

LUX EDMUNDI: JULY, 2015: A CATHOLIC TEACHER'S REFLECTION ON THE PATER NOSTER

“OUR FATHER”: The God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ is the God and Father of each of us and of all of us and we, therefore, governor and governed, employer and employee, manager and managed, teacher and taught, are, not master and servant, but brother and sister, and, in the case of the baptised, members of the Body of Christ, co-learners at his feet, class-mates in discipleship.

“WHO ART IN HEAVEN”: We would, of course, be grossly negligent were we not to prepare the young people committed to our professional care to survive and thrive in this world. We must, though, keep our eyes fixed on the world to come, for “our homeland is in heaven (*Phillipians 3:20*)”, and we must watch lest our thoughts, our words, our lives, our work, our schools, be colonised and controlled by the “this-worldliness”, the materialism, the self-centredness, of our place and time.

“HALLOWED BE THY NAME”: In parts of Western Europe, at least, there is a tendency to consign faith and religion to the private sphere; to treat it as an exclusively personal interest, like collecting Dinky Toys or Barbie Dolls. In Ireland, some would “de-God” our schools, remove from them all emblems of faith, and banish prayer of any kind from our class-rooms. We must – like our forebears in Catholic education - ensure that our days and weeks, our times and seasons, are marked by prayer, joint prayer, communal prayer, public prayer. This will not happen by or of itself. With due respect for the constitutional rights of all, governors, managers and leaders in Catholic schools must make express provision for the public hallowing of God’s name in the schools in their care.

“THY KINGDOM COME”: There is much scholarly and other debate on what precisely Jesus meant in his references to the Kingdom of God. Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI helps us here: “When Jesus speaks of the Kingdom of God, he is quite simply proclaiming God, and proclaiming him to be the living God, who is able to act concretely in the world and in history and is even now so acting (*Jesus of Nazareth*, 2007, 55-56)”. It is part of the vocation of the Catholic school to give witness to the presence of the Kingdom, the action of the living God, in its midst, to so manage itself and its affairs that it becomes a means and a locale for the actualisation of the rule of God in the hearts and minds of those who comprise the “scholastic Church”, the mini-Church of the school.

“THY WILL BE DONE”: We must live and love by the Word of God, by the teachings of Scripture, Tradition and the Magisterium of the Church. So living, so loving, we must discharge to the very best of our ability the duties of our state in life, including our legal and contractual duties within the school and the school system. We must be exemplary in how we manage the little bit of Ireland that is ours to manage. The Catholic school must be a city seated on a hill, a source of inspiration to the world around it, so well run that even those most opposed to faith-based institutions will acknowledge that, whatever drives us, drives us to fair, open and transparent governance.

“GIVE US THIS DAY OUR DAILY BREAD”: A hall-mark of the compassion of Blessed Edmund Ignatius Rice was its sheer practicality. He built schools so that “those oppressed by poverty and injustice” might be instructed “in the principles of religion and Christian piety” but he built them, too, so that a black boy or an Italian immigrant might come, by education, to human dignity, personal development and, yes, social and financial advancement. This is our inheritance and our challenge.

“AND FORGIVE US OUR TRESPASSES AS WE FORGIVE THOSE WHO TRESPASS AGAINST US”: It is, indeed, frightening to think that our “hardness” in school, our lack of “sym-pathy”, “com-passion”, of “feeling-with”, those put by Providence in our care, may at the end merit the awful “Depart from me you cursed” which will consign to eternal separation from God those who refuse to love, especially those who refuse to love, cherish and serve “the least of these”.

“AND LEAD US NOT INTO TEMPTATION”: The greatest temptation for the Catholic school is to conform to the spirit of the age. As educational institutions, Catholic schools are embedded in society. All too easily, they may be conditioned by the social convictions and aspirations of those they serve, who, indeed, may opt for a Catholic school for educational rather than for ethical considerations. Our so-called “good” schools may be especially vulnerable to this kind of reverse take-over and, charters and mission statements notwithstanding, when we do not focus on the *unum necessarium*, the one thing necessary, the service of youth for the sake of the Gospel, anything like evangelizing will come a very distant second to gaining and keeping a high place in whatever “league-tables” matter most at the time.

“BUT DELIVER US FROM EVIL”: No-one involved in Catholic education in Ireland should ever forget that appalling evil was done to innocent children in Catholic schools by Catholic teachers, including religious. Though scholars tell us that the reference is to the humble of the day who believed in Christ, for centuries the Church read the following verse as a terrifying, a damning, judgement on those who led the young astray: “... anyone who trips up one of these little ones who believe in me, it’s better for that person to have a donkey’s millstone hung around his neck, and be drowned in the open sea (*Matthew 18: 6*)”. It was precisely as a stark warning against “scandalising” the young by abusing them sexually, that this particular saying of the Lord’s was cited and quoted in the internal publications of some of the religious congregations dedicated to the Christian education of youth. May the grace of God keep us and those in our care safe from all evil: “May those who seek the Lord not be shamed through me (see *Psalms 69:6*)”.