

## **Archbishop of Westminster**

**Heythrop Conference Day – 3 June 2009**

### **Education and Young People.**

I think the discussion of the challenges facing education today are, of course, very important. My contribution is going to be modest. I hope just to set just a slightly broader context for the focal theme of today which is on the needs of young people

The debate about Catholic schools is often more productive of heat than light. It has a whole number of different strands to it. But I think quite often one of the tactics of those opposed to education with a religious character is to try and isolate it and to try, as it were, to highlight what they imagine to be certain features of that education; then to identify those characteristics as damaging and therefore a legitimate target for reasonable people. We've had a whole series of discussions about admissions, which when inspected much more closely have proved to be fairly groundless, in fact the admissions policies of Catholic schools are open and transparent and on the whole fair. Sometimes it's about social divisiveness and again, a lot of research done and data collected by the Catholic Education Service demonstrates much of it is unproven. And then of course we get the strand of argument that education of a religious nature is simply indoctrination. I would always want to reply, "show me education that is value free". There is no such thing as education that is value free. Schools of a religious character are upfront, overt and very reasoned about the values that shape the education. Whereas I think often those that would claim to be neutral are covert in the values that they present to the children.

But it is none of those things that I would like to take up this morning, but rather a different challenge. And one that intrigues me and I hope will intrigue you. It's the challenge to try and find common ground between the vision of education characterised by our schools and the vision of education across the board. Can we systematically put forward a pattern of thought, a language, an imagery, a framework to which on the one hand, everybody can relate, and yet, on the other hand is also robust enough to carry the distinctive nature of catholic education and the vision that lies behind it? So this is what I'd like to tentatively suggest: that there is a way of thinking about the education enterprise to which everybody can relate, to which everyone can contribute to from their different points of view and yet at the same time is a reliable and faithful vehicle for the distinctive nature of Catholic education which is always centred on the person of Christ. The themes that I

would like to present to you are found, in the CES document 'Catholic Schools, Children of other Faiths and Community Cohesion.' And that document draws on themes from the teachings of Pope John Paul II and Pope Benedict XVI.

In providing such a framework, this document draws on themes from the teachings of Pope John Paul II and Benedict XVI which are not often noticed. These two Popes have given us a framework of thought in which not only to appreciate more deeply the Catholic vision and mission of education but also to understand its inherent openness and welcome for people from the wide spectrum of our society today. The approach taken by these two Popes becomes an important part of the coherent vision that lies behind effective leadership in a Catholic school.

As we well know, the vision of education that inspires a Catholic school is always centred on the person. This might seem a self-evident truth but it is lived today in a setting in which there are competing central concerns. In a Catholic school, the true development of the person, pupils and staff, takes precedence over all other things. Indeed we insist that the true development of the person is more important than the public recognition of the success of the school; than the demands of political pressure; than the requirements of the economy, significant though these things are.

The framework of thought offered by Pope John Paul II and Pope Benedict XVI helps us to explore what the true development of the person really involves. In doing so it appeals to a concern of us all, from the G20 leaders to the man on the Clapham bus: the well-being of our environment, or ecology. This is the starting point for a developing line of thought which takes us to the heart of the education challenge faced by every school leader. Indeed, these two Popes speak of an ecology of education which genuinely fosters human growth.

This aspect of the teaching of John Paul goes back to 1995, to his letter '*The Gospel of Life*', in which he insisted that caring for the world's ecological systems necessarily involved caring for our specific 'human ecology'. I quote:

*'As one called to till and look after the world, the human person has a specific responsibility towards the environment in which he lives, towards the creation which God has put at the service of his personal dignity and of his life, not only for the present but also for future generations. This ecological question – ranging from the preservation of the natural habitats*

*of the different species of animals and other forms of life, to the “human ecology” properly speaking - finds in the Bible clear and strong ethical direction leading to a solution which respects the great good of life, indeed of every life.’ (para. 42)*

In many subsequent statements he developed his use of this key phrase ‘human ecology’. Indeed, he applied this line of thought explicitly to the task of the school. I quote again:

*‘The education which the Church promotes looks to the integral development of the human person. Its purpose is to cultivate the intellect and develop the capacity for right judgement, to help young people to assimilate their cultural heritage and form a sense of moral and ethical readiness for their future professional, civic, family and national responsibilities. An all-round education seeks to develop every aspect of the individual: social, intellectual, emotional, moral and spiritual. For there is an ecology of human growth which means that if any one of these elements is overlooked all the others suffer.’ (14.12.2000)*

Here, then, is a central idea, a pattern of thought, around which we can build an appreciation education and the Catholic school which avoids narrowness and shows how open Catholic education truly is to all that genuinely serves our human good.

We need to look more closely at what this means.

This human ecology can be described as that network of convictions, relationships and activities which we create together which genuinely foster true human growth and development, not only of the individual but, just as importantly, of the society in which that individual lives.

