

**European Congress on Catholic Schools CCEE-CEEC  
Rome, 30 November – 2 December 2008**

**“The Catholic School in the European Public Area”**

**SUMMARY**

The following points attempt to present the key themes explored through this Congress. They are not a full account of the entire work of the Congress but give an overview of its work and major concerns.

1 During the Congress we were given insight into the particular situations of Catholic schools in two parts of Europe, ie Sarajevo and Flanders. In each account it was clear that to look at a Catholic school is to see the history and the current circumstances of a country or a society and to come face to face with the challenges of that situation. Our examination of the situation of Catholic schools across Europe, therefore, gave precious and important insights into the current mission of the Church in each of those areas. Indeed, our discussion of the exact nature of the purpose of Catholic schools in each particular area at this particular time helped to give a clear focus to the precise nature of the mission of the Church. In all these considerations it is important not to lose the specific circumstance of schools and to understand that, while there are indeed key themes which give grounds for shared discussion, a deeper appreciation of the particular circumstances in each of the European countries and societies is an important aim and outcome of these discussions.

2 The Congress looked carefully at some of the key points of the vision of a Catholic school. It was noted that:

- a Catholic school must first of all be a school
- a Catholic school is a school striving to be a Christian community
- a Catholic school offers a whole and rounded education which is good both for the individual person and for the contribution the person makes to the wider society
- Catholic schools are therefore an important part of the project of Europe and of achieving a greater solidarity across Europe and with the wider world.
- Christ is always at the centre of the life and mission of a Catholic school. We spent some time exploring how this central position of Christ can best be presented and unfolded. The following were some of the approaches that were indicated in our discussion:
  - Through the person of Christ as one expressing the paradox of our human condition (ie fallen yet called to perfection; poor yet rich in God's grace; weak yet capable of heroic greatness; destined to die yet reaching for the infinite, etc)

- Through fatherhood: Every person seeks the security and sense of identity that comes through knowing a father. To gaze on Christ is to see the Father and therefore to find life's true meaning.
- Through the foundation of life being in the "community of persons": this can be explored both philosophically and through the mystery of the Trinity and experienced within the school community

The sense of the underlying purpose of the Catholic school, and therefore its fundamental identity, permeated the entire discussion of the Congress.

### ***Ad Intra***

The Congress also looked at some of the ways in which the Church itself can respond to the situation and needs of Catholic schools.

## **3 RELIGIOUS EDUCATION**

The Congress received a report of a major research project sponsored by CCEE into the manner in which religious education is taught throughout the schools of Europe, both Catholic and public. This research highlighted many of the key characteristics of RE as taught in Catholic schools, and contains many of the characteristics of RE as taught in public schools. This research can be a major contribution to the wider political discussion of the role of religious education in European society as well as the contribution to the appreciation of the task of religious education in Catholic schools and of some of its requirements.

The Congress also spent some time on the sensitive issue of how faiths other than Christianity can best be presented within Catholic schools and some of the problems associated with this issue.

The CCEE is preparing occasions at which the findings of this research can be presented more widely, both within the European political arena and to the wider media.

## **4 FORMATION OF TEACHERS**

A constant theme throughout the Congress, and one of its main conclusions, was the need for the greater formation of Catholics as teachers, whether they teach in Catholic schools or not. What is crucial here is that Catholic teachers are able to give an account not only of what they do but also of why they do it. The high quality of education offered in Catholic schools is reasonably well known. What is not well known, nor necessarily well understood by Catholic teachers themselves, is how the truths of faith underpin and inspire this quality of education. Much greater formation of teachers is needed so that they can genuinely bring together the inspiration and motivations of faith as enriching and strengthening their professional expertise.

The Congress wishes to see further action in this spiritual formation of teachers and in their ability to state clearly how Catholic faith forms and inspires their teaching.

It is this work of strengthening the passion of teachers which will enable that passion, both for learning and for faith, to be passed on to their students within the community of the school.

## ***Ad Extra***

The Congress also considered some of the ways in which issues concerning Catholic schools relate to the wider world and present particular challenges.

### **5 POLITICAL PRIORITIES**

The Congress was of the view that Catholic schools across Europe today are important agents for freedom in education. The cause of Catholic education and the role of the Catholic schools is often that of standing for genuine freedom of choice and flexibility in the education provision in each particular country. In some countries this freedom is under direct threat and it is important that Catholic schools stand not only for their own freedom but also for the principle of freedom in education.

This freedom is, of course, founded on and recognised in the rights of parents as expressed in the European Convention of Human Rights (Article 2 of Protocol 1).

There was agreement that a more concerted effort to present the cause of Catholic education across Europe could well be fashioned. It was suggested that a Sunday for Catholic education, or a week for Catholic education, could be held at the same time across the whole of Europe. This would be an opportunity for an authoritative statement of the true values of Catholic education to be made widely public.

### **6 COMMITTED TO TRUTH**

We also believed that the commitment of Catholic education to Christ as the truth was in practice a commitment to a vision of the unity of knowledge and truth. This unity has been damagingly fragmented by positivism and by subject specialisation, such that the coherence of learning as a whole is no longer readily appreciated. This witness of Catholic education within the “society of knowledge” is a crucial one for the wellbeing of all education and for the search for truth across Europe. Each Catholic school can be a point of powerful witness to this truth.

### **7 THE HUMAN PERSON**

A similar theme was also developed on the anthropological question, ie the understanding of the person and of their destiny. There was broad agreement that Catholic education could well promote a more healthy philosophical study and debate, not least because of the evident loss of confidence in metaphysics as expressed in the loss of confidence in the human person. Catholic schools could be a focal point for the promotion of Catholic philosophy. An “optimistic metaphysics” which expresses and explores a fundamental hope in the human person rather than the fragmented and pessimistic view which is so common today.

### **8 THE OPPORTUNITIES OF SECULAR EUROPE**

The Congress took the view that within the secular culture of Europe there are potentially opportunities for Catholic education. A “positive secularism” can be seen to be emerging in some parts of Europe in which faith and religious traditions are given public space in which to express themselves and the common values that often underpin their aspirations. Indeed Pope Benedict has spoken of such “healthy secularism” which entails the possibility of every temporal reality being governed by

its own rules but which can also pay heed to the fundamental ethical base which is inherent in the very nature of human beings. Catholic schools can not only use the public spaces which are opening up in this kind of “healthy secularism” but can also contribute to its formation as a resilient cultural foundation suited to societies that are multi religious and pluralistic.

The Congress ended on a note of realistic optimism. While acknowledging the many difficulties faced by the project of Catholic schools across Europe, much has been affirmed and shared and delegates were able to report being inspired by the meeting itself.

The CCEE Commission on Catechesis, Schools and Universities will now take forward some of the priorities raised in the Congress and plan for their development.

**✘Vincent Nichols**  
**Archbishop of Birmingham**