

**The Catholic School, “it is precisely in the Gospel of Christ, taking root in the minds and lives of the faithful, that the Catholic school finds its definition as it comes to terms with the cultural conditions of the times”**

This morning in the time we have I want to do two things. First to examine, what we mean by the Catholic school and the cultural conditions of the times, and finally to illustrate the how, by concluding with an example of Catholic leadership in a truly pluralist context.

The statement above as I am sure many of you know comes from a 1977 document on the Catholic School published by the Vatican’s Congregation for Education. However, the question for me is not whether we know or recognise from where it comes, rather does it speak to the reality within which we lead the Catholic educational institutions entrusted to us?

It is a profound statement, the evidence being that it has aged well and 40 odd years later we are unpacking it. It can’t be easily read, it needs to be read and re-read to capture the fullness of the statement. The Gospel of Christ, taking root in the minds and lives of the faithful, is where the Catholic School finds its definition as it comes to terms with the cultural conditions of the times.

The primacy, the lasting, the constant, is the Gospel of Christ taking root, living in word and deed. The secondary is the coming to terms with the contemporary, the adapting. Have we – in our leadership - got those two

in the right order? Are they in synch? Maybe not, maybe we start with the contemporary and work back from there with the contemporary forming us rather than the gospel doing so. It's an easy trap to fall into.

What that statement unambiguously makes clear is that the Gospel takes root, that's the definition and then from there it sits within a context. It is not the context first and the adapted Gospel next. So again that question, when we read this statement, is our starting point the gospel and working out from there, or is it the context and let's work back? If we are honest with each other, it is likely something that requires constant attention, for we can slip and with a prevailing cultural context that demands every greater forms of adaptation, we could easily fall into the prevailing cultural mood and thereby undermine our distinctive ethos. And here I wouldn't be too hard, because often the immediate, the tangible is what is knocking on the door. The requirement for professional metrics, reports, and practical day to day issues. The immediate and the instant can easily overwhelm us.

I always find T S Elliot's stranger very sobering in asking that most basic of questions why? For Elliot says if a stranger were to approach you and ask, "What is the meaning of this city? Do you huddle close together because you love each other?" What will you answer? "We all dwell together To make money from each other"? or "This is a community"? Oh my soul, be prepared for the coming of the Stranger. Be prepared for him who knows how to ask questions.

So if a stranger asked you that question, why the Catholic school? How would you answer? The words from 1977 speak as loudly today as they did when they were written. They highlight the risk and the

challenge to the Catholic school. For the Catholic school, when faced with the challenges of the times, could retreat from navigating the complexity, promoting the distinctiveness of their offer in education so that they just blended in with the cultural conditions of the times. In 2014, Pope Francis cautioned against just blending in, speaking in Rome in May 2014 to a group of Italian schoolteachers and students, he said, “Catholic education cannot be neutral. It is either positive or negative; either it enriches or it impoverishes; either it enables a person to grow, or it lessens, even corrupts him. The mission of Catholic schools is to develop a sense of truth, of what is good and beautiful.”<sup>1</sup> In other words, simply blending in erodes the distinctiveness and the very *raison d’être* for existence as a separate offering.

Yet that Catholic school must always exist and engage in a context that is not timeless. That context has prevailing moods and dominant cultures that alter and change over the decades. Pope emeritus Benedict speaking of our culture, spoke of a “dictatorship of relativism”<sup>2</sup>, not recognising any agreed values. Pope Francis spoke of a “tyranny of relativism, which makes everyone his own criterion and endangers the coexistence of peoples.”<sup>3</sup> In that context of nihilism it is difficult to speak of a commitment to forming human, social and spiritual values in service of the common good. And yet that is what in Catholic Schools we are called to do.

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<sup>1</sup> Pope Francis, 10 May 2014, [http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2014/may/documents/papa-francesco\\_20140510\\_mondo-della-scuola.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2014/may/documents/papa-francesco_20140510_mondo-della-scuola.html)

<sup>2</sup> Pope Benedict XVI, (2010), *Light of the World: The Pope, The Church and The Signs Of The Times. A Conversation with Peter Seewald*, San Francisco, Ignatius Press, 50-54.

