
MCAULEY CONFERENCE SERIES

**CATHOLIC PRIMARY
EDUCATION IN
CONTEMPORARY
IRELAND:
FACING NEW HORIZONS**

**ADDRESS BY BISHOP DONAL MURRAY
BISHOP OF LIMERICK AND CHAIR OF THE BISHOPS' DEPARTMENT
OF CATHOLIC EDUCATION AND FORMATION**

**MARY IMMACULATE COLLEGE,
UNIVERSITY OF LIMERICK
22 MAY 2009**

The Catholic Church's Current Thinking on Educational Provision

WHY CHURCH SCHOOLS?

It is important to begin by reflecting about why the Catholic Church and other religious bodies should have an involvement in educational provision at all. That means reflecting on what we understand by education. Chief Rabbi Jonathan Sacks describes it in this way:

“Education is the transmission of a tradition. A civilisation is like an ancient but still magnificent building. Different ages have added new wings here, an altered façade there, rooms have been redecorated, old furniture restored... We inherited the house from our parents and we want to leave it in good order to our children. We know that they will adapt it to their needs, indeed we want them to. Nor can we say in advance how they will do so or what the house will look like in the future. But as its temporary guardians, we know that we must teach our children its history”[1].

If this is the case, it is not surprising that religious communities should see education as part of their task. One of the characteristics of a community is that it has an educational function through which it leads its young members into an appreciation of the traditions and values of the community into which they have been born.

This is more than a question of a sporting organisation passing on its rules and its history and its cabinet of trophies. What marks off a community in the proper sense of the word from a group or an institution or a club is the quality of belonging which it implies. One does not belong to a community simply for a specific purpose – recreational, commercial or the pursuit of some particular interest. One belongs as a whole person and relates to the other members as whole persons.

The State as such is not a community for instance. It is made up of many individuals and communities who work together as citizens to achieve certain political and social goals that are expressed in laws and economic plans and government policies. But being a citizen is not the whole of who we are. There are aspects of our lives into which the State has no right to intrude. One of the most important things in modern society where life has become so complex is to resist the idea of ‘the Nanny State’, the State that knows best about every aspect of our lives. There is more to us than should meet the State’s eye.

The sense of community-belonging with the whole of oneself is found in a civilisation or a culture or a religious commitment. When Christians gather for worship, for instance, we gather with the recognition that we are mortal, that we are

sinful, that our own resources cannot save us from evil and death, that our very existence is a gift of God the Creator and that our hope is in Christ who died so that we might live the life of the new creation. This is a statement about who we are, not just in one or other aspect or sphere; it is a statement of our whole identity, our very being.

That identity is not a straitjacket. The sense of being Catholic, or being Irish, for instance, is not an unchanging and unchangeable reality. Down the centuries it grows and develops. Through the events of history and through interaction with other cultures the house is redecorated and refurbished. Nevertheless, it remains the same house and for those who are Irish or Catholic it defines who we are. As the old joke makes clear, wherever we want to go, we have to start from here. Even if we wish to throw off our cultural or religious identity, it remains part of the story of our lives; we throw it off with a sense of going into exile – even if we do so with some sense of relief.

None of us came into existence as an isolated individual. We became aware of ourselves in an existing community, with an existing language, with traditions and values which we did not create. There are old legends about human beings who were not born into any human community – as in the stories about babies being ‘raised’ by wolves. Such people would have no language, no culture, nothing recognisable as education.

Education is a relationship between people, between teacher and pupil, among pupils and between all of them and the surrounding community. These are relationships founded on trust and on mutual respect for one another as individual persons, not just for our role as pupil or teacher. A great deal of education takes place through personal interaction which communicates values and convictions although neither party may be particularly aware of it at the time.

The point can be expressed in another way. If education is about the formation of the whole person, there can be no real education without a community in which it takes place. An education which would seek to start from a blank sheet would be an illusion. We begin our lives within a tradition which we do not create for ourselves. That tradition, our mother tongue, the experiences which have shaped us as small children, the capacities and potential we possess or have developed and the goals that attract us, none of these are created by us. We find them in ourselves and in our situation even though we can and do modify them, developing our capacities and skills, refining our motivation and our understanding of the environment and so on, but we cannot behave as though they are not part of the story of who we are.

We sometimes slip into an absurd idea of freedom, as if anything that has not originated from my own choice is a limitation on my right to be exactly as I choose.

