EFTRE xvi CONFERENCE : RECONCILING REALITIES IN RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

Short address given by The Most Reverend Dr Michael Jackson, archbishop of Dublin

in Christ Church Cathedral Friday 30th August 2019

FORM … AND EDUCATION

A number of words containing the word: form comes to mind when we are talking about education itself. They include the following, in no particular order: form itself of course, inform, conform, deform, reform and even perform. Not all of these are relevant to our current exploration and for our present purpose many of them may be disregarded. It is, as much as anything, what we who are entrusted with information in the educational context do with information, as the raw material of formation for good and for citizenship in the precious interaction of the classroom, that matters. Grappling with information as teacher and student brings reality into the foreground of the young mind, body and soul. Education in its totality is about the holistic experience of being. This holistic being leads to responsible and energized citizenship where the values of care and respect interact justly, in the idiom of the prophet Micah, with power and authority. The alternative is what the Americans have long ago called infotainment.

RECONCILING REALITIES AND EURIOPE TODAY

Reconciling Realities has been the theme of this Conference to date and it continues until Saturday August 31st. Its conversation and afterglow will continue long into the future. We are an international gathering and I had the pleasure and the honour of attending the xiii gathering in Vienna also. Reconciling Realities brings us back to the founding vision of the Europe to which we belong, irrespective of the fact that some of our members have determined soon to exit The European Union. The European self-understanding as a job of work in co-operation with more and more who are other than we are will not go away. It is an evolving and an enriching self-understanding that requires partnerships and otherness hand in hand. Our European heritage is precious and we do not want it to become the first casualty of narrowing nationalisms. The European responsibility will not recede with the onset of leave nor, we all hope, will the European belonging and contribution, in its widest sense, on the part of those who are for leaving. The European Project was established and embarked upon, we must never forget, more as a pathway to reconcile realities after two brutal and blood-curdling World Wars than it was to define the human person as an economic entity careering towards commodities as the goal of survival and of happiness. Let us never forget that Holocaust is part of the European responsibility and the European reality. Let us never forget that Holocaust is a pulsating, living memory of the distortion of human relationship, civic responsibility, sophisticated science and deformed education.

A CONTEMPORARY FALLACY

Perhaps one of the strongest fallacies with which we live today is the fallacy that the secular is neutral. The doctrine that the secular is neutral gives it an automatic and entitled superiority over religion which is thereby characterized as loaded and defective. Once the battle lines are drawn in this way, religion finds it very difficult to make its case as it is cast in the role of the dinosaur option. Hence we are today conditioned to see the secular as providing information and the religious as providing deformation. The secular also has claimed the high ground of being self-explanatory at the heart of this neutrality by the sublimation of technological function and scientific understanding as the philosophy of life for the post-modern woman, man and child. This is where education kicks in as a key player. In a world where we all now have no option but to struggle with a diversity that will not recede, inspiration and commitment increasingly are expressed in anger and confrontation. I am not sure that everyone had predicted this. It is fundamentally wrong. Commitment and passion lie deep within human motivation. Their distortion is not a given. Religion and faith lie deep within cultural identity. An Ireland angry with its religious past and rightly angry with the abuse that is very much part of that past, effectively refuses to grasp that the diversity of our current citizenship members, from some two hundred and twenty nationalities of origin, sees the active freedom to be religious and public about expression of faith as part of its identity and its citizenship as Irish people. This is a nasty shock both to the pre-secularists and the secularists in a post-secular age. It simply does not suit them at all. It is not how they planned it to be. They had neatly and conveniently separated out culture from any form of religion in the definition of identity. Yet this living diversity, including the religious expression, has enabled us in Dublin to have both an Inter Faith Forum and an Inter Faith Charter that safeguards citizenship and religion and which has the involvement of all the major World Faiths in the city as equal partners.

PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE

Schools are places of memory of the past, critical thinking of the present and hope of the future. It is in this crucible of experience that formation through information takes place. The term: formation has probably too many overtones of the seminary to have any credible currency today. But that is not the sense in which I am using it. This type of educational formation is interactive in terms of age and ability, freedom, need and special need, and has as its focus the movement from observation to independence, the holistic expression of being human in as rich an expression as we can nurture and express, share and celebrate. The experience of others, carefully and critically conveyed and taught in a safe and trusting environment, informs who we are and fashions who we are yet to become (1 John 3.2). Memory of the past requires a religious and a theological framework because otherwise the past will be a series of tableaux of antiquarianism insufficiently nuanced; critical thinking of the present requires a religious and a theological framework because the opportunities are right in front of us in the civil society to interpret the present as living history for ourselves and with others when the faith perspective, anger or no anger, is part of the lived dilemma; hope of the future requires a religious and a theological framework because a functioning society of local and global proportions needs to include the hope and the dignity that religion has constantly and relentlessly held out to the outcast and the marginalized in societies as being integral to a living world. In all of these, religion needs the contribution of those who are patently not religious, if religion is to have any mature sense of perspective to provide both critical distance and critical friendship with all who inhabit the created world.

