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Mission Statement

- To seek to articulate the vision of Catholic education.
- To identify, explore and promote ways in which this vision can be lived in Catholic schools.
- To empower teachers with a renewed and revitalised sense of the vocational nature of teaching.
- To aid student and recently qualified teachers to understand and embrace the fundamental spirituality of their lived work and mission.
- To help promote the school as an integral and intrinsic part of the Church and wider community.
- To celebrate and share the lived experiences in schools as realisations and practical expressions of the Gospel values of justice, service, understanding and outreach.

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Cover image: Pope Francis
Pope Francis: A Strong Sense of Purpose

A new Pope, the first Latin American and Jesuit to hold that office, has emerged onto the world stage with a strong sense of purpose. At 76, he may be termed an old man in a hurry and he has demonstrated right from the start an acute awareness of the importance of symbolic gestures and actions. His ease in dealing with ordinary people and his impatience with some of the traditional ceremonial trappings have been much noted. Both his preaching on Jesus with the emphasis on promoting ‘a poor Church for the poor’ and his preference for what is simple and frugal in terms of living arrangements and dress - characteristics already well-established during his time as Archbishop of Buenos Aires - indicate his priority is with the poor and marginalised. Much early comment on him has focused in particular on his genuine compassion for people, as evidenced by his embrace, at the weekly audiences in St Peter’s Square, of both children and adults with special needs. But he has also made it abundantly clear that he is no sentimental pushover: his criticisms of consumerist culture and an over-emphasis by business on acquisition and profit at any price have been striking, and are very much in line with the course charted by his predecessor Pope Benedict XVI in his critique of global capitalism.

There are grounds to hope that Francis’s pontificate will be marked by a sharing of the Gospel with people of good will and a challenge for us to live more simply, after the manner of St Francis of Assisi whose name he has chosen. He has already also signalled his commitment to the work of ecumenism among the different Christian traditions and to inter-faith dialogue with the other World Religions. All in all, a new pope who is unassuming, direct and spontaneous, one who uses authority not as a status but a service, is a reminder to us as teachers and principals of where our priorities should lie. In a society which so privileges the impersonal and the bureaucratic, and in a state education system suffocating in audits and red-tape, it is heartening that a new leader has emerged onto the world stage witnessing so powerfully to human and spiritual values which can enrich broader society everywhere. Hopefully, we in Catholic education will be inspired to redouble our efforts to discover anew and actualise those distinctive values and perspectives which make our approach to education so successful and life-affirming, both at home and internationally.

This edition seeks to inform and assist us as we go about our purposeful work in our schools. Leonardo Franchi offers some pointers on the Catholic professional development of teachers. Jim Clarke and Malachy Crudden (both from CCMS) note recent research acknowledging the high level of performance of Catholic education locally, not least in terms of tackling social disadvantage and, looking to the future, underline the importance of the catechetical dimension of the work of our schools. Anne-Marie McLaughlin and Thérèse Ferry look at ways in which the Year of Faith is being celebrated at Mount St Catherine’s PS, Armagh and throughout the Derry Diocese respectively. Aidan Donaldson reflects on his experience of poverty on a recent immersion education project in Zambia. Bríd McGuckin offers amusing and insightful comment on her years of experience of the classroom. Fr Kevin Gillespie, writing in Irish, argues that true education is about both knowledge and values. Seán McLaughlin, a primary school pupil, urges us to care for the environment. Michael Maginn, priest and poet, writes poignantly on the importance of personal reflection as a way to awaken awareness of God’s presence in our lives. Seán Skeffington reviews a recent biography of Frank Duff, the founder of the Legion of Mary, and one of the outstanding figures of twentieth-century Ireland. Terry Brady highlights the fact that reform and renewal in the Church begins with Christians looking into their own hearts and beginning the work of personal conversion. Finally, Aine McNally, does just that when she shares her own journey of the heart towards God.
The Professional Identity of the Catholic Teacher
Leonardo Franchi is Head of the St Andrew’s Foundation and Director of Catholic Teacher Education at the University of Glasgow.

