**Keepers of the Flame**

Every year, as regular as clockwork, radio chat-show phone-ins in March are dominated by the shockingly high prices of First Holy Communion dresses. After three tearful days of heart-breaking stories of families suffering severe financial hardships the conversation invariably starts to flag and extends to other topics including Catholic Education. To anyone with any level of exposure to the realities of contemporary Catholic Education it is clear that in many of these contributions old stereotypes abound. In fact many are describing a form of Catholic Education that was last seen in the 1950s. Against this background the publication of the Catholic Schools Partnership’s (CSP) important new document *Catholic Education at Second-Level in the Republic of Ireland: Looking to the Future* needs to be welcomed unreservedly. Simply put it gives a long overdue coherent voice to Catholic Education in Ireland.

The importance of values is forcefully articulated: ‘There is no such thing as a value neutral education. All schools, whether established by the state or by one or other voluntary group, necessarily and implicitly espouse a vision of the human person and give expression to a particular ethos by their choices, actions and priorities. Some people argue that schools should adopt a neutral stance in relation to religion. The inference is that religious belief is purely a private matter and should have no role in the public sphere of education. However, those who would exclude religion from school also espouse their own ethos. They impart a worldview, a philosophy of life, just as much as the person of faith.’

 **Faith and Reason**

Those who cherish the theology of David Tracy will find much to admire here in terms of underlying theological and philosophical presuppositions. To those, like Richard Dawkins, who equate faith with superstition there is a striking emphasis on faith and reason:

‘There is a temptation in contemporary Irish discourse to dismiss religious belief as inherently irrational, divisive and anti-intellectual. Some go so far as to say that schools with a Catholic ethos cannot create a senses of civic virtue. This runs completely contrary to the Catholic tradition which is built on a respect for faith and reason.’

Without using reason faith is doomed to simply repeat the old answers to old questions, rather than better answers to old questions and new answers to emerging questions. However, the document does not make the mistake of elevating reason to a disproportionate degree. Knowledge is not everything. As Thomas a Kempis insightfully observed in *The* *Imitation of Christ*. ‘I would rather feel contrition than be able to define it.’

 **Thick and Thin**

We are living in a world that is changing too fast to be easily understood and that poses a challenge to everybody in the coming years not least those involved in Catholic education. One of the big debates in moral philosophy in recent years has been about the distinction between so-called ‘thin’ moral concepts and ‘thick’ moral concepts. The thin approach represented by people like Hans Kung seeks to find a common moral language while the ‘thick’ approach espoused by Alasdair MacIntyre embodies the particularities and distinctiveness of our traditions.

Listening to some of the debate about the Coolahan *Report on the Patronage of Primary Schools* there is perhaps an analogous distinction to be made in education, e.g. I frequently heard the word ‘multi-denominational’ used when what was described was actually ‘non-denominational’ or secular. There is nothing wrong about any of these but we should have the intellectual honesty to use the right terms and not pretend to be something we are not.

The central challenge for Catholic education was brilliantly captured by Dermot Lane: *If the Church is to remain in education, it will not be by simply divesting the number of schools by 50 per cent or 10 per cent under its patronage and simply continuing to do what it has done in the past. Instead, the Church’s involvement in schools will only succeed by improving the distinctive quality of what it offers in teaching and learning, and the application of that process of teaching and learning to the area of religious education.*

These words – like the Gospel – are easy to say but like the Gospel much more difficult to live by. So the primary challenge will be to be keepers of the flame: Do we give life in a concrete way to the richness of our vision? If so, how?

 The 1998 Education Act recognizes the value of the ‘founding intention’ of the school and the importance of maintaining its ‘characteristic spirit’. So an ongoing challenge will to ensure that both the founding intention and characteristic spirit are retained in ever changing web of social, economic and educational contexts. It is easy to pay lip-service to this but the challenge is not just to talk the talk but walk the walk and give real witness in our schools to the narrative that we belong to and ought to be participating in.

Constraints of space preclude me from dealing with all the challenges facing Catholic Education but I would like to briefly touch on some of the others.

***I come that you may have life and have it to the full.***

Although he never used the word to me Jesus is the pioneer of the holistic approach when he said that: ‘I come that you may have life and have it to the full.’ (John 10:10)

To its credit the CSP document offers a very holistic approach to Catholic education: ‘The aim is to facilitate the intellectual and emotional development of mature human persons who will have the capacity to draw upon multiple resources in interpreting their lives . . . . We need an approach to schooling that keeps curiosity alive, fosters a love of learning, stimulates problem-solving and critical thinking and encourages students to become independent learners while they grow in responsible relationships and develop a sense of the common good.’

It is important as Christians that we rise to this challenge because as Bishop Donal Murray reminds us: *A God who is irrelevant to some spheres or aspects of the creation is not God at all.*

**Our Father**

One of the most significant passages in the gospel is when Jesus is asked how we should pray. I genuinely believe the whole history of Christianity would have been very different if everybody had grasped the enormity of the significance that the first words in the Lord’s Prayer is ‘Our’. A big challenge for Catholic Education will be to work collaboratively with all the partners: trustees, boards of management, parents, teachers, students – and the model will be one of partnership and participation.

The CSP document dreams a big dream – but for the dream to fully materialize there must be ownership by all the partners and that does come easily – and certainly not without partnership. The challenge is to bring people with us. To quote the Irish Catholic Bishops Conference in its document *A Policy for Provision into the Future*: ‘The Catholic school welcomes diversity and strives for inclusivity.’

**I was a stranger and you welcomed me**

The CSP document is acutely sensitive to the fact that we now live in a multicultural society which challenges Catholic schools, ‘to engage in dialogue through facing the reality of a multicultural situation, by overcoming prejudices and by education through encounter with the other.’

I believe that the popular idea of the world as a ‘global village’ is profoundly misleading because village suggests intimacy and community. I think the Irish poet Micheal O’Siadhail is much closer to the mark when he writes of *A Fragile City* with all the connotations of loose social networks and loneliness. In that context a big challenge for Catholic Educationis that our schools are places of hospitality – where all feel cherished and cared for.

In Ian McEwan’s most recent novel *The Children Act* (Jonathan Cape) the heroine muses: ‘Whatever suffering and fear she saw in family and friends could not dislodge an improbable association of hospitals with kindness, with being noted as special, and sheltered from the worst.’

Would it not be great if we had the same association for Catholic schools?

**Be Not Afraid**

Since the recession we are all aware of the prevalence of poverty but perhaps the biggest poverty around us is the poverty of leadership. The CSP has risen wonderfully to the challenge and provided leadership to the Church and society at large and this important new document is a striking illustration of that.

The document quotes Pope Francis: ‘An authentic faith – which is never comfortable or completely personal – always involves a deep desire to change the world, to transmit values, to leave this earth somehow better than we found it’. One of the many challenges facing Catholic Education - and a big one it is – is to be a light to the nation. All of these challenges are also opportunities.