



2016 National Catholic Education Commission Conference

**By the Most Rev Timothy Costelloe SDB
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Good afternoon, everyone. My name is Archbishop Tim Costelloe and it is my great pleasure and honour to welcome you all to the National Catholic Education Commission Conference for 2016. I do so in my capacity as the Archbishop of Perth, as Chair of the Australian Catholic Bishops Commission for Catholic Education, as a proud and passionate supporter of our Catholic schools, and as a fellow disciple of Jesus Christ with all of you.

And so to you all, locals and visitors alike, leaders, teachers, and students in our schools and Education Offices, laity, religious and clergy, special guests and presenters, friends of Catholic education, and all of you brothers and sisters together as God's holy people, welcome.

(2) The theme of our conference this year has inevitably provided me with a focus for the few words I want to share with you this afternoon. It is the theme which has animated, and continues to animate, the mission of Catholic Education in Western Australia in 2016 and we are looking forward to new insights and understandings regarding this theme as these next few days unfold. It is a theme which we hope will speak to all of you as you bring your own experience of, and dreams for, Catholic Education in your own particular settings to this conference.

At the very beginning of the conference, therefore, I want to offer you some initial thoughts which may prompt further reflection as the conference goes on.

The two key words or concepts in our theme are, of course, "faith" and "lead". I paid enough attention at school myself to know that one is a noun and one is a verb. But it is the juxtaposition of the two words that invites us into deeper reflection. And, inevitably, that reflection will present us with challenges which are also, of course, opportunities.

(3) First of all, our conference theme presents us with a proposition that may strike some as strange and perhaps even a little troubling or daunting. We are being invited to reflect on the idea that, if we are going to lead, then we will need faith to do so, or at least to do so in the way that Catholic Education asks of us. Over these few days, I hope we will all discover the opportunity to reflect on the ways in which our leadership is influenced by our faith, and also perhaps on the ways in which our faith is challenged by, and hopefully deepened, because of our experience of leadership and all that it calls forth from us.

(4) Secondly, we are being challenged by the idea that, ultimately, our leadership in Catholic Education is meant to be of a kind that will lead others, and also ourselves, of course, to faith. Because faith is a noun, but one which refers to something that grows, develops, and is never fully and finally attained in this life, we may, as our own faith grows, lead some to an initial experience of faith and others to a gradual deepening of their faith. All of us are on a journey of faith. All of us have already travelled some distance along this journey and all of us have a long



way to go. If the goal of our leadership is to lead people to faith, then we, too, will need to be people who have set out on the journey of faith ourselves, have had some experience of what that journey involves, and especially what it means to persevere in the journey when it proves to be more challenging than we had anticipated. Equally, because faith should never be a purely private matter and is, in fact, in our Christian understanding, always a communal reality, we will need to be willing to commit ourselves to walking with our students and their families, and with our staffs and colleagues, as they, too, travel this journey. Catholic schools cannot afford to be places where the topic of faith is “off limits”: Catholic schools need to be places where it is as natural to talk about faith as it is to talk about the football.

All of this means that “faith” is at the heart of our conference. That is hardly surprising given that this is a conference for people involved in Catholic Education. But it does invite us to pause and consider the nature of faith, and the challenge of faith, and the demands of faith, and the rewards of faith. Why do we need faith in order to lead effectively? And what do we imagine we are leading people to when we say that, at least in theory, we are leading them to faith?

5) I would not be telling you anything you did not already know if I were to suggest to you that faith is about much more than merely intellectual assent to a series of propositions, or teachings, or dogmas. It is about those things, certainly, and they can give us a solid base on which to build our understanding, however limited it might be, of the mystery of God at work in our lives. But knowledge about religious doctrine is not the same as faith. Nor is faith a purely intellectual acceptance of particular propositions or ideas. Faith, we might say, is what happens in the heart. It is the heart that enables us to make sense of what is happening in our heads. It is the heart which prompts and enables us to commit ourselves to what we have begun to understand.

As always for us, as Christians, the best way for us to enter into this mystery is to look to Jesus as we encounter Him in the pages of the Gospel. Let me then remind you of a passage from Matthew’s Gospel which might help us to orient ourselves at the start of our conference. It is quite short so I will read it to you:

(6) *Jesus got into the boat and His disciples followed Him. Suddenly, a furious storm came up on the lake, so that the waves swept over the boat. But Jesus was sleeping. The disciples went and woke Him, saying, “Lord, save us! We’re going to drown!” He replied, “You of little faith, why are you so afraid?” Then He got up and rebuked the winds and the waves, and it was completely calm. The men were amazed and asked, “What kind of man is this? Even the winds and the waves obey him!”*

When Jesus challenges His disciples about their lack of faith, it is not so much their lack of intellectual conviction about Jesus as it is their lack of trust in His care for them which Jesus is questioning. Just before this incident takes place in Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus has spent a long time teaching His disciples, and the crowds, in what we know as the Sermon on the Mount. As part of that sermon, He had spoken of the tender, compassionate and unfailing care of God for His Creation, and especially for His children. “If God cares so much for the birds of the air and the flowers growing in the fields,” Jesus says to them, “how much more will he care for you, you people of so little faith?”



