



**G.R.A.C.E research Colloquium
Keynote Address**

Speech

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Good morning once again, everybody, and thank you for the opportunity to share some thoughts with you as a part of this important research colloquium.

As I understand the task I have been given, it is to speak to you on the topic of *Catholic Education: Formation for Service and Witness*, with particular reference to the “hands” dimension of the theme of this colloquium: **Head, Heart and Hands: Together in Faith**. In the notes provided to me this was helpfully translated into a simple suggestion: speak about living the vision in our Catholic schools.

As you have already heard, I have some experience of Catholic schools, apart from having received my whole education - primary, secondary and tertiary - in Catholic institutions. I was trained as a primary school teacher but then as a member of the Salesians of Don Bosco I very soon found myself teaching in the junior years of secondary school. After my ordination as a priest, I had the role of religious education coordinator in a large boys’ school in Melbourne for three years before I was sent overseas to undertake further theology in Rome at the Salesian university. When I returned to Australia, I taught theology for a number of years at the Catholic Theological College in Melbourne and also for four years here at Notre Dame in Fremantle. On becoming an auxiliary bishop in Melbourne, I was for ten years a member of the Bishops Commission for Catholic Education and was the Chair of that Commission for three years. And, of course, as an auxiliary bishop in Melbourne and for the last twelve years as the archbishop here in Perth, I have had a great deal to do with Catholic Education in both places.

I mention all of this simply to say that my long experience with Catholic Education here in Australia leaves me with a number of very strong impressions. One is that Catholic Education represents one of the greatest treasures of the Church here in Australia and is something which we should celebrate, be proud of, and be committed to maintaining and developing. Another is that Catholic Education is facing significant challenges as it seeks to remain faithful to its mission and identity in an increasingly secularised context.



Another way of saying this might be that Catholic Education in Australia runs the risk of losing touch with its foundational vision and becoming confused about its relationship to both the Church, of which it is an integral part, and of our society whose people and families it seeks to serve.

I would presume that Australia is not alone in facing these challenges. I am also conscious that they may manifest themselves in different ways in different ecclesial and social contexts. I can only speak from my experience here in Australia and leave others who come from different contexts to take what might seem useful for them from what I share with you this morning.

I realise that I am stating the obvious when I say that it is pointless to speak about *living the vision* in our Catholic schools if we are not clear as to what that vision is. The challenge of articulating the vision is very much part of the heart and head dimensions of the trilogy which is the theme of this colloquium, but I do want to say just a few words about the vision question before we go any further.

Those of you who have heard me speak on Catholic education in the past might remember one of my oft-repeated mantras: a Catholic school cannot be a *good* Catholic school if it is not a good school, and it cannot be a *good* Catholic school if it is not Catholic. We should never sacrifice, nor accept that it is appropriate to sacrifice, either of these two dimensions. Equally, we should resist the temptation to see these two aspects, what we might call the academic and religious, or the intellectual and spiritual, as standing alongside each other as two essential though distinct and separate realities. Rather we should see them as two intertwined and mutually supportive characteristics of the vision which underpins the character and identity of the Catholic School: namely, to quote from a recent document from the Dicastery for Catholic Education, to be an educational community which “aims at the formation of human persons in the pursuit of their ultimate end, and of the good of the societies of which, as persons, they are members and in whose obligations, as adults, they will share” (The Identity of the Catholic School, 2022, par 11).

To speak of forming people so as to enable them to pursue their ultimate goal is to speak of something which one of the great saints of the early Church, Saint Augustine, expressed in this way.

You have made us for yourself, O God, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you.

This obviously is a statement of faith and therefore one to which not everybody would subscribe. Of course, we all realise that because it is a statement of faith this doesn't mean that it only applies to people of faith. In the mind of Saint Augustine, and in the mind of the Church, this statement expresses an essential dimension of what we would call our Christian anthropology, that is, of our understanding of what it means to be fully human. It can sound arrogant to say it, but it is our conviction that this statement expresses something which is true for every single human being



whether or not they recognise it or acknowledge it. Because Catholic education, in all its formal and institutionalised expressions, aims at the formation of human persons and, of course, especially of the young, then what I call the “God question” simply has to be an essential dimension of all our educational endeavours. To the extent that the “God question” is excluded from the educational project, as it is in an educational system which proudly proclaims itself to be free, compulsory and secular as our public school system in Australia does, people of faith will recognise that there is something missing here which limits the capacity of an educational institution to so shape and form young people as to help them achieve their full human flourishing.

Many parents, who choose public education for a wide variety of reasons, recognise this limitation and seek to address it by other means. But for many Catholic families, and indeed for many families who aren't Catholic, a Catholic school is their school of choice for their children because they recognise that in one way or another this extra dimension, whether it is understood as religious or as values based, is essential for their children's well-being, happiness and success.

