A Pastoral Letter from the
Irish Catholic Bishops' Conference

VISION 08

A Vision for Catholic Education in Ireland

IRISH CATHOLIC
BISHOPS' CONFERENCE
COMHDHÁIL EASPAG GAITLICEACH ÉIREANN

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The Catholic School in Ireland

Why this Pastoral now?

Education and, in particular, the role of the Catholic Church in education at all levels, has recently become a topic of intense discussion and debate in our country, both north and south. The urgency of such a debate has been heightened by the growing cultural and religious pluralism in our society. It is in this complex and challenging context that schools must operate. The context prompts new questions and calls for new answers to old ones. Why Catholic schools in modern Ireland? What is the special character of such schools? How do they contribute to society and the educational system of which they form such a significant part? It is against this background that we wish to set out our understanding of the nature and purpose of the Catholic school in Ireland today. In presenting this vision of the Catholic school, we wish to invite a response from those engaged with us in education.

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Life Lived to the Full

While they share many characteristics with other schools in offering a public service, Catholic schools seek to reflect a distinctive vision of life and a corresponding philosophy of education. This is based on the Gospel of Jesus Christ. The Gospel sees the world in which we live as God's creation. As human persons, we are made in God's image and destined for everlasting life with God. Life is a pilgrimage in the footsteps of Jesus, who is 'the Way, the Truth and the Life' (John 14,6). He came among us so that, in his own words, we might 'have life and have it in all its fullness' (John 10,10)[1].

What is entailed here is not only the fullest possible human flourishing in this world but a hope for the world to come. It means looking to the fullness of life with God which will never end and which makes sense of our whole human existence. It also means recognizing that eternal life is not 'an imaginary hereafter' but 'is present wherever God is loved and wherever his life reaches us'[2].

Catholic education aims to help each student to develop his or her full potential as a human being. It will do so by preparing and disposing our pupils for this fullness of life, by enabling them to be people who are fully alive. Education means the development of the whole person. An education which makes no room to address the fundamental questions about the meaning of life could not be described as seeking such holistic development. By educating students in their every dimension according to the Gospel, Catholic schools seek to transform not only the individual human lives of our pupils but also, through them, the wider society which

they will help to build. Catholic schools are part of the Church's continuing mission to carry the life-giving message of Christ to every generation. This gives strength and coherence to the Catholic Church's philosophy of education. For Christians, true human fulfilment and the redemption of society are to be found through faith in Jesus Christ and through service of others in imitation of him.

Catholic schools aspire to create an open, happy, stimulating, and mutually respectful community environment in which young people are able to develop the full range of their abilities and talents in a balanced, integrated and generous way. These schools seek to form pupils who will find true happiness and strive to give authentic leadership in society. They will do this through the Christian quality of their lives, the unselfish use of their gifts for the common good and their commitment to work for a more just, cohesive and caring human society

Faith the Foundation

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. This 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. The Catholic tradition of which the schools are a 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.

Catholic education has always placed a high value on reason, both intellectual and practical. In continuity with the earliest traditions of the Church, it regards education and the cultivation of intellectual life as precious in themselves. It sees the use of rational thought and scientific analysis as essential to the advancement of technology and human progress. Therefore, scientific and technological studies are a very important part of education. However, it rejects those diminished and mechanistic notions of rationality which attempt to limit the concept of truth to what can be scientifically established and the concept of human progress to what can be technologically achieved. On the contrary, it believes a reasonable balance must always be maintained between the humanities and technology in education. Faith and reason must be seen as vibrant partners in the human quest for understanding and ultimate fulfilment which is pursued in Catholic schools.

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Religious Education and Prayer

Specifically religious education, designed to confirm and deepen an understanding of the faith, forms an essential part of the curriculum in Catholic schools and functions at its core. This means, for example, that Catholic schools commit resources and time to religious education as a matter of priority.

By integrating their understanding of faith with their experience of the world as studied in other subjects, our pupils are helped to appropriate what they believe and respond to the exhortation of St Peter to be 'always ready to give answer to anyone who asks the reason for the hope which is in you' (1 Pet 3,15). At the same time, while respecting the autonomy of each branch of learning, they are helped to unify the diversity of subjects in the curriculum by seeing all of them in the light of faith and as different approaches to the study of a world 'charged with the grandeur of God' (G.M. Hopkins SJ).

Part of the overall pedagogy of Catholic schools involves helping pupils to grow in self-understanding and develop a language of prayer with which they can express the search for God which lies at the heart of human lives. Worship of God through prayer and the celebration of liturgy and the sacraments, 'the doors to the sacred', belongs at the very centre of the Catholic school's life. Such worship is rooted in faith and inspired by wonder at the transcendent mystery of God revealed in the complex beauty of the universe. It is fundamental to Catholic self-understanding to experience everyday realities as sacramental signs of God working in the world. This sacramental view helps pupils to see themselves as the stewards of God's creation and become aware of their ecological responsibility for nature and the environment.

