

March 2008

Dear Catholic Educators of Ontario,

“Twenty years ago, the Ontario Conference of Catholic Bishops sponsored and supervised the writing of *Fully Alive*, a family life and sexual education program for our Catholic schools. Evidence suggests that the Catholic community in Ontario has been very well served by this program. The great majority of parents, teachers and Church leaders in Ontario have expressed their support of this programme as it provides educational guidance in human love, sexuality and a variety of life issues to our young people.

The world is a much different place since *Fully Alive* was written and implemented. Many of these changes pose very real challenges to both parents and teachers as they seek to provide critical information and values and seek to share the wisdom of our Catholic Tradition with our young people.

Among the new challenges facing our youth, the internet has been a mixed blessing. On the one hand, it has allowed for speedy sharing of information and knowledge, creating opportunities for learning that could not have been imagined twenty years ago. On the other hand, there have been abuses of this technology as well. Pornography is now very pervasive on the internet, and all too easily accessible. Teachers are telling us that sexual information is filtering down to young and younger ages. Television programming, movie, and song lyrics are more and more sexually explicit. Personal relationships can become distorted and open to new forms of abuse.

Bullying remains an ongoing concern with the potential threat to personal safety, and emotional well being. Dating relationships, formal and informally with groups, are beginning at an earlier and earlier age. Some teens have difficulty coping with stress, some even resorting to suicide. There is confusion and concern around topics like sexually transmitted infections, substance abuse, homosexuality and changing family structures.

With shifting boundaries and an often dissonant chorus of competing voices in our society, the tasks associated with growing into adulthood have become increasingly complex for both adolescents and their families. Parents have asked for the support of their Church and our Catholic schools in providing educational support on these issues, helping our young people to develop positive attitudes and life giving skills to navigate the difficult times of early adolescence.

These recent developments pose serious challenges to fundamental values of the Catholic community.

Where the Church teaches the sacred dignity of all persons, society promotes consumer goods as the ultimate measure of human worth.

Where the Church proclaims respect and caring for others as a foundational human truth, society creates technologies that increasingly promote isolation, making interpersonal relationships more difficult to initiate and sustain.

Where the Church calls us to respect sexuality and chastity as sacred dimensions of human personhood, society erodes the value and sacredness of human sexuality, bringing it to the base level of one more commodity.

Where the Church promotes life long commitment of husband and wives in the sacrament of marriage with the creation of new life in a community of love, society places very little value on marriage and the family.

Where the Church requires an ongoing commitment to a truly just and peaceful world, we encounter depictions of ongoing conflicts that intensify in the breadth and depth of their violence.

This is but a snapshot of the world that shapes the young adolescent.

What are parents and teachers to do to help and support their young people as they attempt to navigate the all too turbulent waters of early adolescence?

We should start by reminding ourselves of the goodness of our young people. Recent studies have indicated that Canadian teens are very hard working, sometimes with school, home and work commitments that rival that of adults. Their teachers find today's teens devoted to their families and friends. They are often very open (sometimes perhaps too open) on personal matters. They display a strong concern for issues of social justice. They are loyal. They have the desire for a good life. They are not afraid to ask questions and to seek guidance from adults on what is right. They value authenticity, and are unafraid to challenge authority when they detect insincerity or lack of commitment. They are very comfortable with technology and use it extensively to build social networks. They profess a hunger for an authentic and meaningful spirituality.

What the Bishops of Ontario wrote in 1994 to the Catholic youth of our province still remains true:

Together with your parents and teachers, we want you to know that we believe in you. We appreciate your idealism, openness, energy, capacity for friendship, loyalty, humour, and spirit of adventure. These are great strengths. We believe in your fundamental goodness and your desire to grow toward full Christian maturity. In our eyes, as in the eyes of God, each one of you is sacred. (OCCB, *Intimacy and Sexuality*)

Further, members of the Catholic community of Ontario, particularly parents and teachers, have called for greater educational support and guidance that reflect the values of the Gospel of Jesus Christ and the wisdom of the Church. In response to the concerns of both parents and teachers, additional resources in family life education have been developed as a joint project of the:

- Ontario Conference of Catholic Bishops
- Catholic Curriculum Corporation
- Catholic Association of Religion and Family Life Educators of Ontario.

The Education Commission of the OCCB has approved these resources for piloting as supplementary material for the *Fully Alive* program. It is understood that these resources are not meant to replace *Fully Alive* which remains the core resource for family life and sexual education in our schools. Teachers, however, can enrich the program according to the needs they recognize in their classes by using these new resources, which can also be integrated into other subject areas in harmony with provincial guidelines, teacher ability and scheduling concerns.

By providing teachers with lessons and support documents that reflect Catholic teaching and values on a variety of sensitive issues, it is our hope that our young people will be provided with educational guidance in human love that is both timely and supportive. Teen culture has shifted. We are called to become more fully human in and through our human relationships, in and through interpersonal intimacy and love. As our young people leave the security of their families and begin to be challenged by their peer culture, it is vitally important that their teachers step forward and provide parents with support in challenging societal values and providing an alternative voice, the voice of the Gospel.

Yours in Christ,

+ Paul-André Durocher