<sup>3</sup> Pope Francis, (2013), *Address to Diplomats Accredited to the Holy See, theHolySee*, [http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2013/march/documents/papa-francesco\\_20130322\\_corpo-diplomatico.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2013/march/documents/papa-francesco_20130322_corpo-diplomatico.html)

As Catholic educators, overcoming the “tyranny of relativism” is the challenge. How do we maintain a distinctive ethos when we are surrounded by competing value-systems, with a growing suspicion of religion or anything that deviates from an assumed ‘state’ norm, which is deemed to be neutral? Charles Taylor calls this a secular age and characterises it as a period where religion is increasingly separated from life; a falling off of religious practice and that postmodern cultural conditions marginalise faith.

That’s a world away perhaps from the 1970s when our quote was written. And yet it wasn’t. The document on Catholic education was already alive to the shifts in society, which were occurring.

The context though in which we find ourselves is so different from that described by Fr Christopher Jamison in *The Disciples’ Call*<sup>4</sup> in which he speaks of a “not wholly mythical golden era” when “every Catholic boy and every Catholic girl would, at some stage of their education, consider becoming a priest or a nun.” He describes this era as a totally Catholic culture which, in the context of Catholic education, was strengthened by the 1944 Education Act which, building on previous Education Acts, enabled every Catholic child to attend a Catholic school free of charge. Jamison suggests that this total Catholic culture began to die in the 1960’s and disappeared by the 1980’s. He cites the statistics for Mass attendance, which halved between 1980 and 2000 to around 1 million as evidence of this disappearance. Professor Stephen Bullivant in his most recent book, ‘Mass Exodus’ has provided even starker figures for the fall-off in the United States and England and Wales.

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<sup>4</sup> Jamison, C. OSB., (2010), *The Disciples’ Call: Theologies of Vocation from Scripture to the Present Day* London, Bloomsbury : 224

George Weigel, in his book, *Evangelical Catholicism*,<sup>5</sup> goes as far as to say that our post-modern culture is toxic to the Christian message. He writes that “the cultural Catholicism of the past was ‘comfortable’ because it fitted neatly within the ambient public culture, causing little chafing between one’s life ‘in the Church’ and one’s life ‘in the world.’

The contrast between the “cultural osmosis” of the total Catholic culture and the new context, which began to unfold in the 1960’s, has been explored extensively in critical scholarship. Almost twenty years ago Professor James Arthur described an *Ebbing Tide*<sup>6</sup> in which he cites falling Mass attendance, decreasing percentages of Catholic teachers and students in Catholic schools and a growing trend to challenge all forms of authority.

In 2013 Professor Arthur cited further research, which showed an accelerating secularisation process within Catholic schools in England. He said that policy and practice were consequently becoming more distant from the educational principles of Church teaching.<sup>7</sup>

At this time of growing individuality and secularisation, there is a tendency in public policy to speak of a level playing field, which reduces our differences to the point where we can allegedly operate neutrally.

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<sup>5</sup> Weigel, G., (2013), *Evangelical Catholicism*, New York, Basic : 19

<sup>6</sup> Arthur, J., (1995), *The Ebbing Tide: Policy and Principles of Catholic Education*, Leominster, Gracewing

<sup>7</sup> Arthur, J., (2013), *The de-Catholicising of the Curriculum in English Catholic Schools* in Grace, G., *International Studies in Catholic Education*, London, Routledge Vol. 5 No.1: 83

This approach advocates that the only way to build cohesive societies is to reduce or marginalise those aspects, which might be distinctive. To reduce them for the sake of integration and cohesion. When it comes to religion that often means creating a more privatised form of religion or replacing it with a more civic type of belief system. Yet that approach is riddled with contradictions because it often wants to replace absolutist claims by faiths with a single absolutist claim made by the state. Such systems elsewhere, and in history, have not led to greater understanding, but often much intolerance and discrimination against those not sharing the prevailing creed. Furthermore, an expression of something distinctive, does not necessarily lead to a barrier to integration, rather it can be the basis for profound encounter with difference.

