

Catholic Culture – An Impossible Dream?

The role of education in shaping our attitudes and our ethics: Is the dream worth fighting for?

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I will divide my talk which is entitled "Catholic culture and Catholic identity – is it worth fighting for? Can the battle be won?" into three parts:

1. The emergence and achievements of Catholic education in the UK;
2. The social and political challenges facing today's Catholic parents and schools; and
3. What we might hope to achieve by the cultivation of a specifically Catholic culture and the fostering of a Catholic identity.

Before discussing those three themes let me begin by mentioning the title of the conference.

At a moment when Europe is facing such economic and political turbulence – and when young people – think, for instance of Spain's 50% unemployment rate among young people, or the more than 1 million young British people who are not in education, employment or training – and you could easily understand why we might succumb the besetting sin of despair, choosing instead to simply tread water, abandoning our dreams, hoping simply to cling on.

During my teenage years civil war was raging in Biafra; there was carnage in Vietnam; Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy were assassinated; and the world was gripped by the nuclear arms race of the Cold War. I had bought a copy of Kennedy's beautifully written and inspiring *To Seek a Newer Land* and the harsh reality of those events, including his own violent death, seemed wholly at odds with his expression of idealism and hopefulness.

What I quickly learnt was that it takes courage to pursue dreams and courage to risk failure. Only big dreams have the power to inspire, to motivate, to move hearts and to shape character.

My university in Liverpool encourages its students to "dream, plan and achieve" – for dreams to be realized they need a hard cutting edge and perseverance.

The poet Langston Hughes, whose death occurred a year before Robert Kennedy's, saw the importance of not abandoning our dreams:

“Hold fast to dreams,
For if dreams die,
Life is a broken-winged bird that cannot fly,
Hold fast to dreams,
For if dreams go,
Life is a barren field,
Frozen with snow”

And while Hughes was composing poetry, Mitch Leigh, in 1965, was composing the lyrics to the song *The Impossible Dream* or *The Quest*.

It was Robert Kennedy's favourite song and became the most popular and best known song from Leigh's musical *Man of La Mancha*. The words are sung by Don Quixote as he stands vigil. It is his response to Aldonza's question “what does it mean to follow the Quest?” It's later sung again by prisoners in a dungeon as Miguel de Cervantes is brought before the Inquisition – hopefully not a fate we will face today. But Aldonza's question is ultimately the same as Fr Porter's. What does it mean to follow the Quest? Is it an impossible dream?

Perhaps the answer to the question is to be found in the Acts of the Apostles. Building on the prophecy of Joel, St Peter tells the fledgling church:

“Your young men will see visions, and your old men will dream dreams. ... Your sons and daughters will speak what God has revealed.”

In their generation they were told to dream dreams, to have visions, and to annunciate what God had revealed to them. That admonition remains true in our generation and, indeed, every generation.

However fierce the Black Dog becomes; however weighed down we come by our own imperfections and failing; it is our duty to sustain the dream and to continue the quest.

So let me turn then to the three themes I want to address:

1. The emergence and achievements of Catholic education in the UK
2. The social and political challenges facing today's Catholic parents and schools; and
3. What we might hope to achieve by the cultivation of a specifically Catholic culture and the fostering of a Catholic identity.

1. The emergence and achievements of Catholic education in the UK

A few weeks ago I attended a Jubilee Mass marking the half century of the existence of the Catholic grammar school where I was educated. I wondered if any of those who had originally discussed its creation had considered it an impossible dream.

As you walk through the door of that school fifty years later you are still met by the gaze of the Lady who watches over the place and you experience the same sense of community and the same commitment to providing a first class education for children from many diverse backgrounds which was there at its inception.

In common with many of my classmates I came off a council estate, my family having been rehoused from the East End. Mother was an Irish immigrant, my father a factory worker. It was a mixed marriage and no-one, from either side of the family, had ever entered higher education.

My excellent primary school education was provided by Sisters of Mercy and along with all the rudiments of elementary education I was taught the basics of the Catholic faith. Parochial life and school life were completely interwoven – and whether it was May or Corpus Christi Processions, preparing for first holy Communion or Confirmation, helping at church bazaars, joining the parish cub and scout packs, serving Sunday Mass, or raising money for children in the Congo, it was all part of the web and weave of Catholic identity and Catholic culture.

