



***Quo Vadimus?
The Future of Catholic Education in Western Australia***

PUBLIC LECTURE

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When I was a young man in my final years of preparation for ordination as a priest, one of my lecturers in Church History, Fr Austin Cooper, often spoke about the role and importance of conservatism in the life of the Church. At the risk of over-simplifying his views the “take-away” message from his lectures was as we might say today that conservatism is all about evaluating what has been handed on from the past in order to discern what is of lasting value and, indeed, essential, from that received tradition if we are to be faithful to our own identity as we seek to move courageously and enthusiastically into our future.

I was impressed by that insight at the time and remain so today. To manage the present and build for the future with confidence we need to be people who live out of the richness of our past, while not being people who are slavishly locked into that past. As we think about Catholic education in our country, in our state, and in this archdiocese of Perth, this means that we need to have an eye on the past, an eye on the present, and an eye on the future. I do realise that this makes three eyes and we only have two. So let me use another image. We need to be like jugglers, circus performers, who have to keep three balls in the air at the same time: the past, the present and the future. Just as the circus act will be a failure if the juggler drops any one of the balls, so our attempts to construct a viable vision for Catholic education will falter if we fail to allow the past, the present and the at least partly unknown future to interact with, and mutually inform, each other.

As far as the future is concerned what we are really talking about, I believe, is the vision that informs and guides us. We do not know what the future will hold. We do not know the difficulties, the opportunities, the challenges, or at least not in any detail. We can, of course, make some predictions about these things and plan for them in the best way we can. But we do not have a crystal ball, and our Catholic tradition would not encourage us to consult the stars or the astrology pages in the local newspaper. What we can do is seek to identify that which lies at the heart of the Church’s engagement with the education of young people and seek to ensure that as we try to meet the myriad challenges which will confront us, and grasp hold of the many opportunities which will be set before us, we do so with courage, with creativity, with energy, and also with fidelity. The decisions about where we wish to go in the future will need to be in harmony with the fundamental insights which have guided the Catholic Church’s involvement in education for the last fifteen hundred years or more.

If we do look to the past, and here I am talking not about the last fifteen hundred years but rather about the last 150 years here in Australia, we quickly realise that there was a fundamental purpose in the establishment of a Catholic education system in Australia in the early years of British settlement. In the very earliest days of the colonies different religious traditions, notably the



Anglicans, the Catholics and the Presbyterians, all established schools for their own adherents, and received some form of government aid to do so. However it was in the second half of the nineteenth century that the various colonial governments gradually moved away from supporting denominational schools to supporting government schools which would be, to quote the famous Victorian Education of 1872, free, compulsory and secular. What we today would call State or Government schools were established and financial assistance to the various religious traditions to assist them in the running of their own denominational schools was diminished or discontinued. This happened a little later in Western Australia than in other parts of the country, but with the passing of the Assisted Schools Abolition Act of 1895, government aid to Catholic schools came to an end and Bishop Gibney, the bishop at the time, set about doing whatever he could to provide a Catholic education for Catholic children and, it is important to note, for any other families who wished to take part in what the Catholic system had to offer.

Earlier in that century, in 1869, the Catholic bishops of Australia, in the face of the growing opposition to government assistance for Catholic schools, had already taken a momentous decision which was to determine in large part the nature of the Catholic Church in Australia from then on, right up until today. In that year the bishops declared that “as far as we can we will take care that separate education for Catholic children be everywhere propagated”. This decision to establish a separate system of Catholic schools lies at the origin of the Catholic System as we know it today, and indeed set a course which would shape the whole Catholic Church, and not just its schools, which is still evident in the way our Church operates in the 21st century. Significantly, because of the absence of government funding and the poverty of the Catholic community generally, the bishops looked overseas, especially although not only to Ireland, for religious sisters and brothers who could, to put it bluntly, provide a cheap and reliable labour force to run the schools. At the same time, remarkable initiatives were taking place within Australia in this regard. Archbishop Polding established the Sisters of the Good Samaritan in Sydney, and Saint Mary of the Cross MacKillop, together with Fr Julian Tennyson Woods, began what would eventually become the Sisters of Saint Joseph, the Josephites. The extraordinary contribution of religious sisters, brothers and priests, which has deeply marked our experience of what it is to be the Church here in Australia, cannot be overemphasised – and that presence is due in large part to the decision of the bishops to erect a Catholic school system.

The early history of Catholic education in Western Australia, and in Australia generally, is both a remarkable and a complex one. We do not have time to delve into it tonight. There is one question however that I would like to raise and it is this. Why? Why did the bishops make the decision they did? Why did they not, instead, consider the possibility of concentrating their efforts on a system of Sunday School classes as many of the other traditions did? Why did they not, in other words, decide to leave the secular realm of education in the three R's to the government and provide for what was lacking, in their eyes, in government education, namely, education in the faith?

