



CONGREGATION FOR CATHOLIC EDUCATION
(for Educational Institutions)

[\[EN - ES - FR - IT - PT\]](#)

**THE IDENTITY OF THE CATHOLIC SCHOOL
FOR A CULTURE OF DIALOGUE**

Instruction

Introduction

1. At the World Congress *Educating today and tomorrow. A renewing passion*, organised in 2015 in Castel Gandolfo by the Congregation for Catholic Education and attended by the representatives of Catholic schools of every order and level, one of the most recurrent and topical issues in the general debate was represented by the need for a clearer awareness and consistency of the *Catholic identity* of the Church's educational institutions all over the world. The same concern was expressed on the occasion of the most recent Plenary Assemblies of the Congregation as well as in the meetings with Bishops during *ad limina* visits. At the same time, the Congregation for Catholic Education has been confronted with cases of conflicts and appeals resulting from different interpretations of the traditional concept of *Catholic identity* by educational institutions in the face of the rapid changes that have taken place in recent years, during which the process of globalisation has emerged in parallel with the growth of interreligious and intercultural dialogue.

2. In relation to what falls within the remit of the Congregation for Catholic Education, it seemed therefore appropriate to offer a more in-depth and up-to-date reflection and guidelines on the value of the *Catholic identity* of educational institutions in the Church, so as to provide a set of criteria responding to the challenges of our times, in continuity with the criteria that always apply. Moreover, as Pope Francis said, "We cannot create a culture of dialogue if we do not have identity" [\[1\]](#).

3. This *Instruction*, the result of reflections and consultations at the various institutional levels, is intended as a contribution that the Congregation for Catholic Education offers to all those who work in the field of school education, from Episcopal Conferences, the Synod of Bishops or the Council of Hierarchs, to Ordinaries, Superiors of Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, as well as to Movements, Associations of the Faithful and other organisms and individuals that exercise pastoral care for education.

4. As general criteria intended for the whole Church to safeguard ecclesial unity and communion, they will have to be further adapted to the different contexts of the local Churches scattered throughout the world according to the principle of subsidiarity and of the synodal path, according to the different institutional competences.

5. The Congregation for Catholic Education hopes that this contribution will be welcomed as an opportunity to reflect and deepen our understanding of this important topic which concerns the very essence and *raison d'être* of the Church's historical presence in the field of education and schooling, in obedience to her mission to proclaim the Gospel by teaching all nations (cf. *Mt 28:19-20*).

6. The first part of the *Instruction* frames the discourse of the presence of the Church in the school world in the general context of her evangelising mission: the Church as mother and teacher in her historical development with the different emphases that have enriched her work in time and space up to the present day. The second chapter deals with the various actors working in the school world with different roles, assigned and organised according to canonical norms in a Church, rich in multiple charisms given to her by the Holy Spirit, but also in line with her hierarchical nature. The final chapter is dedicated to some critical issues that may arise in integrating all the different aspects of school education into the concrete life of the Church as experienced by this Congregation in dealing with the problems brought to its attention by the particular Churches.

7. As we can see, this is not a general and, even less so, comprehensive treatise on the subject of *Catholic identity*, but rather an intentionally concise and practical tool that can help to clarify certain current issues and, above all, prevent conflicts and divisions in the critical area of education. In fact, as Pope Francis observed in relaunching the *Global Compact on Education*, "To educate is to take a risk and to hold out to the present a hope that can shatter the determinism and fatalism that the selfishness of the strong, the conformism of the weak and the ideology of the utopians would convince us [that it] is the only way forward"^[2]. Only a strong and united action by the Church in the field of education in an increasingly fragmented and conflict-ridden world can contribute both to the evangelising mission entrusted to her by Jesus and to the construction of a world in which human persons feel they are brothers and sisters, because "Only with this awareness of being children, that we are not orphans, can we live in peace among ourselves"^[3].

Chapter I: Catholic schools in the mission of the Church

The Church, mother and teacher

8. Among other things, the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council drew from the Fathers the maternal image of the Church as an expressive icon of her nature and mission. The Church is the mother who generates the believers, because she is the bride of Christ. Almost all Council documents draw on the Church's motherhood to unveil her mystery and her pastoral action, and to extend her love to an ecumenical embrace of the "children separated from her" and to believers of other religions, reaching out to all people of goodwill. Pope John XXIII opened the Council by expressing the Church's irrepressible joy of being a universal mother: *Gaudet Mater Ecclesia*.

9. The icon of the Mother Church is not only an expression of tenderness and charity, but also holds the power to be a guide and a teacher. The Pope Himself has associated the denomination of mother to that of teacher, because this Church, "the pillar and ground of the truth (cf. 1 Tm 3,15) [...] was entrusted by her holy Founder [with] the twofold task of giving life to her children and of teaching them and guiding them –both as individuals and

as nations – with maternal care. Great is their dignity, a dignity which she has always guarded most zealously and held in the highest esteem”[4].

10. As a consequence, the Council affirmed that “To fulfil the mandate she has received from her divine founder of proclaiming the mystery of salvation to all men and of restoring all things in Christ, Holy Mother the Church must be concerned with the whole of man’s life, even the secular part of it insofar as it has a bearing on his heavenly calling. Therefore, she has a role in the progress and development of education. Hence this sacred synod declares certain fundamental principles of Christian education especially in schools”[5]. This clarifies that the educational action pursued by the Church through schools cannot be reduced to mere philanthropic work aimed at responding to a social need, but represents an essential part of her identity and mission.

The “fundamental principles” of Christian education in schools

11. In its declaration *Gravissimum educationis*, the Council offered a set of “fundamental principles” regarding Christian education, especially in schools. In the first place, education, as the formation of the human person, is a *universal right*: “All men of every race, condition and age, since they enjoy the dignity of a human being, have an inalienable right to an education that is in keeping with their ultimate goal, their ability, their sex, and the culture and tradition of their country, and also in harmony with their fraternal association with other peoples in the fostering of true unity and peace on earth. For a true education aims at the formation of the human person in the pursuit of his ultimate end and of the good of the societies of which, as man, he is a member, and in whose obligations, as an adult, he will share”[6].

12. Since education is a right for everyone, the Council called for the *responsibility of all*. The responsibility of *parents* and their priority right in educational choices rank first. School choice must be made freely and according to conscience; hence the duty of civil authorities to make different options available in compliance with the law. The *State* is responsible for supporting families in their right to choose a school and an educational project.

13. For her part, the *Church* has the duty to educate “especially because she has the responsibility of announcing the way of salvation to all men, of communicating the life of Christ to those who believe, and, in her unfailing solicitude, of assisting men to be able to come to the fullness of this life. The Church is bound as a mother to give to these children of hers an education by which their whole life can be imbued with the spirit of Christ”[7]. In this sense, the education that the Church pursues is evangelisation and care for the growth of those who are already walking towards the fullness of Christ’s life. However, the Church’s educational proposal is not only addressed to her children, but also to “all peoples [to promote] the complete perfection of the human person, the good of earthly society and the building of a world that is more human”[8]. Evangelisation and integral human development are intertwined in the Church’s educational work. In fact, the Church’s work of education “aims not only to ensure the maturity proper to the human person, but above all to ensure that the baptised, gradually initiated into the knowledge of the mystery of salvation, become ever more aware of the gift of faith”[9].

14. Another fundamental element is the *initial and permanent formation of teachers*[10]. “The Catholic school depends upon them almost entirely for the accomplishment of its goals and programs. They should therefore be very carefully prepared so that both in secular and religious knowledge they are equipped with suitable qualifications and also

with a pedagogical skill that is in keeping with the findings of the contemporary world. Intimately linked in charity to one another and to their students and endowed with an apostolic spirit, may teachers by their life as much as by their instruction bear witness to Christ, the unique Teacher”. Their work “is in the real sense of the word an apostolate [...] and at once a true service offered to society”[11].

15. The success of the educational path depends primarily on the principle of *mutual cooperation*, first and foremost between parents and teachers, making it a point of reference for the personal action of their pupils, in the fervent hope that “even after graduation [teachers] continue to assist them with advice, friendship and by establishing special associations imbued with the true spirit of the Church”[12]. Based on these assumptions, what is needed is healthy cooperation – at the diocesan, national and international levels – capable of promoting between Catholic and non-Catholic schools that collaboration required for the good of the universal human community[13].

