

LUX EDMUNDI: ADVENT REFLECTION: DECEMBER 2014

It is said that, when indicating what distinguished his from other independent English boarding-schools, a Benedictine headmaster maintained: "You prepare boys for life. We prepare them for death". This incident may be apocryphal but it serves to remind us that – as, for instance, Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* so powerfully depicts – sermons to the young on the Four Last Things (Death, Judgement, Heaven and Hell) were formerly common and many of a certain age would empathise with Stephen Dedalus and his Belvedere class-mates left in "a blue funk" by the preaching of Fr. Arnall, S.J., during their three-day retreat: "*Memento novissima tua*": "In all thy works remember thy last end, and thou shalt never sin" (*Ecclus 7:40*).

Today, though death is still the only ineluctable Fact of Life - though, indeed, schools are currently asked to include suicide as a topic in their respective Pastoral Care Programmes - for a Principal to instance preparation for it as an important educational objective would result almost inevitably in misunderstanding, if not, indeed, in controversy.

There has been public comment recently on secularism in Ireland. Some appear to hold that, the guarantee of the Lord notwithstanding (*Matthew 18:8*), in this particular respect, at least, the gates of hell have prevailed against the Church, the Body of Christ, the People of God, in Ireland.

"Secularism" arises from, and issues in, the conviction that it is this age and this world alone which matter; that human origins, nature and destiny are wholly comprehensible and fully explicable with sole and exclusive reference to a temporal, material, this-worldly, understanding of things. For many, this "secularism" implies and necessitates agnosticism, atheism, anti-clericalism, anti-religion and, almost inevitably, anti-Catholicism, the Church being the whipping-boy of choice in this context – because, perhaps, it is the bulwark, not just of Christian faith, but of religious faith of every kind.

Amongst the experts, the fundamental secularisation hypothesis – that development inevitably results in a decline in religious faith and practice – is, in fact, more contested now than ever, and some of its former proponents have qualified, some have renounced, their support for this theory.

Each time we recite the Creed we proclaim our faith that Christ will come again to judge the living and the dead and we profess our belief in the resurrection of the body and life everlasting. The *saeculum*, therefore, is *not* all there is, and humanity is more and greater than the material, the corporeal, the visible, the measurable. As far as the human person is concerned, materialism is always reductionist in its consequences, and, under any material, secular, regime, human beings, especially "the least", are too often instrumentalised, reified and, ultimately, treated as disposable.

The Season of Advent is a time in which we prepare to welcome Christ. When, at this time, Christians look to the Eschaton, they are being quintessentially counter-cultural. Catholic schools would do the young people in their care a huge and enduring service had they the courage of their convictions to emphasise, not just the First, but the Second Coming of Christ. In so doing, they would affirm the transcendent wholeness and dignity of the human person and provide an antidote to the crass, myopic and selfish materialism which first bred, and then consumed, the Celtic Tiger.

Maranatha! Come Lord. Come Lord Jesus. Come, Lord, do not delay.