



CATHOLIC SCHOOLS WEEK 2009

Speaking Notes of
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Before you can even pose the question “What is a Catholic school”, much less answer it, you have to ask the question: “What is education about?” An Italian philosophical writer, Luigi Giussani spoke of education in a somewhat complex definition as: “helping the human soul enter into the totality of the real”¹.

If that definition might appear somewhat abstract in an English translation, I can tell you that at first reading it is equally abstract in the Italian original. But, as you look closer, it is really about two concrete things: it is about the human soul, not in the technical sense, but in the sense of a truly mature and rounded, talented and creative human person. And it is about the concrete reality of the world in which that person is called to live, but reality in its totality. Education then is about helping a concrete person in the totality of his her own identity to enter fully into the concrete reality of life in its totality. And the totality of the reality is never just self-centred but belongs within a network of human relationships and supports. And the totality of life includes not just the transient, but also the transcendent.

To permit the individual young person to enter maturely into the reality of the world of his or her time, education must lead young people to assume responsibility for shaping their own destiny

¹ Luigi Giussani: *The Risk of Education*, Crossroad Books (1995)

in freedom and personal integrity. Such an understanding of education leads us way beyond the idea of education as a mere means of imparting techniques and information to one of enabling, and empowering the young person to address, in freedom and responsibility, the realities of his or her own life and the realities of the world he or she lives in. It involves education to discernment and understanding and then education on how to witness to the reason of our choices and to the reason of our hope.

Such a vision of education requires, in the first place, a particular understanding of the relationship between educator and the person being educated. It requires a personal encounter between teacher and student. Perhaps better than the term "teacher", in this context, would be the term that was often used in small country schools in Ireland: "the master". The teacher must be the master in the sense of a "maestro", a great artist or musician, who generates a school of artists and musicians inspired by him or her. Education involves a common path of educator and student, a sharing not just of knowledge but of wisdom. This is the only way in which true education will take place, in that it takes the full human personality and dignity of the young person seriously.

This is a very demanding path and a very time-consuming one in an educational environment which is already at times very full. I believe that there is no alternative. I am often struck when celebrities and personalities are asked about their school years; I have never heard any of them reply: "we had a marvellous building", or: "we had a wonderful curriculum". Their reply is always about a teacher, and once again rarely about a teacher's technical ability to teach French or physics, but more about that something special which a teacher meant to that young person as a person, a quality

which, coincidentally, probably also made their teaching of French and physics or whatever qualitatively better.

We live in an era of change and progress. There is, however, a real difference between teaching a technical subject and fostering progress in moral and personal growth. When we teach about progress in technical, scientific and economic research today's advances can be added to those of the past in a cumulative manner. Personal growth involves formation to responsibility. Moral choice always requires freedom. Freedom is not passed on as one could pass on technical data. Freedom cannot be imposed. The young person's freedom is ever new.

Pope Benedict has noted that "each person and each generation must make his or her own decision anew, alone. Not even the greatest values of the past can be simply inherited; they must be claimed by us and renewed through an often anguishing personal option"².

Education in this sense is much more than formal education. Authentic education, following in the train of Pope Benedict's thought, needs closeness and trust between young person and educator which are born from love. This is evident in the care and education and love of parents for their children. Teachers know also that, within a school community, to educate always involves giving something of yourself. Without the experience which children have of being loved by their parents, young people will never become loving persons. In the same way, it is through the self-giving of the teacher that pupils are led to overcome the

² cf. Pope Benedict XVI: [Letter to the faithful of the Diocese and City of Rome on the urgent task of educating young people \(January 21, 2008\)](#). Many of my reflections in this Conference draw from this Letter of Pope Benedict.

selfishness that is in them and become in their turn capable of authentic love.

An initiation of pupils into knowing and understanding cannot be limited to providing notions and information. It must address the question of responsibility and thus inevitably the fundamental questions about truth and truth as a guide in life. I am not saying that technical knowledge is not important. There are not many jobs being offered today to pure philosophers and I would certainly not be too happy to be operated upon by a doctor who had only studied the philosophy of medicine. But the teacher who has a true philosophy of education will be a better teacher of French or physics than someone who simply tries to pass on techniques.

The young person must attain responsibility within the realities of the culture of the day, influenced by ideas, by life styles, by the basic self understanding of society. The young person must be a child of his or her generation. Young people must also learn how to discern within that world where true progress is to be found in their own personal lives and in society as a whole.

The child has to learn that society is not an abstraction or a force which is absolutely determining regarding his or her own values and life style. Education will take place in a particular context, but all of us have the ability and indeed the responsibility to change the context within which education can take place. The task of "challenging afresh" is, you might say, the special charism of the young person. A young person who just conforms, who does not ask questions, who does not challenge, will not grow to maturity. When this special charism of youth is not respected and fostered, then the outcome will be less than a mature adult. I might say that even the conformism of youth – such as their conformity in the

way they dress – is very often an affirmation of difference with respect to the generation of their parents and teachers.

This challenge of discernment and verification of values involves establishing the balance between what the young person has received, what we might call tradition, and the experience of his or her evolving life. Very often today, the young person – at an ever earlier age – faces this characteristic moment of “challenging” just at a point in which parents and teachers today often feel that their efforts are not having success.