16. As far as Catholic schools are concerned, the conciliar declaration represents a turning point, since, in line with the ecclesiology of *Lumen Gentium*[14], it considers the school not so much as an institution but as a *community*. The characteristic element of the Catholic school, in addition to pursuing “cultural goals and the human formation of youth”, consists in creating “for the school community a special atmosphere animated by the Gospel spirit of freedom and charity”. To this end, the Catholic school aims “to help youth grow according to the new creatures they were made through baptism as they develop their own personalities”, as well as “to order the whole of human culture to the news of salvation so that the knowledge the students gradually acquire of the world, life and man is illumined by faith”[15]. In this way, the Catholic school prepares pupils to exercise their freedom responsibly, forming an attitude of openness and solidarity.

Further developments

17. The conciliar declaration *Gravissimum educationis* aimed at presenting only “certain fundamental principles of Christian education especially in schools”, then entrusting “a special post-conciliar commission”[16] with the task of further developing them. This is one of the commitments of the Office for Schools of the Congregation for Catholic Education, which has dedicated a number of documents to deepening important aspects of education[17], in particular, the permanent profile of Catholic identity in a changing world; the responsibility of the witness of lay and consecrated teachers and school leaders; the dialogical approach to a multicultural and multi-religious world. Moreover, for Catholic schools it is important that students “be given also, as they advance in years, a positive and prudent sex education”[18].

The dynamic profile of the Catholic school identity

18. The Catholic school lives in the flow of human history. It is therefore continually called upon to follow its unfolding in order to offer an educational service appropriate to the present times. The witness of Catholic educational institutions shows on their part a great responsiveness to the diversity of socio-cultural situations and readiness to adopt new teaching methods, while remaining faithful to their own identity (*idem esse*). By identity we mean its reference to the Christian concept of life[19]. The conciliar declaration *Gravissimum educationis* and the documents that followed it traced the dynamic profile of an educational institution through the two terms “school” and “Catholic”.

19. As a *school*, it essentially shares the characteristics of all school institutions, which, through an organised and systematised teaching activity, offer a culture aimed at the integral education of individuals [20]. In fact, school as such “is designed not only to develop with special care the intellectual faculties but also to form the ability to judge rightly, to hand on the cultural legacy of previous generations, to foster a sense of values, to prepare for professional life. Between pupils of different talents and backgrounds it promotes friendly relations and fosters a spirit of mutual understanding” [21]. Therefore, to be defined as a school, an institution must know how to integrate the transmission of the cultural and scientific heritage already acquired with the primary purpose of educating individuals, who must be accompanied towards achieving integral development while respecting their freedom and individual vocation. The school must be the first social setting, after the family, in which the individual has a positive experience of social and fraternal relationships as a precondition for becoming a person capable of building a society based on justice and solidarity, which are prerequisites for a peaceful life among individuals and peoples. This is possible through a search for truth that is accessible to all human beings endowed with rationality and freedom of conscience as tools useful both to study and in interpersonal relationships.

20. In addition to the above-mentioned characteristics which draw it apart from other ecclesial institutions such as the parish, associations, religious institutes, etc., a *Catholic* school is endowed with a specific identity: i.e. “its reference to a Christian concept of life *centred on Jesus Christ*” [22]. The personal relationship with Christ enables the believer to look at the whole of reality in a radically new way, granting the Church an ever renewed identity, with a view to fostering in the school communities adequate responses to the fundamental questions for every woman and man. Therefore, for all the members of the school community, the “principles of the Gospel in this manner become the educational norms since the school then has them as its internal motivation and final goal” [23]. In other words, it can be said that in the Catholic school, in addition to the tools common to other schools, reason enters into dialogue with faith, which also allows access to truths that transcend the mere data of the empirical and rational sciences, in order to open up to the whole of truth so as to respond to the deepest questions of the human soul that do not only concern immanent reality. This dialogue between reason and faith does not constitute a contradiction, because the task of Catholic institutions in scientific research is “to unite existentially by intellectual effort two orders of reality that too frequently tend to be placed in opposition as though they were antithetical: the search for truth, and the certainty of already knowing the fount of truth” [24].

21. The Catholic identity of schools justifies their inclusion in the life of the Church, even in their institutional specificity. And, all the more, the fact that Catholic schools are part of the *Church’s mission* “is a proper and specific attribute, a distinctive characteristic which penetrates and informs every moment of its educational activity, a fundamental part of its very identity and the focus of its mission” [25]. Consequently, the Catholic school “takes its stand within the organic pastoral work of the Christian community” [26].

22. A distinctive feature of its ecclesial nature is that it is a *school for all*, especially the weakest. This is testified to by the “establishment of the majority of Catholic educational institutions [in response] to the needs of the socially and economically disadvantaged. It is no novelty to affirm that Catholic schools have their origin in a deep concern for the education of children and young people left to their own devices and deprived of any form of schooling. In many parts of the world even today material poverty prevents many youths and children from having access to formal education and adequate human and Christian formation. In other areas new forms of poverty challenge the Catholic school. As in the

past, it can come up against situations of incomprehension, mistrust and lack of material resources”[27]. This concern has also been expressed through the establishment of vocational schools, which have been a keystone of technical training based on the principles of manual intelligence, as well as through the provision by educational institutions of curricula geared to the skills of persons with disabilities.

The witness of lay and consecrated educators

23. Another important aspect, increasingly relevant to achieving the integral formation of students, is the witness of lay and consecrated educators. In fact, “In the Catholic school’s educational project there is no separation between time for learning and time for formation, between acquiring notions and growing in wisdom. The various school subjects do not present only knowledge to be attained, but also values to be acquired and truths to be discovered. All of which demands an atmosphere characterized by the search for truth, in which competent, convinced and coherent educators, teachers of learning and of life, may be a reflection, albeit imperfect but still vivid, of the one Teacher”[28].

24. The work of the *lay Catholic educator* in schools, and particularly in Catholic schools, “has an undeniably professional aspect; but it cannot be reduced to professionalism alone. Professionalism is marked by, and raised to, a super-natural Christian vocation. The life of the Catholic teacher must be marked by the exercise of a personal vocation in the Church, and not simply by the exercise of a profession”[29].

25. In the case of *consecrated persons* “Both in Catholic and in other types of schools, [their] educational commitment [...] is a vocation and choice of life, a path to holiness, a demand for justice and solidarity especially towards the poorest young people, threatened by various forms of deviancy and risk. By devoting themselves to the educational mission in schools, consecrated persons contribute to making the bread of culture reach those in most need of it”[30]. “[...] in communion with the Bishops, [they] carry out an ecclesial mission that is vitally important inasmuch as while they educate they are also evangelising”[31].

26. The specificities of the lay faithful and of consecrated persons are enhanced by their *sharing in the common educational mission* which is not closed within the Catholic school, but “can and must be open to an enriching exchange in a more extensive communion with the parish, the diocese, ecclesial movements and the universal Church”[32]. In order to educate together, a path of common formation is also necessary, “an initial and permanent project of formation that is able to grasp the educational challenges of the present time and to provide the most effective tools for dealing with them [...]. This implies that educators must be willing to learn and develop knowledge and be open to the renewal and updating of methodologies, but open also to spiritual and religious formation and sharing “[33].

Educating to dialogue

27. Today’s societies are characterised by a multicultural and multireligious composition. In this context, “Education contains a central challenge for the future: to allow various cultural expressions to co-exist and to promote dialogue so as to foster a peaceful society”. The history of Catholic schools is characterised by welcoming pupils from different cultural backgrounds and religious affiliations. In this context, “what is required [...] is courageous and innovative fidelity to one’s own pedagogical vision”[34], which is expressed in the capacity to *bear witness, to know* and to *dialogue* with diversity.

28. For the Catholic school, a great responsibility is to *bear witness*. “The Christian presence must be shown and made clear, that is, it must be visible, tangible and conscious. Today, due to the advanced process of secularization, Catholic schools find themselves in a missionary situation, even in countries with an ancient Christian tradition”[35]. They are called upon to commit to bearing witness through an educational project clearly inspired by the Gospel. “Schools, even Catholic schools, do not demand adherence to the faith, however, they can prepare for it. Through the educational plan it is possible to create the conditions for a person to develop a gift for searching and to be guided in discovering the mystery of his being and of the reality that surrounds him, until he reaches the threshold of the faith. To those who then decide to cross this threshold the necessary means are offered for continuing to deepen their experience of faith”[36].

