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Augusta Muthigani  
*OIEC*

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## How Education Can Save the World

Augusta Muthigani<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract:** While issues faced by Catholic schools around the world depend on local context, a number of common challenges are often encountered globally. This article considers eight such challenges: (1) the decline in the depth of faith and values; (2) an inadequate number of clergy and religious serving in schools; (3) a changing scenario for teaching personnel; (4) a changing face of families; (5) ethical and religious pluralism; (6) inadequate child safety mechanism; (7) lack of research, data and documentation; and finally (8) the need for catholic Schools to reach the socio-economically marginalized. Based on an analysis of these challenges, the article suggests step that Catholic schools can take to meet those challenges. The article is adapted with minor modifications from an address at the opening session of the OIEC World Congress held in New York in June 2019.

**W**e are privileged to be here today to represent Catholic school networks from around the world. There are over 200,000 Catholic schools worldwide serving millions of children and young people from various backgrounds. Our types of schools range from poor and rural to well-resourced city schools and many in between.

We endeavor to provide holistic and quality education at all levels from early childhood to universities. Additionally, there are many non-formal education sites that enable many young people to acquire vocational skills that support their socio-economic needs. These are mostly youth who did not excel academically for higher education, and therefore for securing their livelihood. Our sites help in giving them a sense of dignity and enable them to make a positive contribution to the society.

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<sup>1</sup> President, OIEC

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But what holds us together as the largest global network of Catholic schools?

1. It is our faith, values, and principles that are encapsulated within us and our school communities. Specifically, our faith, our values, and educational principles are drawn from the Gospels, the social teaching of the Church, and key Vatican documents. Our vision and mission spring from the same faith, values, and documents.
2. It is our commitment to reach out through education to the “ends of the earth” (Matthew 28:19-20) as mandated by Christ for the salvation of all people.
3. It is our ability to accommodate those who are different from us in faith and social status.
4. It is our common values, including unconditional love, justice and mercy, service, and sacrifice and care.
5. It is our shared understanding of children as our main focus and a core responsibility in terms of their safety, ability to learn, grow and thrive to their optimum potential when under our guardianship.

This is in line with the Vatican Council’s declaration *Gravissimum Educationis* (Paul VI, 1965), which emphasizes “the harmonious development of physical, moral and intellectual abilities aimed at the gradual maturation of a sense of responsibility, the conquest of true freedom; positive and prudent sex education...” and educating to fraternal humanism—building a civilization of love, 50 years after *Populorum Progressio* (Paul VI, 1967).

As we commence this conference, I feel it is important to place our vision and mission at the center of our reflections and discussions. This mission is to “nurture pupils and students in their lifelong journey in faith and help them develop as mature people empowered to shape and enrich the world by living the Gospel of Jesus Christ in their everyday lives”(Paul VI , 1965, pp. 729-730).

This mission statement ought to inform our reflections over the coming three days in terms of:

1. How well we are doing?
2. Where can we do better? And
3. How can we continue to learn from our past experiences and from one another?

We have to acknowledge that Catholic schools generally have lived up to this mission. Our schools serve children and youth from all backgrounds, faith, culture, ethnicity, color, and socio-economic status, especially in areas of greatest need: they focus on the integral development of a person. We

have witnessed graduates from our schools come through as successful leaders in all fields whose faith and character is evident in their operations.

Yet we also need to be open to accepting where we have fallen short—where we have not placed children and their needs at the center of our work, where we have protected reputation over safety, where we have over-emphasized the academic to the expense of the holistic development of the child.

### **Challenges Affecting Provision of Catholic Education**

At this juncture, let me explore some of the challenges that I think we should be conscious of as a network, reflect on, and act on. These challenges include but are not limited to the following.

#### **Decline in the Depth of Faith and Values**

This may be attributed to casual uptake of catechism, spiritual exercises, negative influences of the media and technology, certain legal and policy provisions, social dynamics that contradict our Church teachings, and competing demands of life even for children, young people, teachers, and parents. Therefore, it is becoming challenging for children to be effectively nurtured in faith, values, and character.

How do we as a network of Catholic schools re-strategize so that we turn this challenge into an opportunity for the furtherance of Catholic education?

Consider purposeful and targeted on-going formation in faith of parents and teachers in order that they be able to nurture children in the Catholic faith. This calls for more and well-trained faith mentors. Could we consider a role for teachers as faith mentors, as they spend extensive time with children?