And yet this is a challenge for our society. For regulatory authorities faced with such a challenge, it might seem easier to roll back diversity from the public sphere and impose a one size fits all approach arguing that it is ‘neutral’, fair, value for money, etc. But if that is done in one area, which differences are immune from being rolled back? Furthermore, rolling back faith would raise another set of problems. The new norm, what would it be ‘neutral’ from? And fair to whom? In such a new era whose values would prevail? These are live questions for our society and require an intellectual contribution from a variety of standpoints, including those of us involved in Catholic education.

The Catholic school will always sit within a wider context. Not yesterday’s context, nor tomorrow’s, but today’s. If it is functioning then it will help to sustain that wider context, and to enrich it. The Catholic school must be open to the society, confident in what it has to offer and

the society should be open to all its constituent parts, including the contribution of made by faith communities.

Our cultural conditions are now quite different from 1977. In another forty years they are likely to be different again. The Gospel is the constant, but that is lived and acted on through the faithful who live in the society.

How we interact with the prevailing culture depends on what that culture is. Is it a secular one, which only sees a 'private' role for faith in the wider society? Is it something, which is confined to Sunday morning? Is it an individual freedom to worship, but without a collective dimension which is allowed to manifest itself in society? Will it be a world in which the state emerges with a monopoly on service provision in education, health, etc. and at the expense of wider society? Will it be a world where faith providers can perhaps deliver a service, but will not be able to call on official funds to do so? Or is our world one which will be comfortable with a multiple number of service providers, with the state regulating the space to sustain acceptable standards in service delivery and content? For each of us depending on where we are from the answer is likely to be different. Though regardless of where we are from, the regulator and service provider must find ways to cooperate, respecting the proper role/remit of the other. That principle, at least in the West should stem from something deeper than simply prevailing popular moods, but should be founded on our approach to democracy, the individual and maintaining a healthy distinction between the state and the society.

The Catholic school has a key contribution to make, not just through its formation of students and staff, but by its very existence and

what that fact says about the health of the society. For critiques by faith communities can help to reinforce democratic processes in liberal states by ensuring alternative perspectives are heard, and group think is avoided. A Catholic school does not just help the state through the provision of services, but helps to ensure the very plurality that keeps the state liberal and open to challenge. Without that challenge democratic states could run the risk of becoming illiberal and imposing a stagnating culture of uniformity.

The Catholic school in a pluralist context should be welcomed, supported and encouraged by the state as contributing to society. Such pluralism is not simply tolerance, but exchange and interest in the other. It is not relativism but respecting distinctiveness. The definition of pluralism would allow, even encourage groups to participate and engage in the society as individuals or through collective organisations and would see them as contributing to the common good. But at the other extreme, pluralism is not anarchy. A pluralist society is aiming to do just what it says, build or administer a society which will be plural. Its goal is a society by plural means, and that will mean regulation and minimum standards.

The Catholic school by its existence signifies something of society's pluralism and openness. Is that enough? Of course not! If it is truly a Catholic school then the Gospel will be witnessed in the thoughts and actions of the school. So again a question for us to reflect on; how is the Gospel witnessed in word and deed in our schools?

Our commitment in Catholic schools is to form the student and to do so not just intellectually, but in a holistic fashion. We commit to

doing so not because of a body of regulations tell us, but from within the context of the Gospel of Christ. Again, that witness, that motivation has something to offer wider society. As society has come to rely more on regulations as a means of ordering behaviour, it has proved time and time again to not be enough. One just has to think of the financial crisis of 2008. Professor Philip Booth said recently, ‘regardless of how we regulate economic activity; there is no substitute for resourceful ethical people in all sectors of the economy. In place of virtue, we have seen an expansion of regulation.’ A society’s answer to T S Elliot’s stranger, that is held together just by compliance to rules is inherently fragile, open to further abuses which will be met by a further expansion of regulation. This cannot be enough. Regulation isn’t enough of a foundation to build integration. Catholic education, by its history, presence and offer, helps to remind broader society that regulation is not enough to build societies or keep them together. It needs something more. And for Catholic education to be effective, it must always offer that something more and to form the society, not simply be formed by it.

