

Senior SPHE/RSE Keynote speech of Archbishop Eamon Martin (Friday Sept 4th 2026)

Last month approximately 100,000 young people on the island of Ireland received their Leaving Certificate or A-level results. There were the usual happy photos of smiling students with their proud parents and teachers, along with the customary articles and interviews about trends in the results and various third level courses and destinations.

I was struck by the words of one young man who was asked about the challenges he faced during his Leaving Cert year; he answered honestly, “deciding what to do at the end of it all.”

What will they do at the end of it all? That’s the kind of question that grounds our approach in Catholic schools, or perhaps even: What kind of person will they turn out to be?

I remember the late Pope Francis once telling young people in the Philippines that the most important subject they must learn in life is to love. ‘To love like Jesus’, he said, ‘we need three languages: the language of the mind, the language of the heart and the language of the hands. These three languages must be spoken together in harmony.’

Our Catholic schools aim to be places where young people learn to love and to serve God and neighbour with the languages of the mind, the heart and the hands. In Senior SPHE/RSE we endeavour to help young people to integrate their thoughts, feelings and actions so that they leave school as fully rounded individuals - not only with good grades, but also with attitudes and values, inspired by Christ, that will help them become fully the person that God wants them to be.

Today you will have the opportunity to delve into the actual content and modules of the new “Living Love” Senior Programme for Catholic schools. In this address I want to situate Living Love within the mission, ethos and theological vision of Catholic schools as they seek the integral formation of young people: intellectually, morally, spiritually, emotionally, socially and physically.

The title I’ve chosen is “Forming Hearts for Love”, drawing from the image of the heart in Pope Francis’ last encyclical, *Dilexit Nos*, where he describes the heart as the place ‘where the fragments of life are gathered into unity’. This image allows us to reflect on the fragmentation experienced by young people

nowadays and on how the Catholic school can become a “school of the heart”: a community in which young people are accompanied and formed in the virtues they will need to “live love”.

SPHE and RSE belong intrinsically to the mission of the Catholic school. Our task is not simply to tell young people what they may, or may not do, but rather, to help them become capable of responsible freedom and love. It is the responsibility of the school Board of Management/ Governors and principal, in consultation with parents, to promote the moral, spiritual, social and personal development of students and provide health education for them (Education Act 1998:9d).

Existential Questions

In Chapter 7 of *Amoris Laetitia*, Pope Francis said that the decisive educational question for parents is not where our children are physically at this or that moment, and who are they with, but rather, where they are existentially? Where do they stand in terms of their convictions, their goals, desires and dreams? Where are they on their life’s journey? Where is their soul?

These are critical questions. And today, in launching *Living Love*, we could add further questions, like: Where are our young people learning what love means? Who is shaping their thoughts about sexuality and intimacy? How do they learn to cope with attraction or heartbreak? And what happens when it is pornography that answers their questions long before the guidance of trusted adult?

Cura Personalis

In Catholic schools we care about the answers to these questions because the care of the person, (what Ignatian spirituality refers to as *cura personalis*) is at the core of our ethos and mission is about the accompaniment of the whole person - body, mind and spirit.

Fragmentation

Young people today are surrounded by so much fragmentation. They inhabit a culture in which realities that should properly belong together are too often separated, like:

- Body from person;
- Sexuality from committed relationship;
- Biological sex from gender;
- Freedom from responsibility or boundaries.

None of this is their fault. They have inherited this environment. They live within a culture that bombards them with enormous quantities of information, imagery, opinion and stimulation, and often before they have developed the interior resources needed to interpret it.

Online activity is undoubtedly impacting on their health and well-being. How sad it is that many young people today feel so isolated and alone that they turn for “comfort” to addictive behaviours - both online and offline: dangerous risk-taking with alcohol, drugs and sexual relationships, reckless driving, violence - and often spurred on by a social media culture where likes and followers affirm poor choices.

