

VISIONS FOR LEADERSHIP Leaders in Catholic Education

Tuesday 31 March 2009

LEADING A CATHOLIC SCHOOL

So the G20 Summit is upon us! National leaders are beginning to arrive here in London and the expectations are high. Already significant demonstrations have taken place over the weekend, and more are to come. But the expectations on the Leaders are immense and wide-ranging, too. Indeed the whole scope of political leadership has expanded enormously in recent decades. Today we speak of 'world leaders' for the issues that national leaders have to deal with are indeed global. National interest is no longer a definable focus, since most of what affects our lives here has international if not global causes and consequences. It is not possible to take a narrow view of leadership.

The same is true of my role in the Church. I must give attention not only to the life and events of the Catholic community in Birmingham, but also to those of a far wider scope. The opening and consecration of a new synagogue in Birmingham is on my agenda. The earthquake in Pakistan was important for me, as a majority of Birmingham Muslims are from that country. The loss of jobs in the manufacturing heartland of the West Midlands is not something to which I can be indifferent. The list could be long. But there is no place for narrowly defined leadership.

The same is true for leadership in a Catholic school. A Catholic school is not an isolated enterprise, living and functioning in a world of its own, concerned only about its own well-being. Like the Church, it is not only knitted into our wider society but it also has a sense of mission to that

wider society. So here too there is no place for narrowly defined leadership.

This challenge was addressed in a document issued recently by the CES: *Catholic Schools, Children of Other Faiths and Community Cohesion*. In it we not only presented a vision of a Catholic school set in the context of our contemporary society but also one which recognised the need for a clear framework within which the wider demands of schools leadership could be thought through, in particular in relation to the multi-faith nature of society.

In providing such a framework, this document draws on themes from the teachings of Pope John Paul II and Benedict XVI which are not often noticed. These two Popes have given us a framework of thought in which not only to appreciate more deeply the Catholic vision and mission of education but also to understand its inherent openness and welcome for people from the wide spectrum of our society today. The approach taken by these two Popes becomes an important part of the coherent vision that lies behind effective leadership in a Catholic school.

As we well know, the vision of education that inspires a Catholic school is always centred on the person. This might seem a self-evident truth but it is lived today in a setting in which there are competing central concerns. In a Catholic school, the true development of the person, pupils and staff, takes precedence over all other things. Indeed we insist that the true development of the person is more important than the public recognition of the success of the school; than the demands of political pressure; than the requirements of the economy, significant though these things are.

The framework of thought offered by Pope John Paul II and Pope Benedict XVI helps us to explore what the true development of the person really involves. In doing so it appeals to a concern of us all, from the G20 leaders to the man on the Clapham bus: the well-being of our environment, or ecology. This is the starting point for a developing line of thought which takes us to the heart of the education challenge faced by every school leader. Indeed, these two Popes speak of an ecology of education which genuinely fosters human growth.

This aspect of the teaching of John Paul goes back to 1995, to his letter *'The Gospel of Life'*, in which he insisted that caring for the world's ecological systems necessarily involved caring for our specific 'human ecology'. I quote:

'As one called to till and look after the world, the human person has a specific responsibility towards the environment in which he lives, towards the creation which God has put at the service of his personal dignity and of his life, not only for the present but also for future generations. This ecological question – ranging from the preservation of the natural habitats of the different species of animals and other forms of life, to the "human ecology" properly speaking - finds in the Bible clear and strong ethical direction leading to a solution which respects the great good of life, indeed of every life.' (para. 42)

In many subsequent statements he developed his use of this key phrase 'human ecology'. Indeed, he applied this line of thought explicitly to the task of the school. I quote again:

'The education which the Church promotes looks to the integral development of the human person. Its purpose is to cultivate the intellect and develop the capacity for right judgement, to help young people to assimilate their cultural heritage and form a sense of moral and ethical readiness for their future professional, civic, family and national responsibilities. An all-round education seeks to develop every aspect of the individual: social, intellectual, emotional, moral and spiritual. For there is an ecology of human growth which means that if any one of these elements is overlooked all the others suffer.' (14.12.2000)

Here, then, is a central idea, a pattern of thought, around which we can build an appreciation of the leadership of a Catholic school which avoids narrowness and shows how open Catholic education truly is to all that genuinely serves our human good. The task of leadership in a Catholic school is one of fostering this ecology of human growth.

We need to look more closely at what this means.

This human ecology can be described as that network of convictions and relationships and activities which we create together which genuinely foster true human growth and development, not only of the individual but, just as importantly, of the society in which that individual lives.

