



Promoting Catholic Education

Good evening, ladies and gentlemen. I'm very grateful to be with you to discuss a subject of direct and very personal lifelong concern for me, Catholic education. I think the original title for my talk was "Defending Catholic Education," and it's a good title. But it's a title that, when I began my own involvement with Catholic education several decades ago as a student, would have seemed odd to an audience such as this one. That audience would have been mystified that the notion of Catholic education would need defending.

In the time between my early school years and my current post of Vice Chancellor at a University determined to sustain and deepen its Catholic identity, our culture and society have changed so that there's no mystery to anyone here as to the need to defend Catholic education. Over that time, there have been successes, such as the expansion here in Australia of government support for Catholic schools in the 1970s. My own University was established in 1989 by a unanimous vote of the Western Australia Parliament. But those successes came in the midst of grave and accelerating cultural changes that have led many to question the goodness of any religious education and, in particular, a Catholic education. So those of us whose lives have been shaped by Catholic education and want to bequeath those same benefits to future students must indeed rise to its defence now. And for any here who question that defence, I thank you in advance for listening charitably to what I have to say and for entering into the conversation with an open mind.

However, being Irish, and an optimistic Irishman at that - a rare creature perhaps - I've never been content with playing defence or fending

off the arguments of others. We also need to make the case in positive and well-founded ways for all that a Catholic education offers. So my remarks will, I hope, both defend and promote the idea of Catholic education, an idea that is not merely defensible but is one of the most noble, cherished, rich and important goods our civilization has developed and spread throughout the world. I know, because I've seen it not just over decades, but across all latitudes and longitudes.

A fundamental aspect of humans is that we want to know things. Another fundamental aspect is that we all seek the good, confused as we may be about what the good really is. And another fundamental aspect of humans is that we deliberate about the choices in front of us, then we choose and act. So to put my talk in those basic human terms, the questions I want to invite you to deliberate about are what is good about Catholic education? Why choose a Catholic school or university?

Ladies and gentlemen, those question needs to be answered personally, by each of us; those who have made the choice, and those for whom the choice was made for them.

I will cover three dimensions tonight as to why choose a Catholic school or education; the philosophical, the practical and, perhaps the most difficult for someone trained as a diplomat, the personal or the pastoral. I have chosen that order because although the philosophical and the practical maybe more academic, the personal cannot be explained or understood without them.

First, the philosophical. This will have two parts. First, the distinct philosophy that is

found in the approach to Catholic education, its provenance, its depth and its global reach. I also want to point out, and you will forgive me for this as a political scientist, is what the existence of Catholic schools, especially those enjoying State support, says about the health of our liberal democracy. My second point will cover the practical dimensions, in particular some of the criticisms of a Catholic education. It is perhaps the dimension we now hear about the most. And finally, I want to conclude with the personal/pastoral, because it would be wrong not to respond to the question posed with personal observations about what the Catholic school meant for me.

Catholic education could be summed up as expanding each person's capacity for love, so that we develop the whole person, nurturing body, mind and spirit. Pope emeritus Benedict XVI, during his State Visit to the United Kingdom in 2010, when he visited St. Mary's University, said the fundamental purpose of a Catholic education is 'about forming the human person, equipping him or her to live life to the full – in short it is about imparting wisdom'. And Catholic schools should never lose sight of that bigger picture. That bigger picture was characterised as something bigger than the individual subjects studied or skills acquired. It was putting all the work undertaken in the context of growing in friendship with God, and all that flows from that friendship. It was not just to learn to be good students, but good citizens, good people. And of course Pope Benedict was echoing the thoughts of Saint John Henry Newman in his call in the 19th Century for universities to be places where a thousand schools make contributions and where the academic formation is wide and inter-woven across disciplines. In Newman's words, 'It is the education which gives a [person] a clear, conscious view of their own opinions and judgments, a truth in developing them, an eloquence in expressing them, and a force in urging them.'

For me this is the distinctive philosophy offered by a Catholic education. It is about living a fulfilled life and about forming people of virtue, sound judgment and character.