29. In addition to bearing witness, another educational component of school is *knowledge*. School has the important task of bringing people into contact with a rich cultural and scientific heritage, preparing them for professional life and fostering mutual understanding. Faced, then, with the continuous technological transformations and the pervasiveness of digital culture, professional expertise needs to be equipped with ever newer skills throughout life in order to respond to the needs of the times without, however, “losing the synthesis between faith, culture and life, which is the keystone of the educational mission”[37]. Knowledge must be supported by means of a solid *permanent formation* that enables teachers and school leaders to be characterised by a marked “ability to create, invent and manage learning environments that provide plentiful opportunities”, as well as “to respect students’ different intelligences and guide them towards significant and profound learning”[38]. Accompanying pupils in getting to know themselves, their aptitudes and inner resources so that they can make conscious life choices is of no secondary importance.

30. Catholic schools are ecclesial entities. As such they participate “in the evangelizing mission of the Church and [represent] the privileged environment in which Christian education is carried out”[39]. In addition, the Church considers dialogue as a constitutive dimension, as she is rooted precisely in the Trinitarian dynamics of dialogue, in the dialogue between God and human beings and in the dialogue among human beings themselves. Because of its ecclesial nature, the Catholic school shares this element as constitutive of its identity. It must therefore “practise the ‘grammar of dialogue’, not as a technical expedient, but as a profound way of relating to others”[40]. Dialogue combines attention to one’s own identity with the understanding of others and respect for diversity. In this way, the Catholic school becomes “an educating community in which the human person can express themselves and grow in his or her humanity, in a process of relational dialogue, interacting in a constructive way, exercising tolerance, understanding different points of view and creating trust in an atmosphere of authentic harmony. Such a school is truly an educating community, a place of differences living together in harmony”[41]. Pope Francis provided three fundamental guidelines to help dialogue, “*the duty to respect one’s own identity and that of others, the courage to accept differences, and sincerity of intentions*. *The duty to respect one’s own identity and that of others*, because true dialogue cannot be built on ambiguity or a willingness to sacrifice some good for the sake of pleasing others. *The courage to accept differences*, because those who are different, either culturally or religiously, should not be seen or treated as enemies, but rather welcomed as fellow-travellers, in the genuine conviction that the good of each resides in the good of all. *Sincerity of intentions*, because dialogue, as an authentic expression of our humanity, is not a strategy for achieving specific goals, but rather a path to truth, one that deserves to be undertaken patiently, in order to transform competition into cooperation”[42].

An education that goes forth

31. In the face of contemporary challenges, echoing the Second Vatican Council, Pope Francis recognises the central value of education. It is part of the wide-ranging pastoral project for a “Church that goes forth”, “standing by people at every step of the way”, making her presence felt in an education “which teaches critical thinking and encourages the development of mature moral values”^[43]. With educational passion, the Pope draws attention to some foundational elements.

Education as “movement”

32. Education consists in a polyphony of movements. First of all, it starts with a *team movement*. Everyone collaborates according to their personal talents and responsibilities, contributing to the formation of the younger generations and the construction of the common good. At the same time, education unleashes an *ecological movement*, since it contributes to the recovery of different levels of balance: inner balance with oneself, solidarity with others, natural balance with all living beings, spiritual balance with God. It also gives rise to an important *inclusive movement*. Inclusion, which “is an integral part of the Christian salvific message”^[44], is not only a property, but also a method of education that brings the excluded and vulnerable closer. Through it, education nurtures a *peacemaking movement* that generates harmony and peace^[45].

A global compact on education

33. These movements converge to counter a widespread *educational emergency*^[46]. The latter mainly stems from the breakdown of the “educational compact” among institutions, families and individuals. These tensions also reflect a crisis in the relationship and communication between generations, and a social fragmentation made even more evident by the primacy of indifference. In this context of epochal change, Pope Francis proposes a *global compact on education* capable of responding to the current “transformation that is not only cultural but also anthropological, creating a new semantics while indiscriminately discarding traditional paradigms”^[47].

34. The path of the global compact on education tends to favour interpersonal, real, lived and fraternal relationships. In this way, a long-term project is launched to form people who are willing to put themselves at the educational service of their community. A concrete pedagogy – based on bearing witness, knowledge and dialogue – is a starting point for personal, social and environmental change. For this reason a “broad compact on education is needed, capable of imparting not only technical knowledge, but also and above all human and spiritual wisdom, based on justice” and virtuous behaviour “that can be put into practice”^[48].

35. The concrete nature of a global compact on education is also expressed through the harmony of co-participation. It originates from a deep sense of involvement taking the form of a “platform that allows everyone to be actively involved in this educational task, each one from his or her own specific situation and responsibility”^[49]. This invitation takes on great value for religious families with an educational charism, which over the ages have given life to so many educational and training institutions. The difficult situation affecting vocations can be turned into an opportunity to work together, sharing experiences and opening up to mutual recognition. In this way, the common goal is not lost

sight of, nor are positive energies wasted, making it possible to “adapt to the needs and challenges of each time and place” [50].

Educating to the culture of care

36. This ability to adapt finds its *raison d'être* in the culture of care. It is born within the “family, the natural and fundamental nucleus of society, in which we learn how to live and relate to others in a spirit of mutual respect” [51]. The family relationship extends to educational institutions, which are called upon “to pass on a system of values based on the recognition of the dignity of each person, each linguistic, ethnic and religious community and each people, as well as the fundamental rights arising from that recognition. Education is one of the pillars of a more just and fraternal society”. [52] The culture of care becomes the compass at local and international level to form people dedicated to patient listening, constructive dialogue and mutual understanding [53]. In this way, a “fabric of relationships for the sake of a humanity capable of speaking the language of fraternity” [54] is created.

Chapter II: The actors responsible for promoting and verifying Catholic identity

37. “The educational mission is carried out in a spirit of cooperation between various parties – students, parents, teachers, non-teaching personnel and the school management – who form the educational community” [55]. These and other responsible parties [56], who through their work promote and verify educational projects inspired by the Church’s teaching on education, act respectively at various levels: at the level of the school itself, at the level of charismatic initiatives among the People of God, at the level of the Church hierarchy.

The educating school community

Members of the school community

38. The whole school community is responsible for implementing the school’s Catholic educational project as an expression of its ecclesiality and its being a part of the community of the Church. “The fact that in their own individual ways all members of the school community share this Christian vision, makes the school ‘Catholic’; principles of the Gospel in this manner become the educational norms since the school then has them as its internal motivation and final goal” [57].

39. Everyone has the obligation to recognise, respect and bear witness to the Catholic identity of the school, officially set out in the *educational project*. This applies to the teaching staff, the non-teaching personnel and the pupils and their families. At the time of enrolment, both the parents and the student must be made aware of the Catholic school’s educational project [58].

40. The educating community is responsible for ensuring respect for the life, dignity and freedom of pupils and other members of the school, putting in place all necessary procedures to promote and protect minors and the most vulnerable. Indeed, it is an integral part of the Catholic school’s identity to develop principles and values for the protection of pupils and other members with the consistent punishment of transgressions and offences, strictly applying the norms of canon and civil law [59].

Pupils and parents

41. *Pupils* are active participants in the educational process. As they grow older, they increasingly become the protagonists of their own education. Therefore, not only must they be made responsible for following the educational programme delivered with scientific competence by teachers, but they must also be guided to see beyond the limited horizon of human reality^[60]. In fact, every Catholic school helps “pupils to achieve [...] an integration of faith and culture”^[61].

42. The first persons responsible for education are the *parents*, who have the *natural* right and obligation to educate their children. They have the right to choose the means and institutions through which they can provide for the Catholic education of their children (cf. can. 793 § 1 CIC and can. 627 § 2 CCEO). Catholic parents are also bound by the obligation to provide for the Catholic education of their children.

43. In this regard, schools are of primary help to parents in fulfilling their educational function (cf. can. 796 § 1 CIC and can. 631 § 1 CCEO). Although parents are free to entrust the education of their children to any school of their choice (cf. can. 797 CIC and can. 627 § 3 CCEO), the Church recommends to all the faithful to foster Catholic schools and also to assist, according to their means, in establishing and maintaining them (cf. can. 800 § 2 CIC and can. 631 § 1 CCEO).

44. It is necessary for parents to co-operate closely with teachers, getting involved in decision-making processes concerning the school community and their children, and participating in school meetings or associations (cf. can. 796 § 2 CIC and can. 631 § 1 CCEO). In this way, parents not only fulfil their natural educational vocation, but also contribute with their personal faith to the educational plan, especially in the case of a Catholic school.

