



## STATEMENT ON "AN ECHO IN OUR HEARTS"

November 1, 1996

---

### Preamble

The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties ...of...those who are poor or in any way afflicted...raise an echo in our hearts"<sup>1</sup>

In this era of change, anxieties and tensions affect almost all of us. One group in particular calls for special attention in Florida now; namely African-American and other black children and young people.

Unlike other immigrants to America, African-Americans were snatched from their homes and families and brought here against their will. They brought with them a heritage of art, culture and spirituality that has enriched our Church, our nation and our communities. Many have flourished and prospered, especially in recent decades. However, an intolerable number of black children are growing up in conditions that offer little hope for the same future to which other Americans aspire. They face challenges and difficulties that are more severe, and often different, from those faced by others in our society. Many of the causes are social, economic and educational; they ensue from centuries of forced slavery, followed by legal and social segregation and court-approved separate but grossly unequal schools.

Their hopes and joys, griefs and anxieties, and those of their parents and families, raise an echo in our hearts today. That echo evokes in us the special concern for their education as well as that of all young people. "Our immediate and continuing concern is to provide the best possible education for children and young people in and out of Catholic schools."<sup>2</sup>

We pray that all Catholics in Florida, and all people of good will, open their hearts to this echo.

### History

Just after the Civil War, Bishop J.P. Augustin Verot, bishop of Savannah and vicar apostolic for Florida (later the first bishop of the Diocese of St. Augustine), brought the Sisters of St. Joseph from France to Florida to undertake the education of "free blacks" whose education was largely ignored by governmental authorities. Other religious orders followed, opening missions and parochial schools to educate black children. The effort persists to this day.

All of us can be proud of the record of Catholic schooling for black children. A significant number of successful black professionals and business people received their education in Catholic schools and Catholic universities. Of the first three black members of the Florida legislature in this century, two of them, Mary Singleton and Joe Lang Kershaw, were graduates of the parochial school system.

Our brothers, the Black Bishops of the United States, said in 1994:

The Catholic school has been and remains one of the chief vehicles of evangelization within the black community. We cannot overemphasize the tremendous importance of parochial schools for the black community. We dare to suggest that the efforts made to support them and to insure their continuation are a touchstone of the local Church's sincerity in the evangelization of the black community"<sup>3</sup>

We applaud the great efforts of so many people involved in this ministry, including religious and lay, faculty, parents and supporters, who have labored long to establish and support Catholic schooling for black children.

Today, with a network of some 200 schools in Florida, the Church faces enormous need and demand for Catholic schools. As the costs and regulatory burdens have increased, the availability of a Catholic school education for low-income and socially disadvantaged families of all races has diminished. Parishes continue to develop means for tuition subsidies and scholarship assistance for attendance at parochial schools, but it must be said that access to these schools for low-income families is more and more difficult to maintain. This is especially so for black families for whom the Catholic Church has a special and historic solicitude. As Catholic schooling has become less available, we should point out that with integration, the quality of public schooling for black and minority children has increased and has contributed much to the upward mobility of black children.

### **The Present Moment**

Pope John Paul II has described the school's role. He was speaking of Catholic schools, but this quote applies just as well to public schools:

"The school's task is to cultivate in students the intellectual, creative, and aesthetic faculties of the individual; to develop in students the ability to make correct use of their judgment, will and affectivity; to promote in them a sense of values; to encourage just attitudes and prudent behavior; to introduce them to the cultural patrimony handed down from previous generations; to prepare them for their working lives; and to encourage friendly interchange among students of diverse cultures and backgrounds that will lead to mutual understanding and love."<sup>4</sup>

Parents are the primary and irreplaceable educators of their children. Along with schools, relatives and neighbors, they have a critically important responsibility to give encouragement, inspiration and firm guidance to children, while instilling intellectual curiosity and a thirst for learning. There must be strong communication and cooperation to help children face the challenges, temptations and options in life. In that regard, we compliment black Catholics for the active role they play in the raising of their own children and those of their neighbors.

Public schools educate the majority of Catholic children in this state and over 85 per cent of Florida's children. In 1989, we wrote as bishops of Florida, to express our strong support for an effective and accountable public education system capable of delivering academic excellence, moral development and character formation.<sup>5</sup> Our pledge of cooperative support for good public schools remains steadfast.

