

Why choose a Catholic School?

Why choose a Catholic School? This evening ladies and gentlemen that question needs to also be answered personally, by each of us; those who have made the choice, and those for whom the choice was made for them.

I will cover three dimensions tonight as to why choose a Catholic school; the philosophical, the practical and, perhaps the most difficult for a diplomat as we are trained to avoid it, the personal or the pastoral. I have chosen that order because although the philosophical and the practical maybe more academic, the personal cannot be explained or understood without them.

First, the philosophical. This will have two parts. The distinct philosophy that is found in the approach to Catholic education, its provenance, its depth and its global reach. The additional philosophical point, and you will forgive me for this as a political scientist, is what the existence of Catholic schools, especially those enjoying state support, says about the health of our liberal democracy. My second point will cover the practical dimensions, in particular some of the criticisms of a Catholic education. It is perhaps the dimension we now hear about the most. And finally, I want to conclude with the personal/pastoral, because it would be wrong not to respond to the question posed with personal observations about what the Catholic school meant for me.

Catholic education could be summed up as expanding each person's capacity for love, so that we develop the whole person, nurturing body, mind and spirit. Pope emeritus Benedict XVI, during his State Visit to the United Kingdom in 2010, when he visited St. Mary's University, said the fundamental purpose of a Catholic education is 'about forming the human person, equipping him or her to live life to the full – in short it is about imparting wisdom'.¹ And Catholic schools should never lose sight of that bigger picture. That bigger picture was characterised as something bigger than the individual subjects studied or skills acquired. It was putting all the work undertaken in the context of growing in friendship with God, and all that flows from that friendship. It was not just to learn to be good students, but good citizens, good people. And of course Pope Benedict was echoing the sentiment of Blessed John Henry Newman, soon to be Saint John Henry Newman in his call in the 19th Century for universities to be places where a thousand schools make contributions and where the academic formation is wide and inter-woven across disciplines. In Newman's words, '*It is the education which gives a [person] a clear, conscious view of their own opinions and judgments, a truth in developing them, an eloquence in expressing them, and a force in urging them.*'²

For me this is the distinctive philosophy offered by a Catholic education. It is about living a fulfilled life and about forming people of virtue, sound judgment and character. Retaining such a focus in an era of ever more specialization in education can be challenging. One of the great challenges in contemporary education is how to maintain a focus on the

¹ Pope Benedict XVI, St. Mary's University, 17 September 2010, http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2010/september/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20100917_mondo-educ.html

² Newman, John Henry (Cardinal), *Idea of a University*, London, 1952

unity of knowledge spoken of by Newman - so that even if one later specialises, one still has a broad understanding across many disciplines. Because Newman's idea is that the learning takes place in the interdisciplinary space – and it is within that encounter that one is led to searching questions, and possible answers, which in turn broadens the horizon and the mind and forms the human character.

That does not mean a diminishing of the vocational; it ensures that knowledge is balanced with a comprehensive formation, which equips the student in the broadest possible sense whether they pursue a more vocational or academic track. Nor is the Catholic approach to education narrowly focused on the academic and measured by a grade in an exam (important as they are in some cultures). That grade is purely a momentary and partial indicator of a level of understanding. A Catholic education is a richer, deeper and more sophisticated ecology that goes to make up the Catholic school, that provides the roots which allows the ecology to flourish and grow, and academic results are just one plant in that ecology.

So education in the Catholic tradition is to remember the bigger picture, to think about formation in its widest human sense so that it is not simply about acquiring a trade or a profession important as they are to modern living. Rather, it is about the formation of the whole person.

It is not possible however, to form the whole person unless the approach is underpinned with an understanding of what, and who the human person is, and where that person stands in the order of creation. In Catholic education we take that view from our Christian faith, biblical and tradition, It is that view of the human being in the widest context, a

Christian anthropology, which sets the philosophy of Catholic education apart and contrasts with the subjectivism which is increasingly the more prevalent paradigm in the contemporary era. Catholic education is rooted.

