

**Address on the occasion of the blessing
and inauguration of Francis-Norbert-Blanchet School**

Salem OR, September 12, 1995

Archbishop Levada,
Brothers and Sisters,

I am deeply honoured and really happy to participate in the inauguration and blessing of this school.

In its own right, the opening of a new school is undoubtedly a meaningful event: it is a gesture of hope for the future, despite the difficulties of the present day. It is a gesture of trust in your children as well as in the development of their various capabilities. It is also a gesture of love for these same children to whom you wish the best there is.

And, as far as you are concerned, the best of all is a school which witnesses to your convictions and your values, a Catholic School. In this regard, the name you chose for this school speaks for itself: it is the name of your first bishop and archbishop, Francis-Norbert Blanchet. Archbishop Blanchet was both an educator and a man of great faith.

As you well know, when Father Blanchet arrived in this part of your country, he began teaching to the French-speaking Canadians who lived here working at the fur-trade, as well as to the numerous native Indians. He realized that the Indians could not easily figure out measuring time the way we do. In his correspondence, he relates that he had made "a wooden board on which were embedded markings showing the centuries after the creation of the world as well as some of the main events of sacred history. He then called this board "historical ladder" while the Indians called it "sahale stick" or "wood from above, wood from heaven or from God". Afterwards, this ladder was painted on a piece of cloth or even on paper so that it could be carried more easily while travelling. Upon parting from the people he had visited, Father Blanchet gave them several of these ladders.

Here is a reproduction of this ladder as taken from a painting on a piece of cloth. The writing is in French: its title is "*Échelle chronologique et historique de la religion*". On it centuries are identified by horizontal lines and years by dots. Starting at the bottom the ladder, we notice forty lines before the coming of Christ (in a French Christmas hymn, we sing: "*Depuis plus de quatre mille ans*": "Since over four thousand years, Jesus' coming was foretold by the prophets...") and then thirty-three dots that stand for the thirty-three years of the life of Jesus-Christ. Then, eighteen horizontal lines and forty-four dots refer to the years up to the date of this reproduction, the year 1844.

As a good pedagogue, Father Blanchet had also the idea of underlining some main events of our sacred history. We notice here the creation of the sun and the moon, Noah's Ark, the tower of Babel, the temple of Solomon, the Calvary, the Church of Constantine, the Reformation, his two missionary expeditions to British Colombia (1838) and to seventeen other missions.

In his correspondence, Father Blanchet mentions that the Indians -- and probably also the white people -- took very much interest in this depiction of the history of our faith and that they themselves could later use it to teach their own tribesmen.

This pedagogical instrument does not compare with the plenty of instruments we have today in our schools. But I guess that the teachers at "Francis-Norbert-Blanchet School" will be happy to look up to Father Blanchet while using their own pedagogical resources at the service of their students.

The patron of your School was also a man of great faith. When I first read the accounts of his travel from Montreal to the Pacific Coast and the hardships of his first years of missionary work in this area, a compelling thought came to my mind: "How deep a faith was required from that man!" What a faith, what a love of God and of his brothers and sisters whom he wanted to win over to God! Is not this man an inspiration for all Catholics who share the same faith and the same love? At times I wonder whether the practice of our faith has nowadays become too easy... However, as a matter of fact, if one's faith stands at the core of one's life, it is not so easy to live up to it.

I have just said that Father Blanchet wanted to lead the people of this country to God. It reminds me of what a French and remarkable philosopher named Jean Guitton said three or maybe four years ago upon receiving Pope- Paul-the-Sixth award for his works: "There are three main ways, he said, to go to God: the way of truth, the way of love and the way of beauty". In a Catholic school these three ways are proposed to the students on their way to God.