Developing Human Persons

The Christian understanding of the human person includes the call to the fullness of life and eternal destiny (cf. John 10:10). The whole human person in this sense is the focus of the Catholic school's educational endeavour. Its mission is to help students to grow in confidence and self-esteem and to develop their humanity. It should lay foundations for life-long growth and hope, freed from ignorance and the other factors which can inhibit human flourishing. The promotion of a wide range of co-curricular activities within the school and the local community reflects this focus on the personal development of each pupil.

It is part of the mission of the Catholic school to provide sensitively and effectively for the needs of all its students. In a climate of trust and through the provision of skilled pastoral care, it aims to accompany them through the important experiences of their growing-up years. This accompaniment is particularly important at times of crisis and loss, or when dealing with failure. In this way students are supported through current difficulties and prepared for the challenges of adult life.

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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. This demands additional resources. Increases in public provision towards meeting these needs and thus enhancing opportunity and educational outcomes are a welcome step forward.

Education for Living

Catholic education is inspired by the Gospel and, as such, respects the freedom and dignity of every human being. It teaches students to recognize 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. A central part of the endeavour of the Catholic school is to inculcate in pupils the qualities of personal integrity and moral courage which are marks of an authentic Christian personality. Catholic teachers will encourage their students to see their abilities as being for the benefit of others and not just themselves. They are called to serve others, above all those who are victims of poverty and injustice of any kind.

This approach to education also includes growth in realistic knowledge, love and acceptance of ourselves, and an understanding of the world we live in. This is a world where conflicting forces and values operate in human society, a world where there is great goodness and where there are great virtues and great achievements, but where there are also unjust structures produced by human sinfulness, and where human lives are diminished as a result. All of us, individuals, communities, institutions, including the Church itself, can be complicit in this. 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.

Education in a Time of Transition

We are acutely conscious of the shortcomings of some of our educational institutions in the past. However, that should not make us forget those parents and dedicated educators who, for generations worked under the most difficult conditions with very few resources and often with little assistance from public funds. We are thinking here of the priests, religious and lay people who taught in and staffed our schools, acted as trustees, managers or in other capacities with great generosity and for very little reward. Despite such difficulties and limitations, they managed to provide an education to generations of children who would otherwise have been deprived of it.

Over time the Church in Ireland has been able to engage in different ways with the State in the provision of schooling at all levels. It is now forty years since universal post-primary schooling was made available to the young people of the Republic of Ireland with the introduction, in 1967, of free education and, where necessary, school transport. The Catholic secondary

school was to the fore in enabling the success of this initiative, with 95% of these schools changing from being fee-paying and entering the free scheme. Equally, in Northern Ireland, the provision of post-primary schooling for all in grammar and secondary schools was achieved in no small part through great sacrifice on the part of parishes and communities. Much of the recent economic success of our island can be attributed to the way in which our schools have built on this inheritance.

With the number of priests and religious involved in educational leadership and in education as a whole currently in decline, many religious congregations are now engaged, in some instances through collaboration with other congregations, in the process of exploring, planning and setting up new forms of trusteeship. By these means, some or all responsibility for the schools they formerly administered will be transferred to trusts made up wholly or partly of lay people. The decision to do this springs from the belief that Catholic education is the responsibility of the whole Catholic faith community[3] . As the rich legacy of the past is entrusted to a rising generation of highly professional and dedicated lay leadership, the moment is ripe for such a transition.

Education for Excellence

In current circumstances Catholic schools continue to meet the challenge of seeking educational excellence, while resisting the pressures of merely pragmatic, utilitarian approaches which tend to subordinate the good of the person to lesser ends. We believe that over-emphasis on competition, a too narrow preoccupation with examinations and specialising at too early an age on highly specific courses are inimical to true education. We are convinced that our Catholic schools can best contribute to the wellbeing of the educational system as a whole by the pursuit of genuine excellence while remaining faithful to our distinctive vision and approach. The provision of skilled professional educators, informed and committed to a Catholic ethos, is an essential part of this contribution.

Education and the Community

While carefully facilitating the emergence of each pupil's unique individuality, Catholic schools recognize that 'education can be carried out authentically only in a relational and community context'[4]. We see the school as an extension of the community of the family, reflecting and supporting the values of Catholic family life and respecting the role of parents as the primary educators of their children. At the same time the school exists consciously within the community of the Church. Understanding the demands of social justice and the common good, we also wish to function within the wider human community for which the Church exists and in which our pupils are called to live and serve with their God-given talents.

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"Education is … the way in which the various overlapping communities … initiate us into the richness of a shared life and heritage."

