

Catholic Education in a Society that is either indifferent or hostile

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Fellow Catholic educators and members of the Marist European Network I am delighted to be part of your Conference and to be able to engage with you in conversation regarding something about which I am passionate, as no doubt you are too, namely the subject of Catholic Education. The topic I was asked to focus upon was ‘Catholic Education in an indifferent or hostile Society’. However, given that Catholic Education per se is about much more than what happens in schools and would in itself require a Conference alone to begin to explore it, I intend to limit my remarks to what goes on in schools and colleges from age four to nineteen or to the compulsory years of schooling from four to sixteen. [The reason I distinguish between these two age profiles is that in England and Wales we have sixteen Catholic Sixth Form Colleges for 16+ age range, many of whom are at the cutting edge of Catholic Education in a pluralist environment, not least your own St. Mary’s Blackburn and St. Mary’s Middlesbrough].

At the outset I should like to make certain things clear as to where I stand on issues to do with ‘Catholic’ and with ‘Education’. I am unreservedly a Vatican II Catholic with all that this entails. My whole personal adult faith journey and professional formation have been imbued with the Spirit of that great Conversation initiated by good Pope John XXIII and carried forward subsequently, despite many and current attempts to undermine its thrust and vision for our world. My personal philosophy of education is deeply informed by its seminal teaching on Catholic Education as described in *Gravissimum Educationis* [and in subsequent documents until now] whose purpose is to enable young people to become ‘lovers of true freedom who will make their own judgements in the light of truth’. My life’s work as a Catholic educator has been one of fascination with and radical commitment to a form of education

1. that, at its best, defies narrowness and “dumbing down” to the level of the latest bright idea
2. that is confident and articulate in its self promotion and various expressions.

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3. that both sees itself and expresses itself in the daily realities of its life as a vital part of an emerging Church's pastoral and evangelizing Mission to the world.

4. that is both humble and wise enough to engage with others in the same field who too seek the Common Good

5. that is faithful to a Wisdom Tradition it is privileged to inherit and inhabit for its time,- cherishing it, communicating it, critiquing and contributing to it and celebrating it as a resource of wisdom for the times that we are and for the world in which we live.

I should like to begin the substance of my presentation with a number of key references that both anchor my thoughts and free up my deliberations from straying into negativities about our current context within Society, within the Church and within Catholic Education in general. After all we Christians should be a people of Hope not despair for whom the cross is the unique liberating symbol of ways forward despite adversity. And so the Prophet Isaiah wisely tells us

“Do not remember the former things
Or consider the things of old.
I am about to do a new thing.
Now it springs forth.
Do you not perceive it?
I will make a way in the wilderness
And rivers in the desert.” Isaiah 43:18-19

Isaiah's message of Hope, of God's sustaining Love and purpose, of a God that continuously surprises us, if we but have eyes to see, to new and unthought of possibilities despite adversities- all this should inform our perspectives, give us a sense of balance and direction for the situation in which we currently find ourselves.

Prior to the beginning of the Second Vatican Council Pope John XXIII speaking directly to the Roman Curia, in particular to those “embattled misanthropes who sought security by returning to the past and denigrating the present”. Peter Hebblewaite said:²

“In the everyday exercise of our pastoral ministry, greatly to our sorrow, we sometimes have to listen to those who although consumed with zeal do not have very much judgement [discrezione] or balance. To them the modern world is nothing but betrayal and ruination. They claim that

² P. Hebblethwaite, *John XXIII. Pope of the Council*, Oxford, Geoffrey Chapman, 1984.

this age is far worse than previous ages, and they go on as though they had learned nothing at all from history- and history is the greatest teacher of life [maestra di vita]. They behave as though the first five centuries saw a complete vindication of the Christian idea and the Christian cause, and as though religious liberty was never put in jeopardy in the past. We feel bound to disagree with these prophets of misfortune [sventura] who are forever forecasting calamity- as though the end of the world were imminent. And yet today Providence is guiding us towards a new order of human relationships which, thanks to human effort and yet far surpassing its hopes, will bring us to the realisation of still higher and undreamed of expectations; in this way even human oppositions can lead to the good of the Church.”

Pope John’s great sense of history made him see the importance of responding to the Spirit now, recognizing as he did that “the substance of the ancient deposit of faith is one thing, and the way in which it is presented is another” (*Letters*, p. 427).

These prophetic words are no less real today as we face up to the demands of being Church in a world experiencing the secularization of society and a virtual “eclipse of the sense of God.”

