PROVISION OF QUALITY EDUCATION IN GHANA: THE ROLE OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH

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THE ROLE OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH

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I would like to thank the organizers of this Graduation Ceremony for my presence here this morning. I deem it a great honour and a privilege to be given the opportunity to deliver this address to you at the First Graduation Ceremony of the Spiritan University College. On this occasion I have been asked to share some reflections with you on the topic: Provision of Quality Education in Ghana: The Role of the Catholic Church.

Historical Overview of the Church and Education

The Catholic Church, from the beginning of her existence, saw her evangelizing mission as having both a spiritual and material dimension. In line with promoting the material dimension of her evangelizing mission, the Church has all through the ages put a premium on education. From the earliest times, the Church, at great cost and sacrifice, established schools, which have enriched humankind and responded to the needs of every time and place. Church schools first appeared centuries ago, growing up alongside monasteries, cathedrals and parish churches. In the British colonies, as elsewhere, religious missions were instrumental in introducing European type education. The Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts, the Moravian Mission, the Mission of Bremen, the Methodists and Roman Catholic missionaries all established themselves on the Gold Coast (now Ghana) between 1820 and 1881, opening elementary schools for boys and girls, a seminary, and eventually a secondary school (in 1909). Catholic education can be said to have started as far back as 1529, if not before, but it was only at the beginning of 1880 that there was established a small school at Elmina. From that time until now the Church has established several schools all over the country.

One cannot talk of education in Ghana without speaking of the partnership that exists between Religious Bodies and the state. Since the time of Sir Gordon Guggisberg, the Governor of the Gold Coast (1919-1927), there has been an educational partnership between the Government of the day and the Religious Bodies. This partnership still exists and its main purpose is to encourage the Religious Bodies not only to establish more educational institutions but also to make education affordable to the majority of Ghanaians, especially those in the rural areas.

While some Protestant Churches such as the Methodist and the Presbyterian started establishing schools in the 1840s and 1870s, the Catholic Church started rather late. However, we are proud to say that out of the 12 Educational Units in the country, the Catholic Church Educational Unit has the greatest number of schools. At the tertiary level, apart from our Colleges of Education and Seminaries, the Catholic Church in Ghana can boast of the Catholic University College of Ghana at Fiapre, Sunyani, and the Spiritan University College, Ejisu.

After this brief historical overview of education in Ghana, we will now address the question of the role of the Catholic Church in the provision of quality education in Ghana. I would like to do this under the following headings: (1) The Church’s understanding or philosophy of education; (2) The infrastructure needed for the provision of quality education; (3) The role of parents; (4) The role of teachers/tutors/lecturers and the Administration; (5) The role of school children or students.

1) The Church’s Understanding of Education

If the Church has sought to promote education throughout the ages, it is important for us to establish what the Catholic Church understands by education. Speaking of the education of young people, Vatican I’s Declaration on Christian Education, Gravesimum Educationis, says that education should equip young people with the necessary and useful skills with which they will be able to participate actively in the life of society in its various aspects (Gravissimum Educationis 1). According to the document, The Catholic School on the Threshold of the Third Millennium, the Catholic school should be able to offer young people the means to acquire the knowledge they need in order to find a place in a society which is strongly characterized by technical and scientific skills (par. 8).

The Declaration on Christian Education sees education as bringing about the nurturing of the intellectual faculties of students and helping them to develop capacity for sound judgment and introducing them to the cultural heritage bequeathed to them by former generations (Gravissimum Educationis 5).

As we read in the document, The Catholic School on the Threshold of the Third Millennium, The Catholic school sets out to be a school for the human person and of human persons. The person of each individual human being, in his or her material and spiritual needs, is at the heart of Christ’s teaching: this is why the promotion of the human person is the goal of the Catholic school (par. 9).

