

Community Cohesion and the Catholic School

Talk given by Archbishop Vincent Nichols to groups of Catholic staff during 2007.

Introduction

There are many points of view from which we can see that the issue of community cohesion is important in our society today. The sources and examples of division and potential division are much discussed and illustrated. Often the situation and role of schools in our society are in the fore-front of this discourse. Indeed, for some schooling is considered to be part of both the problem and the solution. It is often stated, quite gratuitously, that 'faith schools' are socially divisive and that schooling ought deliberately to 'mix' children in as many ways as possible. The contention, of course, is that religious belief is firmly part of the problem and prevents the achievement of 'community cohesion'.

The recent Education Act brought many of these views to the fore. Indeed in the run up to the passing of the Act many proposals were made about admissions criteria for schools, and particularly for new 'faith schools'. In response to some of these proposals, we suggested that every school ought to be required to give an account of how it contributes to community cohesion. Although we were assured, initially, that this would be impossible, in fact this is now a requirement. OFSTED is required to report on the contribution made by each school to community cohesion.

As a result, Catholic schools are beginning to formulate accounts of the work they do towards 'community cohesion'. The questionnaires which have been circulated are proving to be very fruitful sources of information and ideas, both within the Diocese and for the CES nationally. Early indications are that our schools are well able to give a good account of themselves.

What is also clear is that these discussions touch directly on other current themes, such as 'Britishness' and Citizenship. So in considering these matters we touch into very crucial and sensitive areas.

1 Definitions, Context and Initial Reflection

What is meant by 'community cohesion'? What does a cohesive community look like, whether we are thinking about a school or a wider community? And what are the realities that you experience, within your school and in its wider social setting?

A House of Commons Committee offered the following definition of community cohesion:

- *A common vision and sense of belonging for all members of the community;
- *The diversity of people's different backgrounds and circumstances are appreciated and positively valued;

- *Those from different backgrounds have similar life opportunities;
- *Strong positive relationships are being developed between people from different backgrounds in the workplace, in schools and within neighbourhoods;
- *The ability to integrate people from different ethnic backgrounds so that they can relate together in terms of where they live, their education, employment and social/recreational spheres.

Our first reflection is to look at the **contexts** in which we are seeking to enhance our community as cohesive, respectful of difference in race, culture and religious belief, offering equal opportunities to all and creatively welcoming of new-comers.

The first context is clearly that of our individual schools.
 For example, how has the in-take to your school changed in recent years?
 How is the school responding to those changes?
 What are the problems and successes within the life of your school in this regard?

The second context is the area of society in which your school is set.
 How has that changed?
 What are new challenges that have emerged and can be experienced in the neighbourhood?
 How is the school responding to those challenges?

The third context is of our wider society.
 Here there is much public comment on changes in demography and the difficulties and opportunities they bring.
 How do these aspects of wider British society impact?
 What does your school do in response and in preparing youngsters for their active participation in that society?

2 Foundations

In our participation in the work of community cohesion we have to be ready with both reasoned argument and evidence. I would like to address briefly the first of these requirements.

a) To start with, can we think about the phrase 'community cohesion' itself and the meaning of the two words which make it up.

In our British context and culture most thinking about 'community' begins with the notion of the individual. In our culture there is a long tradition of emphasising the importance of the individual. This tradition is important and fruitful in many ways. It is the basis for our appreciation and upholding of the rights of conscience. It is the basis for our upholding the right of freedom of speech. These are crucial qualities in our life, often defended at great cost.

These qualities have their roots in our Christian tradition. This is important to remember otherwise we end up thinking that all aspects of our secular culture are aggressive towards our faith. In fact many are derived from it.

Nevertheless, excessive emphasis on the importance of the individual, as the point of departure for our self-understanding and actions, brings serious difficulties within it. For example, no successful grouping of people into an effective unit (such as in the armed forces, or the Scouts, or an orchestra or choir etc) can be achieved without individuals giving up aspects of their individuality, individual freedoms, choice and expression. In order to attain shared accomplishments, individuals have to submit themselves to the greater whole.

A culture excessively concerned with individual rights will find the continued development of such efforts and communities increasingly difficult. There are times and places in which the importance and requirements of the group will outweigh the 'rights' of the individual if the common good is to be achieved. Obviously such 'submission' needs to be consciously accepted, increasingly as an individual grows in self-understanding and maturity.

The Catholic approach to these issues always starts with an emphasis on the person, rather than on the individual. The notion of person, unlike that of the individual, includes the dimension of relatedness as essential to it. Every person is born, formed, nurtured and grows in relationship with other people. Those relationships give shape and meaning to that person. Our Catholic emphasis is that essentially we are persons and therefore 'belong' to one another. The emphasis of 'individualism' is that we are essentially separate.

This emphasis on the person leads naturally into (and out of) an emphasis on the family. A human being is born into a family. That is fundamental to the nature of being a person. This is one reason why it is important that we keep challenging any excessive emphasis on the 'individual' which starts from our separateness one from another.