Le Chéile

Teachers today are continually reminded of the need for reflection on their practice and professional identity. This call is grounded in the notion that in times of curricular flux and political interference in the ways in which school are run, good teachers remain the backbone of our educational systems. If this is the case for teachers in secular school, how much more so is it for teachers in Catholic schools.

The Church’s teaching on education reminds us of the need for excellence in the formation of (lay) Catholic teachers: ‘The concrete living out of a vocation as rich and profound as that of the lay Catholic in a school requires an appropriate formation, both on the professional plane and on the religious plane. Most especially, it requires the educator to have a mature spiritual personality, expressed in a profound Christian life’. Such high ideals serve as an inspiration to all with an interest in Catholic education. Yet we need to be aware of the risk in seeing these words simply as phrases which are suitable for adorning ‘mission statements’ and school handbooks. In order to help Catholic teachers see their professional development as something integral to and allied with their Catholic identity, this short article offers four keys to Catholic professional development for teachers. A point for examination follows each key.

First key: the Catholic teacher as a good human being

Good teachers foster the human virtues in the way they act in the classroom, in the staffroom and in wider society. The conscious ‘living-out’ of the human virtues is an affirmation of the dignity of the human person and hence a faith-filled manifestation of the Catholic identity of the teacher. We are familiar with the phrase ‘grace builds on nature’: the recognition of the human virtues is an essential feature of the identity of the Catholic teacher. The good teacher is one who looks to the Truth and leads others to it through instruction and example.

Point for examination

What value do we place on professional honesty, diligence, probity, tolerance, cheerfulness and humility?

Second key: the Catholic teacher as an accomplished professional

Good teachers are, by definition, accomplished professionals. It would be a serious error to downplay poor professional practice in any context. As a Catholic school should be known for being the best of schools, it follows that good Catholic teachers should be recognised by their peers for their excellence in all aspects of education.

The history of Western education cannot be told without due recognition of the major contribution of the monastic orders, the Church-inspired rise of the universities and the post-Enlightenment expansion of education which was often driven by Catholic Religious Orders. To know this story is to know and ultimately learn from our family tree. The great Catholic orders were replete with hard-working, dedicated Brothers and Sisters who brought prayer, sacrifice and professional competence to the task of building a new Catholic educational system.

While few of us today are called to build new schools as in former days, we are called to learn from the past and continually to improve our practice. This might mean that we draw on good research about how children learn and, in dialogue with colleagues, foster a research culture in our schools. It could also involve revisiting some of the tried and tested paths to excellence like the fostering of order in the classroom and careful planning of learning – sometimes seen as unwelcome reminders of a less enlightened age. While this latter approach might lack a sense of the glamour which comes from being at the heart of a so-called cutting-edge initiatives, it is a timely reminder of the value of ordinary things done well for the glory of God.

Point for examination

Do we value good time-keeping and the prompt marking of work as indicators of our human commitment to the students in our charge?

Third key: the Catholic teacher as an informed Catholic

Good Catholic teachers think and act with the mind of the Church. They are comfortable with Church teaching and value it as the principal animating force in their own personal life and in the life of the school. To ‘think with the Church’ does not connote a blind attachment to fideism; the Catholic intellectual tradition seeks to marry...
both faith and reason in the search for truth. The Catholic educator is in the uniquely privileged position of having a professional identity which is merged with the Church’s mission to proclaim Truth: to fulfil this task requires some careful planning of one’s own religious and cultural formation.

**Point for examination**

Do we read the Gospels on a regular basis—even five minutes a day will allow us to become more familiar with the narrative? Do we see value in studying the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*?

**Fourth key: the importance of divine filiation**

We recognise that all the baptised are sons and daughters of God. Reflection on this allows us to see our mission as a vocation to serve: we are called to educate by providence. In his homily at his Mass of Inauguration, Pope Benedict XVI spoke these profound words:

> Only when we meet the living God in Christ do we know what life is. We are not some casual and meaningless product of evolution. Each of us is the result of a thought of God. Each of us is willed, each of us is loved, each of us is necessary. There is nothing more beautiful than to be surprised by the Gospel, by the encounter with Christ.

**Point for examination**

What does it mean to see ourselves and others as ‘necessary’? In what way can we, as Catholic educators, reflect this in our practice?