While there are ongoing criticisms and problems involving sectors of public education, the disparities are most felt by many in the black community where youngsters from families of little or no economic means often emerge under-educated and, thus are ill-fitted to compete in or contribute to our ever-advancing technological society. Our failure to properly invest these youngsters with knowledge, skills and hope for the future poses both real and immediate danger to their welfare and a grave potential threat to the future economic and social health of all communities.

It is this crucial present situation that impels us to arouse in Catholics, and all people of good will, concern for the quality of education provided to black youngsters in our state. The white community, being the vast majority of Catholics and of citizens, has a special obligation in this regard.

### **Future Challenge; Greater Response**

In the landmark 1979 document, "Brothers and Sisters to Us," we, together with other bishops of the United States, cited racism and economic disparity as primary factors that place a heavy burden on all minorities, black people in particular. We declared that all forms of discrimination constitute "a serious injustice which has severely weakened our social fabric and deprived our country of the unique contributions of many of its citizens."<sup>6</sup> Today, blacks in Florida, and indeed all across America, still face the specter of subtle but powerful discrimination that works to deny them equal opportunities to participate in all

the benefits of society. Under-education of black youngsters is one major element that threatens to rob them of their future.

The black community and black parents have an important role in securing for their youth a future of promise, but they do not operate in a vacuum. They deserve to be joined by all Floridians, parents, neighbors, pastors, businesses and civic groups in active support of their own children's schools and of all schools in their communities. Standing in solidarity with the aspirations of our black brothers and sisters, the Church in Florida is impelled to greater and more creative responses beyond what is being done now.

Therefore, to move forward together, we urge the following.

1. We have been called to love one another, thus to see, hear and understand each other. We must first listen to each other; not just to words and rhetoric, but listen heart to heart.

2. Progress begins with dialogue. We urge pastors, parishioners, educators, black community leaders and others to engage in ongoing discussion and interaction concerning the problems of the education of black children, both in public, private and parochial schools; in religious education programs; and in the community.

3. We urge our parochial school administrators, faculties and parents' organizations, together with parishioners and parents, black and white, to work to overcome any barriers they see to the admission of black students to parochial schools.

4. Black alumni from Catholic schools are unsung stars of a true success story. We urge them to join together for the purposes of cooperative efforts in developing strong, moral, educated black youngsters and publicizing the benefits of Catholic schools, and of all education. Catholic schools, working with the local diocesan Office of Black Catholic Ministry should seek to contact and bring together such alumni and help to coordinate their efforts.

5. New experiments in community schooling, charter schools and parental vouchers are being explored and implemented throughout the nation. We urge that public officials, major corporations, churches, civic groups and educators work together to develop or establish viable alternative schools to be located in predominantly black communities in Florida.

## **Conclusion**

What we outline here are small steps, but they are a sure and necessary beginning on the road to a stronger response to this echo in our hearts -- and in the hearts of all followers of Christ -- to these joys and hopes, griefs and anxieties of today's black children. We prize the future as we do the past. We urge that all Catholics in Florida, and especially black Catholics, enter or re-enter this missionary path with confidence, in company with these young people to whom we are "no longer strangers and sojourners, but ... fellow citizens with the holy ones and members of the household of God."<sup>7</sup>

### **John C. Favalora**

*Archbishop of Miami*

### **John J. Snyder**

*Bishop of St. Augustine*

### **John J. Nevins**

*Bishop of Venice*

### **J. Keith Symons**

*Bishop of Palm Beach*

**Norbert M. Dorsey, C.P.**

*Bishop of Orlando*

**Robert N. Lynch**

*Bishop of St. Petersburg*

**Agustin A. Roman**

*Auxiliary Bishop of Miami*

**Endnotes**

1. *Gaudium Et Spes*, Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, Documents of Vatican Council II, Ch.1.
2. "Teach Them," A statement of the Catholic Bishops of the United States, May 6, 1976, 5.
3. *What We Have Seen and Heard*. A pastoral Letter on Evangelization from the Black Bishops of the United States, Part II, 1984. 14 *Origins* 273, 285.
4. "The Catholic School in the Eighties: Address to Educators," Pope John Paul II, New Orleans, September 12, 1987; 17 *Origins* 277, 280-281.
5. "Statement on Public Education," February 9, 1989. Statements of the Catholic Bishops of Florida, p. 123.
6. "Brothers and Sisters to Us," Statement of the Catholic Bishops of the United States, 9 *Origins* 381, 383.
7. Ephesians 2:19.