

CHANGING A CULTURE: THE VITAL ROLE OF SCHOOLS

Robert O'Brien

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Mr Robert O'Brien

Head of RE and PSHE, Westminster Cathedral Choir School



Robert O'Brien has taught in both primary and secondary schools. He is currently head of RE at Westminster Cathedral Choir School, where he leads a team of teachers in the implementation of *Alive to the World*. Beginning with the classical virtues which underpin the programme, Robert is working on a project to integrate other classical principles of education into the modern curriculum in response to what Pope Benedict has called "an educational crisis... a mentality and a form of culture that lead to doubting the value of the human person and the goodness of life".

A married father of three young children and housemaster for thirty choristers aged 8-13, he is particularly interested in the integration of the whole curriculum with PSHE, liturgy and personal prayer, under the patronage of saints such as John Bosco, Thomas More, *Thérèse* of Lisieux and Francis of Assisi.

Changing a culture: the vital role of schools'

Section 1: My background and how I became involved with *Alive to the World*

Firstly I would like to thank Louise for the opportunity to speak here today. Not only because of the importance of the topic to parents, children and teachers, but also because it is something of a homecoming for me. Coming from up the road in Handforth it is a special pleasure to be able to do something for my home diocese. I went to school firstly at St Benedict's Primary School, Handforth and then St Ambrose College, Altrincham. Both of these schools gave me a strong Catholic identity that has stayed with me.

I learned many valuable things at my Catholic schools but I received a fuller picture of the faith and life of the Church in the thriving Catholic chaplaincy at St Andrews University, with weekly talks on aspects of Catholic theology, ethics and history, as well as Mass, rosary and a monastic retreat. Perhaps because of its historic connections with the Faith Movement, there was also a strong emphasis at the chaplaincy on the complementarity of faith and reason. This was just after the excitement of the Jubilee Year and in the final years of the pontificate of Blessed John Paul II, who had done so much to stabilise Catholic teaching through the new *Catechism* (1992) and through encyclicals such as *Veritatis splendor* (1993) and *Fides et ratio* (1998).

From St Andrews I went on to my first teaching position at Downside School, joining when the school became co-ed in 2005. In January 2008 I moved to Westminster Cathedral Choir School. As well as a teaching timetable, my prime responsibility was and is to be Head of Boarding, which meant looking after 30 boarding choristers throughout the day and the evenings, at weekends and in the most important weeks of the Cathedral's calendar, Holy Week and Christmas. Over the last five years I have picked up responsibility for RS and PSHCE too, and so, with three small children of my own I've got quite a lot of interest in the moral formation of children!

Section 2: Westminster Cathedral Choir School is an *Alive to the World* success story

I would like to move on now to show that *Alive to the World* can help Catholic schools achieve their aims and, moreover, that these achievements can receive recognition even from secular inspection bodies.

First, for those who are unfamiliar with the course, *Alive to the World* is a series of textbooks for children from Year 3 – Year 8 for use in Personal, Social and Health Education (PSHE). Most schools have one period of PSHE per week. Many schools, I think it is fair to say, provide what we would consider inappropriate sex education in these lessons, by which I mean that inaccurate information is provided, sexual acts are considered in an entirely morally neutral way, and the material provided is explicit and destroys modesty. In some ways it is more damaging than other explicit material that might be viewed by teenagers, since it is being presented by a teacher.

A Catholic school clearly cannot operate on these principles. First, the details of sex education belong inalienably to parents, and this cannot be delegated to schools, unlike other aspects of education.¹ The *Alive to the World* course, which is intended for the classroom, therefore deals with personal and moral development, and specifically with relationships, in a much broader way than what we would call specifically ‘sex education’. Moreover, whereas people anticipate Catholic teaching in this area to be a series of prohibitions, the very title ‘*Alive to the World*’ suggests a very positive approach towards life. This is in contrast to the sense of emptiness that many people feel, which Father has spoken about, and which Pope Benedict refers to when he speaks of ‘a widespread atmosphere, a mindset and form of culture which induce one to have doubt about the value of the human person, about the very meaning of truth and good, and ultimately about the goodness of life’. So we are alive to the world, not afraid of it.