Teachers and administrative personnel

45. Among all the members of the school community, *teachers* stand out as having a special responsibility for education. Through their teaching-pedagogical skills, as well as by bearing witness through their lives, they allow the Catholic school to realize its formative project. In a Catholic school, in fact, the service of the teacher is an ecclesiastical *munus* and office (cf. can. 145 CIC and can. 936 §§ 1 and 2 CCEO).

46. Following the doctrine of the Church, it is therefore necessary for the school itself to interpret and establish the necessary criteria for the recruitment of teachers. This principle applies to all recruitments, including that of administrative personnel. The relevant authority, therefore, is required to inform prospective recruits of the Catholic identity of the school and its implications, as well as of their responsibility to promote that identity. If the person being recruited does not comply with the requirements of the Catholic school and its belonging to the Church community, the school is responsible for taking the necessary steps. Dismissal may also be resorted to, taking into account all circumstances on a case-by-case basis.

47. In the formation of the younger generations^[62], teachers must be outstanding in correct doctrine and integrity of life (cf. can. 803 § 2 CIC and can. 639 CCEO). Teachers and administrative personnel who belong to other Churches, ecclesial communities or religions, as well as those who do not profess any religious belief, have the obligation to recognise and respect the Catholic character of the school from the moment of their employment. However, it should be borne in mind that the predominant presence of a group of Catholic

teachers can ensure the successful implementation of the educational plan developed in keeping with the Catholic identity of the schools.

School leaders

48. The educational role of teachers is associated with that of school leaders. “School leaders are more than just managers of an organization. They are true educational leaders when they are the first to take on this responsibility, which is also an ecclesial and pastoral mission rooted in a relationship with the Church’s pastors” [63].

49. In accordance with the canonical norms concerning Catholic schools, it is the responsibility of the school leadership to collaborate with the entire school community and in close dialogue with the pastors of the Church. This in order to make explicit, along with the official educational project, the guidelines on the school’s educational mission [64]. Indeed, every official act of the school must be in accordance with its Catholic identity, while fully respecting the freedom of each person’s conscience [65]. This also applies to the school’s curriculum, which “is how the school community makes explicit its goals and objectives, the content of its teaching and the means for communicating it effectively. In the curriculum, the school’s cultural and pedagogical identity are made manifest” [66].

50. A further responsibility of the school leadership is the promotion and protection of its ties with the Catholic community, which is realised through communion with the Church hierarchy. Indeed, the “ecclesial nature of Catholic schools, which is inscribed in the very heart of their identity as schools, is the reason for ‘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. can. 803 CIC; can. 632 and 639 CCEO)’” [67].

51. Therefore, the school leadership has the right and the duty to intervene, always with appropriate, necessary and adequate measures, when teachers or pupils do not comply with the criteria required by the universal, particular or proper law of Catholic schools.

Educational charisms in the Church

Institutional expression of the charism

52. In the course of the Church’s history, various realities have contributed to the establishment of Catholic schools. In particular, in the various Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, inspired by their founders, *consecrated persons* have established Catholic schools and are still effectively present in the educational sector.

53. More recently, by virtue of their baptismal vocation, also the *lay faithful*, individually or united in *associations* of the faithful, whether *private* (cf. can. 321-329 CIC and can. 573 § 2 CCEO) or *public* (cf. can. 312-320 CIC and can. 573-583 CCEO), have taken the initiative to establish and direct Catholic schools. There are also school institutions established and directed jointly by the lay faithful, consecrated persons and clerics. The Spirit of God never ceases to bring forth various gifts in the Church and to inspire vocations in the People of God to exercise the apostolate of educating the young.

The definition of “Catholic” school

54. The apostolate of the lay faithful, consecrated persons and clerics in schools is an authentic ecclesial apostolate. It is a service that requires unity and communion with the

Church in order to define the school as “Catholic” at all levels, from the school management to the school leadership and teachers.

55. Unity and communion with the Catholic Church exist *de facto* when the school is directed by a *public juridic person*, as for example in the case of an Institute of Consecrated Life, and consequently the school is considered *ipso iure* a “Catholic school” (cf. can. 803 § 1 CIC).

56. When a school is directed by an *individual faithful* or by a *private association of the faithful*, in order for it to be defined as a “Catholic school”, recognition by ecclesiastical authority is required, that is, as a rule, by the competent diocesan/eparchial Bishop, the Patriarch, the Major Archbishop and the Metropolitan of the Metropolitan Church *sui iuris* or by the Holy See (cf. can. 803 § 1;3 CIC and can. 632 CCEO). Every apostolate of the faithful is always to be exercised in communion with the Church, manifested in the bonds of the profession of faith, the sacraments and ecclesiastical government (cf. can. 205 CIC and can. 8 CCEO). Therefore, it is necessary for every educational apostolate of Christian inspiration to obtain concrete recognition on the part of the competent ecclesiastical authority. In this way, the faithful are guaranteed that the school of their choice provides a Catholic education (cf. canons 794 § 2; 800 § 2 CIC and canons 628 § 2; 631 § 1 CCEO). In this, canon 803 § 3 CIC and canon 632 CCEO also state that no Institute, although in fact Catholic, is to bear the name of “Catholic school” without the consent of the competent ecclesiastical authority. Furthermore, canon 216 CIC and canon 19 CCEO recall that no initiative can claim the title “Catholic” without the consent of the competent ecclesiastical authority.

57. The educational apostolate should also be understood in the sense that, unless a school has been formally recognized as Catholic, it cannot present itself as such in order to avoid the official recognition procedure set out in canon 803 CIC and canon 632 CCEO. This would prevent ascertaining that the objective criteria are actually met. It will therefore be the duty of the diocesan/eparchial Bishop to accompany such initiatives and, in the case of a *de facto* Catholic institution, to invite it to apply for recognition as such as an expression of visible communion with the Church.

58. In cases where the term “Catholic” is used illegitimately or is aimed at giving the impression that the school is in communion with the Church, it is the responsibility of the competent diocesan/eparchial Bishop, having heard the school management and leadership and after examining the individual case, to state in writing and, should he deem it appropriate, also publicly with the aim of alerting the faithful, that this is not a Catholic school recognised and recommended by the Church.

The service of ecclesiastical authority

The diocesan/eparchial Bishop

59. The *diocesan/eparchial Bishop* plays a central role in discerning the “Catholic” identity of a school. According to John Paul II: “The Bishop is the father and pastor of the particular Church in its entirety. It is his task to discern and respect individual charisms, and to promote and coordinate them”^[68]. This competence to organize the various charisms in the particular Church translates, among other things, into certain specific actions.

a) It is up to the diocesan/eparchial Bishop to carry out the necessary *discernment and recognition* of educational institutions established by the faithful (cf. can. 803 § 1; 3 CIC and can. 632 CCEO).

b) It is the task of the diocesan/eparchial Bishop to discern and give *ecclesial recognition to the charism* of the educational apostolate with regard to the act of erecting a public juridic person of diocesan/eparchial right (cf. can. 312 § 1, 3°; 313; 579; 634 § 1 CIC and can. 575 § 1, 1°; 573 § 1; 423; 435; 506; 556 and 566 CCEO), whereby a school directed by it is *ipso iure* a “Catholic school” (cf. can. 803 § 1 CIC).

c) The explicit *written consent* of the diocesan/eparchial Bishop is required for the *establishment* of Catholic schools in his territory by Institutes of Consecrated Life or Societies of Apostolic Life, whether of diocesan/eparchial, patriarchal/or pontifical right (cf. can. 801 CIC and canons 437 § 2; 509 § 2; 556; 566 CCEO). This written consent is also required for any other public juridic person wishing to establish a Catholic school.

d) It is the right and duty of the diocesan/eparchial Bishop to ensure that the rules of universal and particular law on Catholic schools are applied.

e) It is the right and duty of the diocesan/eparchial Bishop to *issue prescripts* concerning the general organisation of Catholic schools in his diocese. These prescripts, which are inspired by the Magisterium and the discipline of the Church, must respect the autonomy regarding the internal direction of the school and are also valid for schools which are directed by public juridic persons, above all by the religious, or when they are managed by the lay faithful (cf. can. 806 § 1 CIC and can. 638 § 1 CCEO). In these prescripts, the diocesan/eparchial Bishop can also establish that the statutes or curricula of Catholic schools are subject to his approval, taking into account binding civil laws^[69]. If the diocesan/eparchial Bishop ascertains violations of Church doctrine or of discipline, he must request the school governing authorities, such as the Major Superior of the Institute of Consecrated Life which runs the school or the management of the school itself, to correct them. After warning the religious Superior in vain, the Bishop himself can make provisions of his own authority (cf. can. 683 § 2 CIC and can. 415 § 4 CCEO).