But that is not how human beings work. We exist within a tradition, with a native language, with a body that we did not create. And within our community we learn to speak and to act, we develop our skills; we learn what is important and what is peripheral. All of this is not a limitation or constraint – this is what makes it possible for us to communicate, to learn and to choose. We are never creative in the strict sense of making something out of nothing. We create by using our capacities, the raw material that is provided by our environment and the possibilities that we see. Then we may create something new, but never out of nothing!

HOW WE LEARN WHO WE ARE

It is this context and history that has formed us into the people we now are. To begin as if we had no previous context that receives us, to which we belong, would be to diminish us by cutting us off from the tradition, the story, which makes us what we are:

“Deprive children of stories and you leave them unscripted, anxious stutterers in their actions as in their words”ii[2].

Of course the most fundamental community, the most fundamental belonging, is found in the family. Robert Frost said: *“Home is the place where when you have to go there they have to take you in”iii[3].*

That is where we learn who we are; that is where we learn to communicate. Education is an activity which needs that sense of belonging with the whole of oneself. We easily say that education is about the whole person of the pupil. That means that it is concerned for the growth of the students in every aspect of themselves. It is not just about producing good citizens, or productive members of the workforce, or entrepreneurs, or people with particular skills. It is about educating whole people into the whole life of their community. Although that may be easy to say, it is a daunting yet a fundamental human task. That is why, of its nature, and most especially at primary level, education is essentially a family and a community activity

The family is the first and almost irreplaceable educator:

“The role of the parents in education is of such importance that it is almost impossible to provide an adequate substitute. It is therefore the duty of parents to create a family atmosphere inspired by love and devotion to God and humanity which will promote an integrated, personal and social education of their children”iv[4].

The Irish Constitution, therefore, has it right when it speaks about primary school provision. It recognises that the State is not the primary educator. Its role is not to provide primary education but to provide for it, by supporting initiatives in society

and making provision itself only when that becomes necessary and then only with respect for the role of the primary educators:

“The State shall provide for free primary education and shall endeavour to supplement and give reasonable aid to private and corporate educational initiative, and, when the public good requires it, provide other educational facilities or institutions with due regard, however, for the rights of parents, especially in the matter of religious and moral formation” v[5].

The main thrust of education does not come from the State seeking to perpetuate the structures and the institutions and the economy for which it is responsible. It comes from families and communities wishing to keep alive the traditions and the values and the knowledge that have made them who they are. The Constitution recognises that this is especially important in the area of religious and moral formation. vi[6].

In the Catholic Church, and indeed in all the Christian churches, as well as in other faith traditions, the provision of education, in the widest sense and at whatever level, is central to what it means to be a community of faith. Every Christian community is under the imperative to be missionary, to be educative, to make disciples of all the nations (Mt 28:19).

This activity does not take place exclusively or even principally in schools. It is first of all an activity of the community as a whole and of each member in his or her own way – parents, relatives, neighbours, parishes, dioceses, the wider church. It is an activity that marks every aspect of the community’s life. That activity has been evident in the Church from the beginning:

“What was handed on by the apostles comprises everything that serves to make the People of God live their lives in holiness and increase their faith. In this way the Church in her doctrine, life and worship, perpetuates and transmits to every generation all that she herself is, all that she believes” vii[7].

THE CATHOLIC SCHOOL

Thus it is that the Catholic community, particularly at primary level has sought to provide schools in which to further this responsibility of perpetuating and sharing all that we are and all that we believe. This is the context in which Catholic schooling has to be seen. The Catholic school cannot be understood in isolation from that context. It is an organic part of a community which seeks to share its beliefs and values with all its members, in a particular way with its younger members. Too often we try to think of the Catholic school and its ethos as if this were something that could be understood within the four walls of the school with no reference to the community of which the school is a part or the family which has entrusted the child to the school.

The most obvious thing in the thinking of the Catholic Church on school provision is that, wherever that is possible, parents who wish it should have the opportunity to have their children educated in a school which lives in that tradition of faith. In saying that, it also has to be recognised that for all sorts of reasons, many Catholic children go to other kinds of schools. That raises a question that is not strictly part of our topic today, namely how such schools can respond to the needs and rights of Catholic pupils.

