

# **TALK TO PRIMARY SCHOOL PRINCIPALS OF DIOCESE OF DERRY (ROLE OF THE CATHOLIC PRIMARY SCHOOL IN SOCIETY TODAY)**

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## **INTRODUCTION:**

It is indeed a very great privilege being here with you all today to share some thoughts with you as primary school principals about the role of the Catholic primary school in society today.

Perhaps it would be of interest to you to know something of my own background and education. Initially born in the north of Ireland, my first formal education after my home was by the Sisters of the Cross and Passion in Ballycastle followed by a few years at the local boys school. On coming to Scotland when I was about eleven years of age I was a pupil initially in two primary schools in Glasgow followed by four very happy years at St Patrick's Secondary Boys School in Dumbarton. My family then moved to Edinburgh and I continued my education at Holy Cross Academy, Edinburgh before going on to the University of Edinburgh; then St Andrew's College, Drygrange to study philosophy and theology in preparation for the Priesthood; and then completed the Diploma of Education at the University of Edinburgh.

Following on that there were five years which rooted me in the values of Catholic education – when I was a teacher of religion as well as of mathematics and science including being school chaplain and assistant priest in the local parish of Cowdenbeath, teaching in St Columba's Secondary School.

Following on that ministry I served for three years successively at St Patrick's Parish, Kilsyth and then in St Mary's, Bathgate. Then a more formal role in education and formation took place when I was Spiritual Director of St Andrews College, Drygrange; followed by five years as Rector of St Mary's College, Blairs.

During those first twenty years in the Priesthood and now some twenty three years as Archbishop of St Andrews and Edinburgh with the latter five years as Cardinal I might say that my role in education and formation has never really ceased – with most of my life being involved in education in one way or another.

In addition I have had the privilege of visiting a considerable number of countries abroad: particularly in Africa and Central and South America as well as in India, China and Australia. Invariably I have "sought out" schools; or perhaps it would be easier to say that they have sought me out and wherever I go invariably I am asked to visit and to speak in schools of one kind or another.

## LEADERSHIP IN SCHOOLS:

Obviously vitally important to the role of the Catholic primary school is the leadership provided in that school – and, consequently, I am more than happy to initially share some thoughts with you about leadership.

When speaking in America recently the Pope went to the Catholic University of Washington where he met with representative from the Catholic academic world. The event was attended by a total of around 600 people including 235 rectors of Catholic universities and colleges, 195 diocesan heads of education, as well as professors and students.

The Pope did not hesitate to present his own high ideals. Let me quote from his address:

“Education is integral to the mission of the Church to proclaim the good news. Set against personal struggles, moral confusion and fragmentation of knowledge, the noble goals of scholarship and education, founded in the unity of truth and in service of the person and of the community, become an especially powerful instrument of hope”.

The Pope highlighted the need “to reflect on what is particular to our Catholic institutions” and to ask “how do they contribute to the good of society through the Church’s primary mission of evangelisation?”

Pope Benedict went on: “A university or school’s Catholic identity is not simply a question of the number of Catholic students. **It is a question of conviction** – do we really believe that only in the mystery of the Word made flesh does the mystery of man truly become clear? Do we accept the truth Christ reveals? Is the faith tangible in our universities and schools?”

I think Pope Benedict has given us enough food for thought in those few remarks from his address which I have quoted to occupy us for many weeks and months concerning the “**atmosphere of wise freedom**” in our schools in which **personal growth is to develop**.

Consequently, I ask you how authentic you are in terms of being a witness to your faith; I ask you how confident you are in your knowledge of the faith and whether or not that knowledge has grown over the years? I ask you if you are confident that your overall school community takes seriously its mission to be at the heart of the Church – a phrase used by the Congregation for Catholic Education in 1998; and I ask you whether or not your Catholic school helps young people to develop their understanding of Gospel values and of how to apply them to life.

