

Catholic Schools and Care for our Common Home – Rising to the Challenge of Laudato Si

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“Young people demand change. They wonder how anyone can claim to be building a better future without thinking of the environmental crisis and the sufferings of the excluded.” Pope Francis, Laudato Si Chapter 13

“You have stolen my dreams – how dare you.” These were the powerful words of Greta Thunberg, the 16 year old climate activist, as she addressed world leaders this week at the start of the UN General Assembly. The diminutive, normally soft spoken, yet laser sharp teenager, spoke with a rage and fear that was truly arresting. Her four minute speech encapsulated perfectly the emotion which had filled the streets last Friday and it certainly caught the attention of the world media. Suddenly everyone has an opinion about Greta Thunberg and the massive student climate strike movement she has sparked. Most have welcomed her direct plea to the older generation – shaming governments in a world which seems to have forgotten what the word shame means. Yet others are clearly more perplexed by her astonishing outburst – with the political right claiming she is part of a global conspiracy to bring down capitalism, and others like Ryan Tubridy shamelessly questioning her mental health and suggesting she should go home and watch a movie.

One thing is absolutely certain: Greta Thunberg is shaking things up and she is not going away. She has captured the imagination of millions of young people and older people around the world, who are not going to wait any longer and take excuses from those in power in the face of a looming crisis. It is the younger generation – their dreams – which are going to feel the full brunt of climate change, their dreams destroyed through delays and denial. We are living in unprecedented times where, as Greta also said at the UN: “this is all wrong”. Children should not have to bear the burden of responsibility – and yet they feel they do. They should be in school, yet they have come to a point where what they have learnt about climate change is making them question the very point of education. These are very uncomfortable times for our generation and for our schools.

It is against this backdrop that I would like to address the question of care for our common home. I will do so through the lens of Laudato Si, Pope Francis’ ground-breaking letter to us all on care for our common home. I will first look at the science of climate change, and how it relates to the youth movement we are seeing now. I will then consider how Laudato Si, rooted in Gospel values, can help us frame a Catholic ethos in our schools which is deeply rooted in the idea of integral ecology – a concept at the centre of Pope Francis’ thought. Finally, I will come on to addressing some practical questions – like what to do about Catholic school engagement in the climate strikes?

‘Unite behind the science’

Before coming on to discuss the question of our response, the first thing we need to do is to really understand the scientific facts of climate change. For both Pope Francis and Greta Thunberg, the first thing each of us needs to do is simply stop for a moment and grasp what is really going on. What are the scientists saying to us? It is only when we do this, and move beyond the headlines, the mis-information, the muddle of fact and fiction, that we can understand the magnitude of the crisis the world is currently in. We need to unite our hearts and minds behind the facts, the science.

The science on the current state of the climate is alarming. The events of summer 2019 have shocked even the most well qualified climate scientists. The summer has brought dramatic melting of the Greenland ice-sheet, unprecedented heatwaves in Europe, a ring of fire in the Arctic Circle, and burgeoning methane lakes in Siberia. Most recently, the world has watched on as horrific fires in the Amazon rainforest burn uncontrolled. These fires driven by disastrous economic and political policies underpinned by a deep populist denial of climate change. Scientists have warned that the likelihood of irreversible feedback loops has increased dramatically in the past few months. This means that what is lost now is never coming back. The changes to eco-systems are permanent.

Many countries have called climate emergencies, but are at a loss when it comes to translating that urgency into policy implications. Those implications require far reaching political and social change. Without a massive sea change in public understanding and 'buy in' to the changes needed, the changes will be too late to avoid catastrophic climate change. In the words of campaigner Bill McKibben, when it comes to climate change 'winning slowly is another way of losing.' At present, the world is losing the climate change battle. The most recent IPCC status report on keeping global warming below 1.5°C came to the startling conclusion that the next decade of humanity is the most important since humans have stepped on this planet. Speaking at the launch of the report in November 2018, Deborah Roberts, the co-chair of the working group stated that: "The next few years are probably the most important in our history." Scientists have said that there is one decade to make the vast changes needed – to get our economies and societies onto a different path. But actually the next two years are critical given the long-term nature of policy and system change. The times we are living in are unparalleled. The poor in the developing world are at the forefront of this crisis – and bear the burden the hardest. The stakes for the generation born and in school today could not be higher. It is an existential threat, as Pope Francis says in *Laudato Si*: "Doomsday predictions can no longer be met with irony or disdain. We may well be leaving to coming generations debris, desolation and filth."¹ It is this stark realisation – borne out of a clear understanding of the science – that has sparked the global climate movement today, led by teenagers across the world.

