
**ANNUAL CONFERENCE OF THE CATHOLIC PRIMARY
SCHOOLS MANAGEMENT ASSOCIATION**

**CELEBRATING
A VISION FOR LIFE
IN CATHOLIC
PRIMARY SCHOOLS**

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Celebrating a Vision for Life in Catholic Primary schools

Summary

- The vision for Catholic education today is rooted in faith as it always has been. It takes its inspiration from the person and the teaching of Christ.
- We need to encourage teachers who are capable of exercising leadership in schools to do post-graduate qualifications in Catholic school leadership. I believe we need to be preparing for the day when such qualifications will not be just desirable in candidates for leadership positions, but will be a requirement.
- Another important element of the Catholic vision for education is that it is person-centred. The aim is the full growth of the individual spiritually, socially and morally as well as intellectually, in communion with Christ.
- The Catholic view of Education is that faith cannot be compartmentalised. It must permeate everything that takes place in the school.
- Teachers teach by example as much as by words. Their Christian witness, the values and attitudes that they embody in their daily interactions with those around them, in the small and large events of school life, these can be a powerful influence on their students.
- An important aspect of the community dimension of Catholic schools is inclusivity.

Introduction

On 12 May last year the Bishops of Ireland launched their Pastoral Letter Vision 08: A Vision for Catholic Education in Ireland. While it was a Pastoral Letter of the Bishops it was written very much in collaboration with the Religious and other stakeholders in Catholic Education. In the meantime Catholic Schools Week 2009 took place, beginning on January 26 and ending on February 1. Whilst this was an all-Ireland initiative, it was the first time that such a week-long event was planned for the Republic of Ireland. The Catholic Church in Northern Ireland has hosted 'Catholic Schools Week' for some years now.

The Week was a celebration of the important role that Catholic schools play in the wider educational system. It was also an opportunity for all of us, pupils, parents, teachers, members of Boards of Management and Patrons, to reflect on our particular understanding of education, assimilate it into our lives and try to put it into practice more fully in our schools. The theme I was asked to speak on in today's presentation, "Celebrating a Vision for Life in Catholic Primary Schools", is an invitation to continue that reflection on our vision for Catholic education and to reflect on it particularly as a vision for life.

New Context

The Pastoral Letter restates the ideals and vision for Catholic education in the context of the present time. Clearly the new realities of twenty-first century Ireland make it necessary to take stock of where we are in Catholic education and what are the challenges and opportunities in this new situation. The opening paragraph outlines the main features of that context: decline in the practice of the faith in homes, the advent of a diverse, multi-religious and multi-cultural society, and the increasing influence of a culture of secularism. It is in this context that we must answer the question, what is the vision for Catholic education today? What are we offering to modern Irish society? What is this vision for life that we are talking about? How can we best provide for the education and formation of the pupils in our schools? What is the optimum environment for staff and students in which all of this can come about?

A Vision Rooted in Faith

Christ the Model and Inspiration

The vision for Catholic education today is rooted in faith as it always has been. It takes its inspiration from the person and the teaching of Christ. Its philosophy of life cannot be accommodated within the narrow bounds of a worldview that is confined to what can be seen and measured and tested. It embraces the big picture. It works out of a worldview that embraces time and eternity. It is a vision for life based on the words of Jesus: "I have come that they may have life and have it in abundance" (John 10:10). It is a vision for life lived to the full here on earth, and for eternal life in the presence of God hereafter.

We live in a world where people feel increasingly anxious about the future. We have the global threats of war and cosmic disaster on the one hand and the ever present threats to our individual existence, threats of adversity, violence, illness, and ultimately, death on the other. In such a world our greatest need is for hope. One of the most important and enduring characteristics of the Catholic vision for education in this context is the emphasis on hope. This is mentioned very early in the Pastoral Letter: "What is entailed here is not only the fullest possible human flourishing in this world but a hope for the world to come" (p. 2).

