

“Educating Towards Relationships”

**Presentation by Dom Mark Patrick Hederman, Abbot of Glenstal Abbey,
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Le Chéile

The soul of any society is in their system of education, which elaborates the values they wish to promote. It is said that all schools paint a picture of the world. ‘The Le Chéile vision is based on Gospel values and has at its centre a philosophy of education based on the unique dignity of the human person created in the image and likeness of God.’ Nobody would or could disagree with what is written in your admirable vision statement. But the problem lies elsewhere.

The dangers and the pit-falls of so-called ‘Catholic Education’ are not the vision statements or the inspired people who are behind these, but rather the negative historical circumstances and erroneous perceptions of a contemporary population. What people think, and what the media portray, is quite different from the project as outlined in the various manifestos. And, we have to face reality, the difficulty for us is that the word ‘Catholic’ can have bad press in the twenty-first Century thanks to catastrophic revelations in the recent past, with an ensuing overall lack of trust in the institution as such. As Pope Francis said to the members of the Curia last December: ‘Priests are like planes: they only make news when they crash. How much evil a single priest who ‘crashes’ can do to the whole body of the Church.’ Even where such negative connotations are not immediately associated with any Church run groups, there can be quite legitimate expectations that whatever is Catholic is likely to be hide-bound and conservative; fearful, guilt-ridden, puritanical and suspicious of success. For many in our society the very notion of ‘Catholic Education’ can conjure up images of sectarianism, of initiation to a cult, of some form of brainwashing to a particularly hard-line Catholic world-view. Organisations such as yours must recognize the work they have to do to offset antipathy and prejudice even before they set about proclaiming the very positive philosophy of education which they are in existence to provide.

The work of education can never be that of supplying a ‘world-view’. There is a real world out there which is more than my vision or my perspective on it. There is a child who

is about to enter that world and who may be the one who is going to provide us all with an insight never before imagined. The genuine educator is one who makes that introduction, makes that connection between each child and the world we live in, without second guessing the conclusion or pre-empting the possible result. Anything can happen when personhood meets the universe.

It is vitally important not to allow the perception of a reactionary ghettoized minority to be foisted upon us by the media and some hostile public opinion. It is true that your vision statement includes such exemplary statements as: 'The way in which the Catholic Church thinks of itself has changed dramatically since the Second Vatican Council. The Church no longer defines itself in terms of an institution distinct from everyday society. It acknowledges that God's work is alive in all human activity. We can find God by reading the signs of our times – in the wealth of culture and in the increasing importance of community.' And this quotation from Pope Benedict XVI: 'Those who practise charity in the Church's name will never seek to impose the Church's faith upon others. They realize that a pure and generous love is the best witness to the God in whom we believe and by whom we are driven to love. A Christian knows when it is time to speak of God and when it is better to say nothing and to let love alone speak.' But, the media and the moguls don't read the disclaimers, nor do they pay any attention to the small print. They work on banner headlines, cartoons and caricatures. The Catholic Church, for the Pantomime which the Press is keen to promote, is the Wicked Stepmother of every fairy tale, Cruella de Vil, or the strict governess in General Montgomery's autobiography who used to get up every morning and say: 'Go out and see what that child is doing and stop him!' They don't read your detailed philosophy of education, but they do turn to page 28 of your Charter, and highlight fourteen coats-of arms surrounding the Le Chéile symbol in the centre of the page, and they say, 'Aha, I told you so, we're dealing here with the Da Vinci Code or some variation of Dungeons and Dragons!'

Our schools must not appear to be sectarian and supportive of values and lifestyles which have been rejected by the majority of twenty-first century families in this country. Otherwise we are categorized as out-of-date leftovers from a previous era, such as the Amish communities in America and Canada. Founded in the Seventeenth Century, they

refuse on principal to move into the Twenty-First. They use horses for farming and transportation, dress in a traditional manner and forbid electricity or telephones in the home. Church members do not join the military, nor do they apply for Social Security benefits, take out insurance or accept any form of financial assistance from the government. They value rural life, manual labour and humility, and they discontinue formal education at the age of fourteen.

