

Homily by Archbishop Kevin McDonald during Mass at the Headteachers' Conference Wednesday, 11th October 2006

Readings:

Galatians: 2:1,2,7-14

Luke:11:1-4

The first reading we heard in today's Mass is, on the face of it, about a problem that existed in the early Church and is not an issue today. It was the whole issue of how those Jews who had accepted Christ as Messiah and Lord, who believed in his resurrection and saw the Church as the new Israel, should relate to Gentiles, people of a non-Jewish background who had come to faith in Christ. St Paul was the great Apostle of the Gentiles and very insistent that Gentile converts to Christianity should not be burdened with Jewish customs and practices. They should enjoy the freedom that comes through faith in Christ.

That issue raises the much more general question of how we relate to people of different cultures, different backgrounds. How we both respect them and include them. And that is a live issue in our schools today. In missionary territories, Catholic missionaries have run schools for people who do not share our Christian faith. This is a service, an act of Christian charity and witness. And in our own schools we have always included people of other faiths and no faith when we have not been able to fill our schools with Catholic pupils. In this culture, we exist primarily to nurture and develop the faith of the baptised not in an exclusive way, but rather in an open way. Some who argue against Catholic schools say they are by definition exclusive, that they militate against social cohesion by separating children into distinct religious or ethnic groups. But that is a very superficial view. For there to be peace and social cohesion in society we need young people who are equipped with the values and beliefs that will enable them to contribute to social cohesion. And what are those values and beliefs? Well, faith that all men and women are created in the image and likeness of God and so are worthy of respect. What more compelling philosophical reason is there for respecting our fellow men and women than that they are *created*, created by God in his own image. We respect all life including unborn life and the life of the sick and the disabled, but the value of life doesn't depend on our assessment of its usefulness or its worthwhileness but in the fact that that human life is created, sustained by God, drawn on a unique journey through life, and destined for resurrection.

Without these values there is the danger that our young people will grow up in a spiritual and moral vacuum where their views on life, on sexuality, on

marriage, are shaped by the media, by television, by peer pressure that is entirely secular and fed by financial interests. Recently, I was speaking to a Muslim and we were talking about young people. He said that some of their young people, sadly, do become secularised and they lose touch with their Muslim roots. But he said other Muslims including young people are deeply shocked by the spiritual and moral vacuum that they find here, in our politics, our media, and our culture as a whole. They see it as a culture that must be filled with faith and, if Christians have lost the historic faith of their country, the vacuum must be filled with what they see as the true faith, Islam. It's really in Europe and North America that people live without religious faith and it is a culture of death. But our parishes and schools must be beacons of truth, because we are bearers of the true faith, where the Gospel of peace is authoritatively taught. The Church does not support war and violence in the name of democracy. Its message is of life, of respect, of justice and of peace. That is the message we impart to our young people and to other young people in our care. There will be some special cases in which we will take a quota of children that constitute community places. But the fact that, by and large, we exist for the Catholic community does not mean that we are not, therefore, at the service of the whole community. It is precisely through our schools that we channel our values into that community.

Recently, Archbishop Nichols wrote to the Secretary of State for Education and Skills indicating the way in which our schools exist for the good of society, and showing how our Section 48/50 inspectors can monitor that by looking at the involvement of our schools in the wider community, by providing education in citizenship, by preparing children for life in a multicultural society, by appreciating the traditions of others.

Our young people need to be able to engage in dialogue with people of other faiths but the first prerequisite is a solid and clear grounding in their own Catholic faith - as solid and clear as the grounding of any other group in our society. Dialogue between people who are uninformed or uncertain is a waste of time and counterproductive. The challenge is great but it is clear to me that our schools are responding to that challenge and I greatly appreciate all that has been done and will be done to meet it.