

Pastoral Letter on Our Catholic Schools to be read or made available on Education Sunday - 9 September 2018

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Today is Education Sunday and I want to acknowledge, highlight and praise the contribution Catholic schools have made over the years not just to the life of the Catholic Church, but to the life of the nation as a whole. When Pope Benedict visited this country he paid tribute to the contribution of our Catholic schools. At the opening of his address to our young people at *The Big Assembly* he called them to be holy, to be saints: He said “*When I invite you to become saints, I am asking you not to be content with second best. I am asking you not to pursue one limited goal and ignore all the others. Happiness is something we all want – the key to it is very simple – true happiness is to be found in God. We need to have the courage to place our deepest hopes in God alone, not in money, in a career, in worldly success, or in our relationships with others, but in God. Only he can satisfy the deepest needs of our hearts.*”

Catholic schools are places of great ethnic richness, they are places characterised by tolerance, respect, a genuine spirit of enquiry and search for truth. Perhaps it is for these reasons that so many parents who are not of our faith also choose to send their children to a Catholic school. The Church fully understands the innate dignity of every human person made in the image and likeness of God, and as a result She seeks to avoid any narrow understanding of education that is seen only in terms of good examination results or training for work, important as these are. Speaking about the nature of a Catholic school, Pope Benedict said “*A good school provides a rounded education for the whole person. And a good Catholic school, over and above this, should help all its students to become saints. Non-Catholics too will feel encouraged to practise virtue and to grow in knowledge and friendship with God alongside their Catholic classmates. Respect and friendship for members of other religious traditions should be among the virtues learned in a Catholic school.*” Our Catholic schools are part of our contribution to the *Common Good* of society as a whole. Every child is welcomed, valued and respected in a Catholic school. Although the majority of children will normally be Catholic, the social, cultural and ethnic diversity of the Catholic school is very rich, which means that

tolerance and mutual respect are priorities. In a Catholic School, the person and teachings of Jesus Christ form the foundation of the life and activity of the school. This does not mean that a child will be pressured into accepting the Catholic faith. However, it does mean that the Gospel values of love, truth, mutual respect, forgiveness, and a special care for the vulnerable and those in need will be evident. In a Catholic school, our aim is that every child – whether they are Catholic, of another faith or none, will be respected, affirmed, supported and encouraged. Our Catholic schools are places in which young people learn how to be more than just good workers, but good citizens who know how to look beyond their own needs to the needs of the wider world.

Education is one of the most powerful weapons in combating poverty and in helping children to reach their full potential as human beings. So Catholic education is part of the Church's effort to realise Christ's desire for us all that we might *"have life, and have it to the full."* This is achieved not just in the teaching of RE, but by a whole system of Gospel-based values encompassing the way everyone relates to each other and in extracurricular activities, in other words by the whole Catholic ethos of the school. Here we find a genuine means of evangelisation – of exposing young people to the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and of helping them to respond to Christ's invitation to "follow me". Our Catholic schools are a very important part of the life of our Church in fulfilling our primary purpose – to proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ, keeping 'Christ at the centre'. Our Catholic schools enable us to do this in ways that parishes alone would find difficult.

Catholic Education is not just a theory or an idea which exists in thin air. In the end it is those who work on behalf of it and those who participate in it who craft this great treasure. Parents who choose a Catholic school and contribute to its life; parishioners who serve as foundation governors and trustees or members of chaplaincy teams or who help in practical ways with the running of a school; teaching and support staff who have specifically chosen to work in a Catholic school and often go the extra mile and of course the students themselves. Over the years our forefathers fought hard to establish and maintain Catholic Education in these lands. Now it is our turn to ensure that Catholic Education is maintained and enabled to grow and develop for future generations.

To this end I have initiated the expansion and development of Catholic, Deanery based Multi Academy Trusts (Catholic MATs) across the

Diocese. Local families of schools have already begun to come together in School to School Support Groups and I now want these groupings to develop further into local Deanery based Catholic MATs. Through these local families of schools the aim is to protect, secure and develop the Church's mission in education into the future. In this way the formation of the young people will be enhanced. This important step forward for Catholic education in our Diocese which seeks to ensure that every school sits within a network of collaboration so that each institution both gives and receives support. The reality is that Catholic schools must collaborate with each other, viewing other Catholic schools as equal partners. Headteachers and governors, the stewards of our Catholic schools, must engage in this collaborative endeavour for the benefit of Catholic education.

The Government still anticipates that the majority of schools in this country will become academies in future years. While the compulsory nature of this change has been withdrawn, the legislative elements necessary are in place for schools to become academies. The direct funding of academies has reduced the capacity of Local Authorities and some are already struggling to provide adequate resources to support schools.

There are increased powers of intervention in struggling schools that receive a warning notice about their performance. We need to place secure structures around vulnerable schools in order to help them to improve and to flourish. Budget management and a new National Funding Formula will cause significant challenges for many schools. Schools will need to be able to operate with slimmer services as well as working closely with other Catholic schools to create economies of scale.

The move to establish a network of MATs in the Diocese seeks to ensure that Catholic schools work closely together as isolation would compromise the Church's mission in education. The academisation process will enable clear working relationships to be developed between local Catholic schools to assist with school improvement, leadership recruitment, formation, governance and co-operation to strengthen our Catholic mission. This development moves beyond existing partnerships or federations to enable a new spirit of collaboration so that the present success of Catholic schools in our Diocese can remain effective and be protected.

Within a changing landscape of national educational policy and

provision I believe we need to reinforce and develop the relationships between our schools. We are at our best when we work together, for each other, in service of the common good, embracing both *solidarity* and *subsidiarity*. This is essential to all decisions and actions undertaken by our Catholic schools.

I want Diocesan Catholic schools to utilise existing experience of forming academies and MATs, drawing upon the experience of our legal advisers, the Catholic Education Service and other Dioceses. The establishment of a network of Deanery Based MATs has already begun and I expect that it will take about three years to complete. These MATs will evolve gradually across our Diocese as we work initially with those schools that are best placed and want or need to make a more immediate transition.

One significant advantage of establishing Catholic Multi-Academy Trusts is that the delivery of services to schools will be improved through the streamlining of partnerships with key providers, for example in the areas of school improvement, succession planning, training and professional development. There will also be opportunities for more effective centralised services, such as HR, legal and financial management support.

The grouping of schools into MATs is intended to translate my vision for education in the Diocese into a workable and resilient reality that secures and enables the development of all Catholic schools in to the future.

In his latest Apostolic Exhortation- *On the Call to Holiness in Today's World* - Pope Francis talks of "*Holiness found in our next-door neighbours, those who, living in our midst reflect God's presence*". Today we celebrate the achievements of Catholic Education and the "Saints-next-door" who work in them. I ask for your continued prayers and support for all who are involved in this holy endeavor now and in the future.

Yours in Christ & Mary,

+Alan Williams, sm Bishop
of Brentwood