

Intentional Catholic Schools - Hubs of God's Mercy- Archbishop Eamon Martin

Some years ago a friend of mine doing educational research told me she had come across a doctoral thesis with the title 'Polishing Leaves'. It was about the effectiveness of school inspections and the title was based on a visit to a school in England a few days before a whole school inspection, where the caretaker was seen in the foyer polishing the leaves of the rubber plants! The argument was that inspections often don't reflect the reality of school life because schools tend to put on their very best show for the inspectors - even down to polishing leaves!

A few months ago I was challenged to assess the effectiveness of our Catholic schools. I expressed a very positive opinion of what I've experienced during my visits to schools. 'But of course, what would you expect', I was told. 'They are bound to be at their best when the Archbishop is coming'!

It got me thinking: how might we measure the effectiveness of a Catholic school? Think of your own school for a moment. How would you assess its ethos? It's difficult, of course, because the Catholic ethos is so embedded in the totality of school experiences. But then, if we cannot define it, measure it, or at least offer some indicators of what would make it a good Catholic school, then ethos remains an intangible, 'woolly' concept.

Many schools have clearly articulated what it means to them to be a 'Catholic school'. The various Trust bodies, the Catholic Schools Partnership and others have produced some helpful resources to assist Catholic schools in evaluating their ethos. However we all know how easy it is to pay lip-service to our Catholic ethos and to simply put on a good show when necessary. It is much more important to be, what I call, an 'intentional' Catholic school. This is one which says loudly and clearly: This is who we are. We are a Catholic school inspired by Christ. We know what that means for us; we celebrate our distinctiveness; we deliberately nurture and develop our Catholic ethos in the whole school community. We can name and demonstrate the experiences, Gospel values, knowledge and understanding, attitudes and behaviours which we want to pervade everything that we do.

I recognise that it is sometimes difficult in Ireland to be an intentional Catholic school. In recent years it has not been politically correct to speak too loudly about the Catholic ethos - some have labelled us exclusive, sectarian even. Last month we celebrated Catholic Schools Week with the theme: Catholic schools - challenged to proclaim God's mercy. Today, in the context of the Jubilee Year of Mercy, I would like to explain why for me that description sums up well what is an intentional Catholic school - one which seeks to proclaim God's mercy.

The Mercy of God has been a hallmark of the teaching and witness of Pope Francis over the past three years. From his choice of motto, to his most recent book, *The Name of God is Mercy*, Pope Francis has continually presented God's mercy as God's greatest attribute and as the most important message which the world needs to hear at this time. He challenges all of us to ask: how do I live and proclaim mercy?

What does that mean for a school - to live and proclaim God's mercy? The difficulty for schools is that the world presents such a contrary image to young people. They are told to be successful is to be strong, powerful, popular, wealthy, self-reliant, healthy, fit, trendy and attractive; the world

persuades them to focus so much on themselves and their personal interest; it holds up excellence and high achievement and dismisses or even punishes weakness or failure. Schools are easily tempted to buy into this prevailing culture, even to the extent of measuring their own success in terms of popularity or in league tables of examination results.

But in life our young people are presented with a very different reality. They have to find their way in a world filled with aggression, war and torture, abuse, domestic violence, addiction, poverty, homelessness and austerity; they will have to cope as often with failure and disappointment as with success and achievement. Last October, at the Synod on the family in Rome, I listened to bishops from all over the world describe the hopes and anxieties that face the families of the world. We heard passionate, first-hand accounts of forced migration and persecution; we were shocked by the extent of human trafficking and the commodification of women and children. We heard about child soldiers and the exploitation of street children in large cities.

What can Catholic schools do to offer young people the values, attitudes and skills that will help to sustain them in the future, especially in times of personal disappointment, sickness, weakness, failure or loss? They can do so by becoming 'hubs of mercy' in which children and young people learn to respect themselves and to be sensitive to the dignity of others? The Latin word for 'mercy' (*miser cordia*) derives from two words: one, *miseria* for misery; the other, *cor* or *cordis* for heart.

Mercy is what happens when a heart of love meets the misery or pitiful state of others and the world. An intentional Catholic school will nourish mercy in the school community, as the hymn says: 'I will take their hearts of stone, give them hearts for love alone'. It helps them think beyond themselves and develop a heart which is moved with love at the state of the world and the wretchedness and poverty of so many people. It urges them to see the world as Christ sees it, to put themselves in the shoes of the least fortunate.

Father George Kosicki, CSB, summed up the meaning of the Latin word *miser cordia* as "having a pain in your heart for the pains of others, and taking pains to do something about their pain." Mercy inspires us to action, to try to make a real difference. As the Irish language urges us: *deanaigi Trocaire* - don't just feel mercy, DO mercy!

As a blueprint to guide our thoughts and actions during the Year of Mercy, Pope Francis has offered the corporal and spiritual works of mercy. 'It is how we will be judged', he says, reminding us of the Parable where the King rewards who performed corporal works of mercy, e.g. fed the hungry, gave drink to the thirsty, clothed the naked, welcomed the stranger, visited the sick and those in prison.

