



17 December 2014

Dear Pastors and Pastoral Animators, Trustees and Teachers, Parents and Students of the Archdiocese of Grouard-McLennan,

I still recall with delight the day my teacher introduced me to the poem *If*, by Rudyard Kipling. What wisdom! I thought. It didn't replace the Scriptures as the guide for my life, but I have reflected on it often as I've confronted issues, both in my own spirit and in the world around me. The very first line is a classic: *"If you can keep your head when all about you are losing theirs and blaming it on you"*.

Over the past few weeks, there has been much discussion in Alberta about the government's proposed Bill 10. Although this has been withdrawn for further reflection, the debate continues. Interest groups are voicing their dissatisfaction with this bill, which is being dubbed the "gay students' rights bill", and Catholic school boards and bishops are being targeted for the direction all this has taken. Over the past few days, the Alberta Catholic School Trustees Association (ACSTA) and other Alberta bishops have issued statements on their position and the impact of this bill on Catholic schools. I have not had the same opportunity to speak of this matter, as I had surgery late last week and only on Monday was released from hospital.

In the spirit of my quote from Rudyard Kipling, I encourage us all to be still for a moment, and ask ourselves a few questions:

- What is the issue here? Is it our desire to guarantee that our schools be safe and affirming environments for all of our youth? Or is it something else?
- Who, or what, is at risk? Who is being bullied? And by whom?
- What do we believe about Catholic education? Do we hold Catholic schools to be permeated with a Catholic understanding of life and Christian values? Do we expect Catholic schools to be distinct in aiding parents as the first and prime educators of their children? If we hold out Catholic schools to be indistinguishable from all other schools, why would we and many non-Catholics choose them?

I fear that I may have strayed from the particular matter of Bill 10 and ventured into the realm of Catholic education *per se*. More to the point, let me affirm the following:

- That parents are the primary educators of their children; schools are meant to assist them in this relationship, not replace them.
- That there is a sacred quality to the individual person, which in every instance calls for respect and honour from others.

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- That one's personal identity is multi-faceted, and impacted by many factors, including experiences and relationships. The element of mystery in a person's character calls for respect and honour.
- That homes and schools and parishes must be safe and caring communities.
- That those who are held up for ridicule and shame need to be protected against such by the community.

The ACSTA has already endorsed and promoted among all Catholic school boards in Alberta a program for safe and caring communities, outlined in the document entitled *Supporting Inclusive Communities: Resources & References in Alberta*. I believe that if followed conscientiously, this is both suitable and adequate in creating the sort of environment that will cherish and protect all of our youth at risk for being bullied and intimidated, whether that risk arise from body image, academic (or lack of) achievement, ethnic identity or sexual orientation. In this light, I suggest that so-called "gay-straight alliances" are redundant in our Catholic schools and belong to an agenda other than the benefit of our students.

Sincerely in Christ the Redeemer,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "+ Gerard Pettipas, C.Ss.R." with a flourish at the end.

+ Gerard Pettipas, C.Ss.R.
Archbishop of Grouard-McLennan