It is very often precisely at this age that many parents lose their nerve in speaking about faith with their children. In such a situation it is easy to revert to playing safe. Yet faith requires risk; enhancing freedom entails risk. Rather than engaging in dialogue, parents and teachers can be tempted to think that it is best to leave it up to the young person alone to find his or her way regarding faith. Parents lose their nerve, perhaps also because the Church has let them down by providing very few services to help them in their task as religious educators. It is easy to think that the protagonists of Catholic education are the school and “the Church” – the bishops and their bureaucracy. The structures of Catholic education policy must dedicate much more time and expertise to working with parents.

Pope Benedict XVI, just over one year ago, wrote an interesting letter to the people of the diocese of Rome on what he called an “educational emergency”³. The letter was not just about Catholic schools. The letter was about an emergency in understanding what education is about. He addressed also the challenge for parents, noting just as I have said that there can be a temptation among parents and teachers as well as educators in

³ *ibid.*

general to give up their role as educators in the fullest sense of that term. He pointed, as one of the causes for this situation, to "a widespread atmosphere, a mindset and form of culture which induce one to have doubt about the value of the human person, about the very meaning of truth and good, and ultimately about the goodness of life. It then becomes difficult to pass on from one generation to the next something that is valid and certain, rules of conduct, credible objectives around which to build life itself".

What are we to do in the face of our failure too often in our efforts to form mature young people who know how to cooperate with others and give their own lives meaning? Where are we with the passing on of the faith in our Catholic schools? What are we to say about a Catholic school system and catechetical programmes which have produced the numerically largest cohort of un-churched young people in recent Irish history? Irish young people are amongst the most catechized in Western Europe, with religious instruction right through primary and secondary school, and yet we cannot say that they are among the most evangelised. Indeed the biggest challenge that I, as Archbishop, see for the Church in Dublin is precisely that of the evangelization of young people and their insertion as true and committed members of a believing and worshipping community.

Where does the blame lie? The response which Pope Benedict gives in his letter on the "educational emergency" is interesting and, as often with Pope Benedict, surprising. "Do not be afraid!" he writes, "None of these difficulties is insurmountable. They are, as it were, the other side of the coin of that great and precious gift which is our freedom, with the responsibility that rightly goes with it".

In the past a driving force in the educational work of religious congregations and of the vast network of Catholic education

structures was the care of the poor and the desire to offer children who were in some manner disadvantaged the opportunity to realise their talents and creativity to the fullest degree possible.

Today, while a concern for the disadvantaged has not lost its centrality, education must also look at a new challenge of poverty among young people; the poverty of a lost sense of meaning in life, of resignation or indifference, and a lack of a coherent ideal. The school today has to address the anxiety of children who come from families where love is not experienced and transmitted, where the empty idols of consumerism dim the sense of searching for what are the deepest needs of the person. Many young people though highly idealistic have never been led to understand where they must ground their ideals. Even those who profess adherence to a Catholic tradition may be well-rehearsed in the technicalities of religious knowledge, but may never have had a true experience of faith.

Education must address this new form of poverty with the same passion and commitment which inspired the Catholic school system to reach out in the past to the poor and marginalized.

Education presupposes freedom, but it cannot avoid its responsibility of authority, not of the authority of imposition, but the authority of clear and explained wisdom, of the type that can only come from one who is "master", who inspires on the basis of personal goodness, who witnesses to a coherent life by personally living in accordance with the truth. Coherence in the life of the teacher will engender a loving concern which also knows how to indicate to the young person when a young life begins to follow a false path.

This is surely not an easy task but it is what is needed. It is what parents want for their children; it is what children are seeking today at a much earlier age than in my time. It is what society needs if it is to foster a new generation which is competent, which has a passion for learning, which has the creativity which has been a such a contribution to the development of Irish society, but also has a passion for truth, for justice, for honesty and decency and solidarity, characteristics which our Irish society needs today and will need even more tomorrow.

Our world needs a witness of coherence between truth and the way we live, if we are to address the issues of corruption and lack of accountability in areas like the world of finance; our world need a witness to coherence in life in the face of unacceptable levels of violence in our society; our society needs a witness to coherence in life in order to overcome the growth of that industry of emptiness and delusion which is built upon drug abuse or the cynically entitled drug-oriented "recreation".

The "educational emergency" about which Pope Benedict spoke challenges every aspect of the educational community. Some years ago a study commissioned by UNESCO and chaired by Jacques Delors spoke about the need for a pluri-dimensional education: "education to know", "education to do", "education to live with one another" and "education about being"⁴. What is the place of the Catholic School in this process of education and what is the contribution of the Catholic School to education within society as a whole? There is a sense in which the Catholic school, with its integrated vision of life based on the life and teaching of Jesus

⁴ J. DELORS, *L'éducation un trésor est caché dedans*, Rapport à l'UNESCO, Paris, 1996.

Christ is truly pluri-dimensional and if pluri-dimensional education is what is desirable the Catholic school system could well have real advantage.