f) It is the right and duty of the diocesan/eparchial Bishop to *visit* all the Catholic schools in his diocese, including those established or directed by Institutes of Consecrated Life, Societies of Apostolic Life or other public or private associations, whether of diocesan/eparchial right or of patriarchal or pontifical right (cf. can. 806 § 1 CIC and can. 638 § 1 CCEO). The Bishop is required to visit them at least every five years, personally or, if he is legitimately impeded, through the coadjutor Bishop or the auxiliary or the Vicar general or episcopal Vicar/Protosyncellus or Syncellus, or some other presbyter (cf. can. 396 § 1 CIC and can. 205 § 1 CCEO). It is advisable for the Visitor to take both clerics and lay persons as companions, people who are truly experts in the various aspects of Catholic education. The visitation should concern different areas: the quality of the curricula, so that “the instruction which is given in them is at least as academically distinguished as that in the other schools of the area” (can. 806 § 2 CIC); the ecclesiality of the school which is manifested in its communion with the particular and universal Church; the pastoral activity of the school and its relationship with the parish; the conformity of the educational project of the school with the doctrine and discipline of the Church; the administration of the temporal goods of the school (cf. canons 305; 323; 325; 1276 § 1 CIC and canons 577 and 1022 § 1 CCEO). The visitation can be divided into three phases: the preparatory phase, in which the visitor asks the school to draft a report on its current state; the visitation proper, after which the visitor describes in a report the situation found during the visitation and issues, in an authoritative way, any provisions or recommendations; the third phase, in which the school implements any provisions or recommendations on the basis of the visitor’s report.

g) It is the right and duty of the diocesan/eparchial Bishop to *watch over* all Catholic schools in his diocese/eparchy, including those founded or directed by Institutes of Consecrated Life, Societies of Apostolic Life or other public or private associations, whether of diocesan/eparchial right or of pontifical/patriarchal right (cf. can. 806 § 1 CIC and 638 § 1 CCEO). Although the privileged locus for the diocesan/eparchial Bishop to exercise his right of vigilance is during the canonical visitation, he can intervene whenever he considers it appropriate, and he must do so whenever the Catholic identity of a school situated in his diocese/eparchy is seriously affected. If the school depends on a public juridic person of pontifical/patriarchal right, should the diocesan/eparchial Bishop, who is responsible for pastoral life in his diocese/eparchy, become aware that facts contrary to doctrine, morals or ecclesial discipline are taking place in the school, he shall alert the competent Moderator for the latter to take action^[70]. Should the competent authority fail to do so, the diocesan/eparchial Bishop may appeal to the Congregation for Catholic Education, without prejudice to his obligation to take measures directly in the most serious or urgent cases.

h) It is the right of the local eparchial Bishop/ordinary to *appoint* or at least *approve teachers of religion* for his diocese/eparchy, and likewise, if reasons of religion or morals require it, to remove them or to demand that they be removed (cf. can. 805 CIC and can. 636 § 2 CCEO).

i) Since all teachers participate in the ecclesial mission, the diocesan/eparchial Bishop may also *remove a teacher* in the case of a Catholic school run by the diocese/eparchy. In other cases, he may require that a teacher be removed if the conditions for his or her appointment are no longer met. The Bishop must make explicit the reasons and decisive evidence which justify a possible removal (cf. canons 50; 51 CIC and canons 1517 § 1; 1519 § 2 CCEO), always respecting the teacher's right of defence and giving him or her the possibility of defending him or herself in writing, also with the help of an advocate expert in canon law (cf. can. 1483 CIC and can. 1141 CCEO). The diocesan/eparchial Bishop must also show in his decision that no other adequate, necessary and proportionate means are available to enable the teacher to continue with his or her service in accordance with the ecclesial mission of the school.

Parishes and the parish priest

60. At the level of the particular Church it frequently happens that Catholic schools are under the direct management of the diocese/eparchy or that of the *parishes* as public juridic persons, represented by their *parish priests*. In this case the hierarchy of the Church not only exercises its duty of vigilance over Catholic schools, but can also be directly involved in their establishment and direction.

Dialogue among the Bishop, consecrated women and men, and the laity

61. In addition to purely juridical aspects, as pastor of the particular Church, the diocesan/eparchial Bishop should enter into dialogue with all those who collaborate in the educational mission of Catholic schools. To this end, the Second Vatican Council recommended that “at stated times and as often as it is deemed opportune, Bishops and religious Superiors should meet to discuss those affairs which pertain to the apostolate in their territory”^[71]. “Constant dialogue between Superiors of Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life and Bishops is most valuable in order to promote mutual understanding, which is the necessary precondition for effective cooperation, especially in pastoral matters. Thanks to regular contacts of this kind, Superiors, both men and women,

can inform Bishops about the apostolic undertakings which they are planning in Dioceses/[eparchies], in order to agree on the necessary practical arrangements” [72].

62. In mutual exchange and trusting conversation many problems can be solved without the Bishop having to formally intervene. This regular exchange, for which the diocesan/eparchial Bishop is responsible, should also take place with all others who are responsible for Catholic schools in a particular Church, such as the Moderators of public juridic persons or the faithful who direct their own Catholic school as an apostolate. Likewise, the Bishop is obliged to maintain an ongoing dialogue with the schools themselves, especially with school leaders, teachers and pupils.

The Episcopal Conference, the Synod of Bishops or the Council of Hierarchs

63. The *Episcopal Conference*, the *Synod of Bishops* or the *Council of Hierarchs* have competence with regard to Catholic schools and, in general, to education in all kinds of schools, especially religious education. In particular, it is up to the Episcopal Conference, the Synod of Bishops or the Council of Hierarchs to issue *general norms* in this regard (cf. can. 804 § 1 CIC). Episcopal Conferences are especially recommended to apply to the local context by means of a general decree [73] the principles of the promotion and verification of the identity of Catholic schools, illustrated in general terms in this *Instruction*. Furthermore, it is necessary to enforce canonical norms in the light of the respective state legal system.

64. The Episcopal Conferences, the Synod of Bishops or the Council of Hierarchs which is responsible for Catholic schools must also take into account their planning in the territory, in order to provide for both the preservation and the progress of the schools. In addition, the Episcopal Conferences, the Synod of Bishops or the Council of Hierarchs will seek to promote the support of dioceses/eparchies with financial means to those in need for the maintenance and development of Catholic schools. A common reserve fund could also be set up at the Episcopal Conference, the Synod of Bishops or the Council of Hierarchs. To this end it is recommended that the Episcopal Conference, the Synod of Bishops or the Council of Hierarchs establish a Commission for Schools and Education, assisted by a Commission of experts.

The Apostolic See

65. The *Holy See* has a subsidiary responsibility for Catholic schools. In a general way, the *Roman Pontiff* has entrusted the *Congregation for Catholic Education* with the task of making “every effort to see that the fundamental principles of Catholic education as set out by the magisterium of the Church be ever more deeply researched, championed, and known by the people of God” [74]. This Congregation has published numerous documents with the aim of guiding Catholic schools in the fulfilment of their mission [75].

66. In addition, the Congregation “sets the norms by which Catholic schools are governed. It is available to diocesan/eparchial Bishops so that, wherever possible, Catholic schools be established and fostered with the utmost care, and that in every school appropriate undertakings bring catechetical instruction and pastoral care to the Christian pupils” [76]. This juridical competence concerning Catholic schools also includes, in a subsidiary way, the exercise of supreme moderation over them, in the name of the Roman Pontiff. This is manifested in a concrete way when petitions and requests are addressed to the Apostolic See, which the Congregation examines [77]. It also examines appeals presented in accordance with the norms of law in order to claim rights and legitimate interests (cf. can.

1732-1739 CIC and can. 996-1006 CCEO). This competence is also manifested when the Congregation exercises its power directly over an individual school, which may occur specifically when the school is under the direction of a public juridic person of pontifical right.

Chapter III: Some critical aspects

67. The Congregation for Catholic Education notes that in the appeals lodged, very often there is a conflicting perception of the Catholic identity of educational institutions. This often stems from the interpretation, which is not always correct, of the term “Catholic” and from the lack of clarity regarding competences and legislation.

Divergent interpretations of the term “Catholic”

68. The basic problem lies in the concrete application of the term “Catholic”, a complex word that is not easily expressed by means of exclusively legal, formal and doctrinal criteria. The causes of tensions are mainly the result on the one hand of a reductive or purely formal interpretation, and on the other of a vague or narrow understanding of Catholic identity.

