Homily by Kathleen Hughes, RSCJ  
A Homily in Celebration of  
The Goals and Criteria  
for Sacred Heart Schools in the United States, 2005

At the outset I want to make three claims about our new Goals and Criteria:

First, this document represents an urgent and timely pedagogical response to the cataclysmic events of our world and our Church in the last fifteen years;  
Second, these Goals and Criteria have the potential to be prophetic, but only if we continue to probe them deeply, keep them all in a carefully calibrated balance, and challenge each other to their realization;  
and Third, our Goals and Criteria actually capture five ways of naming God and thus they present us with five ways of being transformed into the divine image, a transformation which the reading from Second Corinthians just hinted at, a transformation we have never before claimed explicitly in the living of our mission.

First, then, locating our revised Goals and Criteria in the events of these last fifteen years.

It is interesting to note that Saint Madeleine Sophie Barat encouraged periodic re-articulation of our educational philosophy—of the principles and values, the broad purposes, the hopes and ambitions which we now call The Goals and Criteria for Sacred Heart Education. More than one hundred and fifty years ago she said:

We must not be blind to the fact that in these times of activity in which we live, demands are made upon us and obstacles arise so that certain modifications and a certain “perfectioning” become indispensable. God forbid that we should wish to compromise…our principal end to these tendencies, but we must again…review our Plan of Studies to modify and complete it.

Now, as then, the times in which we live place new demands on our work of education and require of us a re-articulation both of the foundational principles which guide our work and of the vision and spirit which animate us.

The introduction to our 2005 Goals and Criteria states that September 11, 2001 forever changed our context. Certainly that event more than any other has changed our worldview and reshaped our hearts, but 9/11 and its aftermath is not all that has moved us to this revision. Consider some of the other events in the fifteen years since our last edition of the Goals and Criteria:

There have been stunning advances in science and technology. The DVD, the World Wide Web, the Pentium processor, cell phones, digital cameras and iPods are ubiquitous. The human genome project has reached a certain maturity. The cloning of Dolly has launched an unprecedented moral debate, joining other scientific breakthroughs, like stem cell research, with challenging life and death implications, especially for people of faith. The SARS epidemic and the AIDS pandemic are evidence of our global vulnerability to disease. Large power failures in Europe and the northeast United States demonstrate aging infrastructures pushed to the limit by ever greater energy needs.

These have been years of terrible natural disasters: earthquakes destroyed sections of Japan, Turkey, Iran, Mexico, Pakistan and Kashmir; a tsunami in southeast Asia, in a matter of minutes, left eleven countries decimated; the flooding and mudslides in Guatemala buried whole villages; the hurricane devastation of Andrew then paled in comparison to the fury of Katrina and Rita…and one wonders as we gather here for prayer what havoc Wilma will wreak. In all these instances, the death and destruction, the dislocation and isolation, the loss of life and of personal history is mind-boggling. So too have been the economic ripple effects around the globe.

Disasters the human community inflicted on itself produced even greater death and destruction…recall the Rwandan genocide, the Balkan war, the hostilities in the Congo, the conflict in Afghanistan, the famine in Niger, the Haitian rebellion, and the war in Iraq. In addition, peoples in Madrid, Bali, and
London experienced the same vulnerability, shock and horror which we knew the day the Twin Towers fell.

In these latter years the Church has known its own upheaval. Widespread sexual abuse at the hands of vowed priests and religious continues to play out in the headlines together with a conspiracy of silence and cover-up at the highest levels of ecclesiastical governance. Many lament a loss of voice and moral authority on the part of the hierarchy precisely when “disturbing words” are needed for our age. Others note a seeming preoccupation with internal matters of little consequence, appropriate postures during the Eucharist for example, while the human community is caught up in an unprecedented spiritual quest for the divine, a quest we named at the 2000 General Chapter as: “the thirst for God, the hunger for justice, the desire for equality, the longing for meaning, and the ache to belong, the very needs we ourselves experience,” the very needs that cry out for authoritative and inspired leadership.

Happily some events and movements have produced glimmers of hope, reconciliation and human community. These fifteen years have included the reunification of Germany, the independence of East Timor and the establishment of the European Union. The peace process in Ireland is hope-filled and so, too, the possibilities of peace seem tangible in the land of Jesus’ birth. Remarkably, natural disasters have made friends of enemies: the military in Ache, for example, has laid down its arms; Pakistan has welcomed relief supplies from India.

The trajectory of these events cries out for the deepening—in ourselves and in our students—of both a global consciousness and a global conscience—the very words we used only last year when this body named “interculturality” as a key priority in the Network’s strategic plan. It is more and more obvious that our destiny is bound up with the whole of the human community. It is further obvious that we who are women and men of privilege have a special obligation to our brothers and sisters to use our education, our energy, our wealth and our influence at the service of and advocacy for the wider human community.

