

**Catechetical Convocation
Keynote Address
September 16, 2017**

In 1816 a young French boy, Peter Julian Eymard, wandered off from the family home. His sisters searched frantically for him and finally found him in the parish church, standing on a stool close to the tabernacle of the high altar. In response to their anxious questions, he answered simply, “I am here listening to Jesus.” That young boy became Father Peter Julian Eymard, teacher, reformer, and founder of the Congregation of the Blessed Sacrament.

Six years before his death, Father Eymard took in a novice for Holy Orders. The young man had recently lost his beloved sister and was depressed. Father Eymard soon discerned two truths about him. First, he was gifted with an amazing artistic talent. Secondly, he did not have a vocation to the priesthood.

But, instead of dismissing him from the Order, Father Eymard chose to help the man discern God’s plan for his life. Father Eymard rebuilt an old garden shed and offered it to this man as his private studio. Father Eymard gave him not only the gift of time and space and resources, he gave him the gift of *himself*—his God-given love of humanity, and his belief in this particular young man.

Before leaving the Congregation of the Blessed Sacrament, the former novice gave a gift to his beloved teacher. It was a magnificent sculpture of Father Eymard. That novice was none other than Auguste Rodin. From the

Congregation of the Blessed Sacrament he went out into world to become one of the greatest sculptors of all time. His masterpiece we all know as *The Thinker*, and is at the Philadelphia Museum of Art.

This story speaks to me of the mission and identity of Catholic education: teachers who have personally encountered Christ and then offer the gift of themselves to their students. This is teaching by example. It is the work of a lifetime of continuous conversion to Christ. It is the cornerstone of a culture of vocation, helping our students discover and embrace Gods' definite plan for their life.

Father Eymard's generosity with Rodin reminds us of the meaning of the word *educate*, that is "to lead forth." To teach the Catholic faith is to lead forth what is by nature *already there* in each of our students -- their identity and calling as children of God. Catholic education is teaching them from that place of lived encounter. Catholic education challenges and inspires our students to trust the guidance of the Master Artisan, the Holy Spirit, to lead and guide them into the life and destiny that is uniquely theirs.

Let us remember and thank God for the Catholic educators and catechists who were the "Father Eymard" in your lives. All of us here today were surely blessed by a mentor, teacher, or coach who made a gift of his or her time and talent to help you become the person God created you to be.

I also thank YOU for saying "yes" to your vocation as Catholic educators and catechists. Like Father Eymard, you have been given the unique and potentially world-changing capacity to shape the intellect, will and

souls of your students. Like Father Eymard, your cooperation with the Holy Spirit can and does change lives. I am truly grateful to all of you.

Early in life, I knew I wanted to be a teacher. In college, I studied for my teacher's certificate; and I also had a poem framed and hung on my dorm room wall. It was entitled, *The Teacher*, and it read in part:

I took a piece of living clay
And gently formed it day by day,
And molded it with power and art,
A young child's soft and yielding heart.
I came again when years were gone,
It was a man I looked upon,
He still that early impress bore
And I could change that form no more.

The privilege of being a teacher carries with it tremendous challenges, but also amazing rewards.

And now the bad news. We must admit that the past forty years of Catholic education and catechesis have not gone well. We can no longer avert our gaze from the wounds and scars on the body of Christ, the Church, our Mother and Teacher, in her ministry of teaching the Catholic faith:

- For every one Catholic God brings into the Church, six leave
- Only 30% of Americans raised Catholic are still practicing their faith, and less than 22% attend Mass weekly

- **More than 45% of Catholics do not know our teachings about the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist**
- **More than 40% of Catholics do not believe in a personal God**

To highlight the obvious, we are in a state of educational and catechetical emergency.

My fellow teachers and catechists, let the gravity of these numbers sink in. They should frighten us. They should be for us what Father Thomas Merton defined as an act of contemplation: “*a long, loving look at the real.*”

These numbers are a call to action. We can no longer continue a maintenance model of Catholic education. We must become mission-minded teachers and catechists.