So what role for the Catholic school in our changing society? A lot will depend on the state’s behaviour and a lot will depend on our behaviour.

If the state commits to a pluralist approach then Catholic schools can thrive. However, if it shifts to a more absolutist state model to the detriment of society, then it is unlikely that Catholic schools will survive in their current form. And while that would be a regret due to the loss of state-funded initiatives, it would be an even greater loss to society because of what it would signify, because society would lose some of its most core and basic freedoms at the expense of an ever encroaching state.

Ultimately freedom would be impinged, societal and personal. A ‘state pays so state rules’ approach could lead to totalitarianism and upset the inherent equilibrium in a society, which all democratic states should strive for. For the purpose of the state is to provide the opportunity for a good life for its citizens, not to define such a life for all citizens, or extract resources from those citizens without representations and adequate checks and balances, nor is the purpose of the state to impose uniform beliefs on a population. While the state can impose reasonable restrictions on the use of public funds, it shouldn’t use the threat of deprivation of public funds either as a matter of outright strangulation of unfashionable beliefs and groups, or to favour some parts of the plurality over others, which would be unfair. That would destroy over time associations and communities that do not hold the state line in every way.

The state should encourage what de Tocqueville called the mediating associations between people and the state that carve out room for a good and virtuous life. The risk, as highlighted by Alasdair MacIntyre, is that the modern secular state sees itself in competition with such communities and associations, and as its resources grow, it will seek to wipe them out. Ultimately, unless very careful, secular states, with absolutist tendencies can weaken even destroy democracy, which requires difference to function and renew itself through constant questioning and reflection.

So how do we avoid such a situation arising where the state in the western democratic tradition becomes illiberal? What role for the Catholic school? Does it have a role? Is this your problem? Well the answer is yes to each. Our role as Catholic educators is to engage and respond coherently to arguments which question the role or necessity of

the Catholic school. And we do not just do so to protect vested interest, but to do a broader service to society, to ensure it remains open, inclusive and rooted in its core values and alive to critique. We must have a confidence in the uniqueness of the offer of a Catholic education, which opens the minds, crosses cultures and borders and forms good character and citizens.

And colleagues that means we must remain vigilant on the need to constantly integrate the Catholic ethos, the Gospel of Christ, with what we do each day. We cannot simply cast it aside to be replaced or usurped by the latest prevailing professional philosophy. All of us, but the leaders in particular, must be reminded of the broader goals of faith and the need for distinctiveness. Retaining that integration of the Gospel coming to terms with the cultural conditions of the times requires constant attention. Because getting the balance right all the time is not always easy, especially with pressures from within a professional culture that rightly demands ever more inputs and data to be able to measure impact and value for money. But the Catholic school needs to start with its ethos and identity; it needs to flow from that, and not simply regulation for regulation sake, important as they are to modern good practice and management. If we don't, then we, like other parts of society, run the risk of cutting ourselves off from our distinct roots, and to borrow a Habermas phrase – of drying up!

As leaders we have to live up to the challenge. We have to take the Gospel of Christ as the guide, in word and deed. We have to navigate the cultural conditions of the times, while remaining faithful and true to the Gospel. In doing so we can be mindful of the words of St. Paul VI, “modern man listens more willingly to witnesses than to teachers, and if

he does listen to teachers, it is because they are witnesses”<sup>8</sup>. Those words are reflected in Pope Francis’ most recent Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* in which there are 25 references to ‘witness’ and 61 references to ‘spiritual/spirituality’. In a section entitled *Taking the First Step, Being Involved and Supportive...Rejoicing*, which sounds like a maxim for a Catholic Head, Pope Francis suggests that “the disciple is ready to put his or her whole life on the line, even to accepting martyrdom, in bearing witness to Jesus Christ.”<sup>9</sup> Referring specifically to teaching, the Pope insists “we need to remember that all ....teaching ultimately has to be reflected in the teacher’s way of life, which awakens the assent of the heart by its nearness, love and witness.”<sup>10</sup>

So I return to that T S Elliot question, and again I turn it back to you. Who gave you that witness to you in your life? Who gives it to you today?