Pope Benedict XVI

The Vatican II Document ‘Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the modern world’ [*Gaudium et Spes*, no. 21] declares:

“Although the Church altogether rejects atheism, it nevertheless sincerely proclaims that all men and women, those who believe and those who do not, should help to establish right order in this world where all live together. This certainly cannot be done without a dialogue that is sincere and prudent.”

My personal view is that we are currently in danger of that dialogue petering out, faced as we are on the one hand, with an aggressive fundamentalist atheism and, on the other, with a Church leadership in danger of losing its moral authority coupled with an incremental fundamentalism of its own of dubious theological foundation – neither position attuned to a genuine dialogue of any real substance. I am reminded of something Hans Küng said years ago:

“There can be no peace among the nations
Without peace among the religions.
There can be no peace among the religions
without dialogue between the religions

There can be no dialogue between the religions
Without research into theological foundations.”

While he was referring to our multi-faith context his remarks are equally valid and necessary today, if not more so: it seems to me that dialogue should now, more than ever also extend to the new `religions` of materialism, secularism and consumerism - and to other world views and philosophies of life, for the sake of our common humanity and for the common good of all creation. In response to the question ‘Who is my neighbour?’ Jesus gave us the parable of the Good Samaritan- our neighbour is everyone; there is no limit to neighbourliness, nor to hospitality. Our neighbours- the humanist, the secularist, the atheist, the agnostic, the confused, the believer, the theist etc, etc- are the very people we should be in conversation with; in dialogue and in solidarity with; not just from a distance but up close because after all they are not just `out there` or in society generally- they are `in here` in our school communities, in our staff and students- in our parent body, in our governors, in our trustees, in our Church. And we need our schools as oases of humanity with all their diversity, to be safe places, of hospitable dialogue, of challenging critique, and of genuine encounter in the service of justice, peace and social transformation- the building of the Kingdom!

Pope John Paul II wrote:

“Dialogue does not originate from tactical concerns or self- interest but is an activity with its own guiding principles, requirements and dignity. It is demanded by deep respect for everything that has been brought about in human beings by the Spirit who blows where he will. Through dialogue the Church seeks to uncover the ‘seeds of the Word’, a ray of that Truth which enlightens everyone`; these are found in individuals and in the other religious traditions of humankind.”

Never before was such a dialogue with contemporary culture more necessary given its increasing complexities, ubiquitous, globalization, uncertainties, insecurities and vulnerabilities. For the Church and for those of us who work in Catholic schools this is a threshold time and a Kairos time; maybe, as Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote some sixty plus years ago, “we are moving towards a completely religionless time” in the dominant Western post Christian culture; but religion on the world

stage, and paradoxically given the multi-faith nature of our society, is hardly on the wane!

Referring to the challenges the Church faces in contemporary culture John O' Donoghue wrote in *The Furrow*: "The old maps and the faded geographies no longer offer much. This is a time for imaginative responsibility and maturity to allow something new and subversive to emerge." I would contend that it will have to be a very different model of Church from what is dominant currently if it is to be true to its mission of promoting the reign of God, the Kingdom; one inspired by the vision, guiding principles and direction of Vatican II.

I would also maintain that many of our Catholic schools are at the cutting edge and forefront of that mission, as befits the times, and of being Church in new and dynamic ways for our young people and their families, living in a world hardly imagined fifty years ago.

And so to indifference or hostility towards our schools. Starting with indifference, Steve Bruce in "God is dead. Secularization in the West"³ argues that "widespread indifference" characterizes the attitude of most people in the West towards religion. I suppose it was indifference among the Catholic Community in Newfoundland that caused the demise of Catholic schools at the turn of the millennium. Indifference to religion in contrast to indifference to schools, such as ours, is a totally different matter. In Britain I would hardly describe attitudes towards our schools, or faith schools generally, as indifferent. There certainly is hostility and antagonism towards them. Our opponents argue that we are divisive, narrow, retrograde, insular, indoctrinating, exclusive, a threat to liberal democracy etc, etc. But if this is an accurate picture, in Britain, why are Catholic schools so successful, sought after by parents with religious affiliation or none; why are we oversubscribed, envied by many for our achievements and even lauded by Ministers of her majesty's government e.g. Alex Salmond in his Cardinal Winning lecture in Scotland, as First Minister, in 2008 referring to the esteem in which Catholic schools are held, referred to them as "an integral and highly successful part of public education in Scotland" with "some of the highest levels of achievement" And that "the record of Catholic schools in Scotland is second to none." The same could be said about our schools in England and Wales.