The Catholic definition of the person as 'made in the image and likeness of God' finds a real echo in an Islamic definition of a human being: a person made for intimacy.

What follows is that our understanding of community is rooted in our understanding of the person. This gives rise to our view of community – as meeting the needs of the person, as the place of fulfilment for the person, as the place in which we cooperate for our own and for our common good. This is far more positive than a view of community which is rooted in the notion of individual. From that perspective, the community, or society, is the place and mechanisms in which individuals co-exist, for mutual benefit, and in which mechanisms are in place for 'keeping the peace' between essentially autonomous individuals.

So our thinking is 'person centred'. Our sense of community is not one of a collective of individuals but of a community of mutually dependent persons.

We can also reflect for a while on the word 'cohesion'.

On the whole, understanding of this term swings between 'multi-culturalism', on the one hand, and 'integration' on the other. Neither extreme is acceptable, the first suggesting a kind of co-existence with enough space for each group to express itself without threatening others; the second suggesting conformity to required practices and values. 'Cohesion', in a better sense, and one based on the notion of 'the person in community' has to build on a number of key foundations.

One of these building blocks is the way in which we handle 'difference'. This must begin with great efforts to understand difference, to acquire a kind of 'literacy' about the people around us. Then there must be a respect for difference, while not receding into indifference over principles and values.

A second building block is the identification of commonality: characteristics which bind people together; an identification of shared problems and obstacles to proper aspiration which have to be overcome. When such issues are shared, then a fruitful coming together in a common effort can be realised, which often contributes far more to mutual understanding and social cohesion than actions which seek to address that cohesion directly.

b) What is the contribution that faith can make to this understanding, this discussion? In particular, what is the contribution that the Catholic faith can offer?

In response may I first emphasise the fact that the Christian faith is a revealed religion. In it we receive, as a gift of God, insight, understanding, truth, light which we cannot properly or fully generate for ourselves.

An illustration of this aspect of faith comes with the various understandings of 'spirituality'. In common parlance (as illustrated on the shelves of a bookshop) 'spirituality' refers to a capacity within every person for 'things of the spirit'. That capacity is understood as a realm we need to enter if we are to discover our 'inner selves', attain 'inner peace' etc through a variety of practices. This notion of spirituality sees no need for revealed truth. All we need for our fulfilment is already within. Indeed any suggestion that we need to receive a truth we cannot fully find for ourselves is demeaning.

The Christian and Catholic understanding of 'spirituality' is different. For us, the spiritual is discovered when, as St Paul states, our spirit and the Spirit of God 'bear united witness that we are indeed children of God.' Catholic spirituality is not simply an inner journey; it is a meeting between each person and the Lord, a meeting in which we receive precisely what we need for our fullness of life: the Holy Spirit. Through that Spirit we are able to find our true selves, know forgiveness, be nurtured in compassion for others. These are things we simply cannot do for ourselves.

So when we think about the contribution that our faith makes to the task of community cohesion we have to keep in mind the revealed nature of faith.

The Catholic faith contributes much to our human efforts to live well together. Can I express this gift in three points:

*Faith discloses our common origins and our common destiny.

If, as part of the work of cohesion, we are seeking our commonalities, these are well described for us in the revelation that every person is the creative work of God, loved by God and destined for eternity with God. Here is the foundation of everything.

*Faith discloses the truth about our human nature and about how we are to live together.

In Christ God has shown us the truth about ourselves, about the foundations of the 'good life', about the centrality of love and sacrifice, about the reality of forgiveness of sin, about our belonging to one another. Faith provides clarity about the pattern of living which is wholesome for human beings, a pattern which can be expressed and explored in moral discourse.

*Faith discloses the ways in which we are to deal with difference, for it opens to us the sources of key values, such as respect and tolerance.

The call for tolerance is incessant. Yet little time is spent reflecting on the sources of tolerance and the fundamental reasons behind that call. Only if one is clear about the imperative of mutual respect, founded in an acceptance of the God-given dignity of each person, will the practice of tolerance be sustainable. Without these roots, tolerance, and respect, will evaporate. Many say that as a society we are living off our Christian heritage in this regard. That heritage has to become a living source.

In these ways it is possible to argue that the sources of faith are clearly part of the solution of community cohesion and not part of the problem.

Could I illustrate that with a brief reference to Citizenship education. The three aspects of Citizenship education announced in government documents are:

*Social and moral responsibility. This clearly requires a clear moral framework if it is to be coherently developed.

*Community engagement. This is clearly enhanced when a school knows it is part of a wider community, both in the locality and across the world. This is the case with a Catholic school.

*Political literacy ie the understanding and practical ability to take part in our democratic political processes. In illustrating this strand of citizenship education, Sir Bernard Crick wrote that it would imply the ability to identify an immoral law and know how to get it changed. This, too, requires a coherent moral framework which struggles with questions of individual rights in the context of moral principle and the common good.