Person-centred

Another important element of the Catholic vision for education is that it is person-centred. That is a characteristic which most modern philosophies of education would lay claim to. The difference between the Catholic vision and that of other philosophies is why it puts the person at the centre. It does so because it recognises in each student someone created in the image and likeness of God and therefore someone with a dignity and destiny that transcend all other values. It aims at the full and harmonious development of the potential of every student as a human being. This means there is much more to education than achieving academic results. The aim is the full growth of the individual spiritually, socially and morally as well as intellectually, in communion with Christ. As Pope John Paul II reiterated time and time again, the wellbeing of society and of each individual rest on respect for the dignity of the person.

Integration of Faith and Culture

Clearly, religious education is a priority in a Catholic school and requires a serious commitment of time and resources in the school plan. However, the pastoral letter

points out that "faith is not simply 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 (p.3)." Here we touch on the integration of faith and culture that is spoken of so frequently in the Church documents on Catholic education. It is a particular challenge for the culture we live in today which, while it might be prepared to recognise the claims of faith in the private sphere, would prefer to keep it there. The Catholic view of Education is that faith cannot be compartmentalised. It must permeate everything that takes place in the school. It touches on every subject that is taught, every activity that is engaged in. It shapes not only the matter taught, but the way it is taught. It even shapes the environment of the school which will be rich in Christian symbols and iconography. In sum, it shapes the ethos, or characteristic spirit of the school.

Some Practical Implications

There are many practical implications of this vision for the day to day life of the school, for teachers and principals and boards of management. There would not be time to list them all so a few examples must suffice.

Teachers and Principals

The document of the Congregation for Catholic Education, *The Religious Dimension of Education in a Catholic School*, speaks about the unique environment of a Catholic school as one "illuminated by the light of faith... and permeated by the Gospel spirit of love and freedom." It goes on to say that "[p]rime responsibility for creating this unique Christian school climate rests with the teachers as individuals and as a community" (par 25-26). Clearly, then, the implementation of a Catholic ethos in the day-to-day life of the school depends largely on the teachers and above all on the principal of the school. Teachers have a great need for ongoing support to enable them to discharge this responsibility in relation to the ethos of the school. At the very least young teachers need courses of induction into the ethos of the Catholic school at the beginning of their teaching careers. Many teachers respond enthusiastically to offers of ongoing formation by way of conferences, retreats, mentoring to enable them to grow in faith and understanding of their role. This is one aspect of the support needed. The other relates to knowledge and skills, and to that end in-service courses and opportunities for post-graduate studies in the field of Catholic Education are needed.

The principal of a school has the role of leadership of that educational community. The principal of a Catholic school has therefore a responsibility of spiritual leadership. That may sound daunting, but most principals that I have known down the years have exercised this role without even thinking about it. It grew out

of their personal conviction and commitment to the faith. However, we live in a changed world today. Teachers cannot be assumed to have the level of faith commitment that was generally the case in the past. Hence the importance of the various supports mentioned above. In addition to that we need to encourage teachers who are capable of exercising leadership in schools to do post-graduate qualifications in Catholic school leadership. I believe we need to be preparing for the day when such qualifications will not be just desirable in candidates for leadership positions, but will be a requirement.

Boards of Management

The members of the Board clearly need to have an understanding of the ethos of the school and the vision of Catholic education that underpins it. The joint initiative taken by CPSMA and the Mater Dei Institute in devising and rolling out the Wellsprings programme on the Ethos of Catholic Primary Schools is a very important first step in providing some formation for Boards in this regard. There are many aspects to the Boards responsibility for upholding the ethos of the school on behalf of the Patron, as required by the Education Act. Among the more important ones are making sure that the school plan allocates appropriate time and resources for religious education, and seeking to ensure that this is implemented in practice. The Board also has responsibility for the various policies operated in the school, many of which impinge on the ethos of the school. The admissions policy has particular relevance in this regard. The Board must also be careful to oversee the content of programmes used in the school where these are likely to touch on the school's ethos, for example Religion and RSE programmes.

The most important service of the board to the ethos of the school is in its employment of teachers, and particularly of principals, who are able and willing to uphold the school's ethos and promote it in the day to day life of the school. Clearly this requires that the whole board, but especially those involved in the selection process have a clear grasp of the ethos themselves and that they have the necessary skills for the tasks of interviewing and selection of candidates.

