

# **Keynote address by Archbishop Eamon Martin to JMB/AMCSS 31st Annual Conference Galway**

**3 May 2018, Galmont Hotel (formerly the Radisson Blu Hotel)**

All over Ireland these days, thousands of young people in their final year of primary education are receiving the sacrament of Confirmation. This year in anticipation of the World Meeting of the families, I'm taking the opportunity at Confirmation ceremonies to say thanks to families, to acknowledge and celebrate the joy of love in the family, and to reflect on some of the challenges, pressures and struggles which families face. The Confirmation ceremony is a special moment of connection between Family, Parish and School. It is an opportunity to humbly recognise how much we all need each other and to underline the importance of our working together in order to offer the very best education to our young people.

The three and a half thousand young people confirmed this year in the Archdiocese of Armagh will transfer in September to post-primary schools in Louth, Armagh, Tyrone and Derry - schools like your own. The theme of your Conference is: "Catholic Schools - a Meeting of Families". I would like to reflect on some of the distinctive ways in which our Catholic schools can support families in the sometimes daunting task of educating young people today.

In many ways a good Catholic school becomes part of the "extended family" for each of its pupils. Over the next six or seven years you will interact with the parents and families of the pupils who join you in September. You will share the joys of their family life, and sometimes also, their private struggles. You will journey with these young people through some of their most formative years, as they develop physically, emotionally, psychologically and spiritually; you will help them relate to the world and explore the great questions of today; you will guide them as they begin to form their personal attitudes and values, setting down for themselves principles and foundations for life; you will comfort and encourage them as they learn to cope with the complexity of relationships, and as they discover who they are as a person.

At the outset it is important for me to be clear that as a school you are not the primary educators of children and young people in many of these areas. The family remains for them the privileged place of encounter and growth - parents are the first teachers, the home is the first "school of humanity". Many years ago Pope Saint John Paul II described this right and duty of parents to be the first educators, as "essential", "original", "irreplaceable" and "inalienable" (see *Familiaris Consortio* 36).

Nevertheless parents need support. They turn to you, as trusted fellow pilgrims, to accompany them and their daughters or sons, and especially to help them cope with the

twists and turns in teenage life. They rely on your wisdom and experience.

At the World Meeting of Families later this year, the seminal text for reflection and discussion will be Pope Francis' *Amoris Laetitia* (*The Joy of Love*). Chapter seven of that document is entitled: 'Towards a better education of children'. It looks in detail at the educational role of families. Today, inspired by the thoughts of Pope Francis in *Amoris Laetitia* chapter seven, I want to concentrate on three of the ways in which you, the leaders and managers of our Catholic post-primary schools can support families, by:

Helping to develop in young people a responsible use of freedom; Establishing a sound morals and values framework for life; and Learning to form healthy and life-giving relationships.

## **Helping to develop in young people a responsible use of freedom**

Pope Francis cautions parents - and by extension, I expect, also teachers and schools - against being "obsessive" in wanting to control their children's every experience and movement (AL 261). Much more important, he says, is "the ability to lovingly help them grow in freedom, maturity, overall discipline and real autonomy".

Pope Francis goes on to say that "Education includes encouraging the responsible use of freedom to face issues with good sense and intelligence. It involves forming persons who readily understand that their own lives, and the life of the community, are in their hands, and that freedom is itself a great gift (AL 262)".

Perhaps one of the most dominant messages presented to young people nowadays is one of entitlement and personal autonomy. It is a challenge for any parent or teacher to strike the correct balance between freedom and surveillance - between giving young people enough space to develop responsibly, while at the same time ensuring they are not placing themselves in danger. With so many risks out there - from alcohol, drugs, unhealthy relationships, the perils of the internet - striking the balance between being too strict and too lenient is not easy. How much should we hold on - 'keeping an eye' on them, wanting to know their every movement and location? How much do we let go - trusting them to make their own decisions and giving them space to develop into the person God wants them to be?

At times, families and schools will need to offer what Pope Francis calls "loving correction", pointing out what is right and what is wrong, and where young people might be going astray. It does young people no good to ignore the influence of evil in the world, and the temptations to sin which can sometimes weaken their will, darken their thoughts and lead them into danger. Schools can assist families in helping young people to develop good habits, sound interior principles and ways of thinking, an awareness of boundaries, and the self-discipline of sometimes just saying 'no'.

Catholic schools therefore should never underestimate the significance of their Pastoral Programmes, and in particular their Positive Behaviour Management policies and strategies which must always be characterised by love, tenderness and mercy.

Pope Francis explains: "A balance has to be found between two equally harmful extremes. One would be to try to make everything revolve around the child's desires; such children will grow up with a sense of their rights but not their responsibilities. The other would be to deprive the child of an awareness of his or her dignity, personal identity and rights; such children end up overwhelmed by their duties and a need to carry out other people's wishes (AL 276).