'As often as you did it to one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did it to me' (Matthew 25). The spiritual works of mercy are perhaps less well known, but they are equally important - to instruct the ignorant, to counsel the doubtful, to comfort the sorrowful, admonish the sinner, forgive willingly, bear wrongs patiently and pray for the living and the dead.

Given that these corporal and spiritual works represent mercy in action, their prominence in the life of a school community is a useful indicator of an 'intentional' Catholic school. A few years ago, Cardinal Walter Kasper in his book, *Mercy - the essence of the Gospel and the key to Christian life*,

described the corporal and spiritual works of mercy as concrete responses to four kinds of poverty in the world: (1) physical-economic poverty (2) cultural poverty (3) poverty of relationships (4) spiritual poverty. (Incidentally Pope Francis read Cardinal Kasper's book while in Rome for the conclave that elected him and said: "it did me such good that book, so much good").

Let us consider how an intentional Catholic school responds to Cardinal Kasper's four kinds of poverty.

Physical-economic poverty

Firstly: physical-economic poverty. Catholic schools are renowned for their outreach to the poor and hungry and suffering in the world. An 'intentional' Catholic school goes out of its way to confront the so-called 'globalisation of indifference'; it instils in pupils a sense of empathy for those less fortunate than they are, like the homeless, migrants and refugees. By frowning upon waste and what Pope Francis calls the 'throwaway culture' which reduces everyone and everything to consumers or units of consumption, the intentional Catholic school sensitises the hearts of everyone in the school community to those who suffer. It reminds us never to take for granted the opportunities in health, education, food, water, that we are privileged to share. A good Catholic school teaches and prays grace before and after meals; it raises awareness of the injustices and inequalities that so dramatically divide the rich and poor on earth.

The founders of our schools were often inspired by a preferential option for the poor and we remain rightly proud of the efforts of Catholic schools to serve the most disadvantaged students. The Secretary General spoke earlier about the Department's efforts to promote inclusivity. I salute the role played by our Catholic schools as inclusive and caring communities. Catholic schools, inspired by Christian faith and love, have adapted to the significant net migration into Ireland and many of them have led the way in integrating migrants into local communities. They have been leaders in areas such as social inclusion, special needs and traveller education.

It is important however that we continue to evaluate our school policies like assessment and admissions policies, exclusion policies, special needs, uniform and bullying policies to ensure that those who are most marginalised are not being neglected or unfairly disadvantaged and that they are enabled to reach their full potential.

Cultural Poverty

Cardinal Kasper draws attention to a second kind of poverty in the world today: cultural poverty.

The prevailing culture of consumerism and unrestrained personal autonomy presents real challenges to our schools and young people. Young people are often left without moral reference points. An intentional Catholic school therefore seeks to form young people in a consistent and coherent ethic of life. They have a strong conviction about the sacredness of human life and the dignity of the person, about the centrality of the family, about solidarity and the common good, and the need for a fair distribution of goods in the world.

Catholic schools are person-centred, promoting the dignity, self-esteem and full development of every young person who is made in God's image and uniquely loved by God. A Catholic school would

want no pupil to leave without being enriched intellectually, spiritually, morally, socially and emotionally and without adequate literacy, numeracy or skills to help them find purpose in life and dignity in work. Pupils with disabilities or other special educational needs are given particular attention and support. An intentional Catholic school works to overcome all kinds of exclusion which would deny any young person the opportunity to receive quality education. There is absolutely no place for bullying, harassment, racism, homophobia, or any form of victimisation in a Catholic school. How the school deals with incidents of this kind sends signals about the lived reality of its Catholic ethos.

Poverty of Relationships

Kasper's third kind of poverty, poverty of relationships, presents particular challenges for schools today. The pursuit of individualism and instant gratification that is a hallmark of Western culture can take a heavy toll on our youth. Ironically, despite the revolution in social media and communications technology, too many young people lack essential skills in personal communication; many can only form fleeting and cosmetic friendships and find themselves unable to manage their feelings or relate to others, particularly in moments of crisis, loss or anxiety. How sad it is that so many of our young people today feel so isolated and alone that they turn to addictive behaviours and may even consider taking their own lives. An intentional Catholic school living the message of mercy seeks to model and inspire depth in relationships, which are inspired by Christ, marked by respect, understanding, forgiveness, empathy and selflessness. Relationships and sexuality education is offered within a Catholic morals and values framework and it presents the positive, yet challenging Catholic vision for relationships, chastity, marriage and the family.

Into what seems at times to be a 'soul-less world', we have the joy of spreading the Good News that: human life is sacred, that each human being comes from God, who created us, male and female; that we are willed by God who loves each and every one of us; that self-giving love and commitment in the marriage of a man and a woman open to life is not only possible, but is a beautiful and fulfilling gift with the power of God's grace; that chastity is achievable, healthy and good for our young people; that the giving of oneself to another in marriage for life is special, rewarding and a wonderful symbol of Christ's forgiving, faithful love for his Church.