That distinctive Catholic offer is about living a fulfilled life, rooted in the Gospel, and springing from the central truths of the human person, about forming people of virtue, sound judgment and character capable of living within society. It is about having a regard for the needs of others and the common good – as part of the individual good; a sense of the obligations that must accompany rights if a political order is to survive; a notion of the natural law, the transcendent order that includes both duties to our community beyond our own ease and comfort, and our responsibilities to previous and future generations; and a long-standing intellectual tradition of the pursuit of universal and eternal truths. It is contrary to the increasingly predominant view of education, which often reduces education to simply acquiring personal knowledge. A Catholic inspired education, properly embedded into a Christian anthropology is about others. Such an education helps to create what the humanist philosopher Jurgen Habermas calls ‘bonds of solidarity’ the very foundations on which our societies rest.

So the offer of an education inspired by the Catholic tradition and delivered in a Catholic school is distinctive through its depth, heritage and breadth.

Ladies and gentlemen the Catholic Church has been following a distinct approach now for a considerable period of time. In the case of

Universities for well over a thousand years; and as universities grew out of schools, I suspect even longer for Catholic schools. The West's oldest universities grew out of the Church and to this day the Catholic Church is the world's largest trans-national provider of primary, secondary and tertiary education. Each day over sixty million students attend Catholic schools across the world. Each of those schools shares in something bigger than the single school. They share a larger history and tradition. They share an approach to education that is the oldest tradition in the western world, and one of the oldest across the world, especially if one appreciates the Hellenic influence in early Christianity.

This vast network of education crossing cultures, languages, faiths, nationalities, ethnicities, social income brackets, does something else significant for our societies. It helps to keep our societies pluralist and open. Why?

Our approach to Catholic schools is a product of a rather unique historical context and a philosophical tradition born out of that context. Our society did not get it right over the centuries as it tried to accommodate difference. Today, the existence of Catholic schools, and state funded ones at that, tell us something deeper about our society and the role of the state vis a vis the individual and non-state organisations. To me as a diplomat it tells me something about the health of liberal democratic order.

Some states, especially totalitarian ones, would not tolerate Catholic schools or other types of schools, other than those delivering a rather narrow state narrative and agenda. One just has to recall what happens when dictatorships take power. They suppress that which is

different. The plight of schools in the former USSR and its orbit was a particular case in point. Liberal, and open states on the other hand do not fear different approaches to education and often encourage state support and funding. The Catholic school, by its very functioning and existence says something about the limits of state power and control. I have always found that how faith communities are treated by the state can often be a litmus test for a broader set of freedoms within the society.

Critiques by faith communities can provide a real service and value to the liberal state by contributing to the plurality that helps to keep the state open to challenge, otherwise it could run the risk of becoming illiberal, above challenge and imposing uniform beliefs on its citizens. Western liberal democracies need debate and vibrant differences to remain alive and achieve renewal. It is their oxygen. One of the West's most eminent philosophers – Jurgen Habermas is alive to that risk. He says, “It is in the interest of the constitutional state to deal carefully with all the cultural sources that nourish its citizens’ consciousness of norms and their solidarity.”

The Catholic school thus for me is one of the living examples of a healthy pluralism. That pluralism does not deny western society's Christian roots or heritage which are reflected across a whole set of norms from the legal to the parliamentary. The society's Judaeo-Christian foundations rather, provide a pluralist platform on which others can integrate, engage and participate. I am not saying that it was always thus and the path to achieving that inclusiveness was not always easy. But it is a working system nonetheless which has managed over the centuries and recent decades to integrate various differences of faith. In my view it is more preferable and organic than trying to create a platform, which has

not evolved and perhaps has weaker roots, one that reduces distinction to a form of nihilism. Pluralism allows for a variety of voices and providers rather than a singularity of approach.

And so that philosophical tradition which underpins the Catholic school exists because of a wider commitment to pluralism in society. That pluralist society is one often characterized by a weaker state acting as a regulator, but open to a variety of service providers meeting acceptable standards and contributing to the flourishing of wider society. I suspect that vision of the state, a weaker state, constrained by other organisations and sitting amidst an enriched society, but not a state which has consumed society, is one that I think many of us would hold to, especially considering the history of our society in recent decades. We alas cannot be complacent, as we have seen even in the West, state power beginning to encroach on some of societal freedoms.

