

Church-run schools need public financial support, Vatican envoy says

VATICAN CITY - A Vatican official praised church-run schools as valuable components of modern education, saying they deserve public financial support and must not be muzzled on moral issues.

Archbishop Silvano Tomasi, addressing a U.N. meeting in Geneva July 6, said educational systems work best when they include participation by parents and various elements of civil society, including religious organizations.

In order for that to work, he said, “public financial resources must be made available in order to assure fairness” for those promoting alternative educational programs.

In carrying out its educational role, the state “should respect the choices that parents make for their children and avoid attempts at ideological indoctrination,” Archbishop Tomasi said. He cited the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, which defends the freedom of parents to choose nonpublic schools and ensure the religious and moral education of their children in conformity with their own convictions.

“And this includes the right to make moral judgments on moral issues,” the archbishop said.

He said religious organizations are often better positioned to provide education to the most vulnerable children and families, including those in remote or rural areas, those with special needs or drop-outs.

Archbishop Tomasi noted that the Catholic Church has about 200,000 primary and secondary schools located in every continent, with about 58 million students and 3.5 million teachers.

“While protecting their identity, these schools welcome students from every ethnic

and religious background and socio-economic class," he said.

Catholic schools teach children how to make "free, reasoned and value-based decisions," the archbishop said.

It's not enough for schools to convey technical information, he added. The goal of education must include formation of the person and transmission of values like personal and social responsibility, a work ethic and a sense of solidarity with others."

Archbishop Tomasi, the Vatican's representative to U.N. agencies in Geneva, was speaking at a session on global education sponsored by the U.N. Economic and Social Council. He noted that although the number of children without access to primary education is dropping, about 68 million children remain out of school.

If current trends hold, he said, the international community will not be able to meet the goal of universal primary education by 2015.

He said educational levels are directly tied to poverty levels. Another key factor is war and civil strife; some 28 million children not attending school live in countries affected by conflict, he said.