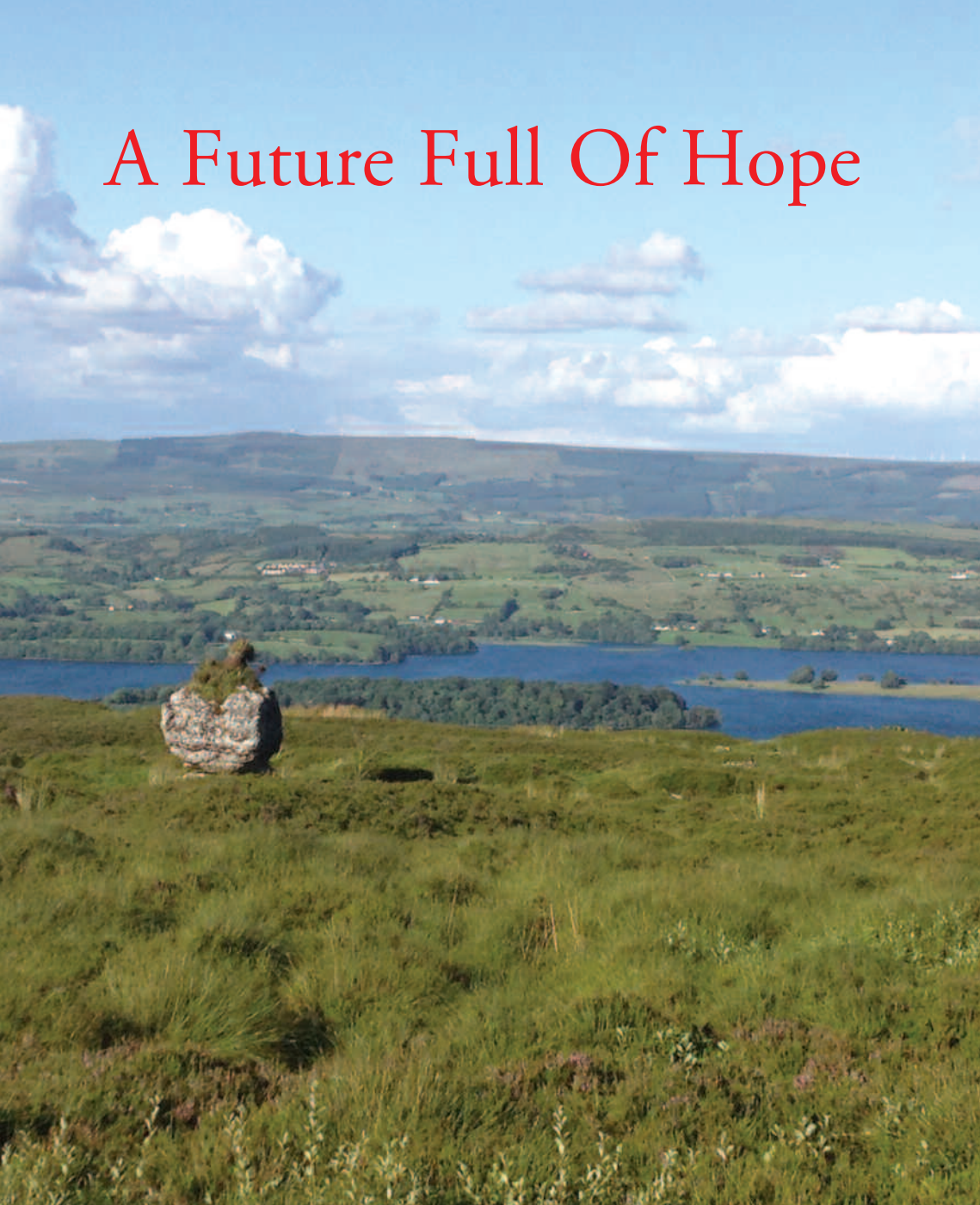


A Future Full Of Hope



A Pastoral Letter from Kevin Doran, Bishop of Elphin

A Future Full Of Hope

Since becoming Bishop of Elphin in July 2014, I have had the opportunity to visit quite a few parishes and schools. The idea has gradually taken shape that I would share some thoughts with you, the people of the diocese, on our contribution to the education of our children, which is so important to us all.

There have been many reminders in recent months of the First World War, which began just 100 years ago. Thousands of young Irish men went off to that war, filled with the optimism and the idealism of youth. Many of them never returned and many of those who did suffered on as a result of the physical and emotional wounds inflicted by the war. In towns and villages all over Ireland parents waited anxiously for news of their sons, asking themselves, "was it for this that we raised our children?"

Raising Children - For What?

