

The Pope and the primary purpose of Australian Catholic Schools

John Moylan cfc



The current successor of St Peter recently made a statement about the primary purpose of Catholic schools. It was powerful in its simplicity. This statement was a message to nearly 100,000 Australian Catholic school students and their teachers gathered in a setting and at a date full of symbolism.

The setting was a celebration to mark 2,000 years of Christianity at Stadium Australia; the date was March 17th, the feast of St Patrick, the great Apostle of Ireland. The Pope's message speaks for itself:

Catholic schools have grown more complex, but at their heart lies a great and simple truth. They are to be above all schools of holiness. They exist primarily to give saints to the world.

Catholic schools exist primarily to give saints to the world. Before anything else they are to be schools of holiness. They are not to be turned in on themselves, but they are there to provide saints to serve the community of the world. This clear, concise message begs for reflection, prayer and action.

Given the confusion and the divisions that exists in some circles about the purpose of Catholic education today, it will be interesting to see how the bishops of Australia, and those with special responsibilities for Catholic schools, react to this millennial message.

The Pope makes it crystal clear that the original theory supporting Catholic schools must still be paramount.

The strength of the Pope's clear message can be gauged by the very public setting of its expression. Important also was its timing. The feast of St Patrick, the great Apostle of Ireland, has many connotations of apostleship, mission, tradition and history for the Australian Catholic Church and Australian Catholic schools. Both were built upon foundations of the sacrifice of people largely of Irish birth or de-

scent. The turn of the millenium is a time extremely significant in the Pope's agenda for renewal and long-term goal setting.

The primary purpose of Catholic schools as expressed by the Pope resonates with the charism of founders of the teaching religious congregations. The bishops who have given these congregations a mandate to teach in their dioceses have a similar primary purpose. Yet, it would be interesting to know whether the primary purpose of Catholic schools has been expressed so publicly, clearly, forthrightly and authoritatively in Australia as it was in the message on March 17th 2000.

Resonating with Vatican II

The Pope's message shows the approach of a Pope very much immersed in the reforms and the fresh opening to the world of Vatican II. As a bishop, and later as an archbishop, the future Pope made impressive contributions at all four sessions of this ecumenical council. At the council's second session in 1963, as a 43 year old bishop and highly respected philosopher, he engaged in the debate leading to the formulation of the most important document of Vatican II, *The Dogmatic Constitution of The Church*.

The future Pope argued that the "constituting cause" of the Church was holiness. **Every baptised Christian, had a vocation to holiness**, which was the destiny of all whom Christ "had sanctified in the truth" so that they might be "sent ... into the world" (John 17:18-19).

The universal call to holiness was one of the key doctrines of *The Dogmatic Constitution of the Church*, which teaches this truth with inspirational elegance and power in Chapter 5. This chapter, as did other conciliar teachings, clearly teaches that holiness is not just the calling of clergy, hierarchy

Have some (at least) Catholic schools lost sight of their principal purpose for existence? Can there be a danger that any school can do this from time to time if it is not vigilant? John Moylan's paper could serve as a timely reminder.

Br John Moylan is a Christian Brother Golden Jubilarian. He has a Master of Arts from the Graduate School of Religion and Religious Education at Fordham University, New York City, and a Master of Education in Religious Education from the Australian Catholic University. He has had extensive teaching experience and articles published in Australia and overseas.

He can be contacted at Christian Brothers' Community, 78 Glen Stuart Rd, Magill, SA 5072.

Phone: 08 8364 4494; Fax: 08 8364 3949

and members of religious congregations. The laity, in different and complementary ways, are just as truly called to sainthood for the sanctification of the world.

Maintaining Authenticity

His Holiness showed that he realises Catholic schools have grown in complexity, but, amidst this complexity, he wanted to make certain that their primary purpose remains the dynamic driving force behind them. Confusion about the purpose of Catholic schools, and a resulting lack of trust in their capacity to achieve their real purpose, has the potential to destroy them as an authentic Catholic educational enterprise.

Writing about the USA situation, a well regarded sociologist, researcher and Catholic priest, Andrew Greeley, also a fiction writer of note, has claimed:

The fundamental crisis in Catholic schools is neither financial nor organisational: it is theoretical. They will not be routed by external foes, increasing costs, apathetic laity or Court decisions. Catholic schools will go out of existence if Catholic educators no longer have enough confidence in what they are doing to sustain the momentum and sacrifice involved in maintaining Catholic schools.

