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Ireland - Archbishop Martin on Catholic Schools

Scotland - Kirk and Humanists agree on 'Time for reflection'

Archbishop Eamon Martin gave this homily on RTE live broadcasts on radio and television last Sunday, marking Catholic Schools Week.

“In Catholic schools, we help young people to become stronger followers of Jesus, and to find a clear direction in their lives despite all the conflicting and confusing messages that surround them” – Archbishop Martin



Apparently Pope Francis has more than ten million followers on Twitter – not bad for a 77 year old! He’s also the most talked about person on Facebook! But there’s still a way to go before he has as many

Facebook friends as Rihanna or Cristiano Ronaldo! Of course Pope Francis is not on Twitter because he wants us

to follow him. The Holy Father wants us to follow Jesus. Recently someone sent me this text: ‘Jesus doesn’t have a mobile, but I talk to Him every day; Jesus isn’t on Facebook, but I am His friend; Jesus isn’t on Twitter, but I am one of His followers’!



Two Sundays ago at the Sistine chapel in Rome, Pope Francis baptised 32 little children. He used a lovely image. He described every newly baptised child as being like a link in a chain of faith that goes right back to the time of Jesus.

The very first followers of Jesus were simple fishermen: Simon Peter and his brother Andrew, James and John the sons of Zebidee. He called them as they sat in their boats preparing the nets for a catch. Did you notice that at the same moment Jesus called them, He also gave them a mission? Follow me, he said, and I will make you fishers of men and women. You see, you cannot be a follower or friend of Jesus and keep it to yourself. By becoming His follower you accept a call to spread the good news about Him to others.

Two Sundays ago at the Sistine chapel in Rome, Pope Francis baptised 32 little children. He used a lovely image. He described every newly baptised child as being like a link in a chain of faith that goes right back to the time of Jesus. Whenever parents bring their children for baptism, he said, they are adding another link to the chain. And, please, God, when these little ones grow up, they in turn will come back to have their own children baptised. And so the chain of faith goes on and on.

What a wonderful privilege it is for a parent to create a new link in the chain of faith. What an honour and challenge it is to pass on to a child the gift of faith and friendship with Jesus. I want to acknowledge today the vital role of parents in handing on to their children the light of Christ, telling them their first stories about Jesus, teaching them to make the Sign of the Cross and gradually showing them by word and example how they can know and love God and keep His commandments.

Parents are the first teachers of children in the ways of faith. But today, at the beginning of Catholic Schools week, I also want to pay tribute all those who work in, and support our Catholic schools – the teachers and other staff, members of Boards of Management and all who contribute to the life of our schools in any way. Together, in our Catholic schools, we help young people to become stronger followers of Jesus, and to find a clear direction in their lives despite all the conflicting and confusing messages that surround them.

This week we will be celebrating five key characteristics of our Catholic schools – the five W's: Welcome, Word, Wisdom, Worship and Witness.

Catholic schools are places of where all are WELCOME. In Catholic schools we listen to God's WORD and try to follow God's word in our lives. Our children not only learn information and skills, but in our schools they also gain true WISDOM which will last them a lifetime. In Catholic schools our young people, teachers and parents have opportunities to praise god and WORSHIP together. But most importantly, Catholic schools are about WITNESS. Witness means going out to make a real difference in the world by the way we live our lives. After all, that is what being a friend and follower of Jesus is all about.

Think again about those simple fishermen: Simon Peter, Andrew, James and John.

Because of their witness, because they chose to become fishers of men and women, here we are in Drogheda – Ireland – 2000 years later worshipping God together. It all began with twelve followers who went out to create new links in the chain of faith. Today we are among 2.2 billion followers of Christ around the world – 2.2 billion, a third of the world's population. Now, beat that Rihanna!

Kirk and Humanists in joint call for school 'Time for reflection' reform

The Church of Scotland and Humanist Society Scotland have jointly called for legislation to change 'Religious Observance' in school assemblies to "Time for Reflection".

