



DERRY DIOCESAN CATECHETICAL CENTRE

The Catholic School in the Secular World

Fr Paul Farren, Director, Derry Diocesan Catechetical Centre

Could we ever have described the world that we live in today? Could we ever have imagined a time when we were, for the most part, confined to our houses – schools closed – shops closed – Churches closed. Could we ever have imagined so much of life being lived online? It was unimaginable. This pandemic has changed our lives so dramatically. The most dramatic way that it has changed our lives, I believe, is that it has insisted that we are safer when we are apart. We are safer when we keep distance from each other. The closer we come to each other the more threatening we become to each other. We live in fear of each other today. It is the most awful way to live. We are driven by fear. We are driven apart by fear. In the past we were afraid of big things – of war, nuclear war, of violence, of flooding and extreme weather. Now we are afraid if somebody coughs. In the past we often judged the success of an event by how big the crowd was – now most events do not happen but if they do, they are a success if the crowd was small and we weren't too close to anybody else. It's all about being apart and separation in order to stay safe.

One of the most heartbreaking things I heard during the first lockdown was from a man standing outside the Church at his father's funeral. We were standing outside the Church because his father had died with Covid and at that time his body was not allowed to be brought into the Church. The man said to me, *"Father, I visited my father every day, until the last six weeks of his life when he needed me most. I wasn't allowed near him then."*

So as a society today unlike any time in the past we are defined by separation – social distancing – bubbles – fear. While the separation was necessary it cannot last. As we emerge from this pandemic, we will have to erode the social distancing; we will have to burst the bubbles and we will have to tackle the fear. For a Catholic School that should not be a great challenge because at the very core of a Catholic School – in its heart – it is to bring people together, to enable people to reach out to others and to do away with fear.

While it should be easy to recover from the pandemic in a Catholic School it is not easy to be a Catholic School in our society today. There are many challenges beating at the door of the school and often in the school. These challenges come from the secular society that we live in. I believe that the greatest challenge that we face from secular society is the absolute focus on self. It is all about me today and it is all about how I feel. My feelings cannot be challenged. I have a right to do whatever I think will make me happy. This is very strong. Ultimately this always brings separation and division and fighting. For

example, in school some people think they have a right to the result in the exams that they want. There doesn't have to be any evidence that they know their subject. They feel they still have a right to the result because they need it for whatever they want to do next. If they don't get it, they fight. They expect you to say whatever needs to be said to get the result that they need. I know of somebody who wanted a house recently and they found out what gets you the most points to reach the top of the waiting list. That is what they wrote on their form. It didn't describe reality, but it got them the house.

What about the truth? What about the truth of what they know? This brings us to a manifestation of the problem of the focus on self and that is, that truth is no longer objective. It is about what is true for me and what is true for you. What is true for me mightn't be true for you. And we think we are both right and so what results is chaos. We can see evidence of this so often today.

How does a Catholic School exist and live in a society where often the focus is on self and the truth is made up to suit the individual? This is a real challenge because the foundation of a Catholic School can never be subjective truth based on the wants of individuals. The foundation of the Catholic School is the Word of God – the Gospel. This remains true and constant no matter what the society we live in is like. We cannot deviate from the Gospel. Often, we hear that a school is child centred but a Catholic School is not child centred. A Catholic School must be God centred. We focus on God. This is radical and this changes life, and it certainly challenges the narrative of much of society today. When our focus is on God it cannot be on ourselves. When a Catholic School's focus is on God then the child is at the centre because that is what Jesus tells us to do but the focus is always on God. So, in a Catholic School our focus is on God and our textbooks are the Bible and the Catechism of the Church. That is where we start and that is who we are and that is where we get our objective truth – not a truth to suit us but the truth of God. When you apply to work in a Catholic School you know what you are coming into, and it is different and in a Catholic School public opinion will not change the truth.

Sometimes when truth is spoken about in this way the impression is that it is hard and old fashioned and out of touch with the reality of the moment. Nothing could be further from the truth. The truth, which is given to us by God, reveals love, true love in its fullest sense. That is what the Catholic School is to be – a community of love. Saint Paul tells us what love is when he says,

Love is always patient and kind; it is never rude or selfish; it does not take offense and is not resentful. Love takes no pleasure in other people's sins but delights in the truth; it is always ready to excuse, to trust, to hope, and to endure whatever comes. Love does not come to an end.¹

Love delights in the truth. It doesn't create a truth. It doesn't manipulate the truth. It delights in the truth and more than that it endures whatever comes. True love demands sacrifice. That is one of the most difficult parts of the truth that a Catholic School needs to communicate today. There cannot be love without sacrifice. There cannot be love if the focus is on the self. However, when our focus is on God, and when we take time to focus on God- and the Catholic School is a place of prayer- then we become more and more aware of how much God loves us. We hear that said so often, but we need to take time to allow our awareness of God's love to seep into every part of our being. It is when we experience more and more deeply God's love that we become more and more aware of who we are. Our identity flows out of God's love for us. It is God who gives us our identity. I believe he gives us our identity in the same way as he revealed Jesus' identity at his baptism in the river Jordan. At Jesus' baptism the voice came from heaven and said,

This is my Son, the Beloved. My favour rests on him.²

¹ 1 Cor 13:4-8

² Mt 3:17

The truth is that God says this about each one of us. He says you are my daughter, my son, my beloved. My favour rests on you. This is who we are. Each one of us is a beloved child of God. God's favour rests on each one of us. This is vitally important. Our identity is that we children of God. That is the truth of who we are. Sometimes today people's identity can be reduced to one aspect or perceived aspect of their being. This is not right. God made each one of us in his own image and likeness and he never makes a mistake. He never makes a one-dimensional person and he never makes a label. He makes us exactly as he wants us and he does it because he loves us. Male and female he made us and he made us out of love. His desire is that we love him. That's all he wants – that we love him. But he wants us to love him first and foremost before everybody and everything else because when we do, then in that loving relationship with God we learn how to love others.

