

Local Catholic educators learn from pope

Catholic educators working in the Archdiocese of Baltimore had high praise for Pope Benedict XVI following a papal address on Catholic education April 17 at The Catholic University of America in Washington, D.C.

Dr. Ronald J. Valenti, archdiocesan superintendent of Catholic schools; Dr. Thomas Powell, president of Mount St. Mary's University in Emmitsburg; Dr. Mary Pat Seurkamp, president of College of Notre Dame of Maryland, Baltimore; and Father Brian Linnane, S.J., president of Loyola College in Maryland, Baltimore, all participated in the meeting.

In his address, the pope urged educators to bring students into a deeper understanding of faith. He also reaffirmed the "great value" of academic freedom while noting that any appeals to academic freedom "to justify positions that contradict the faith and teaching of the church would obstruct or even betray the university's identity and mission."

Dr. Valenti said the papal address, delivered in a "humble" and "affirming" way, contrasted sharply with the chastising once predicted by some in the media.

"He was very optimistic and thankful for the gift that Catholic schools are to our nation," said Dr. Valenti. "He asked us to be authentically Catholic."

Declaring himself "spellbound" by the intellectual heft and pastoral sensitivity of the pope's address, Dr. Valenti said it reminded educators that faith is the "very core and substance of what we are and what the magisterium calls us to be."

Father Linnane said the pope's address "challenged us to think about the nature of our work and what makes us Catholic."

He was pleased Pope Benedict highlighted the importance of the connection between faith and reason.

“It’s an openness to ask questions that lead us into the realm of mystery,” said Father Linnane. Deeper questions about faith and meaning should not just come in theology and philosophy classes; they should flow naturally across disciplines, Father Linnane said.

The Jesuit priest said he is considering giving copies of the pope’s address to new members of the faculty each year.

Dr. Seurkamp said the pope reminded college presidents that “it’s important to make sure students have opportunities to pursue knowledge vigorously but to understand that we have a responsibility to educate the whole person.”

“He urged that we not move away from our commitment to serving the poor, and I think that applies to our institutions of higher learning,” said Dr. Seurkamp. “We need to think about what role we can play helping elementary and secondary education to make sure a strong education is available.”

With Mount St. Mary’s celebrating its bicentennial, Dr. Powell was invited to greet the pope personally. Dr. Powell could not be reached for comment by The Catholic Review.