While it is questionable whether the majority of parents or the majority of teachers at present would have in mind that the primary purpose of Catholic schools in Australia is to provide saints for the world, there is increasing demand for places within them. **As Flynn and Mok have concluded there is a renewed sense of vitality and vision about today's Australian Catholic schools, and they continue to manifest a climate of confidence and professionalism.**

In Australia, unlike the USA, there is now substantial government funding supporting Catholic and other denominational schools, and Australian parents, not only Catholic, are making significant financial sacrifices to send their children to these schools. In many cases these sacrifices are huge. If these schools continue in their present vein, with the teachers being financially rewarded on a scale comparable with those in government schools, there appears to be little danger of them ceasing to exist in the short term.

Nevertheless, no school can be value free, and the values transmitted by the explicit, implicit and null curricula of the school should always be open to examination. Christ did not call his followers into a community to accept a few, or many, excellent values, whether or not they are politically correct at a particular time. He called for far more than that.

Christ called His people into a total relationship with Him. His people are called to be engaged in the totality of their lives with Him in the holiness of the life of the Blessed Trinity.

The Catholic school has not completed its task if it only leads the students to appreciate some virtues, no matter how good they are in themselves. Christ calls his disciples into an uncompromising loving relationship with Him, a relationship full of contemplation, beauty and self-giving. Matthew 10: 27 describes Christ laying down his conditions of discipleship in the following terms:

Whoever loves mother or father more than me is not worthy of me, and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; whoever does not take up his cross and follow after me is not worthy of me. Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.

The Place of the Eucharist

Relevant here is to recall that Vatican II teaches that the Eucharist is the source and summit of the Christian life. In the Eucharist God's people offer their whole lives with Christ, through Him, in Him, in the unity of the Holy Spirit to the Eternal Father in union with the whole Church, present, past and future.

At the conclusion of the Eucharistic Prayer at Mass, in the 1st, 2nd, 3rd, 4th or other approved Rites, the

same final sentence is used by the ordained priest acting on behalf of all the Church. The concluding sentence of the Eucharistic Prayer summarises the high point of the Christian vocation, namely to worship God the Father with Christ and his community in the unity of the Holy Spirit.

Polding's Rationale

The man credited with founding the revamped Catholic Education system which Australia inherits, Archbishop Polding, like the Pope, **realised that the authentic Christian vocation is one of a complete relationship with God, not just the selected keeping of some or many Christian virtues.** In his rationale for Catholic Schools he wrote that it is not only *"presumptuous, but speciously religious, to select certain virtues as the kernel of Christianity"* He went on to write that *"what is worse than this presumptuous selection is the covert assumption that it is possible for men (sic) to have these genuine and constant, without the operation and guidance of Christian doctrine and sacramental grace."*

A realistic aim

George Weigel, a noted papal biographer claims that no two Vatican II texts have been cited as frequently by Pope John Paul II in his teaching than

Confusion about the purpose of Catholic schools, and a resulting lack of trust in their capacity to achieve their real purpose, has the potential to destroy them as an authentic Catholic educational enterprise.

Articles 22 and 24 of *The Church in the Modern World*. In Article 22 the Council taught that Jesus Christ reveals the face of God and the real meaning of human existence; Article 24 teaches that the meaning of human life is found in self-giving not self-assertion.

This so-called Law of the Gift, which is written into the very nature of the human being, expresses the truth that there is a likeness between the union of the Blessed Trinity and the union of God's daughters and sons in truth and charity. It asserts that Christ has shown by his life, teaching, death and resurrection that there can be no genuine lasting self-fulfilment except by radical self-giving. A saint is much more than one who practises some virtues; a saint is one who gives himself or herself totally to God and to others despite the cost. **The saint is to show the Face of Christ to the world.**

On French national television on the night World Youth Day in Paris ended in 1997, a middle-aged interviewer questioned Cardinal Lustiger, the Archbishop of Paris, about the amazing success of that day when over a million youth were present at the closing Mass and about the huge numbers present at the other exercises associated with the occasion. Cardinal Lustiger suggested that it was a question of generations.

The interviewer belonged to a generation that had grown up in the Church and lost the faith in the late sixties or thereabouts, and had been fighting the Church ever since. The new generation had been left empty, many had found Jesus Christ, and wanted to explore what that meant. **The Cardinal concluded by saying that the interviewer should not read the young people's lives through the interviewer's experience,** and that in the minds of these young people, being Christian and being engaged, intelligent, compassionate, dedicated people is not incompatible.