Saint Paul puts it this way: "For freedom Christ has set us free ... you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence ... Live by the Spirit - the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control" (Galatians 5).

Responsible freedom is more than the capacity to choose this, or that. It includes the instinct to weigh up what is right and wrong, what is wholesome and healthy, what is in harmony with God's will for our long term happiness and the happiness of others. Responsible freedom helps young people to think beyond themselves and develop a heart which is moved with love - to see the world as Christ sees it - and to put themselves in the shoes of the least fortunate.

### **Establishing a sound morals and values framework for life**

Young people today are often given the message that 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.

But in life our young people will 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.

Catholic schools can assist parents and families by helping young people find moral reference points, by offering a morals and values framework, or roadmap, to guide them.

Such a framework will be centred on the Gospel, and especially on the principle of loving God and loving our neighbour as ourselves. Everything else - the Commandments, the Beatitudes and other teachings of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount, and all the precepts and moral teachings of the Church - point us to ways of expressing a loving relationship with God and neighbour, or caution us about acts and behaviour that might contradict it.

The Catholic school ought therefore to be a community

inspired by Gospel values and transmitting Gospel values, including: the sacredness of human life; the dignity of the person; integrity; peace; tolerance; justice; honesty and truth; holiness; gentleness and compassion; mercy and forgiveness; purity; respect.

Just as the family home introduces children to the process of socialisation and awareness of others and the needs of the world; the school builds upon this, ensuring that young people learn to relate to, and understand the needs of others, helping them realise that when you take account of others, sometimes you have to postpone, or wait for your own needs or desires. *Amoris Laetitia* puts it well:

"The task of education is to make us sense that the world and society are also our home; it trains us how to live together in this greater home. In the family we learn closeness, Care and respect for others. We break out of our fatal self-absorption and come to realise that we are living with and alongside others who are worthy of our concern, our kindness and our affection (AL 276)".

A litmus test of Catholic school ethos will be how its most vulnerable members are getting on. Pupils with disabilities or other special educational needs will be given particular attention and support, and the school will work to overcome all kinds of exclusion which would deny any young person the opportunity to receive quality education. There is therefore no place for bullying, harassment, racism, homophobia, or any form of victimisation in a Catholic school.

A good Catholic school will inspire empathy for those less fortunate, like the homeless, migrants and refugees. By frowning upon waste and what Pope Francis calls the 'throwaway culture', the Catholic school reminds us never to take for granted the opportunities in health, education, food, water, that we are privileged to share. It models for families the importance of praying grace before and after meals; it raises awareness of the injustices and inequalities that so dramatically divide the rich and poor on earth.

Pope Francis has said: 'None of us can think we are exempt from concern for the poor and for social justice (*Evangelii Gaudium* 201)'. As leaders and managers of Catholic schools, I encourage you today to always look out for those who are being left behind. Be alert to potential inequalities in our educational system and to those young people - particularly the socially disadvantaged and those with greatest educational needs - who might leave without meaningful qualifications or opportunities, only to end up marginalised and forgotten by society.

### **Learning to form healthy and life-giving relationships**

Learning to form healthy and life-giving relationships is an essential aspect of all education, firstly at home, and then supported by schools. There is no doubt that 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. Catholic schools should therefore model and encourage relationships marked by respect, understanding, forgiveness, empathy and selflessness.

### **Social Media**

For many years now families and schools have grappled with the challenge of monitoring the use of smartphones and other mobile devices by children and young people. It is estimated that approximately a quarter of 8-11 year olds already have a social media profile. The debate in recent days about the 'digital age of consent' raises many important questions for families and also for schools.

As educators you no doubt value the positive impact that access to online resources can have on learning and teaching. Increasingly however, we are aware of the more threatening nature of much online activity for our young people, and its undoubted impact on their health and well-being. Issues mentioned include sleep deprivation, obesity, cyber-bullying, vulnerability to targeted advertising, harvesting of their data, access to hard-core pornography, the dangers of sexting and "sextortion", and the addictive nature of many popular 'apps'.

Year heads and other pastoral staff in your schools will be aware of young people who become dependent on online affirmation and popularity, who display anxiety at being left out of online forums and conversations, or being the target of others' bullying attentions.

Families and parents will welcome debate and discussion within schools on all these issues. Internet security and literacy is now an essential life-skill for pupils and parents alike. Parents will be interested in your advice about boundaries, guidelines and "digital breaks", about the age appropriateness of various digital activities, on ways of talking to their children about issues as they arise, on how to monitor and be vigilant about their son or daughter's use of the internet and on recognising signs of problems before they become critical.

### **Relationships and Sexuality Education**

The particular danger presented by online pornography brings us to the issue of relationships and sexuality education. In *Amoris Laetitia* chapter seven, Pope Francis questions whether we have yet taken seriously the challenge of developing what the Second Vatican Council called "a positive and prudent sex education" with "due weight being given to the advances in psychological, pedagogical and didactic sciences (AL 280)".