It was the perfect preparation for a nervous scholarship boy arriving for his first day in the first year of a brand new grammar school planted by the Jesuits on the edge of east London and named for one of the 105 Tyburn martyrs, St Edmund Campion – and confronted with subjects and discipline, mud, rugby and sport, in few of which I excelled.

Underneath Our Lady's statue is a plaque marking the death of the school's first headmaster, Fr Michael Fox SJ. He invested every last bit of energy in building the school and getting it open. Fr Fox died just weeks later. If sacrifice for the common good is at the heart of Catholic culture perhaps that plaque tells its own story.

Fr Fox gave everything to create the school but everyone caught the dream, followed his example, and worked hard to make the enterprise a success – not least badgering our families and neighbours every week to contribute to CASCADE, the school tote which was forever paying off the building debt.

I still have fond memories of the priest who gave me a love of history, Fr WKLWebb SJ, my Irish English teacher, Tom McCarthy, who always invoked St Jude – patron of hopeless causes – before attempting to teach us; David Hocking, our music master, who trained us to sing *Stabat Mater*; and Derek Foster, who despaired of my inability to speak French but introduced me to Hilaire Belloc and Chesterton instead.

After three years, a thriving school was handed over to the local diocese. This was driven by the need of the Jesuits to conserve numbers and there was the inevitable sadness at the disappearance of a formidable Religious Order. It was, however, an early harbinger of the direction in which the Catholic Church was headed. That school has been lay-led ever since the Jesuits departed but it has jealously guarded its identity and ethos.

It's good that Jesuits, who have shaped so much of Catholic education throughout the world, are opening a serious debate about the continuing purpose and challenge facing our schools. The Jesuit contribution to education has been phenomenal – but think too of the Ursulines, the Salesians, the Benedictines, and the many religious orders and dioceses who have educated the disadvantaged and the poor and enabled masses of people to escape the tyranny of poverty and social disadvantage.

It's good, also, that we are meeting here at Stonyhurst. In 1754, a weary and bedraggled group of children, led by some fugitive Jesuit priests, arrived in Lancashire, having escaped from an

increasingly hostile continental refuge, and planted their school, here in the house of Thomas Weld. It ended post-Reformation peregrinations which had taken the school to Bruges, Liege and St Omer. It was a principal bridge-head for the many schools which have followed.

As they planted their tattered flag in Lancashire's damp soil, those early educational pioneers must have seen the prospect of national provision of schools, parish by parish, must have seemed like an impossible dream.

Yet think of what has been achieved here. Their school has produced more saints and *beati* than any other, and along with seven Victoria Crosses Stonyhurst's story demonstrates that a steadfast faith and patriotic love of country are not incompatible.

In planting several daughter schools and Jesuit educational values – creating men and women for others – they have inspired many who work in Britain's Catholic schools. In turn it supports schools for the poor in Zimbabwe and promotes three things: AMDG (*ad maiorem dei gloriam*) that everything will be committed to the greater glory of God; *Quant je puis* – to do all that I can; and to form “men and women for others”.

It's true that these are deeply subversive values in sharp elbowed, self-centred, Britain; but they are a reality – not a dream – in many of our counter-cultural Catholic schools – and where they are not, we should work harder to create such an ethos.

In the eighteenth century, sectarian suspicions and anti-Catholic bigotry must have sharpened the sense of impossibility of this endeavour. This, and the accusation that these schools would be a Trojan horse, or a fifth column, encouraging loyalty to foreign potentates and an inability to be fully patriotic citizens, fanned the flames of prejudice.

The accusations today come from angry atheists: but they amount to the same thing. In reality the facts tell a different story and demonstrate – perhaps with application to other religious minorities living in Britain today – that the dream of cherishing your faith whilst loving your country – Thomas More's declared wish to be “the King's good servant but God's first” - has been fulfilled.

In the reign of Elizabeth II, we have seen an extraordinary blossoming of Catholic educational provision. When she ascended the throne, sixty years ago, there were 2.8 million Catholics in England and Wales. Today, there are over 4 million; 6 million in the UK.