The other danger is that the orders, by establishing an umbrella organization such as Le Chéile, could be presented or perceived as grasping power-lusting control freaks unwilling to let go of their hegemony over the Irish educational scene. *Greim an baiste*. The grasp of the dying, as the Irish puts it so graphically.

Okay, you say in your documentation that ‘the establishment of the Le Chéile Schools Trust marks a significant moment when lay people are assuming still more responsibility for Catholic education,’ and that you are now ‘open to and welcomes all who share that vision and wish to benefit from it.’ But why is it only now that you are opening your doors to people other than yourselves? Why would you start such a process when you yourselves, as orders, seem to be dying out? These are the questions and the suspicions which a world antagonistic to the Church can easily harbour. We have to show people that ours is another way: the way of freedom for the person. Our job is to anticipate the surmises and make our schools into the living proof of an alternative vision. ‘The Le Chéile vision is based on . . . the unique dignity of the human person.’ This word ‘person’ in the Christian context is unrecognisable from its normal usage in any other context. This is what we have to explain and promote. The person, in our understanding, whether divine or human, is unrepeatable, unique, original, sui generis, matchless, peerless, exceptional and eternal. To achieve personhood we have to escape from the biological individuality which makes us children of the natural world. The title of my own book *The Boy in the Bubble* [Veritas, 2012] comes from a poignant example. David Phillip Vetter, a boy from Texas, was born with a genetic disease known as ‘severe combined immune deficiency syndrome’ (SCID). This required him to live almost his entire life in a sterilized, bubble-shaped cocoon at the Texas Children’s Hospital in Houston, to ‘isolate’ him from germs and viruses. His condition made him famous in the media, where he was known as ‘the boy in the plastic bubble.’ David died on

February 22, 1984 at the age of twelve. The bubble-shaped isolation unit in which he lived, created by NASA at the Johnson Space Centre, can be seen at the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History. Vetter's tragic life and death brought up many ethical issues about the viability of the 'isolation' treatment. Fortunately, advances in medicine over the years have rendered the 'isolation' treatment obsolete.

However, David's life could be a vividly portrayed image of the condition we find ourselves in without ever becoming aware of it. His condition is ours writ large. Martin Buber's intuition about each one of us as human beings is that we are born individuals inside a Mobile Biological Isolation System and that we only become persons by releasing ourselves from this solitary confinement and developing what he called an 'I-Thou' relationship with someone outside our individuality orbit. Becoming a person means stepping outside the isolation unit in which we are born as individuals, and extending ourselves into the surrounding aura or orbit which makes up the space between ourselves and other people. This space 'in between' is the habitat of persons.

We all suffer from 'severe combined immune deficiency syndrome' when it comes to meeting other people and the world we are required to inhabit. We preserve ourselves from all such contact with a suit of armour that surrounds us like a shell. We have to find ways to stretch out into the world around us like snails emerging into sunlight. There are several ways of developing this special relationship which encourages our exodus but one of these is through education. The educator's role is to establish with the pupil that specific contact which will unlock the armour and allow the person to expand. This contact is the primary word in education. It establishes a trust.

Trust, trust in the world, because this human being exists - that is the most inward achievement of the relation in education.¹

There are other relationships which make up the web of successful education. Relationship with God, relationship with family, relationship with peers. But the essential relationship with the teacher is paramount. It is a contact rather than a content. The 'supreme artistry of the teacher' sees the full being of the child, recognizes what stands

¹ Martin Buber, *Between Man and Man*, Macmillan, New York, 1964, p. 125.

between the child and such fullness, and knows the secret of how to remove these obstacles. We need to nurture people who can move effortlessly between the arts and science, between technology and design, between creative writing and business. We need to open a space for experimentation at every level. Each child should have every opportunity to explore every possibility available. There is no end to their talent and to the variety of their skills. We have to make sure that they develop fully and totally at every level, the physical, the emotional, the intellectual, the intuitional and the spiritual.