Young people today pick up messages that to be successful is to be strong, powerful, popular, wealthy, self-reliant, healthy, fit, trendy and attractive; the world often persuades them to focus on themselves and their personal interests, their entitlement to comforts and pleasure; it holds up excellence, high achievement personal autonomy and choice and dismisses or even punishes weakness or failure.

But in the reality of life our young people will have to find their way in a world filled with aggression, war and exploitation, abuse, coercive control and domestic violence, addiction, poverty, homelessness and austerity; they will have to cope with failure and disappointment.

In SPHE/ RSE Catholic schools can assist parents and families by helping young people discover moral reference points, values and virtues to guide them. In a Christ-centred learning environment our schools emphasise loving God and loving your neighbour as yourself. Everything else – the Commandments, the Beatitudes, the Sermon on the Mount and the precepts and moral teachings of the Church – point to ways of expressing a loving relationship with God and neighbour, or caution us about acts and behaviour that might contradict it.

SPHE/RSE in a Catholic school emphasises Gospel values, including: the sanctity of human life; the dignity and worth of the person; peace, tolerance and justice; chastity, honesty and truth; holiness; gentleness and compassion; mercy and forgiveness. Human sexuality is presented as a God-given, embodied dimension of the human person. Because parents are the primary educators of their children, we consult them in a meaningful and respectful way about the content and methodologies of the RSE programme and let them know of the right to withdraw their children from sex education (although it is our hope that they will be

confident in the Living Love programme).

SPHE in a Catholic school seeks to inspire empathy for homeless people, migrants and refugees, and those who struggle because of tensions or breakdown in marriage and family life. SPHE will expose bullying, harassment, racism, or any form of sexual victimisation. It will inspire faithful stewardship of all God’s creation, and alert young people to the injustice of wastefulness and the so-called ‘throwaway culture’.

The heart unites the fragments

In his 2024 encyclical, *Dilexit Nos*, Pope Francis spoke of ‘The Importance of the Heart’. He presented the heart as the centre where human life finds unity. The heart makes authentic bonding possible. It is from the heart that genuine relationship, commitment and communion become possible.

During adolescence and into young adulthood, young people have to make sense of a whole range of emotions and thoughts about their body, their friendships and attractions; their likes and dislikes, and their emerging sense of identity. The heart is where experiences - which might otherwise remain scattered - are integrated and brought into relationship with one another.

The Catholic school therefore aspires to be a ‘school of the heart’ - not in any sentimental way - but by offering solid principles, gospel values, and sound stepping stones for the future. It does this best whenever it is immersed in the Heart of Christ, where students encounter love which is self giving and does not manipulate or use others.

Pope Leo XIV, in his first encyclical, *Magnifica Humanitas*, speaks about safeguarding the human person in this technological age of artificial intelligence. It is in Christ, he says, that we discover the fullness of our human dignity. And he goes on to say that schools are vital partners in helping young people to seek truth, meaning, relationship, critical thought and stable values. (MH 1, 143). In all this, the deepest reference point for a Catholic school is the Heart of Christ.

Virtuous Living

One way to nourish the heart in SPHE/RSE is to develop an understanding and practice of Catholic virtues.

According to the Catechism of the Catholic Church, “A virtue is an habitual and firm disposition to do the good.

It allows the person not only to perform good acts, but to give the best of herself or himself. The virtuous person ... pursues the good and chooses it in concrete actions. The goal of a virtuous life is to become like God." (CCC, #1803)

By exploring Catholic virtue ethics in SPHE/RSE, young people can be helped to discover and transform their inner character (their heart) rather than to simply follow a rules-based checklist of "do's and don'ts".

Notice how the Catechism describes a virtue is an habitual and firm disposition to do the good. It is not a once-off; a virtue is something we learn to do naturally, resolutely and often, and this is because our hearts have been schooled and formed; our passions and our instincts have been ordered to doing the right thing, the just thing, the prudent thing, and everything in moderation.