A Vision for Life

Education for Living

The Catholic vision of education is a vision for life. One of the distinctive characteristics of Catholic education is that it is an education for living. While academic studies, acquisition of skills and preparation for future employment are important elements of education they are not the whole story. They are not even the most important part of the story. Of course parents want results, and the better educated and more ambitious parents will send their children to schools where they are most likely to succeed. The survey that the Bishops' Council for Research and Development published this time last year, "Factors Determining School Choice", showed that, when it came to choosing a school for their child, parents ranked the religious education provided by the school only fifth in order of importance. Things such as meeting the child's needs, providing a good grounding for secondary school, and good discipline came higher than religion. Nevertheless, more than 70% considered religion to be important or very important. That is encouraging.

A Holistic Education

A Catholic vision challenges conceptions of education which are aggressively market oriented and individualistic in approach (Grace, 1996, p.70). It challenges educational practice where the focus is solely on success measured in narrow academic terms. In the face of the populist demand for league tables and high performance feeder schools, "a Catholic conception of education...[is]...primarily moral and spiritual, concerned with principled behaviour and focussed upon community and public good outcomes..." (Grace, *ibid.*)

An education inspired by a Catholic vision for life is holistic. It is concerned with the integral formation of the whole person, and particularly with preparing students to live life as responsible members of society. It tries to teach them how to be in right relationship with the world around them, with other people, and with God. To quote the Pastoral Letter (p. 5):

[Catholic education] teaches students to recognise the difference between right and wrong in their personal lives and in their relations with others. It tries to develop each one's capacity to reflect on and respond to the often difficult and complex moral issues which confront us as individuals and as a society. It does this in the light of the Gospel and the rich tradition of Catholic principles concerning respect for life, personal fidelity, justice, truthfulness and integrity of conscience.

This section goes on to say that a central part of the task of a Catholic school "is to inculcate in pupils the qualities of personal integrity and moral courage which are marks of an authentic Christian personality". It suggests that Catholic teachers "will encourage their students to see their abilities as being for the benefit of others and not just for themselves. They are called to serve others, above all those who are victims of poverty and injustice of any kind" (ibid).

Some Practical Implications

Formation as well as Information

The most important practical implication of what I have been saying here for the life of the school is that it sees the teacher's role as going far beyond just imparting information to her students to include forming the student in positive attitudes and values. I think most of our teachers have no difficulty in doing this in matters such as respecting others, treating others as we would like to be treated ourselves, avoiding behaviours like bullying, stealing, striking, shouting and other forms of aggression. The task of moral formation is integral to the work of the teacher. For the Catholic teacher this moral formation is rooted in the teaching and example of Jesus and it is supported by prayer and the sacraments. Some teachers may feel reluctant to see themselves as being responsible for the formation of students in these matters that are more directly to do with spiritual formation. Obviously, the primary responsibility lies with the parents with regard to all of this, but the teacher in loco parentis shares that responsibility too.

Example of Teachers own Lives

In the collection of essays "**Reimagining the Catholic School**"(2003), Thomas Groome speaks about the importance of the teacher's own personal faith and its influence on the students. He says:

If we are to move beyond pious rhetoric, then spirituality must permeate the whole curriculum of Catholic education - what and why, how and who we teach. In gist, it invites teachers to bring their own souls and their deep heart's core convictions in faith to the teaching task, and likewise that they engage the souls of their students, reaching into their 'deep heart's core' as persons. (pp. 40-41)

In other words teachers teach by example as much as by words. Their Christian witness, the values and attitudes that they embody in their daily interactions with those around them, in the small and large events of school life, these can be a powerful influence on their students. In the famous words of Pope Paul in **Evangelii Nuntiandi**:

"Modern man listens more willingly to witnesses than to teachers, and if he does listen to teachers it is because they are witnesses" (par 41).

Resist the market mentality

Perhaps the most important implication in this area is for Patrons, Boards of Management and teachers alike to resist the pressure to reduce education to some kind of points' race. Happily that pressure is not as strong at primary level as it is at second level here. But vigilance is needed and sometimes intervention by Patrons to prevent some schools becoming ghettoised because they are committed to holistic methods and high standards of inclusivity.

