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Joint Letter of the Dicastery for the Institutes of Consecrated Life and the Societies of Apostolic Life and the Dicastery for Culture and Education

The following is the Joint Letter of the Dicastery for the Institutes of Consecrated Life and the Societies of Apostolic Life and the Dicastery for Culture and Education, addressed to all involved in the mission of education in Catholic schools:

Letter

To all involved in the mission of education in Catholic schools.

Dear Friends,

On 22 May 2023, the Dicastery for Culture and Education and the Dicastery for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life invited to the Vatican a number of leading figures in the worldwide network of Catholic schools, in order to discuss in person the prospects and difficulties involved in the mission of education in our time, which Pope Francis has described as “not simply an epoch of changes, but an epochal change.” [1]

Why did the invitation for this listening session come not only from the Dicastery for Education but also from that for Consecrated Life? Because a significant number of the over 240,000 Catholic schools that make the Church one of the world’s leading players in primary and secondary education are directed by Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life. The joint initiative was not only strategic, but also – and above all – concerned with respecting what the Apostolic Constitution *Praedicate Evangelium* recommended in its call for “reciprocal listening, whereby everyone has something to learn” (No. 4). On that occasion, as Offices of the Holy See in service to the Holy Father, we were able to learn from those engaged on the front lines of education; moreover, the two Dicasteries were able to learn from one another. Two eyes always see better than one, and two ears hear better than one.

We express our gratitude to those who devote their lives and energies to the important mission of education to

which they have been called. Our thanks go to teachers and non-teaching personnel who make up the educational community worldwide: they are like different-coloured threads woven into a single tapestry. Our thanks also go to those families who avail themselves of the expertise of the Christian community and raise their sons and daughters in an educational partnership with Catholic schools. We likewise thank those Bishops, Dioceses and Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life who invest significant human effort and financial resources in maintaining older schools and building new ones. Seen from above, the work of all these individuals and groups – each with its own touch and charism – makes up a magnificent choreography that desires to include everyone in the dance of life.

During last May's meeting, a number of serious difficulties were also addressed. Some of these exist worldwide, while others are felt more acutely in certain local contexts. The recent pandemic continues to have its effects, as do the global economic crisis, decreasing birth rates, severe poverty and unjust disparities in access to food, water, health care, education, information, culture and the internet. At least in some countries, the legislative system does not acknowledge parity in the financing of non-state schools. Furthermore, some Dioceses throughout the world, as well as Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, have experienced a significant drop in vocations. At least in the western world, faith in God is often strongly excluded from public life and, more generally, from the lives of the men and women of our time. This gives rise to complex practical consequences, leading in some cases to the closure or sale of schools and thus to a loss of "personality" in educational offerings. Wherever a school run by a Diocese or by a Religious Congregation is closed, something of the history of that unique local Church, or of the distinctive charism of that religious congregation, disappears from the educational environment. When we see the painful closure of a school, we witness the disappearance of a place that symbolizes and preserves a spark of hope. Lastly, those taking part in the meeting pointed out that new and unprecedented circumstances, opportunities and questions are at times making it more difficult to express our Catholic Christian identity in a way that is open to dialogue yet firmly committed, solidly grounded and on good terms with all.

This situation might well frighten us, not least because of how quickly its effects are making themselves felt. Yet we know that it is precisely amid such situations – like the primordial chaos (cf. *Gen* 1:2) – that God performs his most amazing works. Reading some of the data about the current situation might tempt us to lose hope; yet, what first seems to "block" our courage could turn out to be a kind of "starting block" for making a new leap forward. For example, the complex circumstances in which we are called to carry out our work as Catholic schools might spur us to make greater efforts to "sing in unison", as the Holy Father recently asked of the Pontifical Academic Institutions in Rome (cf. *Audience*, 25 February 2023). Sadly, Catholic schools sometimes operate in the same geographic area not as soloists who let their unique vocal timbre enrich the larger chorus, but rather as divided, isolated and in some cases even dissonant voices that clash with others. It is urgent for the various Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life to sing together as a choir, and for Bishops, parish priests and diocesan pastoral offices to sing in tune with the rich educational charisms present in schools run by Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life. It is essential that clergy, religious men and women, and lay people all sing as one choir, and that lay people be given the chance to echo the educating voice of a Diocese and even the unique timbre of a religious charism. To that end, we encourage initiatives and even experiments that are imaginative and creative, open to sharing with one another and to concern for the future, exact in their analysis yet like a breath of fresh air in their outlook. May the fear of risks not dampen the spirit of boldness; a crisis is no time for hiding one's head in the sand, but for gazing up at the stars, like Abraham (cf. *Gen* 15:5).

In these last lines, we wish to emphasize certain things that "need to be done". All of us, in fact, need to be increasingly determined to "sing together as a choir". For we are convinced of the possibilities and beauty of the mission to educate, as an "inalienable right" that fosters the dignity of the human person (*Gravissimum Educationis*, 1). As Offices charged with assisting the Holy Father in the exercise of his Petrine ministry, we especially wish to offer you these words of encouragement. We shall make use of both old and new ways to listen to your voices on our common journey, to address realities in a timely way and to help the body of the Church to develop forward-looking solutions, even in the most difficult circumstances. May the Spirit of Christ enlighten our minds and hearts, and enable us to exercise discernment, to be imaginative and to take risks.

With sentiments of gratitude and fraternal esteem, we send you our greetings.

Card. João Braz de Aviz

Card. José Tolentino Calaça de Mendonça ³

Prefect

Prefect

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[1] POPE FRANCIS, *Christmas Greetings to the Roman Curia*, 21 December 2019.