A virtuous life does not happen automatically; we have to work on it through regular reflection and examination of our behaviours and attitudes. It means getting up and trying again after falling. We grow in virtue; we cultivate virtue so that our intellect and will and spiritual core work together to help us live a life of responsible freedom.

The Cardinal Virtues

Let's look at the four virtues which the Catechism (see #1805) describes as "pivotal", or "cardinal" virtues.: they are prudence, justice, fortitude, and temperance.

The first cardinal virtue, Prudence (CCC1806) helps us to discern the right and good thing in every circumstance; prudence guides our conscience. In SPHE lessons, pupils might be encouraged to develop prudence by learning to pause before making an important decision; to pray and seek sound advice rather than acting on impulse or emotion. They learn to ask themselves: how can I discern wisely, rather than simply reacting all the time to pressure, impulse or emotion?

The second cardinal virtue, Justice (CCC1807) disposes us to behave fairly and give what is due to both God and our neighbour. In SPHE/RSE the students will be encouraged to ask themselves: Do I recognise the dignity and rights of the other person; do I ever reduce anyone to an object for my gratification? Do I give quality time to God in my life?

Thirdly the cardinal virtue of Fortitude (CCC1808) gives us the courage and strength we need to face fear or

hardship or being unpopular when we are trying to do the right thing. Drawing attention to fortitude in SPHE/RSE helps young people to ask themselves: Can I resist pressure from peers and others; can I remain faithful to my conscience, establish my own personal boundaries, and respect another people's boundaries?

The fourth cardinal virtue is Temperance (CCC1809). Temperance "moderates the attraction of pleasures - it is about restraint and balance, moderation or "sobriety". In SPHE/RSE, young people will be challenged to reflect on how well they can practice self-control when it comes to material goods, food, entertainment, social media, and physical pleasure.

A space for reflection and dialogue

Seen through the lens of these cardinal virtues, SPHE/RSE can become a sacred space for reflection and dialogue, for in any senior class there is likely to be a variety of young people of different religions, faiths or none and who are at different stages in their spiritual development and maturity. When approached with sensitivity and with careful preparation, SPHE lessons can help young people to be much more aware and intentional about what it is that is already shaping their hearts and minds - the conversations and influencers; media, friends and adults. Equally, they can be encouraged to be good listeners, who are able to hear the opinions and perspectives of others, without cynicism or defensiveness.

Good SPHE/RSE lessons will help young people interrogate their assumptions, forge their own character and deepen their interiority so that they can move beyond just knowing what is right to genuinely feeling and living it. They will learn to be honest about themselves, their intentions and relationships; they learn to get up after disappointment, to accept that mistakes, wounds and failures are human and do not have to define the whole of your life. They learn to listen to others - however different - with respect, sensitivity and compassion, and to adamantly reject bullying or ostracism.

Human Dignity

The teacher who has managed to facilitate such a trusted, respectful and sacred space within the SPHE/RSE classroom will have created something very precious.

Because at the heart of such a classroom environment will be a deep respect for human dignity and for the sanctity of life; an appreciation that every young person

possesses their dignity before their achievements and exam results, their popularity and attractiveness, or any other characteristic.

A Grammar of Dialogue

The 2022 Instruction from the Congregation for Catholic Education (see pp 17-21) on “The identity of the Catholic School” speaks of a ‘culture of dialogue’ and a ‘grammar of dialogue’. This dialogue begins with having clarity and confidence about one’s own identity and beliefs, continues by being open to serious encounter with the “other”, and bears fruit in respect for difference and the building of trust. Young people and their families bring to school differing beliefs and life choices. The Catholic school was not dilute its own identity. On the contrary, it is an environment where all persons are respected without prejudice and discrimination, should be confident in living its characteristic spirit, in stating its core values and beliefs, in explaining why it believes it, while all the time listening respectfully to the experience and perspectives of others.

Respect for the dignity of all does not require the Catholic school to abandon its own understanding of the human person, or to endorse particular lifestyles, life choices or ideologies in contemporary culture, such as gender ideology, which are at odds with the Catholic position.