A Catholic school is “**a place of encounter with the living God who in Jesus Christ reveals his transforming love and truth**”. And this in turn elicits a desire to grow in knowledge and understanding of Christ and his teaching, leading students to lead lives of Christian witness.

## HOW WE LIVE OUT OUR LEADERSHIP IN PRACTICE:

Quoting St Paul’s Letter to the Ephesians used in the Mass of the Feast of the Sacred Heart we might transfer St Paul’s words to ourselves and in our role of leadership in our Catholic school: “May God give you the power through his spirit for your hidden self to grow strong”.

It is indeed when our hidden self grows strong that we can enable the pupils for whom we have responsibility to grow strong themselves.

The foundress of the Society of the Sacred Heart Sister Madeleine Sophie also spoke of how pupils should be respected in our Catholic schools and to be helped in their own personal growth in that same atmosphere of wise freedom.

She said: “Welcome them with kindness and give them encouragement, so that their hearts will open out and you will be able to help them by your advice to form their characters”.

And in another place she said: “we respect this child, this little creature made in the image of God who is already able to make wide choices if the teacher takes time to stimulate her or his reasoning powers and to develop judgement”

This must be accomplished in an atmosphere of love and understanding.

I remember a Sister of the Sacred Heart in our own Archdiocese who on her visits to schools would frequently say: “If there is one happy and committed head teacher then there is a possibility of thirty happy and committed teachers. And if that is the case then there is the possibility of perhaps one thousand happy and committed pupils”.

Commitment to Gospel values is vitally important; as is commitment to the loving care of those who are being formed in our schools.

Thinking back to my own teaching experience in St Columba’s Secondary School, Cowdenbeath – which was at the time one of those schools described as the “old junior secondary schools” – I spoke to my principal teacher of chemistry one day about a particular class with whom I was unable to do very much quite simply because of the indiscipline among the pupils and their lack of desire to achieve anything.

The words of that principal teacher have remained with me to this day: “Have you tried to show any love to your pupils? Remember the backgrounds from which they come. Some may arrive here at school without having eaten anything since perhaps a bag of chips the night before. They might be returning home with a latch key around their necks because neither mother nor father is home or will be home until the pubs close. You might be the only person showing those young pupils love and respect throughout the whole of the day”. Those words were said to me some forty years ago – and one might think of the deterioration of social standards and of family life over that long period of time.

### **PUPILS IN OUR SCHOOLS BEING PREPARED FOR LIFE IN SOCIETY TODAY:**

Can I speak now not just of leadership in our schools but **pupils in our schools**. They are the focal point of all our teaching. And the role of our Catholic primary schools in society today is to prepare our pupils through more than competent committed teachers for life in a society which so often does not want to hear the Catholic Christian message preached.

As I have already indicated they come to us from a great variety of backgrounds – although perhaps here in Derry there is a greater uniformity of background.

However I am speaking of the vast majority of pupils presented to leaders in the Church for “education”.

Home conditions were not as they once were; social conditions in our towns and cities have deteriorated dreadfully; we know from the mass media of the numbers of very young people almost immediately caught up in drink and drugs culture and the abuse of their gift of sex; and we are aware of the proportions who from an early age are taken from normal schooling and prepared for life in other institutions.

When recently visiting a primary school in one of the deprived areas of my own Archdiocese one head teacher sadly said to me: “I now have more social workers visiting my school than I am allowed to have members of staff!” We ask ourselves **whether or not faith is tangible in our school**. And we question whether or not it is given fervent expression: liturgically, through prayer; in a concern for justice; sacramentally; through acts of charity; through respect for creation. I would like to think that that is one of the principle goals hear in Derry to ensure the **personal growth of each and every individual** presented here in Derry for education and formation.

And I think it must be brought home to the pupils here just how privileged they are.

