

Homily of Archbishop Dermot Farrell at Mass for the Association of Patrons and Trustees of Catholic Schools

🕒 14. OCT, 2021

Today we remember with gratitude the women and men of religious congregations who established the post-primary schools, at the invitation of the local bishop, for the education and faith formation of the children of the local parish. These founders were especially concerned to provide for the most marginalised in the community, especially the poor in the parish. In particular, I thank those who initiated the project and those who brought it to completion.

As you know, the thinking behind the formation of the Association of Patrons and Trustees (APTCS) was to bring cohesion to this sector and to create a platform for cooperation between all the various Trusts and bishops involved in Diocesan Secondary Schools.

The primary challenge for the Patrons and Trustees is to maintain the ethos of the Catholic School – an ever increasing challenge in the contemporary world. APTCS has the potential to build on the excellent work done by the various Trusts – CEIST, Le Chéile and ERST. As a group of Patrons and Trustees, we have a very serious obligation and responsibility to be faithful to the founding intentions of the women and men who began this work. Are there challenges in our schools today? Yes. But there were also challenges in the past. The priests and religious who built, maintained and served Catholic schools for generations made great sacrifices; we stand on their shoulders today. As women and men of faith, we believe that God has chosen us, and those who work hard every day in Catholic schools across the country, to serve at this time. In the words of today's first Reading, "There is no difference between the person who waters and the person who sows" (1 Cor 3:8).

APTCS is ethos driven. The reason we are deeply involved in Catholic Schools is to provide parents who wish to educate their children with a school whose ethos is Catholic. Such an education cannot just focus only on points, or academic subjects. We are not naked intellect. The school is not a laboratory for facts. Spiritual and moral formation are required, too.

It would be a mistake to think that most parents are less interested in a school with a Catholic ethos than previous generations. We should not shy away from our ethos. We must put ourselves in the public square. If the Catholic School is to fulfil its mission properly, it cannot retreat into what it considers a safe space. A Catholic school that isolates itself becomes self-centred and self-referential.

The Patrons and Trustees who are charged with responsibility for these schools now need to consider seriously what it is we do, how we do it, and how we prepare these schools to continue to reflect the Catholic ethos for the families who wish to enrol their children in them. I am not by any means suggesting a bunker mentality in regard to the Catholic school, as this would be unhelpful in evangelising the culture of today. Pope Francis puts the challenge well: "openness to others, whoever they may be, must always be cultivated: the gospel is meant for everyone... it is a leaven of new humanity in every place and time" (Address to General Assembly of Focolare Movement, 6 February 2021).

"Openness to others, whoever they may be..." We see the same openness emerge in the disciples at the end of the Gospel in today's Mass. This story, which we know so well, ends in a typical Lukan flourish: Jesus—a stranger to the two disciples—makes as if to go on, the disciples invite him in, and they recognize him the breaking of bread.

Their welcome of the stranger they have met on the road is key. Hospitality is the key. Welcome leads to recognition. The world operates in another dynamic: in the world recognition *leads to* hospitality. But in Jesus' world it is the other way 'round: our welcome, our openness to the other is the key to recognizing Christ.

In particular, the cry of the poor and the disadvantaged, especially in the local parish, must always be heard by a listening, concerned, and hospitable Church. Any school with a Catholic ethos cannot be deaf to the particular educational needs of these children who face multiple challenges every day. To insulate ourselves from their educational need contradicts our core mission to provide a preferential option for the poor and disadvantaged.

The Emmaus journey is more than its ending. This journey of Jesus with his disciples is also a school of Christian leadership. Christ is the model for those who are called to lead others.

First of all, the leader is a person of vision. The disciples were disheartened, sad not only that their Lord had been killed, but that their own hopes had been dashed with his death. "Our own hope had been..." (Luke 24:21).

In the long journey on which he brings them, he shares his vision with them. Leadership inspires people. Christ leads the disciples from self-absorption to generosity. "They pressed him to stay with them..." At the end of the journey *with him*, they are changed, transformed we might say. This is not a new set of ideas; this is a renewed heart.

Leadership involves sharing the vision. He opened their eyes to the Scriptures, and he opened their hearts to the stranger, because in mystery he had opened their hearts to himself. "Did not our hearts burn within us as he talked to us on the road."

Christ's explanation of himself and his mission, is a meeting with him in his mission. Unless we meet Christ as he is, we are only meeting an idol of our own

making. Unless we meet him in the poor and the disadvantaged, in those forced to the margins, and those left behind, we are meeting but an idol—an idol named Jesus—whom we have made. Then we meet a Christ who has “hands but they cannot feel,” a Lord who has “feet but cannot walk”—to paraphrase the psalm (see Psalm 115:7). Unless we countenance meeting Christ on the cross, we risk passing by the wounded stranger on life’s road (see Luke 10:30). Unless we can face the emptiness of the tomb, “we will not hear those words, ‘he has gone before you to Galilee’” (Matt 28:7) (Michel de Certeau).

The good leader motivates people; she or he brings us to engage with the world as it is, in its ups and downs, in its contours. This is what Christ did. His disciples, who would have preferred a neat apocalyptic ending, with clear indications of who was on each side, found it quite unsatisfactory.

The leader makes himself redundant. Christ disappears from their sight. “He had vanished from their sight.” That is what every good parent does as they help the growth of their children from cradle to adulthood. It is what every good teacher does: we liberate those we educate to discover the world *for themselves*. We make ourselves redundant.

The Catholic school has a mission, but we would do well to heed Pope Francis’s observation that “many ecclesiastical establishments, at every level, seem to be swallowed up by the obsession of promoting themselves and their own initiatives, as if that were the objective and goal of their mission” (Address to Pontifical Mission Societies, 21 May 2021).

As Patrons and Trustees, we know that the work continues and the Good News is as necessary as ever. With the Spirit of the Lord in our hearts, we can accomplish what we have been called to do. “We are partners working together for God” (1 Cor 3:9). May our hearts burn within us as we journey with him on his way.