



The Holy See

**LETTER OF JOHN PAUL II
TO THE REVEREND EKWA BIS ISAL, S. J.
SECRETARY GENERAL OF THE CATHOLIC
INTERNATIONAL EDUCATION OFFICE**

*To the Reverend Ekwa Bis Isal, S. J.
Secretary General of the Catholic International Education Office*

It is with great pleasure and special hope that I address you, and through you the Catholic teachers of the whole world, meeting in Bangkok for the Eleventh General Assembly of the Catholic International Education Office.

Your organization, which at present includes representatives of eighty-five countries, is intended to be an expression of the Church's presence in the world, and in particular in the field of education.

The fact that Thailand has been chosen for this important meeting brings to my mind pleasant memories of my pilgrimage to the noble continent of Asia.

The subject which you propose to study at this assembly is "Education in Values for Society in the Year 2000". This might seem a little premature, but in fact many of the young people who will be receiving education at the beginning of the third millennium have already been born, or will be born in the next few years. Similarly, the future instructors of those young people are already teaching, or are training for that profession.

What sort of world awaits those future generations of students? What heritage will they receive from these present years, full as they are of social upheavals, threats of war and profound social and religious crises? What education can society offer them, to help them build a peaceful society of individuals and peoples?

One of the most serious aspects of the present historical situation is the decline of respect for the

essential values governing human life. As I said in my first Encyclical, the human situation seems far removed from the objective demands of the moral order, of justice and love (Cfr. IOANNIS PAULI II *Redemptor Hominis*, 16).

Man is the only creature that God has loved for his own sake (Cfr. *Gaudium et Spes*, 24, and he is at the basis of every value. And values take on significance only in relation to man, created as he is in the image and likeness of God. It is only by recognizing the essential openness of man to the infinite mystery of God that one establishes an authentic system of values that will not make man the slave of things and institutions but will respect the primacy that belongs to the order established by the Creator.

But Revelation tells us that man is not only the image of God: he is also the child of God, raised to a sharing in the divine nature, through a free gift of his infinite love bestowed in Christ. It is Jesus Christ who is the “light that enlightens all men” (*Io.* 1, 9) that reveals to us the new meaning of existence and transforms it, thus making people capable of thinking and living in a manner worthy of children of God. It is Jesus Christ who reveals not only God to man, but man to himself (Cfr. *Gaudium et Spes*, 22).

The Catholic school, having the benefit of the light of faith, is in a privileged position to set before its pupils an education in fundamental values, for the establishment of a world free from the threats that hang over it today. In this way, young people will learn to reject the false values of a decadent society and to discover the true values upon which a civilization of love can be built.

In this regard it is of fundamental importance that recognition be given to the primacy of spiritual values over those that are material and economic, for the values of the spirit contribute in a more direct way to the development of the noblest and most worthy aspects of the human person. It is spiritual values that give meaning to material values. As I said to the 34th General Assembly of the United Nations on 2 October 1979, this pre-eminence of spiritual values “is also a contributing factor to ensuring that material development and the development of civilization are at the service of what constitutes man. This means enabling man to have full access to truth, to moral development, and to the complete possibility of enjoying the goods of culture which he has inherited, and of increasing them by his own creativity” (IOANNIS PAULI PP. II *Allocutio ad nationum Unitarum Legatos*, 14, die 2 oct. 1979: *Insegnamenti di Giovanni Paolo II*, II, 2 (1979) 532).

In the face of the beguiling influence that the consumer society exercises today, the Catholic school, under the guidance of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, must show young people that there is more joy in giving than in receiving, that a person’s worth is based on what he or she is, rather than on what he or she has. They will thus discover the liberating value of a simple and austere life.

Young people today, fascinated by the achievements of modern sciences, tend to place unlimited confidence in those achievements and even to regard them as the supreme values. It is therefore important that the Catholic school should show its pupils that humanity's progress cannot be measured solely by the progress of science and technology; true progress is seen when primacy is given to spiritual values and to the progress of the moral life.

Radically unjust situations existing in materialistic society bring it about that while some live in abundance others die of hunger. To remedy this a new world order is needed, and therefore an education in the values of justice and love, the basis for such a world order.

In a secularized society which has lost the sense of the sacred and likewise the sense of morality, there is an urgent need for education in religious values, an education which will enable its beneficiaries to discern the call of faith. It is for the Catholic school to awaken young people to the value of the interior life, so that they can respond to that call of faith with enthusiasm and generosity.

Finally, Christianity neither suppresses nor ignores the human values which our contemporaries prize - values such as sincerity, consistency, the freedom and self-affirmation of the individual. Far from ignoring these values, it perfects them by referring them to the divine source from which they come, at the same time recognizing that, by reason of the corruption brought by sin into the human heart, they must first be purified.

Thus the Christian message can give men and women the fullness of the meaning of life and an interior enrichment that merely human ideologies cannot communicate.

In concluding these reflections, I invoke the Holy Spirit's enlightening graces upon the deliberations of the General Assembly, and I cordially impart to all participants my Apostolic Blessing.

From the Vatican, 23 January 1982.

IOANNES PAULUS PP. II