A Catholic school aims to foster a sense of vocation in children, whether this be to the married state, or the religious life, or to the priesthood. For those living according to the teachings of the Catholic Church, each of these states of life will require self-control. Each state of life requires the virtues of justice, temperance, fortitude and prudence. So the course is about becoming a gift worth having; a gift to another person, to the Church, to God. Instead of life being about pleasure seeking, we learn the value of challenges (fortitude), without which we become pathetic and brittle characters. Many of the stories are based in the home environment, and we see how certain characteristics enable us to live well together, whilst we also see much set in the school environment. Other stories are about citizenship, about our contribution to a wider society. In all of these environments the course is promoting the idea that we must be generous. We must be givers, not takers. The virtues learned are easily

¹ Cf *Familiaris Consortio*, 36.

transferred to the sexual sphere, where married people as much as those living celibate lives, must learn how to be in charge of one's appetites. I am thinking especially of the discipline and mutual understanding inherent in Natural Family Planning. I am sure that priests do what they can in order to pass on these ideas in marriage preparation classes.

In the case of my own school, five years ago rapid expansion had led to the loss of the once-enviable Catholic ethos. The school was slammed in two inspection reports, in which the spiritual, moral, social and cultural development of pupils was rated 'inadequate'. The Catholic ethos had lost its vigour (even according to inspectors), the boys were not interacting in a healthy way (according to pupils) and staff were not handling the pastoral situations they were facing effectively.

From September 2007, WCCS had begun a pilot of *Alive to the World*, and now we also restructured the Religious Studies curriculum (using the Ignatius Press course *Faith and Life*), introduced a weekly whole-school Mass in Westminster Cathedral (with traditional Latin chant sung by even the day boys, beautiful architecture and mosaic, and fine serving); the school invested heavily in brightening up the living spaces and modernising classrooms. There was opposition, of course, and in an independent school the customers are important. Our strategy was to do lots of traditional things but to make everything look as modern as possible. That we were running a brand new PSHE course was a good look.

PSHCE had hitherto been a subject taught to forms by yet another different teacher, so we made it so that the form teachers taught their own forms. This extra contact time dramatically improved the relationship between the form teacher and the form. The themes of study formed the backbone of school assemblies (parents invited), and were clearly advertised in the Head's weekly email home.

When the books were printed, staff and pupils enjoyed having a proper resource, an integrated, colourful series of books based on stories with characters that developed like a novel; this brought coherence to a subject that had previously felt like a random hotchpotch of 'contemporary issues'; forms and form teachers enjoyed having a weekly slot to reflect on pastoral issues – a lesson without prep or assessment that was focused on the important questions, with scope for open discussion. That the chapters often represent positive role models of teachers was, also, frankly, beneficial to our own staff. Knowing that the books came from a Catholic stable also gave the management of the school reassurance that the topics would be handled sympathetically and no editing would be required; just thoughtful

application to our particular circumstances. Boys from non-Catholic homes perceived these lessons to be different from RS. Hugely important was that non-Catholic teachers were able to become collaborators in the transmission of sound moral values in a way normally reserved for RS teachers.

It was an enormous relief that the progress made was recognised by OFSTED in their 2011 report, which stated: '[a] well developed personal social health and citizenship education programme provides all pupils with excellent, age appropriate, guidance on social and health issues.'

In March 2012 the Independent Schools Inspectorate (ISI) rated WCCS 'excellent' in spiritual, moral, social and cultural development.² Whilst not mentioning Alive to the World by name, each of the following is a reflection on its impact. The report noted that:

- *'By the time they leave the school at the age of thirteen, pupils are mature, courteous and caring, and display high levels of consideration for one another. They know how to behave and show respect for their teachers through good manners. This level of development is fully in accordance with the aims of the school. This represents a highly significant improvement since the previous inspection'*

- *'The pupils' spiritual development is excellent. For example, some pupils acknowledge a profound spiritual experience in the weekly mass that is led by the gallery choir and the school chaplain in the cathedral... The pupils' educational experience fosters their self confidence and personal belief...'*

- *'The development of the pupils' moral awareness is exceptionally good. They know right from wrong, and are alert to any perceived injustice they encounter. The pupils show high levels of courtesy towards each other and to visitors...'*

² ISI inspection report, March 2012, page 7.

- *‘The social development of the pupils is strong; during the inspection, the behaviour of pupils of all ages was exemplary. Senior pupils take on responsibilities within the school community with enthusiasm. Older pupils are given responsibility for helping younger pupils.’*

I firmly believe that by presenting a values-led course based on virtue ethics rather than a series of topics – sex, drugs etc. – we did something much more fundamental than ‘raising awareness’. I think we managed to change the way the pupils think about themselves and others. The distinct learning process (knowing, accepting, doing) works, once teachers have internalised it themselves. The fundamental message is that the virtues enable us to flourish; selfishness makes us lonely and unhappy. The boys see the impact in the stories they study on a weekly basis and translate it into their own situations. Just a couple of weeks ago I was observing a lesson with the lower Year 8 set, and I was taken aback by the seriousness with which they were engaging with the lesson. Having introduced the course in September 2007, these boys have used the Alive to the World course since they began at the school, and I think it has had a cumulative effect.