In 1952 there were 1,488 voluntary aided schools, today there are 2,131 – and a further 147 independent Catholic schools. They form 10% of the country's schools. In 1952 525,437 children were educated in Catholic schools. Today it is nearly 837,000.

If you were to hold up a mirror to our diverse nation you would find nowhere more representative than Catholic schools – with 31% of pupils from ethnic minority backgrounds (compared with 26% nationally); and that 18.6% live in the most deprived areas (14.3% nationally).

That these schools are chosen destinations for the church and unchurched alike is demonstrated by waiting lists and demand.

That they achieve good results is testified by their above average Contextual Value Added scores (57% for primary and 65% for secondary compared with 50% and 53.2% nationally) and 74% of Catholic primary schools are judged good or outstanding by OFSTED (66% nationally). At age 11

Catholic schools outperform the national average in English and Maths SAT's scores by 5% and at GCSE they outperform the national average by 6%.

We all know that league tables and testing are not the only ingredients in measuring a school's performance but could it be that the ethos which exists in many of these schools is the reason why they achieve these measurable results?

The belief that every pupil is loved by God - even if they have been wounded by rejection or broken relationships; the cultivation of a respect for authority and ideals; the knowledge that when you fall short or make mistakes, it's not the end - these all make up the Holy Grail of ethos.

It is always instructive, however, to ask ourselves whether there is more that can be done to enhance and consolidate that ethos. Catholic schools do not exist to simply turn out better mathematicians who understand algebra and quadratic equations better than their State school counterparts.

Catholic education does not deliver Gradgrind facts about History and English, Geography and Science with a bolt-on called religious study.

The rich Christian seam must run through the whole curriculum, informing the whole spirit of teaching and subject, combining *fides et ratio* – faith and reason. Christianity is not about irrationality and as faith needs reason, so reason needs faith.

It was a Benedictine monk who offered the wry observation that, in the end, the real purpose of Catholic education is about teaching a person how to face death.

Beyond the SATs and Contextual Added Value scores lies a more profound reason for wanting a Catholic education for your children – it is the desire to know God, to know the man made in His image, to know how to live and how to die. There would be no point in keeping the word Catholic in the names of our schools if they cease to educate for our relationships with one another, with God and for the never ending struggle between vice and virtue.

Secular rationality and religious belief need one another and they must temper and civilise one another. This is the unity of life.

It is where the transcendent meets man. In *The Catholic School on the Threshold of the Third Millennium* we are challenged to restore to “the educational process the unity which saves it from dispersion amid the meandering of knowledge and acquired facts, and focuses on the human person in his or her integral, transcendent, historical identity.” It's where the Mystery of the Word made flesh and the mystery of man, his purpose and destiny, become clear. Ideally, this approach will be reinforced by strong family and parish community ties.

This brings me to my second theme.

2. The social and political challenges facing today's Catholic parents and schools

It is remarkable how much is achieved despite the difficult environment in which contemporary Catholics live.

Self evidently, in a society which suggests it is illegal to wear a cross, to say prayers before a public meeting, to celebrate uniquely Christian festivals, feasts or seasons, or to hold views on the human person which are not majoritarian is inevitably going to make life difficult – difficult, but unlike so many places in the world, it won't cost you your life.

In the case of Catholic adoption agencies – and professions such as gynaecology and obstetrics and, increasingly, midwifery and nursing, it has certainly become much more difficult but, with that in mind, should we not up our game in explaining what we stand for, and particularly, the mission and objectives of our Catholic schools and why their dilution or elimination would be tragedy for society as a whole: a society which needs Catholic schools, their values and ethos.

Catholic schools do not exist in a vacuum. They exist against a backdrop of nearly 50% of marriages ending in divorce and 800,000 children with no contact with their fathers, and many families. We need a new parable reflecting on the need for the prodigal fathers to return to their children.

In England, for boys aged 12 to 17 the factors most strongly associated with serious or persistent offending can often be traced to the absence of a father. Others boys have a poor relationship with their father, who may be violent or take little interest in them. And other fathers are working such long hours that they cannot give their sons the time they need. All of this has accurately been described as the 'Dad Deficit'. In a survey conducted by Adrienne Katz of 1,400 boys, 13 % were found to have low self-esteem, low motivation and low confidence. Boys in that group said that they were uncertain about their responsibilities and depressed about their future. 20% of that group had been in trouble with the police; 11 % were deeply depressed or suicidal. Three out of four suicides in our country are males. Many will have been to schools in which they have been branded as failures, told what they can't do rather than what they can do, and as failure is reinforced self esteem plummets.

