

Homily of Bishop Tom Deenihan for Mass to open Catholic Schools Week 2024

Today, we celebrate the beginning of Catholic Schools Week, a week in which we are invited to reflect on and celebrate the work of Catholic schools in our parishes and communities. I am delighted to be launching the Week from the Cathedral in Mullingar with representatives of the Catholic post-primary schools in the parish; Saint Finian's, a co-educational post-primary school under the Patronage of the Bishop, Saint Mary's, a boys post-primary school under the Patronage of ERST and Loreto Girls Post Primary School under the Patronage of the Loreto Schools Trust.

Yesterday, we also celebrated the Sunday of the Word of God. This is a celebration that Pope Francis introduced to encourage us to focus on the power and wisdom of scripture – the Word of God.

While both celebrations are distinct, they can be linked easily enough too. The Word of God must inspire and influence our daily lives and the Word of God must inform or permeate our Catholic schools. Indeed, yesterday's response to the Psalm, 'Lord make me know your ways' can be said to be the mission of the Catholic school; the Good News of salvation, the light of knowledge and the power of opportunity.

Today's gospel, like yesterday's, is taken from the opening chapters of the gospel of Saint Mark and, like last week's Sunday gospel, portrays an account of the start of Jesus public ministry. The gospel relates how Jesus invited and gathered the apostles around him. It was an invitation but the personality and witness of Christ must have influenced the response of Simon, Andrew, James and John too.

In many ways, today's gospel is a challenge to the Catholic school. The personality and the witness of Christ must inform the teaching and management of Catholic schools and the school, by its actions, must invite its pupils to encounter Christ.

Much has been written about Catholic schools. There can be some confusion about what a Catholic school is and does. For some, it is an excellent academic education, for others, it is a more general and broad contribution, bearing in mind the needs of the student. Unfortunately, others see it as indoctrination. The reality is broader.

A Catholic school, and by extension, a Catholic education, is about people. Students come from different backgrounds, with different personalities and have different experiences but, like everyone else, are made in God's image. Today, the diversity in our Catholic schools in terms of ability, nationality, socio-economic background, ethnicity and faith is significant and that is as it should be. When these five criteria are taken into consideration, I would challenge anyone to tell me that Catholic schools are not as inclusive as any other type of school. They must be to be true to their ethos!

The Catholic school must embody respect. Respect for the individual student with their own distinctive talents and characteristics and respect for others, also made in the image and likeness of Christ. Respect for others is a key task for schools and society. Catholic schools, conscious that we are made in the image and likeness of God believe this to be true and it is and must be a key characteristic of any Catholic school. Faith in Jesus Christ has something to inform and influence debate and actions in this regard.

Faith cannot be compartmentalised to a Church on Sunday morning but must have an influence on how we act and on what we say. Indeed, the issue of respect and respect for others is a key one for our time and has come to the fore in Irish society in recent weeks, particularly in relation to those from other countries and those from our own country seeking accommodation.

In addressing this point, I must mention the teachers who teach in our schools, those who know and who respect their students, those who acknowledge difference and those who support, not just academically, the students with

many varied abilities and gifts. Our teachers are integral to the mission of the Catholic school and they have our thanks and our admiration. The voluntary work of Board members must also be acknowledged. Their dedication is further evidence of the esteem in which such Catholic schools are held. If we value something, we will work for it and give our time to it.

That is true of all schools. However, faith as well as reason is important in a Catholic school. Faith is too important for our Church and our students to be diluted by ideology and political correctness. Our students need a vision and the reassurance of a God who loves them, they need a sense of a compassionate Church, they need a way of expressing their faith and they need hope for the future. They need a sense that we are born for more than what this life can offer. That is the importance of a faith-based education. You, I, and society as a whole must be careful at this time that we do not close the door to faith and deprive our students of the hope, consolation and direction that faith can offer. Faith is not an empirical or comparative study – it is an encounter, an invitation and an openness to God in our lives. True plurality, be it in society or in education, will always support and encourage faith, as it will those who do not profess faith. Plurality or inclusion cannot be against faith otherwise it is a mere ideology.

To quote Saint Peter, we must always be prepared to give a reason for the Hope that is within us. Christianity dictates that neither our schools, our students nor ourselves should be hopeless in the broader sense. Faith is important! It is ironic that when we live in an age of searching and seeking, the person, the compassion, the transforming and reassuring message and teaching of Jesus Christ offers what many are seeking.

It is a repeat of Saint Paul's experience in the Acts of the Apostles when he said to the people of Athens that the unknown God that they were searching for and had an altar erected to, was in effect, Jesus Christ. Perhaps there may be a case to make that we have taught in Ireland a rather restrictive version of faith, of Catholicism and of Jesus. The challenge for all of us involved in Catholic

education is to teach the entire picture that gives life, confidence and, critically for our students at this time, a sense of hope. A Catholic school after all is a school that can say of itself that quotation from John 10:10 'I have come that they may have life and have it to the full'.

At this time, many parents are hoping to enrol their children in Catholic primary and post-primary schools because they appreciate the vision and service that such schools give. This year Catholic Schools Week celebrates that service to friends, family, and the local community and to faith. That service is the contribution of Catholic schools to this and every parish community and to Irish Society. How many talents have been nurtured, and, how many doors have been opened and, in so doing, how many were able to live life to the full?

It is easy to forget that Catholic schools predate free education in Ireland and provides opportunity and education to many. Indeed, many of our Catholic schools were founded by Religious Congregations and Orders in fulfilment of the corporal works of mercy, to instruct and, in so doing, to feed, to cloth, to open doors and to train and enable a new generation for a new world and provide new opportunity. That point was well made on a documentary on RTÉ last week. That is the historic contribution and service that Catholic schools have given to individuals, local communities and society.

Today, many Catholic schools are involved in outreach programmes to the community that involve assisting, supporting, visiting and so learn valuable lessons on social responsibility, social justice and social obligations. Indeed, students of Catholic schools who, like Pope Francis, see Care for our Common Home as a vital obligation have supported the ecological movement. Catholic schools do serve the community!

To conclude, one could do worse than to quote Catherine McCauley, the foundress of the Mercy Sisters 'The function of a school is to fit its students for life without unfitting them for eternal life'. A good education, a Catholic education is not a preparation for capitalism or a narrow narcissistic and selfish

view of life, a view that is gaining traction throughout the world, but rather one of compassion, of service, of respect and of using one's talents and opportunities for the greater good. Society needs that vision! Service is an important word and service to the community is worth celebrating. That is the theme or message of Catholic Schools Week this year.

May God continue to bless that work of service in and by our Catholic schools and those who assist it and may that work of service continue to be done in Catholic schools throughout the country and may it be appreciated, valued and celebrated.