the faithful. Apart from the different settings in which these are imparted, the aims that they pursue are also different: catechesis aims at fostering personal adherence to Christ and the

development of Christian life in its different aspects (cf. Congregation for the Clergy, [General Directory for Catechesis](#) [DGC], 15 August 1997, nn. 80–87), whereas religious education in schools gives the pupils knowledge about Christianity's identity and Christian life. Moreover, Pope [Benedict XVI](#), speaking to religion teachers, pointed out the need “to enlarge the area of our rationality, to reopen it to the larger questions of the truth and the good, to link theology, philosophy and science between them in full respect for the methods proper to them and for their reciprocal autonomy, but also in the awareness of the intrinsic unity that holds them together. The religious dimension is in fact intrinsic to culture. It contributes to the overall formation of the person and makes it possible to transform knowledge into wisdom of life.” Catholic religious education contributes to that goal, in which “school and society are enriched with true laboratories of culture and humanity in which, by deciphering the significant contribution of Christianity, the person is equipped to discover goodness and to grow in responsibility, to seek comparisons and to refine his or her critical sense, to draw from the gifts of the past to understand the present better and to be able to plan wisely for the future” ([Address to the Catholic religion teachers](#), 25 April 2009).

18. The specific nature of this education does not cause it to fall short of its proper nature as a school discipline. On the contrary, maintaining this status is a condition of its effectiveness: “It is necessary, therefore, that religious instruction in schools appear as a scholastic discipline with the same systematic demands and the same rigour as other disciplines. It must present the Christian message and the Christian event with the same seriousness and the same depth with which other disciplines present their knowledge. It should not be an accessory alongside of these disciplines, but rather it should engage in a necessary inter-disciplinary dialogue” ([DGC](#) 73).

To sum up:

– Religious nature is the foundation and guarantee of the presence of religious education in the scholastic public sphere.

– Its cultural condition is a vision of the human person being open to the transcendent.

– Religious education in Catholic schools is an inalienable characteristic of their educational goal.

– *Religious education is different from, and complementary to, catechesis, as it is school education that does not require the assent of faith, but conveys knowledge on the identity of Christianity and Christian life. Moreover, it enriches the Church and humanity with areas for growth, of both culture and humanity.*

IV. Educational freedom, religious freedom, and Catholic education

19. In short, the right of parents and pupils to education and religious freedom are concretely exercised through:

a) freedom of choice of school. “Parents who have the primary and inalienable right and duty to educate their children must enjoy true liberty in their choice of schools. Consequently, the public power, which has the obligation to protect and defend the rights of citizens, must see to it, in its concern for distributive justice, that public subsidies are paid out in such a way that parents are truly free to choose according to their conscience the schools they want for their children” ([GE](#) 6; cf. [DH](#) 5; c. 797 CIC; c. 627 § 3 CCEO).

b) The freedom to receive confessional religious education in schools, integrating one’s own religious tradition into the school’s cultural and academic formation. “The Christian faithful are to strive so that in civil society the laws which regulate the formation of youth also provide for their religious and moral education in the schools themselves, according to the conscience of the parents” (c. 799 CIC; cf. [GE](#) 7, [DH](#) 5). In fact, the Catholic religious instruction and education which are imparted in any school are subject to the authority of the Church (cf. c. 804 § 1 CIC; c. 636 CCEO).

20. The Church is aware that in many places, now as in earlier periods, religious freedom is not fully in force, both in law and in practice (cf. [DH](#) 13). In these circumstances, the Church does her best to offer the faithful the formation they need (cf. [GE](#) 7; c. 798 CIC; c. 637 CCEO). At the same time, in keeping with her mission (cf. Vatican Council II, Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et spes*, 76), she never stops denouncing the injustice that takes place when Catholic pupils and their families are deprived of their educational rights and their educational freedom is affected. She urges all the faithful to commit themselves so that those rights may become effective (cf. c. 799 CIC).

This Congregation for Catholic Education is certain that the above-mentioned principles can contribute to finding ever greater consonance between the educational task, which is an essential part of the mission of the Church and the aspiration of Nations to develop a society that is fair and respectful of each person's dignity.

For her part, the Church, exercising the *diakonia* of truth in the midst of humanity, offers to each generation the revelation of God from which it can learn the ultimate truth about life and the end of history. This is not an easy task in a secularized world, characterised by the fragmentation of knowledge and moral confusion. It involves the whole Christian community and constitutes a challenge for educators. We are sustained, in any case, by the certainty that – as Pope Benedict XVI affirms – “the noble goals of [...] education, founded on the unity of truth and in service of the person and the community, become an especially powerful instrument of hope” ([*Address to Catholic educators*](#), 17 April 2008).

We request Your Eminence/Excellency to make the content of this *Circular Letter* known to all those concerned with the educational service and mission of the Church. We now thank you for your kind attention and, in communion of prayer with Mary, Mother and Teacher of educators, we take the opportunity to express our sentiments of highest esteem, consideration and respect, remaining

Yours in the Lord,

Zenon Card. GROCHOLEWSKI, *Prefect*

+Jean-Louis BRUGUÈS, O.P., *Secretary*