It seems to me that, if it has not already been done, then someone might take up these questions as the basis of a doctoral thesis. I have not had time to research any documentation which could shed light on the fundamental motivation of the bishops, or the specific factors driving their decision, although it would not be hard to make a few guesses which would need of course to be tested. Did the bishops feel that the Church was under siege from a kind of militant anti-Catholicism masking itself as a benign or even aggressive secularism? Did they operate out of a kind of ghetto-mentality which saw the non-Catholic world as the enemy? Were they frightened of losing their people, and especially their young people, if they did not maintain and strengthen



a separate Catholic education system? Did they believe that as a somewhat persecuted and marginalised community, the best way for the Church to combat this marginalisation was to give their children the best possible education within a context which would enable those children to be educated, climb the social and employment ladders, and be strengthened in the faith at the same time? I am sure all these factors, and many others, played some part in the decision by the bishops to establish their own system of schools. But behind all these possible reasons, I cannot help wondering if the bishops, either implicitly or explicitly, were motivated by the belief that it is not in fact possible to separate religion from all the other dimensions of life: that education, if it is to be complete and integral, must be informed by and permeated by a world view, an understanding of what it is to be human, which, in the case of the Catholic tradition, places the relationship between a person and God at the heart of what life is all about. This of course is the very opposite of a secular, or at least a secularist, world-view. Indeed to opt for a secular system of education rather than a faith-based one is as much the adoption of an ideology as is the decision to opt for a faith-based system.

I would propose then that a foundational reason for the establishment of the Catholic school system in Australia lies in a deeply held conviction that there is no true and comprehensive education unless that education is informed by, underpinned by and permeated by the unshakeable belief that the exclusion of God from the educational endeavour so badly distorts the true meaning of what it is to be human that it is a betrayal of young people. I would argue that the bishops in the late nineteenth century were not prepared to betray their young people in that way. The religious who so heroically responded to the bishops' call similarly were not prepared to betray the young people in that way. And most importantly the Catholic community, and Catholic parents, were not prepared to betray their children in that way. The remarkable story of Catholic education marked by extraordinary courage and sacrifice and played out in parish primary and secondary schools all over Australia, had begun.

If we had time I would have liked, at this point, to make something of a theological excursus to explain what I am trying to express here. We do not have time, but let me simply make this point. We live at the moment in a society and culture which seeks to relegate religion to the private sphere. It is acknowledged, sometimes grudgingly and with some perplexity, that religion is important to many people, and the right to freedom of religion is upheld in theory, if not always in practice. Society is prepared to allow people to "be religious" if that is their inclination, but religious belief is not something to be forced on others, and religious convictions certainly should not be the basis for public policy. What this means is that the question of God is removed from the public sphere and confined to people's private lives. While there are many examples from history and from contemporary experience of the damage that can be caused by the misuse of religion in public life, and while our own history in Australia is marked at times by a very destructive sectarianism, nevertheless for a believer the practical exclusion of God from public life, and the demand that a belief in God should not and must not have any effect on the way in which believers engage in public life and discourse, makes no sense at all. From a Christian's point of view, we might say that if God is as we believe he is, if God is as Jesus tells us he is, then God stands at the heart of everything: God stands at the heart of an individual's life; God stands at the heart of people's relationships; God stands at the heart of the common lives we share as members of communities; God stands at the heart of our life as a society. The fact that so many people, including religious people, do not experience God in this way, does not point to the fact that God is not at the heart of life, but rather to the mystery of humanity's banishment of God from their lives. This is the idea captured in the Book of Genesis where, after the first sin, the man and the



woman seek to hide from God, to distance themselves from God, because of the gulf they have opened up between God and themselves through their sin. Because of sin, the God with whom they had walked in the garden in friendship now becomes a God to be feared and avoided. God hadn't changed - he was still the God of friendship and love – but humanity had changed. It had lost its sense of the true nature of God and succumbed to a distorted understanding of who God really is. We see this same phenomenon of seeking to keep God at bay playing out in human history ever since: we see this same phenomenon playing itself out in our own personal stories and in the story of our society and culture. The very existence of our Catholic education system is a clear proclamation that we, as a Catholic community, do not accept this banishment of God to the margins.