This is an underclass of young men, often detached from the socialising influences of the family, often believing that they are unfairly excluded from the opportunities of the consumer society. If we want to reduce crime, drug abuse and domestic violence and to strengthen families, we must give these young men back hope and self-confidence. More than any other group, our education system has been failing these young people who desperately need values and a sense of self worth.

During the height of the riots last year Britain's mask slipped, revealing something of the sharp-elbowed, tatterdemalion and violent society which exists not far below the surface. Who didn't feel sickened at the sight of a bleeding boy, attacked and robbed again by those who first appeared to have come to his aid; or the 67-year-old killed because he tried to prevent arson; or the 11-year-old brought before the courts and convicted because, along with thousands of other looters, he exploited the breakdown in law and order?

Beyond our shock and anger we must also ask ourselves some deeper questions about the country we have made and the country which we want it to be. If we do not attend to the root problems, far worse will visit us in the future. This will involve the renewal of our battered and compromised institutions and require us to reassess how we see ourselves as citizens and how we see our obligations and duties, our responsibilities as well as our rights. It needs two things: different values and a clearer sense of what promotes human wellbeing. This is something which the Catholic community can offer our country – not because we are perfect but because we know what is needed. John Henry Newman rightly reminded us that "if a man waited until he was perfect before he acted he would do nothing."

I mentioned Robert Kennedy earlier. Speaking after the 1965 Watts Riots in Los Angeles – America's first urban riots – Robert Kennedy said that leaving people socially alienated in urban ghettos had simply led the disaffected to end up 'having nothing to do with the rest of us'. We must not make the same mistake. Kennedy saw the importance of forming good citizens: 'Since the days of Greece and Rome when the word 'citizen' was a title of honour, we have often seen more emphasis put on the rights of citizenship than on its responsibilities. And today, as never before in the free world, responsibility is the greatest right of citizenship and service is the greatest of freedom's privileges'.

In 2005, another American Catholic, Mary Ann Glendon coined the pithy phrase 'Traditions in Turmoil' as the title for her analysis of the jettisoning of the ties which bind and the abandonment of duties. Consider for a moment the consequences of discarding values and virtues once taught by parents and re-enforced by educationalist and by civil society.

A faithless society has become an atomised, lonely, and selfish society; a faithless society has become a culturally diminished society; a faithless society has become a fatherless society and a broken family society. What has been done in the name of freedom has created a world of CCTV cameras; to high streets which have become no go areas after dark; and to binge drinking and shelves full of anti depressants. How has this made us freer or happier? In 2006 a report by University College, London stated that 'The UK has the worst problem with anti-social behaviour in Europe'. It has increasingly felt like a world rapidly going to hell in a basket.

According to the Children's Society, 100,000 children run away from home every year. Save the Children says that 3.9 million children are living in poverty and that a staggering 1.7 million children are living in severe, persistent poverty in the UK-which is, after all, one of the richest countries in the world. Every day 4,000 children call Childline. Since it was founded in 1986, it has counselled more than a million children.

Before they are born, each day we abort 600 of our children, some up to birth if they have a disability or defect such as a cleft palate. Blessed John Paul II once observed that 'A nation that kills its own children is a nation without hope'

Consider that five million images of child abuse are in circulation on the internet, featuring some 400,000 children. In Edinburgh, figures published last year showed a 75% increase in the number of babies addicted to drugs because of their mothers' addiction. As they grow up suicide accounts for 20% of all deaths among young people aged 15 to 24.

The twenty first century is fast becoming a century of toxic loneliness – and any number of computer terminals and virtual reality friends on social networking sites are no substitute for human commerce and human kindness. The levels of loneliness, despair and depression are the backdrop against which we are living.

An estimated 1 million elderly people do not see a friend or neighbour during an average week; 7 million people are now living alone in Great Britain – entirely unprecedented in our history. 26% of households comprising just one and on present trends by 2016 36% of all homes will be inhabited by a single person.