The distinct philosophy that underpins the Catholic school, in my opinion also underpins much else in our society. It is part of something bigger than the nation, it touches humanity in its widest form, it reminds us of what it is to have faith and it gives expression to our life of gospel values as a community and it opens us up to challenge. It is a tangible expression of a religious freedom and our openness to the world, and the state's openness to difference. If that freedom were to be removed, or a new more supposedly level or neutral platform introduced by the state, it would diminish our society and risk upsetting a delicate balance that all healthy societies need to grow and develop. It would also erode, in my view a necessary and healthy check on state influence and power. So choosing a Catholic school not just forms good citizens, but nurtures a healthy society.

Now, my second point, the practical. Catholic schools, despite the impressive results are not without their critics. There are those who would deny their very right to exist, especially to enjoy state subsidy or subvention. Some would have us believe that Catholic schools foster mistrust or hatred. They could, but often such sentiments don't come from the school, but from the home or wider society and there is no body of evidence which shows that graduates of Catholic schools are more prone to negative behaviours. Duncan Morrow's report on Scotland's Catholic schools showed that they did not cause sectarianism. Across many Catholic and Anglican schools in England it is noticeable that they have significant numbers of students coming from other faith communities because of the values and ethos enshrined in the school. I witnessed that many times across Pakistan where many of the Catholic and Church of Pakistan schools had a majority of Muslim students and provided a space for minorities to meet and integrate. And in St. Patrick's High School in Karachi one photo sums it up, it's a photo of one of the founders of the Indian BJP party with the former President of Pakistan. The photo was taken when they were both at a Catholic school.

Some also claim that Catholic schools are not representative of wider society and tend to serve privilege. The most recent statistics for the Catholic schools sector in England show the following. Catholic schools are more ethnically diverse than the national average, they take more students from deprived areas, they have a higher number of Ofsted ranked good or outstanding schools and students score higher in GCSEs and SATs than the national average. 18.7% of pupils at Catholic primary schools come from the lowest 10% of income sector of society compared

to a national average of 13.9%; at secondary school again the Catholic sector has a similar pattern with 17.4% coming from the lowest income bracket compared to 11.8% nationally.³ I suspect the figures in Northern Ireland are similar.

We are often told that faith schools are ghettos, which undermine cohesion in society, by separating people on religious difference. Between the Catholic and Church of England they provide close to a quarter of all school provision in England. And far from being ghettos, nearly 40% of pupils in Catholic primary schools are from ethnic minority backgrounds, compared to a national average of 27%. In Catholic secondary schools nearly 35% of students come from ethnic minority backgrounds. Catholic schools in England have over 30% of students coming from a non-Catholic background and over 45% of teachers in Catholic schools are not from a Catholic background. Catholic Schools are part of the widest network of education found anywhere in the world and make a rich contribution to the society not only in the local contexts, but also in the global context. A similar picture is found in the Church of England schools. So faith schools can hardly be described as ghettos. And here in this diocese you transform lives and outcomes with the dedication you show. How many schools can point to two Nobel laureates among its alumni?

The distinct approach, which focuses the Catholic school on the wider formation, not just the academic, helps to develop the whole person. It instils a formation of character to develop good citizens. That

³ Income Deprivation Affecting Children Index, Department for Education, London, 2015

commitment on the part of the staff is supported by a wider group of people, drawn from parishes and the diocese as illustrated by our gathering this evening. That ecology that unique ecology is what gives rise to the excellence found in many Catholic schools. That wider community dimension is often not appreciated. From time to time ministers look at the exam results enjoyed by Catholic schools, and think that one part of the model (the exam results) can be exported to other schools. Ministers and officials often fail to understand the wider context and the foundations.

For example, Michal Gove, as Education Secretary speaking in 2014, said that schools would be required to integrate character-building activities throughout the curriculum. We know that an emphasis on character building in the context of Catholic education is not a new concept. Often when ministers try to copy the Catholic school they fail to appreciate that the positive utilitarian outcomes are the product of something deeper. Catholic schools are not just motivated by the latest key performance indicator, fad or gimmick. Rather, the approach stems from centuries of wisdom and insight about the human person, and their dignity as being made in the image and likeness of God, and underpinned within a Christian anthropology. Speaking at St. Mary's, Pope emeritus Benedict said, "the task of a teacher is not simply to impart information or to provide training in skills intended to deliver some economic benefit to society; education is not and must never be considered as purely utilitarian. It is about forming the human person, equipping him or her to live life to the full – in short it is about imparting wisdom. And true wisdom is inseparable from knowledge of the Creator, for "both we and our words are in his hand, as are all understanding and skill in crafts" (Wis 7:16)."