In many of the schools which I visit in my Archdiocese now the proportion of Catholic pupils is sometimes approximately 50%; and of that 50% a very small proportion practice their religion as they should either from their homes, in their parishes or elsewhere. Even the words “Mass” and “Liturgy” mean little or nothing to some of the pupils in our Catholic schools. When recently speaking to some priest chaplains in our Catholic primary and secondary schools I was told that now this lack of faith and unbelief has percolated into our primary schools and even the senior classes there have many pupils who no longer practice their faith.

It is indeed a privileged atmosphere to have in a school like yours the opportunity for pupils not only to practice their faith sacramentally but to **live their faith as Christians together** and helping one another and growing in their knowledge and appreciation of those of other faiths.

It is so sad to realise that at times all ambition seems to be crushed out of our pupils because of the atmosphere in our schools – while the reverse is true in some areas of great need and disadvantage throughout the world.

Just over two years ago I was in Darfur in Sudan along with our Scottish Catholic International Aid Fund visiting projects funded by SCIAF. It was extremely heartening being in that vast desert of poverty which has been described over the past few years as the “world’s worst humanitarian disaster”. Whole communities have literally moved to Darfur for security for their families and their schools have moved with them.

I remember visiting a Muslim school with fine young people, girls and boys, just like some of your own pupils. On asking them what they wanted to do when they left school I was given answers such as you might find – to be a doctor, a pilot, a nurse, a teacher, an engineer, and so on. On listening to all of the answers I was quietly told by the head teacher that these pupils although invariably very bright had no chance of even completing their primary school certificate because of lack of money and so unable to enter secondary school but there was no possibility of them ever entering university. What a waste of wonderful talent.

And I remember in Rwanda some few years before that visiting one of the genocide sites and being shown around by a very young priest. He pointed out the little chapel where his parents and family had worshipped – now containing innumerable skulls and other parts of bodies piled up in the sanctuary area. I asked him how he had escaped the carnage – his reply was very simple: “I was in Rome at the time of the genocide in my country preparing for priesthood; I now work for peace and reconciliation!”

## **CONCLUSION:**

Our schools, our leaders in schools and our pupils must be preparing for life – as Pope Benedict XVI said in USA they must be: “Fit for mission?”

As the Pope asks: “Is Christ the true centre of our Catholic school and classrooms; are our schools enabling living encounters with Christ, proclaiming the Gospel of Jesus Christ, bringing each person closer to the Father through the power of the Holy Spirit?”

High standards are put before us by our Church with regard to what we are trying to achieve in our schools. We should ask ourselves some of the questions which I have posed regarding whether or not we are Catholic Christians, Christians of another Christian denomination, or members of one of the other of the great world faiths.

I think back again to my own years preparing young men for the priesthood. There was that strange year of three Popes with Pope John Paul I occupying the See of Peter for just thirty three days. One of his memorable saying comes back to me frequently: **“Let us advance in order and discipline while still enjoying the glorious liberty of the children of God!”**

Could that not also be the motto for each and every one of us concerned with education and formation here in Ireland. Could those words not be applied to give an answer to the challenge of education today “personal growth in an atmosphere of wise freedom” about which about I have been asked to speak.

We answer the challenge facing us by advancing as Pope John Paul I indicated in an atmosphere of order and discipline while still enjoying that glorious liberty of the children of God – realising the powers we have as children of God, brothers and sisters of Jesus Christ, under the power and the influence of the Holy Spirit and always conscious of the tremendous responsibility that is ours in forming young people and preparing them for life.

The role of the Catholic primary school in society today is consequently, more than important. Along with our Catholic homes and parishes it must be a place of formation – sometimes a very basic initial formation – laying foundations with regard to our different academic subjects to basic morality and to knowledge of the faith which will last them throughout their lives. It is indeed a vastly different world in which we now live to that in which our parents and grandparents lived. We must always be aware of that as we deepen in our own faith, leading those for whom we are responsible into an every deeper knowledge and love of our Father in heaven, his Son, Jesus and that Spirit who will help and direct us in our wonderful vocation.