The Community Dimension

The Parish School

Quoting a recent document from the Congregation for Catholic Education, the Pastoral Letter states: "*Catholic schools recognise that 'education can be carried out authentically only in a relational and community context'*" (p. 6). One of the great strengths of our primary education system is its rootedness in parishes. Parishes have to contribute heavily to meet the costs of providing sites and local contributions to the building of their schools. Parents' committees often raise considerable funds to provide equipment and facilities to enhance the educational experience of their children. As a result the parish community has a deep sense of ownership of the local school and in many ways the school becomes a focal point of the community, especially for the young families in it. Clearly, this is much more the case in rural communities or in small towns than it is in large urban centres. In either case this community dimension does not just happen. It needs to be fostered and built up. It will be easier to do that where the majority of pupils are from the already existing community of the parish. It will take a much greater effort where the school is serving students from several parishes. The contribution of this community spirit to the wellbeing of the school and to the education of the students has been documented in studies of Catholic schools in other countries and it is safe to assume that it is also the case here.

About ten years ago Matthew Feheny wrote an essay on the future of the Catholic school from an Irish perspective. He looked at research on the success of Catholic schools in America, England and Australia. Referring to the American experience specifically he pointed out that their success was due not so much to better teaching of secular subjects but "rather that Catholic schools are characterised by an atmosphere of pastoral care and a deliberate attempt to create community." In all three countries he found that Catholic schools "were found to be especially successful in creating school communities out of educational institutions. This success is even more striking with children in deprived communities." (From *Ideal to Action*, pp. 211, 217)

So a Catholic school is not just an educational institution. It is a community where people respect each other and care for each other. The Pastoral Letter might be seen as setting an impossibly high standard for Catholic schools. It says (p.3): "*Catholic schools aspire to create an open, happy, stimulating, and mutually stimulating community environment in which young people are able to develop the full range of their talents and*

abilities..." However, I can say that, from my experience of visiting schools in our own diocese, most of our schools come very close to this ideal. That is a tribute above all to the dedication and professionalism of our teachers.

Inclusivity

An important aspect of the community dimension of Catholic schools is inclusivity. This is a somewhat recent emphasis in the vision of the Catholic school, though in practice Catholic primary schools were invariably open to students from different social strata and backgrounds. While maintaining its own ethos, *'the Catholic school welcomes diversity and strives for inclusivity'*. (Cf. Catholic Primary Schools #4.3). The presence of so many children in our schools from different ethnic and religious, as well as social, backgrounds is a challenge to our traditional assumption that Catholic schools were simply for Catholic children. Rather than seeing students of other faiths as an obstacle to the mission of a Catholic school the Pastoral Letter sees them as an enrichment.

Catholic education values tolerance and inclusiveness... [It] is open to generous dialogue with Christians of other traditions and those of other faiths and none... The presence of children from other denominations is seen as an enrichment of the educational experience offered by the school...The schools see such diversity as offering opportunities for deeper understanding among people holding diverse convictions. (p. 8)

I believe our schools have done society and the State a huge service in helping to integrate the huge influx of people from other countries into our community. I think it is generally recognised that Catholic Primary Schools have been to the fore in welcoming students from other countries and cultures and in integrating them successfully in the life of the school and the community. The contribution of schools in this regard was acknowledged by Dr. Tom Collins, Head of Education, NUI Maynooth, in his address to the Kilmainham Symposium in March 2007: *"I think the world of education has coped incredibly well with this challenge. The primary sector has absorbed multiple nationalities into the sector practically unnoticed and now the second-level is doing it. But because it is has gone unnoticed it should not be unrecognized"*. ("What Ireland Needs from its Education System", NAPD Le Chéile, May 2007, 87)

Another aspect of this emphasis on inclusiveness is the commitment to students suffering disadvantage of one kind or another and particularly students with special needs. The letter states: "In the Catholic school there is a strong commitment to pupils for whom the traditional methods of education are a challenge. This means, for example, that those who are educationally disadvantaged and those with special needs are actively supported in achieving their full potential." (p. 5)

Huge demands have been made on teachers and principals in facilitating this enormous task of integrating both students of different ethnic and cultural backgrounds and those with special needs. With very scarce resources and sometimes very poor facilities they have done an outstanding job of making all feel welcome and providing them with first-class educational opportunities while continuing to achieve the highest standards in education for all their students. We owe an enormous debt of gratitude to our teachers who have been at the coalface of this very challenging and demanding task.