Reductive view

69. The specific charism with which Catholic identity is lived out does not justify a *reductive interpretation* of catholicity that explicitly or *de facto* excludes essential principles, dimensions and requirements of the Catholic faith. Moreover, catholicity cannot be attributed only to certain spheres or to certain persons, such as liturgical, spiritual or social occasions, or to the function of the school chaplain, religion teachers or the school headmaster. This would contradict the responsibility of the school community as a whole and of each of its members [78]. Moreover, by underscoring this responsibility we do not intend to introduce a “perfectly egalitarian society”, nor any moral or disciplinary perfectionism that would be hard to judge.

Formal or charismatic view

70. According to a *formal interpretation*, Catholic identity is expressed through a “Decree” issued by the competent ecclesiastical authority, which grants legal status, recognises property and governance according to canonical norms, also granting the possibility of civil legal status in the State where the institution is established. This identity is guaranteed by means of control and certification by the competent ecclesiastical authority, with the possibility of appealing to the Holy See in the event of conflict.

71. In addition to the definitions of exclusively juridical nature, there are others according to which what counts above all is the “Catholic spirit”, the “Christian inspiration” or the “*charismatic fulfilment*”, terms which are poorly defined, hardly concrete and seldom verifiable in reality. According to these interpretations, neither the application of canonical norms nor the recognition of legitimate hierarchical authority are considered necessary. If this were to be the case, it would only be of “symbolic” value and therefore hardly effective. Sometimes, in the case of educational institutions established and/or directed by Religious Orders, Institutes of Consecrated Life, Societies of Apostolic Life or charismatic groups,

there is an imbalance between the charism and ecclesial belonging. In some situations, any reference to the term “Catholic” is avoided, choosing alternative juridical terminology.

“Narrow” view

72. Another reason for conflicting interpretations is represented by the “*narrow*” Catholic school *model*. In such schools there is no room for those who are not “totally” Catholic. This approach contradicts the vision of an “open” Catholic school that intends to apply to the educational sphere the model of a “Church which goes forth” [79], in dialogue with everyone. We must not lose our missionary impetus to confine ourselves on an island, and at the same time we need the courage to bear witness to a Catholic “culture”, that is, universal, cultivating a healthy awareness of our own Christian identity.

Clarity of competences and legislation

73. Sometimes critical situations around Catholic identity arise out of a lack of clarity about competences and legislation. In these cases, it is necessary first of all to maintain a fair balance of competences, in accordance with the *principle of subsidiarity*. This principle is based on the responsibility of each individual before God and distinguishes between the diversity and complementarity of competences. Everyone’s responsibility is also assisted by suitable tools which – through the exercise of self-assessment and subsequent exchanges with “external experts” – help each person to be a protagonist in the educational project. These tools also help to establish, participate in and promote ecclesial unity, as well as various forms of associations and bodies at regional, national and international level that are capable of creating a community in the Catholic educational sphere. Moreover, there should be no lack of mutual trust between the various leaders, in order to promote a more tranquil and serene cooperation favourable to the educational mission. An aptitude for dialogue and communion undoubtedly contribute to this end.

74. *Statutes* play an important role in ensuring the necessary clarity. Sometimes they are not up to date; they do not clearly illustrate competences or new procedures; they are designed too rigidly to the point of regulating general situations without leaving room for discernment or possible solutions that can only be found at local level.

75. The legal and competence issue affecting Catholic educational institutions also arise as a result of the *double regulatory framework*: canonical and state-civil. Because of the different aims of the relevant legislation, it may happen that the State imposes on Catholic institutions, operating in the public sphere, unbecoming behaviours that cast doubt on the doctrinal and disciplinary credibility of the Church. Sometimes public opinion also makes solutions in line with the principles of Catholic morality almost impossible.

76. Through the Regulations issued at national level (by the Episcopal Conferences, the Synod of Bishops or the Council of Hierarchs) and the enforcement Statutes drawn up from a canonical and civil-law point of view, it is advisable to make available all the elements necessary to overcome conflicts concerning the interpretation and the application of the two legislative systems. For its part, Canon Law, based on the fundamental principle of the salvation of souls (can.1752 CIC), provides various solutions to guarantee communion between the parties involved in the educational mission, and acts as a barrier to the *scandal of the breakup of the Church’s internal unity*, the inability to promote dialogue among her members, and the exposure of conflicts in state courts and the mass media.

77. In addition, for the sake of clarity, Catholic schools must have either a *mission statement* or a code of conduct. These are instruments for institutional and professional quality assurance. They must therefore be legally reinforced by means of employment contracts or other contractual declarations by those involved having clear legal value. It is acknowledged that in many countries civil law bars “discrimination” on the basis of religion, sexual orientation and other aspects of private life. At the same time, educational institutions are granted the possibility to draw up a profile of values and a code of conduct. When these values and behaviours are not respected by those concerned, the latter can be sanctioned for lack of professional honesty in failing to comply with the terms set out in the related contracts and institutional guidelines.

78. In addition, beyond purely legal norms, other *instruments more suited* in promoting individual responsibility to the benefit of the identity of the institution often appear to be more effective. By way of example: individual and collective self-assessment procedures within the institution, guidelines on desired quality standards, permanent formation courses and the promotion and strengthening of professional skills, incentives and rewards, and the collection, documentation and study of good practices. On the part of those who exercise responsibility in the Church, it will be more effective than any other attitude and measure to create a climate and behaviour expressing benevolence and trust towards all members of the educational community as manifestations of Christian virtues.

Some sensitive issues and areas

79. There are situations in educational life that require great attention and sensitivity to resolve any tensions and conflicts that may arise. First of all, *the choice of teaching, non-teaching and direction personnel*. Taking into account the different contexts and possibilities, it is necessary to formulate clear criteria for discernment regarding the professional qualities, adherence to the Church’s doctrine, and consistency in the Christian life of the candidates.

80. *Conflicts* also occur in the *disciplinary and/or doctrinal field*. These situations can bring discredit to the Catholic institution and scandal in the community. Therefore, they cannot be underestimated both in terms of the nature of the conflict and the repercussions within and outside the school. Discernment must begin in the local church context, bearing in mind the canonical principles of graduality and proportionality of any remedial measures to be taken. Dismissal should be the last resort, legitimately taken after all other remedial attempts have failed.

81. There are also cases in which *State laws* impose choices that conflict with religious freedom and the very Catholic identity of a school. While respecting the different spheres, there is a need for reasonable defence of the rights of Catholics and their schools both through dialogue with State authorities and through recourse to the courts having jurisdiction in these matters.

82. Problems can arise within the local Church as a result of *differences of opinions* among the members of the community (Bishop, parish priest, consecrated persons, parents, school leaders, associations, etc.) concerning the viability of the school, its financial sustainability and its position in the face of new educational challenges. Once again, dialogue and walking together are the main way to resolve these problems, while also keeping in mind the hierarchical nature of the Church and respecting the different competences.

83. A problem that always causes conflicting reactions is the *closure* or change of the legal structure of a Catholic school due to management difficulties. This problem should not be solved in the first instance by considering the financial value of buildings and property with a view to selling them, or by transferring management to bodies that are distant from the principles of Catholic education in order to create a source of financial profit. In fact, the temporal goods of the Church have among their proper purposes works of the apostolate and charity, especially at the service of the poor (cf. can. 1254 § 2 CIC and can. 1007 CCEO). Therefore, in the case of a diocesan/eparchial or parochial school, it is the responsibility of the Bishop to consult with all those concerned in order to evaluate every possible solution to safeguard the continuity of the educational service. In the case of educational institutions run by religious or lay people, before closure or alienation, it is highly desirable to consult the Bishop and to find, together with the educating community, viable ways of continuing to offer their precious mission.

Encounter and convergence to consolidate Catholic identity

84. Catholic identity should be a *place of encounter*, a tool promoting the convergence of ideas and actions. In this way, different perspectives become a resource and a foundational principle for the development of methodologies suitable to solve possible critical issues and find shared solutions.

85. The echo of this attitude resounds already in the first encyclical of John XXIII, where it is stated that “The Catholic Church [...] leaves many questions open to [...] discussion”[\[80\]](#). In this sense, whether a case necessarily requires direct intervention on the part of the church authority must make the object of careful consideration, since “the common saying, expressed in various ways and attributed to various authors, must be recalled with approval: “in essentials, unity; in doubtful matters, liberty; in all things, charity”[\[81\]](#).