And it is also that wider formation, which focuses on the whole, not just a part that better equips the young student to navigate life to the full. That approach which focuses beyond just the academic actually helps the student to grow and to achieve. A student that is comfortable in a community, talking and engaging with people who are different to them will also be comfortable in life. Someone who knows who they are, asks searching questions, engages with difference without being overwhelmed by it, all of these attributes stem from that distinct philosophy of education. Catholic education asks people to think beyond themselves, to communicate cross-generationally and to understand the plight of those less well off materially and socially, and to underpin that with a belief in something greater than self. That wider community context, which the Catholic school engages with beyond its gates, means that the student is being developed for their active engagement in the wider society. That too will help them succeed, to develop their skills and talents to the best of their ability and to engage in the society they live within.

And part of that wider engagement is through School Boards and those Boards through their members have a vital role to play in nurturing the Catholic school. For Pope emeritus Benedict reminded us that the identity of a Catholic school is not simply about numbers or the orthodoxy of course content, but about conviction. The constant integration of the ethos with the educational philosophy reminds all concerned of the broader goals of Catholic education. Retaining that integration requires constant attention. Getting the balance right all the time will not always be easy. But the Catholic school or university needs to be as attentive to its ethos and identity as it is to the essential professional metrics, otherwise it runs the risk of cutting itself off from its

roots and hence its distinctive offer. And if it did cut itself off, then the rich ecology would diminish which would gradually see the uniqueness of the offer, and its contribution disappear. In those circumstances we would lose, a ladder, which has helped many of us achieve and grow.

And finally, the pastoral, which I will illustrate through the personal. Why choose a Catholic school? Ladies and gentlemen, some of you will have chosen Catholic schools for your children, some of you will have had a school chosen for you by parents or guardians. You have asked me today why choose a Catholic school. My answer to be genuine must touch on the personal.

I have spoken about the philosophical and the practical. They both in my experience complement the pastoral/personal. The success of Catholic schools in this society can easily be measured by utility, league tables and exam results, but they are simply manifestations of deeper more profound success. For most of us going through Catholic schools we were likely to be the first in our families to go to University. I was the first in my family to complete secondary school. My parents had just missed out on the 1944 education act.

I might have gone to university even if hadn't attended a Catholic school, but on that I'm not sure the odds stack up. When I speak of the ecology of the Catholic school, I am referring to something I experienced. A place that showed a human concern and care beyond the academic. I am a beneficiary of that Catholic school ecology. I believe strongly that if it had not been for the engagement of teachers, lay and clerical, then it is highly unlikely (in fact most certainly so) that I would not have returned to study for A Levels, nor would I have applied for or attended

university. The pastoral interest, care and concern shown by those teachers, changed a life. They did not only educate, they gave a confidence to a young person who had decided that finishing school was not for them, that University was not for them. About this time each summer, the former Vice Principal of that school in Newry would take to his car, travelling through the country side of South Down and South Armagh encouraging parents to let their children go to university. It wasn't part of his job, he wasn't paid for it. It was his vocation. He did it. He knew he was dealing with many first generation families where education, especially the prospect of third-level was beyond the imagination. He engaged with the students. He engaged with the parents. He engaged with a very reluctant me. His agency, I have no doubt replicated across the world in many Catholic schools, has done so much to advance attainment, change our society for the better and create empowerment. It may be unfashionable in some quarters now to give credit to Catholic schools and those within them who helped to transform lives and as a result, societies. I don't really care to be fashionable. I just recall what happened and the effect it had on my life. So this question you posed can never just be academic for someone like me, it is deeply personal.

The belief, from those teachers, and that priest in particular that I could go to university well it lit something. I know I was not the only beneficiary of such encouragement and guidance. And as your Bishop knows, I went to university and he had the task from then on of trying to manage me! But he and others got me through.

The personal experience though does not stop at the prospect of a university education. I look back on my years in Catholic schools in this

society and I thank God for those who taught in those schools at that time and who gave witness to the faith in quite challenging circumstances. I recalled many years later at a conversation in Downing Street about the watchtowers in the border when someone boldly said that they were always there. I knew they hadn't been because I watched them being built from my classroom window.