Retaining such a focus in an era of ever more specialisation in education can be challenging. One of the great challenges in contemporary education is how to maintain a focus on the unity of knowledge spoken of by Newman - so that even if one later specialises, one still has a broad understanding across many disciplines. Because Newman's idea is that the learning takes place in the inter-disciplinary space – and it is within that encounter that one is led to searching questions, and possible answers, which in turn broadens the horizon and the mind and forms the human character.

That does not mean a diminishing of the vocational; it ensures that knowledge is balanced with a comprehensive formation, which equips the student in the broadest possible sense whether they pursue a more vocational or academic track. Nor is the Catholic approach to education narrowly focused on the academic and measured by a grade in an exam (important as they are in some cultures). That grade is purely a momentary and partial indicator of a level of understanding. A Catholic education is a richer, deeper and more sophisticated ecology that goes to make up the Catholic school, that provides the roots which allows the ecology to flourish and grow, and academic results are just one plant in that ecology.

So education in the Catholic tradition is to remember the bigger picture, to think about formation in its widest human sense so that it is not simply about acquiring a trade or a profession important as they are to modern living. Rather, it is about the formation of the whole person.

It is not possible however, to form the whole person unless the approach is underpinned with an understanding of what, and who the human person is, and where that person stands in the order of creation. In Catholic education we take that view from our Christian faith, biblical and tradition, It is that view of the human being in the widest context, a Christian anthropology, which sets the philosophy of Catholic education apart and contrasts with the subjectivism which is increasingly the

more prevalent paradigm in the contemporary era. Catholic education is rooted.

That distinctive Catholic offer is about living a fulfilled life, rooted in the Gospel, and springing from the central truths of the human person, about forming people of virtue, sound judgment and character capable of living within society. It is about having a regard for the needs of others and the common good – as part of the individual good; a sense of the obligations that must accompany rights if a political order is to survive; a notion of the natural law, the transcendent order that includes both duties to our community beyond our own ease and comfort, and our responsibilities to previous and future generations; and a long-standing intellectual tradition of the pursuit of universal and eternal truths. It is contrary to the increasingly predominant view of education, which often reduces education to simply acquiring personal knowledge. A Catholic inspired education, properly embedded into a Christian anthropology is about others. Such an education helps to create what the humanist philosopher Jürgen Habermas calls ‘bonds of solidarity’ the very foundations on which our societies rest.

So the offer of an education inspired by the Catholic tradition and delivered in a Catholic school is distinctive through its depth, heritage and breadth.

Ladies and gentlemen the Catholic Church has been following a distinct approach now for a considerable period of time. In the case of Universities for well over a thousand years; and as universities grew out of schools, I suspect even longer for Catholic schools. The West’s oldest universities grew out of the Church and to this day the Catholic Church is the world’s largest international provider of primary, secondary and tertiary education. Each day over sixty million students attend Catholic schools across the world. Each of those schools shares in something bigger than the single school. They share a larger history and tradition. They share an approach to education that is the oldest tradition in the western world, and one of the oldest across

the world, especially if one appreciates the Hellenic influence in early Christianity.

This vast network of education crossing cultures, languages, faiths, nationalities, ethnicities, social income brackets, does something else significant for our societies. It helps to keep our societies pluralist and open. Why?

Our approach to Catholic schools is a product of a rather unique historical context and a philosophical tradition born out of that context. Our society did not get it right over the centuries as it tried to accommodate difference. Today, the existence of Catholic schools, and state funded ones at that, tell us something deeper about our society and the role of the state vis a vis the individual and non-state organisations. To me it says something about the health of liberal democratic order.

Some states, especially totalitarian ones, would not tolerate Catholic schools or other types of schools, other than those delivering a rather narrow state narrative and agenda. One just has to recall what happens when dictatorships take power. They suppress that which is different. The plight of schools in the former USSR and its orbit was a particular case in point. Liberal, and open states on the other hand do not fear different approaches to education and often support these different approaches through the provision of state funding. The very existence and functioning of the Catholic school, motivated by the practical expression of faith, says something about the limits of state power and control. I have always found that how faith communities are treated by the state can often be a litmus test for a broader set of freedoms within the society.

