

LUX EDMUNDI: REFLECTION: SEPTEMBER, 2016

There is in the Irish language a whole range of maxims advocating and celebrating community and cooperation and we make use of them regularly in our various communications. We invoke the idea of *muintireas* and we recommend the paradigm of the *meitheal*. Staff, pupils, and parents are not infrequently reminded of those communitarian values expressed in our proverbs: “*Ní neart go cur le chéile*”; “*Ar scáth a chéile a mhaireann na daoine*”, and we may have incorporated these fruits of traditional and popular wisdom in our crests, our logos, our stationery.

The notion of togetherness, of our being in this or that initiative together, of our pulling together to achieve what are always common objectives, is attractive in itself, re-assuring, energising and, most especially, consonant with the Good News proclaimed in and by Christ Jesus, who came that we might be one; who, in the waters of Baptism constituted us members of his Body, the Church, the People of God; whose disciples from the very outset lived and worked in *koinonia*, in communion, in fellowship each with the other, all walls between them razed by their Crucified Lord.

It may be wondered, though, whether, in practice, we are more like the church of Corinth than that of Jerusalem, at odds with each other rather than at peace, divided rather than united. There can be divisions in and between our school communities, systems and sectors. Our attitudes towards the educational “Other” – however defined – can be quite negative. When the “Other” is considered a threat to our interests, we quickly become defensive and even aggressive. We can be that to those we deem, as it were, not of “the household of the faith”, but, even within that “household”, we can, to say the least, be very wary of any other Catholic school that threatens us in any way. Our competition for, say, numbers, for the abled and abler pupils, the “better” students, can put paid to communion, collaboration and to all the nice things we highlight in our charters, our mission statements, our websites. Our interests trump our Catholicity and, if truth be told, Gospel values can get very short shrift if “they” are trespassing on “our” prerogatives, our prominence, putting our present and/or our future at risk, and we must act to stop them and protect ourselves.

The Education Act 1998 makes provision for an education system that is, *inter alia*, “conducted in a spirit of partnership between schools, patrons, students, parents, teachers and other school staff, the community served by the school, and the state (Long title)”. Such partnership is good in itself and its actualisation will serve the common good *and* our own good a well. Fairness in funding, for example, at the level of both the system and the school, can be sought and achieved – even if only incrementally – through partnership, which, in fact, is the means by which any such benefits are achieved in the Irish system of education. If we are to have, e.g., fair and equal capitation grants for students, it is likelier to come through negotiation and agreement, through cooperation, through partnership (social or other), between Minister, management and unions. Such improvements are more unlikely to come through any one interest going it alone, much less through each interest warring with the other and all warring with the state.

Catholic school authorities at national level are, it seems, working towards greater collaboration. This could result eventually in one consolidated authority to speak and act for, and on behalf of, Catholic schools. This, in turn, could be an instrument of *koinonia* amongst us all, seed and fruit of the Catholic social Gospel. This process will, surely, be all the more effective, all the more authentic, if conceived and pursued from the ground up as well as from the top down, if those at the chalk-face are invited and permitted to do a bit more than pay, pray, obey (“pray” being, perhaps, optional).