#### **Inadequate Number of Clergy and Religious Serving in Schools**

Many years back, the number of clergy and religious personnel working in Catholic schools was significantly higher. Their presence and impact was felt. Many children and young people modelled their lives from these religious people. Most of us here are a product of their work.

Currently, in some parts of the world, the number of the religious are decreasing. For instance, as of 2014, Europe had experienced a decrease in vocations of 48%, while North America has seen a decrease of 27%. This means that there are fewer clergy and religious available to provide Catholic education in schools.

On the other hand, Africa has seen the number of sisters grow by 93%, Diocesan priests by 354% and Brothers by 61%. Yet, though the vocations are high, the apostolic work of religious and clergy in this part of the world has diversified from education and health to professional careers including bankers, lawyers, engineers, doctors, and social workers and medical fields among others. These

were a reserve of lay people previously. Engagement in such careers by clergy and religious helps to meet the expanding functions of Dioceses and congregations. But there are fewer clergy and religious working with children and youth in schools.

Let us remember that the mission of Catholic education is what has given us a cutting-edge in education worldwide. Since quality human capital is key in the furtherance of Catholic education, how can we close the gap that has been left by the decreasing numbers of clergy and religious available for the school apostolate? I see an opportunity in giving deep formation in Catholicism and spirituality to committed lay people who undertake faith formation and leadership courses, while continuously mentoring them to sustain the provision of Catholic education. I believe the Catholic schools network is capable of facilitating this worldwide.

### **Changing Scenario for Teaching Personnel**

We are witnessing in many parts of the world a much younger generation of teachers whose teaching is a job rather than a calling. Besides, they have limited faith and character formation. In government-aided schools, the teacher's mandate is more secular and academic with minimal faith-focused programs. Furthermore, teaching in many parts of the world has lost its glamour and status in society.

How well prepared are these teachers, not only in the ethos of particular schools, but also in pedagogy and teaching? What can we, as a network of Catholic educators, do "to develop an educational plan that promotes the reasons for cooperation" with parishes and those in the vineyard of Christ? (Congregation for Catholic Education, 2017, no. 1.6)

Our schools need personnel that will continue to provide an education centered on holistic development, particularly for those experiencing conflict, abuse, discrimination, and unmet basic needs. How then can we use our network to restore the status of teachers as faith and character mentors? How can we use the niche of Catholic schools to reclaim the social status of teaching as a calling and profession?

### **Changing Face of Families**

The modern family is evolving with demands that present problems of decreasing parental engagement as the primary educators and caregivers of their children. These changes are due to socio-economic challenges and associated work demands, increasing one-parent or blended families, child or grandparent-headed families, as well as the erosion of positive traditional cultural values that served as glue to families' values around bringing up children.

This is heavily impacting the role of school administrators and teachers in schools who have to supplement the role of parents, as well as parents and guardians who sacrifice so that their children receive the best at home and in school.

“Educational and academic institutions wishing the person at the center of their mission are called to respect the family as the first natural society and to put themselves at its side, in line with a correct understanding of subsidiarity” (Congregation for Catholic Education, 2017, no. 2.9). What opportunities exist for us as a network of Catholic schools to support families in distress and sustain effective parenting of children and young people in schools, since the Church has a strong concern for the wellbeing of the family unit? How should we consider school-focused family life and parenting programs that focus more on holistic formation of children?

### **Ethical and Religious Pluralism**

In the world today, citizens of different traditions, cultures, religions and worldviews co-exist every day, often resulting in misunderstandings and conflicts. It is the duty of the Catholic church to proclaim the cross of Christ as the sign of as the source of all Grace. (Congregation for Catholic Education, 2017, no. 3.11)

Education to fraternal humanism can address the misunderstanding that arises as a result of difference in beliefs and views.

How can our network of Catholic schools confront the challenges of radicalization, religious divide, ethnic and racial strife, political animosity, and socio-economic poverty? How can our educational institutions be accommodative to all while preserving their distinctive Catholic character? How can we minimize the gaps between North and South so that we learn from each other?

Consider our responsibility to provide formation for an appropriate culture of dialogue between and among the cited and other divides. This responsibility calls for transformative and trans-relational leadership that models the values of continuity, freedom, equality, sharing, consistency, peace, and common good. I believe that some of us here have implemented such programs and would be willing to share.

### **Inadequate Child Safety Mechanism**

The issue of safety needs to be prioritized by Catholic schools. We cannot ignore the problems the Church is facing today. We need to enhance our efforts in this area, so that children experience the “fullness of life” (John 10:10) in Catholic schools. What can our network of Catholic schools do to make our schools centers of holistic pastoral care and humanism in which the values of care, justice, respect, freedom, human (child) rights, and responsibility upheld and lived, where children are safe, happy, and thriving?