In many different kinds of schools and in many parts of the world Catholic young people receive an education which is respectful of their beliefs and which gives them the opportunity to worship in the Catholic tradition and which builds up their faith. But there is a particular value in a school in which faith is integrated with the whole syllabus. The importance of that integration is not always seen and it is frequently misrepresented. We might begin by saying clearly what integration does not mean.

Sometimes people feel uneasy about integration of the curriculum because they fear that it may mean that every other subject must become a branch of Religious Education. Each subject in the curriculum has its own methods and its own content and its own autonomy. An education that did not recognise this would be failing in its purpose.

“Individual subjects must be taught according to their own particular methods. It would be wrong to consider subjects as mere adjuncts to faith or as a useful means of teaching apologetics. They enable pupil(s) to assimilate skills, knowledge, intellectual methods and moral and social attitudes, all of which help to develop (their) personality and lead (them) to take (their) place as active member(s) of the (human) community. (The) aim is not merely the attainment of knowledge but the acquisition of values and the discovery of truth”viii[8].

But that autonomy of the individual subjects cannot mean that they remain as isolated and unrelated pieces of knowledge. If education is about the development of the whole person then in the pupil – and indeed in the teacher – the subjects cannot remain simply as separate compartments. Each element of the curriculum contributes to the student’s understanding of him/herself, of others, of the world, of the meaning of life, of God. If one does not recognise that, it is hard to see how one could regard these individual sections of the curriculum as contributing to the growth of the whole person.

THE VISION

Catholic education begins with the conviction that the human person is not a series of unconnected compartments. Human life is not a chaotic pursuit of many unrelated and often incompatible goals. It begins with the recognition that our life has a purpose; we have a hope, which is large enough to respond to every question,

every longing, every relationship, every suffering, every tragedy and even to death itself. Catholic education believes that:

“This great hope can only be God, who encompasses the whole of reality and who can bestow upon us what we, by ourselves, cannot attain”ix[9].

The ideal situation for a Catholic child is that he or she should be educated in a school where this conviction is, so to speak, ‘at home’. If what the child is learning at home about the love of God, about death not being the end, about right and wrong, is not being echoed in the school, if questions about these issues are not being dealt with in a way that is in harmony with the child’s faith, this would be a recipe for confusion. It would also amount to teaching the child that there is a place – namely the school – where these beliefs are not relevant.

This is particularly important when that faith conviction is no longer ‘at home’ in the wider society as it once was. The expression of religious convictions is often accompanied by a somewhat embarrassed recognition that speaking like this may sound a little eccentric or old-fashioned or out of touch with ‘the real world’.

The suggestion that religious belief is not relevant to large areas of life is the essence of secularism. It may sound like a recipe for tolerance and harmony – “let religion keep to its place and we will avoid a lot of divisive issues”. The reality is that this amounts to a denial or at least a profound misrepresentation of God. A god who is irrelevant to some spheres or aspects of the creation is not God at all!

The Pastoral Letter, Vision 08 outlines the importance, in our context, of an atmosphere for education that understands the broadness and openness of the vision of faith and knows that it is not just a particular area of knowledge but the very meaning of our lives:

“In a climate of growing secularism, Catholic schools are distinguished by faith in the transcendent mystery of God as the source of all that exists and as the meaning of human existence. Thus faith is not just the subject matter of particular lessons but forms the foundation of all that we do and the horizon of all that takes place in the school. The Catholic tradition of which the schools are part has been continually enriched through centuries of reflection and development. This not only offers our pupils a rich heritage of wisdom but also gives them stability, a framework of meaning and a sense of direction for their lives in a time of rapid and often confusing cultural and social change”x[10].

VISION AND CHALLENGE

We have painfully seen again in recent days how the vision can be betrayed and deformed. The vision itself requires repentance: Repent and believe the Good News.

The enormous and lasting damage done – not least the obscuring for so many children of the vision of hope which Catholic education exists to share.

We must try to offer hope and healing however unworthy and broken these events make us feel, they do not weaken the truth of the vision of hope.

SEEKING THE TRUTH IN AN INCREASINGLY PLURAL SOCIETY

A Catholic school really living the Catholic vision is the ideal situation for a Catholic family, but the ideal is not always possible. We have to look at the reality of a society in which there are increasing numbers of people who do not share the Catholic faith, increasing numbers who are not Christians and indeed of people who do not have any faith. We also have to look at the fact that there are Catholic families for whom the religious education of their children is not very high on the list of priorities. We also have to recognise the various situations of Catholic parents, or parents only one of whom is a Catholic, in which the choice of a school *“that can best promote the Catholic education of their children”*xi[11] may present particular quandaries.