I want to pause here not so much to make an aside as to underline what I think is a very important point.

I mentioned above the idea that some and perhaps many families who choose a Catholic education for their children do so because they see Catholic schools as being values-based. It is this, rather than the explicitly religious nature of the school, which is attractive to these parents. I also suspect this is the reason why many people apply for positions in Catholic schools. This is a very positive thing, of course, and represents one of the reasons why the presence of Catholic schools in a society is such an important contribution to the harmony and well-being of a society. What is sometimes forgotten, however, by many parents and families and also by many teachers and other staff members in our schools, including some in leadership positions, is that the presence and stability of these highly appreciated values rests absolutely on their foundations in what I like to call the Catholic worldview. Put simply, this world view coalesces around a trinity of fundamental presuppositions of faith: that God exists; that God is fully and finally revealed in Jesus Christ; and that the Church, notwithstanding its many faults, limitations and failings, is Christ's privileged, though not exclusive, way of being present and active in the world.

Values cannot just be notional: they have to be lived out consistently and in concrete, practical ways. They also have to be coherent and based on something solid. That something solid, that something which gives the values coherence, is the Catholic worldview which is the only enduring foundation for the survival and relevance of Catholic Education.

It is important that I be very clear here. I am not suggesting for a moment that Catholic schools should be Catholic ghettos, or that families, children and young people, or staff members who are



not Catholic, should be made to feel like second-class citizens in our schools. Nor am I suggesting that it should be the explicit aim of the school to convert everyone to formal membership in the Catholic Church. What I am suggesting, however, is that Catholic schools should never be or appear to be apologetic or reticent about their Catholic identity. People who encounter the Church through our schools should be encountering the spirit and presence of Christ and, ideally, have the opportunity to see the option for Christ and his Church as an attractive and appealing invitation. The recent document from the dicastery for Catholic Education to which I referred earlier expresses this quite well:

Due to the advanced process of secularisation Catholic schools find themselves in a missionary situation, even in countries with an ancient Christian tradition. They are called upon to commit to bearing witness through an educational project clearly inspired by the gospel. Catholic schools do not demand adherence to the faith; however, they can prepare for it. Through the educational plan it is possible to create the conditions for people to develop a gift for searching and to be guided in discovering the mystery of their being and of the reality that surrounds them, until they reach the threshold of faith. To those who then decide to cross this threshold, the necessary means are offered for continuing to deepen their experience of faith (Identity, par. 28).

With this suggestion from the Dicastery for Catholic Education we are moving more directly from the *head and heart* dimension of our theme to the *hands* dimension. If we are wondering how to *live the vision* of Catholic Education in our schools then perhaps, in light of what I have said above, we might ask ourselves, in terms of the concrete reality of our current involvement in Catholic Education, a few fundamental questions.

The first is this: how successful is my Catholic school community being in creating the physical, psychological, and spiritual space for the *God question* to become front and centre in the day-to-day life of the school? On the one hand, is it clear to everyone in the school – students, staff, parents, and others - that the religious dimension of the school is not simply something tacked on at the end or tolerated, but is acknowledged and celebrated and valued? On the other hand, is it also clear that each person's religious, cultural, ethnic and social reality and background are not just tolerated but respected. Again, the document from the dicastery addresses this issue:

The Catholic school must “practise the ‘grammar of dialogue’ not as a technical expedient but as a profound way of relating to others”. Dialogue combines attention to one's own identity with the understanding of others and respect for diversity. In this way, the Catholic school becomes “an educating community in which (people) can express themselves and grow in their humanity, in a process of relational dialogue, interacting in a constructive way, exercising tolerance, understanding different points of view and creating trust in an atmosphere of authentic harmony (Identity par 31).



These words from the Dicastery for Catholic Education, written in 2022, reflect very clearly, as does the whole of this important document, the conviction of Pope Francis that God is calling the Church, and every institution in the Church, into a renewed way of being; what the pope calls Synodality. It seems to me, then, that we might begin to construct a tentative or initial answer to the question of how to “live the vision in our Catholic schools” if we weave together some of the thoughts I have shared with you this morning. So let me try to do that briefly now.

If indeed Catholic schools, due to the process of secularisation, find themselves in a missionary situation in which they are called to bear witness to Christ, the face of the Father’s mercy, through an educational project clearly inspired by the gospel, then the pattern of Christ’s encounters with people must become the pattern of the school’s encounters with the community it exists to serve: the students, the families, and the local community in which the school is physically situated. If this is to happen, then the initial and ongoing formation of staff will have to take on a particular emphasis. Familiarity with the gospels, with a focus on discovering the mind and heart of Jesus, that is the inner attitudes which played themselves out in the stories he told and the ways in which he dealt with each person’s situation, will need to be deepened. And for this to happen schools will need to source, either from within their own ranks or from the wider Church community, people who are skilled both in terms of their own knowledge of the scriptures and in their ability to communicate this in effective and attractive ways. But first must come the realisation that this **is** a vital aspect of on-going staff development in a Catholic school.