Consider mounting whole school community safe and protective environment programs in which every member plays his/ her rightful role to contribute to the holistic wellbeing of all members of the school community.

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**Research, Data and Documentation**

I know that all our schools are doing a lot to effectively deliver Catholic education to our children and youth, yet data is not comprehensively available from all regions to us and our significant stakeholders. I am also aware that the Catholic Church worldwide boasts of many renowned universities that have capacity to support our work through research activities. From such evidence-based and documented research findings, data, recommendations and ways to obtain lessons are needed so that we are assisted and focused in efforts to continuously pursue our purpose as Catholic educational institutions.

Further, such data on the evidence-based successes and lessons learned in one setting will go a long way to, inspire, motivate or challenge peers in other similar or different locations to appropriately apply the said lessons, or lobby relevant potential supporters for resource mobilization for greater achievement in the mission of Catholic education. How can the Catholic network of schools benefit from the thousands of researchers and personnel from these Catholic universities in our countries and abroad?

**Catholic Schools and the Socio-economically Marginalized**

In many parts of the world, especially where people face socio-economic, religious, and cultural discrimination, as well as marginalization and violent displacement, Catholic education has been a great source of care, compassion, and hope. The “positive values of hope, love, and salvation of all mankind spur many Catholic schools to deliberately admit children from such backgrounds to learn alongside the social economically privileged peers in an atmosphere of empathic care and support in the spirit of the option for the poorest and most vulnerable” (Principles of the teachings of the Catholic Church) even as they have to make economic sacrifices.

In recent times, however, due to the increased financial constraints and high number of such children requiring support, some Catholic schools have reduced the number of disadvantaged children they are admitting into their schools. This exclusion of the most in need concerns us as the Catholic Church as it remains true to her principles and call for service.

How can we make our Catholic schools places of hope, life-giving and inclusion of the poorest and most marginalized members of society while maintaining our niche as best performing in educational outcomes for the future generation of our society? I believe that the OIEC network, with some refocusing and re-strategizing, can significantly contribute to widening the net for inclusion and give hope to the most marginalized members of our society.

Why have I focused on these challenges, while they are not new? These issues can to help us reflect on our strategic choices and approaches to education. These challenges are also an opportunity to reach out to others in different regions and fields, including others from outside our Catholic community who share our values, so as to forge forward as one strong Catholic group

of educators. In addition, it is in acknowledging our challenges that we are able to move forward and seek solutions. We have to take advantage of our strengths and opportunities for fulfilling the mission of Catholic education.

Our Catholic educational institutions worldwide stand out for quality and humanism, as well as formation in faith, positive values and character, and academic excellence. How can the network of Catholic schools sustain these positive attributes that have worked for us for many centuries in the past and ‘saved’ so many people through the generations?

### **Moving Forward and Call for Action**

I suggest the following actions:

1. Telling our story, with no apology, of provision of holistic quality education. We need to be clear on what we have achieved worldwide and the values we have inculcated in millions of citizens and their socio-economic impact on societies.
2. Building capacity for teachers in faith, Catholic identity, and leadership
3. Equipping Church leaders with skills and the ability to engage in the public space on issues that affect Catholic education at the local and international levels. This ability includes communication skills, profile, and tenacity.
4. Collaborating closely with Catholic universities to facilitate research in Catholic identity, teacher training and formation, and leadership. This would enable development of evidence-based interventions that enhance Catholic identity worldwide.
5. Facilitating National Education Commissions to engage in policy formulation and advocacy
6. Rediscovering what we have, what we have lost, and reclaiming it. Could we document our successes and our uniqueness
7. Enhancing our quality, standards, and processes so that Catholic schools continue to be of the highest quality and values; thus becoming schools that are the right choice for all children.

### **Conclusion**

Thus, my firm conviction, guided by our faith, our Christian values, the principles of Catholic education, our unity in diversity, our commitment, and our passion is that the provision of holistic education offers an opportunity to save the world. During the three days of the conference, please do remember that people judge education on the type of products schools produce, not grades. Catholic schools worldwide have produced leaders of integrity. Leaders who have witnessed by

living the Gospel's values as well as democratic values, thus making the society a better place to live. Let us join Pope Francis in thanking all those who teach in Catholic schools as educating is an act of love; it is like "giving life." Thank you for listening to me.

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