One hundred years later, as I sit down to prepare these few thoughts that same question seems just as relevant. For what are we raising our children? There are so many things to consider; who they will become; how they will earn a living; who they will meet and



perhaps marry; whether they in turn will have children of their own. We hope they will stay in touch, that they will be happy and that they will still turn to us in time of need.

Towards the end of the ceremony of Baptism, there are a number of blessing prayers for the parents. One of those prayers refers to the joy of a Christian mother when she sees "the hope of eternal life shining in her child". Do you see that hope sometimes, even as you tuck the younger ones in for the night or watch the teenagers struggle with their homework? Your child is also a child of God. This mystery of God's presence in the life of each one of us, is beautifully expressed in one of the psalms, which may be familiar to you:

*O God, you search me and you know me.
All my ways lie open to your gaze.
When I walk or lie down, you go before me:
Ever the maker and keeper of my days. (Psalm 139)*

What God has in mind for your child, to use the words of the prophet Jeremiah, is "a future full of hope" (Jer. 29:11). This is the future that is entrusted to your care as parents.

St Augustine understood the challenges facing young people. Although he was brought up as a Christian, he looked for happiness in material things. His mother, St. Monica, never stopped praying for him and never stopped hoping that he would find God. Later in life, Augustine wrote "*you have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in you*".^[7] It is for this relationship that our children were created. It is in this friendship with a loving God that they will find their true and lasting happiness.

Parents are the First Teachers

The corresponding blessing for fathers at the end of the ceremony of Baptism describes how, together, the parents, "will be the first teachers of their children in the ways of faith" and prays that they will also be "the best of teachers". Parents sometimes wonder "how can we share our faith with our children, when we are only struggling with it ourselves?"

I understand this. I often feel the same when I get up to preach the Word of God on a Sunday morning. We are all on the same journey. Some of us have just travelled a bit further. I think we deepen our faith by sharing it. If, in the process, we are challenged to live it a bit more richly ourselves, so much the better. Young children sometimes ask the most complex questions, but they are not usually looking for complex answers.



The early years in a child's life are all about relationship. Children are gradually introduced to aunts and uncles, cousins, neighbours and friends. We invite them into our "family circle". I remember, as a child, meeting the caretaker at my father's place of work. I thought he owned the place. It didn't matter. He was a point of reference in my father's life, so he was important to me too.

A child's relationship with God begins in just the same way. God makes this a bit easier for us, because He comes to us in human form, in the person of Jesus. If Jesus is spoken about in your home; if there are pictures or books about his life that the children can identify with; if there is a prayer at mealtimes and at night before sleep, then Jesus will be part of the family circle. With a child's imagination, prayer is not "rocket science"; or perhaps I should say, it is no more difficult than rocket science is for children these days. Perhaps we adults make it difficult for ourselves when we take ourselves too seriously. Unfortunately, as we grow to adulthood, we sometimes lose our sense of mystery, our capacity to be amazed.

Some years ago, I chatted individually with each of the children preparing for confirmation in my parish. I asked them, among other things, what they would like their parents to do to help them prepare. The answers were very interesting. There were three things that kept coming up again and again. My parents could help me by "teaching me my prayers", by "bringing me to Mass" and by "telling me about their own Confirmation." It seems so little, and yet it would mean so much.

More recently I was chatting with a young woman who wanted help

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in preparing for Baptism. "My parents were kind-of hippies in the 1960's", she said. "They thought it would be a good idea to let me make up my own mind when I grew up. What they didn't seem to realise was that, by not having me Baptised and by not bringing me up in the faith, they were already making up my mind. Fortunately, I had a grandmother who brought me to Mass". We owe a lot to grandparents, but they cannot take the place of parents, nor is it fair to expect them to do so.

The School at the Service of the Whole Person

Like most institutions, schools are under pressure from every direction these days. More is expected of them than ever before. Education serves the economy and our economy has become more complex and more global. There is an expectation that the education system should respond accordingly. Politicians and social researchers often suggest that we need more maths, more



science, more languages, in order to respond to the needs of the economy. Sometimes they are right. It is important to remember, however, that our children are not *FOR* the economy. Rather, the economy is for our children. This means that our schools have to look to the education of the whole person, without ignoring the essential needs of the economy, which impacts on the life of every individual. Our children need to be formed to think rationally, to form mature relationships, to engage in constructive dialogue and to use their many and varied gifts in the service of others (which most of them do willingly with a little encouragement). Increasingly our schools are asked to be involved in the formation of values and attitudes. In recent years, for example, the Green School project has encouraged our children to be more environmentally aware and to bring that awareness into their homes.

It is against that background that we must look at the place of Religious Education in our schools. If faith is part of our world, then it must also have its place in our schools. As with history or music, or home economics, the school supports the religious formation that parents give their children at home, and provides the expertise that parents lack, because they cannot be experts in everything. But no school, however excellent, can adequately fill the gap if parents fail to play an active part in the education of their children.