The Pope, in his farewell homily to these youth, strongly called upon them in the following terms:

Continue to contemplate God's glory and God's love, and you will receive the enlightenment needed to build the civilisation of love, to help our sisters and brothers to see the world transformed by God's eternal wisdom and love.

Is there not a danger, that like the interviewer in question, and the many people inside and outside the Church who have been stunned by the amazing numbers who have participated in recent World Youth Days, that educators have misread today's young who have been left empty, and many have either found Jesus Christ, or are, at least, open to looking towards Him, and

are seeking to explore what this means? The Pope is unafraid of unequivocally proclaiming the Christian message of where salvation is found, and why.

In his encyclical at the beginning of the new millennium, *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, His Holiness recalled the core legacy of the jubilee celebrations of 2,000 years of Christianity and proposed a clear direction for the future. He wrote in Article 15 that he:

would not hesitate to describe it as the contemplation of the face of Christ: Christ considered in his historical features and His mysteries, Christ known through His manifold presence in the Church and in the world, and confessed as the meaning of history and the light of life's journey.

He called for new energies and concrete initiatives as we "put out into the deep" in this quest for holiness in service of the community of the world. But, also in Article 15, he warned of the danger of "**doing for the sake of doing**", and the need to give priority to contemplation and prayer in these words:

It is important however that what we propose with the help of God should be profoundly rooted in contemplation and prayer. Ours is a time of continual movement which often leads to restlessness, with the risk of 'doing' for the sake of 'doing'. We must resist this temptation by trying 'to be' before trying 'to do'. In this regard we should recall how Jesus reproved Martha: 'You are anxious and troubled about many things; one thing is needful' (Lk 10:41-42).

Conclusion

The Church's chief teacher and pastor has clarified the primary purpose of Catholic schools in Australia. He has high expectations based on the teachings of Vatican II and scripture that all are called to holiness, and

that self-fulfilment is found in radical self-giving in the service of God and others.

It is an imperative that those in leadership positions especially, and all engaged in Catholic Schools, are completely and effectively committed to excellence in realising this purpose. The Pope in *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, has emphasised the priority of contemplation and prayer, and of ensuring **that action be thoroughly grounded in prayer.**

Questions have been raised whether an earlier generation, who may be viewing the world through the eyes of cynicism, negativity and division, are failing to understand the possibility of today's youth finding in Christ and his Church the answer to their emptiness.

Many experienced teachers from yet older generations are well aware how possible it is to engage the

Nevertheless, no school can be value free, and the values transmitted by the explicit, implicit and null curricula of the school should always be open to examination.

imagination of students so that, with God's Grace, they have real experience of frequent prayer. They know this can be done when a school culture is supported by the iron-clad customs, demands and expectations of virtually all Catholic schools. It can happen when Christ, His mother and saints are encountered through a school day punctuated by a variety of well-chosen prayers of all types, beautiful altars, novenas, stirring hymns, visits to the Blessed Sacrament, celebrations of the liturgical seasons and feasts and other proven practices.

Especially powerful are such means in the middle, late primary and early secondary school, the stage when the majority of students are at Piaget's concrete operational stage of mental development. At that stage young people are called by nature to learn "the story of their tribe". However, if the culture of the school fails to give priority to promoting a life of prayer and contemplation at any stage, it is implicitly giving false teaching which is seriously damaging to the school's primary purpose.

As a first step there is a real need for Catholic schools to engage and unite leaders, teachers, parents and students in a life of contemplation and prayer if they are to fulfil their primary purpose. This calls for creativity, but it is a necessity.

Bibliography

Flynn Marcellin & Mok Magdalena. *Catholic Schools 2000: A Longitudinal Study of Year 12 Students in Catholic Schools 1972-1982-1990-1998*. Sydney: Catholic Education Education Commission, NSW, 2002, p.7.

Weigel, George. *Witness to Hope: The Biography of John Paul II*. London: Harper Collins, 1999, p.162.

Greeley, Andrew M. *The Communal Catholic*. New York: Seabury Press, 1976, p.174.

Polding, Bede. *Pastoral Letter on Public Education to the Clergy*. Sydney: S.M.C., 1859

Weigel, George, *op.cit.*, pp 795-798, p 846.