The aim is to make these events inclusive of as many pupils as possibly, and "clearly not gatherings where one faith or belief system is promoted over another", says a press release from the two bodies.

The agreement in principle on an issue which has stoked heated debate marks a significant breakthrough -- and a joint statement by the Kirk and a body seeking to give voice to ethical non-believers appears to be a first.

The Rev Sally Foster-Fulton, Convener of the Church and Society Council of the Church of Scotland, said: "We welcome this exciting opportunity to collaborate with our humanist colleagues in supporting genuinely inclusive Time for Reflection in schools that supports the community and spiritual development of all pupils whatever their faith or belief.

She continued: "Scotland is a wonderfully diverse nation. Regular, inclusive Time for Reflection will enhance young people's ability to celebrate difference rooted in respect."

Douglas McLellan, Chief Executive of the Humanist Society Scotland added: "We welcome the opportunity to work collaboratively with the Kirk. We urge the Public Petitions Committee to make strong recommendations for the change of Religious Observance to 'Time for Reflection.'

"This removes the religious exclusivity of the current system and brings about fairness and equality for all. If this change is made, it will bring current practices in-line with the modern demographic in Scotland," he commented.

The Church of Scotland and the Humanist Society Scotland will make their joint submission as additional evidence to the Petition

Committee of the Scottish Government on Tuesday 28 January, when there will be discussion of the petition of the Scottish Secular Society (PE01487) to make Religious Observance an 'opt-in' activity.

They will ask the Public Petitions Committee to urge the Scottish Government bring forward legislative proposals to remove the reference to "Religious Observance" in the Education (Scotland) Act 1980 and insert "Time for Reflection" instead.

The move has been welcomed by the Christian think-tank Ekklesia, which examines the changing place of belief in the contemporary world, arguing that in a plural society religions should neither be established nor excluded.

"It is vital for a healthy society that people of different religious and non-religious outlooks can learn to share public space fairly, collaborate on common values, uphold the rights and dignity of all, and negotiate disagreements with informed respect," said Ekklesia co-director Simon Barrow.

"A 'Time of Reflection' in schools ought to be a space where these virtues can be put into practice by breaking down barriers, challenging prejudices and providing opportunities for the appreciation of different viewpoints and experiences," he added.

"The Kirk and the Humanist Society are right that such vital space for reflection in schools should not be restricted on grounds of religion or belief. A genuinely multi-voiced education system is to the benefit of all," said the Ekklesia co-director.

The Church of Scotland has suggested five principles for the practice of 'Time of Reflection'. These are that Head teachers decide who leads it; outside leaders, including chaplains, do so to assist the school in delivering a Time for Reflection agenda defined by the school, bound by the need to be genuinely inclusive; it should be built on the exploration of sensing as defined by the 2000 review; it should never be confessional in nature nor worship or

state sponsored prayers; and the best Time for Reflections are often pupil led.

However, the Scottish Secular Society, which is still pressing for an 'opt-in' rather than an 'opt-out' policy for any period of reflection involving mention of religion, gave a rather guarded response to the joint statement from the Church of Scotland and Humanist Society Scotland.

It said it would back legislative change, but added: "The suggested change in terminology would in and of itself do nothing to prevent the abuses that we reported in our petition and earlier related evidence.

"In addition, it runs the risk of adding to the existing confusion already experienced by parents over what their children are taught in this area," the SSS claimed.

In Scotland, what are called assemblies in England and Wales have been referred to as 'Religious Observance'. The debates around RO have revolved around issues of parental and pupil choice, the extent to which they are confessional or informational, and the scope of the reflections and practices involved - specifically whether they offer a range of viewpoints consonant with the demography of the country.

* Humanist Society Scotland / YouGov survey on RO and RME (Religious and Moral Education) in schools (*.PDF Adobe Acrobat document): <http://www.humanism-scotland.org.uk/content/resources/RO--RME-in-Scottis...>

* Church of Scotland: <http://www.churchofscotland.org.uk>