

Introductory input - Archbishop Christopher Prowse
Catholic Education Key Leaders Day
Mercure Canberra Belconnen
Friday 9th August 2024

In this Year of the Holy Spirit as we open ourselves to Encounter, Discipleship and Mission on our Synodal journey to our October Assembly, we gather today as Key Leaders of the Archdiocese.

My first comment is to thank you so much for all that you do and are for us particularly in the area of Catholic Education in our Archdiocese. In setting the tone, for today, I would like to contribute by offering the following reflections.

Many years ago, when I was a Seminarian, we were very concerned about one of our colleagues. He started to act in ways that were not typical and as his friends we were concerned about what was happening in his personal life.

This change in behaviour also came to the attention of the Formation staff. At the time, a very experienced Spiritual Director tried to intervene. After a session with him, our colleague gathered with us. He shared with us that the Spiritual Director was not particularly attentive to his actions but was more attentive to the deeper aspects of his life. The Spiritual Director had one major statement that was the "take away" for this young man on his journey of life at that time. The Director said, "I am worried about your humanity."

Because we were all part of his "humanity", we wanted to help as best we could.

It seems to me that in today's world, we could expand upon this advice of the Spiritual Director. Could it be said that humanity is worried about humanity? The times today seem so apocalyptic and there are so many signs of despair and hopelessness. Philosophically, there seems to be a reckless subjectivism in our lack of following through on common sense. There is an excess of ideological polarisation on almost every aspect of our shared humanity.

We, as the Catholic family are part of this humanity. How can we help?

Upon reflection, I feel that we have two Gold medals that we propose to such a troublesome world.

The first Gold medal comes from our Jewish heritage. It basically states that you simply renew humanity from within.

Simply renewing humanity from without can be helpful but it moves towards superficiality and may not unite that which is separated.

This reminds me of a story about a Rabbi and his students. The question the Rabbi asked his students was: "How do you know when the Night ends and the Day begins?"

One of his brightest students said: "We know when you look out at the fields and you can distinguish between my field and the field of my neighbour. That is when the night has ended and the day has begun."

A second student said: "We know this from when we look out from the fields and we can distinguish between my house and the house of my neighbour. Then we know that the night has ended and the day has begun."

A third student said: "Rabbi, when I see an animal in the distance and I can tell what kind of animal it is, whether it is a cow or a horse or a sheep, I know the night has ended and the day has begun."

The fourth student said: "Rabbi, when I can see a flower and distinguish its colour, whether it be red, yellow or blue, I know the night has gone and the day has begun."
Every answer made the Rabbi sadder.

He said, "No! None of you understand! You only divide. You only distinguish one thing from another. You separate. Is that all you can do? Just splitting the world into pieces. Isn't the world split into enough fragments already? The true answer is that when you look into the eyes of the person beside you and you can truly say, "You are my brother, you are my sister – then truly the night has ended and the day has begun."

Certainly, from our Jewish background we can say that the dawn has arrived when every human person's dignity is respected and is treated as inviolable.

The second God medal we propose to a divided world comes from our Christian heritage. It is a great extension of our Jewish heritage.

Not only do we say, "Renew humanity from within...we add ...do this in the light of Jesus – Crucified and Risen from the Dead."

A very good summary of this is found in the thoughts of C.S. Lewis (1898-1963) – The British Writer and Anglican Scholar. He summarises Christianity spectacularly when he says, "I believe in Christianity as I believe that the sun has risen, not only because I see it but because by it I see everything else." This is the floor stone inscription of C.S. Lewis at Poet's Corner, Westminster Abbey, London.

How true this is. We Christians believe that the night is gone and the dawn has risen in Jesus the Son of God. This Sun/Son is a dawn that will never set. And, as C.S. Lewis observes, with this dawn light and in this light everything else in reality is seen through this filter. This brings deep love, joy and peace that the world cannot bring of its own resources.

It is a disinterested love (agape) which sees Jesus in the suffering of others in a very special way. Jesus Himself says; when we see His light in the suffering of others, do something about it, "You did it to me" (Matt.25/40). It is the meaning of the great parable of the Good Samaritan in Luke 10/29-37. Here the Church is seen as a hospital to heal those who have fallen by the wayside of life and whose humanity is endangered. Pope Francis uses a familiar expression of seeing the Church as "A field hospital in the middle of a battle ground."

We also help our shared humanity in bringing two great gifts to the table of healing.

The first great gift is our "Intellectual Tradition." We could call it the "Peter Principle." It is in the Acts of the Apostles that Peter stands up after hearing arguments on all sides about important issues of the Church in its infancy. He speaks and summarises, on behalf of us all, in an ordered and structured manner and in a way that makes perfect sense for the way forward.

May we do the same? May we balance the excessive subjectivism of our shared humanity in today's world in harmony with objective principles that bring out all that is good, all that is true and all that is beautiful in life?

I think it is Pope Saint John Paul II that brings out this balancing beautifully when he says, "To be truly Christian is to be fully human." We Catholics are very good at balancing apparent opposites and bringing them together to allow human flourishing. At our best, we are not into dividing and splitting.

A few nights ago, a visitor to the Archdiocese, Dr Helen Alvaré, said similar things. Pope Saint Paul VI said a similar thing when he addressed the United Nations in the 1960's. He said the Catholic Church is an "expert in humanity" (4 Oct 1065).

Dr Helen Alvaré called for us to be courageous in the Market Place of life in bringing forward this Intellectual Tradition even if it means there could be suffering involved. Let us take hope and consolation from the Saint of today whose name is St Teresa Benedicta of the Cross. She also joins in a prophetic way, the Saint of yesterday our own Australian Saint, St Mary of the Cross MacKillop. In bringing healing to society means you cannot bypass the Calvary Cross!

The second great gift we bring to the table of healing to our world today is our "Contemplative Tradition." We could call this the "Marian Principle." It is named after Mary the Mother of Jesus, the one who ponders and treasures all that God is giving her with pure grace to which she responds with total faith.

The Saint of today, St Edith Stein, (St Teresa Benedicta of the Cross 1891-1942) was martyred in the Nazi concentration camp of Auschwitz. She was a convert to Catholicism from Judaism. She brought to her life and to the Church a very high intellectual capacity to show philosophically the greatness of God. She is seen as one of the six patrons of Europe and is on her way, please God, in the years ahead to become a possible Doctor of the Church.

Yet even though she came from a very strong Intellectual tradition, her conversion to Catholicism came via the Marian principle.

Her biographers talk about it in this way. "Edith spied a woman, fresh from her rounds of shopping, kneeling in an empty Church, obviously lost in prayer. She had certainly seen people at prayer in the Synagogue, but she had never seen anything like this communion with a presence personal yet unseen." Edith Stein saw all this and was amazed at this woman's utter simplicity. She wrote later, "I could not forget that."

This woman with shopping bags lost in prayer in a Cathedral never met Edith. However, she did witness strongly to the presence of something transcendent and very appealing to Edith Stein's hungry heart for Jesus.

Pope St Paul VI in his celebrated Apostolic Exhortation on Evangelisation (1975, No.41) summarises that the modern world is attracted more by “witnesses than teachers.” Let us remember this wordless testimony that shouts out the presence of God in our midst.

Next year Pope Francis has declared the Jubilee Year with the title “Pilgrims of hope.” My prayer is that today will help us to be men and women of hope and join in pilgrimage with the rest of humanity to heal our humanity.

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