It is communities which educate. Education is, to a very significant extent, the way in which the various overlapping communities to which we belong as human beings – the family first of all – initiate us into the richness of a shared life and heritage. Education enables us to enter into the community's experience and knowledge, its history and culture, its values and faith. The State can and should facilitate communities in their educational task but must always recognize that the task belongs first of all to the families and communities of which we are part. Education can never be reduced to becoming simply a process by which the State seeks to produce good citizens, or by which the economy sets out to provide productive contributors to the wealth of society, or even by which science aspires to enlighten students about the wonderful new knowledge it has acquired. All these are undoubtedly part of the process but education is always about more than any of them and is concerned with the whole person and the community to which each person belongs.

Catholic schools aspire to be themselves warmly participative communities. The school community comprises not only pupils/students and teaching staff but also parents, ancillary staff, board members and others who may be associated with the school. In particular, the school seeks to invite the fullest possible collaboration of parents and to empower and assist Catholic families in their task of handing on the faith to their children[5]. Catholic schools also have a concern for the ongoing professional development of their staffs and the training and formation of their board members. Commitment to the personal and professional nurture of all school personnel is an essential element in building the school community.

Parish Schools and the School as a Community Partnership

In many parts of Ireland the community of the parish continues to act as a centre of Catholic religious education, worship and liturgical celebration for those whom it serves. The great strength of the Catholic primary school system in Ireland has been its rootedness in parish communities, where the school commands the support and loyalty of the families involved. The primary school is an integral part of the local community in many areas and itself plays a unique role in community building. It provides a focus where families meet and get to know each other, and around which they are united by a shared interest in the welfare of their children. It gives the local community a sense of ownership of the educational enterprise and a corresponding commitment to ensure that the enterprise flourishes and succeeds.

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Efforts are being made to develop a stronger collaborative partnership between the school, the parish and the local community by means of such structures as boards of management (or governors) in the governance of schools. In primary schools in particular, initiatives in faith formation, the sacramental preparation of pupils, and after-school programmes in schools (for example, 'Do This in Memory', Early Start, Summer Schools, Home-School Link projects), are of increasing service to the parish and the wider community. These initiatives are examples of inter-agency partnerships which are for the good of pupils, their families and the community as a whole.

An Inclusive Community

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. Catholic schools are open to children of all denominations. The presence of children from other denominations is seen as an enrichment of the educational experience offered by the school and as a practical expression of the commitment to inclusivity[6]. Indeed, Catholic schools are to the fore in welcoming the 'New Irish' in both primary and post-primary schools on this island. 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.

The School and Society

The Catholic school seeks to enable our pupils to take their full place in society, to engage in dialogue with contemporary culture and to serve the world to the best of their ability [7]. Dialogue with culture is an essential aspect of living the faith in every age, but our students must also learn to preserve the necessary critical distance from those features of the surrounding culture which may be opposed to true human flourishing and to the Gospel of Jesus Christ, which invites us to life in all its fullness.

A Catholic Education Service

It is the Bishops' intention to provide in cooperation with the Religious Trustees further support in the near future for those involved in the work of Catholic education by establishing a national Catholic Education Service for the whole of Ireland. The protection of a Catholic school's ethos is both a moral duty and a legal responsibility of the Bishop as Patron/Trustee, but this is not in conflict with the need to value the freedom of conscience and proper role of each member of the school community.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we look forward to a fruitful dialogue about the best way of ensuring that our schools can develop in the coming decades. We are convinced that this can only happen on the sure foundation of remaining faithful to the Gospel we serve while, at the same time, 'scrutinizing the signs of the times'[8], as these signs emerge in the needs and demands of the larger national and international community to which we belong. In this way, in conversation with all our partners in education, we will ensure that the structures, and the schools themselves, remain effective, relevant and true to an authentic vision of the Catholic school, such as we have tried to set it out in this brief letter.

References

1. *In the second century, St Irenaeus wrote that 'the glory of God is the human person fully alive' (Against the Heresies IV,20,7).*
2. *BENEDICT XVI, Spe Salvi, 31.*
3. *Decree on the Apostolate of Lay People – Apostolicam Actuositatem Vatican II. P.2,5.; Lay Catholics in Schools: Witnesses to Faith P.2,4. Sacred Congregation for Catholic Education, 1982. Rome.*
4. *Educating Together in Catholic Schools: A Shared Mission between Consecrated Persons and the Lay Faithful #12. Congregation for Catholic Education (2007).*
5. *'The Church, recognising that parents have the primary responsibility for the education of their children, strives to assist them in this task. While all parents have both the duty and the right to educate their children, Catholic parents have also the duty and the right to choose schools that can best promote the Catholic education of their children (Can 793)' (Irish Catholic Bishops' Conference, 2007, Catholic Primary School, A Policy for Provision into the Future, Veritas Dublin).*
6. *Building Peace, Shaping the Future (Catholic Bishops of Northern Ireland, 2001, Armagh).*
7. *Gaudium et Spes: the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World #1.*
8. *Gaudium et Spes: the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World #4.*

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