Lest we become complacent and too comfortable, indifference to our schools, if it really exists, is not just theoretically the preserve of the

³ Steve Bruce, *God is Dead Secularization in the West*, Oxford, Blackwell, 2003.

wider secular society that just ‘doesn’t do God’ - it is very much alive and well and kicking within our wider Catholic Community. It manifests itself in the fact, that, despite only a minority of our families practising, they value a Catholic education for their children, for a variety of reasons, but practice of their faith is not on the agenda. It would appear that the institutional Church apart from its schools, has no relevance for them, nor does it speak to them at any depth in their lives. This haemorrhaging of our members, now well into its second generation, has immense implications for the Church generally, as I’m sure we all know, but also for our schools, being a ‘last chance salon’ for the Church as we know it. In Britain I do not believe that indifference towards Catholic schools and faith schools generally is the issue; rather it is that such schools provoke strong passions either way. And the issue goes to the heart of what constitutes a liberal democracy today in pluralist Britain and of how to cope with diversity.

So what of this hostility towards our schools? How can one begin to give an account of it, understand it and deal with it constructively? I do not think this can be separated out from hostility to religion generally tied up in Britain with an aggressive fundamentalist atheist polemic of the likes promoted by Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens amongst others. This particular persuasion sees religion as follows:⁴

1. as harmful to the individual and to the integrity of the state.
2. as deeply authoritarian, backward looking and toxic
3. as the cause of disharmony, conflict and war.
4. as a breeding ground of extremism resulting in the current terrorist threats that are a daily reality globally.
5. as obscurantist, lacking rationality, breeding uncritical docile and passive adherents.
6. as reliant on inaccessible authorities and erudite texts of dubious origins and authenticity.
7. as claiming privilege of a particular tradition over others and over other social groups’ rights.
8. as promulgating an exclusivist, rigid and narrow concept of Truth whilst rejecting other Truth claims as false.
9. as breeding isolation, insularity and exclusivity all inimical of a democratic society.

Is it any wonder Catholic schools are being pilloried by this fundamentalist atheistic lobby, intent upon airbrushing religion totally

⁴ Based on John Sullivan, *Learning the Language of Faith*, Matthew James, 2010.

from the public square along with all its manifestations, expressions and institutions! In their minds our schools erode social and community cohesion, deepen social division and at times cause virtual apartheid, limit the autonomy of children, entrench the rights of parents over them, damage other schools by their admission criteria and arrangements, deny social justice to those not of ‘the faith’, and enjoy unjustified privileged financial support from central and local government.

We need to address and debate this critique and be able to present the counter arguments to those in society who question our very right to exist presenting “a reasonable case with reasonable arguments.” [Pete Smith Archbishop of Southwark, quoted in *The Tablet*, 19.6.2010].

In Britain the case for Catholic School is:

1. The 1944 Education Act and the inauguration of the Dual System giving us the right to have our schools alongside state provision.
2. The primary rights of parents in choosing the education for their children enshrined in European Human Rights Legislation, [and in Canon Law.]
3. The fact that Catholic schools’ outcomes of Her Majesty Inspections in the category of social and community cohesion score disproportionately higher than their state counterparts.
4. That schools such as ours are a feature of a strong and healthy pluralist society which embraces diversity of its various communities.
5. That Catholic schools are non selective on the grounds of ability and in certain areas are, if anything, more weighted to children with particular learning needs and disabilities and from deprived and lower socio economic backgrounds.
6. That in terms of academic success alone, given the profile of our students, we outperform our partners in state schools [The value added analysis].

Whilst this evidential case is strong, Catholic schools need also to be able to “tell their own story”, to demonstrate their distinctive contribution to a liberal democracy – this distinctiveness argument is one that also needs more understanding and appreciation from within the Catholic education community and the Church generally. Our schools are distinctive as Catholic schools as follows-

1. by being authentic and Mission led schools based on all that is best in an up to date rationale for Catholic education in which the experiences of community is absolutely foundational.

2, by seeing themselves as, but one of a variety of educational contributors, all committed to the common good, working in partnership where possible and desirable, removing barriers and building bridges.

3. by having a spirit of welcome and openness to all who share in their values, recognizing, valuing and celebrating otherness.