With regard to tertiary education, the Church says in Ex Corde Ecclesiae, the Apostolic Constitution on Catholic Universities, Every Catholic university, as a university, is an academic community which, in a rigorous and critical fashion, assists in the protection and advancement of human dignity and of a cultural heritage through research, teaching and various...
services offered to the local, national and international communities (par. 12). The same document says further, A Catholic university pursues its objectives through its formation of an authentic human community animated by the spirit of Christ. The source of its unity springs from a common dedication to the truth, a common vision of the dignity of the human person and, ultimately, the person and message of Christ, which gives the institution its distinctive character (par. 21).

In line with all this, Catholic academic institutions should pursue and seek to achieve excellence in disciplines that are relevant to the needs of students and that will prepare them for the world of work. The education that they receive must also make them better citizens of our society. The provision of quality education by the Catholic Church should ensure that those who come out of our educational institutions are people of integrity. The educated person who lacks integrity is dangerous to society. As Samuel Johnson (1709-1784) says in Rasselas, "Integrity without knowledge is weak and useless, and knowledge without integrity is dangerous and dreadful!" It is against this background that I find it incomprehensible and mind-boggling that the new education reforms in our country should leave out of the syllabus Moral and Religious Education, and consign it to be taught as a mere "concept" in the teaching of English and other subjects. The teaching of Religious and Moral Education as a subject in its own right is the one tool that religious bodies have for promoting proper moral formation of the human person.

In line with the foregoing, there is also the need for well-staffed and well-equipped chaplaincies in our academic institutions to cater for the pastoral and spiritual needs of students and staff. There must be ways of ensuring that students and staff are exposed to religious practices and beliefs. Chaplains should be deeply involved in the life of their schools and offer the needed pastoral care. While non-Catholic students in our academic institutions cannot and should not be forced to become Catholics, they must, on admission into Catholic academic institutions, sign a statement by which they promise to respect Catholic traditions and the Catholic ethos of our institutions.

2) The Infrastructure Needed for Quality Education

It is obvious that the basic requirement for any school is the infrastructure needed for the school. The school needs physical structures like classrooms, good libraries, science laboratories, computer laboratories, dormitories, etc. The Catholic Church has done her best to build many schools, but she often faces great financial problems maintaining them or building new ones. In view of the partnership with the State, it is necessary for government to supplement the efforts of the church in the provision and maintenance of school buildings. The commonly held view that the Catholic Church is rich should be debunked. In this connection, we should note what The Declaration on Christian Education, or Gravissimum Educationis, n. 6, says:

The public authority is bound according to the principle of distributive justice to ensure that public subsidies are so allocated that parents are truly free to select schools for their children in accordance with their conscience.

In this connection I would like to identify myself with Pope John Paul II's earnest hope that in all democratic countries steps be taken to implement true equality for non-state schools, an equality which at the same time respects the educational program (cf. Pope John Paul II, Letter to the Superior General of the Piarists, in L'Osservatore Romano, English edition, July 23, 1997, p. 2). It is against this background that I would like to request the Government to assist our private universities with money from the GETFund to put up structures on their campuses. At the moment this is not possible because the law establishing the GETFund does not permit it to assist private academic institutions. I would, however, appeal to Government to amend this law so that all private tertiary institutions like the Catholic University, the Spiritan University College and our Colleges of Education that are rendering a social service will be assisted from this fund. Those who contribute to the GETFund include the parents of children who go to private universities.

3) The Role of Parents

It is the belief of the Church that education does not begin in the school but in the home. The Church teaches that since children derive their lives from their parents, these parents have a serious obligation to educate them, and are therefore the primary and principal educators. Canon 1136 of the 1983 Code of Canon Law says, "Parents have the most grave obligation and the primary right to do all in their power to ensure their children's physical, social, cultural, moral and religious upbringing." Parents are responsible for creating a family atmosphere animated by love and respect for God and man, in which the well rounded personal and social education of children is fostered. Therefore, the family is the first school of the social virtues that every society needs.