Spiritual Poverty

When it comes to responding to the fourth kind of poverty - spiritual poverty - the Catholic school comes into its own. For it is here that Catholic schools touch upon their very *raison d'être* as centres which share in the responsibility of helping young people to grow in faith.

What are the spiritual works of mercy in which a Catholic school can excel? : To teach children and young people about God, to help them grow a personal friendship with Christ, to explain the truth of our faith and guide them in their searching and questioning, to inculcate values, teaching right from wrong. At the same time pupils of all faiths and none can be enriched by their experience of life in a Catholic school. People of diverse identities are recognised, welcomed, respected and cherished in a Catholic school which prepares all its pupils to lead fulfilling and purposeful lives that will contribute to the Common Good.

Parents are, of course, the first educators of their children in the ways of faith. The parish

community will also be supportive of its young members as they continue their faith journey from infancy to childhood to adulthood. The contribution of the Catholic school to this is essential and life-giving. There are some who question the role of Catholic schools in faith formation and mission - some prefer to place responsibility for sacramental preparation, catechesis and faith development wholly within the remit of the home and parish.

There are other challenges. In many of our primary schools, teachers find themselves quite literally 'in loco parentis', being the first to introduce children to God, to teach them to pray and what it means to be loved by God. First Holy Communion and Confirmation teachers are often disappointed that, having put so much effort into explaining the meaning and beauty of the sacraments to their pupils, parents are simply not bringing their children to Mass on a regular basis.

The vision for evangelisation and catechesis articulated in the National Catechetical Directory, *Share the Good News*, sees a continued role for all three partners - home, school, and parish - in evangelisation and the handing on of faith. Although it time to re-imagine and re-configure the traditional 'triad' of home, school, and parish, schools can still make a huge contribution to the spiritual development of their pupils, e.g:

Prayer and worship should form part of the day for every teacher and pupil; there are opportunities for Confession and for the celebration and adoration of the Eucharist; Catholic prayers and the Rosary are taught to all pupils. In cooperation with diocesan religious education advisers, there is a strong catechetical component to Religious Education so that all pupils can learn the truths of the faith and are instructed in all aspects of the moral life and grasp the essentials of Catholic social teaching. This responsibility does not rest solely within Religious Education. Other subjects can help pupils engage in dialogue about the interaction of faith and culture, promote a culture of life, love and respect for creation and develop a sense of wonder through the beauty of religious art and music.

There is no doubt that our schools are becoming increasingly more diverse with pupils and teachers from a wide variety of cultural, religious or non-religious backgrounds. Pope Francis has pointed out that our Catholic schools and universities are spaces of 'dialogue and encounter, not unlike that in which Jesus began to proclaim the Good News - a 'Galilee of the nations', a crossroads' of people, diverse in terms of race, culture and religion'.

With regard to this point I encourage Boards of Management and other members of our school communities to participate in the current National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) consultation concerning Education and Religions and Beliefs and Ethics. We must make it clear that Religious education in faith-based schools is inseparable from the ethos of the school. We are committed to helping all our pupils learn to engage in interreligious dialogue in age-appropriate ways. For us in Catholic schools religious education is based on a Christian vision of the human person with a clear respect for all people, irrespective of faiths. Any proposals from the NCCA must therefore take account of the ethos of schools.

I recognise that many teachers may feel inadequate when it comes to faith formation or dialogue.

An important leadership task in Catholic schools, therefore, is to encourage and provide opportunities for teachers to pray, to speak about faith, and learn their own mature language for discussion about faith matters. A help in this is the variety of faith development and adult catechism opportunities are now available at parish, diocesan and national level throughout Ireland. These initiatives are helping many Irish Catholics, young and older, to find their 'Catholic voice'

To conclude, I would like to come back to the image of Polishing Leaves in cosmetic preparation for the school inspection. I have tried to explain in this talk that being an intentional Catholic school goes much deeper than any outward signs of Catholic ethos like crucifixes on the walls or the occasional school Mass; an intentional Catholic school is one where the works of mercy permeate the totality of experiences in the school community to confront the material, cultural, relationships and spiritual poverty that is so prevalent in our world. I finish by praying with you, inspired by this prayer of St Faustina, the great saint of Divine Mercy, which sums up the attributes we might all strive for as staff and pupils of an intentional Catholic school.

O Lord, I want to be completely transformed into Your mercy and to be Your living reflection.

Help me, O Lord, that my eyes may be merciful, so that I may never suspect or judge from appearances, but look for what is beautiful in my neighbours' souls and come to their rescue.

Help me, O Lord, that my ears may be merciful, so that I may give heed to my neighbours' needs and not be indifferent to their pain.

Help me, O Lord, that my tongue may be merciful, so that I should never speak negatively of my neighbour, but have a word of comfort and forgiveness for all.

Help me, O Lord, that my hands may be merciful and filled with good deeds, so that I may do only good.

Help me, O Lord, that my feet may be merciful, so that I may hurry to assist my neighbour.

Help me, O Lord, that my heart may be merciful so that I may feel all the sufferings of my neighbour.

Amen.