A growing familiarity with the mind and heart, the inner attitudes, of the Jesus of the gospels will facilitate what the document calls *practicing the “grammar of dialogue” not as a technical expedient but as a profound way of relating to others*. This grammar of dialogue enables people to express themselves, grow in their humanity, interact in a constructive way, exercise tolerance, understand different points of view, and create an atmosphere of trust. We don’t have time to explore this more fully now, but I would suggest that the story of the encounter between the risen Jesus and two of his disciples, who were running away from Jerusalem and heading for Emmaus after the horror of the torture and execution of Jesus, is an instructive example of what this grammar of dialogue looks like. A central feature of it is that Jesus **invites** the two disciples into a dialogue and then **listens** to what they have to say before he begins to try and **lead** them further into the mystery. This story might well become a pattern for the kinds of discussions which often take place between various staff members, or between teachers and parents, or between students and teachers. In secondary and tertiary institutions in particular, it might provide a worthwhile methodology for leading people to faith.

In all of this it is important, as the Dicastery makes clear, that true dialogue *combines attention to one’s own identity with the understanding of others and respect for diversity*. An important word here is respect; important, too, is the idea that respect for others coexists with an attentiveness to one’s own identity. We are not expected or called to abandon who we are or what we believe



– we are not called to abandon our vision - as we seek to be respectful towards others. On the contrary, our own identity demands that we bear witness through an educational project **clearly inspired** by the gospel.

The reason why the word *respect* is so important is that it implies so much more than tolerance. Earlier the document, as we have seen, speaks of the need to exercise tolerance, but in reality tolerance alone is simply not enough. It is a kind of “live and let live” attitude which often means little more than grudgingly putting up with someone or something. This may help to lessen tensions, but it doesn’t create community. It is **respect** for the other, even when their “world-view” does not sit comfortably with our own identity, which can begin to break down barriers and bring people together. It is **respect** which at least holds out the hope of a unity which can co-exist, even if not always completely comfortably, with a healthy diversity.

The challenge of holding together confidence in and commitment to the vision and world-view which underpins the Catholic school, and the capacity for maintaining a culture of respectful dialogue in which all are valued and respected, is not easy and leaves us with many challenging questions – and sometimes the answers to those questions must be sought and decided upon at the local level, which is the only place where the full context can be appreciated. But this is what the new situation of the Catholic school – the situation of ever-increasing secularisation – calls for.

As a final comment, and as a way of offering another tentative answer to the question of how to *live the vision* in our Catholic schools, I would offer you a passage from Pope Francis’s Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*. This is what he says:

I dream of a “missionary option”, that is, a missionary impulse capable of transforming everything, so that the Church’s customs, ways of doing things, times and schedules, language and structures can be suitably channeled for the evangelization of today’s world rather than for her self-preservation. The renewal of structures demanded by pastoral conversion can only be understood in this light: as part of an effort to make them more mission-oriented, to make ordinary pastoral activity on every level more inclusive and open, to inspire in pastoral workers a constant desire to go forth and in this way to elicit a positive response from all those whom Jesus summons to friendship with himself. As [John Paul II](#) once said to the Bishops of Oceania: “All renewal in the Church must have mission as its goal if it is not to fall prey to a kind of ecclesial introversion”.

For our purposes today we might recase this passage in this way:

I dream of a “missionary option”, that is, a missionary impulse capable of transforming everything, so that the *local Catholic school’s, or Catholic Education Office’s*, customs, ways of doing things, times and schedules, language and structures can be suitably channelled for the evangelization of today’s world rather than for *their* self-preservation. The renewal of



structures demanded by pastoral conversion can only be understood in this light: as part of an effort to make them more mission-oriented, to make ordinary *day-to-day* activity on every level *in the school or office* more inclusive and open, to inspire in *teachers and other staff members* a constant desire to go forth and in this way to elicit a positive response from all those whom Jesus summons to friendship with himself. As [John Paul II](#) once said to the Bishops of Oceania: “All renewal in the Church (*which for us means also the Catholic school*) must have mission as its goal if it is not to fall prey to a kind of ecclesial (or social) introversion”.

My hope is that the *Global Researchers Advancing Catholic Education* initiative, faithful to the Church in this time of rapid change and complex challenges, may help us all to recognise and embrace the mission given to Catholic Education by the Lord and play our part in helping to bring alive the culture of synodality which the Lord, through the leadership of Pope Francis, is asking of us.

Thank you.