Many who are lonely and living alone have no-one to help or advise them as they are caught up in spiralling unemployment and indebtedness. Last year total UK personal debt stood at £1,451 billion. 331 people every day of the year are declared insolvent or bankrupt. This is equivalent to 1 person every 60 seconds during a working day

Should we be surprised that more than 140,000 people attempt to commit suicide every year? Last year, Samaritans answered 4.6 million calls from people in despair, which is one call every seven seconds. Also last year, 29.4 million anti-depressants were dispensed, which is a 334% increase since 1985 at a cost to the National Health Service of £338-million.

John Maynard Keynes correctly observed that ‘No society can surely be flourishing and happy, of which the far greater part of the members are poor and miserable’. Britain needs to observe the good advice given to passengers alighting from the tube at London underground stations – to “mind the gap.” If the gap goes on widening, everyone will suffer.

Pope Benedict, during his visit to the UK, said that Christians must “take a lead in calling for solidarity with those in need. The prophetic voice of Christians has an important role in highlighting the needs of the poor and disadvantaged, who can so easily be overlooked in the allocation of limited resources.”

Our bishops have declared that we must act in putting “a genuine commitment to the good of others ahead of self interest” and work to create “a new culture of social responsibility

Nearly seventy years ago Winston Churchill wept when he saw the destruction of the East End of London by Nazi bombardment. Perhaps we should shed a few tears ourselves. But Churchill also understood the importance of drawing a whole nation around a common cause: ‘All the great things are simple, and many can be expressed in a single word: freedom, justice, honour, duty, mercy, hope’.

So, in the light of the challenges which this materialistic and difficult society poses what words might best express what we believe we have to offer contemporary Britain? Let me turn to my third theme.

3. What we might hope to achieve by the cultivation of a specifically Catholic culture and the fostering of a Catholic identity?

Fr David Ranson, in a paper delivered in 2009 in Australia, entitled *A Service Shaped by Catholic Identity*, suggested four ways of thinking about Catholic identity; that,

- a particular motivation galvanises us;
- a certain body of teaching directs us;
- a certain ecclesial tension keeps us fresh, and;
- a particular apostolic strategy holds all of that together.

Canon Law and the Catechism of the Catholic Church say that Catholic identity is possessed by those who are baptised and are fully in communion with the Catholic Church; joined with Christ in its visible structure by the profession of Faith and the Sacraments, and are; bound together by ecclesiastical governance.

Our motivation must be the cultivation of the servant leadership of Jesus Himself; our teaching will be the upholding of the Judaeo-Christian values which have shaped so much of our law and our thinking, sustained in our own times by Catholic Social teaching and our belief in the common good; a willingness to be fresh and engaged in the world around us rather than falling victim to faith fatigue; and a strategy which does not neglect identity or recollection– the memory of what has gone before and who we are.

But Catholic identity and culture is about more than Canon Law.

GK Chesterton saw no contradiction between a pint, a pipe and the cross. Catholics have never seen any inconsistency in both believing in a loving God and joyously celebrating life. Many of us recognise the truth of Hilaire Belloc's verse:

“Wherever the Catholic sun does shine
there is always laughter and good red wine.
At least, I have always found it so,
Benedicamus Domino!”

That last phrase – “Let us bless the Lord” – is in joyful thanksgiving for all that is good in our lives and it recalls the words from Genesis used each year in our Easter Vigil liturgies “God saw all that he had made and it was very good.”

It is true that in different ages – and especially in some of our northern European countries - some of the things that God gave us have been despised by religious believers: the Gnostics hated the material world, the Jansenists hated sex, and the puritans abolished festivals and celebrations. These heresies though, were all repudiated by the Church and, even though some of this thinking still percolates into our lives, it is not at the heart of universal Catholic identity or culture. Saying that you hold God and his creation in reverence and awe is not the same as saying that you are frightened silly of him.

Among the world's one billion Catholics the love of food and drink; of family and community festivals; the generous gift of time and whole lives in loving service; the celebration of the sacraments, feasts and seasons; of life itself: these, are all the hallmarks of a faith that knows how to enjoy itself and these are gifts needed in a world which has lost its way.

Catholics particularly understand the crucial importance of the extended family and we are right to insist that this is central to our identity and culture.