Critiques by faith communities can provide a real service and value to the liberal state by contributing to the plurality that helps to keep the state open to challenge, otherwise it could run the risk of becoming illiberal, above challenge and imposing uniform beliefs on its citizens. Western liberal democracies need debate and vibrant differences to remain alive

and achieve renewal. It is their oxygen. One of the West's most eminent philosophers – Jürgen Habermas is alive to that risk. He says, “It is in the interest of the constitutional state to deal carefully with all the cultural sources that nourish its citizens’ consciousness of norms and their solidarity.”

The Catholic school thus for me is one of the living examples of a healthy pluralism, or a constructive diversity of groups with different but essentially compatible views within a political community. That pluralism does not deny western society’s Christian roots or heritage which are reflected across a whole set of norms from the legal to the parliamentary. The society’s Judaeo-Christian foundations rather, provide a pluralist platform on which others can integrate, engage and participate. I am not saying that it was always thus and the path to achieving that inclusiveness was not always easy. But it is a working system nonetheless which has managed over the centuries and recent decades to integrate various differences of faith. In my view it is more preferable and organic than trying to create a platform, which has not evolved and perhaps has weaker roots, one that reduces distinction to a form of nihilism. Pluralism allows for a variety of voices and providers rather than a singularity of approach.

And so that philosophical tradition which underpins the Catholic school exists because of a wider commitment to pluralism in society. That pluralist society is one often characterized by a weaker state acting as a regulator, but open to a variety of service providers meeting acceptable standards and contributing to the flourishing of wider society. I suspect that vision of the state, a weaker state, constrained by other organisations and sitting amidst an enriched society, but not a state which has consumed society, is one that I think many of us would hold to, especially considering the history of some of societies in recent decades. We alas cannot be complacent, as we have seen even in the West, state power beginning to encroach on some of societal freedoms.

The distinct philosophy that underpins the Catholic school, in my opinion also underpins

much else in our society. It is part of something bigger than the nation, it touches humanity in its widest form, it reminds us of what it is to have faith and it gives expression to our life of gospel values as a community and it opens us up to challenge. It is a tangible expression of a religious freedom and our openness to the world, and the state’s openness to difference. If that freedom were to be removed, or a new more supposedly level or neutral platform introduced by the state, it would diminish our society and risk upsetting a delicate balance that all healthy societies need to grow and develop. It would also erode, in my view a necessary and healthy check on state influence and power. So choosing a Catholic school or education not just forms good citizens, but nurtures a healthy society.

But to go back to defence for a moment, we cannot take our existence for granted in an increasingly secularised society. The healthy pluralism that animates liberal societies has changed to bring to the fore groups whose view of the good is very different from that of the Catholic Church, and who would remove any vestige of Church teaching from the culture and society. The tolerance that marks successful liberal communities has come to include those who are intolerant of opposing views. There are competing understandings of human anthropology that exclude the wisdom of the Judaeo-Christian tradition; a misplaced emphasis on feeling over reason; and a misunderstanding of the relationship between faith and reason. The divisions between members of a society that focusses on what bioethicist O. Carter Snead has recently called “expressive individualism” mean that at present human life from conception to natural death is under constant threat. Individual freedom seems to trump all, forgetting what we have learned and what we should offer to society about a true common good. The very young and the aged are increasingly vulnerable.

Now, my second point, the practical. I’d like to blend the defence and promotion of Catholic schools by looking at the experience of several places, including Australia. Some

critics would argue that Catholic schools might promote division and sectarianism, undermining tolerance. But in societies much more historically divided than Australia, that's not the case. Professor Duncan Morrow's report on sectarianism in Scotland showed that Catholic schools showed that they did not cause sectarianism. Across many Catholic and Anglican schools in England it is noticeable that they have significant numbers of students coming from other faith communities because of the values and ethos enshrined in the school.

