

**NUI Convocation Centenary Annual Public Lecture
Callan Hall, National University of Ireland, Maynooth, 8.00pm, 10th April 2008**

Delivered by Most Reverend Diarmuid Martin, Archbishop of Dublin

THE ROLE OF EDUCATION IN THE NEW IRELAND

For many years I lived in Rome in a German institution where life ran according to a fixed schedule and a well-tried routine. A peculiarity was that when it came to meals, if there were ten people at table, then ten slices of meat appeared and only ten, eleven people then eleven slices and only eleven.

On one occasion the elderly German nun who managed the dining room mentioned to me that when she had first arrived in Rome in 1937 things had been different and one could have asked and would have obtained as much meat or as much fruit as one wanted. I asked her what had brought about the change and she looked at me as someone totally out of touch with reality and history, as she answered: "the war". Our conversation took place however in 1977; thirty-two years after the war had ended.

The incident comes to mind because in order to understand the complexities of the current Irish education system one has to go back in history and know something of the complexities of that history. Of my predecessors there were varying views on education. Archbishop Daniel Murray was one of the few Irish bishops who wished to give strong support to the National School system and to the Queens Colleges; Cardinal Cullen, on the other hand, would have preferred a separate Catholic University, and Archbishop William J. Walsh finally worked towards the establishment of the National University of Ireland and became its first Chancellor. The challenge is to understand and appreciate history but not to get caught up in history or, as with my German nun, to allow history to determine the present.

I believe that we are at an important moment in our reflection on the role of education in Ireland. Ireland is changing and we have an opportunity, indeed an obligation, to think openly, constructively and in a more integrated way about the future of education in Ireland. But we have to be ready to look at history and learn from it and to recognise how at various times and in various ways ideological, political or narrow religious interests attempted to use our educational system for their advantage. It was something that happened in our history, right across the ideological board. We would be foolish to think that similar ideological attempts to gain influence might not still be possible today, right across the ideological board. What is really needed today is for all who are really interested in the future of education in Ireland to work together in this task.

When I was given the title of my lecture I was tempted to change it from *Education in the New Ireland* to: "*Education is the New Ireland*". In a knowledge-based society and economy, education is perhaps the crucial factor in fostering progress. At the highest level, investment in research is the key to ensuring that Ireland will be in a technological leadership position in the world. At the other end of the scale, the quality of and access to basic education is the key to inclusion rather than exclusion, to opportunity rather than marginalization for the least fortunate in our society.

In our knowledge-based world there is a sense in which "education is the economy". The quality of our education system has been a vital component in Ireland's economic success. Teachers have done a remarkable job, very often in poor physical conditions, in generating a passion for learning. Teachers have enkindled that passion for learning in our young people, bringing it to the most remote parts of the country, resulting in the ability of communities across the country to furnish a creative and innovative workforce open to the future of a modern economy. In the same way

teachers have given our younger generations a new sense of national pride and a passion for an Irish culture which has in its own way copper-fastened a positive self image of our nation.

Sadly, while education contributed decisively to Ireland's unprecedented growth and wealth, not enough of the fruits of Ireland's unprecedented growth and wealth have been poured back into education in a focussed way. We still have school buildings which are not up to adequate standards. We have been slow in addressing the needs of our international children. We still have schools with very high class-sizes. We have not got the process of planning right. There is very little thought being given to pre-school education for a future in which most grannies, who now do so much child care, will be working grannies.

I am sure that the Minister for Education would refute me with a baffling list of figures concerning investment in schools especially in recent years. Credit should be given, yes, for what has been done. But deficiencies still exist. One cannot help feeling that these deficiencies should have been addressed when economic resources were plentiful. They will, unfortunately, not be adequately addressed if or when those resources become less. An economic programme which underestimated the value of investment in education clearly misunderstood the nature of a modern economy. Capital investment must include investment in human capital and in the structures which foster social capital.

The Presidents of our two largest Universities only recently set out their concern about how core funding per university student has been reduced by over 33% since 1995, while maintenance and upgrading of the physical infrastructure of universities has virtually ground to a halt through lack of funding. They assert that student/staff ratios in countries like Scotland or Denmark are now four times better than Ireland, and operating budgets in these countries are between two and three times those available here.

They recognized that while the Government has invested heavily in research funding for universities in recent years, the parallel reduction in core funding is making it increasingly impossible for Irish universities to compete on equal terms at international level. Virtually every recent review of the Irish third-level sector, in fact, has concluded that there is a major funding deficit by comparison with relevant international competitors.

