

Building Bridges

Voices and Visions from the PAREF International Conference

Executive Summary and Highlights



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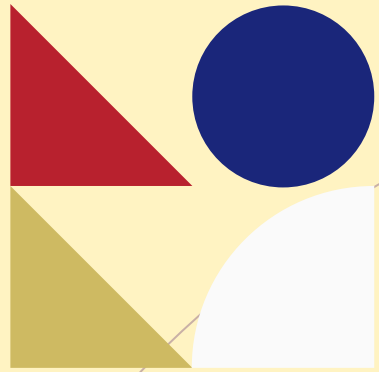
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Executive Summary

From February 28 to March 2, 2025, the Building Bridges International Conference brought together over 400 participants—including parents, educators, administrators, and students—from across the Philippines and around the globe. Hosted by PAREF Southridge School, this three-day milestone in PAREF's 50th year embodied our shared mission: to form hearts and minds, to deepen faith, and to build bridges across diverse communities.

Participants and Speakers from Australia, Kenya, India, Taiwan, the United States, Italy, Spain, and more experienced a vibrant program featuring:

Keynotes by Fr. Esteban de Sas (Italy), Dr. Pete Paciorek (USA), Dr. Juan Dabdoub, and Prof. Aitor Salaverría (Spain) — each bringing perspectives that renewed our understanding of Christian identity, character mentoring, and strategic formation.

A greatly expanded breakout menu, enriched by additional sessions such as:

- “Comprehensive Sex Education” with Atty. Toto Villareal, offering a Catholic framework for a sensitive topic.
- “Force Multipliers for Good” by Dr. Paciorek, deepening his exploration of mentor identity.
- “The Marriage Course”, focusing on supporting parents in their foundational role.



- “Paula Mills: From Students to Saints in Business”, linking faith and enterprise.
- “Chippy Dioko: Mentoring for Mental Health”, highlighting relational care.
- “Julia Buencamino Project”, an artistic call to compassion.
- “Woodrose: Being a School of Character”, showcasing lived experience.
- “Neurodivergent Children” session emphasizing inclusive formation.
- “Apostolic Initiatives with Parents” by the Capulongs, encouraging parental partnership in mission.

“This was not just a conference—it was a reawakening of purpose.”

Each session reinforced the conference’s themes—bridging gaps between home and school, faith and reason, individuality and community, suffering and redemption, worldliness and holiness. Together, they formed a compelling narrative of what it means to build bridges in character, faith, and formation.



Highlights & Insights of the Sessions

Opening Ceremony

The Opening Ceremony launched the conference with elegance, warmth, and joy. Framed by powerful visuals, global greetings, and opening prayers, it set the tone for what was not only a gathering—but a family reunion of mission-aligned schools and souls.



World-Worthy Ideas:

- Global participation is not just symbolic—it fuels shared identity.
- Celebrations, rituals, and ceremony deepen commitment and awaken meaning.
- Formation is not only taught through words, but through beauty, order, and celebration.

Why It Matters Globally:

As education becomes more pragmatic and pressured, events like this remind us of the role of beauty, hospitality, and shared spirit in awakening the heart.

“Before we teach, we must gather. Before we instruct, we must inspire.”



Dr. Pete Paciorek – Force Multipliers for Good: The Being and Doing of Character

In this more reflective session, Dr. Paciorek explores the dual dimension of character formation: the inner self (“being”) and its outward actions (“doing”). He invites educators to embrace not just the responsibility but the privilege of moral leadership.



World-Worthy Ideas:

- A “force multiplier” is a person whose virtue inspires a chain reaction in others.
- Character is not something we teach—it is something we transmit by presence.
- The most effective formation happens when students see virtue lived, not just taught.

Why It Matters Globally:

In a world obsessed with performance and credentials, this talk reminds us that moral influence outlives academic success. It’s a call for educators everywhere to rediscover their true vocation as culture-shapers.

“Be the reason someone chooses courage over comfort.”

Dr. Juan Dabdoub – Teaching for Character (for Administrators)



Speaking directly to school leaders, Dr. Dabdoub challenges administrators to see themselves not merely as managers, but as architects of culture. This session explores how policies, hiring, evaluation, and leadership all contribute to a living culture of virtue.

World-Worthy Ideas:

- Teachers will teach what leaders' model and reward.
- Culture eats curriculum for breakfast—what's tolerated becomes the norm.
- PRIMED is not only for teachers; it must shape the way schools are run.

Why It Matters Globally:

If formation is to last, it must be systemically sustained. This session provides a governance roadmap for leaders who want to make virtue thrive beyond personalities or programs.

“Leadership is not about control. It’s about cultivating the conditions for virtue to grow.”

Dr. Pete Paciorek – Student Misbehavior on the Rise: Let's Focus on Character Development



In this energizing keynote, Dr. Pete Paciorek takes a hard look at rising classroom discipline problems and offers a bold solution: not more punishment, but more character formation. Speaking as an educator, coach, and father, he challenges school leaders to see beyond surface behaviors and reframe their approach to student development.