The inspiring introductory words of the Second Vatican Council’s Constitution on the Church in the Modern World seem so appropriate:

The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the people of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ. Indeed, nothing genuinely human fails to raise an echo in our hearts. For ours is a community…united in Christ, led by the Holy Spirit in our journey to the Kingdom of our God, and we have welcomed the news of salvation which is meant for every human person. That is why this community realizes that it is truly linked with humankind and its history by the deepest of bonds. [§1]

Truly the events of these past fifteen years have stretched our minds and our hearts, shifted our preoccupations as educators, and occasioned new emphases in our revised Goals and Criteria. And so, as members of the world community we have adopted the following new convictions as criteria to be lived:

We must educate to:
- a deeper understanding of our global reality,
- an appreciation of the interdependence of all creation,
- a balanced and critical awareness of the impact of globalization,
- a nuanced knowledge of world religions,
- an honoring of religious diversity,
- a more thoughtful stewardship of our earth’s resources.

We have recognized that our students need:
- strong formation in critical thinking,
- practice in social analysis,
- continuous reflection on the ethical uses of technology,
- skills in reconciliation and peace-making,
- and direct contact and reciprocal relationships with people who are on the margins.
We affirm that only a deep and abiding faith will sustain us in these cataclysmic times and we have stated unequivocally that we stand confident and firm in a faith tradition, encouraging, for each member of the community, a personal and dynamic relationship with God.

Thus far I have summarized the new emphases of the Goals and Criteria and that which prompted them. But here’s a far more important question: Are these new Goals and Criteria prophetic? No. Not yet! Not until they are embodied. Words in a printed document can make us feel good. These words particularly can make us proud – they are words hard won after reflections and conversations across the country and a whole series of reviews and revisions so each voice could be heard and respected. We can be justly proud of this document.

But it will be a prophetic statement only when its content is probed and deepened by each of us and when its directions shape our own lives and our decision-making. It will be prophetic when boards of trustees hire, shape a budget, determine personnel policies and educational priorities through the lens of this document; when faculty members challenge one another to the breadth of vision contained within; when administrators live centered lives and call all their constituencies to the same concern for balance and reflection; when the entire school community relates to one another with respect and uses direct and open communication; when the Provincial Team and the Network Board and the Sacred Heart Commission on Goals use their respective influence to form the adult community in our mission of making known God’s love in this 21st century world – the tap root of the vision here articulated.

Three specific actions could enable the prophetic in these pages to emerge: first, that we hold ourselves to the behaviors this document requires, not just the attitudes; second, that we become thoroughly convinced that all five goals are equally important; and third, that we concede we are not able to exhaust its content after one or two readings or a faculty or board retreat. As we have said so often to one another in the process of the revision, “values taken for granted or left unarticulated become inoperative.”

Finally, I want to make a claim about the transformative potential of the Goals and Criteria. Five years ago the Society of the Sacred Heart held a General Chapter, a gathering of RSCJ delegates from all 45 countries where we serve, and for the first time including some of our lay colleagues in ministry. The focus of the Chapter was to give greater definition and orientation to our educational mission. The course of those deliberations we came to a startling conclusion. All of us would have agreed as we began that the work of education is a work of transformation. Few of us would have been ready, at the outset, to claim that our work was a participation in God’s work of transformation. It is God who longs for the development of whole human persons, their minds, their imaginations, their hearts, their souls. It is God’s grace which enables transformation to happen. It is God’s mission, not just our own, that we have embraced in our service of education and it is to God that all our work and each of the goals is oriented.

Now, five years later, I’d like to claim even more. It seems to me that the five goals which have shaped our educational vision are really five ways of naming the divine and thus five ways of being gradually transformed into that same divine image:

For Mystery is the name of God and lively faith is the path to Mystery

Truth is the name of God and rigorous intellectual discipline is the path to Truth

Compassion is the name of God and mutual service in love is the path to compassion.

Community is the name of God (sometimes we say Trinity) and large-heartedness is the path to communion.

Freedom is the name of God and acceptance of self and the other is the path to freedom.

A few minutes ago a very short reading from 2nd Corinthians was proclaimed. It may have felt extraneous to this celebration but it has everything to do with opening ourselves to the transforming
power of God whom we serve in our ministry of education, and gradually in such partnership with God, being ourselves transformed into the same divine image. As St. Paul wrote:

All of us, gazing with unveiled faces on the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into that same image from glory to glory, as from the Lord who is the Spirit.

What an awesome responsibility is ours.

What an amazing gift.

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