Education is the economy. Have we fully realised that? Have we also recognised that while education is the backbone which supports the economy, economic activity is only one dimension of human activity? Have we seen that there is more to growth than increased prosperity and that the balancing of books is not just a mere bookkeeping exercise but consists in identifying how outcomes really respond to needs and ensure optimal and sustainable future growth? The heads of the Universities rightly note that "Education is the key to our future and investment in the creativity, skills and talent of our people will always pay dividends".

One sees, I might say, a similar failure in health care where structures have been created and capacity generated which now cannot be used because the question of on-going resourcing had not been adequately addressed in advance. Bad planning is bad use of public resources. One can create balanced books through the under-utilisation of resources or capacity, but what you are really doing is falsely calculating the real costs of health care or education.

Despite investment in education there has been a lack of planning. I feel that local authorities could be doing more. I am not just talking about the situations which arose last year in Diswilstown or in Balbriggan which have more complex roots than just the questions of school places, of enrolment policies and of patron models.

Ireland is going to have to face a very different religious and ethnic demography in the years to come. To fully understand our pluralist Ireland we need much more research data and much more differentiated research data. We need to look at all the factors involved. What are the factors which are leading to a concentration of immigrants in certain areas? Why is it that some parishes have large concentration of ethnic diversity and others with very similar socio-economic backgrounds have almost none? Many of the factors leading to an unbalanced concentration and possible ghettos are not educational factors and you cannot expect schools to address them on their own.

The natural desire of immigrants to be close to their own is at times being hijacked by the mechanisms of our property market which can drive those on subsidized rents or with limited ability to pay rent to congregate in certain areas or even to move rapidly from one area to another. Ghetto schools, which we all wish to avoid, are not necessarily just the fruits of bad educational policies, but of a range of other policies which create ghettos for which the school cannot not be held to blame.

Demography is a mathematical science but a mathematical science which studies free and at times not easily predictable human choices. I recently established special enrolment measures in one area of the Archdiocese of Dublin to help ensure that the Catholic schools in that area, while maintaining their Catholic ethos, would establish a realistic mix of religious and ethnic make-up more or less in line with the overall mix of the area. My hope is that this will help avoid some of the problems which had emerged last year. Let me say very clearly, however, that the result could possibly be the opposite of what was intended, if it is not accompanied by a genuine desire for real integration on the part of the wider community. There are limits to what social engineering can attain and it can rebound in unexpected ways. The volume of the racist or quasi-racist mail that I received following that modest decision of mine did not encourage me.

Integration requires a positive decision by a community. I have anecdotal evidence that this is not always happening. I hear of parents - even those who might fit into the social categorization of "good catholic parents" - making decisions with their feet or with their four-wheel-drives to opt out of diversity in schools.

In a large urban area like Dublin, mobility is a characteristic of our times. There are schools in Dublin where over 80% of the children come from an area outside the local parish or community. There are many factors, positive and negative, involved.

Schools in an area with an ageing population very often aggressively advertise for children from other areas in order to maintain staff size. In many cases parents choose a school near to grandparents who act as child-minders. Parents deliberately choose a school in a socially more favourable area because they genuinely want their children to have a better chance in life. But part of that mobility has been the result of parents opting out of diversity of an ethnic kind or of diversity due to a high incidence of children with special educational needs.

While I recognise that parents have the right to choose the best possible education for their children, I am unhappy when Catholic parents opt out of diversity and send their children to schools precisely because there is less diversity in them. While I recognise that parents have the right to choose the school they consider best, the exercise of rights must also incorporate concern for the common good.

There is also a sense in which government policy contributes to such a flight from diversity, when it does not ask all patron bodies to equitably share the burdens and challenges of diversity. One finds situations in which some patrons are allowed to stick to a policy of small classes and remain small and single stream and the burden then falls on other schools to accommodate all diversity. I cannot say that things are

perfect, but the overall record of the Catholic schools in the Archdiocese of Dublin in adapting to diversity is excellent.

I would be very unhappy to find that Catholic schools were being deliberately less open to diversity than others and where necessary I am prepared to take steps to redress such situations. I visit our Catholic schools and I see the diversity that is present there. I was greeted in a Catholic school only last week by a young pupil who said to me, "you are a friend of my father"; he was the son of the Imam of one of our Mosques.

I would be unhappy if Catholic secondary schools were to become mainly elitist. The fact that university fees have been abolished means that more people have the money available to invest in the education of their children in fee-paying schools at second level, many of which are the schools which attain best results for entry into university.

Would it not be better to have just one school system for all? Do the community schools at second level not offer a model which could be universalised also at primary level?

I am happy to see the emergence of a new model of patronage linked with the VEC in North Dublin. Not only am I happy, but I am hopeful that these schools will become schools marked by educational excellence. That will be the key to their success. Some have expressed that fear the new "State school" may end up having to take in just those who have not made it elsewhere. The way to avoid this is to ensure that each school is one to which any parent in the community would be happy to send their child. I am puzzled as to why the system is being rolled out with such caution. The lack of a real pluralism in patronage models is putting unfair pressure on Catholic schools.