PATRONAGE

Within the Church of Ireland, we have patronage of two hundred primary schools and an active association of patronage with in around forty secondary schools in the twenty-six counties. The curriculum is as prescribed by the Department of Education and Skills and we have opportunities to engage with its construction through a range of representative Bodies. Patronage enables us to create and convey an ethos, a characteristic spirit within which the curriculum is delivered and with which it is engaged. From an Anglican perspective, Scripture Tradition and Reason are the pivots on which our theological method rotates. Taken on their own, these undoubtedly seem rather arid and academic, but taken together they help pedagogically to inform experience. They are not value-free nor have they ever claimed to be – but neither is secularism! They are part of the ways in which Anglican Christians connect the scientific and the sociological world around us to core tenets of value and precedent and prospect. By law, we hold patronage and it is our duty to exercize it in shaping the breathing and the rhythm of the school day as part of who we are and what we offer into our society. It is part of what we do as citizens with a sense of purpose in terms of altruism and of contribution to a value-enriched life. Overwhelmingly, parents like it as an expression in schools of in loco parentis. The problem is that many in power want to remove our values from civic life. And so it becomes a circular argument based in mutual irreconcilablity.

The value and the enrichment of the theme of this Conference is that it recognizes fair and square that there are realities, in the plural, and that it is not a matter of one narrative as the prescriptive narrative of entitlement over against other narratives. In a world of religious plurality, this brings us to the heart of the educational reality and to religious education as the place where such a methodology can be taught and learned. Broad mindedness and fair mindedness feed from each other. Religious education and religious values want to be part of this national conversation. Both need the information and the spirit of enquiry that the hard talk about realities in the world of today offers. In this way children, teachers and parents can be leaders in citizenship through the perspectives that open minded religious education brings as an equal partner with the rest of the kaleidoscopic experience of education that sheds light on the school day.

INFORMATION BOMBARDMENT

We are in one of the Dublin cathedrals. There are, of course, two. One is religious, the other secular – but not in the way in which we use these terms today of course. The one in which we are this evening is derivative of a monastic foundation and in this sense religious, as in Religious Order, in our case Augustinian; St Patrick’s is a new secular and non-monastic foundation from the Middle Ages. Both are loved by the people of Dublin. Both are visited daily by people from all over the world, of faith and of no faith. Both are places of God and renowned as such - unashamedly. Both are ecumenical and Inter Faith. We have no real sense what will be the next stage or phase of the communication which today shapes our living. We know, however, that in the present we are in the throes of information bombardment. We know also that our general attitude to social media, or what more and more people are beginning to call anti-social media, is frighteningly immature, especially where children are concerned. The nobility of the human person and the safeguarding of the vulnerable come together, and must come together, in the realities that face us in schools because children have no option but to bring inside with them their outside and domestic worlds and to seek answers from those they trust. Schools are, in a tangible sense after all, in loco parentis for much of the working day for today’s children with busy parents. This gives everyone in schools a very particular duty of care to avoid deformation. Sometimes our politics lurch to the left, sometimes to the right. We are currently in a right-lurching phase with narrowing nationalisms. We are bombarded today not so much by economy with truth as by generosity with falsehood. Leadership is not a simple concept in either its motivations or its outcomes. We need to teach our children to spot the signs that in fact the emperor is wearing no clothes – much of the time. Leadership and service need always to go together (St Mark 10.45).

BECKETT

My encouragement to you in regard to religious education is the enigmatic prophecy of one of our most European of Irish writers, Samuel Beckett. Beckett was born in what is now the Republic of Ireland, in Dublin, and he went to school in what is now Northern Ireland, in Enniskillen. I offer a Beckettism as a realism, not as a nihilism. You know it and it comes from his penultimate printed work Worstward Ho:

Ever tried.

Ever failed.

No matter.

Try again.

Fail again.

Fail better.