4. by being a genuine alternative to other provision taking seriously the two foundational pillars of nurturing spirituality and developing a sacramental perspective on life,- thus countering the pernicious dualism and narrowly materialistic and secular ideology that dominates a lot of educational provision and the daily lives we all live.

5. by being schools of reconciliation, beacons of transcendence and health centres of the spirit at the service of the individual in all our brokenness and of an increasingly fragmental and polarized dispirited society- challenging what divides, working for what unites and coheres.

6. by becoming agencies for social transformation at the service of the struggle for justice and peace, in line with the Gospel imperative and by adroit teaching and leadership of the students in this regard to challenge the injustices, excessive materialism and dehumanizing aspects of our society, seeking more just, co-operative and peaceful means of co-existence.

7. by playing a significant part in the dialogue of life and praxis with the members of other major world faiths who are also a resource of Wisdom for the society we build together with all people of good will, mindful of what John Henry Newman once said: “There is something true and divinely revealed in all religions of the earth.”

It is interesting reflecting on the arguments for distinctiveness and for the validity of our claims to exist that the excellent document ‘Catholic Schools on the Threshold of the 3rd Millennium’ sets out the rationale superbly and challenges those of us involved in schools to live up to these expectations.

Here I simply list a number of key phrases:

1. “Such an outlook calls for courageous renewal on the part of the Catholic school” no. 3

2. “one of its distinguishing features is to be school for all” no.7

3, “this ecclesial dimension is not a mere adjunct but is a proper and specific attribute, a distinctive feature.... a fundamental part of its very identity and the focus of its mission” no. 11

4. “a school for all with special attention to those who are weakest” no. 15

5. “a place of complete formation through interpersonal relationships” no. 18

6. “fulfil a public role, for their presence guarantees cultural and educational pluralism, and, above all, the freedom and right of families to see that their children receive the sort of education they wish for them” no. 16

7. “Thus it follows that the work of the school is irreplaceable and the investment of human and material resources in the school becomes a prophetic choice” no. 21

This document reminds me of Pope John XXIII’s deep sense for solidarity with all human beings and of his urgent desire to engage the world in a mutually beneficial conversation. It is also suffused with the spirit of Vatican II and as such should inspire and inform a rationale for our Catholic schools as befits the role of the Church through education to meet the needs of our times. It is the perfect response to those who see no place for us in contemporary society.

However there is still work to be done! To enable our schools to be up to the task and to ensure that Catholicity is both the permeating principle in what we provide and the hallmark of an authentic distinctiveness, there are a number of ‘internal’ priorities that we need to continuously address. It is these that I now wish to highlight.

As a Catholic community we need to do the following:

1. Give priority to Spiritual Leadership of our schools including the identification, nurturing and sustaining of future leaders in a well presented process of formation so that they can play their part in the ongoing dialogue with society and its culture, answering The Big Questions- What is it to be Human? What constitutes the Good Life?

We need to -

2. Cherish the spirituality of the teachers as their primary resource, nurturing and developing their interiority, giving them sustenance for their own journey to wholeness, creating development opportunities as an integral part of professional development and of the “cultivation of [their] human spirit.” Vatican II, *Gravissimum Educationis*

We need to –

3. Enable teachers to claim or reclaim their vocation, their best gift, the self God wants them to be, reaffirming this deeper role in the formation of children- in contrast to a narrow skills based and rather

mechanistic model currently in vogue, part of a dominant utilitarian ideology of education and of teaching.

We need to-

4. Identify and provide formation opportunities for governors, entrusted as the guardians of the vision, of our schools, to enable them to carry out their role of gauging and supporting the mission integrity of their schools.

We need to-

5. Reclaim an incarnational and integrated approach to all we do, inspired by what is variously described as ‘the Catholic imagination’ or ‘the sacramental imagination’ or ‘the incarnational imagination’, a seeing-God-in-all-things approach, which perceives reality as sacred and the sacred as real. This “God in the bits and pieces of everyday” [Patrick Kavanagh, Irish poet] approach is the perfect antidote to the insidious dualism that bedevils society, the Church and Catholic education. For those of us in Catholic schools it will require a lot of unlearning and new learning, an epistemology that will unsettle some of our hallowed pedagogical concepts.

We need to-

6. find a language of values to connect and to cohere within our diverse school communities that does justice to promoting the values of the Gospel and that articulates with deeply held humanizing values of our diverse students, staff and school communities.