I went to Catholic schools in Melbourne from 1959, when I was in prep, until 1971, when I completed my secondary schooling. Both schools catered for what we might call working class families. Mum worked part time in a fruit shop and dad worked in the local pub. They had to make great sacrifices to send both my brother and me to Catholic schools, and it was not easy for them to find the funds for such things as uniforms, books, even bus fares at times, not to mention such things as excursions, although these were in reality few and far between in those days. In both my primary and secondary schools there were some excellent teachers, some ordinary teachers, and some poor teachers. The facilities were not overly impressive, the resources were limited, and the classes were large. One thing, however, was very clear. The “God question” was absolutely front and centre. Prayer at the beginning and end of the day, regular celebration of the sacraments, daily religious education classes, religious images, and the presence of religious sisters, brothers and priests all pointed in the same direction: God, as God was understood within the Catholic tradition, was the whole reason for the school's existence. Not everyone embraced it, not everyone liked it, some agitated against it, many just put up with it, but no-one was in any doubt as to just why the school existed.

At the beginning of this presentation I suggested that as regards Catholic education if we wish to manage the present and build for the future with confidence we need to be people who live out of the richness of our past, while not being people who are slavishly locked into the past. I would now like to suggest that this fundamental pillar of Catholic education, namely that is based on the conviction that a full and integral education of the young is only possible if the existence of a loving God who is made known to us in Jesus Christ informs and permeates the educational environment and all aspects of the educational endeavour, must remain the foundational principle and fundamental philosophy of our involvement in education. A Catholic school will always be, or at least should always be, a school where the “God question” is front and centre.

Before considering what this might mean in practical terms, I would like to make the following point. Education of the young is one of the many aspects of the Church's life which we might think of as our gospel-inspired contribution to the welfare, the common good, of the society in which we live. In this sense it stands alongside our involvement in health care, which is quite extraordinary here in Western Australia, and in our social outreach through the many agencies which are supported by the Catholic community. I am thinking of Life-Link, of Centacare, of the St Vincent de Paul Society, of Pregnancy Assistance, of Aboriginal Catholic Ministry, of the Emmanuel Centre, and of many others. I would like to think that each of these endeavours is grounded in the kind of inspiration that we find in one of St Paul's letters where he remarks that “the love of Christ urges us on” (2 Cor 5:14). Certainly each one of our agencies would have begun that way. As the Letter to the Corinthians makes clear Paul does what he does, and by



extension we as Christians do what we do, because he and we are inspired by and supported by the love of Christ – our love for him and his love for us. The motivation is important. St Mary MacKillop is famous for her advice to her sisters; “Never see a need without doing something about it”. Another of her sayings, again addressed to her sisters, is less well known but is in fact the counter-balance to the first saying. “Never forget” she advises her sisters, “who it is you are following.”

There is an ongoing and very necessary discussion in Catholic agencies as to what the Christian origins and inspiration of these agencies, and their grounding in the Catholic tradition, means for their present and their future. This is a complex matter and we do not have time to go into it in any detail now. However if we were to briefly take health care as an example, one of the things we would certainly say is that a Catholic hospital or health care facility, while it is necessarily and gladly open to everyone, will not provide procedures which are not morally acceptable in the Catholic tradition. Many people find this difficult and argue that if public money is being spent in these facilities, then the full range of procedures should be available just as they are in other non-Catholic facilities. The point that is often missed, of course, is the fact that these restrictions are not arbitrary rules but rather inevitable consequences of the fundamental vision of life which grounds the very existence of our Catholic hospitals in the first place. They are a consequence of the “never forget who it is you are following” principle without which Catholic institutions of any kind, be they health-related, welfare-related or education-related, have no reason for existing.

It follows that a Catholic hospital, while it will not necessarily only employ Catholics, will require of its staff that they support and comply with, or at least do not seek to undermine, the Catholic ethos and moral standards of the hospital. Catholic hospitals claim the right to operate within the parameters of Catholic moral teaching because they exist as a practical expression of what following Jesus means. If they are not able to be faithful to that fundamental imperative, then they have no right to continue as Catholic facilities.

The same could be said of most Catholic Welfare Agencies. At the very minimum there are certain things in which Catholic agencies will not involve themselves. But it is important to recognise that while the decision not to be involved in certain things sets a minimum standard for the Catholic identity of any particular institution or agency, what is really at stake is the vision of life, the world view, which underpins these particular instances, and it is the presence of this world view, and the desire to make it the foundation of the particular agency’s day to day activities, which is really the key to the agency’s Catholic identity: *Caritas Christi urget nos* – the love of Christ drives us on.

What about Catholic education? Can we and should we say much the same about the Church’s involvement in this area? Well, yes we should and do. But in the case of Catholic education do we need to say something more?