Multiple causes, one root

Pope Francis, moreover, in *Laudato Si*, provides a rich analysis of the sociological, economic, political and technological causes of the tragedy we are facing today on our planet. The causes he points to are many, and form a web of complex justifications for where we are today. He points to colonialism, the fossil fuel that date back to the industrial revolution, the failures of the economic system to absorb waste, the failure to address growing concentration of wealth and inequalities and the rapid rise of a technocracy. At the centre of this problem he points to an economy based on rampant consumerism and waste – a throw away economy where we seldom have to face the consequences of our actions. The causes, he repeatedly says, are many. They can't be oversimplified in a simple formula. Yet, underlying all of this, at the very root of the problems we face, Pope Francis points to a widespread false anthropology and spiritual crisis. It is the fractured, neglected relationship with the life sustaining relationship with the earth and with our brothers and sisters, that has above all gotten us to this point. In one of the most powerful passages of the Encyclical, he nails the inter-connection between the climate crisis and this anthropology: "When people become self-centred and self-enclosed, their greed increases. The emptier a person's heart is, the more he or she needs things to buy, own and consume. It becomes almost impossible to accept the limits

¹ *Laudato Si*, Chapter 161

imposed by reality.”² Addressing this involves a process of prayer, reflection and ecological education.

Catholic Ethos and Values

What does all of this mean for Catholic schools, as you seek to discern ethos and relevance in a world which is increasingly marked by ecological breakdown, and where young people and the Pope are appealing to everyone. What is our place in the “great cultural, spiritual and educational challenge [that] stands before us.”³ Surely this is a question which should be at the forefront of every Catholic educator today? After all, the specific purpose of a Catholic education, as set out by the Pontifical Council for Education, is the formation of boys and girls who will be ‘good citizens of this world’, loving God and neighbour and enriching society with the leaven of the gospel. As a generation facing the realisation of an ecological emergency, how are our schools responding? Can the light from *Laudato Si* help us find a new sense of relevance in society?

To do that, I believe we need to think of the Catholic ethos in the broadest sense. Certainly our schools need to be engaged in Catholic religious education, participation in the sacramental life of the church and fostering a sense of broader community. Yet looking beyond the sacraments, many schools are asking what is distinctive about the ‘ethos’ and ‘values’ of Catholic education today. The conversation usually stops with a discussion about sex education in schools. Pope Francis has challenged traditional viewpoints in three key documents⁴ which all point to the need to rethink our Catholic identity in view of protection of Creation *and* care for our neighbour. It is a broad vision centred around a consistent ethic of life. In *Laudato Si*, Pope Francis states that: “Living our vocation to be protectors of God’s handiwork is essential to a life of virtue; it is not an optional or a secondary aspect of our Christian experience”⁵. Four years on from the publication of this encyclical, I think we are still just scratching the surface of what full implications of what Pope Francis is saying here.

The Pope goes on to say that being true to our vocation as Christians requires an “ecological conversion” which is also a “community conversion.” For Catholic schools, which are first and foremost called to be an authentic experience of living community, this call to ecological conversion and to be “protectors” is key to any definition of ethos in the future. Any experience of authentic Christian living, which witnesses to Gospel values, must model care for other human beings and also for all the myriad of species in Creation. This goes from the very simplest of tasks, such as engendering responsibility to recycle well, to only use what is needed, to engage with nature in a loving manner – all the way up to how to challenge those negative behaviours and social norms that promote destruction of nature. Catholic schools have a key role to play in modelling and promoting simple living, sustainable consumption and, for example, avoiding the traps of fast fashion and youth trends which impact on the environment.