I talked to a married man once who told me something that initially shocked me but then I realised how right he was. He said – I told my wife that I loved God more than I loved her because it was only by doing that, that I could love her right. It was a powerful truth. We need to love God first above all others. That frees us to love as God wants us to love. This is true love. The love that God has for us, gives us life. It literally gives us the lives that we live. Therefore, the love that we have for one another should give life to them as well. Love brings unity. Love can never be about the one who is giving the love. It is always about the other – to be united – to be life giving. This is so beautifully expressed in how God made them male and female in the act of sexual intercourse where, within the lifelong commitment of marriage, the two bodies become one, and united are open to new life and to being life giving. This should always be a sacred act.

So often in the world today the word love seems to have been stolen and twisted into something selfish that gives me pleasure and satisfies my perceived wants and desires. It is not true. To love is to give and to never stop giving. The deepest love goes right to the soul. There is a wonderful example of this in the Saints Basil and Gregory. Writing about their relationship Gregory said,

We seemed to have a single soul animating two bodies.

The reason that Gregory could say that was because, as he goes on to say,

We directed our lives and actions, following the guidance of God's commandments, and at the same time spurring each other to virtue.³

In other words, to live pure lives. Basil and Gregory could be so close and so united in friendship because their focus wasn't on each other. Their focus was on God. That freed them to do the will of God and live virtuous, pure lives. When God is our focus we realise the truth about ourselves that really challenges how we live.

During the Year of Faith in 2013, there was a conference for all Post Primary teachers in Buncrana. As the conference began, I was seated beside a friend of mine. On each chair was a small piece of paper with a piece of scripture on it. I read the piece of scripture placed on my chair. I took an instant dislike to it. It was from St Paul's first letter to the Corinthians. It read,

You are not your own property, then; you have been bought at a price.⁴

I reacted to this quotation. I showed it to my friend who agreed that she didn't particularly like it either. There was an empty chair next to her so she swapped my piece of scripture for the piece on the empty chair. I can't remember what that piece of scripture was, but I was happy with it.

³ Office of Readings, From a Sermon, Saint Gregory Nazianzen, Feast Day, Saints Basil and Gregory

⁴ 1 Cor 6:20

The conference began with a time of prayer. The person leading us in prayer told us that the piece of scripture placed on our chair was an individual gift from God for each one of us that day. It was in a way God speaking to our heart. Immediately after this was explained, my friend sitting beside me took away the piece of scripture she had given to me and gave me back the original one. She smiled as she did it!

The truth is that we are not our own property. We have been bought at a price, that price is the life of Jesus. We can react as I did to the thought that we are not our own property. It goes against so much in society today. It's my life I can do what I want! It's my body I can do what I want! It's mine! Yet it's not. Our lives, our bodies, they are gifts from God. Jesus died to free us from the control of the world. Our bodies are gifts from God and they are temples of the Holy Spirit. God gives us the gift of our bodies so that he can live within us and be present in the world. Our bodies give flesh to our souls where the Holy Spirit lives. Therefore, as St Paul goes on to say,

That is why you should use your body for the glory of God.⁵

Our whole lives in this world should focus on God and give glory to God. That's why we are here and that is why Catholic Schools are here too – to teach young people to focus on God and give glory to God. Mary, the mother of Jesus, is the one who can teach us how to do that best. Mary lived a pure life. Purity of life is when we are completely open to God in our minds, in our souls and in our bodies. Mary was completely open to God and she said yes to God and she gave life and flesh to God in Jesus, her son.

We are called to live pure lives too – lives completely open to God and to God's perfect plan. We are called to surrender our minds, our souls and our bodies to God. Since our bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, then, we like Mary, can give flesh to God in our lives too. We are called to be the love of Jesus, the forgiveness of Jesus, the presence of Jesus in our world, in our society, in our school. Like Jesus we may be crucified for it, but we can do nothing else because we know that we are living the truth. The truth is the truth even if the majority agree with it or disagree with it. The truth is the truth. God is the one who holds the absolute and objective truth.

So, as you begin a new school year focus on God – focus on the face of Jesus. Realise that all you have and all you are is a gift from God whose beloved you are. Grow in love – grow in love of God by allowing him to love you and by allowing his love to seep into every part of your life. Let that experience of love be the love that you share with others. Let the joy of Mary's purity be a reality in your life. Through your purity of life, the love you give to others will give life and joy to them. No matter how hard the pandemic has tried to keep us separated, that love will unite us and make us one. That is what we celebrate every time we share in the life of Jesus at Mass. We are one.

⁵ Ibid