**Conclusion**

In a homily at the University of Glasgow, Archbishop Philip Tartaglia (Archbishop of Glasgow) explained the university’s motto *Via Veritas Vita* as follows:

- **Via** – Christ is our way, our model, our example in life.
- **Veritas** – Christ is our truth, our guiding principle, our goal and point of reference
- **Vita** – Christ is our life, our recipe for true human fulfilment in this life and the next. It is He who said: “I have come that they may have life and have it in abundance.” (cf John 10:10).

As a reflection on the professional identity of the Catholic teacher, there is nothing more to add.

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2. This story needs telling afresh today. The history of education would offer a challenging spine for programmes of teacher education.
Catholic Education: Purpose, Strengths, Challenges
Jim Clarke (Chief Executive) and Malachy Crudden (Senior Adviser), Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS), Hollywood, Co. Down

The goal of Catholic Education is the formation of the child. While the needs of society and the economy must be reflected, these cannot be at the expense of the human development of each young person. Catholic education and the Catholic educator must also strive to enable young people to take up meaningful roles within society. To do this our school leaders and teachers must promote academic attainment, through a reliance on the promotion of a Christian vision and value system. The Catholic school creates the circumstance through which these qualities infuse the learning experiences, enhancing the prospects for each young person to develop fully. Leadership from trustees, governors, principals, teachers and many other staff encourage and support our young people. High quality learning and teaching supported by empathetic pastoral care lead to stronger outcomes.

These are fine words – but where is the evidence? A snap shot of recent data gives encouragement that Catholic education is effective. It also reminds us, however, of continuing challenges. The OECD sponsored international research on primary school literacy (PIRLS) and numeracy (TIMMS) show Northern Ireland ranking 5/45 and 6/50 respectively. The Northern Ireland Public Accounts Committee report, Improving Literacy and Numeracy Achievement in Schools (2013) noted that ‘social deprivation appears to have a greater negative impact on achievement levels in controlled schools that in their maintained counterparts’. This is despite a more than 10% higher level of social deprivation in maintained schools. These figures replicate the outcomes at post-primary. A recent report by the University of Ulster (Educational Performance and Post-Primary Schools in Northern Ireland, January 2013) observed: ‘In view of the greater propensity of maintained secondary schools to meet the educational needs of Northern Ireland’s less privileged post-primary pupils, it is remarkable that they also recorded a better educational performance than controlled secondary schools.’ It is evident that the co-relation between educational achievement and social disadvantage is strong but it is also the case that the ethos of the Catholic school is important. Working closely with the family and the community in which the school is situated is a major factor in mitigating the worst impacts.

While research may give us grounds for confidence in the influence of the Catholic ethos in our schools, it also illuminates both the educational and the moral challenges which continue to confront us. Social deprivation is a blight on our society and the expected impact of welfare reform aligned to economic stagnation, particularly for our young people, is only going to increase the challenges for Catholic educators. The ‘End Child Poverty’ campaign noted that Derry and Belfast areas had the fourth and fifth highest levels of child poverty with West Belfast at 43% the second highest for any UK parliamentary constituency.

Creating equality of opportunity to promote social mobility is a problem across the Western world but it is particularly so in Northern Ireland where the gap in achievement between the social classes is amongst the widest and is replicated in terms of access to schools. The bishops, working in tandem with the other trustees, have set a course to reduce these inequalities in education by moving away from academic selection. This, however, is only one small step in ensuring that Catholic education maintains its relevance.

The purpose of Catholic education is to prepare our young people for today’s world not just in the narrow sense of transmitting skills and knowledge but also in ways which instil self-belief, imagination, vision and faith - qualities which are too often relegated in our modern world. The task Catholic education sets for itself presents many challenges for us today, not least the extent to which it can help prepare pupils for the complexities of modern living, not only in terms of the transmission of knowledge and skills which the modern economy requires, but also instilling the values necessary for Christian living. Alongside this lies the responsibility of fulfilling the catechetical role which the Catholic school has traditionally undertaken. These are the continuing challenges for Catholic education.
Bringing the Year of Faith to Life

Anne-Marie McLaughlin is Vice Principal and P6 teacher at Mount St Catherine’s PS, Armagh

The Year of Faith, called by Pope Benedict XVI, invites us to ‘perceive, ever anew, the marvels that God works for us’. It is a time when we are invited to develop our faith and live out Christ’s message more fully in our everyday lives. It began last October and will end in late November. In this article I want to take stock of how we at Mount St Catherine’s have tried to make this year special, mindful that there is still time for other schools to mark it too.

