

## **Your Part in a Great Enterprise** Address to Boards of Trustees

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What is our dream for Catholic education? In what direction is its future? Does it have a future? After all, so much has changed since Catholics of a previous generation first built Catholic schools. Society has changed; aspects of Catholic life have changed. So, has the need for Catholic schools changed?

The question is worth addressing because the best assurance I can give you about the worthwhileness of what you do as members of Boards of Trustees depends entirely on our Catholic schools being just as necessary today, perhaps even more so, than when they started.

In providing this assurance, I include those members of Boards of Trustees who are not Catholics. We are no less grateful for what they do. And we owe it to them to explain why our schools, and why their support for our schools, matter to us so much.

To substantiate our claim that Catholic schools are still necessary, we could look to official Church documents, or we could look to social anthropology, or we could look to history.

The historical approach involves looking at why Catholics felt the need for schools in the first place, and what made those schools so successful. In this country, as in Australia and USA, both the need for these schools and the reason for their success were rooted in what has been called “the immigrant experience”. Catholic migrants brought with them the faith that had given their lives meaning, and for which many had already made great sacrifices. Coming out of their home environments, they found that in their new environments they were minority groups – whether for religious reasons or ethnic reasons or both – and this only increased their desire to hang on to what meant so much to them. Minority cultures experience pressures to conform to the majority culture around them. Having their own schools, gave Catholics the spaces they needed for preserving their identity and handing it on.

But, of course, it was always part of Catholic education’s aim to enable students to take their place in society, and that meant educating them to be socially and economically successful. The record shows that Catholic schools did this – notwithstanding the greater sacrifices made by parents and by staffs usually working out of less advantaged buildings and facilities. Yet, ironically, that is also how our schools risk becoming the victims of their own success: as the graduates successfully take their place in society, their sense of being different diminishes. And so their sense of needing their own schools can also diminish. This is even more likely as they consciously or unconsciously absorb the values and ideologies of the majority culture around them, which today is post-Christian and secular.

This is where we can learn from social anthropology about what is necessary if people are to avoid being assimilated into the majority culture about them. I am thinking of Fr Gerry Arbuckle’s 1960’s research into the situation of Maori in the Catholic Church. He argued that Maori need opportunities to experience their own identity as Maori, to savour

it and nurture it, precisely in order to stand tall and take their place within a predominantly non-Maori environment. It makes the difference between assimilation which destroys people, and true integration which enables them to make their own distinctive contribution.

I see an analogy here with what Catholic schools do for Catholics. Catholics need to have a strong sense of their Catholic identity precisely in order to take their place in a predominantly non-Catholic and often non-congenial environment without losing their bearings.

In my view, that is our situation today. Our ancestors were concerned to preserve our Catholic identity in an environment that was mainly Protestant. That has largely changed. The need now is to preserve our Catholic identity in an environment that is mainly secular – not for the sake of separating ourselves, but for the sake of taking our place in that kind of society without losing our bearings. If Catholics are to be able to take their place and make a positive contribution to society, they must first have the opportunity to experience their own identity, savour it and nurture it. They need to discover why they are Catholics and why they can be proud of it. Out of that strength they are able to be leaven in the dough of a society that is crying out for meaning.

I said at the outset that our schools originated in the faith and commitment of Catholics who wanted to pass on what gave their lives meaning. Ultimately, what we mean to ourselves and how much we mean to others depends on how much we mean to God. Only if we matter to God can our lives truly matter. And there is no greater reason for believing that we matter to God than the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. That is the core of Catholic faith and is at the heart of Catholic character.

We need to acknowledge this with gratitude and humility, because what we know about God's love as it has been revealed in Christ is what State schools are not free to teach. The secular clause of the Education Act forbids it. Our freedom to do so is legally enshrined in the Private Schools' Conditional Integration Act, and we need to preserve this treasure against erosion from any quarter.

What is happening in USA is a salutary reminder of how it would have been for us were it not for the PSCIA. Their Catholic schools are in crisis. Since 2000, total enrolment in Catholic schools has dropped by 20%. The Archdiocese of Washington has converted some of its schools to "charter" status schools, which means that the taxpayer picks up all the costs, but the schools lose their right to operate as religious establishments. And now in the Archdiocese of New York, they are finding that many of these charter schools are adopting the practices formerly associated with the Catholic schools, including uniforms, discipline and the promotion of a clear set of values. This means that those schools now attract students who might have otherwise have gone to Catholic schools. In more than one way, the Catholic schools are the victims of their own success.

A more imminent danger to Catholic character in our country comes not from outside our Catholic schools but from within. And nobody is better placed than you are to guard against it. That is because you are involved in the appointment of teachers, and in their ongoing professional development. You may well be advised by school principals on both these matters. But you may not pass up your legal responsibility for what then happens.

The sole reason, and the legally enshrined reason, for designating some positions as “tagged positions” is to promote the Catholic character of the school. So what is to be said of the appointment to tagged positions of teachers who are either unable or unwilling to promote Catholic character? It comes back to how well Boards of Trustees are fulfilling their legal obligations regarding appointments, and regarding the provision of ongoing formation for such teachers.

Of course, taking on the responsibility of a tagged position when one is either unwilling or unable to fulfil that responsibility also reflects on the teacher’s own personal integrity. If they hold a tagged position they have a responsibility to receive the formation necessary for fulfilling the purpose of a tagged position. And Boards of Trustees have an obligation to ensure that money is made available for this to happen. Sometimes you will have to do this against the pressure of that money being needed elsewhere. The point is that at least some of our resources must go towards the enhancement of Catholic character, and that is a legal obligation.

Be assured that our Catholic Schools’ Office under the leadership of Lynette Roberts-King is always available to advise and assist you. Be also assured of my own readiness to help at any time.

Something very wonderful is happening in our schools that can be known only by experiencing it. The formation children receive is coming from the perspective that they matter not just for this life but forever. How we care for them is different because of *why* we care. Knowing they are loved by God makes that difference. You are part of making that possible, and I thank you.

After we have had time to discuss anything arising from what I have said, I would like to share with you four pages: three of them are a report I wrote after Lynette Roberts-King and I had met with principals/staff/BOT members in four regions of our diocese to look at the reasons why some of the children who go through our Catholic primary schools are not going on to Catholic secondary colleges, and to see what we could do to promote better networking between the primary and secondary sectors. The fourth page is a letter to Boards of Trustees throughout New Zealand accompanying a brief report prepared by the NZ Catholic Education Office concerning *The Common Good*, and how that important principle of Catholic teaching applies to the financial administration of our schools.