Naturally the family is the first place in which each person experiences a 'human ecology'. That is why we say that the family is always the first place of education, the primary responsibility resting on the shoulders of the parents.

Gradually the young person comes in contact with the wider culture of the family's own life and of its neighbourhood. These have their effect, for good or for bad, on the development of each person in these early years.

The school then plays its enormous part. Pope Benedict, using this same vision of the nurturing of a human ecology states that young people

'need above all else to be exposed to love and to develop a healthy human ecology, where they can come to realise that they have not been cast into a world by chance but through a gift that is part of God's loving plan. Parents, educators and community leaders, if they are to be faithful to their own calling, can never renounce their duty to set before children and young people the task of choosing a life project directed towards authentic happiness, one capable of distinguishing between truth and falsehood, good and evil, justice and injustice, the real world and the world of virtual reality'.(27.4.2006)

In a school this ecology, or climate, generated by our 'ethos', is the sum total of the different components at work in the school which interact with one another in such a way as to create favourable conditions for a formation process. Education always takes place within certain specific conditions of space and time, through the activities of groups of individuals who are active and also interactive among themselves. Of course they follow specific programmes of studies and these are an important element in the fashioning of the life of a school. But all the elements are to be considered in developing an organic vision: the persons involved, the space in which life is lived, the allocation of time,

the relationships which are fostered, the quality of the teaching and learning, the patterns of study and all the other various activities. All of these come under the overview of the leader of a Catholic school. From the first moment that any person sets foot in a Catholic school he or she ought to have the impression of entering a new environment, one that has its own unique characteristics.

The nurturing of such a climate is the task of the leader.

When looked at more closely, this 'human ecology' is in fact a series of interlocking ecologies, as indeed is the complex of ecological systems which make up our natural environment. In the first place, there is that ecology or atmosphere which is created by the patterns of daily living. To use the phraseology of the Prophet Micah, it is the ecology of loving tenderly. In order to create such a climate, all relationships in which the school is engaged have to be based on a deep respect between the persons involved, without exception. And it is important to recognise that the root of the respect that we owe to each other is the acknowledgement that every individual is created by God and has an inner dignity, or spiritual dimension, that comes from God alone. Thus, the building of an ecology of daily living must acknowledge the spiritual, moral and cultural values of every person present and seeks to draw them together into a healthy environment in which all can prosper.

A second aspect of this human ecology can be seen in a corporate effort to build an atmosphere of justice within a school. We all know that nothing rankles more in the sensibilities of young people than an injustice committed, either to them, or to their friends, or within the school community as whole, or indeed in the wider world. So we must consciously foster an ecology of justice, to which everyone is a

contributor and in which everyone is a participant. This is a very important part of nurturing the environment of true human growth. Indeed the practical exercise of 'the works of mercy', to alleviate the effects of injustice, are the building blocks of an environment characterised by justice and tempered by mercy.

Thirdly, and perhaps very significantly today, there can be no genuine human ecology that fails to recognise the faith and religious experience which is innate in human beings and central to many people in our schools today. An important part of the construction of a healthy human ecology is therefore that expressions of faith and the practices of religion are given their space within a school, both according to the school's own tradition and mandate and according to the variety of faith and religion which are in that school. Here there are delicate matters to be considered by everybody in leadership in a school and it is in these that the CES document is precisely helpful.

I have started with this way of thinking about our Catholic schools as places of a fruitful human ecology, and of leadership in schools as fostering that ecology, precisely because this is an open pattern of thought and one that invites and treasures the contributions of all who are present.

However, it is equally important to understand and to examine this framework from the particular perspective of our Catholic belief. Indeed it is not overstating the case to say that the key to this fruitful human ecology, and therefore the key to Catholic education, is provided by the dimension of faith. In that perspective we joyfully recognise the presence and action of God to be that key. We acknowledge that just as all truth rests in the Word of God, through whom all things were made

and through whom all things will come to their completion, so too the construction of a true human ecology can only be achieved in relationship to that Word. Indeed, we affirm that the complete understanding of our created world, of ourselves, of our growth, of our relationships, of our society is to be found within the living wisdom revealed in the unique Word of God.

It making this claim, it is important to appreciate that this Word is spoken from all eternity and will continue to be spoken to the end of time. That eternal speaking of the world is beyond our perceiving. But we can see and sense the echoing of this eternally spoken Word in so much of the created world around us. More importantly, we recognise and hold in faith that this same Word is expressed in all those actions and events which make up the history of salvation recorded and handed onto us in the sacred scriptures. We recognise most centrally that this eternal Word of God, in whom all things make sense, finds flesh in the person of Jesus of Nazareth who then becomes its fullest expression and its true presence in our world.