World-Worthy Ideas:

- “We don’t have a behavior problem—we have a character deficit.”
- Discipline without mentorship only reinforces fear, not formation.
- Classroom and sports field must become training grounds for integrity.
- Teachers must be “force multipliers” of virtue—modeling self-control, empathy, and courage.

Why It Matters Globally:

From Manila to Madrid, schools are seeing the same struggles: disengaged learners, disrespectful behaviors, and anxious teens. Dr. Paciorek reminds us that restoring respect, order, and joy in learning begins with the adult’s willingness to mentor—not just manage—children.

“Form the heart first, and the behavior will follow.”

Lance & Isha Capulong – Apostolic Initiatives with Parents



This inspiring session reframes parents not as “clients” of the school but as co-apostles of its mission. Lance and Isha Capulong share practical stories of parents leading prayer groups, organizing missions, and revitalizing family spirituality within the PAREF ecosystem.

World-Worthy Ideas:

- Apostolate begins at home, and schools should train parents to evangelize through daily life.
- Parents are not merely beneficiaries of school formation—they’re its most potent allies.
- Initiatives grow when parents are trusted, empowered, and supported.
- Marriage, parenting, and mentorship are fields of mission, not just duty.

Why It Matters Globally:

As family life becomes increasingly secularized and distracted, empowering parents to lead in faith formation is the Church’s greatest hope for renewal. This session offers replicable ways to activate parents worldwide.

“When parents become apostles, the whole school becomes a mission.”

PAREF Southcrest: The Marriage Course

This deeply personal session brings to light the foundational role of strong, Christ-centered marriages in the holistic formation of children. Presented through testimonies and practical tools, The Marriage Course is more than a program—it's a lifeline for couples navigating modern-day pressures.

World-Worthy Ideas:

- A school cannot form students well if parents are disconnected or wounded.
- Marriage is a vocation that must be renewed and enriched continually.
- When spouses pray and grow together, the home becomes the first school of love and virtue.
- Testimonies reveal powerful stories of reconciliation, healing, and renewal.

Why It Matters Globally:

Broken homes, single-parent fatigue, and marital disconnection are universal. Schools that form not only students but parents—and support marriages—contribute directly to the moral stability of society.

“Strong marriages raise strong children. Form the couple, and you fortify the family.”



Chippy Dioko – Mentoring for Mental Health

This session addresses the growing mental health crisis among youth and offers a compelling alternative to therapy-centered models: meaningful mentoring. Chippy Dioko invites teachers to be 'relational anchors'—safe, consistent, emotionally available adults for their students.

World-Worthy Ideas:

- Mental health support doesn't begin with programs—it begins with presence.
- Teachers are in the best position to notice silent suffering.
- Mentoring fosters trust, belonging, and identity formation.

Why It Matters Globally:

Mental health stigma persists worldwide. This session reframes the teacher's role—not as a savior, but as someone who walks with. The ripple effects are powerful: lower anxiety, deeper learning, and more resilient youth.

“A single caring adult can anchor a young person in a sea of anxiety.”



Dr. Juan Dabdoub – Framing Thoughts to Redesign Character Education



Dr. Dabdoub delivers a visionary message to schools: true character education is not a module—it's a mission. Drawing from the PRIMED model, he challenges leaders to think in terms of formation systems, not feel-good activities.

World-Worthy Ideas:

- Without institutional coherence, formation efforts collapse into fads.
- PRIMED (Prioritization, Relationships, Intrinsic Motivation, Modelling, Empowerment, Developmental Pedagogy) gives structure to what many schools do intuitively.
- Strategic alignment—from hiring policies to classroom practices—makes formation sustainable.

Why It Matters Globally:

Many schools want to form character but lack direction. This session offers a blueprint—a framework that any culture, curriculum, or institution can adapt.

“Formation must be designed. Good intentions alone don’t build virtue.”

Nonie & Shamaine Buencamino: The Julia Buencamino Project

This emotionally moving session uses the tragic story of a young girl to open a conversation about suicide, loneliness, and the transformative power of creative expression. The Julia Buencamino Project champions the use of art, empathy, and school-based support to prevent emotional crises.

World-Worthy Ideas:

- Artistic expression can be a channel for grief, growth, and grace.
- Suicide prevention must involve family, school, and society in equal measure.
- Silence around mental health kills; dialogue heals.

Why It Matters Globally:

Every culture grapples with youth despair. This project offers hope—an example of how beauty, storytelling, and honest engagement can save lives.

“Art can’t erase pain—but it can keep pain from becoming fatal.”



Merlee Jayme: Mentoring Neurodivergent Children

This session reframes neurodivergence not as a challenge to be solved, but as a gift to be understood. Educators and parents are invited to approach children with autism, ADHD, or learning differences with deeper patience, personalized strategies, and a strong commitment to virtue-centered inclusion.