It is always our desire to help our pupils find ways to live out their faith and a language to articulate it. Some pupils are well formed already at home; others rely on school for their main faith formation. Part of our year’s action plan is to involve parents in every way that we can in this work. We have very well attended regular Parent Seminars at which an aspect of ethos or spirituality is among the three or four topics discussed. We have also developed ‘Family Faith Bags’, take-home faith sharing resources which reflect the liturgical year and encourages prayer and spirituality in the home.

For pupils, our Sacred Space enables prayer services, reflection, meditation, circle-time in a beautiful, dedicated room. Our lay chaplain, whom we share with the neighbouring St Catherine’s College, leads many of these activities. Families are invited to our various liturgies and events such as those during Catholic Schools Week, assemblies, workshops and meetings. We really want our pupils to have rich spiritual lives, full of ritual and symbolism. They experience the changing cycle of the liturgical year (Advent, Lent, Easter etc) through sharing celebrations and liturgies, sometimes in school and sometimes in the local church.

Our pupils, whatever their age or size, are encouraged by our Religion and Ethos Team to develop character by involving themselves in service of others. We openly encourage children to stand up and be true disciples, eager to resolve conflict in the playground or in the home, finding Christ in everyone they meet. These are the constant messages of the Alive O Programme. Our local bishop Cardinal Seán Brady invited Mass-going Catholics to bring the Pope’s Year of Faith alive by bringing a friend or family member to Mass on the first Sunday of Advent. We started on our own doorstep and told our children that they could help with this. We invited them to ask a family member to go with them, both their nuclear family and extended family. One small boy, showing great enthusiasm, immediately approached the school chaplain, present in the assembly, and invited him!

Our P6 launched the Year of Faith in October with a vibrant assembly, using drama, dance, prayer and music to help the rest of the school community understand what it was about. They carefully explained the significance of each part of the logo and it is now on display in the entrance hall. They prayed the words of the Creed - so central to our understanding and public declaration of our faith - in the seven languages of the school’s pupils. One of the most touching parts was when they shared the stories and paintings of people of faith and prayer that they knew: not surprisingly, granny featured repeatedly!

This year P7 and the P4 pupils were given special certificates to remind them that they received the gift of the Holy Spirit or their First Eucharist received in the Year of Faith. All pupils received a school prayer book created to commemorate the year. We also framed a postcard picture of Pope Benedict XVI for each class Prayer Space and these will be all the more poignant now that he has retired. P7 pupils will close the Year of Faith in November with a service for all pupils and parents.

Changing demographics mean that parents from other faith backgrounds and none chose to send their children to our school. All are welcome, and the gifts they bring. Pupils not receiving catechesis or sacraments are integrated into school life. They are welcome to journey with their friends as they make sacramental preparation and to attend the actual celebrations - perhaps, after discussion with their families, to participate in a blessing. In our school we also invite Catholic children studying in the local controlled school to share some of their sacramental preparation with our pupils and to share the actual day of celebration with us. We are by definition a Faith School with a proud Catholic ethos and we warmly welcome all with genuine respect.

There is a myriad of wonderful resources out there for teachers and parishes to help make the celebration of the Year of Faith more meaningful. Here are some that I have found useful:

The Scottish Catholic Education Service: http://www.sceses.uk.com/year-of-faith.html
For a really inspiring sung version of the Creed that pupils will love- Youtube, Rich Mullins’ ‘I Believe in God the Father’

The prayer for the Year of Faith is very accessible to young children.