Let me explain this with a comparison. Suppose that one of you is the father of a five-year-old little girl. One morning while sitting at table for breakfast you notice a flower-pot filled with dandelions. If you are a physicist, you might think of the wavelength corresponding to the bright yellow colour of the dandelions (how many angstroms?... I do not remember!) If you are a chemist, you might try to guess the relative quantities of mineral salts in the various parts of the plant. If you are a biologist, you would refer to the hormones needed for the blossoming of this particular species. Moreover, since you are not deprived of a certain artistic sense, you might rather appreciate the harmony of forms and colours. But, if suddenly your little girl runs up to you hugging you in her small arms and saying: "Happy birthday, daddy!", then I am sure that the pot of dandelions placed there by your child, suddenly becomes the most beautiful pot of flowers in the world.

This comparison illustrates the three manners in which things can be understood. As a physicist, a chemist or a biologist you are answering to the "how" question. Nowadays, we very much go this way -- and it is a valuable and necessary approach -- but it is not the only one. The scientific approach to things as well as science itself are not the only valid ways to discover things. Philosophy and religion try to answer to the "why" question. In one of his novels, Soljenitzine, who experienced the gulags of Russia, writes: "The harshest life is not the life of men who struggle against the sea, who dig the earth or who search for water in the desert. The harshest life is the life of the man who day after day, when coming out of his home, bumps his head on the lintel of the door because the lintel is too low". So is it when there is no perspective, no horizon to life: it is through meaning that life is given its horizon and direction. A life without a meaning is like a river which has not yet dug its bed: its energies are dispersed and get lost in all directions causing all kinds of damage.

The way of beauty is also necessary in education. I strongly feel that education to beauty is particularly relevant to prevent the pitfalls of our consumerist and technique-minded society as well as to develop above all the capacity of interiority and to give meaning to life. Don't we have much to learn from the old Greek philosophy of education which gave priority to music, poetry, theatre? For instance, in our secondary schools in Quebec, we seldom hear students sing: this is no sign of progress. I thank your students who sang beautifully during this celebration.

I was happily surprised to read in the correspondence of Archbishop Francis-Norbert Blanchet that from the very beginning of his ministry, he invited his people to learn sacred hymns. Two of them he identified as "*Tu vas remplir le voeu de ta tendresse*" (which is unknown to me) and "*Je mets ma confiance*" which I learned from my mother when I was a kid. May I dare sing it to you:

*"Je mets ma confiance
Vierge, en votre secours,
Servez-moi de défense
prenez soin de mes jours.*

(Refrain)

*Et quand ma dernière heure
viendra fixer mon sort,
Obtenez que je meure
de la plus sainte mort."*

By singing this I am not giving you an example of beauty, but I cannot remain indifferent to the fact that my relative François-Norbert sang and taught this hymn in this part of the world, some one hundred and fifty years ago. I usually say: "Beauty awakens the heart and, when the heart is touched, prayer come easily".

The way of truth, the way of beauty, the way of love. In our times, when so much concern is given to individual rights and to personal freedom, it is important to remember that nobody can find happiness by himself alone, in himself alone and for himself alone. A Catholic school, more

than any other school, has the responsibility of inviting their young students to think of others, to give and not only to receive, to create occasions for sharing, etc. The problems arising from the gap between rich and poor, from the lack of food in the third-world, from the homelessness in our large cities, etc. will be solved to-morrow or left unsolved by our students of today.

When referring to vocations, professions and careers, the Catholic educators must stress the importance of service to society and to the Church. I greatly appreciate what the poet and philosopher Tagore has said:

*"I was sleeping and I dreamt that life was but joy,
I awakened and I saw that life was service,
I served, and I saw that service was joy."*

In the field of service, a Catholic school offers the wonderful example of Jesus. Who was a better servant than He was?

Let me conclude by borrowing a small parable from one of our great poets in Quebec, Msgr. Félix-Antoine Savard. He fancied the roots of a tree saying to themselves: "I am blind, the soil is dark, but I trust my highest bud". For instance, we all know that it is the highest bud of a conifer tree that is entrusted with the growth in height of the tree. It is also my strong conviction that our Christian faith, the message of the Gospel, can foster the growth of the highest bud in each one of our children... And help them grow up to the best of their abilities in life and love. This is my strongest hope for each one of them.

+ Bertrand Blanchet
bishop of Rimouski