**“The Irish Catholic” Conference**

**THE FUTURE OF FAITH BASED SCHOOLS IN A SECULAR SOCIETY**

Reflections of

**Most Rev. Diarmuid Martin**

Archbishop of Dublin

——————————————–

Charlemont Hilton Hotel Dublin, 20 October 2016

If you want to understand the value and the contribution of faith-based schools in any society, I believe that your starting point must be a broad reflection on the role of education.

Pope Benedict on a number of occasions spoke of what he called an *educational emergency*. He was not speaking, as I had imagined when I first heard the term, about problems of the Catholic schools system.  He wished rather to draw attention to a fundamental “emergency” or uncertainty about the deeper purpose of education in a growingly pragmatic and utilitarian world. He was not speaking about the lack of classrooms and equipment; he was talking about the very nature of education itself.

The pressures to which young people are exposed today can lead to a great fragmentation in their lives, due also to the great pressures and concentration of academic programmes and due to a fragmentation regarding where values are to be rooted.

Faith-based schools can be defended only to the extent to which they truly represent an integrated vision of what education is about.  A closed, ghetto faith-based school would betray the very nature of education.   Faith schools must be intellectually open and reach beyond the purely pragmatic and utilitarian.   Otherwise they lose their purpose and their true contribution to society.  If a faith school is to win acceptance in today’s society, it must convincingly show that it offers a true vision of education and show how this vision is beneficial to society.

What do we mean by a secular society?  More and more people are finding that they can live without any direct reference to God.  Many of them will still turn to the Church in special moments in their lives. Secularisation however is not just about a fall in Mass attendance or weaker attachment of individuals to their faith.  It is not about a political or media bias against the Church.

Where the overall presence of God in society diminishes or becomes relativized, then society as a whole begins to ask itself if God matters at all. If society goes about its business without God really mattering, then the overall place of faith in society changes.

When a society which maintains an overall relationship with a God who matters, changes into one where God is less and less present, then men and women of faith find themselves talking a language with which society finds it harder and harder to engage.

Secularisation may or may not be hostile, but when it no longer understands faith as relevant, then our faith-language becomes a foreign language to many in our society.  Pope Benedict said that our challenge today is “to speak about God to people who no longer know where to find him”.

In such a situation there is also the danger that men and women of faith develop an uncertainty and a fear of witnessing to their faith in the structures of society, a fear of somehow offending others or of offending pluralism and thus in their own way they contribute to the privatisation of faith.

A faith-based school in a secular society will be different to a faith school rooted in an active and practising faith community.  Despite affection for their faith, many parents and indeed children are deeply affected by the secularisation of culture.  Faith-language may not be easily or directly accessible to their vision of life.   How do we translate our vision from a language which springs from our faith into the language of reason and dialogue, without losing its originality?

Allow me an aside to underline what I mean.  In one of the talks which formed part of what he called “The President of Ireland’s Ethics Initiative”, President Michael D. Higgins focussed on the principles which should guide “a realistic future for Ireland as a nation and as a democracy.

He set out from the context of an Ireland which had just undergone a major economic crisis. Ireland had moved from being top of the class in international financial and economic jargon into an economy which needed a bailout from a troika of sources.  What happened and where do we go now?

President Higgins began by looking not at banks and austerity and international monetary organizations.  He began with values and ethics. He asked about the values needed “as we set about the work of transition from a society which was not the best version of ourselves to one which is grounded in a more ethical version of our Irishness”.   He stressed that the challenge requires change “in consciousness, institutional thinking and indeed a new contemporary form of ethical literacy”.

He set out to look at the fundamental philosophical underpinnings of a view of the economy which almost unnoticed drove our society down wrong roads and roads which inevitably pointed away from long-term social sustainability.

My point is that this same culture of narrow pragmatism which damaged our economy is also a threat which can undermine education.  Ethical and philosophical reflections are not a luxury or a waste of time.  A lack of appropriate challenge to an individualistic understanding of what economy is and what the social function of an economy is, ended up harming many individuals and communities.

Reflection and critical debate about the type of society we wish to attain and sustain and the values which should underlie it are part and parcel of an integral understanding of education.  The faith school must be a school which is rooted in solid values.  The faith based school must be one which fosters the ability of critical reflection and societal conviction on the part of its students.  As believers we have to identify aspects of our faith-language which find resonance, be understood and find attraction in a more secular world where there is however still a sense of seeking for meaning.

The debate between faith and culture is not something esoteric for the experts.  It is vital for the healthy growth of a pluralist society. It constitutes an essential contribution to the search for a common language which can communicate with and captivate secular society.  There are some who would look on the introduction of faith into debates about educational policy in more secular societies as an obstacle to common reflection.  For them it would be the introduction of a divisive element.  In that sense narrow secularism is hostile to pluralism

The faith school must be a place where young believers develop the capacity to realise that their faith can bring an added integrating dimension to their future professional life and in their life in society.

John Henry Newman wrote about his idea of a mature Catholic laity. He wrote:: ‘I want a laity, not arrogant, not rash in speech, not disputatious, but men who know their religion, who enter into it, who know just where they stand, who know what they hold and what they do not, *who know their creed so well that they can give an account of it..*”

Pope Benedict noted in his homily at the beatification of Cardinal Newman: “The service to which Blessed John Henry was called involved applying his keen intellect and his prolific pen to many of the most pressing ‘subjects of the day’. His insights into the relationship between faith and reason, into the vital place of revealed religion in civilized society, and into the need for a broadly-based and wide-ranging approach to education…  continue today to inspire and enlighten many all over the world”.

Faith based schools are called to foster not robots but “keen intellects and prolific pens [capable of] addressing the pressing subjects of the day”.   The future of Catholic schools in Ireland will depend on their ability to help young people find faith in Jesus Christ, but a faith that can bring its impact effectively on the values which will inspire a future and different Ireland.

The Irish educational system is unique in Western Europe.  Catholic schools dominate the educational landscape as nowhere else. These schools are at the same time State schools and Catholic schools, but in some cases they have suffer from a split personality.  This dominant place of Catholic schools reflects a religious and cultural demographical situation of the past.    If Catholic schools feel that they can continue to be all things to all citizens then they may well end up with a compromised ethos, trying somehow to fit in with the scrambled ethos of the student and family mix around them.

Faith schools are not instruments of religious indoctrination.  There is no reason why they cannot and should not be open to receive children of other traditions, just as they should not be limited exclusively to one social class. An exclusivist ethos should be alien to any faith school.

Faith schools will only be effective to the extent that they are anything but compromised in their ethos.  The opposite of “compromise” is not “fundamentalist”.  The opposite of compromise is commitment.  A faith school must be one committed to an integrated vison of education which fosters a future generation who, to quote Newman again, “know their creed so well that they can give an account of it” and give that account in our times within a pluralist society.

In that sense there is not just room for faith-based schools in a pluralist society, but a pluralist society needs quality faith-based schools.   **Ends**