All of this clearly poses problems not only for parents but for Catholic schools. *“Catholic schools are open to children of all denominations”*xii[12]. That means that they are willing to face up to the challenges involved in responding to a situation of a plurality of faiths and of non-faith approaches among the people who may wish to have their children enrolled in a Catholic school. In particular, this can bring issues to be addressed both for the parents of children of other traditions and for the parish in which the Catholic school is placed. The Irish Bishops posed the problem as follows:

*“It is sometimes the case that people choose the Catholic school simply because it is the only school available, and not because they wish their children to have a Catholic education. This can cause difficulties for parents who do not share the ethos of a Catholic school. It can also put an unfair financial and administrative burden on the parish. We feel that in such circumstances the Church should not be left with the task of providing for the educational needs of the whole community. As the Catholic Church accepts that there should be choice and diversity within a national education system, it believes that parents who desire schools under different patronage should, where possible, be facilitated in accessing them”*xiii[13].

The difficulty in practice is to make arrangements that will be respectful of the primary rights and obligations of parents and families into the future. It is important to try to look clearly at some of the difficulties and misunderstandings that may arise as we seek to do so.

First of all we need to look at the most basic objection that is raised and which may even lurk in the minds of people who are firmly committed to bringing their

children up in the Catholic faith: *“Is it necessary to bring religion, and the differences and separations that this implies, into the schooling of little children? Have we not seen in this country enough of these divisions and their tragic fruit?”*

The prevalence of that approach is not surprising. In some cases it may be a reaction to the Troubles, it is being expressed again in the light, or rather darkness, of the Ryan Report, but it also reflects an underlying presumption of the culture of many parts of the world, and most particularly of Western Europe. It is presumed that ‘real’ knowledge is that which derives from scientific proof and that everything else is opinion or even superstition. It is said, therefore, that if people want that other kind of knowledge taught to their children, they should do it in the privacy of their homes and not expect society at large to undertake a task that many of their fellow citizens regard as pointless if not harmful.

If we were to accept that as the basis for education, we would be relegating faith to an inferior level of knowledge. We would certainly have travelled a long way from a culture which believed that knowledge of God, however limited and inadequate, was the highest form of human knowledge!

“It may well happen that what is in itself the more certain may seem to us the less certain on account of the weakness of our intelligence, “which is dazzled by the clearest objects of nature; as the owl is dazzled by the light of the sun” ...; yet the slenderest knowledge that may be obtained of the highest things is more desirable than the most certain knowledge obtained of lesser things...”xiv[14].

What is at stake here is the human capacity to seek the truth, even to inquire about the ultimate mystery of existence. Granted that the pupils in Second Class will not be struggling with the higher reaches of metaphysics, but if they are not taught to deal with mystery and to wonder at things that cannot be proved or experimented upon by the scientific method, and if they are not helped to listen to the tradition of faith which sees God’s presence and God’s love everywhere in creation, they are not being educated as whole persons.

Over thirty years ago, the Bishops of the Netherlands wrote a letter about Catholic education in which they pointed out that the school should unapologetically make room *“for things that cannot be called directly useful or profitable... A school hinders its pupils from discovering the meaning of life when the preparation for examinations is its only aim and a large number of passes its only pride” xv[15].*

The achievements of science should not be downplayed, but it should not be seen as the only form of knowledge, as the only valid way of seeking the truth. It is obvious that the kind of certainty that one can have in mathematics, for instance, is different from the kind of certainty one can have in the sciences, and is different from the kind

of certainty one can have in ethics, and is different again from the kind of certainty one can have in speaking about God. This was something that Aristotle recognised nearly two and a half millennia ago:

“...it is the mark of an educated man to look for precision in each class of things just so far as the nature of the subject admits; it is evidently equally foolish to accept probable reasoning from a mathematician and to demand scientific proofs from a rhetorician” xvi[16].

When one does experience mystery and wonder, this opens up questions which cannot be fully addressed by mathematics or by scientific proofs. They are addressed at their deepest level by philosophy and especially by religion. *“Granny has died. Where is she now?” “Who made the world and the stars and the plants and the animals – and who made me?” “Why do people get sick?” Or perhaps we may come across “the child who asked the most basic question, “Mummy, why is a cow?” xvii[17]*

To approach the mysteries of life and death and creation, to approach art and music and history and literature without any reference to the faith and the questioning of the people who speak to us in these cultural expressions is not educating the whole person of the pupil. A great deal of art and literature grapples with the unlimited longings of the human heart in tension with the all too limited realisation of those longings in our lives. To attempt to deal with these matters without ever listening to the echo of the pupil’s faith and the pupil’s search for the truth of God in them would be a failure to seek the whole truth about the whole person.