Some Practical Implications

Admissions Policies

The challenges posed by an inclusive policy for admissions to Catholic schools are formidable. Balancing the need to be welcoming to people of all faiths with the obligation to provide for the Catholics children of the parish or parishes served by the school can be difficult to achieve. However, the problem comes to the fore when the level of provision in the area in question is inadequate. This can be due to bad planning on the part of the State or a lack of other patron bodies to make provision in a particular area. The general principle is that Catholic schools will welcome students of other faiths or none, provided that they have places for them. It is important to recall in this context what was clearly indicated in Catholic Primary Schools: A Policy for Provision into the Future: "... the Church should not be left with the task of providing for the educational needs of the whole community." (par 5.1)

Respect and Dialogue

In schools where there are students of other faiths principals and teachers have to achieve a delicate balance in their dealings with both students and parents: The religious freedom and the personal conscience of individual students and their families must be respected, and this freedom is explicitly recognised by the Church. On the other hand, a Catholic school cannot relinquish its own freedom to proclaim the Gospel and to offer a formation based on the values to be found in a Christian education; this it its right and duty. (Religious Dimension of Education in a Catholic School, par 6)

I believe our principals and teachers have tried very hard to achieve this balance. An innate sense of fairness to minorities makes them go out of their way to ensure that students of other faiths are accommodated as far as possible. If there is a danger it is perhaps in the other direction, that of tending to dilute the Christian ethos out of a fear of offending or making others feel excluded. Recent controversy regarding the placing of cribs in public places and objections upheld regarding the broadcasting of religious advertisements are examples of this kind of imbalance. I

am sure there are many examples of very good practice in schools around the country. It would be a valuable service if these could be searched out and made available to all.

The difficulties mentioned should not prevent us seeing the positive contribution that inclusivity can make to the educational community. The opportunities for dialogue with Christians of other traditions and those of other faiths and none are there in many schools. But for these to become an enrichment of the educational experience for students - and teachers - the opportunities have to be grasped. The informal interactions in class and in the playground will, perhaps, be the most important opportunities for mutual learning by students from different backgrounds. But this can be supplemented and built upon in lessons by encouraging students from different backgrounds to reflect together on their beliefs, prayers, rituals and celebrations. Much work needs to be done to provide in-service for teachers to enable them to do this in a way that will make it a genuine enrichment of the educational experience of all the students.

Conclusion

I have highlighted some aspects of Vision 08 A Vision for Catholic Education in Ireland and their implications for the day-to-day life of our schools. It is evident that Vision statements and accompanying documentation remain at the level of lofty ideal unless they find expression in everyday life. This represents a challenging task for the education community of Patrons, Management, Staff, Pupils and Parents. Much has been achieved in this regard. We build on a solid tradition which we have inherited and which is carried forward by the commitment of all associated with our schools today. For that we are grateful.

Each generation takes up the task of ensuring that schools provide the best formation and education for the young of its time. The Catholic community today wishes to assist Catholic schools in providing formation and education for this generation of pupils which will enable them to develop and grow and lead happy and fulfilled lives and thus serve the common good. Vision 08 sets a vision for the task. May it come to life in the daily life of our schools.

I will end by quoting searching questions addressed by Pope Benedict XVI to Catholic educators in the conference hall of the Catholic University of America in Washington, on Thursday, 17th April 2008. The answers to these questions offer us a guide in our quest to bring Vision 08 to life in our schools.

Is the faith tangible in our universities and schools? Is it given fervent expression liturgically, sacramentally, through prayer, acts of charity, a concern for justice, and respect for God's creation? Only in this way do we really bear witness to the meaning of who we are and what we uphold.

Subsequently he warns:

While we have sought diligently to engage the intellect of our young, perhaps we have neglected the will. Subsequently we observe, with distress, the notion of freedom being distorted. Freedom is not an opting out. It is an opting in - a participation in Being itself. Hence authentic freedom can never be attained by turning away from God. Such a choice would ultimately disregard the very truth we need in order to understand ourselves.