World-Worthy Ideas:

- Neurodivergent children thrive when relationships are prioritized over rigid routines.
- Labels should not limit expectations—each child has a mission and potential.
- Formation must adapt, not dilute; virtue and character remain relevant to all learning profiles.

Why It Matters Globally:

Across countries, schools are navigating inclusive education without sacrificing formation. This session offers a way to honor uniqueness while preserving the universal call to holiness and excellence.

“Difference is not a deficit. Every child deserves to be formed in virtue.”



PAREF Woodrose – Being a School of Character

Woodrose School shares how formation is not an add-on but the DNA of its institution. Through touching stories from students, parents, and teachers, this session illustrates what it means to truly be a “School of Character.”



World-Worthy Ideas:

- Character is caught more than taught—culture is everything.
- Classroom management, community life, and celebration of virtue are all formation opportunities.
- Parents and staff must walk the same path for formation to be credible.

Why It Matters Globally:

Schools everywhere are rediscovering the hunger for meaning. Woodrose’s lived example provides a roadmap—not just strategies, but a spirit that can inspire educators worldwide.

“Formation isn’t a subject. It’s the soul of the school.”

Paula Mills – From Students to Saints in Business: Faith-Driven Entrepreneurship

Teaching students (and teachers) to see business serve others and transform communities.

Power of Problem-Solving:

Encouraging students to identify real-world problems and create innovative solutions.

Resilience and Virtue in Entrepreneurship:

How virtues like resilience, humility, and integrity are essential for success.



In this bold and refreshing session, Paula Mills opens up the world of entrepreneurship as a mission field. She challenges the idea that business and holiness are incompatible, showing how integrity, faith, and service can animate startups and boardrooms alike.

World-Worthy Ideas:

- Entrepreneurial ecosystems are starving for leaders with conscience and conviction.
- Work is a vocation—it's where the Gospel can and must be lived.
- Students must be equipped to bring virtue into innovation, economics, and enterprise.

Why It Matters Globally:

Young people are increasingly disillusioned with institutional careers. This session empowers them to reimagine success—not just as profit, but as purpose.

“The startup world needs saints, not just strategists.”

Atty. Toto Villareal – All About Comprehensive Sex Education

In this timely and clarifying session, Atty. Toto Villareal provides a legal, ethical, and pedagogical framework for addressing sex education in schools. Grounded in Catholic principles and human dignity, his talk highlights how educators can confront confusion with clarity and compassion.

World-Worthy Ideas:

- Parents are the first and primary educators in matters of sexuality.
- Legal protections exist to uphold family rights in educational contexts.
- Comprehensive sex education must be value-based, age-appropriate, and anchored in truth.

Why It Matters Globally:

As debates on gender, identity, and sexuality intensify across nations, this session offers a calm, intelligent, and faith-driven approach—one that forms minds and safeguards innocence without abandoning science or dialogue.

“Truth and love are not opposites. They are the foundation of authentic education.”



Closing Ceremonies – Building Bridges Conference

The Closing Ceremonies crowned the three-day experience with gratitude, resolve, and joyful unity. It wasn't a farewell—it was a commissioning. Delegates left inspired to continue what was begun: a global movement to place character, faith, and formation at the heart of education.



World-Worthy Ideas:

- Conference participants renewed their personal and institutional commitment to formation.
- Cultural presentations and testimonies brought a spirit of family and mission.
- The conference became a springboard—not a summit.

Why It Matters Globally:

It's easy to let inspiration fade. This ceremony made sure it wouldn't. It marked the start of a wider community of bridge-builders—schools, families, mentors, and students collaborating across borders.

“This wasn't the end of a conference. It was the beginning of a movement.”



Epilogue:

Builders of Bridges, Bearers of Light



The final applause may have faded. The stage lights dimmed. The conference rooms emptied. But Building Bridges was never meant to remain within the walls of an auditorium.

It was a fire lit in the hearts of hundreds—a fire meant to be carried home, into our schools, our families, our communities. What we witnessed during those three extraordinary days was more than a professional gathering. It was a glimpse of what the world could look like when educators, parents, and leaders come together to form the whole person—body, mind, and soul.

Now, the real conference begins.

It begins in the morning greeting of a teacher who sees beyond grades.
It begins in the quiet guidance of a father mentoring his son.
It begins when a principal stands firm for truth, when a mother consoles a troubled teen, when a student chooses courage over conformity.

Each of us is called to be a builder of bridges—between faith and reason, compassion and justice, tradition and innovation. Each of us is invited to become what St. John Henry Newman called a “light bearer”—someone who brings the presence of Christ into the darkest corners of culture, education, and history.

So let this book not be the end of a memory, but the beginning of a movement. May it sit not only on your coffee table, but also in your conscience. May it remind you not just of what was said—but of what still must be done. Because the world needs more bridges. And you—you were made to build them.