Being builders of unity

86. In this perspective, for the Church of today, Pope Francis relaunches some principles of the social doctrine and invites us to find viable ways in the educational field, so that, in the case of possible tensions, the willingness to reach better results prevails[\[82\]](#). In the presence of certain attitudes that do not lead to the resolution of disputes, the Pope proposes the high road of *unity over conflict*: “When conflict arises, some people simply look at it and go their way as if nothing happened; they wash their hands of it and get on with their lives. Others embrace it in such a way that they become its prisoners; they lose their bearings, project onto institutions their own confusion and dissatisfaction and thus make unity impossible. But there is also a third way, and it is the best way to deal with conflict. It is the willingness to face conflict head on, to resolve it and to make it a link in the chain of a new process. ‘Blessed are the peacemakers!’(Mt 5:9)”[\[83\]](#).

87. Even in the most serious conflicts, the unity of lived faith based on the Gospel remains the guiding compass. In this framework, doors are open to a true culture of dialogue through *inclusive and permanent communication*. Dialogue and communication practices within the educational community of the local and universal Church must be established, promoted and practised even before any tensions arise. They are to be protected and cultivated even during conflicts, and if necessary re-established. The role of *direct and internal communication* cannot be replaced by unconnected persons, institutions, mass media and public opinion. A strategy of communication and communion is needed in order to avoid the risk that in cases of conflict other people, who are often neither competent nor well informed, decide the line of communication and action.

Being generators of development processes

88. In line with another principle “time is greater than space”, the Pope suggests “initiating processes” instead of trying to defend positions and spaces of power [84]. Indeed, there is a risk that those who seek perfect solutions and fight passionately for their realisation – often unrealistic – will end up by damaging conflict resolution even more with their attempts.

89. In the search for a solution to a problem, it is necessary to ask oneself whether the solutions proposed and developed mainly serve the purpose of protecting one’s own position or whether they can initiate a positive dynamic generating further processes of development. In this regard, Canon Law provides for an itinerary aimed at the *progressive application* of disciplinary and penal norms, such as prior warnings, the proportionality of penalties, and a certain graduality in the face of objective personal limitations, always safeguarding the priority of the salvation of souls.

90. Moreover, in order to initiate fruitful processes, a *profound discernment* is required, that brings together the human, spiritual, juridical, subjective and pragmatic dimensions. Without prejudice to the obligation and the right of the Bishop “to watch over and visit the Catholic schools in his territory, even those which members of religious institutes have founded or direct” (can. 806 § 1 CIC and can. 638 § 1 CCEO), hasty statements on problems concerning Catholic identity do not help to resolve disputes. Possible measures regarding an educational institution’s alleged deviation from catholicity, which may also become necessary as well as legitimate, should remain a *last resort* in cases in which there is absolutely no possibility of avoiding great objective damage to the whole Church and her mission.

91. It should not be underestimated that in an increasingly globalised world even particular decisions, linked to a local context, have repercussions for the universal Church. If no practicable solution is found by the competent authority, a *regular process* needs to be initiated with the consultation of all parties involved, consideration of all canonical and civil law aspects, possible rights of third parties that may coincide or conflict with one’s decision, as well as of the effects that such a decision may have on other Church initiatives in the educational field and on public opinion.

Being developers of real and lasting solutions

92. In conflicts, aspects of a particular problem sometimes end up making the object of a discussion on principles and ideals. In order not to fall into this error, the principle that *realities are more important than ideas* [85] is helpful. In this sense, solutions should be developed at the most immediate level possible, involving those who are directly a part of the local reality and know it in all its elements. Therefore, it is best to avoid delegating internal Church conflicts to other juridical institutions, unless this is expressly required by law. Immediate recourse to higher ecclesiastical authorities should also be avoided, since a local solution is more immediate and sustainable. However, every member of the faithful in the Church retains the right to bring matters to the attention of the Apostolic See [86].

93. Finally, according to the principle that *the whole is greater than the part* [87], those working to resolve natural tensions within the Church must consider the consequences that even a single conflict can have for other areas and levels of the Church. The exercise of prudence is therefore paramount and reliable. Any possible solution decided and applied must be considered in a long-term perspective so as not to impair the fruitful and trusting

possibility of collaboration between people and institutions. They are called to walk together to enable the Church to provide the world with her educational service.

Conclusion

94. In publishing this *Instruction* on the Catholic identity of educational institutions, in a spirit of service the Congregation for Catholic Education intends to offer a contribution for reflection and some guidelines to help share the missionary transformation of the Church, because “it is vitally important for the Church today to go forth and preach the Gospel to all: to all places, on all occasions, without hesitation, reluctance or fear”.[\[88\]](#)

95. Pope Francis, in addressing the theme of the encounter among faith, reason and the sciences, emphasises that “Catholic schools, which always strive to join their work of education with the explicit proclamation of the Gospel, are a most valuable resource for the evangelization of culture, even in those countries and cities where hostile situations challenge us to greater creativity in our search for suitable methods”[\[89\]](#).

96. In light of these exhortations, this *Instruction*, starting from the essential criteria which mark the Catholic identity of schools, wishes to accompany their renewal in order to respond to the new challenges that, in the epochal change we are living, the world proposes to the Church, mother and teacher. The response will be effective with the acquisition of full identity in obedience to a transcendent truth, as Pope Francis recalled, citing a memorable text by Pope John Paul II: “If there is no transcendent truth, in obedience to which man achieves his full identity, then there is no sure principle for guaranteeing just relations between people. Their self-interest as a class, group or nation would inevitably set them in opposition to one another. If one does not acknowledge transcendent truth, then the force of power takes over, and each person tends to make full use of the means at his disposal in order to impose his own interests or his own opinion, with no regard for the rights of others... The root of modern totalitarianism is to be found in the denial of the transcendent dignity of the human person who, as the visible image of the invisible God, is therefore by his very nature the subject of rights that no one may violate – no individual, group, class, nation or state. Not even the majority of the social body may violate these rights, by going against the minority”[\[90\]](#).

97. The Congregation for Catholic Education expresses its deep gratitude for the solicitude and efforts of those involved in educational institutions and hopes that the Catholic identity profile of the educational plan will contribute to the creation of a global compact on education to “rekindle our dedication for and with young people, renewing our passion for a more open and inclusive education, including patient listening, constructive dialogue and better mutual understanding”.[\[91\]](#)

Vatican City, 25 January 2022, Feast of the Conversion of St Paul the Apostle.

Joseph Card. Versaldi
Prefect

Archbishop Angelo Vincenzo Zani
Secretary

Index

Introduction

Chapter I: Catholic schools in the mission of the Church

The Church, mother and teacher

The “fundamental principles” of Christian education in schools PAGEREF _Toc98425817 \h 4

Further developments

The dynamic profile of the Catholic school identity

The witness of lay and consecrated educators

Educating to dialogue

An education that goes forth

Education as “movement”

A global compact on education

Educating to the culture of care

Chapter II: The actors responsible for promoting and verifying Catholic identity

The educating school community

Members of the school community

Pupils and parents

Teachers and administrative personnel

School leaders

Educational charisms in the Church

Institutional expression of the charism

The definition of “Catholic” school

The service of ecclesiastical authority

The diocesan/eparchial Bishop

Parishes and the parish priest

Dialogue among the Bishop, consecrated women and men, and the laity

The Episcopal Conference, the Synod of Bishops or the Council of Hierarchs

The Apostolic See

Chapter III: Some critical aspects

Divergent interpretations of the term “Catholic”

Reductive view

Formal or charismatic view

“Narrow” view

Clarity of competences and legislation

Some sensitive issues and areas

Encounter and convergence to consolidate Catholic identity

Being builders of unity

Being generators of development processes

Being developers of real and lasting solutions

Conclusion

Index

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[2] Pope Francis, *Video message of His Holiness Pope Francis on the Occasion of the Meeting Organized by the Congregation for Catholic Education: “Global Compact Education”* at the Pontifical Lateran University, 15 October 2020.

[3] Pope Francis, *Morning Mass in the Chapel of the Domus Sanctae Marthae. Homily of His Holiness Pope Francis “The Holy Spirit reminds us how to access the Father”*, 17 May 2020.

[4] Pope John XXIII, *Encyclical Mater et magistra*, 15 May 1961, 1.

[5] Second Vatican Council, *Declaration on Christian Education Gravissimum educationis*, 28 October 1965, Introduction.