Section 3: AttW and the Catholic life of the School

I hope I’ve managed to demonstrate how useful Alive to the World has worked for us in changing the way our pupils think and behave. I would now like to move on to address more directly the title of my talk, which is ‘changing a culture: the vital role of schools’. To begin with I would like to say that the course does not replace RE, as if the future of RE was to replace doctrine with a non-religious course that teaches good behaviour! Rather, I am tempted to say that by dealing with so much personal development, it rather lifts the pressure from RS and enables it to deal with more theology (which the 2012 Religious Studies Curriculum Directory calls for).

If I may give an example of the way the stories naturally open up a religious dimension: about a fortnight ago, I was observing a Year 8 lesson; the chapter title was ‘Dad’s Promise’. The teacher, who is not a Catholic but is very sympathetic of the school’s ethos, was asking the boys about different promises we make. Various answers were given. But for some reason he decided to probe further than the book itself had: *and who would be the most important person we might make a promise to?* The class thought, and answered: ‘God’. I tend to assume that the entire weight of the Catholic ethos of the school rests entirely on my

shoulders (!), so to hear a non-Catholic teacher, who usually teaches about Geography, talking about the solemnity of our promises to God, was hugely gratifying. I wondered why he was doing it: you cannot explain much without referring to the hierarchy of values.

If I may briefly add something about *Alive to the World* and ‘inclusivity’. The course is cleverly put together because it manages to be utterly faithful to Catholic social teaching whilst being inclusive in its presentation. Monsignor Laffite of the Vatican’s Congregation for the Family has written an eloquent letter to this effect in which he praises the course, recognising that it is ‘a secular programme which uses non-religious language’ whilst it nevertheless ‘fully supports the moral teaching of the Catholic Church.’ It ‘teaches children how to live life well’ whilst it ‘also respects the right and duty of parents to impart to their own children the more intimate aspects of sex education’. It therefore resolves the issue of how best to provide moral formation to a class of mixed beliefs. By basing morality on a reasoned, sound and objective foundation, we can share with all our pupils a clear message of what is true and beautiful in our vision of the human person.

A further reason why I believe the course serves an important function for schools is that, together with Louise’s new book, it is ahead of the game regarding the Theology of the Body. What has been until now an important side-show in contemporary Catholicism is now fully recognised in the new Religious Education Curriculum Directory (a rather fine document). Anyone responsible for PSHCE and RE in schools should study Section 4, Our Life in Christ, in order to be aware of how comprehensive the scope of our teaching should now be. How many other textbooks already integrate the significance of the body in this way?

I would like to conclude with three more general thoughts.

1. The first is that as educators we need to popularise the critique of the aggressive secularism (the dictatorship of relativism – again mentioned specifically in the RECD) that has been so clearly explained by the last two popes; this must be the foundation for a recovery of true Catholic apologetics. It is something of a lost art (but mentioned in the RECD!). We assume that pupils will think that traditional morality is outdated and lacks relevance. But in fact liberalism has been in the ascendency for so long that traditional morality is now new and radical. The worst thing we can do is appear to children either ignorant or apathetic about these deep questions. Even if we sometimes feel that we haven’t the necessary formation (or lack collaborators who do), we must believe it is possible. The best thing I have read on this is Pope Benedict’s little known letter to the

city and diocese of Rome, 'On the urgent task of educating young people'. Try this for a start:

'Must we therefore blame today's adults for no longer being able to educate? There is certainly a strong temptation among both parents and teachers as well as educators in general to give up, since they run the risk of not even understanding what their role or rather the mission entrusted to them is. In fact, it is not only the personal responsibilities of adults or young people, which nonetheless exist and must not be concealed, that are called into question but also a widespread atmosphere, a mindset and form of culture which induce one to have doubt about the value of the human person, about the very meaning of truth and good, and ultimately about the goodness of life. It then becomes difficult to pass on from one generation to the next something that is valid and certain, rules of conduct, credible objectives around which to build life itself.'

Indeed, it 'becomes difficult to pass on' these principles. But what if we fail to do so? Father has eloquently demonstrated that modern views of sex which seem to be liberating in fact devalue the human person and leave people desperate. We are up against a culture that is hostile but we must be sure that our answers are better, more logical, and ultimately more persuasive than the alternative, for all its superficial allure.