Certainly the provision of a good education, like the provision of good health care or the provision of worthwhile services and assistance for those in need, is a valuable contribution to the common good. It is better that young people be educated than that they not be, just as it is better that people have good health care than that they are left to suffer. When the Church involves itself in these activities it does so in response to the command of Jesus to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, visit prisoners and care for the sick. If someone is suffering from a particular disease and is admitted to hospital, the aim of the care that person receives in the hospital is that he or she be



healed of their illness if at all possible. If a person is hungry and comes to a welfare agency seeking assistance, the aim of the assistance is, in the first instance at least, to alleviate their hunger. Catholic hospitals must be allowed to be, and must strive to be, good hospitals. Catholic welfare agencies must be allowed to be, and must strive to be, efficient and compassionate providers of the goods and services people need. And Catholic schools must be allowed to be, and must strive to be, providers of the very best education they can possibly offer. And this is the point. It is the absolute conviction of the Catholic faith that the education, the integral formation, of young people can only ever be partial if it excludes, or marginalises, or trivialises, education in the faith. As Catholics we take seriously the famous saying of Saint Augustine: “you have made us for yourself, O Lord, and are hearts are restless until they rest in you”.

The implication of this, it seems to me, is that the explicit proclamation of the gospel of Jesus and the explicit teaching of the Catholic faith must have a central place in the work of Catholic education which they do not necessarily have in either the health-care sector or in the welfare sector, where the proclamation of the gospel will often be much more implicit. It is all about the nature of the service the Church is offering. Education is about formation. It is about moulding and shaping a young person so as to equip him or her for their future. It is about providing young people with the skills they need to enable them to enter into the exciting adventure of adult life as fully as possible. This is why we want our children to develop the skills and knowledge they need to make their lives successful, satisfying and complete. It is also why we make our schools centres of evangelisation and gospel proclamation. Schools are meant to equip young people for their future, not to handicap them by denying them an essential dimension of their human formation. I am very conscious that this is a faith-inspired statement. Of course it is. Our Catholic schools, in their foundation and in the ongoing commitment of the Catholic community to them, are and always have been a faith statement – and a very concrete one built on bricks and mortar, and much more importantly on courage, on self-sacrifice and commitment, and on trust in God's providence.

I need to make another important point here. I will make it briefly but this does not indicate that it is not absolutely essential to the task of Catholic education. I would like to make it in reference to our present pope and his immediate predecessor. Speaking during an apostolic visit to Portugal in 2010 Pope Benedict made the following comment:

The “indispensable mission of every ecclesial community” is “to receive from God and to offer to the world the Risen Christ, so that every situation of weakness and of death may be transformed, through the Holy Spirit, into an opportunity for growth and life ... Everyone, in the end, asks this of us, even those who seem not to. From personal and communal experience, we know well that it is Jesus whom everyone awaits.”

“And so”, Pope Benedict concludes, “we impose nothing, yet we propose ceaselessly.”

This idea of proposing, but not imposing, the message of Christ, seems to me to be a key to the way in which Pope Francis goes about his ministry. It was certainly clear in his visit to Brazil for World Youth Day. Both his words and his actions are about communicating the joy of following Christ – he invites, he encourages, he explains, he reaches out, he engages – but he does not threaten, coerce or impose.

His words for the World Mission Day this year (2013) can help us catch something of his approach:



The Church – I repeat once again – is not a relief organisation, an enterprise or an NGO, but a community of people, animated by the Holy Spirit, who have lived and are living the wonder of the encounter with Jesus Christ and want to share this experience of deep joy, the message of salvation that the Lord gave us. It is the Holy Spirit who guides the Church in this path.”

A Catholic school or university is a living, dynamic expression of the Church. It is, in Pope Francis’s words, “a community of people, animated by the Holy Spirit, who want to share the experience of deep joy, the message of salvation that the Lord gave us”. To share, to offer, to propose – not to impose, or force, or coerce. A Catholic school or university will be, and will want to be, a place where this desire to propose and facilitate, but never to impose or force, an encounter with Christ, is at the heart of the school or university’s daily life and its self-understanding. And why? Because this encounter will lead to an experience of deep joy which comes from the gift of salvation and life offered by Christ in and through his Church. It seems to me that if we don’t believe this, then we will find it difficult to account for Christ or his Church – and therefore difficult to account for the existence of Catholic schools and universities.

The implication of all that I have said so far is that Catholic schools must be places where the students come first. Our schools, and our university, exist for them. Decisions about the day to day running of the institution will be taken with the best interests of the students at heart. Policies and procedures will be developed on the basis of what most benefits the students. Staffing decisions, curriculum issues, extra-curricula activities, allocation of resources – all these will be considered with the needs of the students in mind. And in a Catholic school or university, the presence of God, as he is made known in Jesus and in the life and teaching of the Catholic Church, will be a fundamental principle which informs all these decisions because an education which does not seek to lead people into a deeper encounter with and appreciation of God is an education which is incomplete, an education which short-changes our young people.

