

LUX EDMUNDI: REFLECTION: APRIL, 2017

Pope St. John Paul II took the command of Christ to Simon Peter “Duc in altum”, “Put out into the deep (Luke 5:4)”, as the motto for the Church on the eve of the Third Millennium. By reflecting on the account of the Miraculous Draughts of Fishes from which these words come, by praying about it, Catholic school authorities may find the light to see, and strength to do, what God asks of them in these undoubtedly challenging times.

The context is this: Christ had just used Simon’s boat as a pulpit and, his sermon over, he told Simon to go back out into the lake to fish. Simon is respectful, a little sceptical maybe, but, ultimately, compliant: “Master, the whole night we have been labouring and caught nothing – but at your word I shall let down the nets”. Extraordinarily, he landed his largest catch ever.

Those who manage Catholic schools in Ireland today will tell you that they cannot be sure any more that all those employed as teachers in those schools will be men and women of faith, much less that they will meet the canonical requirement that they be “outstanding in correct doctrine and integrity of life (can. 803.2)”. They cannot be sure, either, they say, that their Catholic students will engage in any kind of faith activity whatsoever outside school, or that the respective parents of those students will be at all equipped to hand on the faith in the home. This, they insist, is the reality they face day-in, day-out, and they can be at a loss as to know how, precisely, they can effectively discharge their responsibility for the faith formation of those in their care. Like Simon, they feel that they have exhausted themselves in what, as far as their admittedly human eyes can see, appears, more and more, to be a virtually impossible task.

These concerns must be heeded. They are a reading of “the signs of the times” in our schools by those best-placed to do just that; by people whose professional competence is beyond question and whose commitment to Catholic education is exemplary. It isn’t just that these men and women feel they have “caught nothing” but that, in purely human terms, they wonder if, given the circumstances, they ever will.

It is, of course, essential that we be realistic in our assessment of any situation we are asked to address. We must not, however, cede the ground to those who seem to believe that, once they have warned the rest of us to “get real”, they have exhausted all possible responses to the challenges we most undoubtedly face in seeking to form the young in Christ. We simply do not have the option of “fishing” no more. In purely civil terms, we remain obliged to discharge our statutory obligations for the day-to-day management of the schools in which we serve. In that context – and still in purely legal, contractual and professional terms – we are, and must operate as, the first and most crucial agents of the board of management in its endeavour to comply with its statutory obligation to uphold, and to be accountable to the patron for so up-holding, the characteristic spirit of the schools as, in effect, determined by the patron. We have no right to go easy on the Catholic side of things, so to speak, not even on the grounds that our efforts in that direction must inevitably fail.

However, we must not - we cannot - ever forget that we are employed to lead and manage *faith*-based schools; that, in fact, whilst it is the board which appoints us, it is, in the eyes of faith, Christ who commissions us to “make disciples of all ... , teaching them to keep everything that I have commanded you (Mt 28:19-20)”. We are the instruments of Christ in evangelising all those with whose religious, moral and spiritual education we are charged. It is not, of course, all down to us. Paul plants, Apollos waters but it is always God – and, it must be remembered, only God - who gives the growth (cf. I Cor 3:6). Again and again, whether the time is right or not (cf. II Tim 4:2), we must put out into the deep and lay down our nets. This is our part. The “catch” is his. We must work as if everything depended on us but, at the same time, we must pray as if everything depended on him. The real lesson here may very well be that our nets are empty, not because others do not believe enough, but because we ourselves do not pray enough; do not pester God with our importunate demands, banging loud and long on his door, demanding on this occasion, not bread, but “fish” (cf. Lk 11:5-8).