7. Instead of distrusting today’s fashion for spirituality outside of organized religion we, in Catholic schools, need to see it as an opportunity to revisit and rediscover the riches of Christian Catholic spirituality, denied to so many of us adults and in turn denied to our children. I am here reminded of what Dietrich Bonhoeffer once wrote, “Christianity has to shed most of its religiosity and recover a deeper interior Spirituality, a secret spiritual discipline.”

We need to-

8. Be inspired by the mystery and metaphor of the Trinity where relationality and community exist at the very heart of God so as to build community and a deep sense of belonging within our school communities, as being foundational to both evangelization and to holistic education; one which seeks to give our students a sense of

identity, and belonging. Meaning and purpose in life and also an orientation towards the common good.

We need to-

9. deal with the problem of the loss of memory of our Catholic Tradition, for all in our communities and to discover or rediscover ways to re language, re imagine, reclaim, teach and live that living tradition in the very ordinariness of school daily life. In this context witness is the most influential player.

That Tradition is well summarized by Thomas Groome as follows:⁵

“Catholicity”: A Summary

Being catholic entails an abiding love for all people with commitment to their welfare, rights, and justice. It welcomes human diversity, is open to learn from other traditions, and lives in solidarity with all humankind as brother and sister. A catholic cherishes her or his particular culture and roots of identity while reaching for an open horizon and a global consciousness. A Catholic community is radically inclusive of diverse peoples and perspectives is free of discrimination and sectarian sentiment; and welcomes “the stranger” with outreach, especially to those most in need.”

And being in Ireland it would be remiss of me not to highlight, in this regard, the great treasures of the ancient Irish spirituality of the 4th and 5th centuries and the traditions resulting, as a vast storehouse of wisdom that can feed the spiritual hunger of our times and be a living resource for our society that seems, on the surface, to be losing its soul.

We also need

10. a fundamental shift in how we see Catholic schools, from seeing our schools as servicing the needs of the Church to one of being a gift from the Church to society and to serving the common good.⁶

This will be a hard lesson to take for some. The option of religious protectionism, retreating behind the walls, or worse still into a bunker or fortress, is inimical of the Church’s mission of evangelization and of

⁵ Thomas Groome, *Education for life*, Thomas More, 2001.

⁶ *The Queensland Project: Catholic Schools for 21st Century*, published by the Queensland Education Commission, Australia, 2001.

Catholic schooling; it is also diametrically opposed to the Spirit of Vatican II and to the promptings of the Spirit today.

Therefore we also need

11. to recognize, face up to and challenge the loss of confidence in our schools from certain quarters within our wider Catholic community who look for simplistic solutions and answers to the demands involved in the evangelization of culture. At times my retort to this perspective is- ‘Explain to me why our Churches are emptying and yet our schools are thriving?’

And finally we need to

12. be aware of and respond to the limitations of a narrow ecclesiology and theology that is attractive to some of this restorationist mentality, sometimes revealing itself in an exclusivist approach to our schools, i.e. being for Catholics only, preferably from practising Catholic families. If this prevailed there would not be many Catholics schools left!! This mentality not only causes confusion about the nature and purpose of our schools today but is diametrically at odds with a fuller rationale for our existence as Catholic schools as described previously in “Catholic Schools on the Threshold of the Third Millennium.”

Furthermore and more importantly such exclusivism exhibits a failure to appreciate the civic and political responsibilities of the Catholic community through its educational system and plays right into the very hands of our critics who would close us tomorrow!

Catholic schools in Britain are in the main a success story, a Good News Story, both for the Church and for society, infused as they are by an inspirational ideology that makes them qualitatively different from other schools. Over the last seven years I have been involved in three major pieces of research into aspects of Catholic schools in Britain, I have visited at least one third of Catholic Secondary schools, spoken at conferences to about two thirds of Secondary Headteachers and have led Inservice training sessions for schools up and down Britain. The net impression these rich and varied experiences have left me with is one of awe and amazement at and pride in, the excellent work they do in challenging circumstances.

Saint Augustine once said “Make humanity your goal and that’s where you will find God.”

That is what I have witnessed in so many of our schools, despite some of the indifference and hostility they face, from whichever quarter.

In this last section of my presentation I would like to suggest some positive features of our schools, and of their fitness for purpose, that elements within the leadership of the institutional Church could learn from, at this threshold time for the Church, if not a time of considerable crises. I do this because I most earnestly want the Church to play its part better in contemporary society and thus the greater to fulfil its mission to our world, a world in which “God uninterruptedly converses with humanity.” Vatican II, Constitution on Divine Revelation, *Dei Verbum*

So what could be learned from the best practice in our schools that witness to and live the Good News?