On the other hand, I believe that it would be utopian to think that there will ever be a single school model to which all children would be sent indiscriminately. Totally centralised, unified models of education rarely work and they have rarely existed in their pure form. If we are honest, they did not even exist in totalitarian communist regimes. One of the better hotels I stayed in recent times had been a private clinic for leaders of the local communist party. If those who talked an ideology of equality looked after their health separately, you can be sure that they also looked after their children in the same way. Pluralism of providers can indeed add edge to quality in education through competition. Pluralism of patrons has been crucial in sustaining a vital Church of Ireland and protestant community which in its turn makes a significant contribution to diversity in Ireland. Centralised monopoly educational administrations can be shown to have their own problems.

In many countries where there are broad state school systems, Catholic schools still exist and flourish and are regarded as being in the forefront in providing quality education. In many inner-city areas in the United States the Catholic education system is the one which really offers opportunity to the poor and members of minority communities.

There is no evidence that a totally "religiously neutral secularist society" is the best space in which to foster dialogue between cultures and religions. France, which has perhaps the most secularised school system in Europe, has been particularly marked by racial tensions. There is indeed a sense in which, when it comes down to religious diversity, a more secularist society may not be the best one to be able to understand and guide the phenomenon of religious diversity. Pope Benedict XVI has noted that: "The pathology of religion is the most dangerous sickness of the human spirit. It exists within the religions, yet it exists also precisely where religion as such is rejected and relative goods are assigned an absolute value". There are forms of secular society in which hostility to religious values forces religious groups into a dangerously narrow perception of their culture and thus sharpens religious

differences and misunderstandings in a pluralist society.

Here in Ireland I fear that the desire in certain secularist thought to reduce religion entirely to the private sphere may make it harder to welcome fully the strong religious commitment of many of our immigrant communities. My belief is that inter-religious dialogue can best be addressed by people who are strongly rooted in their own faith, rather than by people who have a confused religious commitment or by people who are not religious at all. What is important, however, is that we all address the situation with a sense of mutual knowledge and respect.

All faiths have to avoid any form of fundamentalism, fundamentalism in their own faith, fundamentalism about the role of religion. Religions are obliged to respect the legitimate autonomy of the secular order and of reason. I quote from an earlier writing of Benedict XVI where he notes that: "Imposing a specific political programme in the name of God is to make yourself into God... Whenever a religiously motivated moralism sidesteps this often irreducible pluralism, declaring one way to be the only right one, then religion is perverted into an ideological dictatorship, whose totalitarian passion does not build peace, but destroys it".

Curiously one could build up a historical argument to say that the original national school system introduced in Ireland in the nineteenth century as a single unified system to cope with religious diversity actually had a tendency to eliminate diversity. The then Chief Secretary of Ireland set out three aims for his system: the education of the poorer classes in Ireland; the prevention in State schools of the proselytism which had vitiated the previous systems; and the establishment of a system of "mixed education" in which Protestants and Catholics would be brought up together in the same school.

The aim was indeed a noble one and the honourable purpose of its author was beyond doubt. But the consequences were not exactly what was set out. One prominent member of the original Board noted "The education which is being supplied by the National Board is gradually undermining the vast fabric of the Roman Church. I believe, as I said the other day, that if we give up the National System we give up the only hope of weaning the Irish from the abuses of Popery. But I cannot venture openly to express this opinion".

Today a system of education which excludes religious values from the school in the name of tolerance can easily in fact become an instrument for excluding full citizenship in education to those parents who wish their children to have an integrated religious education and for undermining of their full right to choose.

There is a tendency to forget that the multi-cultural New Ireland of today is perhaps more religious than its immediate predecessor. Immigrants have brought with them not a more secular society but religious revival. The majority of our current immigrant population appears to be Roman Catholic, and let it be said not just white Roman Catholic. These immigrants have brought enrichment not just to our labour market and to Irish culture but also to our parishes and faith communities.

Immigrants of other Christian Churches have equally enhanced and brought numerical increase to existing Christian denominations or have brought a completely new dimension to the Christian life of our country, such as that of the free African Church communities. Ireland now also has for the first time strong Orthodox communities. We now have large Islamic worship communities.

When I visit our Dublin Islamic communities at the close of Ramadan, I am constantly thanked for the manner in which Catholic schools provide a tolerant religious environment to which Islamic parents are happy to entrust their children. They do not want to send their children to a school which has no religious ethos. Our educational experience should reflect this reality. The question is how to do it.