To put it another way, if we confine ourselves to a kind of knowledge which is scientifically demonstrable; if we regard the scientific method as the only way of arriving at real truth. We diminish ourselves and devalue the truth about the human person.

“It is man himself who ends up being reduced, for the specifically human questions about our origin and destiny, the questions raised by religion and ethics, then have no place within the purview of collective reason as defined by “science” and must thus be relegated to the realm of the subjective” xviii[18].

THOSE WHO DO NOT SHARE THE ETHOS

The statement made by the Irish bishops in 2007 recognised that when, in the absence of a local alternative, parents have no choice but to send their children to a Catholic school, this can cause difficulties for them and indeed for the school. The difficulty is twofold. One aspect concerns the right of pupils to be withdrawn from classes of Religious Instruction or Catechesis. This right is recognised in the Constitution in the context of the provision of State aid to schools:

Legislation providing State aid for schools shall not discriminate between schools under the management of different religious denominations, nor be such as to affect prejudicially the right of any child to attend a school receiving public money without attending religious instruction at that school. xix[19].

The increasing number of pupils whose parents do not wish them to receive religious instruction that is designed for Catholic children can make the logistics of this difficult, but since the right is recognised in the Constitution, one would hope that the Government might make possible the conditions to enable it to be recognised in practice. This might require additional space, additional supervision, or the employment of part-time teachers to provide instruction in the faith or values system of the families concerned.

In one sense this question of withdrawal from formal religious formation is the easier dimension of the problem. If the family find the Catholic ethos of the school unacceptable, however, there does not seem to be any obvious solution. If it is the expression of Catholic faith within the life of the school that is unacceptable to them, and if withdrawal from religious instruction is not enough, then it seems that one would have to acknowledge that this kind of school is simply not suitable for that family.

As I already said, an education which would exclude any reference to faith might sound a reasonable solution which would allow all pupils to be on an equal footing. But that would be an illusion. There are many parents, not only Catholics – one thinks of Muslim families for instance – who would find an education that took place ‘as though God did not exist’ utterly repugnant.

Those who take their own faith seriously are better placed to understand the seriousness with which others take their relationship with God. I suspect that many parents of other faiths would be happier to see their children in a school where religion was taken seriously than a school in which religion did not figure at all.

An education that does not address the pupil’s quest for the truth about the meaning of life is not neutral. The widespread acceptance of the assumption that it is neutral is an extraordinary coup by those who argue for that position. Somebody once said that secularism has propagated itself by the utterly brilliant communications technique of simply assuming its case to be entirely self-evident! But it is not self-evident at all. Such an approach is one perspective among many on the underlying question of the meaning of human life and the meaning of education. It is an approach which says that fundamental questions can be adequately explored while ruling out any reference to God.

Education cannot be neutral about the meaning of human life or the about how it understands the human person. Does life have a purpose beyond our present existence and a meaning beyond what can be scientifically demonstrated? An education that would purport to be neutral about such issues would actually be stating unambiguously that these matters do not have the importance and the universal relevance which believers see in them. For a believer, the exclusion of religion, or the study of faith only as an objective phenomenon, does not meet the needs of an integral education. The question of our relationship with God is not an abstract enquiry. It is the most fundamental question about ourselves. The abstract recognition that religious beliefs are to be respected but need not be engaged with is in fact disrespectful:

“The abstract language of rights fails to enter into the depth of what Hinduism means to a Hindu or Confucianism to its devotees. It suggests that the particularities of a culture are mere accretions to our essential and indivisible humanity, instead of being the very substance of how most people learn what it is to be human. In particular it understates the difficulty and necessity of making space for strangers...”xx[20]

Like every educational endeavour, a secularist education would be based on a very particular attitude to the meaning of life:

“Either implicit or explicit reference to a determined attitude to life (Weltanschauung) is unavoidable in education because it comes into every decision that is made”xxi[21].

