

---

**JMB/AMCSS 22<sup>ND</sup> ANNUAL CONFERENCE**

**CATHOLIC EDUCATION:  
VISION FOR  
LIFE AND SERVICE  
TO SOCIETY**

**ADDRESS BY BISHOP LEO O'REILLY  
CHAIR OF THE BISHOPS' COMMISSION  
FOR EDUCATION**

**HOTEL EUROPE, KILLARNEY, CO KERRY**

**29 APRIL 2009**

---

# Catholic Education: Vision for Life and Service to Society

---

## Summary

- Your commitment and achievement in the education and formation of the young ... [is] crucial for the life of the Church in Irish society into the future
- The new realities of 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 make it necessary to take stock of where we are in Catholic education
- As Catholic educators what we offer society must be about much more than what can be measured by examinations or listed in league tables
- We must consciously aim to influence society through the students we educate
- Education has a particular role to play in building a more united and peaceful world
- Because of the historical evolution of the education system at second level, we tend to attract the more academically inclined students. Given this historical tendency we have to take extra care to ensure that our policies and practices are such as to encourage and welcome students of all backgrounds and abilities to our schools
- The vision [for Catholic education] is rooted in faith and takes its inspiration from the person and the teaching of Christ
- To say that faith in Jesus and in His presence in the Church is a key component of effective leadership in a Catholic school clearly has many implications for Boards of Management, for Principals and for those in key positions of leadership in our schools. There are implications about ongoing formation for such personnel, the qualities and qualifications desirable in candidates for such posts
- There are some who would distinguish radically between information (Religious Education) as content, and formation (Catechesis) as socializing people into Christian identity. The reality is we need both and they complement each other
- This is not to say that the task of formation in faith is the sole responsibility of the school. Formation is a community centred task and demands a coalition of parish, family, and school
- The challenge remains to commit ourselves anew to live out the ideals of Catholic education in the day to day life of schools, so that our pupils may act with justice and integrity in an imperfect world when they are adults themselves
- Living out the ideals of Catholic education in the day-to-day life of the school will involve three Ws: Witness, Worship and Welfare
- Catholic schools are characterised by an atmosphere of pastoral care and a deliberate attempt to create community
- As bishops we have the responsibility for holding the ethos of Catholic schools. I assure you of our unflinching support now and in the future

# 1 Introduction

---

I wish to thank the leadership of AMCSS for inviting me to give the keynote address to the JMB/AMCSS 22nd Annual Conference 2009. I am honoured to address, for the first time, the Principals and Boards of Management of over four hundred Catholic Voluntary schools.

I have been associated with second level schools as teacher, school chaplain and bishop. I have worked in the Voluntary Schools sector and in a Community school. I am acutely aware from my own experience of the difficulties that you face daily in your schools and I also know that your work has an enormous impact on your students and on society. Your leadership is crucial for the pupils in your care, for their education and formation as they grow towards adulthood. It is also crucial for the staff in your schools and for the parents who entrust their children to your care.

Currently the Management and Leadership of schools take place in difficult social and financial circumstances. At all times the management and leadership of schools is a demanding task, albeit an exciting and fulfilling one. But in the current context in which you exercise your role the demands on management and leadership in schools are even greater. I am thinking of the present economic downturn, which results in lessened resources for essential services, and of social trends which fundamentally challenge the ethos of Catholic schools.

I wish to thank you for the management and leadership of Catholic Voluntary Schools. We appreciate your commitment and achievement in the education and formation of the young. It is a challenging and exciting task. Part of my brief here this evening is to pledge support to you in your work. The bishops and all entrusted with leadership in the Church hold your work in high esteem and sees it as crucial for the life of the Church in Irish society into the future.

## 'Vision 08'

On 12 May last year the Bishops' Conference launched their pastoral letter, Vision 08: A Vision for Catholic Education in Ireland, which outlines the key elements of our vision for Catholic Education. We had an opportunity to celebrate that vision and reflect on it during the Catholic Schools' Week that took place from 26 January to 1 February this year. I want to thank all of you who participated in the activities of that week and helped to make it a great success.

I now wish to reflect more fully on the vision the Pastoral Letter sets forth and some of its implications for the life of Catholic Voluntary Secondary Schools. The letter attempts to set out the ideas and ideals which should inspire all those who are

involved with Catholic education, parents, pupils, teachers at all levels, administrators, governors and trustees. It draws on the long tradition of Church teaching about Catholic education but there are some emphases which are quite new. These newer elements of the vision derive from the teaching of the Second Vatican Council and the numerous documents on Catholic schools and education published by the Vatican in the intervening years.