A Ecological Education and Spirituality

In *Laudato Si*, Pope Francis dedicates a whole chapter to the need for renewal of society, rooted in ecological education and spirituality. These go hand in hand. He talks about the interconnections

² Ibid, Chapter 204

³ Ibid, Chapter 202

⁴ *Evangelii Gaudium*, *Amoris Letizia* and *Laudato Si*

⁵ *Laudato Si*, Chapter 217

between the different spheres of learning – the family, the schools, the community – and the need for an ecological conversion in each of these. Amongst those, he talks about the role of Catholic educational institutions, and their calling to “provide an education in responsible simplicity of life, in grateful contemplation of God’s world, and in concern for the needs of the poor and the protection of the environment.”⁶ He is under no illusions as to the scale of the challenge! In a world dominated by fast fashion, social media, intrusive marketing – where it can seem like the whole of society is driving young people in another direction – the role of schools and education can be decidedly at odds with the mainstream. Our schools can very easily become the means to deliver society’s expectations of success, wealth and consumption. He even says this: “Our efforts at education will be inadequate and ineffectual unless we strive to promote a new way of thinking about human beings, life, society and our relationship with nature. Otherwise, the paradigm of consumerism will continue to advance, with the help of the media and the highly effective workings of the market.”⁷ The school sits within a community, and that community is immersed in the contradictions of a world still in deep denial.

So how does Pope Francis propose going about this? He points to one area where Catholic schools can play a critical role: engendering in our children a deep love for the natural world. Pope Francis calls “a good aesthetic education”. He points to the fact that the maintenance of a healthy environment and developing a love and appreciation for nature’s beauty are inextricably linked. “By learning to see and appreciate beauty, we learn to reject self-interested pragmatism. If someone has not learned to stop and admire something beautiful, we should not be surprised if he or she treats everything as an object to be used and abused without scruple.” Perhaps the first task of all of us in the education world – whether parents or teachers – is to foster this innate sense of wonder, a deep love for nature in all young children, and helping them to grasp the connectedness to their daily lives. As he says, in one of the most touching chapters of *Laudato Si*: “Even the fleeting life of the least of beings is the object of his love, and in its few seconds of existence, God enfolds it with affection.” (69)

As younger children, this ability to connect to nature is directly related to the amount of time they spend outdoors – immersed in nature, discovering the intricacies of plants, animals... the power of the elements (also in the lashing rain and wind!) ... all the way to observing the stars and planets. Importantly, for us adults, it is about sharing in this wonder with them – gasping in awe, and attempting to answer their many questions. Then, as they grow, involving them in understanding the interconnectedness of nature to their daily lives. Developing a deep understanding of where their food comes from, for example? How the earth is used to make everything we have? And as they grow, also discover how these connections have become fractured as we throw things into the oceans, use more than our fair share, and treat the natural world with disregard.

In my own experience, we are a million miles from there – and yet the steps could be so simple and inexpensive. As a parent, I have to say I was pretty shocked and dismayed when my boys started school. Perhaps because I am immersed in *Laudato Si* and climate action, it has been natural for me to parent my children outdoors. We spend time a lot of time in forests, we attempt to grow our own vegetables and fruit together, we discover nature together. Before starting school my boys spent little time indoors. They climbed trees, got scrapes, and even a few broken arms! So it was a huge shock for me when my eldest son started school. It was even more of a shock for him I would say. From being outside and constantly asking questions, he was literally forced to sit down under

⁶ Ibid, Chapter 214

⁷ Ibid

artificial lights and only speak when spoken to. Needless to say he did not fit in well. I soon started to get letters home from school about his restlessness, his inability to concentrate. Eventually the teachers started to ask if I had thought of getting him assessed to see if he had particular educational needs. Of course I did this, but I felt for me as a parent that the education system, rather than fostering his deep need to connect to nature, to move, to enquire about everything, was seeking to tame him. I dreamt of finding a school which valued nature and was prepared to teach from the outdoors in. I found out that such schools exist – in Scandinavia of all places! There, children can be “forest schooled” – not as a very expensive afterschool activity – but the whole education system is built around the idea that children are born to be part of the natural environment. The best way to do that is to be in nature, not just learning about it in books. It is that same system that by no coincidence gave rise to Greta Thunberg. When it came to my own son, all the assessments came back saying he does not have any ‘condition’, but he needed “movement breaks” – extra time in the day where a learning support teacher would bring him outdoors and let him run around in the yard.