This means that the idea that there could be schools whose ethos would be entirely in harmony with the views of every family and every pupil is false. There will always be issues of an ethical, cultural and religious nature where there will be differences among the pupils and their families. The school can and should respect these convictions and perspectives, but this respect for convictions is not achieved by making them invisible and inaudible. Nor is it achieved by silencing the ethos of the Catholic school. On the contrary, the good school will positively seek to draw enrichment and mutual understanding from diversity:

“Catholic education values tolerance and inclusiveness in an increasingly multicultural society; it is open to generous dialogue with Christians of other traditions and those of other faiths and none, while remaining true to its own distinctive ethos... The schools see such diversity as offering opportunities for deeper understanding among people holding diverse convictions. They also promote the common good of society as a whole”xxii[22].

There is a tempting short cut to that kind of enrichment – to try to teach every pupil about every religion with no commitment to any of them. People say that it is wrong to separate pupils and to ‘create divisions’. It is sometimes claimed that this would

be the path to harmony in society. But this would not be fair to the pupils, whether Catholic or others.

Divisions are not avoided by keeping differences out of sight or refusing to address them. Divisions can become sources of enrichment only if they are expressed and there is a serious effort to understand different points of view. But abstract description cannot capture the real significance of what faith means to individuals and communities.

Hatred and bigotry are the products of ignorance, ignorance first of all of one's own position. The person who, deep down, doesn't know where he or she stands is the one who will dismiss other people's convictions out of hand:

"In real life the people who are most bigoted are those who have no convictions at all... Bigotry is the resistance offered to definite ideas by the vague bulk of people whose ideas are indefinite to excess" xxiii[23]

To leave the pupils with a mixture of different traditions without the possibility of standing in their own tradition and having a tradition to share, would be to leave them with an inadequate basis on which to relate. In order for people to engage constructively with those of different denominations, faiths and cultures they need not just a willingness to dialogue but also some grasp of their own tradition which they are bringing to the table. Without a solid ground to stand on they will either find themselves agreeing with the last thing that was said – even if it is completely incompatible with the second last – or they will become so insecure about their own position that they will be unable really to hear what the others are saying. It would be very unfair to young children to throw them into the arena of world religions without a sense of their own religious identity.

In speaking like this I am not pretending that there are no challenges in approaching things in this way. Nor am I claiming that Catholic schools always succeed in doing so. What I am describing here is the way things should be. To reflect on this is also to challenge ourselves as schools and as communities about the quality of our welcome for those whose culture or religion is different from our own.

Our reflection also reveals, however, that people of faith cannot but have difficulties with a system of education which does not see the openness of the human person to the Transcendent as essential to the nature of education. This means that the study of religion simply as a historical or cultural phenomenon is not educative in the fullest sense of that word. In other words it does not address the growth of the person of the pupil in his or her most fundamental dimension. A study of religious faith without commitment, without worship, leaves the matter exterior to the pupil as an object to be studied rather than as a personal relationship to be developed.

This is a crucial question when it comes to providing religious education for Catholic pupils, and for other pupils, in whatever new forms of schools will be established in the coming years. It will be very important to ensure that in any schools set up by State agencies, the Constitutional guarantee should be fully honoured, so that there is due regard “for the rights of parents, especially in the matter of religious and moral formation”xxiv[24].

BILINGUALISM

The most fundamental danger about an approach which would exclude religious faith, at least in any sense in which it addresses the personal searching of the pupil and the deep mystery of his or her life, is that it empties out what is fundamental. This approach seeks to produce harmony and the peaceful life of society by removing these sources of division.

The problem is that what is being left out of the picture is the deepest motivation that human beings have – namely their vision of what their lives are about. A curriculum made up of separate subjects which are never seen in terms of the overall meaning of life, the overall quest for the truth, is the mirror of a society that lacks an overall vision. That lack can be full of danger, especially in uncertain times such as ours:

“It is when we lose a sense of vision that we find ourselves, in effect, without a map or a destination. That is when people turn to populist leaders capable of manipulating public fear, or to regressive identities and fundamentalisms that allow them to cope with fear by blaming some group or other for being the cause of the world’s ills. These are possibilities that I never thought I would have to warn against in my lifetime, so great were the catastrophes they brought about in the twentieth century. But when feelings run high, memories are short”xxv[25].

We can hardly doubt that feelings are running much higher and the world has become much more at risk in the seven years since those words were published.

