

Talk to Headteachers

Aylesford Priory, 11 February 2004

by The Most Reverend Kevin McDonald, Archbishop of Southwark

I would like to welcome you all here today and to say how grateful I am that so many of you have been able to come at such short notice. I did meet some of you at my installation and you were kind enough to say how pleased you were to have been invited. I might say that I am very glad that those who organised the installation did invite you since it was entirely appropriate for you to be there. The work you do is done on my behalf, and the schools in the diocese are a vital and integral part of the life of the diocese. And that is the point I wish to reflect on. The place of the school in the diocese in changing and challenging times.

Schools, of course, are communities of a very particular kind: they have their distinctive dynamics, their own aims and objectives. Catholic schools also have a kind of dual belonging. The situation of private Catholic schools is somewhat different but most of our schools as well as belonging to the diocese belong to the state system, being funded largely by the government and being regulated by the appropriate government department. Now governments and government policies change and that, as you all know, impacts strongly upon schools and constitutes continuing challenge and stimulus. Changes and developments of any kind, whether occasioned by government policy or by social and demographic factors, are likely to require schools to take stock, to evaluate and perhaps to change and to evolve. And there will be particular ways in which Catholic schools with their particular character and self-understanding will be challenged by changes in the wider world.

We, like others, will need to be constructive, critical and open in the way we engage with new and changing situations. But there will inevitably be times, and there have been times, when the values and principles at work in government policy will be at odds with those of the Church. I am sure you can all think of examples of this and it is not my purpose to dwell on them today. But let me give you an example, from a different context, of the kind of general point I am trying to make. Some months ago I was at a meeting at the Foreign Office. It was a meeting for religious leaders and was called because the Foreign Office wanted to talk about the way in which foreign policy – particularly, for example, the military interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq – impacts upon religious groups and institutions in this country and especially on their mutual relations. In the paper we were given beforehand, we were told that the Foreign Office was open to dialogue but it

was important for religious groups to respect the values of the Foreign Office. I posed a question in the meeting. I said that there seemed to be an implication that the values of the Foreign Office would be different from the values of the religions, and if that were the case could I ask where the values of the Foreign Office came from. I didn't really get an answer. But I think sometimes we do see values and ideals at work in government policy and policies of other bodies we deal with that don't correspond with our faith and the world view that derives from faith; and that requires critical engagement.

On the other hand, it is important that we be positive partners in our relationships with those who provide most of the funding for our schools, and I will return to that later. I want to say something now, though, about belonging within the diocese, about the relationship of the school to the diocese, since it is important that this relationship be as close and constructive as possible. A diocese is a communion, a unique kind of bonding between people who share the same faith, the same sacraments and the same Church order, and integral to that is our communion with the Holy See and the Bishop of Rome. This communion is expressed and ratified by our receiving communion together in our local communities. Now schools are part of this network of parishes, communities and other institutions which make up the diocese. For some of our young people, school is their only experience, or at least their only regular experience of Church. What are we to say about that? Well the first thing I would want to say is that being in a Catholic school does constitute a genuine experience of being Church even though for some it is only a partial experience. Ideally our pupils would feed into their school the experience of parish and would enrich their parishes from their life at school. This, as I have said, does not always happen. But we must not underestimate the significance of what does happen. I vividly remember someone from the Schools' Commission in Birmingham making the point that children in our schools know about prayer. It is integral to their life in school. They may not pray at other times but faith, prayer and religious knowledge are part of their education and part of their world. But precisely because of that, I would like to stress the importance of consolidating and developing relations with the parish and the diocese so as to build up this mutual interaction and nurture which is the ideal. The school, then, while being a distinctive institution, should not see itself as a separate enterprise from what is going on in the parish and in the diocese. The school forms part of

the local Church and, as I said earlier, you act on my behalf: the task of spiritual and moral formation of our young people is one that I delegate to you and your colleagues.

Let me turn to some aspects of the changing and developing situation that are not directly the result of government policy and legislation but the result of the changing nature of our society, particularly as it affects the Greater London area. I'm thinking particularly of the multi-cultural and multi-faith dimension of our schools. First of all, there is the fact that Catholic children now come from very different ethnic and racial backgrounds. I find the great variety of ethnic groups in our diocese very exciting: it is a great enrichment and a great opportunity for the sharing of gifts. A problem we have, especially with African and Caribbean groups, is of losing people to the black-led Pentecostal Churches. Another issue is that of seeking to integrate different ethnic groups in our parishes while giving space for them to celebrate and express their own identity. It is important that our schools be places where Catholic children from different cultures should respect and be enriched by one another. If our schools can provide a setting in which that can happen, they will be helping to build the Church of the future in a very vital way.

We also live in a society in which different religions live side-by-side and must learn to coexist. This is reflected in some of our schools where we welcome members of other religions. This was very much the case when I was a parish priest in Birmingham. We lived in a mostly Muslim area and had to change our admissions criteria in one of our schools in order to respond to the new reality. How do we respond to this challenge and this opportunity? Let me try to answer that by drawing on my experience in ecumenism. For eight years I worked in Rome in the Pontifical Council for Christian Unity. As you know, ecumenism is about relations between the different Christian Churches and ecclesial communities. Its purpose, however ambitious it may seem, is to bring about unity in faith and ecclesial life between all Christians. The responsibilities I have now with the Bishops' Conference are for inter-faith work. This is a quite separate matter. We are not seeking to bring about unity of faith with other religions but to achieve mutual respect and mutual understanding. This will be important for the future of our society since it has become increasingly clear that good relations between the different religions are vital for social cohesion and national security. Now in ecumenical work, for example dialogue between Catholics and Anglicans, sometimes people make the mistake of thinking that it progresses by trying to find the lowest common denominator between the two sides, as if ecumenism were a kind of bargaining process in which the different sides make

concessions in order to find common ground. In fact, it doesn't work like that at all. When members of different Communion come together in dialogue, they must do so from the vantage point of total fidelity to the tradition to which they belong. If they bring the fullness of their faith to the discussion then convergences will emerge.

