

**LAUNCH of
CATHOLIC SCHOOLS WEEK**

JANUARY 26, 2009

EMMAUS RETREAT CENTRE, SWORDS, CO DUBLIN

Your Excellency, Your Grace, distinguished guests and friends

I am very happy to welcome you to the launch of Catholic Schools Week today.

Bishop O'Reilly has spoken about the purpose of the week and the theme to be explored in schools and parishes throughout Ireland.

I would like to say a few words about the *opportunity* the week presents to us as we take note of the excellent resources prepared by the Steering Committee of this initiative and their two collaborators, Maeve Mahon and Tonya Hanly. Their material invites us to explore some of the many strands in the rich tapestry of our Catholic educational heritage.

By the end of the week we will have travelled back to 6th century Ireland, to the era of St Brigid, evoking the Golden Age of Irish monasteries, those centres of Christian Learning attracting students from foreign lands. Earlier in the week we will celebrate the lives and achievements in education of three other highly influential educators, Sts Angela Merici, foundress of the Ursulines, a pioneer in the provision of educational opportunity for women, St Thomas Aquinas, the Dominican theologian, the searcher for truth, who is honoured as patron of Universities, schools and students and St John Bosco, patron saint of youth and founder of the Salesians whose lives are dedicated to the education and training of young people.

These saints were creative visionaries in their own time but eminently practical. Inspired by the life and teachings of Jesus Christ, they integrated growth in spirituality (relationship with God) with excellence in teaching and learning in their schools. Their schools offered students opportunities for "information, formation and transformation".(Fr Martin Delaney's homily).

Ireland's educational history is not without its visionaries who translated their dreams into practical projects in service to others, particularly the young. Lay people such as Nano Nagle, Edmund Rice, Catherine McAuley, Mary Aikenhead and Margaret Aylward have left us a rich legacy of schools across the island, north and south. A visionary Bishop Daniel Delaney of Kildare and Leighlin founded the Brigidine Sisters and the Patrician Brothers in the early 1800s. It is fitting that in Catholic Schools Week the foundation story of each school, whether that of an indigenous Congregation or of those who, in the later years after Catholic

Emancipation, came to Ireland from continental Europe to establish schools here, be revisited and celebrated.

Finally, this week also affords us the opportunity to acknowledge and celebrate the generations of committed teachers at Primary,Secondary and Third Level, in schools for children with special needs such as deafness and blindness and learning difficulties, who exemplify spiritual and moral values, who act as role models and inspire confidence and bring the students towards a better future.

“The lay catholic educator is a person who exercises a specific mission in the Church... To this lay person, as a member of this community, the family and the Church entrust the school’s educational endeavour... Lay teachers must be profoundly convinced that they share in the sanctifying, and therefore educational mission of the Church...

(Sacred Congregation for Catholic Education. Lay Catholics in Schools: Witnesses to Faith, 24. 1982)

My hope is that the reflections and conversations which take place this week will encourage all teachers in their role as key people in the educational mission of the Catholic Church. They deserve our gratitude.

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