



**Homily of Bishop Donal McKeown
Mass to Launch Catholic Schools Week 2022
Diocese of Derry**

Some years ago, there was an advertisement to launch a fizzy drink with the slogan: *'Live life to the Max'*. It must have been a catchy ad because I still remember it. But the idea was not original. As we have just heard in the Gospel Jesus wants everybody to have life – and have it to the fullest. Sometimes the message goes out that Jesus doesn't want us to have too much fun. Wrong! He wants us to live life to the full. He wants you to be full of love and life. And that is the message that Catholic schools have always tried to communicate by word and by deed. Catholic schools are clear that they are not just about teaching maths and literacy very well. When we forget life to the full for each student and get caught up in league tables, we miss the point.

And Jesus is clear that he has a specific idea of life to the full. I was talking to a young woman recently. She has just finished all her seven years of training as a doctor. And she had decided that her dream life is to enter a convent and join other young women who are dedicating their life to loving Jesus and loving others. She said that, on entering the convent, she had to give up so many of the things that she was told would make her happy – plenty of clothes, nice jewellery, her mobile devices, her car – and that now without them, she is happier than she ever was before. Life to the full is more than a full wardrobe or list of on-line friends.

Catholic schools stand for a specific way of looking at life. We have to recognise that – precisely we stand for something distinctive – there are people who want to get rid of any role for faith in public life and especially in schools. We are told that Catholic education is a negative influence on our society and that we ought to have schools that must talk about everything- except making reference to God. The message goes out that you can believe anything that you want – but that religious beliefs should be avoided. The implication is that faith is little more than a private hobby that should not be talked about in polite company. Religious believers who want to talk about their faith will sometimes be portrayed as extremists and fanatics, whose views ought to be ignored by normal people. There is clearly a campaign to blame Catholic schools for being something to be embarrassed about in a modern society.

And yet Jesus keeps saying, I want you to have life and have it to the fullest. And in today's Gospel he uses the parable of the Good Shepherd. Jesus says that He knows us by name. He wants to lead us; He wants to protect us from false shepherds. So how do our schools try to help pupils live their lives to the fullest?

Firstly, we offer a view of the world that speaks of God and grace, hope and eternity. In a world that measures your value by the size of your house or your bank account, Jesus says that each person's life is of eternal beauty and value. The hidden curriculum in our schools finds ways of helping young people find ways of facing the challenge of life. When problems arise or tragedy strikes, so often the school community had an invaluable common language of faith that can help everyone process the pain and shock. Jesus wants us to escape

from a one-dimensional view of life that knows plenty about prices but little about values. Daring to believe and daring to dream are parts of life to the fullest.

Secondly, young people spend 80% of their waking hours outside of school. So, it is crazy to dump everything on schools – and to blame them for problems that some young people have.

There are so many other influences on a young person's life. But our schools have bridged that gap because they have traditionally been rooted in communities. And that link between school, community and family can be a vital element in supporting the rounded learning of our children. A healthy school is linked to its local community – and that has a huge educational advantage. In every country, the Catholic school is open to pupils from all faith backgrounds and none. A Catholic school wants to form young people to be healthy citizens of a vibrant varied society. That, too, is part of handing on the idea of life to the fullest.

Thirdly, the consumerist world needs to break us down into niche markets where there is huge pressure to conform to certain types of clothes, music and hobbies. But the annual Catholic Schools Week has a deliberate outreach to the different generations that play a role in a young person's life. Grandparents and the extended family can be a great source of inspiration and learning. There is a famous image from some of the Pacific Island nations. A canoe needs young and old people on board. It needs the energy of the young to power the boat. And it takes the wisdom of the old to steer it. A wise education integrates the various dimensions of a young person's life and seeks to help them flourish. That helps to promote life to the full.

So, I invite our schools to find opportunities in Catholic Schools Week to celebrate the great work that you do. You integrate the different relationships in young people's lives – within the school, with the community and with God. Much of your creativity and achievements is well known outside your school. But much of the great work that you do happens automatically without you being aware of it, or you assume that there is nothing special about it. But much of what you do is amazing and inspiring.

Reflect this week on the fullness of life that you offer through your faith in God; through your being a school community; on your being back together again; on being amazed at the beauty of people and of the world – and then you be better able to face the future with confidence together. Jesus wants you all to flourish and your schools have great power to help that.

There are so many problems in the world. But you believe that, with God on your side, you can help the world to be a wonderful place rather than a frightening place, afraid of the future. Look back to the past with gratitude and you can look to the coming years with hope. And then you will be living life to the fullest – just as Jesus wants for each of you.