**Comments of Bishop Kevin Doran**

**on the occasion of launching the**

**Pastoral Letter on Education: “A Future Full of Hope”**

Most of us have a variety of projects on the go at any one time. It might be gaining a qualification or losing weight. It could be something as challenging as walking to the South Pole for charity, or something as simple as re-designing a garden. What makes the difference between success and failure is that we keep our eyes firmly fixed on the goal and that we identify and commit to the steps necessary to achieve the goal.

All of us here – parents, teachers, children and parishioners - are involved in one common project, which is the education of our children. In the way that our society is structured, we normally just have one opportunity to get it right. As with every other project that we undertake, it is vital that, before we set out, we ask ourselves what exactly we are trying to achieve and that, from time to time, we take stock to make sure that we are doing everything that needs to be done to achieve our goals.

In writing my first pastoral letter as Bishop of Elphin, I chose to write about education because I believe that it is of crucial importance to our children and to the common good of our society. I wanted to offer some encouragement to all who are engaged in the great project of education and to open up some kind of conversation within the diocese about the place of faith and of the Church in the educational process.

As a child, I was often asked questions like “what do you want to be when you grow up?” I changed my mind three times during my final year at school. For young people these days, the variety of choice is enormous but there are many hurdles to be got over and I think the pressure is far greater than it was when I was seventeen. From time to time, we hear that the economy needs more mathematics graduates, more science graduates and that the schools must adapt to those needs. The stability of the economy is important for all of us, but education is not just about the economy and, more importantly, our children are not just about the economy. But there is a real risk that the needs of the economy might blind us to the wider purpose of education.

But let’s suppose that a young person works really hard, achieves the required results and gets into his or her chosen career, the question remains “what is it all about?” It seems clear to me that, alongside the question “what do you want to be?” an equally important question for our children is “who do you want to be?” Helping young people to unpack that question for themselves is an essential task of education. It is the essential difference between training and education.

The title of my pastoral letter “A Future Full of Hope” is taken from the prophet Jeremiah. In a time of great social and political unrest, Jeremiah, speaking in the name of God, says: “I know the plans I have in mind for you, says the LORD, plans for your welfare, not for disaster! plans to give you a future full of hope.” As Christians, we believe in a God who is good and who, by inviting us into relationship with Him, not only promises us happiness in the next life, but gives a purpose to our existence here and now, which can transform the way we live our lives and the way we participate with one another in society.

For people of faith, this relationship with God is not something we put on like an extra layer of clothing. It is part of who we are. If we believe that education is about preparing our children for life, then, for people of faith, it goes without saying that religious education must have a place in our schools. This is especially true at primary level, where the whole curriculum is integrated and where each subject feeds into and draws from all the others. Religion is part of our history, part of our literature and part of our musical tradition and vice versa.

Our faith in Jesus Christ has concrete implications for our relationships with one another. When we form our children in faith, we are also teaching them to love others as God loves them. This means being good citizens, respecting the lives and the property of others, doing an honest day's work, caring for the sick, working for human rights and social justice. Religious education, properly understood, has an enormous contribution to make to the common good of society, even a society which defines itself in some respects as “secular”.

So, what am I trying to achieve in writing this pastoral letter.

In the first place, I want to invite Catholic parents to reconsider the commitment which they made when their children were Baptised. In the ceremony of baptism, we are reminded that the parents are the “first teachers of their children in the ways of faith". I think parents sometimes wonder "how can we share our faith with our children”, especially if they are struggling with their own. I understand this. I often feel the same when I get up to preach the Word of God on a Sunday morning. We are all on the same journey. Some of us have just travelled a bit further. I think we deepen our faith by sharing it. The transmission of faith in the home is not primarily about academic knowledge. It is about inviting the children into a relationship which is important to ourselves. If Jesus is spoken about in your home; if there are pictures or books about his life that the children can identify with; if there is a prayer at mealtimes and at night before sleep, then Jesus will be part of the family circle.