(7) For Jesus, faith is about trust. It is not so much a question of asking ourselves, “Do I believe in God?” but, rather, “Do I trust in God?” Or perhaps it is better to simply say, “Do I trust God?” Do I really believe that God is as Jesus says He is? Do I believe that there is a divine providence at work in my life, and in the lives of those around me, and in the lives of the young people with whom and for whom I work, which means that, while I know I must do my very best, my utmost, to look after the young people entrusted to my care, I can go ahead with serenity, with courage and with hope, because I know that God loves each of them as much as He loves me, and that He loves me as much as He loves each of them, and that He loves all of us as much as He loves His only Son. How deeply planted is it within me that my life is in God’s hands, that I am sustained and guided by the Spirit of God, and that the Lord Jesus, who is with us whenever two or more are gathered in His name, walks with me, both beside me and before me, showing me the way and picking me up when I stumble?

(8) I am deeply conscious that all of this can to some people sound rather pious or overly spiritualised, or hopelessly unrealistic and other-worldly. We live in a society and a culture which is strangely disengaged with, and becoming more and more ignorant of, its deep Christian roots.

For all sorts of reasons which we cannot explore now, what we might call the “God question” either never presents itself to many people’s consciousness in any compelling way, or is deliberately excluded from people’s consciousness because it is too troubling. Our own people, including many of the parents who choose a Catholic education for their children, many of the young people who attend our Catholic schools, and some and perhaps many of the people who choose to work in Catholic education, find themselves in this situation. It is hardly surprising. The culture in which we live is like the air we breathe. It enters into us whether we are aware of it or not. If the air, which keeps us alive, is tainted in any way its life-giving power, while not destroyed, will nevertheless also bring illness and we may struggle to breathe. If the culture in which we live is influenced by attitudes which distort or seek to exclude the things of God from our lives, we will, perhaps without always realising it, be similarly affected.

Certainly, my own conviction is that this is the greatest challenge faced by Catholic Education in Australia today. Pope Francis himself made a similar point when addressing a Conference on Catholic Education in the Vatican last year. He put it this way:

(9) “Transcendence is what is wanting – for me, the greatest crisis in education (that which is stopping it from being) truly, authentically Christian, is this closure to transcendence.”

The enormity and complexity of this challenge in the context of a society such as ours could be very daunting, so much so that we might be tempted to push it aside, or consign it to the “too-hard” basket, or naively believe that we can entrust it exclusively to a group of specialists, like the Religious Education staff, for example, who will then relieve the rest of us of the burden of attending to the Catholic identity of our schools. I do not believe myself that this is an adequate response. The Church has always understood itself to be a community of disciples. Following the lead of St Paul, we think of ourselves like a body, which is only healthy when every part of the body is functioning properly and in harmony with every other part.

(10) We all share in the privilege, and the responsibility, of Catholic education which has, as its primary aim, in the words again of Pope Francis, “*To prepare hearts, that the Lord might manifest*



Himself (which) is the true mission of the teacher and the goal of all education worthy of the name”.

(11) Precisely because of the extraordinarily daunting nature of this task and this challenge, the words which accompany the logo for our conference become so important: “I can do all things in him who strengthens me”. Our own history in Australia, and our history as a Universal Church, testifies to the truth of this: that history also invites us to remember that Catholic education at heart is no different from any other dimension of the Church’s life and ministry. If we lose sight of Jesus, or push Him to the margins, or pay Him little more than lip service in the day-to-day life of our schools and education offices, we will quickly lose our way, our leadership will begin to founder, and we will certainly not be leading our young people, or our colleagues, or the families we serve, to faith. We may be very efficient, and at the cutting edge of educational theory and practice, but we will not be the schools that our families, our students and our community need us to be.

During our conference over the next few days, we will be presented with opportunities to engage with an almost bewildering array of topics, everything from play as a path-way to learning, to trauma-sensitive schools, to mental health and well-being, to the contribution of Aboriginal spiritualities to Catholic identity, to name just a few. What ties them all together is the truth that, because God came among us as one of us in Jesus, nothing truly human is foreign to us, or outside the scope of our concern, or even fully understandable except in the light which Jesus shines on our human condition. Nor can life, in all its complexity, ever be truly understood and fully lived unless there is this openness to transcendence, this openness to the God who makes Himself known to us in Jesus through His Church.

(12) To lead to faith, to lead to trust, is to lead to Jesus. To have faith to lead is to have trust in Jesus who, through the gift of His Spirit, enables us to be the leaders, the guides, the formators of our young people that God is calling us to be. We can indeed do all things in Christ who strengthens us – so let us make sure that He is at the heart of everything we do and say in our time together.