There is a tendency to forget that education always presupposes and involves a definite concept of humankind and of life. To claim that the school should be neutral regarding religion and values, leads to a weakening of reference to religion in the cultural and educational field, or to its reduction to the comparative study of religions. In this way religion can be taught as a technical historical examination even by an atheist, at a time when education needs real encounter and challenge which can only come from a school ethos of conviction.

A correct pedagogical approach cannot avoid addressing the ultimate questions, attending not only to "how" or to "what was done in the past", but also to "why". The integrated vision of life which should inspire the Catholic school can help the entire educational process through having that unity of vision which can easily be lost through dispersion amid the many faceted curriculums and the competition for time in school programmes. But the Catholic School will only bring this contribution if it maintains a clear focus on the human person in his or her integral, transcendent and historical identity. The Catholic school is under the same curriculum pressures as any other school and must be attentive not to fall into the temptation of itself reducing its attention to religious education.

The Catholic school should indeed be a place where all aspects of the life of the school are taught within the framework of coherence about life, that coherence which comes from knowing and aligning one's life with that of Jesus Christ. Following Jesus involves following his path of self-giving so that others can have life.

In the material prepared for Catholic School's week a number of specific characteristics of the Catholic school are set out, the first of which is that it offers a distinctive vision of life and corresponding philosophy of education based on Gospel of Jesus Christ. The Catholic school further should strive to create a learning environment where every child is encouraged to and enabled to attain their full and unique potential as persons created in the image and likeness of God.

The Catholic school must witness to the fact that being formed in the image and likeness of God means that we should live in a relationship with that same God, through worship and prayer. This requires that the school should, where possible, work in communion with the parish to build up a community of faith that is fully a faith community of our own times. In the climate of mobility which characterises society this bond between school and parish is becoming more difficult as parish and school, especially at second level, are no longer linked.

The Catholic school, in addition to providing excellence in enabling each child to realise their talents, must also seek to generate persons who will use their gifts for the common good and who are committed to work for a more just and caring society, remaining open to and respectful of different religions and traditions. A Catholic school can never be just a narrow Catholic ghetto, cut off from or worse still hostile to the world around it. Christianity can never be exclusivist or elitist.

A Catholic school, while maintaining its specific ethos, can and should be welcoming of others who wish to explore that ethos, or who share some dimensions of it or who wish to critically engage with it. But for that to work the Catholic ethos must be there and must be strong and part of the real world of the school community.

If there is no strong ethos to confront and be confronted with then the adolescent will end of without challenge.

That said, it must be underlined that the real heart of a Catholic school is and must always be that coherent, integrated vision of the meaning of life, based on belief in the God who, in Jesus Christ, revealed himself as a God of love. That faith and love must find an echo in a community of believers who reflect that vision of life in their lives. Without that coherent commitment the originality of the Catholic school is lost.

But what is ethos? One problem is that the term ethos is very much an ethereal concept, one that is hard to pin down concretely. Ethos is more than a framed "mission statement" in the principal's office. Ethos cannot be separated from witness. In the past, in most Catholic schools ethos was linked with the witness of a concrete tradition of religious life. How long can ethos remain without concrete and focussed witness? I believe that the efforts of religious congregations to maintain the ethos of their schools after they themselves no longer have the numbers to be present personally will be stronger the more they can find new ways to permit their specific witness to live on through new forms of community committed to it. Ethos is about real lives rather than just about ideas.

For ethos to flourish it must reach out beyond an individualist philosophy and generate community. This is one of the great challenges which face those passing on the faith in Ireland today. In the past, the fundamental cultural community which provided the structural support for someone who believed was Irish society as such. Even with all its lacks, with its anti-clericalism and its superstitions, Irish society was genuinely impregnated with religious values. Today that is no longer so in the same way. Young people

today need Christian communities where they can experience the support of peers with similar interests and experiences. Without such support the young person will be gobbled up in the centrifugal spin of a pluralism without an anchor.

In a pluralist Ireland there will be a much more pluralist system of education. The Catholic School system has its rightful place within that system. Pluralism does not mean watering down identity. Indeed a Catholic School which waters down its identity waters down its real contribution to society and renders itself useless. The survival of Catholic education in Ireland will not depend on it fitting in to an overall pluralist philosophy, but on it being fully Catholic, bringing the specific contribution that the message of Jesus Christ brings to society.

This is not about a Catholic school system attempting in any way to dominate and control an entire system, a temptation which was and is still there due to the historical development of the Irish educational model. It means rather that in the Catholic school the message of Jesus Christ be brought to young people as they face their way through life in a truly robust and challenging way. Young people should be accompanied in finding answers to their questioning through an encounter with the message of Jesus which is robust and demanding, but also fulfilling and hope-filled.

In that sense, the attitude of the Catholic educator could be likened to the way in which Pope Benedict presented his own task as pastor as he began his ministry as Pope: "There is nothing more beautiful than to be surprised by the Gospel, by the encounter with Christ. There is nothing more beautiful than to know Him and to speak to others of our friendship with Him. [This task] is beautiful and wonderful, because it is truly a service to joy, to God's joy which longs to break into the world".