Therefore we say that at the centre of true human ecology is the person of Christ. He then must be at the centre of our school. He then must be at the centre of the task of school leadership. He then must be at the centre of the life of the leader. Faith in Jesus and faith in the outflow of that presence of Christ into the Church is the key component to effective leadership in a Catholic school.

It is not surprising then, that in seeking out true leaders for our schools we uphold the provision of the law which recognises and provides for a 'genuine occupational requirement', in schools of a religious character, for posts necessary to securing the objectives and activities of the

schools according to that religious character. We need 'practising Catholics' in these key posts, people committed to the inspiration and demands of faith and seeking to put them into practice in all the substantive life choices which they make.

Job descriptions for leadership in a Catholic school lay out the parameters of the role in more familiar terms such as '*To establish a culture that promotes excellence, equality and high expectations*'. The conviction that a Catholic leader brings to the task is the conviction of faith: that the establishment of such a culture, of such excellence, of such equality and of such high expectations is essentially a Catholic task. It is the task of putting into practice the vision of Catholic faith and seeing it flourish in the ecology or the environment of true learning.

Documents for the appointment of a Catholic teacher present the ways in which the vision of a Catholic school is to be translated into agreed objectives and operational plans:

- High standards are to be achieved especially in RE and PHSE – these subjects are chosen out because they more than others actually directly contribute to the quality of the environment of a school.
- Leading learning and teaching;
- Building a professional and a learning community;
- Establishing an appropriate style of management;
- Securing professional and ecclesial accountability;
- Strengthening links with the wider community;
- Establishing secure safeguarding procedures in the school;

All these tasks, often found in our documentation, have to be seen and interpreted under the convictions of faith, for there can be no separation of the vision of faith about how human beings flourish on the one hand, and the professional tasks of leading a community, in the name of Christ, in the practice of achieving that human flourishing.

Could I turn for a moment to offer just some brief considerations of the life of a Catholic school in its wider social context. Today we live in a society which tends to instrumentalise everything. By this I mean that nearly all social and economic activities are tested by what is claimed to be the 'efficiency test'. In other words, everything is broken down to clear objectives and attainments and each is given its price. Once this really takes hold, then education has truly entered the market place its entire ecological system is threatened with pollution. When everything has a price then nothing has lasting value.

This we see happening not only in schools, but also, in hospitals, most tragically in the apparent mismanagement in the Stafford Hospital, in social work and, perhaps most bizarrely, in suggestions that even the way in which grandparents look after their grandchildren should be quantified and priced. In effect what is happening is that the patterns of the market are flooding over all aspects of life and we are finding ourselves considered as never more than consumers and suppliers.

Of course our better natures rile against this. It says, instinctively and strongly, this is not a true account of who we are and of what is important to us.

In contrast what we see is that there must be complementary arenas in life to make up its totality. Of course there is a place for the approach

which prices everything and knows all competitive alternatives. In industry and commerce this must be the case, just as those activities must be shaped by contractual agreements.

Similarly, there is a place for the political battles, which can be so intriguing, in which the competition for power is clearly a key influence. The political institutions of state exist for this purpose, in order to regulate the exercise of power in of society according to the best fashion of liberal democracy.

But our society also needs places which are neither commercial nor political. We need places which nurture what are so rightly called 'civic virtues'. These virtues, such a trust, respect, fundamental honesty, a genuine concern of the other, and for the common good, are essential. Both commerce and political life depend upon them. Yet neither commerce nor political life is aimed at generating these virtues – although that can indeed happen. Rather the generators of civic virtue are precisely the other aspects of life: charities, voluntary and faith-based groups, the family and, of course, the school. These are the activities which the Chief Rabbi speaks about, in his book *'The Home We Build Together'* as 'covenant' initiatives. They are vital to our society. He writes:

'Covenant complements the two great contractual institutions: the state and the market. We enter the state and the market as self-interested individuals. We enter a covenant as altruistic individuals seeking the common good. The state and the market are essentially competitive. In the state we compete for power; the market we compete for wealth. Covenantal institutions are

essentially co-operative. When they become competitive, they die.' (p.234)

This highlights the true value of education, firmly, resolutely and creatively expressed in the enterprise of the Catholic school. Our schools are places of a covenantal agreement, where we stand together with families, parishes and local communities, to create social solidarity: those bonds between us in which true human flourishing can take place. This is central to the task of leadership in a Catholic school and the reason why it is a genuine service to our society at large.