Here is my answer because I saw it just last month as I witnessed a head-teacher come to the end of her long working life. It wasn’t anything she said, rather it was what others said and did. You may think that you have nothing in common with this person, I beg to disagree for you and I have everything in common with her, we just perhaps have not reflected yet on how.

She is an elderly Irish nun aged 89. Until February she was still the head-teacher of a primary and secondary school, but with failing sight and reduced mobility, she retired and was moved to Suffolk. The school where she left, the children and many of the former students wanted to

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<sup>8</sup> Pope Paul VI, (1975), *Apostolic Exhortation Evangelii Nuntiandi*, London, CTS: 41

<sup>9</sup> Pope Francis, (2013), *Evangelii Gaudium*, London, CTS: 24

<sup>10</sup> Pope Francis (2013):42

reach out to her, to let her know how much she meant to them and the difference she had made over her sixty-five year teaching vocation across Pakistan. They lobbied the Cardinal in London, some wrote letters asking ‘Dear Mr Cardinal please send her home’! Here is just one of the comments received from an MIT Nobel laureate in Physics, “Sr. Berchmans met me where I was, without judgement. She inspired me to learn, at times despite my rebellious scepticism. This is the mark of a gifted educator, and I admire that greatly.” Another one of her students went on to become the world’s first female Muslim Prime Minister.

Sr. Berchmans taught in and led Catholic Schools across Pakistan where the majority of the students were Muslim, Hindu, Parsi, or from other Christian denominations, and some had no religious belief.

Just last month when the Cardinal invited Sr. Berchmans to Westminster Cathedral to receive an honour for her lifetime of service to Catholic education, her former students turned up in significant numbers. Many came from Pakistan, many from other parts of the world where they worked. Even a TV news crew from Pakistan turned up to cover the ceremony live. The High Commissioner of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan along with the Ambassador of Ireland, and two little Muslim students whom she taught, brought her forward in a Catholic Cathedral to be presented to the Cardinal to receive the award. That image is our contemporary pluralism and an example of a Catholic educator living out the mandate of those words published in 1977.

Colleagues, sometimes a life, an example can show us more clearly than anything else, what is meant by a complex statement, sometimes it’s not the unpacking of the words, like what some in academia like to do, but

just the simple getting on and doing it as best we can. Cardinal Vincent Nichols summed up Sr Berchman's example when he said, She is a shining example of all that is to be found at the heart of Catholic education: not a narrow self-interest but a radical openness to our human family. Catholic education is not denominational, not just interested in 'our own'. Our desire is always to offer all that is best to whoever will come, contribute and receive, wherever there is space and opportunity, which is not easy to achieve in some present circumstances. This, of course, is the vision of Catholic education that shapes us: committed to the common good of society, open to other faiths in dialogue and respect, firm in its foundations of service and truth, generous in the personal effort invested in the work. For these reasons, we speak always of teaching, at every level, as a vocation: a vocation in the service of our Heavenly Father, in the footsteps of Jesus Christ, our Way, Truth and Life, and in service of our shared humanity.'

Colleagues, Sr. Berchmans didn't lead or teach by being formed by the contemporary culture. The gospel formed her; it was her confidence in the face of adversity and challenge, it called her to leave a rural village in Clare, to become a nun and to teach in a mostly Muslim society and to teach girls. That faith, that Christian faith and commitment to education, changed thousands of lives and her witness has done more for the building of our common human home and integration than most of us could ever contemplate. And the key that I would like to leave you with as our society changes, is that that commitment to faith, that clear expression of Christian faith lived out by a Catholic nun in a mostly Muslim society, was not a barrier to overcoming difference, but a bridge. Those she encountered saw a person of faith, living an integrated life and a holistic life. Sr. Bachman's did not have to reduce faith or particularity

to the point where she had become indifferent to it in order to teach or to be accepted. And nor do we despite the pressures of the prevailing culture. Our task is to have the Gospel form us, not the prevailing culture.

And so Elliot's question for you - the why question? What characterises your Catholic School? Is it love or simple utility? Is your school defined by the gospel or the cultural conditions of the times? Our answers, truthfully given, will tell us whether we are thriving or drying up.