87 years ago precisely this week Dublin was in mourning for the loss of its Archbishop and the National University was in mourning for the loss of its first Chancellor, Archbishop William J. Walsh. Daire Keogh kindly sent me an advance copy of an interesting article on Archbishop Walsh as Chancellor which will be published as part of the centenary celebrations of NUI. What is striking is the manner in which an Archbishop-Chancellor respected the independence of the university, recognising its Catholic roots and composition, but refusing as Keogh notes to "baptise" it. Walsh rather encouraged the establishment of a university true to the origins of the concept of university, that of being at the service of the thirst for knowledge and of the truth.

Our pluralist New Ireland needs a new theory of pluralism and the university is the typical space where pluralism can be nurtured. Pluralism requires open and honest dialogue. The truth is never served by mere polemics. We need a society where people who believe, people who are searching, people who doubt and people who reject religious values can live in a new mature relationship of dialogue and seeking. Enlightened secular society does not need to fear dialogue with men and women who believe or *vice-versa*. The questions which belief proposes in society are fundamental questions and cannot be passed over. The challenges of the message of Jesus Christ are challenges to all.

Such dialogue seems easier in continental European countries than it is in Ireland. Pope Benedict took up this question of the dialogue between reason and faith in a very interesting address which he had intended to read at the Roman University *La Sapienza* and which I heartily recommend to your reading. Unfortunately the Pope was unable to pronounce what is a truly challenging Address, because of groups whose theory of tolerance did not embrace listening to a challenge of the Pope written in the true style of university intellectual dialogue.

Our pluralist New Ireland needs a new theory of pluralism. Our young people need to be helped to attain the science of intellectual searching and dialogue on the deeper questions for life and society. The young person in the New Ireland is called to grow towards responsibility within the realities of the culture of the day, influenced by ideas, by life styles, by the basic self-understanding of this concrete society. The young person must learn how to discern within that world where true progress is to be found in his or her own personal lives and in society as a whole. At the same time, the young person has to learn that society is not an abstraction or a force which is absolutely determinant regarding his or her own values and life style. Education will take place in a particular context, but all of us have the ability and indeed the responsibility to change the context within which education can take place.

This challenge of discernment and verification of values begins for young people today at a much younger age than heretofore. The young person is challenged already at second level education to draw the connections between what he or she has received (tradition) and his or her evolving life. This occurs at a moment in which parents and teachers today often feel that their efforts are not having success. It is very often precisely at this age that many parents lose their nerve in speaking about faith with their children. In such a situation it is easy to revert to playing safe. Yet faith requires risk; enhancing freedom entails risk. Rather than engaging in dialogue parents and teachers can feel that it is best to leave it up the young person alone to find his or her way regarding faith. Parents lose their nerve, perhaps also because the Church has let them down by providing very few services to help them in their task or because society adopts a policy of hostility or at best agnosticism to the fundamental questions about truth. A society which loses the nerve to educate can easily find itself adrift.

A truly pluralist, multi-cultural society will be genuinely tolerant and respectful to all

forms of search for the truth. It has to do so not within the cultural of the past, but in the context of the new challenges and opportunities of today. I am reminded once again of that kind German nun to whom I referred at the beginning of my talk who thirty years after the war had ended had failed to see that there were no good reasons for continuing war-time measures in a different era. All of us, believers and secular society alike, have to waken up to the realities of our day and leave aside the prejudices of the past. I must say, as a duty of honesty, that that same German nun despite her restricted vision on some matters was a truly extraordinary person who looked after allies and representative of the democratic resistance in Rome during the German occupation.

I make no claim that what was done in the name of the Catholic Church in education in the past was always what it should have been done. In some cases, I am ashamed of what happened. But I am also proud of what has been achieved and I am genuinely open and enthusiastic about seeing that the wealth of that achievement can be integrated into a future Ireland built up on a new understanding of dialogue and respect.

Inevitably, if you ask an Archbishop to give a Convocation Address you will get a lecture which focuses on religious issues. I apologise to those who may be disappointed at the aspects of education for modern Ireland on which I have not touched. Religion however is not removed from life. The true believer, as opposed to the ideologue, challenges reason and society not to close itself in on its own thought framework and thus not to degenerate into positivism.

I quote again from Pope Benedict's Address to Rome's University: "The human journey never simply comes to an end; and the danger of falling into inhumanity is never totally overcome, as is only too evident from the panorama of recent history". Universities in particular will change in the New Ireland. New dimensions of knowledge will emerge. Faith and the Christian tradition – along with the tradition of other beliefs – have much to bring to the debates around these new issues. The university is the place where this debate can find a privileged space.

I am hopeful that this debate in our Universities can take place and that universities will renew themselves in open thought and open dialogue for the good of the New Ireland and all its citizens. May the National University of Ireland continue to use all its institutions to foster such a vision.