

LUX EDMUNDI: JULY, 2016: REFLECTIONS ON THE BEATITUDES FOR CATHOLIC EDUCATORS

1. **BLESSED ARE THE POOR:** From the very earliest days of the Church, interpretations of this word “poor” have been many and various. Always, though, there has been an insistence that any explication of the word as used in this particular context must have regard to those who live in actual poverty, the have-nots, the deprived, the oppressed, the marginalised, the voiceless, the unheard, the unheeded. Jesus says that they can be sure of a place in heaven. How sure, though, may they be of a place in this or that Catholic school in Ireland today?
2. **BLESSED ARE THOSE WHO MOURN:** Not a day passes without some reminder of the inner pain endured by so many of our young people and hardly a parish in the land has not experienced the especially poignant grief that occurs when the old bury the young, particularly the young who have died by suicide. In what is quite frequently the Responsorial Psalm at Funeral Masses on such occasions, we proclaim that the Lord is our Shepherd (*Psalm 23*), that, precisely when we walk through the valley of the shadow of death, he is there, with us and for us. Often, though, he is with us in, and through, those who respect, who care, who listen. For our students, for those especially “who labour and are heavily laden (cf. *Matthew 11:28*)”, if the Lord is not there for them in us, and through us, their teachers, their mentors, they may well be convinced that their deepest fears are well-grounded, that they must, in fact, suffer alone, and in a world that, quite simply, just couldn’t be bothered one way or the other. May we and our schools be instruments of the Good Shepherd in supporting our charges, affording them comfort, surrounding them with “goodness and mercy”, helping them find peace.
3. **“BLESSED ARE THE MEEK”:** Nietzsche thought the Beatitudes constituted proof positive for his thesis that Christianity is a religion of slaves, the means by which the weak might destroy the strong. Even we ourselves may wonder sometimes whether meekness is a quality we should inculcate in the young people committed to our professional care. That, of course, will depend on what we mean by “meek”. The word used in the Greek original is *praeis*, which means “the quality of not being overly impressed by a sense of one’s self-importance, gentleness, humility, courtesy, considerateness, meekness in the older favourable sense (BDAG, s.v.)”. This is, in fact, a quality which would enhance the exercise of authority in any community. It is, however, essential in Christian communities, schools included. Whoever is given authority amongst the Faithful, must exercise it, not for self, but for others; not for power, but for service. The Pope is *Servus Servorum Dei*, Servant of the Servants of God, and such must be all who share in the Shepherd-Kingship of Christ. Meekness in this sense is a quality that must characterise the dealings of school leaders with staff and of staff with children. We *must* wash each other’s feet.
4. **BLESSED ARE THOSE WHO HUNGER AND THIRST FOR RIGHTEOUSNESS:** The primary reference here is to “God’s justice”, the kind of righteousness practised by St. Joseph, whom the evangelist characterises as “a just man”, a man faithful in all respects to the Torah, the Law of Moses, the Law of the Covenant (cf. *Matthew 1:19*). Our Torah, our Law, the Law of the New Covenant, is the Law of Love, of love of God above all for his own sake and of the neighbour as ourselves for the love of God. It is for this that we must hunger and thirst and it is this which alone will sustain and satisfy us. A Catholic school, a Catholic teacher, lives by this New Law, is compelled by it, is guided by it, and, in the only evaluation that really counts, will most certainly be judged by it.

5. *BLESSED ARE THE MERCIFUL*: In this Jubilee Year of Mercy, the Holy Father would have us think and pray about Mercy, consider its place in the divine scheme of things, and, as we know ourselves to be objects of God's Mercy, would, in turn, be agents of that same Mercy to those afflicted and deprived in body and/or in soul. In this regard, Pope Francis has, as it were, resurrected the Works of Mercy. He has, on more than one occasion, actually listed the Seven Corporal, and the Seven Spiritual, Works of Mercy. Amongst the latter is this: To instruct the ignorant. It was, in fact, in the exercise of this particular Spiritual Work of Mercy that those who founded our schools, and bequeathed to us their respective charisms, sacrificed so much, endured so much, to bring the Good News to the young, to the poor especially. As it is our inheritance, this particular mode of Mercy is also our challenge, and, like our fore-bears, we too must work long and hard to evangelise, to catechise, always in the unshakable conviction that those who instruct others unto justice will shine like stars for all eternity (cf. *Daniel* 12:3).

6. *BLESSED ARE THE PURE IN HEART*: Modern scholarship relates purity in heart to the singlemindedness that ensures we serve God rather than Mammon and do not terminally undermine our Christian discipleship by trying to serve both. All Catholic schools are subject to a kind of "bipolarity" between this world and the next. They must, in fact, prepare their charges for both. The balance is exceedingly hard to maintain. Our school websites tend to celebrate all kinds of Gospel values, values to be lived in time and vindicated in eternity. Our press releases, though, especially those issued on foot of our Leaving Certificate results, may imply that getting our students into this course or that, at this college or that, matters as least as much as getting them into Heaven. Catholic schools must constantly examine themselves *sub specie eternitatis*, in the light of God's face, to ascertain whether they are, in fact, as single-minded, as pure in heart, as they must be to maintain their identity, and their integrity, precisely as Catholic.

7. *BLESSED ARE THE PEACEMAKERS*: In the Old Testament, the Lord is the peace-maker *par excellence* and it is always his intervention that brings peace, preserves it, restores it when it is lost. Against this background, St. Paul presents Christ as the one who reconciles heaven and earth (cf. *Colossians* 1:20) and reconciles, too, Jews and Gentiles, making of them one People (cf. *Ephesians* 2:15), "a chosen race, a holy nation, God's own people (cf. *1 Peter* 2:9)". By becoming itself a place, and a means, of reconciliation, of peace-making between students of all kinds, the Catholic school is, in fact, at the service of this eternal project, the formation of the whole of humanity into the New Israel, children of their Father in heaven, citizens of the New Jerusalem.

8. *BLESSED ARE THOSE WHO ARE PERSECUTED FOR RIGHTEOUSNESS' SAKE*: It is, again, "God's justice" that is envisaged here, that determination to give each his/her due as a *sine qua non* of our observance of the New Law. In the original Greek, to "persecute" means "to harass someone, especially because of beliefs, persecute ... to drive away, drive out ... (BDAG, s.v.)". Teachers are often amongst those "driven out" by totalitarian regimes. In the 20th century alone, thousands of Catholic teachers, religious, cleric and lay, were persecuted, many unto death, just for being Catholic teachers. We dare not liken our "martyrdom" to theirs but, like them, we must take whatever knocks come our way for our faith in, and service to, the Catholic school. We must bear witness to our faith-based, Christ-centred, convictions and we will be blessed.