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To suggest, as some politicians have done in recent times, that religious education should be taken out of the schools, would be to suggest that it is not really part of life. This is especially true at primary level, where the whole curriculum is integrated and where each subject feeds into and draws from all the others. Religion is part of our history, part of our literature and part of our musical tradition and vice versa.

Our faith in Jesus Christ has concrete implications for our relationships with one another. When we form our children in faith, we are also teaching them to love others as God loves them. This means being good citizens, respecting the lives and the property of others, doing an honest day's work, caring for the sick, working for human rights and social justice. Religious education, properly understood, has an enormous contribution to make to the common good of society.

Catholic Schools Continue the Work of Jesus the Teacher

The Church has no particular desire to own schools or to manage them "just for the sake of it". The purpose of a Catholic school is to assist parents in providing an education for their children which is inspired by the Gospel. I think we need to be clear about what this means in practice. Religious symbols are important, but a



school is not a Catholic School just because it has a crucifix on the wall.

A Catholic school is essentially a community of faith, in which:

- the values of the Gospel influence the manner in which the school is managed as well as the relationships among teachers and between teachers and their pupils
- religious education is taught with the same professionalism as would be expected for any other subject and resourced accordingly
- children of other faiths and none are welcomed on a basis of equality and included fully in the life of the school community, with absolute respect for their own religious faith, but without compromising the religious ethos of the school
- personal and liturgical prayer are encouraged and facilitated.
- communications with parents and messages on social media make reference from time to time to the faith dimension of the school, just as they do to other activities

As you may be aware, the Catholic Schools' Partnership has prepared an evaluation process, by means of which Catholic primary schools can measure for themselves the extent to which they are "living" their Catholic ethos.

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Many schools in the diocese have already completed this process and I want to take this opportunity to congratulate all concerned. I would encourage schools which have not yet done so, to consider engaging in this evaluation process, which will support the whole school community in developing a renewed sense of identity and of mission. The Catholic Schools' Partnership has also published an important position paper on the future of Catholic education at second level.^[1] This is an invitation to reflect on why we have Catholic schools, on the contribution that they make to faith and to the common good and on the challenges they face in carrying out their mission. If you have or expect to have any involvement in Catholic education at secondary level, it would be well worth your while to read this.

Multi-Denominational Schools

In the years immediately following my ordination to priesthood, I taught Religious Education in two vocational schools and also worked as religious education advisor to the VECs in the Dublin region. These were multi-denominational schools rather than Catholic schools but, in keeping with their charter, they provided religious education for the children according to their denomination. As a young priest working in that environment, I felt very supported by my colleagues. Under the terms of Circular Letter 7/79 the VEC schools were able to provide permanent posts for qualified RE teachers and were asked to provide two hours of religious education per week to each class. While the structures have changed and we now have ETBs (Education and Training Boards) rather than VECs, the same basic principles still apply and, where they are implemented, parents can send their children to ETB schools with confidence that the school will play its part in the faith education of their children. Once again, it is important that parents inform themselves as to what arrangements are actually in place for Religious Education in whatever school they choose for their children.

Change of Patronage

The population of Ireland is significantly more diverse today

than it was twenty years ago. The state, which has responsibility for the common good, must "cherish all the children of the nation equally". This has led to the suggestion that some Catholic schools, especially in more densely populated areas, should be transferred to the patronage of other religious or non-religious groups. This clearly makes sense if the places available in Catholic schools significantly exceed the demand for Catholic education. The Church will, of course, continue to support the right of Catholic parents to choose Catholic education for their children, but always on the understanding that the parents themselves are committed to the ethos of the school and to being active partners in handing on the faith to their children.

In keeping with the principles of religious freedom, Catholic schools are committed to respecting the faith and culture of all their pupils. This is especially important in areas where parents do not have a choice of schools. As an expression of this commitment, the Catholic Schools Partnership will shortly publish guidelines to assist Catholic primary schools in implementing best practice in the integration of all pupils.

Teachers and Teaching Religion

We should never underestimate the influence that teachers have in



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the lives of children, not always or primarily by what they say, but by who they are. A teacher who loves his or her subject and who is really committed to the well-being of the children in his or her care, is a great blessing to any school and to the community that it serves. We are blessed with many such teachers. I want to focus briefly on the particular challenges associated with education in faith.

There are facts about religion, historical facts; facts about what the Church teaches; facts about how the Church works; facts about other religions. All of these can be taught in just the same way as the factual content of other subjects. That's why it is possible to have a state examination in religious studies. Factual knowledge and formation in faith are not opposites or alternatives. They complement each other.