## Modern Context

The letter restates the ideals and vision for Catholic education in the context of 21st century Ireland. The opening paragraph outlines the main features of that context. Clearly the new realities of 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 make it necessary to take stock of where we are in Catholic education. What are we offering to modern Irish society and to whom are we offering it?

We have something valuable to offer society. Catholic schools here and elsewhere are known to deliver good educational outcomes. But, as the English Jesuit educationalist, Fr Gerald Grace, reminds us, “a Catholic conception of education...[is]...primarily moral and spiritual, concerned with principled behaviour and focussed on community and public good outcomes.” As Catholic educators what we offer society must be about much more than what can be measured by examinations or listed in league tables. Archbishop Vincent Nichols, the newly appointed Archbishop of Westminster, speaks about our involvement with society in this regard in terms of a mission:

*A Catholic school is not an isolated enterprise, living and functioning in a world of its own, concerned only about its own well-being.....Like the Catholic Church, it is not only knitted into our wider society but it also has a sense of mission to that wider society. So here there is no place for narrowly defined leadership. (Archbishop Vincent Nichols, Leading a Catholic School, Conference 'Visions for Leadership, 31 March 2009).*

We must consciously aim to influence society through the students we educate and I hope that what we are offering society will become clearer as I explore the elements of the vision contained in the Pastoral Letter.

## 2 Key elements of a vision for Catholic Education

---

### a) Inclusivity

Even a generation ago the question about those to whom we are offering education would hardly have arisen. Catholic education was provided for Catholic students. That is still true, but it is by no means the whole truth. We now find ourselves offering education to students from different religious backgrounds, people of other denominations and faiths and people of none. We also have students from many different cultural and ethnic backgrounds and different abilities in our classrooms. We welcome them all provided we have place and resources to accommodate them.

A new emphasis in the vision of the Catholic school is the emphasis on inclusivity. The Pastoral Letter captures this emphasis succinctly when it says:

*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)*

This is not just a case of the Church here making a virtue of necessity. Inclusivity is now very much at the heart of Church teaching on education and is one of the most radical initiatives of the late Pope John Paul II. In his Message - Dialogue between Cultures for a Civilization of Love and Peace - for the celebration of the World Day of Peace on 1 January 2001, Pope John Paul outlined the responsibility of education in intercultural dialogue. The Pope pointed out the need -

*to overcome all ethnocentric selfishness and make it possible to combine regard for one's own identity with understanding of others and respect for diversity... Education must make students aware of their own roots and provide points of reference which allow them to define their own personal place in the world. At the same time, it must be committed to teaching respect for other cultures. There is a need to look beyond one's immediate personal experience and accept differences, discovering the richness to be found in other people's history and in their values... Thanks precisely to this broadening of horizons, education has a particular role to play in building a more united and peaceful world. It can help to affirm that integral humanism, open to life's ethical and religious dimension, which appreciates the importance of understanding and showing esteem for other cultures and the spiritual values present in them. (Pope John Paul II, Dialogue between Cultures for a Civilization of Love and Peace, par 20)*

There are two very important issues here. The first is the need to understand and appreciate one's own identity as a Catholic, to be clear and confident about what we believe ourselves. We cannot reach out in dialogue to people of other faiths or cultures if we are not well grounded and secure in our own. We need, as the Pope says, to be able to define our own place in the world. But that is only the first step. The second is the need to look beyond our immediate personal experience and to discover the richness to be found in other people's history and their values.

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 Pastoral 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 (p5)"*

In the wake of the publication of the Audit of School Enrolment policies by the Department of Education and Science in November 2007 there were many unfair and unfounded charges of elitism against Catholic schools. However, we have to acknowledge that in many places, because of the historical evolution of the education system at second level, we tend to attract the more academically inclined students. Given this historical tendency we have to take extra care to ensure that our policies and practices are such as to encourage and welcome students of all backgrounds and abilities to our schools.