2. A second thought is that we often hear that the Church needs to update its teachings, specifically concerning sexuality. But can we pick this apart a little? It seems to me to stem from the idea that ethics should develop in the same way as technology. Our laptops and tablets update themselves constantly, so we get this impression that everything is in flux. But in our lives, there is no such progress! Again, this is a point made in the same letter from Pope Benedict:

'opposed to what happens in the technical or financial fields, where today's advances can be added to those of the past, no similar accumulation is possible in the area of people's formation and moral growth, because the person's freedom is ever new.'

Technologically, life has been transformed. But ethically, there has been no such progress – in fact, there has been no ethical progress beyond the Garden of Eden, which is why Chesterton called original sin 'the only part of Christian theology which can really be proved', since it is self-evident from 3,500 years of human history. So we need to

emphasise that there is an entirely different order of logic that governs human actions from that which drives forward scientific and technological progress. The human condition does not change! Moreover, we need to promote the idea that the Church shows God's love for us through her teachings. This is more often said by bold young Catholics!

3. Finally, we are doing something more than offering information and raising awareness; we are trying to mould young people so that they can flourish and make free decisions. At first the idea of formation appears to conflict with freedom. But Catholic education has produced its fair number of rebels and revolutionaries, precisely because of its stress on freedom. It respects the intellect, certainly, whilst recognising that we are not purely intellectual; we are also moral. By contrast, our society begins by trying to raise awareness, and then when that fails, it bans it (or in the case of alcohol, tries to raise prices). This is because information alone is incapable of educating the moral will, even backed up with a torrent of emotivism. And to ban something means that society has failed to educate human freedom. People cannot be formed to reject what is bad, so we will have to remove the choice. In this way, how do people acquire any strength of character? What we are trying to do is give young people the strength of character to say yes to good things and no to bad and damaging things. Only by strengthening the family and enabling families, together with parishes, new movements, and schools, can we build character.

We therefore need to present a clear message. We must not be afraid of being a 'creative minority'; Pope Benedict pointed out on one occasion that

‘normally it is the creative minorities that determine the future, and in this sense the Catholic Church must understand itself as a creative minority that has a heritage of values that are not things of the past, but a very living and relevant reality.’

Yes, society is 'rapidly changing', but the human person, the human condition, does not change. This is why we can think historically about heroes and villains from past ages and learn from them – because they were just the same as us. Human passions and appetites do not change; emotions do not change; our deepest yearnings do not change. I see no reason why we cannot teach these great truths to the current generation; they will not thank us if we pass up the opportunity of re-discovering them and passing them on

John Paul II, Apostolic Exhortation *Familiaris Consortio*, 1981.

“The task of giving education is rooted in the primary vocation of married couples to participate in God's creative activity: by begetting in love and for love a new person who has within himself or herself the vocation to growth and development, parents by that very fact take on the task of helping that person effectively to live a fully human life... The right and duty of parents to give education is essential, since it is connected with the transmission of human life; it is original and primary with regard to the educational role of others, on account of the uniqueness of the loving relationship between parents and children; and it is irreplaceable and inalienable, and therefore incapable of being entirely delegated to others or usurped by others.” (John Paul II, *Familiaris Consortio* #36)

Pope Benedict XVI, ‘Address of His Holiness Benedict XVI to pupils’, St Mary’s University College (17 September, 2010).

In your Catholic schools, there is always a bigger picture over and above the individual subjects you study, the different skills you learn. All the work you do is placed in the context of growing in friendship with God, and all that flows from that friendship. So you learn not just to be good students, but good citizens, good people. As you move higher up the school, you have to make choices regarding the subjects you study, you begin to specialize with a view to what you are going to do later on in life. That is right and proper. But always remember that every subject you study is part of a bigger picture. Never allow yourselves to become narrow. The world needs good scientists, but a scientific outlook becomes dangerously narrow if it ignores the religious or ethical dimension of life, just as religion becomes narrow if it rejects the legitimate contribution of science to our understanding of the world. We need good historians and philosophers and economists, but if the account they give of human life within their particular field is too narrowly focused, they can lead us seriously astray. A good school provides a rounded education for the whole person. And a good Catholic school, over and above this, should help all its students to become saints. [...]

Blessed John Henry Newman, ‘The Tamworth Reading Room’ (1841).

People say to me, that it is but a dream to suppose that Christianity should regain the organic power in human society which once it possessed. I cannot help that; I never said it could. I am not a politician; I am proposing no measures, but exposing a fallacy, and resisting a pretence. Let Benthamism reign, if men have no aspirations; but do not tell them to be romantic, and then solace them with glory; do not attempt by philosophy what once was done by religion. The ascendancy of Faith may be impracticable, but the reign of Knowledge is incomprehensible. The problem for statesmen of this age is how to educate the masses, and literature and science cannot give the solution.