Naturally the family is the first place in which each person experiences a ‘human ecology’. That is why we say that the family is always the first place of education, the primary responsibility resting on the shoulders of the parents.

Gradually the young person comes in contact with the wider culture of the family’s own life and of its neighbourhood. These have their effect, for good or for bad, on the development of each person in these early years.

The school then plays its enormous part. Pope Benedict, using this same vision of the nurturing of a human ecology states that young people

*'need above all else to be exposed to love and to develop a healthy human ecology, where they can come to realise that they have not been cast into a world by chance but through a gift that is part of God's loving plan. Parents, educators and community leaders, if they are to be faithful to their own calling, can never renounce their duty to set before children and young people the task of choosing a life project directed towards authentic happiness, one capable of distinguishing between truth and falsehood, good and evil, justice and injustice, the real world and the world of virtual reality'.(27.4.2006)*

In a school this ecology, or climate, generated by our 'ethos', is the sum total of the different components at work in the school which interact with one another in such a way as to create favourable conditions for a formation process. Education always takes place within certain specific conditions of space and time, through the activities of groups of individuals who are active and also interactive among themselves. Of course they follow specific programmes of studies and these are an important element in the fashioning of the life of a school. But all the elements are to be considered in developing an organic vision: the persons involved, the space in which life is lived, the allocation of time, the relationships which are fostered, the quality of the teaching and learning, the patterns of study and all the other various activities. All of these come under the overview of the leader of a Catholic school. From the first moment that any person sets foot in a Catholic school he or she ought to have the impression of entering a new environment, one that has its own unique characteristics. All good schools would claim this.

When looked at more closely, this 'human ecology' is in fact a series of interlocking ecologies, as indeed is the complex of ecological systems which make up our natural environment. In the first place, there is that ecology or atmosphere which is created by the patterns of daily living. To use the phraseology of the Prophet Micah, it is the ecology of loving tenderly. In order to create such a climate, all relationships in which the school is engaged have to be based on a deep respect between the persons involved, without exception. And it is important to recognise that the root of the respect that we owe to each other is the acknowledgement that every individual is created by God and has an inner dignity, or spiritual dimension, that comes from God alone. Thus, the building of an ecology of daily living must acknowledge the spiritual, moral and cultural values of

every person present and seeks to draw them together into a healthy environment in which all can prosper.

A second aspect of this human ecology can be seen in a corporate effort to build an atmosphere of justice within a school. We all know that nothing rankles more in the sensibilities of young people than an injustice committed, either to them, or to their friends, or within the school community as whole, or indeed in the wider world. So we must consciously foster an ecology of justice, to which everyone is a contributor and in which everyone is a participant. This is a very important part of nurturing the environment of true human growth. Indeed the practical exercise of 'the works of mercy', to alleviate the effects of injustice, are the building blocks of an environment characterised by justice and tempered by mercy.

Thirdly, and perhaps very significantly today, there can be no genuine human ecology that fails to recognise the faith and religious experience which is innate in human beings and central to many people in our schools today. An important part of the construction of a healthy human ecology is therefore that expressions of faith and the practices of religion are given their space within a school, both according to the school's own tradition and mandate and according to the variety of faith and religion which are in that school. Here there are delicate matters to be considered by everybody in leadership in a school and it is in these that the CES document is precisely helpful.

I have started with this way of thinking about our Catholic schools as places of a fruitful human ecology, and of leadership in schools as fostering that ecology, precisely because this is an open pattern of thought and one that invites and treasures the contributions of all who are present.

However, it is equally important to understand and to examine this framework from the particular perspective of our Catholic belief. Indeed it is not overstating the case to say that the key to this fruitful human ecology, and therefore the key to Catholic education, is provided by the dimension of faith. In that perspective we joyfully recognise the presence and action of God to be that key. We acknowledge that just as all truth rests in the Word of God, through whom all things were made and through whom all things will come to their completion, so too the construction of a true human ecology can only be achieved in relationship to that Word. Indeed, we affirm that the complete understanding of our created world, of ourselves, of our growth, of our relationships, of our society is to be found within the living wisdom revealed in the unique Word of God.

In making this claim, it is important to appreciate that this Word is spoken from all eternity and will continue to be spoken to the end of time. That eternal speaking of the world is beyond our perceiving. But we can see and sense the echoing of this eternally spoken Word in so much of the created world around us. More importantly, we recognise and hold in faith that this same Word is expressed in all those actions and events which make up the history of salvation recorded and handed onto us in the sacred scriptures. We recognise most centrally that this eternal Word of God, in whom all things make sense, finds flesh in the person of Jesus of Nazareth who then becomes its fullest expression and its true presence in our world.

Therefore we say that at the centre of true human ecology is the person of Christ. He is at the centre of Catholic school life.

In the homily that I gave at the Mass of Installation, I tried to suggest some of the key ways of exploring this key role of 'Christ at the centre', not just at a school, but of our human endeavor. I described the person of Christ as a manifesto of our humanity; but a manifesto that is not a pamphlet but a person, and therefore the relationship that each of us has with that person is our key distinguishing feature. Of course this is expressed in different ways. It lies at the heart of what we as his disciples are convinced about and what we try to put into practice. St Paul insists on the 'supreme advantage' of knowing Christ Jesus. It is an advantage for our human good, for our human ecology, for everything that we do. And he says that in comparison to that advantage everything else is of little worth.

When we look at the starkest, most plain revelation of the humanity expressed in this Incarnate Word, in Christ, in his moment of full self giving, that we find an interpretative key for so many of our dilemmas today. In the crucified Lord we see leadership and power exercised always and ultimately in the service of others and not, when the chips are down, in a self protective self promoting way. When we look at the figure of the crucified Christ, the full picture of human love elevated to its fullness; a love that is faithful until death and a love that is the source of new life. When we look at the crucified Christ, do we not see a manifesto of goodness that is able to resist all temptation to evil and to betrayal? And when we look at this manifesto of human life, do we not see life's ultimate triumph over death in the Holy Spirit? It is that this brings in an entirely new calculus into the practical judgments that shape all of our lives.

But such a conviction, such a supreme advantage of knowing Christ, gives rise to a way of life which we believe fosters true virtue, true, steady life- building habits of mind and action. That's what virtue is. It's those habits of mind and action which genuinely serve the common good.; like honesty and justice and compassion and courage and prudence and temperance; that ability to moderate and use all things with good judgment. There are plenty of indicators in our society today that we need such civic virtues in addition to regulation. Schools are the places where such virtue is generated or where it is neglected. It is interesting to me, and I think a challenge that can properly be put to any school, that a good school will be able to show not just how it generates such civic virtue, but also give an account of why it tries to do so. It will know not just the how, but also the why. In other words a good school will have a coherent moral discourse, it will be able to present not just its codes of conduct, but also its moral reasoning, why these things are held to be crucial in the enterprise of education. I would trust that a Catholic school is certainly able to do this. It should be known not just where we stand, but why we stand in such a place and how that is in service of the common good.

Could I more or less conclude with one further indication concerning this wider context of education and, I believe, the place of Catholic schools within it. These comments I draw from a book published by the Chief Rabbi from a book called 'The Home we Build Together.' Sections of that book are full of insight. He points out that in our society today, there are three different arenas, three different ways in which we come together in a common effort. He distinguishes them in this way; the commercial, the political and then what he calls the covenantal.

Today we live in a society which tends to instrumentalise everything. By this I mean that nearly all social and economic activities are tested by what is claimed to be the 'efficiency test'. In other words, everything is broken down to clear objectives and attainments and each is given its price. Once this really takes hold, then education has truly entered the market place and its entire ecological system is threatened with pollution. When everything has a price then nothing has lasting value.' In effect what is happening is that the patterns of the market are flooding over all aspects of life and we are finding ourselves considered as nothing more than consumers and suppliers.

Of course our better nature riles against this. It says, instinctively and strongly, this is not a true account of who we are and of what is important to us.

In contrast what we see is that there must be complementary arenas in life to make up its totality. Of course there is a place for the approach which prices everything and knows all competitive alternatives. In industry and commerce this must be the case, just as those activities must be shaped by contractual agreements.

Similarly, there is a place for the political battles, which can be so intriguing, in which the competition for power is clearly a key influence. The political institutions of state exist for this purpose, in order to regulate the exercise of power in of society according to the best fashion of liberal democracy.

But our society also needs places which are neither commercial nor political. We need places which nurture what are so rightly called 'civic virtues'. These virtues, such as trust, respect, fundamental honesty, a genuine concern of the other, and for the common good, are essential. Both commerce and political life depend upon them. Yet neither commerce nor political life is aimed at generating these virtues – although that can indeed happen. Rather the generators of civic virtue are precisely the other aspects of life: charities, voluntary and faith-based groups, the family and, of course, the school. These are the activities which the Chief Rabbi speaks about, in his book *'The Home We Build Together'* as 'covenant' initiatives. They are vital to our society. He writes:

*'Covenant complements the two great contractual institutions: the state and the market. We enter the state and the market as self-interested individuals. We enter a covenant as altruistic individuals seeking the common good. The state and the market are essentially competitive. In the state we compete for power; the market we compete for wealth. Covenantal institutions are essentially co-operative. When they become competitive, they die.'* (p.234)

This highlights the true value of education, firmly, resolutely and creatively expressed in the enterprise of the Catholic school. Our schools are places of a covenantal agreement, where we stand together with families, parishes and local communities, to create social solidarity: those bonds between us in which true human flourishing can take place. A Catholic school that does this is a sign, a quasi-sacrament. This, I believe, is one of the key callings of a Catholic school in education today; to be an arena of genuine covenantal cooperation for the common good. This is one of the reasons why our schools are a genuine service to our society at large.