Because, before we ever even mention the question of religion of any kind, we are into an international and humanitarian battle for the next generation of young people. There is a 'silent crisis' the world over says Martha C. Nussbaum, author of *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities*, Princeton University Press, 2010/2012. She doesn't mean the global economic crisis that began in 2008, which caused world leaders to work and find solutions because, at least, everyone knew it was a crisis. No, this crisis goes largely unnoticed, it is 'a world-wide crisis in education.' Education leaders are being short-sighted in their efforts to stay economically competitive. 'Radical changes are occurring in what democratic societies teach the young, and these changes have not been well thought through. Thirsty for national profit, nations, and their systems of education, are heedlessly discarding skills that are needed to keep democracies alive. If this trend continues, nations all over the world will soon be producing generations of useful machines, rather than complete citizens who can think for themselves, criticize tradition, and understand the significance of another person's sufferings and achievements. The future of the world's democracies hangs in the balance [2].' Anxiously focused on national economic growth, we increasingly treat education as though its primary goal were to teach students to be economically productive rather than to think critically and become knowledgeable and empathetic citizens.

We are talking about developing the whole person of the child. Every person should be offered such an experience of the release of the creative principle in their personal lives, so that they in turn can introduce it into the workplace or wherever they happen to be. The essential element in our educational process is quality contact between small groups of students and inspirational teachers. Just as we have to enter this world through the human

body of another person, so this confusing world has to be mediated to us by a human person. Education is being led out into the world by a teacher who has learnt how to make this connection. The teacher is a human person with enough imagination and humility to know what parts of this wonderful world are likely to open the door for us into our own personhood. Becoming a person means entering that space between us and the world around us. Education means nothing less than creative encounter with the precise person who can unlock that door.

Education means leading individuals out into the space of personhood. There is a particular I-Thou educational relationship. This is the specific task of all genuine educators and any other kind of learning is secondary to, and dependent upon, this primary task. If we do justice to this calling we will be responsible for the miracle of personhood in our world; if we betray this trust we can do damage to those in our care making it almost impossible for them ever to become persons. There used to be an ad on T.V. showing children who had taken 'Ready brek' in the morning. These children who had taken the advertised cereal were surrounded by a warm surrounding rainbow with the slogan 'Get up and **Glow.**' These children had a radiant space around them which was a natural shock absorber. They were ready to meet anything or anyone. This advertisement gives an idea of the kind of potential space which surrounds each one of us as individuals and into which we have to expand if we are to develop as persons. We are born individuals and we become persons by moving into this space which is between us and other persons. Some of us never manage to expand into this space and therefore never appropriate it. It remains uninhabited. Such people never really move comfortably into the realm of sociability. They remain individuals.

The kind of education which has built itself up over the last 200 years since the concept of compulsory education for all children took root, has become a capitalistic overdrive towards individualistic and isolated achievement. Competitive individualism: me, myself and my notes. Growth in the direction of individuality comes from the originator instinct; growth in the direction of personhood comes from the instinct towards communion. These two instincts are fundamental and irreducible and both are important for effective and mature development. Cultivation of the originator instinct alone leads to isolation, solitude and anti-communitarian living. An education based on the individual and their talents can never lead to sharing or mutuality. The mind of a newborn child, according to Freud, is completely 'id-ridden', a mass of instinctive drives and impulses, which require

immediate satisfaction. In the beginning we are amoral, selfish, and unable to take 'no' for an answer. We have been described by the more cynical observers of our humanity as 'an alimentary canal with no stopper at either end.' Jung had a more positive view of the 'Ego' as necessary for the maturation of identity. It was the means whereby a child builds up and develops self-respect. Early megalomania should be knocked out of most of us by the sharp edges of real life. The child learns that 'I' am not the whole of reality, that 'the real' is not a circumference around me; that I am not the centre of the world. Such natural lessons de-centre without destroying the ego – we learn to link our ego to a larger reality by lowering the volume and switching the lights away from the ego itself. It is essential to encourage initiative and teamwork and not simply individual achievement. We need to nurture people who can move effortlessly between the arts and science, between technology and design, between creative writing and business. We need to open a space for experimentation at every level. Every child should have the opportunity to explore, every possibility available. There is no end to their talent and to the variety of their skills. We have to make sure that they develop fully and totally at every level, the physical, the emotional, the intellectual, the intuitional and the spiritual. Our job is to spot the talent and then have the imagination to find the means whereby this can flourish.