My own parents left school at 14 and came from backgrounds of acute poverty – but both knew the importance of a positive approach to learning at home; to encouraging the education of their children; to improving their own qualifications; and that, despite the vicissitudes of living in poor housing and in a flat on an overspill council estate, money alone was not the key to transforming the life chances of the next generation. I saw this same trump card used by many families in the inner city neighbourhoods of Liverpool that I represented for 25 years as a City Councillor or Member of Parliament.

Frank Field, who is Member of Parliament for Birkenhead, reflects that he has “increasingly come to view poverty as a more subtle enemy than pure lack of money, and I have similarly become increasingly concerned about how the poverty that parents endure is all too often visited on their children.”

Human instinct surely convinces us that a child ideally needs loving parents to provide security, encouragement and a tough love disciplined framework in which they can flourish. Reversing the remorseless erosion of stable parenting cannot be achieved overnight but it is the key to liberating the hundreds of thousands of people trapped in cycles of poverty and who are diminished, stunted, by under achievement.

The impact of how well parents nurture their children goes beyond a child fulfilling its potential – it affects the social cohesion of our communities and will, in the long term, affect the happiness and prosperity of our country.

Manifestly, if we are to be salt and light in the world around us we urgently need to bolster our own Catholic identity. We don't reach out to the vulnerable or weak because they are Catholic – most of them aren't - we do it because we are Catholic. That sense of who we are, rooted in our traditions and beliefs, needs to be strengthened. Archbishop Nichols is right when he says that the stronger our identity the more we will be able to do.

This will mean mobilising the one in twelve Britons who call themselves Catholic: the more than 6 million Catholics in the UK. There is an old African proverb that "to educate a child you need the whole tribe" – it needs everyone including the family and Church.

And what sort of questions might the whole tribe be asking itself about what it wants to achieve?

We could start by asking ourselves the old question about how we nurture the four cardinal virtues of prudence, justice, restraint, and courage.

- How do we ensure that vulnerable groups are not made more vulnerable or stigmatised?
- Do we understand the importance of relationships in sustaining society?
- Can the market help to shift capital to the disadvantaged?
- What creates good communities?
- How can we strengthen the local and unleash the power of creative citizenship?
- Are we going to turn our fire on the weapons of mass consumption?

The Jewish sage Hillel was right when he said: "If I am not for myself, who will be? But if I am only for myself, what am I?"

Are we only for ourselves? Do we find the face of God in each person we encounter; do we believe in the sanctity of each God-given life?

These and many other questions may seem like an impossible dream.

But don't let's underestimate what is already being done and by the commitment which we make because of our culture and identity. For example, 5,000 Catholics already work in prisons with more than 85,000 prisoners. All over the country, the work undertaken by wonderful agencies, from Anchor House to the St. Vincent de Paul Society to the Passage night shelter for the homeless; from Hospice and other hospices to the Cardinal Hume Centre, or the Jesuit Refugee Service, to the parishioners who visit the sick and housebound, all indicate the scale of Catholic involvement and action. There are more than 1000 independent Catholic charities operating in Britain today who helped more than 800,000 people last year alone; and it's not just in the UK.

CARITAS, the confederation of 164 Catholic relief, development and social service organisations, have taken up the call of their faith to serve the needy and the vulnerable -making a vital contribution to the good of all. The Catholic Church is one of the biggest global health providers. It runs 5,246 hospitals, 17,530 dispensaries, 577 leprosy clinics, 15,208 houses for the elderly, chronically ill and people with physical and learning disabilities worldwide.

That snapshot reinforces the 1965 declaration of the Second Vatican Council that "A society which promotes religious freedom will be enlivened and enriched; one that doesn't will decay".

Those who endlessly attack religious belief and seek to drive the faith communities out of the public square need to understand what would be lost to the wider community if they had their way.

Whether it is in combating drug and alcohol abuse or violent crime; standing up for the unborn, for disabled people, for the terminally ill, for refugees, asylum seekers, prisoners, or broken families; or through its involvement in independent and voluntary aided schools, the Church quietly makes a phenomenal contribution to this country and the world's social capital. But a failure to insist on a place at the table where decisions are made and a failure by the Church to punch at its weight, too often leads to its voice being ignored. As a consequence it has been forced to retreat from hospitals and adoption agencies as the State seeks to emasculate their Catholic ethos.

