

THE RE TEACHER IN A CATHOLIC SCHOOL

I thank Edmund Adamus, David Walford and all of you for inviting me to this Day for RE Teachers. I am delighted to be with you and I thank you enormously for your generosity and hard work as RE Teachers in the schools of our Diocese of Portsmouth.

Schools and parishes are the two principle agencies of the Church's mission. If a parish is a Catholic Eucharistic Community of clergy and faithful for service and mission, a school is a Catholic Formation Community formed of teachers, staff, governors, parents and students. I have already laid out an eight-point vision-plan for the whole Diocese called "Bringing People Closer to Jesus Christ through His Church" (handout). I also laid out a complementary vision statement for schools called *The Future of our Diocesan Schools* and how schools might become more effective agents of mission and evangelisation (website). I have asked every school to develop its own strategy for evangelisation. The strategy needs to address three broad constituencies:

- practicing Catholics, the small minority, perhaps 10%, that they might become effective missionary-disciples of Jesus Christ;
- not-yet-practicing Catholics, the vast majority, that they might become more intentional disciples, filled with Eucharistic faith; and
- "people of good will", those of other religions and none, who wish to receive a Catholic education, that they might be given the chance to hear the Gospel.

Of course, we are now teaching and forming Generation Z. It is a generation also of massively diverse ethnicity. Whereas in the past people, if asked, habitually called themselves Christian, today, with the exponential rise of 'nones', many are indifferent or say they have no religion. As Sherry Weddell argues, the transmission of faith in families is nowadays largely disrupted; indeed, youngsters are leaving the Catholic Church in droves. More, even practising Catholics, even parishioners undertaking public ministries, seem to be much less secure in their faith. Pew Surveys shew that almost 50% of *practising* Catholics do not believe in a personal God, or that they can have a personal relationship with God, or that God loves them and wants to enter into a personal friendship with them! The result of the recent Irish referendum, in which the vast majority of practising Catholics willingly voted for abortion – let's leave aside the specific history of the Irish cultural context – was in a sense not surprising.

So first, some words on evangelisation, then something on the role of an RE teacher.

Evangelisation is about presenting the Gospel, that is, the Person of Jesus Christ, the *kerygma* or Great Story of His birth, life, teaching, death and resurrection, and its meaning for us today. It's about enabling people to have a personal life-changing encounter with Him and thus to enter into friendship with Him within His Body the Church. We call this Christian discipleship. Discipleship is about living *under* the Word of God, growing in faith, taking one's place within the Christian community, and

discerning the gifts and charisms God has given for service and for mission. Thus discipleship becomes missionary-discipleship. The disciple becomes an apostle.

Many Catholics are sacramentalised – they have been baptised; they have made their First Communion - and many are to some extent catechised – they know the basics, certainly the Church’s teachings on sex! - but many are poorly evangelised. Sherry Weddell suggests that in the average parish less than 5% are ‘intentional disciples.’ In her book *Forming Intentional Disciples*, she identifies five thresholds in a person’s conversion beginning with trust, then openness, then curiosity, then seeking, finally personal commitment. She illustrates this from the lives of the saints and how of a sudden, God raises up a remarkable evangeliser who changes the world. Yet at Mass on Sunday, many fellow-Catholics are struggling with the very first threshold, trust: Do I trust the Church? Do I like this priest? Do I want to be here? Very few would say: “I want to be here. I love Jesus Christ. I am a disciple. I love the Church.”

Traditionally, the Church has focused on the *fides quae* of faith, that is, the content and teaching to be communicated. But what about the *fides qua*, the individual subject and her/his welcome, reception and acceptance of the saving Message? The key issue today is how to rouse people to awe and wonder, to faith, to a sense of God’s love, to expect from God a religious experience. Whilst entrusting everything to Divine grace, we need to connect with people’s religious sense, with their hearts, with creating an arena, the right conditions, in which they can encounter the Mystery of Christ and so want the Truth and Life He offers. Often, when parents come for Baptism we jump into catechesis or the details of the liturgy. Yet the focus needs to be on ‘religion’, on God. How do we help people to pray, to find God, to experience the love of God, to develop their spirituality, to develop a personal-passionate friendship with Jesus Christ, to grasp the meaning of His death and resurrection, to have a sense of being called personally by Him. As Catholics we have huge resources for this. We have two millennia of spiritual theology, the wisdom and lives of the saints, and a rich and diverse Tradition. Moreover, Generation Z, according to James Emery White, is open to this; there is often a spiritual emptiness, a void yearning to be filled, a sense of awe affront the natural world and universe, and an openness to myth, magic and miracles.

As Catholics, we are good at doing Church - but what about doing Jesus? Evangelisation is about a Person, Jesus Christ, making Him better known and better loved, spreading His teaching, attracting people to His Way of Life.

Evangelisation is also bi-directional, like breathing-in and breathing-out. It is about ourselves being evangelised – a life-long process - as much as ourselves evangelising others. Moreover, evangelisation always has a double intention. Its proximate goal is to attract the individual, but its ultimate goal is to baptise culture, to be a ‘leaven in the dough’ (Lk 13: 20-21). By the Middle Ages, the Church had baptised European culture, but since the 17C, Christians have had minimal success baptising modernity and today’s postmodern secular culture. Consequently, there is now a massive dichotomy between faith and culture, with vast sectors of everyday life from politics,

business and the media to medicine, the arts and the sciences, little touched by Gospel values and Christian influence. To be Christian today is to be counter-cultural.

Now in the light of this a few points on being an RE teacher, either in a primary or secondary context.