I am sure such stories are not unfamiliar, and mine is no way a reflection on his school in particular – I don’t imagine it is not the same everywhere. But it really begs the question of how our Catholic schools can re-make the connection with nature in the every day teaching of our children. In the light of *Laudato Si*, that deep connectedness is at the root of everything and is a profound challenge to our education system today. It is more than being a ‘green school’ or promoting recycling. It is more than having nature walks or nature tables. It is about rethinking our ethos to truly reflect the inter-connectedness of everything.

Courage of Gospel Witness

However, given the scale and urgency of the climate crisis, and the unprecedented threat to the next generation, I would say that the responsibility of Catholic schools in ecological education has to go further. It has to also face the Gospel challenge to give community witness to Gospel values. This is particularly the case when it comes to whether Catholic schools could play a more prominent role in participating in the climate strikes and other forms of public action for climate justice. These global days of action for climate change – especially those led by teenagers – are not going to go away. The next one is planned for the 20th November. To date, Catholic schools in Ireland have been very reticent about getting involved, and the growing movement has been led almost exclusively by the small number of Educate Together trusts. These schools have very courageously championed this issue, supporting the setting up of the Schools Climate Action Network, and seeking to give young people spaces to explore the issues, and plan their response. Some Catholic schools, of course, have also played an important role in the movement. Belvedere College in Dublin has been at the forefront of the weekly climate protests outside Leinster House, and it was moving to see the 5th class from Belvedere carry the *Laudato Si* globe on a stretcher through Dublin’s streets last week. Yet the response of Catholic educational leadership has been slow to endorse, or even facilitate the growing global movement.

I am not denying that these are tricky issues. There is something profoundly counter-intuitive about a school principal sanctioning a school strike! Apart from all the health, safety, child protection issues that principals are asking, there must also be a sense that “if we allow this, what next?” Will students take it as a green light to strike for other things? In Scotland I know that students decided to strike due to education cuts, for example. There is also the issue of lost lesson time in a highly structured curriculum. Or, as the Principal of Blackrock College pointed out, “Why can’t protests

happen at the weekend?”, saying that he found the whole thing a ‘tad infuriating’. His remarks were almost universally decried, but I am sure many were silently asking similar questions within the Catholic schools networks.

From the perspective of an ethos rooted in the courage of Gospel witness, in the light of *Laudato Si*, I would say that Catholic schools have to engage with this growing youth movement. Pope Francis prophetically says in *Laudato Si*: “Young people demand change”⁸ and almost wistfully dreams of a day when “all that is rising up in stubborn resistance” will overcome the status quo. Such engagement would be based on the premise that climate change is at odds with a genuine and consistent ethic of life in all its fullness. Teaching pupils about the Catholic values around life is only consistent within a much more integrated call to protect *all life on the planet*.

Moreover, as the greatest social injustice of our time, raising our voices together on climate change is the most affirming action, which can then translate into many other changes both at home and in school. It speaks to the need for greater concern for those living in poverty and the common good. The call to witness to Gospel values challenges those in wealthy nations, those with high GHG emissions, to act in solidarity with those living in poorer communities affected by climate change. Acting to protect creation is also about witnessing to the fact that we are all global citizens and called to speak out on behalf of those who have no voice.

Yet enabling students and teachers to be part of the great rising we are seeing is also critical in addressing the darker side of this issue. It is very clear from surveys that climate change ranks very high in the fears cited by teenagers and young people about their future. There is a silent epidemic amongst young people, who are facing high levels of ‘eco-anxiety’ and in some instances, this is leading to higher levels of depression and despair about their future. This growing anxiety is accompanied by a sense that the older generation has abandoned the youth to climate change and is unwilling to make necessary changes to their lifestyles to enable emissions reductions. Seeing that your community are supportive of your deep concern and prepared to join with you in calling for change, can help address this anxiety. It can lead to new conversations with students about what other measures can be taken.