When we look at our Ghanaian situation today, we notice that some of the factors that militate against the provision of quality education can be traced to the homes of the students. Some well-to-do parents spoil their children, pampering them with too many things and giving in to their every wish. Some parents give their children too much money to take to school; some even give them mobile phones, which some tutors may not even have. Some go to the extent of allowing their children to drive to school in their cars. Some parents tend to show off to their friends and try to make an impression on the girls, sometimes with disastrous consequences. Some parents, especially the rich ones who have house helps, do not allow their children to do household chores like sweeping the house, scrubbing bathrooms and doing dishes. When such children have to do these chores at school, it becomes a problem, and they think that they are being subjected to modern-day slavery.

There are also poor parents who are unable to give their children the basic things that they need for school. When this happens, it can lead to the pilfering of things belonging to the children from rich homes. It is important for parents to be able to provide the basic needs of their children. This is especially necessary in the case of the girls, who might be
tempted to acquire these necessities, at a price, from unscrupulous teachers or boys from rich homes. Some children come from broken homes and they do not receive the necessary education and training they need for life. Sometimes parents do not really know their children. Some children fear their parents, especially their fathers, and so are well behaved at home. However, at school, they are different, and do things that they will not dare to do at home. It is for this reason sometimes that some parents will defend their children when they are accused of misconduct. Some parents even go to the extent of challenging the school authorities, maintaining that their children are incapable of the acts of discipline of which they are accused. Some parents do not have time for the upbringing of their children because of the time that they themselves spend out of the house working to earn their living. When parents are away from their homes for long periods with no one to supervise the children, these children can watch whatever they want on television and on the internet. It is not surprising to hear that many students of today are conversant with most of the violent and pornographic movies that are in existence. Some of them take what they see in movies for reality and in fact sometimes try to carry them out, in some cases with disastrous consequences. Against this background, it is no wonder that some years ago students from a famous Catholic secondary school attempted robbing a forex bureau with guns. For the attainment of quality education for the children, parents, at the senior high school level, should cooperate actively with the school. This means supporting the educational efforts of the school and using the structures offered for parental involvement, in order to make certain that the school remains faithful to Christian principles of education. The cooperation that must exist between schools and the parents of school-going children is crucial to education. Every school should initiate meetings and other programmes which will make the parents more conscious of their role, and help to establish a partnership. In addition, the school should try to involve the family as much as possible in the educational aims of the school, both in helping to plan these goals and in helping to achieve them.

4) The Role of Students

Catholic tertiary institutions, like other tertiary institutions in the country, receive most of their students from our senior high schools. But what kind of students do we have in these schools today? A look at our senior high schools reveals that while many students are well behaved and disciplined, others are not. Some break school rules, play truant and engage in stealing, especially in the boarding houses. Some find their way into town without permission, especially at night time. Some students, who are academically weak, out of frustration, engage in acts of lawlessness; some of such students try to achieve popularity by engaging in acts of indiscipline. Some succumb to peer pressure and adopt particular types of behaviour, dress, or attitudes in order to be accepted as part of certain groups. Such pressure may also force these students to take hard drugs and engage in other vices. There are also student leaders who abuse their power by forcibly taking things like soap and milk from other students, or by making advances towards some of the girls. There are reports of students engaging in a deviant worship in some of our schools. Some leave the school campus to go and drink alcohol and spirits in nearby towns and villages. Occasionally, when there are strikes and demonstrations, some engage in acts of wanton destruction of school property.

These are some of the characteristics of students in our schools, especially the second cycle schools. If we want to ensure that we get good students in our second and third cycle institutions, we should begin from the primary level.

5) The Role of Teachers and the Administration

The teachers who teach and form our students in our schools cannot help these students if their own moral lives are not good. As the Latin saying goes, in other words, one cannot give what one has not got. While many teachers go about their teaching conscientiously and try to lead morally good lives, the same cannot be said of other teachers. The lives of some teachers are not an inspiration to students. Some teachers in senior high schools show bad example by smoking wee, drinking excessive amounts of alcohol in school, fraternizing with some of the students and having illicit romantic relationships with students. This is especially the case with the young graduates from our universities. Some teachers compromise themselves by receiving gifts from students and borrowing money from them. Some do not carry out their supervisory duties and often sign the attendance register without checking to find out if indeed the class captain has done his/her work well. In all this, the role of the housemasters or housemistresses is crucial. Unfortunately, some of them do not visit the houses to ensure that there is discipline.