Sacred Scripture and Church history teach us that the Church both *has* a mission and *is* a mission. That mission is to evangelize, which includes what the Church calls the “essential moment” of teaching. But there is more. To evangelize does not mean in the first place talking about Jesus to someone but, on a much deeper level, making that person aware of the value he or she has in God’s eyes. The goal of our teaching the faith is to put people in communion with Jesus Christ.

Before they were teachers or evangelists, the apostles themselves were students and witnesses. This must become our model of education. Before the apostles led their students, they themselves sat at the feet of the Master. And before they were teachers *of* the faith they were *witnesses to* the faith. From

that place of encounter they, like Auguste Rodin, discovered their vocations in the world. This is why we end each sacramental encounter with Jesus in the Mass with these words: *“Go in peace, glorifying the Lord by your life.”* All Catholic teachers and catechists must also be students and witnesses at this moment in American Catholic history.

For more than forty years the Church has called for catechetical reforms: an urgent call to develop “new methods, expressions and ardor.” Here in the Archdiocese we heard you, our teachers and catechists, asking that our catechetical certification process be reformed. We heard you. We have spent two years building a process that is more consistent with Church teachings, more flexible to your busy lifestyles, and more affordable for schools and parishes. Last July we launched this new Catechetical Institute as **Vocare: Called to Teach.**

Vocare is an online learning environment that offers both in person and digital methods of teaching and learning the Catholic faith. What is new about Vocare is that it encourages and requires *ongoing study and personal conversion*. This echoes the clarion call of the Second Vatican Council and the *General Directory of Catechesis* which states, *“Continuing or on-going education in the faith follows basic education...it serves the process of continuing conversion.”* (69).

The first question that Jesus, the first teacher of the Catholic faith, asks His students is this: *“whom do you seek?”* Each Catholic teacher must ask that of themselves continuously, and lovingly ask it of their students.

The answer to this question is a lifelong and exacting journey of conversion. Who among us can say we have finished our formation in faith? I know I haven't. There is always room to grow in knowledge and understanding of Christ and His teachings. There is always room to grow in holiness. Today I invite you to join me in renewing your commitment to ongoing conversion in Christ.

More than fifty years have passed since Blessed Pope Paul VI famously taught that “modern man listens to witnesses more than teachers, and if he does listen to teachers it is because they are witnesses.” Thirty-eight years later, Pope Francis delivered the same message in his own words. He stated:

Today's world stands in great need of witnesses – not so much of teachers, but rather of witnesses. It's not so much about speaking, but rather speaking with our whole lives: living consistently, the very consistency of our lives! This consistency means living Christianity as an encounter with Jesus that brings me to others ... Witness is what counts!

Recall that on the Road to Emmaus, the disciples were *already* students of Jesus, having been with Him for the years of His earthly ministry. But they had not finished their journey with Jesus nor had they completed their learning from Jesus. Instead, they invited their mysteriously unrecognizable teacher to *stay with them, abide with them, so they could continue to learn from Him*. Jesus continued to teach them, tracing the contours of their life journey against the divine plan. This encounter changed them forever: “Did not our

hearts burn within us as he talked to us on the road and explained the scriptures to us?”

Unfortunately, there are teachers and catechists today who, often through no fault of their own, have not had an Emmaus moment. They do not fully appreciate what it means to be a disciple of Jesus. Academic degrees alone do not light that fire. Sacramental preparation alone does not light that fire. Becoming a student/teacher of Jesus requires a conscious choice. Not all teachers have made that choice. Not all teachers know Jesus, truly and deeply. Even those of us who have known Christ and taught religion in our schools and parishes for many, many years can still open ourselves more fully to the power of His word and the beauty of His teachings.

Vocare embodies a teaching method of St. Paul, one of the first theologians of the Catholic Church. He taught in words and concepts that were understandable to his audience. This in no way meant diluting the message of Christ. His method began with the world of the hearer: where they were in their faith journey and their ability to receive the message. In the Acts of the Apostles, chapter 17, we see Paul famously doing this at the Aeropagus outside Athens. He began his catechesis by naming and honoring what was true in the philosophy and assumptions of the Greeks. Then and only then, after establishing this personal connection with them, did he propose the Good News of Jesus Christ. This is *pre-evangelization*, building bridges of understanding and trust with those students and families entrusted to our care.