Of course, each school has to think about what it can do, but the global days of action on climate change offer an important opportunity for Catholic schools in a number of ways. They are a gift when it comes to ‘teachable moments’. Taking part in a march or organising a protest can give students, parents and teachers a chance to work together as a wider community to do something very concrete and practical to give witness to Gospel values. Parents can be engaged in the creation of a day of action. Participation offers the school community a chance to witness to Gospel courage by being prepared to stand up and take a stance on the most important intergenerational issue. Working on a day like this fosters teamwork and builds up the sense of community in the school. Organisation and participation in marches, particularly if led by older students, can go a long way to counter the sense of hopelessness many are experiencing by enabling ‘active hope’. Engagement in the day of action is a chance to live the vision of integral ecology – ecological conversion – in the school community. It doesn’t need to end at the end of the day but can foster a conversation about *Laudato Si* in action. And finally, Catholic schools can bring a spiritual dimension to the protests through ensuring there are moments for prayer and reflection, and a blessing of those marching. It brought me so much joy last Friday to see our beautiful *Laudato Si*, Care for our Common home

⁸ *Laudato Si*, chapter 12

globe at the heart of the marches. What greater place could there be for our church and Gospel to be preached?

Finding your own ways to engage

Of course safety concerns are paramount for every school, particularly when it comes to taking part in large public demonstrations. Many schools have engaged in large protests successfully. Some have closed early in order to facilitate student participation. Others have organised buses to attend events as an extra-curricular activity. Some have integrated participation into a whole day of activities around ecological action, involving parents and students. Participation in a large event, however, is not essential. In many ways, localised events organised by schools in individual parishes and towns can be just as impactful – if not more. Doing these in a coordinated way – on the same day as the global protests – can make the students and community feel part of the global day.

All around Ireland, there are great examples of how schools are embracing the global days of Climate action. For example, one Catholic primary school in Dublin held art classes making banners about care for creation before the major protest on March 15th. They then held a march in a circuit down the street in front of the school and back around. They received thousands of ‘hits’ on social media. Others, like Belvedere, have consistently supported the weekly schools strikes.

My favourite example, however, has to be from the CEIST network, following a workshop I gave in March on a retreat. Following that workshop I was invited to Lisdoonvarna on the anniversary of Laudato Si, 24th May to St. Mary’s Secondary School. The date also happened to be the day of the second global climate strike. The Principal saw the significance and decided to mobilise the school for a whole day of events marking Laudato Si and the global school strikes. It was a truly memorable occasion. We started in the school by opening a new garden created by the students in a neglected courtyard. The school then marched through Lisdoonvarna behind a “Care for our Common Home” banner. We ended up at the town hall where we were joined by parents and local community groups for a morning on Laudato Si. The students presented their projects, and we celebrated all the work being done to care for creation. It was a great event and one which had the full support of the school and community. It was really a fantastic example of Laudato Si in action!

Conclusion

I started my talk with the words of Greta Thunberg “you have stolen my dreams”. As teachers and parents, we do everything in our power to nurture the dreams of our pupils and our own children every day. In many respects, we are custodians of those dreams. We share those dreams. They are our dreams too. As Catholic schools, blessed with the treasure of Laudato Si, and the leadership of Pope Francis, we are called on to think about how we embody this heart wrenching inter-generational cry in our schools. How do we embody the message of ecological education in our ethos and curriculum? How do we engender a love of God’s Creation in our whole school community? How do we display the courage of gospel witness to the wider world? It can be difficult to change, but that is exactly what we are called to do. We are called to an ecological conversion each day. As Pope Francis says, “Intergenerational solidarity is not optional, but rather a basic question of justice, since the world we have received also belongs to those who will follow us.”⁹

⁹ Laudato Si, Chapter 159