## **b) Role of Laity**

In recent Church documents there is a greater recognition of the role of lay people in Catholic education than before. This is an obvious development from the Second Vatican Council's teaching in its Constitution on the Church and its Decree on the Apostolate of Lay People, as well as in its Declaration on Christian Education. While there were always lay people involved in Catholic education, what is new is, first of all, the clearer recognition that this involvement is an apostolate, and, secondly, that lay people's involvement is not confined to the roles of teaching or even managing, but also includes leadership and ownership of the educational project. The Bishops' Pastoral of last May talks about the new forms of trusteeship in which some or all of the responsibility for religious-run schools is being transferred to trusts made up wholly or partly of lay people. Speaking about transferring religiously owned schools into these new forms of trusteeship which some of you here represent, the letter says: *"The decision to do this springs from the belief that Catholic education is the responsibility of the whole Catholic faith community."* (p. 6)

### c) Christ-centred

Alongside these new emphases, however, the traditional elements of the vision of Catholic education are reaffirmed. The vision is rooted in faith and takes its inspiration from the person and the teaching of Christ who came among us so that we might “have life and have it to the full”. Its philosophy of life is one which embraces time and eternity: “*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) To quote Archbishop Nichols again:

*We say that at the centre of true human ecology is the person of Christ. He then must be at the centre of our Catholic school. He then must be at the centre of the task of school leadership. He then must be at the centre of the life of the leader. Faith in Jesus and faith in the outflow of that presence of Christ into the Church is the key component to effective leadership in a Catholic school.*  
(Archbishop Vincent Nichols, Leading a Catholic School, Conference ‘Visions for Leadership’, 31 March 2009)

To say that faith in Jesus and in His presence in the Church is a key component of effective leadership in a Catholic school clearly has many implications for Boards of Management, for Principals and for those in key positions of leadership in our schools. There are implications about ongoing formation for such personnel, the qualities and qualifications desirable in candidates for such posts, and the processes of advertising and filling them.

### d) Person-centred

Catholic education is person-centred. 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 and physically, as well as intellectually, in communion with Christ.

Archbishop Nichols has interesting things to say on this topic too:

*In a Catholic school, the true development of the person, pupils and staff, takes precedence over all other things. We insist that it is more important than the public recognition of the success of the school; than the demands of political pressure; than the requirements of the economy, significant though these things are* (Archbishop Vincent Nichols, Leading a Catholic School, Conference ‘Visions for Leadership’, 31 March 2009)

The full growth of each student, spiritually, socially, morally and intellectually is a noble ideal. How do we reconcile it with the race for points on the Leaving Certificate? How do we square it with trying to survive in a classroom on a Monday morning where perhaps a percentage of the students are still bleary-eyed and 'hung-over' after the week-end? It is in these situations more than any other that we really need faith in Christ and Christ-like attitudes, and a hope that is strong and resilient and rooted in something more than human.

## e) **Integration of Faith and Culture**

### • **Religious Education**

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 contemporary culture which, while it might be prepared to recognise the claims of faith in the private sphere, would prefer to keep it there.

Today the need is for Religious Education based on a thorough knowledge and understanding, leading to a Catholic faith that is well informed. There are some who would distinguish radically between information (Religious Education) as content, and formation (Catechesis) as socializing people into Christian identity. The reality is we need both and they complement each other.

It is urgent that schools therefore have the expertise necessary to impart a thorough knowledge of faith. Our schools need to create an environment that brings to life the values and content taught in the classroom. This is not to say that the task of formation in faith is the sole responsibility of the school. Formation is a community centred task and demands a coalition of parish, family, and school. As Thomas Groome points out, the task of formation "*is a profoundly sociological one; it requires handing on the community as well.*" (Thomas Groome, *Handing on the Faith – The Need for Total Catechetical Education in Handing on the Faith*, Robert P. Imbelli, Editor, p. 173)

- **Formation and Information**

The school facilitates the formation of the students while it fulfils its academic role in delivering information about the faith. In the Catholic school the growth and development of the pupils seeks to reflect the values and information received in the formal classes on religion. Such catechesis enables students to consider their life experiences in the light of the Catholic faith and encourages them to live their lives in a way that is consistent with the Gospel of Jesus Christ. We recall Vision 08 which states that Catholic education:

*"...tries to develop each one's capacity to reflect on and respond to the often difficult and complex moral issues which confront us..."(p. 5)*

*"includes growth in realistic knowledge, love and acceptance of ourselves and an understanding of the world we live in."(p. 5)*

Vision 08 goes on to point out:

