

LUX EDMUNDI: REFLECTION: JUNE, 2017

There is ample evidence that Irish teachers, primary and post-primary, principals especially, consider themselves vulnerable to high levels of occupational stress. The months of May and June, the last stretch of the academic year, can be particularly stressful in schools. There is so much to be done, with young people who are tired, mentally and physically, by teachers who are themselves at least as tired, that, even in the best-ordered school, and in the normally most congenial staff-room, the tensions are palpable. The general public is likely to re-act sceptically at any time to teachers who talk about work-related stress. It is likely to re-act with some degree of annoyance to such complaints right now, just before, as they see it, we head off into the “long holidays” they can only dream of. Non-teachers will often confess that they would not do our job for twice the money but it will probably take a lot more time before they realise just how much their own children would be disadvantaged educationally were they taught by men and women drained by a lack of the recuperation, the “re-creation”, that is a desired outcome of our time off, especially during summer.

The research literature attempts to isolate and analyse the main occupational stressors reported by teachers. Though, of necessity, it must often do so provisionally, that literature indicates circumstances which, on the evidence, seem associated with the reduction of occupational stress amongst teachers. Some of the circumstances are external to the teacher and relate to, e.g., how well the school, the students especially, are conducted. Some, though, are internal to the teacher and relate, e.g., to personal factors which help or hinder one’s capacity to cope.

As to those which help, some may be nurtured. There are psycho-physical processes which, it seems, may assist even the most burdened of us manage, or manage better, the stressors in our lives in school. Amongst these is MBI (Mindfulness-Based Intervention). “Mindfulness” is, of course, one of the buzz-words of our time and there is on-going debate as to whether it is, or is not, just another fad. There are, though, authoritative studies which, on foot of empirical evidence, conclude that mindfulness training can indeed assist teachers in managing their emotions and thus help them experience a decrease in work-related stress and a concomitant increase in the confidence that they will respond better to whatever the job – or, indeed, life - may throw at them in the future.

Like TM, mindfulness is thought to derive from Buddhism. As they did in respect of TM, some insist that, given these origins, mindfulness must be - that, indeed, it is - incompatible with Christianity. The Letter of the CDF of 15 October, 1989, to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on Some Aspects of Christian Meditation, suggests that the official position of the Roman authorities on this is more nuanced, is, in fact, cautious rather than simply condemnatory. Besides, as it has done with the other practices it has taken from the religions of the East, the West is almost certain to secularise mindfulness, and commodify it, flogging it on the open market for whatever that market will bear.

We have, more than once, adverted to the tradition that Blessed Edmund brought “his letters and cares and difficulties and doubts” to Christ present in the Tabernacle in the Oratory at Mount Sion. The Lord had, after all, invited him: “Come to me, all you that labour and are burdened; and I will refresh you (Mt 11:28, Douay/Rheims)”. The Lord also invites each one of us to come into his Presence; to bring with us, and to lay down before him, our anxieties, our mistakes, even our despair. We need say or do no more. It is enough for us to be mindful that he is there in his Real Presence in the Tabernacle, his loving gaze fixed steadily upon us (cf. Mk 10:21), his healing power ready to touch us, to restore us, in the very depths of our being, if we but open our hearts to him.