Perhaps we could now look briefly, in the perspective of our Catholic faith, at the different dimensions of leadership, seen now in this broader context.

Leaders of a school are indeed leaders of a community. In this they bring all their skill of keeping people together, helping them to work cooperatively, overcoming dissention and rows, keeping all eyes on the tasks in hand and maybe, most importantly, keeping well rooted in the well-springs of life and faith which give character to the enterprise. This is the work of 'koinonia', building up the Body of Christ, drawing nurture from the Lord who gives himself to us entirely. Hence the celebration of Mass is central to the life of the school.

But this community of a school is not stationary. A school, like the rest of us, is always on the move. Our story is not complete. We are a pilgrim people, both in school as in the Church. Social and political changes are always coming upon us. Here the image of the Exodus helps. We are always searching for new ways, always accompanied by the Lord, especially in our wilderness moments. The leader looks

ahead, plotting a course, avoiding dangers, exercising the virtues of prudence and courage, often in equal measure.

The third aspect of leadership which must always be kept in mind is the management or organisational agenda of every school, the creating of effective structures and procedures, planning, recording, evaluation of outcomes, all the techniques of improvement. These include, very importantly, the management of all those relationships which take the school out of itself, into contact with its neighbours, with other schools, with parishes and local enterprises. Here the image of the vineyard might help, an image so familiar to us not only from the Gospels but also from trips down the Rhine! Yet the point of those vineyards is missed if all we see is their neatness and absence of weeds. All that effort is aimed at the production of fine wine. So too the leader's efforts for good order must always have this fruitfulness in mind. We remember too the injunction of the Lord: cut off from me you can do nothing.

These, combined with the educational agenda itself, reflecting the very creative work of God, make up the scope of leadership: that generation of the truly human ecology in which all can flourish and then bring their contribution to our society at large. Each aspect is essentially shaped by the perspectives of faith, but not only by its perspectives, but also by its grace.

This is my last step, and here I borrow from Fr Hanvey. The faith we bring to the task of education, the Catholic faith which must lie at the heart of all that the leader does, is not simply a perspective or an interpretation of life. Faith does not simply give us a particular spin on what happens to us and how we are best to understand it. The Christian faith is more than that. Nor is our faith simply an additional source of

knowledge, giving us additional information, or clarifying certain dilemmas through the gift of revelation.

Our faith is not simply a value adding factor in our human endeavour.

In contrast we have to understand and always grasp that faith is transforming. What our faith gives us is the possibility of living a different kind of life. Faith does not simply invite us to live a better life. Rather it invites us to live a transformed life. In this transformation, we live always within a living relationship with God, with our full union with God as its promised outcome. In this relationship we are enabled to see life afresh and to act accordingly. This new life is now centred on Christ and therefore in union with him, it is a life that goes beyond every calculation of self-interest. Rather we are driven by the desire to give all in return for all that is given to us by God. Our lives, and the lives we seek to inspire, are marked by generous self-giving, even to the end.

Here we come to recognise the importance of our most basic prayer, the sign of the Cross. In acknowledging the fatherhood of God we acknowledge him as creator. This is our first step of faith, one shared by many, yet tragically neglected by others.

But then in our prayer we also recognise the Son. He is our redeemer. He is the one who, through his historic enfleshment in Jesus of Nazareth, takes our failure, our brokenness and sin to himself and frees us of that burden, through his death on the cross, so that we may live a different kind of life. And then we acknowledge the Holy Spirit. This is God the sanctifier, the one who is able to build up within us the capacity for new life, the courage for new life, the decisions that create new life.

The Holy Spirit sustains us through all the difficulties, oppositions and failures that we inevitably experience.

A leader of a Catholic school will ensure that the day begins with the sign of the cross, as an opening act of worship in a school hall or classroom. In making that sign of the cross we spell out the fundamental vision that the leader is there to nurture, to protect, to carry forward and to root within the wider life of the Church. It is a vision of our world created by a loving father; it is a vision of our lives redeemed, saved from sin and death, by the loving death of Jesus; and it is a vision of the Holy Spirit at work in our world, at work in our lives, enabling us to live transformed lives and to serve each other.

The task of leading a Catholic school is one of great distinction. It involves holding together the role of leadership with the personal and consistent practice of faith. It demands honesty and integrity. It is a key part in the pastoral work of the Church, described by Gregory the Great as '*the art of arts*'. It is a noble service and I thank all who fulfil it and I encourage many to aspire to that service.

✠Vincent Nichols
Archbishop of Birmingham
Chairman, Catholic Education Service