Now let's turn to inter-faith relations as they affect our schools. When members of other religions come to Europe – and I'm thinking especially of Muslims – what troubles them is not our Christian faith but the lack of it: the fact that people in our culture are not faithful to their scriptures and their traditions. So many in our society have lost faith and in doing so have lost touch with their historical, cultural and religious reality. Let me dwell on that for a moment. In the year 2000 some of you may have seen the *Seeing Salvation* exhibition at the National Gallery. Neil MacGregor, who was then curator of the National Gallery, brought together key masterpieces of Christian art to mark the millennium. In his introduction to the book that accompanied the exhibition he made the point that pictures of the birth of Christ, of his miracles, his suffering, death and resurrection, have been, throughout Christian history the way in which people have explored the joy and sorrow, the tragedy and hope that are part of human life. With the loss of faith there are no symbols, no reference points enabling them to interpret and understand their experiences. It has been interesting to read the previews in the newspapers of the El Greco exhibition at the National Gallery. I detect a real frustration among non-religious reviewers that they cannot engage with these religious paintings at the profound spiritual level at which they were created. This is an anomaly and a tragedy which showed itself clearly in the extraordinary reluctance of politicians to include reference to Christianity in the proposed European Constitution. Catholic schools must heal the disjunction between contemporary secularity and the Catholic tradition. They must enable young people to rediscover their roots, their tradition, their faith. Many Muslim children go to special evening classes to learn the Koran and so be deeply imbued in the faith. We must provide an equivalently profound grounding of our children in the tradition of the Catholic Church. And this is not only a matter of personal salvation, it is also the essential prerequisite if they are to help to build up a culture of dialogue in society. As in the case in ecumenical relations, unless they are deeply rooted in their own faith they will be in no position to dialogue with people of other faiths and so will not be able to contribute in depth to social cohesion and peace in our communities.

Now an understanding of dialogue and an attitude of dialogue is characteristic of contemporary

Catholicism. It was Pope Paul VI who wrote so movingly about dialogue in his encyclical *Ecclesiam Suam*. He pointed out that Christianity is, of its nature, a religion of dialogue. God reveals himself in freedom in Jesus Christ and seeks a free response of faith. What we have to contribute to a multi-faith society is a conviction about freedom, freedom of religion, and the importance of dialogue. And our children need to understand deeply that they are free and that the deepest expression of human freedom is the act of faith. They are free to choose good and resist evil, able to take responsibility for their own lives. The moral teaching of the Church and – I would say – particularly of the present Pope presents us with a picture of what is involved in living out our freedom. During their school years they receive the Sacrament of Reconciliation and the Sacrament of Confirmation: catechesis for these sacraments will help them to understand their freedom to do good and the fact that the gift of the Holy Spirit is bestowed on them in order that they may freely respond to the vocation that is unique to each one of them. So formation in faith has nothing to do with brainwashing or indoctrination. It is simply the passing on of the truth that sets us free. It is helping children to engage with God's activities in their lives and that is something they can only do in freedom. And it is in terms of freedom that we should talk about vocation. Having a vocation means being called in freedom, and responding in freedom. You have all responded to a crucially important vocation in the Church. We should not short change our young people but should encourage them to discern what God wants them to do and to be – what he has called them to do. In that context talk of vocation to priesthood or religious life will have sense and will have a context.

Now having said all this, I have to acknowledge, of course, that some people are against Church schools or faith schools, arguing that they are divisive. I hope I've said enough to show not only that that is the opposite of the truth, but I wish to make a further point. I wish to object to the notion that people of no religion are qualified to adjudicate about matters of faith and about faith schools. Freedom of religion is a basic human right. The right to bring up our children in the faith follows from that. It's insulting to suggest that instilling the faith in our young people is indoctrination. Any parents who have faith know that not to hand on the faith would be to deprive their children of the greatest gift we can pass on to them, a free and loving relationship with the loving God. Only people of faith can fully understand the value and significance of a faith school.

Finally, I want to return to the point that the value and significance of our schools is dynamic and evolving. We must be generous with what we have. I

said earlier that we must be positive partners with government which provides most of the funding for our schools. I have indicated ways in which we understand the role of a Catholic school can vary and can develop, and I have instanced the presence of many cultural and many religions as factors that shape our understanding of Catholic schools. As our schools evolve we can never lose sight of their fundamental rationale - that of handing on the faith as part of a good education. But we should be open to being of service to our local communities, particularly when that community is deprived or disadvantaged. There are schools that have a high proportion of children from other religions. There may be situations in which we will find ourselves with a significant proportion of children of other religions or none. Engaging with that new situation is a challenge and opportunity. A key challenge is that of handing on the fullness of Faith in a way that equips and opens young people up to dialogue with other faiths. We have the experience to meet that challenge, to grow in it and through it and to be a source of life and truth not only for our own Catholic children but for many others as well. The Pope has called us to a new evangelisation. Our schools cannot but have a vital role to play in that through teaching, witness, and service, always offered with deep respect to the freedom and integrity of those entrusted to our care. You know much better than I do how we can respond to what is asked of us in changing times. I thank you for all the work you are doing and all the constructive thinking that is going on. I assure you of my encouragement and support. Thank you.