In this context, and at a time when the Church often looks defensive and feels itself under attack, it is worth reiterating that our young people and our schools are a great success story for the Catholic Church. A glimpse of the vast numbers of young people who gather for the World Youth Days, or the commitment which they show to one another in faith-led projects and work, is a reminder to look at the glass half full rather than to always look at the glass half empty.

Our schools are a place where we can discover our Christian vocation; discover true life and sanctity through the lives of the saints and martyrs; and penetrate the mystery of being close to the Lord and learning how to freely give of oneself for the good of others; and to become living signs for our times.

Our schools have proved to be an extraordinarily safe environment with an ethos which forms good citizens and good values; providing a ladder of learning which has offered phenomenal opportunities and social mobility – a singular contribution to stability and the common good. I have seen it first hand through the good citizenship award scheme run by my Foundation for Citizenship, which I established at my university, and which operates across 1,000 schools in the North West. Those awards bear the familiar words “men and women for others” and here is a place where secular and religious values and hopes can coalesce.

In particular, the mandate of a Catholic school is to promote a love of God and a love of man and all of us who have experienced Catholic culture and ethos, as parents, teachers, governors, or a child in a Catholic school – and I have been all four in either the voluntary aided or independent sector – believe that our schools represent the fulfilment of what must have seemed impossible to the bedraggled founders of Stonyhurst and the mainly poor immigrant families who built the wave of schools which followed the 1944 Education Act.

It is said that Archbishop Griffin (then Archbishop of Westminster) was in the Strangers Gallery in the House of Commons when R.A. Butler steered through that legislation and

After providing a financial contribution to the building of new voluntary aided schools, the Archbishop sent the Education Secretary a copy of Butler's *Lives of the Saints*. Certainly, that legislation ensured that what had seemed impossible in earlier generations became possible in theirs. Yet the contribution is not uncontested. The former Lib Dem education spokesman said that “in an ideal world there would be no religious schools” - some ideal world - and there are endless attempts to dilute their identity, tamper with their catchment areas, or to coral them into conformity.

One recent particularly vituperative and vitriolic attack on the Catholic Church, by a lady author promoting her latest book at the Hay on Wye Literary Festival, said “no respectable person should

have anything to do with the Catholic Church.” I don’t know what her personal experiences had been but I didn’t recognize the caricature and nor would the parents of the three quarters of a million children who battle to get their children into the countries 2,200 Catholic schools.

Does anyone really believe that loving parents would put their children into the hands of Catholic teachers and their schools if they thought they were cruel or cold places? No doubt there are individual failures– and worse – but perhaps it is their expectations which were the “impossible dream.” Within the bounds of what is possible it is staggering what has been achieved.

A couple of years ago I challenged a colleague in the House of Lords who said Catholic schools were elitist and mono-cultural. In reality, Catholic parishes and schools are some of the most socially and culturally diverse places in contemporary Britain. They have been the country’s most formidable engine for social mobility. That was a dream which has come true and one from which the whole of society might learn.

The defining ethos of a Catholic school is its belief in God. It will aspire to find God in all things and all people; every aspect of the curriculum and the school’s activity will reflect the all pervading presence of God; with His signature writ large on the school’s values and objectives. This culture will allow God’s goodness and love to inspire the work of the school and to inform the attitudes of staff, governors, parents and students.

The culture will stress formation, driven by a desire to draw out the potential and the talents of every pupil, including the full expression of academic ability, sporting prowess, and the cultivation of citizenship, rather than an obsession with league tables or targets. Its culture will reflect the Catholic belief in upholding the human dignity of every person, the community rather than ego, the encouragement of service and sacrifice, a commitment to others and a belief in the common good. It will encourage young people to be, as Pope John Paul II put it, “signs of contradiction” and “not to be afraid” in questioning materialism, consumerism and anti life attitudes; and to be signs of hope in a despairing world. It will be counter cultural in upholding the teachings of the Church and encourage commitment and involvement in the varied life of the Church. Unashamedly, this recognizes the place of God and religion in our lives. The English historian, Christopher Dawson, believed that a civilisation depends on its faith and cannot long survive once this is disposed of.