If St. Paul taught by connecting the Church's message to the secular culture, so should we. He also conveyed his message using all means available to him, including the excellent road system of the Roman Empire. Originally designed for military conquest, St. Paul readily used those roads as a means to spread and transmit the Gospel. The Roman Roads of the 21st century are the internet, mobile devices, and social media.

As Pope Benedict challenged us, we in our day must go forth and evangelize the digital continent. Thanks to the generosity of our benefactors in the One Faith, One Hope, One Love capital campaign, we can do just that. The internet is now available for you, our educators and catechists, to journey with your students.

I hope and pray that we become a new generation of Catholic teachers and catechists that engages in Vocare, and that the accessibility of Vocare will encourage others to take up the ministry of teacher and catechist. We desperately need this, because we have many internal challenges in teaching the faith:

- Nationally, more than 80% of our catechists are white, forty years old or older, and female.
- Parishes are merging and religious education budgets shrinking. In chanceries, departments of religious education are being merged into other departments, having their budgets cut.

But the challenges we face are not only *internal* to the Catholic Church. We face massive *external* challenges. Bishop Robert Barron, Chairman of the

USCCB Committee on Evangelization and Catechesis, identifies three key ideologies directly affecting our religious education efforts.

The first challenge is what he calls Scientism. Catholics believe all truth is God's truth, and have long seen faith and science as complimentary modes of human knowledge. Catholics believe that science is one extremely valuable way of knowing reality, but it is not the *only* way.

Scientism, by contrast, claims that science *alone* can interpret reality. It claims that the only thing that is real is what can be put under a microscope or measured or tested. This one-dimensional reliance upon the materially measured or tested eliminates the supernatural dimensions of reality. This muting of the transcendent truths is what Pope Benedict called "*the eclipse of God.*"

Catholic teachers know too well the post-modern American cultural and political narrative. That narrative asserts that atheists are pro-science and Christians are anti-science; it asserts that atheists follow science wherever it leads and Christians ignore it; it asserts that atheists are thoughtful and rational, and Christians are inherently irrational.

A central task of Catholic education is to begin telling our story on our terms. We must show the disbelieving world that Catholic teachers and students do not check their minds at the doors of our classrooms. We are zealous for truth wherever it is found, not only in science, but also in what God has revealed. Science and faith are *both* sources of truth which complement and mutually inform each other.

To help us cast this vision, I have asked the Office of Evangelization and Discipleship to develop courses in Vocare that show the organic connection between Catholic faith and science. These courses will help us better appreciate the contributions that faith-filled Catholic priests, mathematicians, physicists, and astronomers have made for centuries to the progress of science.

Bishop Barron notes that a second cultural challenge affecting our religious education efforts is that of relativism. Blessed John Henry Newman, who after St. Augustine is the most quoted theologian in the documents of the Second Vatican Council and who inspired our Archdiocesan Vocations prayer, defined relativism in this way:

“Relativism is the doctrine that there is no positive truth in religion, but that one creed is as good as another. It is inconsistent with any recognition of any religion, as *true*. All are to be tolerated, for all are matters of opinion. Revealed religion is not a truth, but a sentiment and a taste; not an objective fact, not miraculous; and it is the right of each individual to make it say just what strikes his fancy.”

Relativism creates in our students an attitude of “*whatever*.” “You have your truth, I have my truth” “Let’s agree to disagree.” “I’m OK, you’re OK?”

It is nearly impossible to convince a student that Jesus Christ is the way, the truth and the life if the student is awash in a culture that insists there is no way, no truth and no life.

Sadly this is the worldview that impacts our students and their parents even before we they walk into our classrooms. As GK Chesterton said, “he who marries the spirit of this age will be a widow in the next.”

Again, Catholic educators must help change the narrative. We must teach the un-reasonableness of relativism. Every day human beings do in fact make judgements evaluated by an objective standard of right and wrong: whether to obey speed limits, how to invest money, how to be healthy. It is the recent and deadly “tyranny of relativism” that insists that *only* matters of faith and morals have no objective reality.

