

Pope urges U.S. Catholic educators to lead students to deeper faith

WASHINGTON – Pope Benedict XVI urged U.S. Catholic educators April 17 not to simply transmit knowledge to their students but to bring them to a deeper understanding of faith “which in turn nurtures the soul of a nation.”

“A particular responsibility ... for each of you, and your colleagues, is to evoke among the young the desire for the act of faith, encouraging them to commit themselves to the ecclesial life that follows from this belief,” he told more than 400 Catholic college presidents and diocesan education representatives at The Catholic University of America.

The pope was cheered by several hundred students who gathered on the lawn of the campus, and he was warmly applauded when he entered the Edward J. Pryzbyla University Center. He delivered his address while seated on a wooden throne designed by Catholic University students.

Weeks prior to the address many had speculated that the pope might have harsh words of reprimand for college leaders, but instead the pope spoke warmly to the group, calling them “bearers of wisdom” and telling them of his “profound gratitude” for their “selfless contributions” and dedication.

He made one specific reference to Catholic college presidents, near the end of his address, telling them he wished to “reaffirm the great value of academic freedom.” He also noted 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.”

The pontiff also made an appeal to priests, brothers and religious sisters to “not abandon the school apostolate.”

“Renew your commitment to schools, especially those in poorer areas,” he said. His comment drew strong applause from the educators.

"I know from my own days as a professor, and I have heard from your bishops and officials of the Congregation for Catholic Education, that the reputation of Catholic institutes of learning in this country is largely due to yourselves and your predecessors," he said.

That is not to say the pope didn't challenge the group representing kindergarten through college graduate students. Several times during the hour-long address he urged them to live up to their responsibility of imparting truth to their students to enable them to live out their faith in the modern world.

"Not just our own ecclesial communities but society in general has high expectations for Catholic educators," he said, adding that this gives them "a responsibility and offers an opportunity."

He noted that the role of educators is particularly crucial in the modern world where many often question the church's role in the public forum. A primary role of the church, he said, is "upholding the essential moral categories of right and wrong" because without that direction, he said "hope could only wither, giving way to cold pragmatic calculations of utility which render the person little more than a pawn on some ideological chess board."

The church, and those entrusted with a teaching role, also need to speak on the role of truth, stressing that "truth and reason never contradict each other."

As may have been expected, the pope highlighted the importance of Catholic identity - a key issue for Catholic colleges, schools and religious education programs - by noting what it is not.

"Catholic identity is not simply a question of the number of Catholic students," he said. It also is not "dependent upon statistics" nor can it be "equated simply with orthodoxy of course content."

Instead, he stressed that the Catholic identity of a school or religious education program "demands and inspires much more: namely that each and every aspect of your learning communities reverberates within the ecclesial life of faith."

The pope linked the current "crisis of truth" to a "crisis of faith" and said educators

must do more than simply “engage the intellect of our young” but should instead help today’s youths to fully live their faith. “The difficulty or reluctance many people have today in entrusting themselves to God” is a “complex phenomenon,” he said, adding that it is one which “I ponder continually.”

He stressed that teachers and administrators in universities and schools have a “duty and privilege to ensure that students receive instruction in Catholic doctrine and practice.” To not do this, he said, would weaken Catholic identity and cause “moral, intellectual or spiritual” confusion.

As the pope left the campus, students again gave him a rousing send-off, prompting the pontiff to roll down the window of his popemobile and wave as his motorcade moved on to the next event.