Benedict XVI, ‘Letter on the urgent task of educating young people’ (21 January, 2008).

Must we therefore blame today's adults for no longer being able to educate? There is certainly a strong temptation among both parents and teachers as well as educators in general to give up, since they run the risk of not even understanding what their role or rather the mission entrusted to them is. In fact, it is not only the personal responsibilities of adults or young people, which nonetheless exist and must not be concealed, that are called into question but also a widespread atmosphere, a mindset and form of culture which induce one to have doubt about the value of the human person, about the very meaning of truth and good, and ultimately about the goodness of life. It then becomes difficult to pass on from one generation to the next something that is valid and certain, rules of conduct, credible objectives around which to build life itself.

Dear brothers and sisters of Rome, at this point I would like to say some very simple words to you: Do not be afraid! In fact, none of these difficulties is insurmountable. They are, as it were, the other side of the coin of that great and precious gift which is our freedom, with the responsibility that rightly goes with it. As opposed to what happens in the technical or financial fields, where today's advances can be added to those of the past, no similar accumulation is possible in the area of people's formation and moral growth, because the person's freedom is ever new. As a result, each person and each generation must make his own decision anew, alone. Not even the greatest values of the past can be simply inherited; they must be claimed by us and renewed through an often anguishing personal option.

Benedict XVI Address to the Diplomatic Corps, 10 January 2011

I cannot remain silent about another attack on religious freedom of families in certain European countries which mandate obligatory participation in courses of sexual or civic education which allegedly convey a neutral conception of the person and of life, yet in fact reflect an anthropology opposed to faith and to right reason.

G. K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (1908), chapter 2

Modern masters of science are much impressed with the need of beginning all inquiry with a fact. The ancient masters of religion were quite equally impressed with that necessity. They began with the fact of sin--a fact as practical as potatoes. Whether or no man could be washed in miraculous waters, there was no doubt at any rate that he wanted washing. But certain religious leaders in London, not mere materialists, have begun in our day not to deny the highly disputable water, but to deny the indisputable dirt. Certain new theologians dispute original sin, which is the only part of Christian theology which can really be proved. Some followers of the Reverend R. J. Campbell, in their almost too fastidious spirituality, admit divine sinlessness, which they cannot see even in their dreams. But they essentially deny human sin, which they can see in the street. The strongest saints and the strongest sceptics alike took positive evil as the starting-point of their argument. If it be true (as it certainly is) that a man can feel exquisite happiness in skinning a cat, then the religious philosopher can only draw one of two deductions. He must either deny the existence of God, as all atheists do; or he must deny the present union between God and man, as all Christians do. The new theologians seem to think it a highly rationalistic solution to deny the cat.

John Henry Newman, *Apologia pro vita sua* (1865), 217-218.

And so I argue about the world; *if* there is a God, *since* there is a God, the human race is implicated in some terrible aboriginal calamity. It is out of joint with the purposes of its Creator. This is a fact, a fact as true as the fact of its existence; and thus the doctrine of what is theologically called original sin becomes to me almost as certain as that the world exists, and as the existence of God.

Pope Benedict XVI, interview with journalists during the flight from Rome to Prague, 26 September 2009.

Q: Your Holiness, the Czech Republic is a very secularized country in which the Catholic Church is a minority. In this situation, how can the Church effectively contribute to the common good of the country?

A: I would say that normally it is the creative minorities that determine the future, and in this sense the Catholic Church must understand itself as a creative minority that has a heritage of values that are not things of the past, but a very living and relevant reality. The Church must actualize, be present in the public debate, in our struggle for a true concept of liberty and peace.

So it can contribute in various areas. I would say that the first is precisely the intellectual dialogue between agnostics and believers. Each needs the other: the agnostic cannot be content with not knowing whether God exists or not, but must be searching and sense the great heritage of the faith; the Catholic cannot be content with having the faith, but must be searching for God even more, and in dialogue with others relearn God in a more profound way. This is the first level: the great intellectual, ethical, and human dialogue.

Then, in the area of education, the Church has a great deal to do and to give, concerning formation. In Italy, we talk about the problem of the educational emergency. It is a problem common to all of the West: here the Church must again actualize, make concrete, open to the future its great heritage.

A third area is "Caritas." This has always been one of the marks of the Church's identity: that of coming to the aid of the poor, of being an instrument of charity. Caritas does a great deal in the Czech Republic, in the different communities, in situations of necessity, and it also offers much to suffering humanity on the different continents, thus giving an example of responsibility for others, of international solidarity, which is one of the conditions for peace.