SPHE and RSE in Catholic schools can be:

- faithful without becoming fearful;
- clear without becoming harsh;
- compassionate without becoming vague;
- capable of listening without diminishing their Catholic confidence.

Such a position can be retained without ambiguity, for Catholic anthropology - based on the natural and divine law - should never be used to humiliate or diminish anyone.

Difficult Questions.

I have described already how young people today inhabit a fragmented environment, saturated with formative messages (see Christus Vivit 86-90; Amoris Laetitia 281). SPHE/RSE in Catholic schools has the confidence to engage with difficult, and even controversial questions. After all, if trusted adults within the safe space of an SPHE classroom do not accompany students in their thinking - then other voices and influencers will simply move in and claim that space for themselves.

And young people have many questions: about sexuality, pornography, gender issues; coercive control and domestic violence; human trafficking; about dating and attraction; relationships and consent; commitment and fidelity in marriage; fertility and responsible parenthood; about online behaviour and sexual pressure.

Engaging with these questions is not a departure from the mission of the Catholic school. The opposite is the case. Refusing to engage them risks leaving one of the most formative areas of young people’s lives to voices which may have little interest in their flourishing.

Living Love

Friends, you will be introduced today to the various themes within the Living Love programme. These themes reflect an integral view of the person.

The title “Living Love” is important. Christianity ultimately asks not whether you can define love, but whether you can live it. Young people do not simply need more information about relationships and sexuality. They need opportunities to nurture wisdom about what it means to love.

At the centre of Christian faith stands the statement, ‘God is love’ (1 Jn 4:8), and Christians believe that this love becomes visible in Jesus Christ.

The task of Catholic education is to help young people put their hearts into the heart of Christ so that they can truly recognise self-giving love, distinguish such love from its counterfeits and learn to live love themselves.

The launch of Living Love is therefore more than the introduction of just another curriculum resource. It is a commitment by Catholic education to enter one of the most formative areas of young people’s lives and to say: we will not leave you alone with these questions.

We will accompany you. We will listen to you. We will respect your dignity. We will guide you and help you think critically about the forces seeking to shape your desires and choices.

We will offer you a coherent Christian understanding of the person, the body, of responsible freedom, life-giving relationship and love. And we will point you towards Jesus Christ, in whose Heart Christians discover both the mystery of love and the deepest truth of what it means to be human.

We do all this because Living Love is not peripheral to the mission of the Catholic school.

It belongs to its very heart.

between New Testament Studies and Moral Theology.

Some useful references

Archbishop Eamon Martin, Keynote Address to JMB/AMCSS 31st Annual Conference, Galway, 3 May 2018.

Second Vatican Council, Gravissimum Educationis, Declaration on Christian Education, 28 October 1965, especially no. 1.

Pope Francis, Amoris Laetitia, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, 19 March 2016, Chapter Seven, especially nos. 261-283.

Pope Francis, Christus Vivit, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, 25 March 2019, especially nos. 84 and 86-90.

Pope Francis, Fratelli Tutti, Encyclical Letter, 3 October 2020, especially nos. 42-43.

Congregation for Catholic Education, The Identity of the Catholic School for a Culture of Dialogue, Instruction, 25 January 2022, especially nos. 17-21.

Pope Francis, Dilexit Nos, Encyclical Letter on the Human and Divine Love of the Heart of Jesus Christ, 24 October 2024, especially nos. 17-19 and 31-32.

Pope Leo XIV, Magnifica Humanitas, Encyclical Letter on Safeguarding the Human Person in the Age of Artificial Intelligence, 15 May 2026, especially nos. 1, 7-10, 139-140 and 143.

Pope Leo XIV, Address to the International Conference 'Maps of Hope for a Regional Educational Agenda: Mental Health, Digital Technologies and Education', 30 May 2026.

Daniel J. Harrington SJ and James F. Keenan SJ, Jesus and Virtue Ethics: Building Bridges