This fundamental conviction informs my vision for Catholic education in the Archdiocese of Perth. It is both my hope and my aim that every Catholic school, primary or secondary, and our Catholic University of Notre Dame, are places of educational excellence where our young people are provided with the very best education possible. I want our schools and our university to be places of professionalism and unwavering commitment to young people. I want them to be provided with the best facilities possible, with the most qualified and talented teachers and administrators available. I want them to be leaders in educational methods. I want them to be innovative, creative and deeply inserted into the life of our society.

I am sure that everyone shares these desires with me. But in the light of our Christian faith, I also want to say that our schools and our university cannot be and will not be all this if God is not the heart and soul of all our educational institutions. And so I also want our schools, colleges and university to be places where the God of Jesus Christ is not marginalised but acknowledged and honoured, where the richness of the Catholic tradition is not minimised but celebrated, where the beauty of the Catholic understanding of what it is to be fully human is not apologised for but promoted and defended, and where the Catholic world-view permeates every dimension of the school’s or university’s life. I want our educational institutions to be places where the beauty and power of the Christian faith is never imposed, but always proposed in every way possible.



The Catholic Church in Australia remains committed to Catholic education because it believes that life lived with an openness to God is infinitely richer than one lived with the practical absence of God at its heart. As the Archbishop of Perth I remain committed to Catholic education for the same reason. If we are to be involved in the crucial work of education, of formation of young people, of involvement in preparing them for the life which awaits them once school or university has finished, then we can only do so with integrity if we keep striving to keep the mystery of God both at the heart of our own motivation and at the heart of the day-to-day running of our schools, our colleges and our universities. Our young people must be able to encounter the God of Jesus Christ in our schools and in our university. If they cannot, then we are failing.

I am well aware of the challenges and the very real obstacles which make the full realisation of this vision rather difficult. I do not intend to rehearse all those challenges and obstacles here: they are as familiar to many of you as they are to me. But I do want to say this. The genius of Catholicism can be glimpsed in many different aspects of the Church's life and teaching. One such dimension, which has always seemed to me to be of vital importance, is this: Catholicism proposes high ideals and at the level of principle refuses to compromise on them. It is one of the reasons why Catholicism is attractive to so many, and repugnant to so many others. But while the Catholic tradition holds up these high ideals, it is also extremely realistic.

Our own personal history, and the long history of our Church, has taught us that most of us, much of the time, fail to live up to the ideals. There is always a significant gap, sometimes even a yawning gap, between where we are and where we are called to be. The challenge and the adventure lie in continuing to strive towards the ideals, while never ever despairing because we are not there yet. The great mistake would be to believe that because the goals and the ideals are so far beyond where we are at the moment that our only option is to give up, settle for something far less ambitious, and no longer believe in who we are and who we are called to be.

In my eighteen months in Perth I have become very aware of the remarkable richness and the remarkable potential we have in our Catholic education system. I am conscious of the extraordinary and often heroic contribution made by our principals, teachers and other staff to the formation and development of fine young men and women who are being equipped to take up their roles in our community. I am very alive to the ways in which qualities of generosity, compassion, responsibility, leadership, integrity and so many others are being fostered and encouraged and developed in our schools and here at Notre Dame. In all of this our schools, and I believe our university as well, are complementing the formation and reinforcing the values which so many of our young people are receiving at home from their families.

I am conscious, too, of the great efforts which continue to be made to make the sharing of our faith through formal religious education classes, through retreat programs, through liturgical life, through social outreach programs and hear at the University through rigorous and professional theological education, a vital part of the experience of life in a Catholic school or university. In talking about my vision for the future of Catholic education, I want to acknowledge fully and with gratitude that we are not starting with a blank canvas – far from it. But in the light of what is already being achieved the question I would put to each of our schools, and to our university, is this: are we yet the vibrant, gospel-inspired, faith-filled and mission-oriented Catholic community that we are called to be? And if not, and to the extent that we are not, what can we do to become more what we already are and what our identity as Catholic schools and universities calls us and requires us to be?



It is my hope that in my time as Archbishop of Perth I can work with our schools and our university, with our principals and staffs, with the director and staff of our Catholic Education Office, with our clergy and religious, especially in the parish setting, and with our parents to find together answers to the question I have just posed. Our young people need and deserve that we do our best for them. I invite you all to join me in responding to them to the very best of our abilities.