In 1830, Alex De Tocqueville visited America and he remarked that this highly motivated and successful society was animated by its religious belief and character. Without religion you can have a Big State but not a Big Society. Without vibrant faith communities I doubt that you can have a functioning society at all.

We can take our cue from Thomas a Kempis who told us to put our love into action, not to throw in the towel at the first obstacle, but to persist in what we do: "At the Day of Judgement we shall not be asked what we have read, but what we have done.....Those who love stay awake when duty calls, wake up from sleep when someone needs help; those who love keep burning, no matter what, like a lighted torch. Those who love take on anything, complete goals, bring plans to fruition ... But those who do not love faint and lie down on the job."

Catholic action has to be in it for the long term and always remain rooted in our belief in God, and in the person made in the image of God.

Schools and institutions which are truly and faithfully Catholic – and do not diminish their mandate as to be indistinguishable from their secular counterparts – are the most successful and the ones in greatest demand and they can be beacons of hope for the whole of society.

What we must not do is fall in to the trap of becoming like the educators described in CS Lewis' *The Abolition of Man* whom he dubs "the conditioners" because they "make men without chests." In a characteristically blunt turn of phrase he says that we treat our children like "geldings. We bid them be fruitful only to neuter them." Lewis goes on to remark that "The task of modern education is not to cut down jungles but to irrigate deserts. The right defence against false sentiments is to inculcate just sentiments. By starving the sensibility of our pupils we only make them easier prey to the propagandist when he comes." Lewis was right and we must be vigilant in guarding against the conditioners and the men without chests.

Accommodating the mores of society or the ideology of the State – in order to preserve funding streams or because those running the institutions have themselves become unchurched and no longer believe in the principles which led to the establishment of the institution – will certainly make the dream unattainable.

In recent years the eclipse of significant formation programmes and Colleges for the formation of Catholic teachers has weakened our ability to make the dream a reality – and we need to give that serious thought. So have inadequate catechesis of children and the disruption of models of Catholic family and community life by factors such as unprecedented family breakdown, which I have mentioned, has been accompanied by an erosion of parish and church life. The Church has also experienced a loss of nerve in the wake of the child abuse scandals. And the State has increasingly encroached on the formation of the curriculum, examination, admissions, and behavioural questions.

However, despite all of this, evidence from the UK, US and a raft of European countries suggests that when educational institutions are true to themselves and their founding charism they will flourish. Central to this will be the solid Christian belief in the centrality and worth of the human person – and the development of their spirituality and intellect.

This determination to promote human flourishing and the social solidarity which is the common good and which must be manifested in the life of every Catholic educator and Catholic institution. Intrinsic to this is our belief that we are subject to God and required to use our talents and gifts in the service of others. The thrust must be to prepare us for our sublime destiny whilst working out, while we journey there, who we are and for what purpose we were created.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church (n.2221) insists that the right and duty of parents to educate their children is primordial and inalienable.

The State should see the great benefits which such an approach brings to society as a whole.

Fr Adrian Porter asked this conference to reflect on the intriguing question "Is Catholic Culture an Impossible Dream?" Unpacking that question, we were asked to consider whether there is even such a thing as Catholic culture – and, if so, what does it look like? What might the characteristics of a school with a Catholic culture be? What are the forces which militate against sustaining a Catholic culture in schools? What future does Catholic education have in a secular society which is becoming increasingly antagonistic for religious faith?

I have tried to answer those questions by addressing three themes:

1. The emergence and achievements of Catholic education in the UK;

2. The social and political challenges facing today's Catholic parents and schools; and
3. What we might hope to achieve by the cultivation of a specifically Catholic culture and the fostering of a Catholic identity.

The core of my response to the question is that Catholic Culture is a difficult but attainable dream – not an impossible one. And I will conclude with the words of St Thomas More and John Henry Newman. They both warned against expecting an easy life - More said: “We may not expect to go to heaven in feather beds. It is not the way.” And Newman said “Good is never accomplished except at the cost of those who do it, truth never breaks through except through the sacrifice of those who spread it.”

So, it may be difficult, at times it may appear impossible, but we should count our many blessings and ensure that in our generation we cherish the gifts which these earlier generations of English Catholics have entrusted to us.