Loving Father,
Who has called us through the door of faith into fullness of life, help us to understand the teaching of your Son now offered to the world anew.
May we open the door of faith for all humanity.
Through Christ our Lord. Amen

Prayer time at Mount St. Catherine’s

Each class has a Family Faith Bag to take home turn by turn. Contents change with the liturgical year.
In her address at a Conference in Derry last October to launch the Year of Faith, Baroness Nuala O’Loan asked the 500 delegates present some challenging questions about the impact the year would have on their relationship with Christ and one another. ‘What will look different?’ ‘Will anything?’ ‘Will we even know that the Year of Faith has happened?’ Quoting a well-known prayer she wondered, ‘Will we know Him more clearly, love Him more dearly, follow Him more nearly?’ She said, ‘A year is a long time. Much can be achieved. But it will take commitment, and determination, and it will be done in the context of all that comprises our Church and our belief – sacraments, scripture, liturgy, buildings in which to gather to worship, to meet, to care for each other, to educate ourselves and our children and to pray for each other and ourselves, to go forth from, and to proclaim the gospel as we are charged to do every time we go to Mass.’

The Derry Diocesan Catechetical Centre, in its work, witnesses on a daily basis the commitment and determination of school and parish communities to help the people of God deepen their relationship with Jesus Christ. In order to support school communities in the Derry Diocese as they celebrate the Year of Faith, a number of initiatives have been suggested by the Catechetical Centre and the schools themselves are finding different ways to help teachers, pupils and parents come to ‘know the one God who is love.’ (Pope Benedict XVI)

- Advent and Lenten Packs were distributed to schools. The packs contained information and ideas on celebrating the liturgical seasons of Advent and Lent.
- Teachers were made aware of the Sunday Connection feature on the Loyola Press website [http://www.loyolapress.com/sunday-connection](http://www.loyolapress.com/sunday-connection) encouraging them to engage more with the Word of God and to open scripture with their pupils.
- Saying of the Angelus in school each day, acknowledging the faith tradition handed onto us from previous generations.
- Encouraging parents attending Sacramental Preparation Talks to make the Sign of the Cross on the children each evening and for the children to do the same for their parents. Parents have also been given a special bookmark with the Year of Faith Logo on it and a prayer for parents.
- Every child in the diocese has been provided with a bookmark which has the Nicene Creed and Year of Faith Logo on it. These were presented at the Diocesan Mass for Catholic Schools Week.
- A copy of the Youcat (the Youth Catechism) was presented to each school in the diocese.
- A number of post-primary principals who regularly meet in Derry to look at ways in which their schools can work together are bringing around 500 of their staff to a day of prayer and reflection and a number of primary principals are currently organising a Mass and keynote speaker for their staff to mark their Year of Faith and the importance of spiritual development for those tasked with handing on the faith to young people in school communities.
- There is also a gathering being organised for Year 10 pupils in the autumn for a special liturgy to launch the Ambassadors of St Paul Programme. This programme aims to enable young people to experience the love of God in a positive and life-giving way. It is based on the example of St Paul’s life and has three elements—Encountering Faith, Encountering Hope and Encountering Love.
From Pity to Love: A Zambian Experience of Immersion Education

Aidan Donaldson is Chaplain at St Mary’s Christian Brothers’ Grammar School, Belfast. He also plays a key leadership role in the Edmund Rice Network particularly in ‘Project Zambia’ part of the Christian Brothers’ Developing World Immersion Programme. Here is Aidan’s reflection on a recent experience in Zambia:

Trying to come to any sort of an understanding of what I have witnessed and experienced during a couple of weeks on immersion in Zambia completely defeats me. Emotions and feelings are a mixture of hope, inspiration, sorrow, joy, and anger. I am finding it so difficult to look at the world of the marginalised and find a soul or conscience in those who condemn these most vulnerable of people to live in such appalling conditions.

Tuesday, 24 July 2012, was a day of sorrow, utter pity, shame and anger that will remain with me for the rest of my life – I hope. Mrs Angela Miyanda (a most inspirational figure well-known throughout the Edmund Rice Network in Africa) brought a small group of us to visit a community of blind people who had been abandoned by the authorities near Old Kabweza village (approximately twenty kilometres in the bush). They (fifteen families) had previously survived in Lusaka through begging. Since the West has decided that Zambia’s future will be in tourism the presence of these poor people was deemed by the authorities to be an embarrassment that might be unsightly to rich tourists and therefore was untenable.