*"The challenge remains to commit ourselves anew to live out the ideals of Catholic education in the day to day life of schools, so that our pupils may act with justice and integrity in an imperfect world when they are adults themselves."*

- **Witness, Worship, Welfare**

Living out the ideals of Catholic education in the day-to-day life of the school will involve three Ws: Witness, Worship and Welfare, as indicated by Thomas Groome in an article entitled: *Handing on the Faith: The Need for Total Catechetical Education:*

1. *Witness as an aspect of the school. The environment of the school attempts to reflect the communal values of the Christian faith – respect and reverence for every person, hospitality and care towards all, and living witness to faith, hope and love. Furthermore the formal catechesis in the school encourages students to engage with and participate in the parish community thus nurturing their ecclesial identity.*
2. *Worship as an aspect of the school Opportunities for shared prayer and liturgy, for experiences like retreats and spiritual mentoring, are integral to the formal catechetical programme. And indeed the very pedagogy of a class or gathering can include moments of prayer and contemplation, of ritual and celebration. Again the success and effectiveness of worship is enhanced by correlation with the liturgical year and engagement in the local parish*

3. *Welfare as an aspect of the school. Schools have come to recognise “service programmes” as effective in faith education. These are things like Trócaire projects, St Vincent de Paul branches, outreach to nursing homes and so on. Such works and experiences are not just an outcome of Religious education and formation but rather a source of formation in faith as well. It should be possible in the formal curriculum to give pupils the opportunity to name and reflect on their service experiences. Thus students will be able get a practical grasp of Catholic social teaching and how they can contribute to the common good.*

By way of drawing out some practical implications, could I suggest that Catholic schools should be to the forefront in promoting participation by students in the Junior and Leaving certificate programmes in religious education. Catholic schools are entitled to present these programmes in such a way that they support and express the ethos of the school. The guidelines for teaching these programmes in Catholic schools, provided by the Bishops’ Conference when the programmes were introduced, should be an important resource in this regard.

#### **f) Community Dimension**

The community dimension of Catholic education is a central part of the vision outlined in the Pastoral Letter. Schools are not just institutions of learning, still less educational businesses delivering academic outcomes. They are communities:

*Catholic schools recognise that ‘education can be carried out authentically only in a relational and community context’. (p. 6)*

In December 2008 the Council of Episcopal Conferences of Europe organised a Congress on Catholic Schools entitled “*The Catholic Schools in the European Public Area*”. In putting forward a vision for Catholic Schools the Congress noted that “*a Catholic school is a school striving to be a Christian community.*” (“The Catholic School in the European Public Area’, European Congress on Catholic Schools CCEE-CEEC, Rome, 30 November - 2 December 2008)

Every Catholic school must aspire to being an educational community and one with a specifically Christian flavour. The Vatican document, *The Religious Dimension of Education in a Catholic School*, sets the bar very high:

*From the first moment that a student sets foot in a Catholic school, he or she ought to have the impression of entering a new environment, one illumined by the light of faith and having its own unique characteristics... an environment permeated with the Gospel spirit of love and freedom. (par 25)*

About ten years ago Brother 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)

Mr Etienne Verhack, the General Secretary of the European Committee for Catholic Education, addressed this issue of the community dimension of Catholic education at a Conference in Bucharest last month. He stressed the importance of learning to listen to others and of the link between the school community and the person of Christ. He says:

*Because the human person doesn't live without others, the Catholic school has the objective to create a community and to teach [young people] to live together. Such education begins with listening to the other. But there is something more....At the centre of the Catholic school's life and mission there is the person of Christ. Jesus Christ expresses the paradox of our human mission to be poor but rich in the grace of God, to be mortal but called for living eternally. Knowing Christ is also discovering the Father and the true sense of life. This has consequences for education and life in a school community. (Address to Princess Margareta of Romania, Bucharest, 6 March 2009)*

Once again the ideal is a noble one, but not an easy one to achieve. The Vatican document I quoted earlier, *The Religious Dimension of Education in a Catholic School*, spoke of a new environment permeated by the gospel spirit of love and freedom. It goes on to say how this will come about and leaves us in no doubt about who it relies on to bring it about:

*Prime responsibility for creating this unique Christian school climate rests with the teachers as individuals and as a community. The religious dimension of the school climate is expressed through the celebration of Christian values in word and sacrament, in individual behaviour, in friendly and harmonious interpersonal relationships and in ready availability. (par 26)*

