



CATHOLIC BISHOPS' CONFERENCE OF ENGLAND & WALES

Pastoral Letter on Catholic Schools

2 September 2007

We, the Catholic Bishops of England and Wales, want at the start of this new school year to re-affirm our vision of Catholic education and our commitment to providing Catholic schools. We also want to highlight how successful our schools are and the contribution they make to society in general.

For a very long time now, the Catholic Church has been an important partner with public authorities in the provision of education for the children and young people of England and Wales. Schools with a religious character (which make up over a third of schools) are a sector of public education with proven success; they are diverse and they are much sought after each year by hundreds of thousands of parents.

Recent and current calls from some for the abolition of faith schools, or their curtailment, fail to take account of this rich history of co-operation between Church and State which has been to the mutual benefit of both. They also fail to take account of the current achievements of our schools. Independent research and inspection conducted by the Government's own offices demonstrate how well our schools perform, academically and in moral and social education; that they are catering for as wide a range of pupils as any other group of schools, whether the measure be ability, poverty or ethnic identity. They also welcome pupils from the wider community, beyond the Catholic Church, wherever there are places available.

Underlying these indications of the success of our schools is their distinctiveness. Catholic schools are guided in all they do by an important and coherent vision of education. This vision is based on the truth revealed by God about ourselves, our life together in community and our ultimate destiny with God. This gives rise to an educational endeavour centred on the person of Jesus Christ, who is our Way, Truth and Life. Over a long period of time, this approach to education has proved to be one that prepares children and young people well for whatever roles they take on in society or public life, as well as for their personal and family lives. The commitment of the Catholic Church to inter-faith dialogue and to working with other Christians provides a further basis for young peoples' contribution to peaceful social cohesion.

At times, this vision of education stands in contrast to a secular model of education, based on the values of the prevailing culture, which are often far from clear and not always shared.

Those who choose Catholic schools for their children are, in effect, seeking an alternative model of education. Despite the claims of those who propose a purely secular model for all schools, there is no such thing as a "value-free" education. Catholic schools are clear and robust in the principles which guide them and the moral framework within which they educate.

Schooling has been, and remains, an important part of the mission of the Church. The aims of our schools are to help everyone within the school community to grow in faith; to make the most of every ability they have been given; to achieve academic excellence and to prepare well for adult life in a modern and diverse society. These tasks are, of course, carried out in close cooperation with local and national government.

From time to time, bishops and diocesan authorities need to review school provision within specific areas, usually in response to population changes. This will bring about changes in the provision with occasional closures as well as the expansion or re-building of schools. Any such changes are always made after careful consideration of all the factors involved, including the impact on both the local Church community and the neighbourhood.

We urge all members of the Catholic community to value our schools. So we encourage Catholic parents to send their children to the local Catholic school and to be actively involved in its life. We encourage people to work in our schools as Catholic head teachers, teachers, classroom assistants or in other roles. We encourage people to serve as foundation governors to continue supporting and promoting the vision of education on which our schools are founded. We encourage teachers, at their union meetings, and parents or parishioners, in their dealings with politicians, to speak up positively, on the basis of evidence, about the achievements and nature of our schools. Funding our alternative model of education is a costly, but worthwhile, exercise and we thank all those who contribute to this.

As the new school year gets underway, we invite everyone in the Catholic community to join us in praying for all those who are involved in the life of our schools. May this be a good year for pupils and staff, parents and governors, and the local community in which each of our schools is set. May God bless our educational enterprise for the good of our society.



Cormac Cardinal Murphy-O'Connor
President



Archbishop Patrick Kelly
Vice-President