

Educators urged to follow example of Christ in his teaching ministry

ANAHEIM, Calif. – Speakers addressing educators April 14 at the National Catholic Educational Association's annual convention encouraged them to follow the example of Jesus Christ in his teaching ministry.

"I send my best wishes and gratitude for the great work you do in Catholic education, for the great role in evangelization, for delivering the Gospel message to those under your pastoral care," said Archbishop Donald W. Wuerl of Washington in a letter read to the audience by Servite Father Gerald M. Horan, the superintendent of schools of the Orange Diocese, the host of the event.

Archbishop Wuerl is known nationally for his catechetical and teaching ministry and for his efforts on behalf of Catholic education. He is chairman of the NCEA board and the U.S. bishops' Committee on Evangelization and Catechesis.

"We are a mighty force for good in our world. We carry a grand story of people who travel far to teach about Jesus," Karen M. Ristau, NCEA president, told an audience of more than 3,000 educators gathered at the Anaheim Convention Center's arena. The crowd included delegates from Canada, Australia, Italy, Japan, Philippines and Indonesia.

The 106th NCEA convention, taking place April 14-17, was being held concurrently with the National Association of Parish Catechetical Directors' annual convocation and the Catholic Library Association's annual meeting.

In a keynote titled "You Matter Much," Bishop Gerald F. Kicanas of Tucson, Ariz., stressed the importance of educators in guiding students to increase their knowledge of Christ.

"Remember you matter much," he told the teachers, school administrators, religious educators, pastors, parents and volunteers who attended the national event. "What you do is at the heart of the church's mission. You bring faith (and) transmit it, generating a relationship with Jesus Christ," he said.

Bishop Kicanas, who has a doctorate in educational psychology, told the educators they are important to the church's future and that for their hard work they deserve a "big fat bonus check," especially during these hard economic times.

He urged them to become witnesses.

"This (new) generation listens to witnesses, and if they listen to their teachers, it is because they are witnesses," he said. "A teacher affects eternity and you can't (have) influence when it (witnessing) stops."

Most of Bishop Kicanas' speech centered on what he said are the five pastoral priorities set by the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops. He called those priorities a source of energy for Catholic education and urged school leaders to focus their future faculty meetings on those proposals.

They are: faith formation and sacraments; strengthening of marriage; life and dignity of the human person; vocation promotion; and multicultural diversity.

"The church has been struggling with catechesis in its life span," he said, discussing faith formation and sacraments.

Using an amusing story of a family who did not know the biblical tale of Joshua bringing down the walls of Jericho, he stressed the "dire need" for catechesis.

He said there are four generational groups in the church - those born before the Second Vatican Council, those born during Vatican II, those born after Vatican II, and those called the "millennials," born between the years 1979 and 1997.

Millennials have a different way of viewing the church, he said, and expressed special concern for them because they are coming of age in a world where the economy is near collapse and where many people are uninterested in the faith, "with one foot in the world and one in the church, or maybe two feet in the world."

Bishop Kicanas encouraged the teachers to talk to their students about "Christ's way of life for others that leads to joy." To promote the faith he suggested engaging in family catechesis, paying attention to the youth culture, and encouraging people to learn about and participate in the sacraments.

He urged the educators to address the issue of marriage with their students, since the family is the primary place of formation for all people. He also underscored the importance of talking about the dignity of human life from conception to natural death.

“Some don’t accept that teaching (about life),” he said, calling for “a new way of living” that treasures the value, love and joy of human beings.

To illustrate the need to promote vocations, he shared his own experience: His eighth-grade teacher was key in his decision to enter the priesthood, which he said has been a great blessing in his life.

Regarding multicultural ministry, he highlighted the importance of learning a second language as well as educators understanding the cultures of their communities. “Get out of your comfort zones to engage in the multiculture of your communities,” he told the teachers.

Bishop Kicanas said that “the work of the church will be much impeded” if people try to serve the young without taking into account the bishops’ pastoral priorities.

More than 400 workshop sessions were scheduled for the NCEA convention, and more than 400 companies were expected to be exhibitors.

The NCEA, established in 1904, has a membership of 200,000 Catholic educators who serve more than 7.6 million students in Catholic elementary and secondary schools, in religious education programs, seminaries and higher education institutions.