Factual knowledge is essential. It could be described as the "bones"

around which formation in faith takes shape. But the heart of faith is the lived relationship with God. Without that, all we have is "dry bones", to use an image found in the prophet Ezekiel. (cf. Ez. 37:1-14)

The role of a catechist is to share faith and this includes introducing another person to the mystery of God's presence. It also involves helping another person to make the connection between faith and daily life. "I will act this way, because I believe in Jesus." This places a particular responsibility on the catechist to nourish his or her own faith, in much the same way as the PE teacher needs to keep fit. I know that catechists, like priests and parents, sometimes struggle with their own faith. If you find yourself in that position from time to time, it can certainly be challenging, but it can also bring freshness and integrity to your teaching. This is especially so when you take your struggle into the presence of God in prayer. As bishop of the diocese, I would like to offer you my support in nourishing your own faith and would welcome any suggestions as to how this might be possible.

I would strongly encourage teachers who wish to specialise in some aspect of RE, or indeed to prepare themselves for the teaching of RE as an additional subject, to consider undertaking a programme such as the MA or

Post-graduate Diploma in Religious Education, both of which are provided at St. Angela's College, in our own diocese.

As you may be aware, work has been going on for some time now to prepare a new curriculum and a new RE programme for religious education at primary level. When this is finalised, in the near future, it will help us to form the faith of the next generation of children. Sometimes it might seem easier just to continue doing what we have always done, but a new curriculum does help us to ensure that the essential truth of faith is communicated in a way that responds to the needs of our times. It also brings with it the opportunity, through in-service courses, for teachers to renew their own understanding.

The Parish and Education in Faith

Education in faith is like a three-legged stool. We have reflected on the role of the parents and on the role of the school. Now we must consider where the parish fits in, and I don't just mean the priest. I have always enjoyed the opportunity to participate in the life of the school community. One of the high-lights of this every year is to be able to participate in the classroom preparation for First Communion and Confirmation. But these opportunities are relatively limited.

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My question is: “how can the children (and their parents) be helped to have a sense of belonging in and “ownership” of the parish community? This is a two way relationship. Parish programmes such as “Do This in Memory” (for First Communion and First Penance) and “You Shall Be My Witnesses” (for Confirmation) can be very helpful in encouraging children and their parents to be active participants in the parish. Sometimes these programmes are thrown back onto the school and this is not helpful. It is great if there can be some connectivity between what the school is doing and what is happening in the parish, so that there is a real partnership. But our parish communities must take more hands-on responsibility for sacramental preparation.

As parents, your active participation in these parish programmes can often be the doorway to a more active and fulfilling involvement in your parish as well as a moment to reflect on your own faith journey. If you are not willing to

take part in these programmes, then you really should consider whether it makes sense for you to present your children for the sacraments. The parish, like the school, can support you, but it cannot take your place.

We tend to have a very “private” approach to the celebration of the Sacraments. There tends to be some resistance to including First Communion and Confirmation in the Sunday Eucharist. There can be logistical difficulties, but it is worth remembering that these, along with Baptism, are rightly called Sacraments of Christian Initiation. Far from being semi-private events, they are of fundamental interest and importance to the whole community. The faith of these children is crucial to the future well-being of the parish and the lived faith of the parish is the



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essential context in which their faith will be nourished and grow.

The recent International Eucharistic Congress revealed an unexpected hunger for catechesis on the part of the adult population. For some reason or other, this doesn't seem to filter down to parish level. Perhaps this is due to “economies of scale”. Yet, whenever something worthwhile is done, those who have been present usually say “we should do this more often”. As the saying goes, “learning is for life” and it is certainly not helpful if our education in faith ends at the age of eighteen. This is surely a challenge for parishes to work together and to coordinate plans for adult faith development. We also have a lot to do to improve the quality of our communication. There must be better ways of inviting people to participate than simply reading notices at Mass. We need to work hard to make sure that our parish communities

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are alive and that the invitation to grow in faith is always “on the table” because, in the final analysis, faith is best learnt through being lived and celebrated. That's what parish is all about.

I wish you every blessing as we continue together on this journey of faith and I leave you with the words of St. John: *“Think of the love that the Father has lavished on us, by letting us be called God's children; and that is what we are. My dear people, we are already the children of God but what we are to be in the future has not yet been revealed; all we know is, that when it is revealed we shall be like him because we shall see him as he really is”.* 1 John 3:1-3.



Photo: ©Clare Frances Photography

A handwritten signature in black ink, which appears to be 'K. Doran'.

Kevin Doran,
Bishop of Elphin

i. St. Augustine, *Confessions*. Book 1

ii. Catholic Schools Partnership. *Catholic Education at Second-Level in the Republic of Ireland*. Dublin: Veritas 2014. Also available on-line at www.catholicschools.ie



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