### 3 SUPPORT AND SERVICES

---

#### a) Formation and the Staff in Catholic schools

To achieve the goals of Catholic schools as envisaged in the Church's teaching and outlined in Vision 08, the leadership and staff of Catholic schools need support and the specific formation required to fulfil the mission of the school. This formation of lay Catholics as leaders and teachers in schools is crucial for the future of our schools. The European Congress on Catholic Schools in December of last year had something important to say in this regard:

*What is crucial here is that Catholic school leaders and teachers are able to give an account not only of what they do but also of why they do it. The high quality of education offered in Catholic schools is reasonably well known. What is not known, not necessarily well understood by Catholic schools leaders and teachers themselves, is how the truths of faith underpin and inspire this quality of education. Much greater formation of leaders and teachers is needed so that they can genuinely bring together the inspiration and motivations of faith as enriching and strengthening their professional expertise. ('The Catholic School in the European Public Area', European Congress on Catholic Schools CCEE-CEEC Rome, 30 November - 2 December 2008)*

In recent years courses in the leadership of Catholic schools have been devised for schools' staff. These courses, delivered by training colleges and universities, are of immense importance for Catholic schools. A seminar organised on behalf of the CEEC brought together school Principals from European countries for a week long course in Ireland in September 2008. Such courses are essential for initial training, formation, and in-service of Catholic schools' staff.

#### b) Catholic Education Service

It has long been recognised that Catholic Education needs a service body to coordinate and bring unity of purpose to the vast edifice of our mission to formation, education and schooling in Ireland. As some of you are aware, work has been going on to establish such a service for some time. The Catholic Education Service is envisaged as the strong central structure needed to hold Catholic education into the future. It will serve the formal education system at all levels as well as the non-formal and informal sectors. It will support a vibrant Catholic education sector in response to changing social, economic and political conditions in Ireland.

The Catholic Education Service is an association established by the Catholic Bishops of Ireland (IEC) with the cooperation of the Conference of Religious in Ireland (CORI). The CES will initially consist of two agencies: The Trustee Support Service (TSS), which will provide a service to Catholic schools in Northern Ireland, and The Catholic Schools Partnership (CSP), which will provide service to schools in the Republic of Ireland. The TSS and the CES are already in the process of being set up and will:

- Foster coherence in Catholic education at a national level.
- Provide a unified voice for Catholic education in the public forum and with educational bodies and the Government
- Support Catholic educators in the core activities of learning and teaching to foster high quality lifelong learning and faith development for all learners
- Support the roles of Governance, Trusteeship and Management.

## 4 CONCLUSION

---

An article in *The Tablet* (4 April 2009) to mark the London G20 summit suggested that young people have been one of the main victims of an overtly capitalist society. The article quoted a Professor Orbach *“that young people are increasingly preoccupied with becoming famous”*. This has to do with the idea that one must proactively *“create a self”* seen, for example, in social networking websites such as 'Facebook'. The reason behind this, she suggested, was that young people were actually longing for community and a *“desperate sense of recognition”*(sic).

*The Tablet* article went on to quote Professor Orbach, Professor Sennet and Archbishop Rowan Williams as agreeing *“that young people had been badly let down by an education system – based on an overtly capitalist notion of competition – that places too much emphasis on tests. The archbishop explained: “Competition... doesn't actually produce particularly functional practice. It produces obsessive anxiety, an incapacity to imagine failure and therefore it creates a level of denial, tunnel vision, which is exactly how we got here, the crisis we happen to be in.”*

When we reflect on the ethos that underpins our Catholic schools we are immediately aware that it aspires to provide education and formation that offers hope to the young, that aims to create a community where a sense of belonging is central and the dignity of each person is recognised. While our schools respond to the needs of our modern secular society they *“...believe that over-emphasis on competition, a too narrow preoccupation with examinations and specialising at too early and age on highly specific courses are inimical to true education.”* (p.6)

I spoke at the start about our schools having a mission to society. I hope I have shown that they have much to offer to the young people of this time and to contemporary society. The task of leading a Catholic school is one of great importance and significance. It involves combining the role of leadership with the personal and consistent practice of faith. It demands honesty, integrity and professionalism. It is a splendid and noble service and I thank all who fulfil it and I encourage many to aspire to leadership of Catholic schools. As bishops we have the responsibility for holding the ethos of Catholic schools. I assure you of our unflinching support now and in the future.