There seems to be an insoluble dilemma in a society with a combination of competing visions together with a significant number of people who do not see the need for an overall vision at all. This leads to the strange phenomenon of the constant calls for strong leadership together with a deep resentment of any prospective leader who would dare to say that we should all commit ourselves to any particular vision!

Chief Rabbi Jonathan Sacks suggests a way out of this dilemma. In a pluralist society, he suggest, we all need to become bilingual. We need a common language of citizenship in which we can engage with people of other religious and cultural communities. But if we have only this language of the whole group of citizens, “we

have no resources for understanding why none of our several aspirations can be met in full and why we must restrain ourselves to leave space for other groups” xxvi[26]. Besides, it will be a language with no literature, no history, no culture – a language in which no community has lived the life of whole persons.

We also need another language, the language of our families and communities, “where we learn who we are; where we develop sentiments of belonging and obligation; where our lives acquire substantive depth” xxvii[27]. All that I have been saying has been pointing to the need for this language, this mother tongue, to have a place in the language of education, and indeed to be as far as possible the language of primary education.

This is not in any way to divert education from the goals that society and the State rightly expect of the school. Of course education should seek to produce good citizens, people who are capable of undertaking useful roles in the economy, politics, media, and so on. What I have been saying is that if one were to make these the principal goal of education one would distort and diminish the meaning of education. The truth is that a healthy society, a harmonious society and even a productive society, is founded on healthy convictions and a healthy understanding of the truth about the human person:

“Authentic democracy is possible only in a State ruled by law, and on the basis of a correct conception of the human person... Nowadays there is a tendency to claim that agnosticism and sceptical relativism are the philosophy and the basic attitude which correspond to democratic forms of political life. Those who are convinced that they know the truth and firmly adhere to it are considered unreliable from a democratic point of view, since they do not accept that truth is determined by the majority, or that it is subject to variation according to different political trends... As history demonstrates, a democracy without values easily turns into open or thinly disguised totalitarianism” xxviii[28].

To attempt to build a civil society on the basis that such fundamental beliefs and values are private matters and that they have no place in education would be to build without foundations. These values are where our moral energy comes from, from our belief as to what life is ultimately about. One wonders to what extent the events of recent months in many parts of the world, and not least here in Ireland, reflect the detachment of these beliefs and values from areas such as economics and finance and ethical standards. We need to find a language in which we can express our values and beliefs in dialogue with those who do not share our faith.

The role of faith, the role of the Church, in all of this is crucial. The Church “is called to contribute to the purification of reason and to the reawakening of those moral forces without which just structures are neither established nor prove effective in the long run.” xxix[29].

THE FUTURE SHAPE OF PROVISION

To return to the question of school provision, it is very clear that new forms of schools at primary level will be necessary in Ireland. That is most obvious in new areas where the Catholic Church cannot be expected to continue to be the only provider.

“In new centres of population it is incumbent upon the State to plan for the provision of school sites and to ensure, in consultation with the various patron bodies, that there is a plurality of school provision reflecting the wishes of the parents in the area” xxx[30].

It is also clear that in some older areas there are families who wish to send their children to a school under a different form of patronage, which is not currently available to them. The interest of the Church in this situation is threefold:

- that those parents who want a Catholic education for their children should, as far as is possible, have that option available in their area.
- that other parents also should have the choice of the kind of school they wish to have for their children.

Looking to the future it is clear that as Irish society becomes more diverse Catholic schools will not continue to be such a massive proportion of the primary schools in the country. The manner in which a greater variety of provision might be achieved will vary from place to place and will have to be discussed among all the relevant parties in each particular case.

It may be, particularly in urban areas, that, because of population shifts, demographic changes or changing parental wishes, not all the Catholic schools in the area may continue to be viable as Catholic schools. Clearly this is a situation which requires a great deal of consultation with all the parties involved. Anyone who has been involved in the amalgamation of schools, or in making changes in the catchment areas or enrolment policies, for instance, will appreciate the delicacy of making changes! For instance, some of those who became part of the school community when it was a Catholic school and perhaps because it was a Catholic school, may have strong objections to its becoming a different kind of school.

