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TO ALL MAJOR SUPERIORS

Reverend and dear Father,

P.C.

In this year which marks the 400th Anniversary of the first Ratio Studiorum, I am happy to present the work of the International Commission on the Apostolate of Jesuit Education and to publish The Characteristics of Jesuit Education. The document is for all Jesuits, and also for all lay people and members of other religious congregations collaborating with us in our apostolates, especially in our educational institutions.

A document listing the characteristics of Jesuit education is not a new Ratio Studiorum. However, like the Ratio produced at the end of the 16th century and as a continuation of the tradition begun then, it can give us a common vision and a common sense of purpose; it can be a standard against which we measure ourselves.

The Jesuit educational apostolate has been seriously examined in recent years; in some countries it is in a state of crisis. Many factors, including government restrictions, economic pressures and a severe shortage of personnel, make the future uncertain in these countries. At the same time, in many parts of the world, there is clear evidence of renewal.

I am grateful to everyone involved in Jesuit education, both Jesuits and the thousands of other Religious and lay women and men who have worked with us in this apostolate. They have given dedicated service as teachers, administrators, governors or staff, and they have shown added dedication in contributing to the work of renewal. We have moved forward; it is now possible to synthesize our efforts into a new statement of our objectives in education, and to use this statement as an instrument for further renewal: for deeper study of our educational work and for its evaluation. The publication of these Characteristics is at once an expression of great confidence in the importance of this apostolate, and an expression of my prayerful hope that it can be ever more effective in achieving its objectives.

Parents make great sacrifices to provide a good education for their children, and it is given high priority by the Church and by civil governments; the Society must continue to respond to this vital need in today's world. Therefore, in spite of difficulties and uncertainty, education remains a preferential apostolate of the Society of Jesus. The teacher in the classroom and the administrator in the office, Jesuit and lay, exercise a ministry of service to Church and to society which can still have great apostolic effectiveness.

A month ago, in writing to the whole Society on “Apostolic Discernment in Common,” I said that this apostolic discernment “is exercised. . . with regard to the experience of the apostolate and how best to manage it... always looking for more suitable ‘means’ to accomplish faithfully and effectively the mission received, taking into account continually changing circumstances.”

The Characteristics can assist all those working in Jesuit education to “exercise” this essential task of apostolic discernment. It can be the basis for renewed reflection on the experience of the educational apostolate and, in light of that reflection, for evaluation of school policies and practices: not only negatively (“What are we doing wrong?”), but especially positively (“How can we do better?”). This must take account of “continually changing” local circumstances: individual countries or regions should reflect on the meaning and implications of the characteristics for their own local situations, and should then develop supplementary documents that apply this present universal document to their own concrete and specific needs.

Apostolic discernment “in common” is the work of the entire educational “community”. Jesuits contribute their knowledge and experience of Ignatian spirituality, while lay people contribute their own experiences of family, social and political life. Our common mission will be the more effective to the extent that we can all continue to learn from one another.

The Commission, established in 1980 to help further renewal in Jesuit secondary education, has naturally made secondary education the direct focus of their work. But much of this document is applicable to all areas of Jesuit education, while the principles can be applied to all Jesuit apostolates. Those working in other Jesuit educational institutions, especially in universities and university colleges, should make the adaptations that are needed, or develop from this present document a new one which will fit their situation more appropriately. Those in other Jesuit apostolates, whether in parishes or retreat work or the social apostolate, can use the document as a basis for their own apostolic discernment.

In order to make this discernment possible, the Characteristics must have a wide distribution, according to the needs and customs of each Province, and must be read and known by all concerned. I would suggest, therefore, that a personal copy be made available to all teachers, administrators and members of governing boards - both Jesuit and lay - in the Jesuit secondary schools of your Province. A summary of the document could be distributed to the parents of the students. Similarly, copies should be made available to Jesuits and lay people working in other apostolates. In many cases this will require translation; in all cases it will require the printing of multiple copies in an attractive form suitable for convenient reading. To accomplish this task, you may wish to call on the help of your Province Delegate for Education, and you may wish to work together with other Major Superiors in your country or Assistancy.

I want to thank the members of the International Commission on the Apostolate of Jesuit Education for their work during the past four years to produce the Characteristics. This document, like the Ratio Studiorum of 1586, has gone through numerous drafts, taking advantage of worldwide consultations. But only experience will reveal a possible lack of

clarity, an omission or a misplaced emphasis. Therefore I am presenting The Characteristics of Jesuit Education as Father General Claudio Aquaviva presented the first Ratio in 1586: “not as definitive or final, for that would be very difficult and perhaps impossible; rather as an instrument which will help us meet whatever difficulties we may encounter, because it gives the whole Society one single perspective.”

Fraternally in Christ,

Peter-Hans Kolvenbach, S.J.
Superior General

Rome, December 8, 1986
Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception