

NATIONAL CONFERENCE OF CATHOLIC SECONDARY HEADS

LONDON FRIDAY 27 JANUARY 2006

ADDRESS OF THE MOST REVEREND VINCENT NICHOLS
ARCHBISHOP OF BIRMINGHAM

Thanks for the invitation to this Conference. I regret that I was not able to come to join in earlier in the programme, but I hope it has been thoroughly enjoyable. My thanks also to all who have organised it, to the Association and to the CES. I trust this Conference is a moment of encouragement and strength for all of us involved in Catholic education today, especially in our Secondary Schools, for we certainly need a good dose of self-confidence, which is, incidentally, well justified.

Today we face an often repeated criticism and challenge. Indeed some would say that the challenge we face is central to public debate about education and the place that our schools play in it. So I would like to address this challenge head on this morning.

It has become almost common-place, in some circles, to insist that our Catholic schools are socially divisive. Of course it is not often stated quite as bluntly as that. More often the statement is that 'faith schools are social divisive'.

There are many examples of this judgement being made about Catholic schools. Perhaps an indication of how widespread this thinking has become was the place given to it in the Labour Party's 'alternative white paper' on education, issued a few weeks ago under the title 'Shaping the Education Bill: Reaching for Consensus.' On page 2 was the statement 'There has also been considerable concern expressed about the inevitable expansion of faith schools' (under the provisions of the White Paper, presumably) 'and the polarising effect this could have on community relations.' More recently and more explicitly reports of the recent research by the Sutton Trust reflect this same view, on the basis that the 'social mix' in Catholic schools is not the same of the 'social mix' in nearby schools.

So, on this basis at least, our schools are considered by some to be divisive.

But let me approach this concern more positively. Central to much of the policy of the present Government is what is called 'social cohesion', a concern that, as a society, we should progress along the pathway of mutual understanding and peaceful development. This is an absolutely proper aim for any government. And it is quite reasonable that Catholic schools be asked to give an account of how we contribute to mutual understanding and peaceful community living. Indeed I think we can respond positively to such questions with examples of schools contributing significantly to their local community and certainly equipping young people with the skills needed for the development of adult and lasting mutual understanding with others in society.

But that said, it is important to spend a little time this morning examining much more closely just exactly what is meant today by 'social cohesion'. Then we can cast more light on the fear that Catholic schools are an enemy of such cohesion. Then we can give more radical and pertinent answers to the question of what exactly Catholic schools contribute.

So what is meant by social cohesion?

There is in our society a strong and proud tradition of respect for the individual, and a desire to enhance personal autonomy. The current programme on BBC2 called 'The Romantics' is an exploration of some of the roots of this strand of our public culture. This is a fine tradition and makes good sense within a context of an overall coherence of society on the basis of shared cultural and fundamental values.

Yet today ours is an increasingly diverse society in which we can observe the fragmentation of shared values and the emergence of extremist action, with profound on-going effects. In response to this emerging situation, our society has, on the whole, remained with its same priorities and pushed forward with the cause of the individual and of personal autonomy as the central values on which to build.

The logical consequence of this is a particular and radical understanding of society itself. In this view, society as such exists to keep the peace between people of quite divergent views. Society's task, basically, is to protect us from each other. In fact this is the core 'credo' of a secular, liberal society: society is the peaceful coexistence of potential or real enemies.

This thinking underlies much of our public culture. The 'social cohesion' currently being sought is, it seems to me, based on this premise.

Yet this premise is, of course, quite inadequate. It is inadequate simply because it does not reflect the concerns and culture by which most people actually live. Up and down our society, in families, within friendships, even as neighbours, and in the very notion of civic friendship within many towns and villages, we seek for something far more than 'protection from each other'. We share dreams and ambitions; we gather round mutual interests and enthusiasms; we appreciate 'good things' together; we still share, in these groups, patterns of thought, or at least profound instincts, about what is to be held as good and wholesome, and what it not. Within all these groups there is a great deal of shared perception (or moral belief) about what is 'the good life'.* These values, and the reflection that carries them, continue to be handed on from generation to generation, adjusted and enriched as that is done.

Yet these patterns of moral reflection, for that is what they are, are often marginalised by being unrecognised, disowned or sentimentalised within our public culture. Hence they are gradually being eroded. They are, in fact, being replaced by a static appeal to the opinions of a supposed majority or of well-

organised pressure groups. 'Political correctness' is a typical and central expression of this process. And within political correctness, as a method of establishing a public moral culture, as many examples show, reasoning is minimised as a way of making moral judgements. In fact we can say that in forming our public culture we have moved away from rational ethics, the detailed discussion of difference, as a way of making moral judgements into a public strategy that is determined simply to eradicate or suppress difference, for difference is seen as a potential point of conflict.

What are the roots of this thinking? What lies at the heart of the view that society is concerned primarily to protect us from each other, we who are potential or real enemies to each other?

