

CATHOLIC EDUCATION CONFERENCE – HEYTHROP, 23 JUNE 2015



The overriding purpose of Catholic Education is to ensure that children and young people arrive at that fullness of life which Christ came to bring (John 10:10).

Through her educational endeavours and outreach the Church has as her aim the promotion of the full development of the human person, and to inculcate those spiritual and ethical values which cohere with her vision of the dignity of the human person. In this way she aspires to make her contribution to the construction of a more humane and civilised world.

Catholic Education can never lose sight of the inherent tensions between those 'two cities' of which Saint Augustine speaks and about which he wrote so eloquently: the earthly city and the city of God. There exists on the one hand the imperative to prepare and thoroughly equip young people to take their rightful place in the earthly city with the autonomy proper to it, and for them to apply in their environment the values they have drawn from the richness of the long Catholic tradition and patrimony.

Then, on the other hand, there is the city of God, mysteriously and seminally present in this world, and towards which in its eschatological fullness the Church in time makes its pilgrim way. This 'other city' reminds us of the transcendent dimension of the human person, who we believe possesses a destiny and a purpose beyond the structures and confines of life on earth.

The vision of faith which is rooted in God's self-revelation in Jesus Christ should permeate every aspect of our Catholic educational project. As Catholics we believe that in this arena we have a worthwhile, even precious contribution to offer, and something of real value to say in the often conflicting market place of ideas and ideologies, or to employ emeritus Pope Benedict's phrase in 'the court of the Gentiles.'

The Church's single *raison d'être* for her existence is to proclaim Christ the Saviour to the world, and any Catholic educational establishment whatever its nature and level, be it school, college or university, draws its validity and purpose from that self-understanding of the Church. While the daily curriculum of our Catholic institutions may, on the surface at least, not differ greatly from any other educational establishment, nevertheless a deeply religious ethos and Catholic philosophy about human life and its purpose permeates that curriculum, or at any rate should do so.

These truths or faith-convictions concern the human being's place in the divine order of things, his or her uniqueness and inalienable dignity as created in God's image, a dignity which is supernaturally enhanced through baptism, when the person becomes an adopted child of God the Father, and a co-heir with Christ. Such a vision of faith, which can often remain implicit, confers an overall purpose and definite sense of direction to both teacher and pupil or student, a process guided by the promised Holy Spirit.

In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus addressed these words to his disciples: *You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trodden underfoot by men. You are the light of the world. A city set on a hilltop cannot be hid.....Let your light so shine before others, that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.*' (Matt. 5:13-14,16). I feel that this teaching of the Lord has a particular application to the world of Catholic Education.

In a recent conversation with the teaching staff of two primary schools in the diocese of Lancaster I invited them to highlight what they felt was specific to a Catholic school. After some discussion they responded that it was the care and acceptance shown to the individual child. The ethos of their particular schools was, they felt, a warm and caring ethos, where children with difficulties of one kind or another were welcomed and given every opportunity to fulfil their potential. At times it is not easy to pinpoint what exactly distinguishes Catholic education, but this particular group of teachers were aware that they were part of something very special and worthwhile.

The establishment and development of the Church's educational activity since the restoration of the hierarchy over 150 years ago have been nothing less than remarkable, and often entailing considerable sacrifice on the part of the Catholic community. That history has been well documented. What is equally remarkable is the enduring popularity and appeal of our Catholic schools and colleges, even among sections of the population who are not Catholic. Those of you involved in the Catholic education sector here in London, for example, are more than aware of just how competitive admission to our schools and colleges has become. Such a demand for what a Catholic faith-school has to offer is reassuring, yet at the same time it constantly places us on our guard to ensure that our institutions remain thoroughly Catholic in outlook while at the same time engaging with the complex culture of the twenty-first century.

As Catholics of my generation look back over the past fifty years to those euphoric days following the Second Vatican Council, we realise what a considerable distance we have travelled where Catholic education is concerned and how we have consolidated our hard-won place and reputation in the world of the academy. There is much of which we can be justifiably proud, in particular the relatively large number of schools and colleges we have under our care and their outstanding achievements in so many instances.

I highlight here just two of several challenges which coming generations of Catholic educators and the Church as a whole will have to confront. The first is the growing secular lobby and its agenda which in its strongest form is adamantly opposed to the state funding of religious schools. That particular lobby won't go away, and courage and conviction on the part of the Catholic community will be required to address the issues posed by secularism. As a community we have as much right as any other to pass on those truths and values which we hold to be non-negotiable, and we will increasingly have to assert this in the public forum.

A further challenge will be finding sufficient committed professional Catholic governors, teachers and educators prepared and willing to pass on to the next generations those values and that distinctive ethos which have inherited, and which we believe to be of perennial value. As a Church and family of believers we have invested heavily over the past one hundred and fifty years in our schools and colleges, and generations of our children and young people have greatly benefited as a result, not to mention the positive contribution made to the wider society as a whole. We have successfully met and addressed whatever challenges came our way in the course of that century and a half. However, our world and our educational environment in particular have changed in quite unprecedented and far-reaching ways, not least through scientific and technological advances which have affected the lives of all of us. Catholic Education has now the task, and the challenge, of adapting to this new world and addressing the undoubted challenges it will pose. If the past history is any indication, we will meet and deal with whatever challenges and new situations which come our way – provided we remain faithful to our Catholic principles and patrimony, and keep him who is and should be at the centre of all we say and do, and who in his own words declared that he *'is the way, the truth, and the life.'* (John 14:6).

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