[6] *Ibid.*, 1.

[7] *Ibid.*, 3.

[8] *Idem.*

[9] *Ibid.*, 2.

[10] Cf. *Ibid.*, 9.

[11] *Ibid.*, 8.

[12] *Idem.*

[13] Cf. *Ibid.*, 12.

[14] Cf. Second Vatican Council, *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church Lumen Gentium*, 21 November 1964.

[15] *Gravissimum educationis*, 8.

[16] *Ibid.* Introduction.

[17] Sacred Congregation for Catholic Education, *The Catholic School*, 19 March 1977; Id., *Lay Catholics in Schools: Witnesses to Faith*, 15 October 1982; *Educational Guidance in Human Love: Outlines for Sex Education*, 1 November 1983; Congregation for Catholic

Education, *The Religious Dimension of Education in a Catholic School*, 7 April 1988; Id., *The Catholic School on the Threshold of the Third Millennium*, 28 December 1997; Id., *Consecrated Persons and their Mission in Schools. Reflections and Guidelines*, 28 October 2002; Id., *Educating Together in Catholic Schools. A Shared Mission between Consecrated Persons and the Lay Faithful*, 20 November 2007; Id., *Educating to Intercultural Dialogue in Catholic Schools. Living in Harmony for a Civilization of Love*, 19 December 2013; Id., *Educating Today and Tomorrow: A Renewing Passion*, 2014; Id., *Educating to fraternal humanism Building a “civilization of love”. 50 years after Populorum progressio*, 16 April 2017; Id., “Male and Female He Created Them” *Towards a Path of Dialogue on the Question of Gender Theory in Education*, 2 February 2019.

[18] *Gravissimum educationis*, 1.

[19] Cf. *The Catholic School*, 34.

[20] Cf. *Ibid.*, 26.

[21] *Gravissimum educationis*, 5.

[22] *The Catholic School*, 33.

[23] *Ibid.*, 34.

[24] John Paul II, Apostolic Constitution *Ex corde Ecclesiae*, 15 August 1990, 1.

[25] *The Catholic School on the Threshold of the Third Millennium*, 11.

[26] *Ibid.*, 12.

[27] *Ibid.*, 15.

[28] *Ibid.*, 14.

[29] *Lay Catholics in Schools: Witness to Faith*, 37.

[30] *Consecrated Persons and their Mission in Schools*, 30.

[31] *Ibid.*, 6.

[32] *Educating Together in Catholic Schools*, 50.

[33] *Ibid.*, 20.

[34] *Educating to Intercultural Dialogue in Catholic Schools*, Introduction.

[35] *Ibid.*, 57.

[36] *Consecrated Persons and their Mission in Schools*, 51.

[37] Congregation for Catholic Education, *Circular Letter to Schools, Universities and Educational Institutions*, 10 September 2020.

[38] *Educating Today and Tomorrow. A Renewing Passion*, 7.

[39] *The Catholic School on the Threshold of the Third Millennium*, 11.

[40] *Educating to Intercultural Dialogue in Catholic Schools*, 57.

[41] “Male and Female He Created Them”, 40.

[42] Pope Francis, *Address to the Participants in the International Peace Conference*, Al-Azhar Conference Centre, Cairo, 28 April 2017.

[43] Pope Francis, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii gaudium*, 24 November 2013, 24 and 64.

[44] Pope Francis, *Address to Participants in the Plenary Assembly of the Congregation for Catholic Education*, 20 February 2020.

[45] Cf. Pope Francis, Encyclical *Fratelli tutti*, 3 October 2020, 99-100.

[46] Benedict XVI, *Letter to the Faithful of the Diocese and City of Rome on the Urgent Task of Educating Young People*, 21 January 2008.

[47] Pope Francis, *Message for the Launch of the Global Compact on Education*, 12 September 2019.

[48] Pope Francis, *Discorso alla Pontificia Università Lateranense*, 31 October 2019. [Our translation]

[49] Pope Francis, *Message to the Prepositor General of the Poor Clerics Regular of the Mother of God of the Pious Schools (Piarists), on the Occasion of the Online Seminar of the Union of Superiors General and the International Union of Superiors General on the Global Compact on Education (12-14 November 2020)*, 15 October 2020.

[50] *Idem.*

[51] Pope Francis, *Message for the World Day of Peace*, 8 December 2020, 8.

[52] *Idem.*

[53] Cf. *Message for the Launch of the Global Compact on Education.*

[54] Pope Francis, *Video Message on the Occasion of the Meeting Organized by the Congregation for Catholic Education “Global Compact on Education. Together to Look Beyond”* at the Pontifical Lateran University, 15 October 2020.

[55] *Consecrated Persons and their Mission in Schools. Reflections and Guidelines*, 41.

[56] The school is like “a center whose work and progress must be shared together by families, teachers, associations of various types that foster cultural, civic, and religious life, as well as by civil society and the entire human community”, *Gravissimum educationis*, 5.

[57] *The Catholic School*, 34.

[58] Cf. *Ibid.*, 59-60.

[59] Cf. CIC, Book VI, Part II, Title VI: Offences against Human Life, Dignity and Liberty; CCEO Title XXVII, Chap. II: Penalties for Individual Delicts; Pope Francis, Apostolic Letter Issued “motu proprio” *Vos estis lux mundi*, 7 May 2019.

[60] Cf. *The Religious Dimension of Education in a Catholic School. Guidelines for Reflection and Renewal*, 51.

[61] Cf. *The Catholic School*, 38.

[62] Cf. Second Vatican Council, Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity *Apostolicam Actuositatem*, 18 November 1965, 30.

[63] *Educating to Intercultural Dialogue in Catholic Schools. Living in Harmony for a Civilisation of Love*, 85.

[64] Cf. *Ibid.*, 39.

[65] John Paul II, Encyclical *Veritatis splendor*, 6 August 1993, 57-64, in particular: “The judgment of conscience does not establish the law; rather it bears witness to the authority of the natural law and of the practical reason with reference to the supreme good” (60). cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 11 October 1992, 1776-1794.

[66] *Educating to Intercultural Dialogue in Catholic Schools. Living in Harmony for a Civilisation of Love*, 64.

[67] *Ibid.*, 86.

[68] John Paul II, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Vita consecrata*, 25 March 1996, 49.

[69] If the school is not directly under the authority of the diocesan/eparchial Bishop, for example when the school belongs to a public juridic person of pontifical/patriarchal right, upon granting approval, he only verifies the legitimacy, and, in particular, consistency with the Catholic profile of the school.

[70] Without prejudice to proper law, expressed especially in the Statutes, which may provide for different titles, the competent Moderator of an Institute of Consecrated Life or a Society of Apostolic Life may be the “Superior General” or “Provincial Superior” or “Local Superior” and in an association of the faithful the “President”.

[71] Second Vatican Council, Decree Concerning the Pastoral Office of Bishops in the Church *Christus Dominus*, 28 October 1965, 35.

[72] *Vita consecrata*, 50.

[73] The general decree of the Episcopal Conference requires, for its entry into force, the prior *recognitio* by the Congregation for Bishops: “The Congregation deals with matters pertaining to the celebration of particular councils as well as the erection of conferences of bishops and the *recognitio* of their statutes. It receives the acts of these bodies and, in consultation with the dicasteries concerned, it examines the decrees which require the *recognitio* of the Apostolic See.”, John Paul II, Apostolic Constitution *Pastor Bonus* on the Roman Curia, 28 June 1988, 82.

[74] *Pastor bonus*, 114.

- [75] See footnote 17.
- [76] *Pastor bonus*, 115.
- [77] Cf. *Ibid.*, 13.
- [78] Cf. *Gravissimum educationis*, 8.
- [79] Cf. *Evangelii gaudium*, 20-24.
- [80] Pope John XXIII, Encyclical *Ad Petri Cathedram*, 29 June 1959, part III.
- [81] *Idem.*
- [82] Cf. *Evangelii gaudium*, 217-237.
- [83] *Ibid.*, 227.
- [84] *Ibid.*, 222-225.
- [85] *Ibid.*, 231-233.
- [86] Cf. *Pastor bonus*, 13.
- [87] Cf. *Evangelii gaudium*, 234-237.
- [88] *Ibid.*, 23.
- [89] *Ibid.*, 134.
- [90] *Fratelli tutti*, 273. The quote is taken from John Paul II, Encyclical *Centesimus Annus*, 1 May 1991, 44.
- [91] *Message for the Launch of the Global Compact on Education.*
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