I would suggest the following:

1. How to care for, nurture and develop, form and transform, children and young people in safe, secure and hospitable environments which places them at the centre within “ an atmosphere animated by a spirit of liberty and charity based on the Gospel. Declaration on Christian Education, *Gravissimum Educationis* no. 8

2. How to deal with power and authority constructively in the service of human formation with a servant model of leadership as epitomized in the life and teaching of Jesus Christ.

3. How to come down from one’s pedestal and engage constructively in dialogue with contemporary culture, critiquing its shadow and shallow side, affirming its benign elements, without sloganizing or condemning but being a prophetic witness to “Christ who is always resplendent as the centre of History.” John XXIII, at the start of Vatican II

4. How to seek and see Christ within culture yet at the same time being counter culture to those elements within it that are inimical of human flourishing and of the common good of all creation.

5. How to reach out, as the God of Scripture reaches out, to the outsider, to the outside society, with confidence, without fear, with hope, without preconditions, promoting yet protecting our identity and mission, challenging misunderstanding, prejudice and downright hostility.

6. How to be prophetic and how to express God’s dream for all peoples and for all of Creation in the everyday realities of life, founded

upon the life, vision, teaching and Spirit that animated Jesus Christ and still is alive and active today and forever.

7. How to build up a democratic culture and praxis, and a positive internal ethic with wise delegation, collegiality shared accountability and co-responsibility – all key dimensions of Catholic Social Teaching, in particular of subsidiary and solidarity.

8. How to value and respect diversity in all its forms within a very heterogeneous community, living the questions together this poses, holding in creative and constructive tension the issues and concerns, ambiguities and uncertainties that result. I am reminded of something that, Jonathan Sacks, Chief Rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregations of Britain and the Commonwealth wrote:⁷

“Faith does not mean certainty
It means the courage to live with uncertainty
It does not mean having the answers
It means having the courage to ask the questions
And not let go of God
As He does not let go of us.”

9. How to witness to authentic servant leadership centred upon meeting the needs of those in our care, adults and young people, based upon deep and reverential listening and wise response, instead of being like some theological slot machine with a readymade answer to every question and more! and at times displaying an increasingly hard edged, defensive judgmental mentality.

10. How to be genuinely inclusive having no truck with any form of exclusivity on ground of race, gender, ability, socio-economic status or other subtle forms of human diminution, patriarchy, paternalism or personality cults. Instead the best run schools witness to the reality of the gifts of the Spirit, allowing for the giftedness of their members, encouraging their expertise for the building up of the body of Christ.

11. How to build community on an ongoing basis and for young people to develop therefore a real sense of belonging to their local, national and global community not only as a sine qua non of Catholic identity and a basic element in evangelization, but also as a major

⁷ Jonathan Sacks, *To heal a fractured world*, Continuum, 2005.

foundational stone in the ‘home, the society we build together’ (J. Sachs).⁸

Pope John Paul II in the postsynodal exhortation *Ecclesia in Oceania* 2002 said that, “The great challenge for Catholic schools in an increasingly secular society is to present the Christian message in a convincing and systematic way.”

I would contend that the vast majority of Catholic schools, certainly in Britain to the best of my knowledge, meet that challenge courageously and creatively. They realize that “the future of humanity lies in the hands of those who are strong enough to provide future generations with reasons for hoping and living.” Vatican II, *Gaudium et Spes* no. 31

I also believe elements within the institutional leadership of the Church could learn so much from them about how to be Church in and for the world of the 21st Century as “a sacrament, a sign and instrument of communion with God and of the unity of the entire human race” *Lumen Gentium* Constitution of the Church.

I should like to leave you with two images from Sacred Scripture that for me touch the very heart of the marvellous work we are all involved, that Great Conversation across the generations of what it is to be human. They never cease to inspire me to continue labouring for the great unfinished work of Jesus, the Teacher, in the society we live in with all the challenges it presents.

Luke 9:10 – 11:

“Then He took them with Him and withdrew to a town called Bethsaida where they could be by themselves. But the crowds got to know and they went after Him. He welcomed them, He talked to them about the Kingdom of God; and He healed those who were in need of healing.”

And finally from Paul writing to the Corinthians:

“People must think of us as Christ’s servants.
As stewards entrusted with the mysteries of God.”

⁸ Jonathan Sachs, *The home we build together - Recreating Society*, Continuum, 2007.