As a second point of reflection, and in the light of these comments, could you now consider how, in your experience, the tenets and practice of our Catholic faith underpin, and strengthen, the work of community cohesion.

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3 Practical Consequences

Let me return to the three contexts of the work of community cohesion and put forward some of the practical applications that have been brought to my attention.

a) Action with the school.

May I suggest just four points of action and reflection:

i) Action aimed at making new-comers welcome and part of the community. There are so many actions that people have spoken of under this heading: action that reach out to families, from the school or from the parish, making initial contact, assisting with basic needs etc. Many schools and parishes now have leaflets in different languages; some schools offer parents of their children language classes; etc etc

ii) Action aimed at enhancing the understanding of other faiths present in the school and in society. A school has a crucial task of enabling its pupils to attain 'religious literacy'. Without religious literacy a child is at a real disadvantage in understanding and coming to terms with contemporary British society, as well as our history and cultural inheritance. Yet religious literacy must also be aimed at more. We must be striving that all children learn not only about religion but also from religious faiths (as we do consistently). New developments in the Birmingham Agreed Religious Education Syllabus are really promising in this regard.

iii) Action aimed at observing consistently the dignity of every person, even in the most testing of circumstances. In my view, one of the most difficult circumstances in which a school must sustain its practice of respecting every person is in the application of its rules and disciplines. Short cuts are so tempting. Yet the lessons learned by youngsters – for good or evil – when they are being disciplined are very profound indeed. The consistency with which a school practices respect and the observance of the dignity of each person is crucial to the foundations it lays for community cohesion.

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iv) Action aimed at making explicit the moral framework within which the school conducts its life. Youngsters need to be helped, through example and tuition, to engage in moral reasoning: the structured effort to look at situations and come to moral judgements on the basis of principle and careful thought. This is crucial for the building of a cohesive community. Indeed, I would argue that any school which is not able to give a coherent account of the moral framework within which it operates is thereby impeded in its work for community cohesion. It is not as if a school can operate as a 'value-free' environment. That is simply not possible. Indeed,

the moral environment of the school is in practice the one which is being proposed as the basis for future adult living. Every school ought to be able to give an account of its values and moral coherence. Catholic schools can certainly do so.

b) Actions with other schools.

Today there are many points of contact between schools not only within the cohort of Catholic schools, but increasingly within the group of schools within a locality or Authority. These contacts are frameworks for community cohesion and can be used for this explicit purpose. Developments in 14-19 education are a case in point.

The focus of these points of cooperation may vary: sport, cultural activities, educational purposes. But in every case there is real potential for seeing ways in which these activities contribute to cohesion within the wider community.

Increasingly schools are establishing partnerships with schools in other countries, especially those which face poverty and difficulties. These partnerships, too, help to broaden horizons and mutual understanding.

c) Actions within the wider community

Schools properly seek actions with the wider community which help to foster wider understanding and cooperation. Some examples are:

- *bringing together parents of neighbouring schools of different character in joint efforts;

- *seeing the school as a centre for inter-religious dialogue by fostering visits to centres of other religions and encouraging visits by representatives of other faiths;

- *developing programmes of responding to need which bring the school into contact with the wider community either in the contribution the school makes or in the partnerships in response to need which are established.

I am sure there is much you could add to these action points, both to illustrate what your school already achieves as part of its contribution to community cohesion and as plans that you have in mind. This, too, is a good point for further reflection.

CONCLUSIONS

Running through this presentation is the conviction that our faith, and the vision and strength that it gives, is a real asset when it comes to the task of building community cohesion today. Faith is not part of the problem. It is very much part of the solution.

This is our conviction and, as Catholics and as Catholic schools, we need to be confident in putting it forward. We need to do so in two ways.

Firstly, we need to be clear about the arguments involved in supporting our position. I hope that some of the thoughts put forward here will help you to marshal those arguments, the key points to be made, the key definitions and understanding about the person and society.

Secondly, we have to be able to present evidence. This is critically important in some official situations. Of course, this evidence is not lacking. Indeed we have plenty of evidence of the good work carried out by our schools in both laying the foundations of community cohesion and in carrying out the work of building it. So, be ready to present this evidence. Along with the arguments this is what we need.

In summary, I would argue that the Catholic faith as lived and taught is a great source of social generosity. Faith makes clear and nurtures the foundations of respect, so much called for in our society. Faith clarifies and sustains our moral framework and moral reasoning. But perhaps, most importantly of all, our faith presents the possibility and the experience of forgiveness. This quality – of forgiveness, and therefore of compassion for others – is so needed in our society today.

In the work of building a new kind of community cohesion, let us be in the front line, rather than being thought to follow reluctantly a secular agenda. We have so much to offer, so much to give. Let's do so.

✘ Vincent Nichols
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