"It is not easy", he adds, "to approach the issue of sex education in an age when sexuality tends to be trivialised and impoverished. It can only be seen within the broader framework of an education for love, for mutual self-giving".

In this, Pope Francis is repeating the long held view of many educationalists and parents that relationships and sexuality education should not be reduced to the imparting of so-called "objective" information, dissociated from a morals and values framework or from the totality of relationships communicated via the ethos or characteristic spirit of any school - Catholic or otherwise. As Pope Saint John Paul II said:

"Sexuality is an enrichment of the whole person – body, emotions and soul – and manifests its inmost meaning in leading the person to the gift of self in love" (FC 37).

During the recent (18 April) second stage debate in Dáil Éireann on the Provision of Objective Sex Education Bill 2018, the approach of Catholic Schools to Relationships and Sexuality Education was variously described by some as "backward", "grossly distorted", not "objective", non "factual", and even biologically incorrect. It was argued that relationships and sexuality education has to be "non-ethos based". These negative perceptions of the approach to relationships and sexuality education in our schools will sound unfair, harsh, uninformed and agenda-driven to many parents and to those who have been sensitively working in this area within our Catholic schools.

I agree that a review of relationships and sexuality education in all schools, including our Catholic schools, is essential if we are to help young people cope with the risks to their health and well-being presented in both the virtual and real worlds they inhabit.

It is true that relationships and sexuality education in Catholic schools is situated within a morals and values framework that is derived ultimately from the life and teaching of Christ and transmitted through the teaching of the Catholic Church. Catholic schools should seek to promote a positive self-image and attitude to our bodies, an appreciation of the gift of sexuality. They should help educate young people in taking responsibility and making well informed decisions regarding their choices, including being aware of their own values and those of others who may differ from them.

This questions and challenges facing young people in living their lives today should not be ignored or skimmed over. A sound relationships and sexuality programme, developed in consultation with parents, will include age appropriate information, debate and discussion about contraception, sexually transmitted infections, same sex attraction and unions and the full meaning of consent - recent coverage of the Belfast trial and the international #MeToo movement also focuses minds on the issues of sexual violence and harassment. In choosing to send their children to a Catholic school, parents will want schools to help young people

develop what *Amoris Laetitia* describes as a “critical sense in dealing with the onslaught of new ideas and suggestions, the flood of pornography and the overload of stimuli that can deform sexuality (AL 281)”.

Relationships and Sexuality Education ought therefore to be an integral part of the curriculum in a Catholic school. It should present the positive, yet challenging Catholic vision for relationships, chastity, marriage and the family. This will include 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.

In light of much public discussion about LGBT and gender issues, it is important that we, in Catholic schools, also evaluate the support offered to students who are facing new and deep questions relating to their sexual identity as they mature.

All young people must be treated with compassion and be helped to understand that they are loved by God and their inherent human dignity is valued and respected. The prevalence of sexual bullying and ostracisation can so easily leave them susceptible to feelings of rejection, distress, self-harm and risk-taking behaviours. This cannot be tolerated in any school, never mind a Catholic school which holds, as a core value, the dignity of every human person.

In the context of the current debate about relationships and sexuality education in Ireland it would be helpful for us to evaluate, at both local and national level, how our Catholic schools can ensure the safest and most healthy learning environment for all young people. Given that many Catholic schools have already been sensitively offering support to pupils who are beginning to express same sex attractions or raising personal questions about gender identity, it is timely to identify, develop and disseminate best practice in this area across all our Catholic schools. While recognising the challenges at the interface between the Church's moral teaching and pastoral practice, it would be helpful for us to share learning about: inclusive school structures and relationships; sensitive pastoral outreach and support for students; age-appropriate pastoral programmes together with curricular methodologies and resources; quality professional development and training for staff. At all times, the needs and views of parents should be fully considered in such a review and resources and methods should be developed which reflect and enhance the characteristic spirit of a Catholic school.

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To conclude, let me recall again what Pope Francis says in

chapter seven of *Amoris Laetitia* (*The Joy of Love*). In cautioning parents against being “obsessive” in wanting to control their children's every experience and movement (AL 261), he says “The real question, then, is not where our children are physically, or whom they are with at any given time, but rather where they are existentially, where they stand in terms of their convictions, goals, desires and dreams”. Pope Francis continues: “The questions I would put to parents are these: ‘Do we seek to understand ‘where’ our children really are in their journey? Where is their soul, do we really know? And above all, do we want to know?’”

We, in Catholic schools might ask ourselves similar questions. By supporting parents in the ways I have described, leaders and boards of management in Catholic schools are saying with families:

We do want to know. We want to understand where young people are on their journey. We care about where they are existentially; we are concerned about where is their soul; we want them to make responsible use of freedom, to have a sound morals and values framework and to develop healthy and life-giving relationships.

I thank you for all you are already doing in leading and managing our Catholic schools and offer you every blessing as you continue to support families towards a better education of children.