That philosophy of education, which I opened with, the practical that I addressed, all flowed into the personal. The philosophy of education that characterises a Catholic school, kept this society open to the world, even in the darkest days, it reminded us bravely of something beyond the immediate. It stood for the vision of the human person in a broader Christian anthropology in the face of violence and adversity.

My experience of the 1970s and 80s contrasts with what I often hear increasingly in London (and sometimes even on this island) about the effect of Catholic schools in Northern Ireland. Lazy and sometimes prejudicial arguments are trotted out which try to infer or blame Catholic education for contributing to the Troubles. The self-styled and appointed Commission on Religion and Belief in Public Life published its report in December 2015, which addressed the issue of faith based schools and admissions policies. The report stated: 'In England successive governments have claimed in recent years that faith schools and free schools create and promote social inclusion, which leads to cohesion and integration. However, in our view it is not clear that segregation of young people into faith schools has promoted greater cohesion or that it has not in fact been socially divisive and led rather to greater misunderstanding and tension'. The evidence was somewhat scant. The report goes on to recommend that 'Bodies responsible for school admissions should take

measures to reduce selection on grounds of religion in state-funded schools'. The report could not cite any robust evidence for the strength of their conclusions, but at the Press Conference to launch the report Catholic schools in Northern Ireland were again cast in a negative light, with no examples or evidence to back the claims.

The reason I dislike such ill informed opinions is that it does not reflect the reality that many others and I experienced. I went to schools on the border, on both sides, and I don't know of anyone who was radicalized by what they were taught in a Catholic school. I do however know many who were prevented from being radicalized by their education in Catholic schools. Many were challenged to think morally and to act courageously and the Church never flinched from its transmission of a strong moral code regarding its teaching on human life and dignity. That message was delivered within the community and also to the power of the state (a state that I went on to serve and represent). To take such a stand in those days has for me proved a powerful example of Catholic education. It is one I will always be grateful for because had it not been for such witness then one never knows what that would have meant for our society and those young people growing up at that time.

In my experience Catholic schools stopped a bad situation from becoming much worse. They held the line. They adhered to the Christian message. The view on the human person and a Christ centred anthropology was not just an academic perspective, it was real and it held the line and did not succumb to rival ideologies.

So why choose a Catholic school? For me the answer might be very particular and not really able for export to other contexts, but it was in the Catholic school and the parish that I first understood what human dignity meant, that what a proper just order looked like and what injustice looked like. The Catholic school for me was one of the very few places in society where I did not feel second-class. My parish, home and the NHS were probably the only other places. Everywhere else, state and society had become conflated. It was in the school or the parish, that I was able to grow and develop, to question openly, and to appreciate something beyond the temporary and the immediate (which up to that time the reality of what was going in Northern Ireland seemed like my permanent). So that first experience in a Catholic school is where I first appreciated the wider context, the dignity of the human being, and that beyond this geographical space, faith spoke to a different part of one's identity. That education was not narrow, nor shrill, nor closed, but open and challenging and I have no doubt opened my mind to roles and possibilities that I could never have imagined.

That understanding was underpinned with a faith that was passed on. A thinking faith that encouraged dialogue, engagement, debate and witness. That gift ladies and gentlemen is probably the greatest gift I have been given by a Catholic school. It is a constant, it stretches you, it demands more of you and it reminds you that with all the graces you have been given, so much more will be expected from you. That gift of faith is there throughout in many different geographical settings and in some quite challenging circumstances. That gift of faith from my home, my parish and my school, accompanies me everywhere, but probably nowhere more than when you are far from home, alone, and sometimes in

danger. It connects you right back to your roots. It is the familiar, the communal and that which reminds you of something bigger than the moment and the self.

And so, if you experienced the transformation, which I have from being able to go to a state funded Catholic school, you wish that for everyone you know. The philosophy of that education was tested in fire during the Troubles, it did not falter. The staff kept hope they engaged and formed those in their care, they went beyond the call of duty and as a result they changed lives and helped to transform society. And this ladies and gentlemen is one voice at least who will always be grateful for Catholic schools, their existence and those who work in them. You changed a life, and for the better and in the most difficult of circumstances. These are my answers to the question posed. Thank you.