Some years ago, I chatted individually with each of the children preparing for confirmation in my parish. I asked them, among other things, what they would like their parents to do to help them prepare. The answers were very interesting. There were three things that kept coming up again and again. My parents could help me by "teaching me my prayers", by "bringing me to Mass" and by "telling me about their own Confirmation". It seems so little, and yet it would mean so much.

I want to encourage teachers. People expect so much from schools these days, and I know that teachers are under pressure all the time to develop new skills and expertise to share with their pupils. A teacher who loves his or her subject and who is really committed to the well-being of the children in his or her care, is a great blessing to any school and to the community that it serves. We are blessed with many such teachers. I want to focus briefly on the particular challenges associated with education in faith.

There are facts about religion, historical facts; facts about what the Church teaches; facts about how the Church works; facts about other religions. All of these can be taught in just the same way as the factual content of other subjects. That's why it is possible to have a state examination in religious studies. Factual knowledge and formation in faith are not opposites or alternatives. They complement each other. Factual knowledge is essential. It could be described as the "bones" around which formation in faith takes shape. But the heart of faith is the lived relationship with God. Without that, all we have is "dry bones", to use an image found in the prophet Ezekiel. (cf. Ez. 37:1-14)

The role of a catechist is to share faith and this includes introducing another person to the mystery of God's presence. It also involves helping another person to make the connection between faith and daily life. I know that catechists, like priests and parents, sometimes struggle with their own faith. If you find yourself in that position from time to time, it can certainly be challenging, but it can also bring freshness and integrity to your teaching. This is especially so when you take your struggle into the presence of God in prayer. As bishop of the diocese, I would like to offer you my support in nourishing your own faith and would welcome any suggestions as to how this might be possible.

The Church has a long history of involvement in education. In the diocese of Elphin, this is expressed not only in our parish primary schools, but in the significant number of catholic second-level schools and colleges. The diocese is committed to supporting the provision of Catholic Education. We ask parents to support in, not just by sending their children to Catholic schools, but by participating actively in the life of the school community. What we ask of our catholic schools is that they are Catholic not just in name but in nature. This means, among other things, that the values of the Gospel influence the manner in which the school is managed as well as the relationships among teachers and between teachers and their pupils. It means that religious education is taught with the same professionalism as would be expected for any other subject and resourced accordingly. It also means that children of other faiths and none are welcomed and included fully in the life of the school community.

There is, of course a third leg to the stool and that is the parish community. Our children are baptised into the community of the parish and it is our hope that, long after they leave school, they will continue to be active in the life of their local parish community. The parish – and everyone in the parish - for that reason, has an interest in and a responsibility for the faith formation of our young people.

My question is: “how can the children (and their parents) be helped to have a sense of belonging in and "ownership" of the parish community? This is a two way relationship. Parish programmes such as "Do This in Memory" (for first communion and first penance) and "You Shall Be My Witnesses" (for Confirmation) can be very helpful in encouraging children and their parents to be active participants in the parish. Sometimes these programmes are thrown back onto the school and this is not helpful. It is great if there can be some connectivity between what the school is doing and what is happening in the parish, so that there is a real partnership. But our parish communities must take more hands-on responsibility for sacramental preparation.

For parents, active participation in these parish programmes can often be the doorway to a more active and fulfilling involvement in the parish as well as a moment to reflect on their own faith journey.

We need to work hard to make sure that our parish communities are alive and that the invitation to grow in faith is always "on the table" because, in the final analysis, faith is best learnt through being lived and celebrated. That's what parish is all about.

I will finish this morning as I finished the pastoral letter with the words of St. John:

*"Think of the love that the Father has lavished on us, by letting us be called God’s children; and that is what we are.”*

I hope this pastoral letter may help to encourage people in the diocese of Elphin to live that reality of being God’s children and to support one another in supporting our children in coming to that understanding of themselves.