The roots of this thinking, and the social cohesion that flows from it, lie in a profound misunderstanding of the human person. This thinking starts from the position that to be human is simply to be an individual. It is the individual that comes first. Individuals are what we are. What we then become depends on our choices and our actions. What categories or roles we fit into, what kind of relationships we have are secondary and flow from our individual actions and decisions. In fact society itself, in this picture, is the construct of the individuals within it. Society is a matter of our own making.

On this basis, of course, it is impossible to make any objective moral judgement about an individual. I may express an opinion, and I may hold a private truth about another. But there is no shared objective judgement that we can come to. Hence the key requirement is, of course, tolerance, the suspension of judgement, the minimising of rational, sound ethical reflection. Therefore only convention can now shape our common relationships, our social cohesion.

Observable reality, and the reasoning it supports, is of course quite different. To be human is, of course, to be part of a society of other human beings. Society is not the product of the individual. On the contrary, as is quite evident, individuals are the product of society. The first society is, of course, the family in which a person comes into being. The family is the basic unit of society, for it is the first community, the first sharing of life in all its dimensions, which shapes and marks each of its members most profoundly. Yet the family itself exists in, and needs, a wider society. The neighbourhood, the network of friends and, crucially, the school are part of that wider society.

What distinguishes these human communities and societies, illustrating most clearly the relationship between the individual and the wider group, is that key human characteristic, language, which is of its essence, societal, shared, communitarian. There is no such thing as an 'individual language', one that is proper to me alone. It is a contradiction in terms. Language, with its rational discourse and symbolic meaning, is the defining characteristic of the person. Our meeting here today, our shared listening and speaking, give the lie to the view that individualism is our radical reality. Radically, as human beings we belong to each other.

To affirm this is hold to an understanding of the person in society which is neither individualistic (the trend that objects so strongly, and rightly, to our being mere fragments of a whole) nor totalitarian (the trend that is supported by the desire to avoid personal responsibility).

To affirm this understanding of the person in society has enormous consequences. It is to affirm that 'the good life' is essentially communitarian; that the fashioning of the good life requires intelligent rational discourse and not simply enforced conformity to convention; it requires a search for all that is true and good. In other words it requires sound moral education.

This, I believe, is what we strive to provide, for education, understood in the Catholic sense, always teaches us to go beyond the cool distance of tolerance. Rather it teaches us to engage with others, both intelligently and respectfully. It should school us in genuine ways of thinking about right and wrong, about how to understand human endeavour and assess it morally. This education is a vital contribution to the pursuit of happiness, understood not just in a passing experience of happiness but understood as the reasoned construction of a well-made life. Indeed we can say that building happiness is not a task based on the consequences of my actions, not something to be measured by the reports of others about how happy a course of action or an event made them feel. Rather the pursuit of happiness is based on that sense that what I have done is right in itself, even if, in the short term its consequences may be unpleasant.

Education of this sort will help to develop what is called the practical intelligence of moral reasoning. It will help youngsters to grasp that the purpose of such practical intelligence is to change themselves and the world around them by recognising its flaws and by fashioning, through their free decisions, a more moral way of living and a better world.

In this sense, moral education, rather than conformity to political correctness, is a key to social cohesion. And this is, indeed, something to which Catholic schools can and do contribute. This, then, is our first challenge to the understanding of 'social cohesion' at present pursued in our public culture and in some public policies.

But in this exploration of what is meant today by 'social coherence' and how it relates to our understanding of the human person, there is another important point to be made.

In our public culture it is widely held that all that is spiritual is essentially private, while things that are material are shared. We are all members of the market place. Indeed for some people the principle social activity in which they engage is shopping, especially on a Sunday. As was memorably pointed out: 'Tesco ergo sum.'

Our second challenge to contemporary public culture is to point out, persistently and in practice, that the truth is entirely the opposite. The spiritual is precisely what brings us together as human beings. It is the spiritual that

makes it clear that we are not isolated individuals. It is the material that establishes and maintains the distances and differences between us. Think about what we share most deeply: friendship, family bonds and love, neighbourliness, the quest for happiness; music of all kinds, art, reading, poetry, sporting endeavour. These are the things that shift us out of individualism into shared effort, shared dreams, shared identity. And these are essentially of the spirit of the person.

Indeed, often we speak of our cultural endeavours as being the cement of society, and the lack of them as weakening us in our belonging to each other. Hence the importance of our learning about other cultures and striving to become a multi-cultural society. But when we remember that these cultural identities and characteristics are most profoundly spiritual, then our thinking can easily be led onto the next step.

Religious belief is the most profound spiritual quest of the human person. Indeed, the search for meaning, for truth, for goodness and freedom, which so often act as the driving force of cultural expression, are, in the end, what makes up the religious quest. Another way of saying this is that a peoples' culture is only fully explored when the religious roots of that culture are acknowledged and accepted. Multi-cultural studies do not make full sense without an appreciation of the meaning and experience of religious belief.

Similarly, the spiritual depth of the person is truly explored when religious belief lifts up the human spirit and opens us to the transcendent. The search for meaning and truth finds its response in religious belief.