I spoke about that basic human activity of deliberation and choice. Here in Australia, about one-fifth of all primary and secondary school students, around 785,000 youngsters, are in Catholic schools, reflecting the choice of a significant proportion of the population. The number of students in Catholic primary and secondary schools increased by over 8% between 2011 and 2021. Some 40% of Catholic primary and secondary school students are not Catholic, so many non-Catholic Australians choose Catholic education. There doesn't seem to be a sectarian problem here.

And in a much different cultural context, I witnessed that many times during my work in Pakistan where many of the Catholic and Church of Pakistan schools had a majority of Muslim students and provided a space for minorities to meet and integrate. In St. Patrick's High School in Karachi one photo sums it up, it's a photo of one of the founders of the Indian BJP party with the former President of Pakistan, General Musharrif. The photo was taken when they were both at a Catholic school.

Some also claim that Catholic schools wherever they exist are not representative of wider society. Starting again outside Australia, the most recent statistics for the Catholic schools sector in England show the following. Catholic schools are more ethnically diverse than the national average, they take more students from deprived areas, they have a higher number of Ofsted ranked good or outstanding schools and students score higher in GCSEs and SATs than the national

average. 18.7% of pupils at Catholic primary schools come from the lowest 10% of income sector of society compared to a national average of 13.9%; at secondary school again the Catholic sector has a similar pattern with 17.4% coming from the lowest income bracket compared to 11.8% nationally.

The picture here in Australia is impressive. If you want inclusiveness, look at Catholic education. 38% of Catholic schools are in rural or remote regions. 41% of Catholic school students are funded for socio-educational disadvantage. 20% of students have disabilities. Australia's indigenous population comprises 3.3% of the national total. In 2021, 3.4% of students in Catholic schools were indigenous, up from 2.4% in 2011. Catholic education in Australia is a good offered to all.

The distinct approach, which focuses the Catholic school on the wider formation, not just the academic, helps to develop the whole person. It instils a formation of character to develop good citizens. That commitment on the part of the staff is supported by a wider group of people, drawn from parishes and the diocese. That ecology, that unique ecology, is what gives rise to the excellence found in many Catholic schools. That wider community dimension is often not appreciated.

Catholic schools are not just motivated by the latest key performance indicator, fad or gimmick. Rather, the approach stems from centuries of wisdom and insight about the human person, and their dignity as being made in the image and likeness of God, and underpinned within a Christian anthropology. Speaking at St. Mary's, Pope emeritus Benedict said, "the task of a teacher is not simply to impart information or to provide training in skills intended to deliver some economic benefit to society; education is not and must never be considered as purely utilitarian. It is about forming the human person, equipping him or her to live life to the full – in short it is about imparting wisdom. And true wisdom is inseparable from knowledge of the Creator, for "both we and our words are in his hand, as are all understanding and skill in crafts" (Wis 7:16)."

And it is also that wider formation, which focuses on the whole, not just a part that better equips the young student to navigate life to the full. That approach which focuses beyond just the academic actually helps the student to grow and to achieve. A student that is comfortable in a community, talking and engaging with people who are different to them will also be comfortable in life. Someone who knows who they are, asks searching questions, engages with difference without being overwhelmed by it, all of these attributes stem from that distinct philosophy of education. Catholic education asks people to think beyond themselves, to communicate cross-generationally and to understand the plight of those less well-off materially and socially, and to underpin that with a belief in something greater than self. That wider community context, which the Catholic school engages with beyond its gates, means that the student is being developed for their active engagement in the wider society. That too will help them succeed, to develop their skills and talents to the best of their ability and to engage in the society they live within.

But the identity of a Catholic school is not simply about numbers or the orthodoxy of course content, but about conviction. The constant integration of the ethos with the educational philosophy reminds all concerned of the broader goals of Catholic education. Retaining that integration requires constant attention. Getting the balance right all the time will not always be easy. But the Catholic school or university needs to be as attentive to its ethos and identity as it is to the essential professional metrics, otherwise it runs the risk of cutting itself off from its roots and hence its distinctive offer. And if it did cut itself off, then the rich ecology would diminish which would gradually see the uniqueness of the offer, and its contribution disappear. In those circumstances we would lose, a ladder, which has helped many of us achieve and grow.