We are dealing with the age from twelve to eighteen which must be one of the most difficult periods of evolution for any of us. We all have personal experience of what can happen to people in these age-groups. We are aware of just how difficult many adolescents can be. 'Little Emperor Syndrome' is an expression which has been coined with reference to 'only children' in The People's Republic of China, where since 1978 most families have been restricted by law to having one child only. However, many of us can identify with the difficulties such a law has introduced with regard to the children such restriction has produced. The Little Emperor Syndrome seems to be the result of the children being the sole focus of attention for both their parents and their grandparents. It is also sometimes attributed to increased spending power within the family and the parents' desire for their child to experience the benefits which they themselves were denied. Described as a problem 'so acute that it's changing how society functions,' the Little Emperor effect has grown beyond a side effect that 'the architects of China's one-child policy could never have foreseen' into a 'behavioral time-bomb.'

Greatly improved purchasing power coupled with excessive pampering of only children causes hugely increased spending on children. From toys to clothes, parents shower their child with material goods and give in to their every demand; it is not uncommon for children to be the best-dressed members of their families. Recently, it is not uncommon for nearly half a family's income to be spent on the child. This has become considerable enough to be noticed on a global scale: marketing groups attribute a near doubling of platinum jewelry sales in China to China's 'spoiled brat' generation. Little Emperors also bear the burden of heavy expectations. From an early age parents push their only child to educational extremes as they cater to their whims. Many of these precocious children can recite the English alphabet and read newspapers in traditional Chinese by the time they are ten years old, but still their parents perform basic tasks for them fixing their hair, tying their shoes, making their beds. Despite this attention there is tough competition as only two percent of the Little Emperors will be able to study at a university. The 'four-two-one family structure' refers to the collapse of the traditionally large Chinese family into four grandparents and two parents doting on one child. The combination of immense pressure to excel and extreme pampering results in the stunting of social and emotional growth. Such perceived maladjustment of the Little Emperors has become an exaggerated topic for media reportage: stories depict children hanging themselves after being denied sweets, and cases of matricide in retribution for a scolding or a dinner served too late. All this can seem exaggerated or far away, but many can read our own situation with lack of control of adolescence writ large. This little emperor syndrome is a possibility for each and every one of us.

Teachers and teaching can also slot into this *mé féin* cocoon. Teachers in this mould think to themselves: if I stop performing then nothing is learnt. All this project and personal portfolios are okay outside the classroom but not in here, not in my jurisdiction. Talk of non-structured ludic kind of learning is a waste of energy and time. Don't talk to me about collaborative teaching. I don't want any other teacher in my classroom; they're only a distraction.

You must take inspiration from the title of your trust: Le Chéile means 'together' and it doesn't mean going it alone. There has to be a massive shift in culture. Deeper learning and learning together. Not a search for facts but an understanding of the whole

picture, the concept behind the facts. Not one person who is an expert teaching us the way things should be done; but every single one of us together learning every day how to be a human being for the rest of our lives.

Unless we put the child and the child's growth towards wholeness at the centre of our vision, our philosophies of education are askew. But even then, unless our vision of what each person is called towards, is capable of, is created for; unless this vision is aligned with the way in which God Almighty has planned the destiny of each one of us, then it is likely to be myopic and it is likely to short-change those who have been entrusted to our care.

When we say that this people is a Godbearer we mean that out of every population certain people are called by the Holy Spirit to lead us out of bondage and into freedom. The task of the truly humble educator is to stand in the temple until such people are presented to us and then, like Simeon and Anna, to have the humility to recognise the one so much greater than ourselves that we are called to educate. Not everyone, of course, is called either to be such a person or to recognize them, but the special humility of the educator is to be aware of that possibility and to allow for that potential in every child who is placed in our care.

Our role as educators is to establish the rights of every child to have direct personal contact with God's Holy Spirit. These are God's children and we have to leave open the call from God to each one of them. Our schools must be a living example of the words of Jesus:

'I came that they should have life and have it more abundantly.'

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