Simply put, then, this is a true understanding of the human person: what brings us together into social cohesion is that which is spiritual. What expresses the spiritual is our cultural heritage and creativity, which is most deeply rooted in religious endeavour. What sustains and completes our spiritual nature is the gift of religious belief. Social cohesion, then, is greatly served when the spiritual, the cultural and the religious are given their true and proper place.

How ironic it is that in our public culture the opposite view has taken hold. Have we, quite simply, lost our nerve when it comes to the reality of religious belief? We have lost our nerve because, as a society, we have taken the road of relegating all these matters to the sphere of the private and seeking to build our society, our cohesiveness on the material instead. There will never be a truly cohesive society that does not take seriously the spiritual quest of its people, in all the forms of that quest, and which does not give a space in its public culture for the religious beliefs of its people. The rigorously secular, liberal project of social cohesion is mistaken in its fundamental view of the human person and simply will not work.

Is this why much public discourse, on the one hand, belittles faith schools and the contribution they can make, while on the others our schools are popular among so many people? Is this why those who espouse the secular liberal view of society speak out so vehemently against faith schools, not simply

because they are opposed to religious faith, but because all that a faith centred education stands for exposes the fallacies of their position? Is this why the driving force for social cohesion has become the elimination of all difference, or at least the elimination of the appearance of all differences, when the true richness of life lies in appreciation and critically evaluating, by reasoned discourse, the values held in these differences?

Properly understood and carried out, Catholic education serves the common good. Catholic education, as you well know, seeks to provide its pupils with the patterns of moral reasoning by which mature free choice can be exercised in the pursuit of lasting happiness. Catholic education seeks precisely to hand on, in a process of continual understanding and exploration, the values that are fundamental to human well-being, sustained and enabled by a relationship to the Creator. Catholic education equips its students to enter into a plural society with wisdom and discernment, with principles and virtues, rather than with the purely political values of tolerance and the suspension of personal judgement. Catholic education helps its pupils to understand themselves correctly as members of a community, as nurtured and sustained by a community and as contributing to that community. Catholic education explores the proper relationship between the individual and society, not the distorted model of our public culture. Catholic education helps its pupils to give an account of the faith that forms them, to speak of it with confidence and to know that, through it, they can meet with member of other faiths with sensitivity and insight. Catholic education does not encourage its students to approach religious faith at arms length, as if it is something of which to be only suspicious, for such suspicion quickly corrodes the mutual understanding and esteem that true social cohesion actual requires.

Of course, while having these aims Catholic education does not always succeed. But you and I know that over the last hundred years the project of Catholic education in this country has gone from strength to strength, from a position of being on the margins of society to one in which it makes an acknowledge and appreciated contribution to the common good. That experience of exclusion is important for us to remember. Others in our society now experience it in their turn, being subject to the same suspicions that were once cast on us. We, now in our turn, must surely have encouraging words for them, encouraging them into partnerships with public authorities, and exploring with them the difficulties of achieving the level of mutual understanding that makes such partnerships effective. We must say to them that the effort is worth it, that the struggle is valid and that the contribution that they, too, will be able to make will one day by appreciated as long as their effort, like ours is ultimately for the common good of all.

Nothing that I have said so far has been cast in the terms or language of our faith, or called on the resources of faith. But it is easy to do so.

The purpose of our schools, well expressed in this document, 'Christ and the Centre', in which the principle purpose of Catholic education is clearly stated and then spelt out terms of the Gospel values, ethos and distinctive experience of a Catholic school. Our schools are there in order to be a service

to society, in the creation of a society that is 'highly educated, skilled and cultured.' We do this by being faithful to Christ, the Eternal Word of Truth, the one in whom, alone, the fullness of human nature is expressed and in whom the fullness of the Creator is to be found. He is at the centre. In following him we follow the pathway of true humanity and create an education in which faith, culture and life are brought into harmony. This is so because faith and reason work together in the project of education. Faith enables reason to do its work more effectively and to focus on the truth rather than on current blind spots. Faith enhances reason in the work of education. That is at the core of Catholic understanding.

In a Catholic school we acknowledge the societal nature of the human person, rather than his or her radical individualism. So a Catholic school always sees itself as assisting parents, those who shape the first community to which every person belongs. Parents are the primary educators of their children and the first religious educators, too. Quite rightly parents look to the school to propose and model those values which it seeks to live within the community of the family. So a Catholic school understands that it exists in order to assist those parents and families who, through baptism, are part of that one community of Catholic faith, while at the same time wherever possible being welcoming to others who wish to take part in a Catholic education. A Catholic school sees itself, fundamentally, as an expression of the life of the Church and of its mission, acting in partnership with its parishes and neighbouring schools.

But you know all this. What I have tried to do this morning is find some insight into the reason why our public culture finds this vision so baffling and so threatening. I hope I have given you some little insight into that. I would like to do so because my hope would be that you will leave this Conference with renewed confidence in your calling as a head teacher of a Catholic Secondary school and more able to give a penetrating account of what we do, the challenge we offer to our society today and the contribution we can, and do, most certainly make.

✠ Vincent Nichols
Archbishop of Birmingham

(*Those who have read 'The Good Life' by Herbert McCabe published recently and posthumously, will recognise the source of much of what I am saying)