It seems to me that an RE teacher in a Catholic school has a double function. First, to impart religious knowledge, so that students and staff can learn about Christianity in general and Catholicism in particular. This includes a working knowledge, in line with the curriculum, of other religions and none-religions too. It is also important that students gain their qualifications and at secondary level gain GCSE and A Levels. Religious knowledge assists students one day to assume an effective role in society. This is important. Many leaders in society and policy-makers nowadays seem to be remarkably ignorant of religion and thus unwittingly disrespectful to religious people.

But secondly, in a Catholic school the RE teacher also has an evangelistic and catechetical role. This is very important at primary level, and in a different way at secondary too. Whilst it's right to differentiate home-parish-school in the transmission of faith, the reality is that for many students, staff, teachers, governors and parents, the school is their main perhaps their only engagement with the Church and with the proclamation of the Gospel. Within the Catholic Formation Community of the school, the RE teacher therefore has a hugely important role. It's analogous to that of the lay ministry of a *lector* in the pastoral structure of a parish. Just as a *lector* in a parish is trained in Scripture, proclaims the Word of God in the liturgy and coordinates the work of catechesis and formation in a parish under the pastor, so too in a school, an RE teacher has a ministry to those who make up the school community. The religious knowledge s/he imparts must have an evangelistic and catechetical character.

To expand on this. The ministry of the RE teacher is founded on the person of the teacher him-/herself. To offer religious knowledge that is also evangelistic and catechetical – evangelising catechesis – requires an *evangelised* RE teacher. The RE teacher must be a credible witness, full of purpose, full of human virtues like friendliness, joy, inclusiveness, full of God. S/he must be holy, able to connect their own religious experience with the experience of others. S/he needs to be evangelised constantly, that is, converted to the Person of Jesus Christ, in love with Him. This means spending time in prayer and Eucharistic Adoration, celebrating regularly the Sacrament of Reconciliation, above all, loving Jesus in the Mass. It means loving the Scriptures and studying the Church's teaching in order to know not only what the Church teaches but *why*, and what that teaching means today. In this way, the religious knowledge imparted can nourish the heart as much as the head and the will.

Religious knowledge as evangelising catechesis presents everything in relation to the Person of Jesus Christ. It relates everything to the *kerygma*, to the Great Story of His birth, life, teaching, death and resurrection. It relates everything to a personal encounter with Him, the Way, the Truth and the Life, in the Bible and in the Holy

Eucharist. We must beware presenting Jesus as basically a Good Guy. He was. But He was also a Man of Mystery. He was God the Son.

There is now an urgent need to review and update the RE curriculum and its resources, not least because of the greater diversity of ethnicity of our students. The GCSE and A level syllabuses are one thing, and the diocesan RE programme another. But the RE curriculum, if it is going to enable a more effective evangelising catechesis to be given, must also address the key blocks to faith that post-modern people, millennials and Generation Z raise:

- The existence of God: Does God really exist? Or is He a projection of human need? If He is so good, why does He allow so much suffering in the world?
- Science and religion: empirical science seems to give the truth, the facts, while religion seems to be a matter of private opinion. What is the real relationship between science and religion, faith and reason?
- Jesus Christ: Who is He? He was a good man, even a prophet. But did He really exist? How can it be sure He was Divine, the Son of God, the Truth?
- And the Church. Why does the Church seem to impose so many moral rules, especially on sexuality, such as its opposition to gay marriage?

There are other questions too. A more general block is the sheer busyness of life today, the utterly pervasive digital media with constant work, communication, consumerism and entertainment. These obscure the sacred canopy, like street lights in a city at night obscuring the stars. The big questions of life are often blocked out. Yet, spirituality is part and parcel of being human. The universe and the natural world ever evoke human awe and wonder. An evangelising catechesis thus needs to rouse that religious sense further and create space for the questions posed.

Lastly, fun. RE as evangelising catechesis needs to be fun. Catholics here can learn much from evangelical Christians. Rick Warren, the founder of the extraordinarily successful Saddleback Church in California, now the centre of a global network of church-plants and missions, in his classic book *The Purpose-Driven Church*, stresses the importance of belonging. The newcomer must be welcomed and immediately feel a sense of belonging; he or she is invited to join a small formation-group. He calls this 101. When they have finished that, they graduate to another group, 201, and then to another, 301, and another, 401, and so on. Transposing this into a Catholic context, every Catholic, not just newcomers, should constantly be in formation and part of one course then another. Everyone might belong to a small group – a Men’s Group, Youth Group, Young Mothers’ Group, SVP - whose key ingredients are prayer, formation, fun and friendship. I often wonder whether our schools, particularly at secondary level, might develop chaplaincy clubs - small groups: chant club, minny-vinnys, Rosary group, worship band, football - where students can have fun, form friendships and share testimonies of what God has done for them. Of course, this is more the role of the chaplain and chaplaincy than the RE teacher.

To conclude. To see the school as a Catholic Formation Community in an era of mission and evangelisation means giving the RE teacher a pivotal role. The challenge of evangelisation in Britain is enormous but exciting. Britain is a fertile mission-field

in which the potential harvest is rich and at this point ripe. True, whilst it is rare to encounter direct hostility, there are small but vibrant activist groups in society such as *Stonewall* or *The National Secular Society*. But there is also great openness and opportunities. There is no need for despondency. Christ is the only Way, the Truth and the Life (John 14: 6), and we believe that even at this moment the Holy Spirit is at work in people's hearts wooing them towards Christ and His Church. It is not the 'Gospel-product' that is defective but the ability of people in a busy, secular consumer-culture, full of distractions, entertainment, mobiles and the internet, to hear God's Voice. We stand within the great Catholic Tradition. The Message we have is wonderfully Good News. It is addressed to every single person. This is why the task of the RE teacher is vital: to communicate the knowledge but also the Message, the Person of Jesus Christ, so imaginatively and attractively that all who listen can find the way to that true, genuine, lasting human happiness and fulfilment for which they long. Thank you for listening!