And finally, the pastoral, which I will illustrate through the personal. Why choose a Catholic school? Ladies and gentlemen, some of you

will have chosen Catholic schools for your children, some of you will have had a school chosen for you by parents or guardians. You have asked me today to defend and promote Catholic education. My response, to be genuine, must touch on the personal.

I have spoken about the philosophical and the practical. They both in my experience complement the pastoral/personal. The success of Catholic schools in this society can easily be measured by utility, league tables and exam results, but they are simply manifestations of deeper more profound success. For most of us going through Catholic schools we were likely to be the first in our families to go to University. I was the first in my family to complete secondary school. My parents had just missed out on the UK 1944 education act, which substantially increased free places for students who would not otherwise be able to continue in school beyond the age of 14.

For my part, that philosophy of education, which I opened with, the practical that I addressed, all flowed into the personal reality of growing up in a space where the relationship between state and society was not settled, indeed it still isn't - Northern Ireland. The philosophy of education that characterises a Catholic school, kept my own society open to the world, even in the darkest days of the conflict, it reminded us bravely of something beyond the immediate. It stood for the vision of the human person in a broader Christian anthropology in the face of violence and adversity, and it articulated a clear view on the sanctity of human life irrespective of the audience or the circumstance. That made a lifelong impression on me.

I went to schools on the border between Northern Ireland and Southern Ireland. I look back on that time and recall the many around me who were prevented from political radicalization because of their education in Catholic schools. In those schools daily, we were challenged to think morally and to act courageously and the Church never flinched from its transmission of a strong moral code

regarding its teaching on human life and dignity. That message was delivered within the community to those who engaged in violence, including the state and its agencies (a state that I later went on to serve and represent). For the Church in those times to take such a stand, was for me a powerful example of Catholic education and what it stands for. It is one I will always be grateful for because had it not been for such witness then one never knows what would have become of our society and those young people growing up within it at that time.

In my experience Catholic schools stopped a bad situation from becoming much worse. They held a line. They adhered to the Christian message and didn't let it succumb to the power of alternative messages which can often whip one up in the emotion of the moment. The view on the human person and a Christ centred anthropology was not just an academic perspective, it was real, it was lived, and it held.

So, when you ask someone like me to promote Catholic education it's an easy task because it made such a crucial difference in enabling, and opening doors through education which had been firmly closed to my parents and grandparents. I know that my lived experience in the first half of my life is unlikely to be that of someone of the same age growing up here in Australia. But your infrastructure of Catholic education which you have today shares the same roots. In 2020 you celebrated 200 years of Catholic education and one of the key architects of that first infrastructure lies a short distance from us here in the person of Fr. Theyry now buried a long way from the land of his birth and this Cathedral owes much of its history to the Abbey at Downside where the remains of St. Oliver Plunkett now rest.

When you experience a Catholic education which not only taught you but showed you what human dignity meant, what a proper just order looked like and what injustice looked like, then you value that for the rest of your life. The Catholic school for me was one of the very few places in society where I did not

feel second-class. Everywhere else, state and society had become conflated. It was in the school and the parish that I was able to grow and develop, to question openly, and to appreciate something beyond the temporary and the immediate. That education was not narrow, nor shrill, nor closed, but open and challenging and I have no doubt opened my mind to roles and possibilities that I could never have imagined. I suppose an acceptance and inclusion that was delivered through education and not violence.

Our experiences ladies and gentlemen shape who we are, and our values are shaped by our family, our peers and the education institutions we have been a part of. It is this latter influence which I have dwelt on today, and outlined its lasting impact. I believe that my experience in formation within a Catholic school was transformative and far from unique. So you will find here one voice at least who will always be grateful for Catholic schools, their existence and those who work in them. Catholic education changed a life, and for the better and in the most challenging circumstances. This is my best answer to your challenge to promote or defend Catholic education – it can transform and change, overcome injustice and provide hope that as Heraclitus says – 'everything can change'.

Thank you.