There might also be a fear that the current ethnic or religious make up of the pupils or the youth population of the area could change as dramatically in the next ten or fifteen years as it did in the last and that substantial changes may be made which later seem to have been overhasty. All of this will require careful assessment of numbers, projections and resources as well as of the nature of any alternative provision and of the real needs of the area:

“However, such evaluation should take into account not only financial and numerical criteria but also a concern for those who are needy or disadvantaged. In certain circumstances it may be considered desirable to enter into new patronage arrangements, provided these arrangements respect the rights of Catholic parents, in particular in relation to the religious instruction of their children within the school curriculum” xxxi[31]

In practice this may mean the provision of transport in order to enable parents, whether Catholic or of other denominations or faiths, or of no religious belief, to send their children to schools of their choice. Where the numbers seeking a particular kind of school are too small or the distances too great it may not be reasonable to provide schools for every group of parents, but every effort should be made to facilitate parental choice.

It is important, however, that in an effort to please everybody, we do not succumb to the false assumption that a school in which there is no religious formation is somehow fair to everyone. Such a school would be fair only to those who believe that religious formation has no part to play in the education of children.

The interest of the State is in the formation of good citizens, but that cannot be done without setting out to form the whole person. The modern democratic State is built on foundations that it did not and cannot lay. It is bound to respect rights that it did not create and cannot abolish: the right to life, the right to respect for one’s dignity, the right to equality before the law and so on. Pope John Paul makes what seems at first sight a surprising statement:

“In a certain sense, the source and synthesis of these rights is religious freedom, understood as the right to live in the truth of one’s faith and in conformity with one’s transcendent dignity as a person” xxxii[32].

In other words, all of these rights grow out of the transcendent dignity of the person. That is the foundation on which the State, and all human society, is built. That is also the foundation of Catholic education.

+Donal Murray
Bishop of Limerick

References

- i^[1] SACKS, J., *The Politics of Hope*, Jonathan Cape, London 1997, p. 184
- ii^[2] MACINTYRE, A., *After Virtue*, Duckworth, 1985, p. 216.
- iii^[3] FROST, R., *The Death of the Hired Man*, 122-123
- iv^[4] VATICAN II, *Gravissimum Educationis*, 3.
- v^[5] *Bunreacht na hÉireann*, art 42, 4, my italics.
- vi^[6] Cf also Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) 26.3 and UN Convention on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (1966), 13.3.
- vii^[7] VATICAN II, *Dei Verbum*, 8.
- viii^[8] CONGREGATION FOR CATHOLIC EDUCATION, *The Catholic School*, 39.
- ix^[9] BENEDICT XVI, *Spe Salvi*, 26, 27. 31.
- x^[10] IRISH CATHOLIC BISHOPS' CONFERENCE *Vision 08*. 2008.
- xi^[11] *Code of Canon Law* 793.
- xii^[12] *Vision 08*
- xiii^[13] IRISH CATHOLIC BISHOPS' CONFERENCE, *Primary Schools: A Policy for Provision into the Future*, 2007, 5.1.
- xiv^[14] AQUINAS, *Summa Theologiae*, I q 1, a 5, ad 1.
- xv^[15] *Letter of the Netherlands Bishops on Catholic Education*, 1977
- xvi^[16] ARISTOTLE, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1.3.
- xvii^[17] BROWN, P, quoted by RADCLIFFE, T., *Why Go to Church?* Continuum London 2008, p. 49
- xviii^[18] BENEDICT XVI, *Address at the University of Regensburg*, 12 September 2006.
- xix^[19] *Bunreacht na hÉireann*, 44.2.4^o.
- xx^[20] SACKS, J., *The Dignity of Difference*, Continuum, London, 2002, p. 62
- xxi^[21] CONGREGATION FOR CATHOLIC EDUCATION, *The Catholic School* (1977), 29.
- xxii^[22] *Vision 08*.
- xxiii^[23] CHESTERTON, G. K., *Heretics in Collected Works 1*, San Francisco, 1986, pp. 201-202
- xxiv^[24] *Bunreacht na hÉireann*, art 42, 4, my italics.
- xxv^[25] *The Dignity of Difference*, p. 84
- xxvi^[26] SACKS, J., *The Persistence of Faith*, Weidenfeld and Nicolson London 1991, p. 67.
- xxvii^[27] *The Persistence of Faith*, p. 66.
- xxviii^[28] JOHN PAUL II, *Centesimus Annus*, 46.
- xxix^[29] BENEDICT XVI, *Deus Caritas Est*, 29.
- xxx^[30] *Vision 08*.
- xxxi^[31] *Primary Schools: A Policy for Provision into the Future*, 5.2.
- xxxii^[32] *Centesimus Annus*, 47.