With regard to teaching, there are teachers who do not show commitment and zeal. Some are simply lazy and do not teach well. Some teachers sell photocopies of their lecture notes in order to get some money, and students who refuse to buy such photocopied notes can receive low marks for their assignments and examinations. Sometimes some teachers are not able to complete their syllabus and this makes students unsure of themselves with the result that they are prepared to pay large amounts of money for leaked examination questions.

In some of our universities there are lecturers who are called Al Qaeda lecturers. These are lecturers who will not teach well. They just quickly read their lecture notes, not taking the trouble to explain anything. When it comes to examinations, they set questions on topics not treated in class. Some are just bullies who do not have the welfare of the students at heart. There should also be sponsorship packages that will enable tutors and lecturers to upgrade themselves and acquire higher degrees.

Apart from those who teach in our academic institutions, there are those who head these institutions and without whom the work of the teacher will not be possible. Some of them also contribute to indiscipline in their institutions. Some do not render satisfactory accounts of monies collected from students for doing various things in the school, and this can
often breed discontent among students and even lead to demonstrations. Some heads do not have a sympathetic ear for their students, and often dismiss their grievances without taking the trouble to investigate them. Some heads are also guilty of highhandedness, lack of fairness, firmness and integrity, and the failure to provide or use administrative structures. Some cannot provide adequate supervision. All these do not promote the reception of quality education in our Catholic schools and so there is the need to find a remedy.

The teachers, lecturers and heads of our various academic institutions must find a way of maintaining their moral integrity and uprightness. To have the moral courage to correct and discipline students, their conduct must be exemplary. Those who are teachers ought to realize as teachers that they play a crucial role in the formation of the youth. They must not think that as teachers they are simply professional people who merely pass on knowledge in the school; teacher is to be understood as educator – one who helps to form human persons holistically. The task of a teacher goes well beyond transmission of knowledge, although that is not excluded. They should by their lives as much as by their instruction bear witness to Christ, the unique Teacher. For the teacher good conduct is essential. It is well known that conduct is always much more important than speech. Students should see in their teachers the morally correct attitude and behaviour that is often so conspicuously absent from the secular atmosphere in which they live. Without this witness, the teacher will fail to make the required impact.

In the context of our schools in Ghana, teachers must have the moral courage to be able to resist a number of things including pressure from opinion leaders who try to use their position and authority to influence them when it comes to disciplining students. They should be able to withstand pressure from parents and guardians who offer you fat envelopes in return for admission favours. By their lives as much as by their teaching and administration, teachers should bear witness to Christ, the unique Teacher. For the teacher or administrator good conduct is essential. In order to ensure that there is discipline, school authorities must establish the necessary administrative and communication structures. There should be Students' Representative Councils in our institutions and students must be educated and motivated to use them. It will be necessary to have a representative of the administration on such Councils. Such representatives will act as fathers to these students and guide them in their discussions. Such a person will also be able to see things from the perspective of students and this will help the authorities of the academic institutions in the resolution of problems.

The authorities in our academic institutions must also ensure the rule of law and follow its due process. They must not rush in taking decisions, especially those that are punitive. They must also strengthen the Guidance and Counselling services in their schools. At the tertiary level, there must be professional counsellors who will be invited periodically to talk to the students.

Conclusion

In conclusion, let me congratulate you, my dear graduands, on completing your course of studies. Let me also congratulate your parents and guardians, your lecturers and professors and all those who in various ways have made it possible for you to be here today. My dear graduands, as you go out into the world, let integrity be your breastplate, your shield, your helmet and the sword which will help you to win the war against whatever is wrong morally and spiritually in our society today. May the good Lord bless and keep you.

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