Our vision is for the full canvas of God’s loving design for His creation. In the Gospel of John, Jesus tells us that He has come to convey a message that is the only certain source of true peace, joy, fullness of life. It is unloving and unmerciful to teach a partial, distorted version of this truth, the only message that addresses the deepest longings of the human heart.

According the Bishop Barron, the third challenge we face in our classrooms is a consequence the first two. It is *the culture of self-invention*. The central confusion found in our culture today —in individuals, families and society itself – is confusion about what it means to be human.

Many of our students today believe that *life itself* is their own project. They must decide everything about everything. Their thoughts and feelings alone determine reality, and happiness is whatever they make or do not make of it. “My identity, my purpose in life, my gender, it’s all up to me.” These are the new state-sanctioned doctrines of American secularism. Facebook now lists more than 50 gender pronouns.

But, Catholic education has a different vision of the human person. As St. Paul said, “It is no longer I who live but Christ who lives in me.” The Gospel message we are called to share is a counter-cultural one. It proclaims to each and every one of us: Your life is not only about *you*. It’s about *Christ within you*. It’s about *His* plan for your life. We are who God has made us to be, and we find peace, joy, and fullness of life when we live according to *His* will, not according to the whims of the human heart or ego or the whim of the state.

My brother and sister teachers of the faith, the ideologies arrayed against us are vast and sophisticated – and we might even say, “politically correct.” But we do not lose hope.

These challenges are also God-given opportunities to teach the Catholic faith anew. I propose we do so according to the classic ideals of *the true, the good, and the beautiful*.

Through Vocare, we experience that there is a truth that sets us free. It is possible to live a good and happy life. It is through beauty that we discover the artistry of the Creator.

Vocations are embraced in many ways. Sometimes it is through intellectual arguments. Other times it is through the charity of a stranger, the witness of a teacher, a profound prayer experience, or Christian friendship and accompaniment. Some people need to experience the reality of their own brokenness, their own need for healing, before they can hand their lives over to Jesus. But every human heart is restless— *every one* – restless until it rests in God. In a beautiful opening passage, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* states, “The desire for God is written in the human heart.” (CCC 27) This is a universal desire, one that exists within the deepest yearnings of every human being. Every human being longs for what is authentically true, good, and beautiful. Because God has placed a desire for Himself within our hearts, we are drawn to those qualities which reflect His very being.

In his Apostolic Letter at the close of the Jubilee Year 2000, Saint Pope John Paul II exhorted all Catholics with these words:

“We wish to see Jesus.” (Jn. 12:21). This request, addressed to the Apostle Philip by some Greeks who had made a pilgrimage to Jerusalem ... [This request] Echoes spiritually in our ears Like those pilgrims of two thousand years ago, men and women of our own day – often perhaps unconsciously – ask believers not only to “speak” of Christ, but in a certain sense to “show” him to them.... Our witness, however, would be hopelessly inadequate if we ourselves had not first *contemplated his face*. (*Novo millennio ineunte*, 16)

We are invited to travel these roads in our formation as teachers and catechists. We are invited to embrace the ancient and ever new Catholic vision of the human person—the Theology of the Body—and teach this to our students, our Archdiocese, our post-modern culture – wounded and ravaged as it.

We began here today with the vocational journey of Father Peter Eymard, educator and priest. He once described himself as “like Jacob, always seeking, always on a journey.” But, the truth, goodness and beauty of his life was there from the beginning—Jesus Christ present in the Eucharist. This enabled him to see truth, goodness and beauty in the young student artist entrusted to his care. May our journey of faith give us the courage to do the same.

St. Peter Julian Eymard, pray for us. Help us as Catholic educators to proclaim a “yes” as generous as yours. Renew in us the flame of the love of learning. Let us keep walking the long road of our lifelong conversion in Christ. Give us the grace to yield ourselves to His plan for our lives, allow Him to be the sculptor of our lives, and those of our students and parents, who so clearly want us to share God’s truth, God’s goodness, and God’s beauty with their children.

May God bless you always, in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.