They were promised houses, electricity, water, good agricultural land, tools, seeds, schooling for their children… instead they were brought to a land without water and given tents and mud huts (which have all collapsed during the rainy season). They have to walk three miles to the nearest water pump (which often has no water) in a line using sticks to guide them in one hand and carrying a bucket in the other hand. Those who have some sight try to grow what maize they can but without tools, seeds and irrigation this is so difficult. And if life is so hard and unfair for these people trying to feed themselves and their own children then you also meet their orphaned grandchildren who they care for.

Listening to one of these victims – Mr Nkumbula – crying to the very heavens about the injustice of ‘having been abandoned like animals… like snakes in the bush’ so that they cannot find their way back to Lusaka where they might make tourists feel uncomfortable by their very presence fills me with anger (for authorities) and shame to be a beneficiary of a world that makes this injustice happen. At the reflection last night Br Brendan Prior spoke wonderful words of wisdom from the Scriptures about being in a ‘wilderness… a dry and weary land where there is no water, of Job (like the old man above) who had done no wrong and yet had been abandoned and about outcasts and how Jesus treated them. He then moved from the religious to the everyday life and led us to consider how when some cruel people get sick of a pet dog in Ireland they put it in a car and abandon the animal miles away from home so it will never find its way back – like these blind people of Old Kabweza.

Mrs Miyanda brought us to this space so that we could be witnesses to the plight of these people and to invite us to respond… and we have to. She already knows their needs and how we can help to bring these people back to life. It will involve a water pump, support for growing maize, building decent homes and above all else showing by our help, love and support that they are not abandoned. It may have been a hard number of days for our immersion team in Zambia but it is a lot harder to live as a disabled child in Kanyama slum or be a blind person abandoned and forgotten in the middle of the bush.

My response to the challenges of these past days is to look at myself and ask the question suggested by Mother Teresa of Calcutta when she defined true love as ‘giving … but give until it hurts.’ I am asking myself does my giving really hurt me and my lifestyle? Have I the courage and generosity of the poor widow in Mark’s Gospel who gave everything she had or am I like the wealthy in the same story who gave from their excess? Is immersion leading us deeper into true Christian relationship with those on the margins, so that we will come to truly see the blind people of Old Kabweza as our brothers and sisters, and be moved not by pity but by love?
Joys in Teaching
Brid McGuckin is a Primary 5 teacher at Holy Family PS, Magherafelt, Co. Derry

I look back fondly on my teenage years at St Mary’s Grammar School, Magherafelt. What great days, so filled with fun, so carefree! I recall the careers teacher often asking me: ‘do you still want to become a teacher?’ My answer always was: ‘Yes, Miss Cullen’. She would invariably shake her head and remind me about the lack of jobs in the profession then and for the foreseeable future. I didn’t care! I had no fear of the future. I felt called by God to teach. I did not agonise: a quiet voice inside whispered endlessly that teaching was for me.

My parents advised me to complete a degree before going into teaching. I would always have something to fall back on should there be an absence of teaching jobs. I followed their advice and went to Queen’s University, Belfast, to study Agricultural Science. My studies in Agricultural Zoology gave me knowledge of ‘the control of pests associated with plant life and animal life’. But I never felt at ease in this field. So I went next to St Mary’s College, Belfast, to complete the PGCE. When I walked through the large wooden doors of the College on my first day I felt immediately at home. I loved the lectures, the lecturers and the warm, friendly, social environment. Teaching practices in St Colman’s PS, Lambeg and St Brigid’s PS Tirkane, Maghera nurtured my inner yearning to be a teacher. No matter where I went people asked me the connection between ‘Agric Zoo’ and the Primary School - was it the control of little pests?

My first job was in St Michael’s PS Ravenhill Road, Belfast. I loved it. I received the best possible guidance and support there. Strangely St Michael’s was awarded the accolade of ‘School of Excellence’ the year after I left! I had to leave as I was getting married to a Maghera man and needed to be closer to home. My DASE in Special Needs afforded me the luxury of stepping into a new job, as a Special Needs teacher, in St Joseph’s PS, Magherafelt. Another great School! Twenty-two years later I am still there (now called Holy Family PS) and very happy.

Some teaching experiences
I love teaching more with each passing year. I love the innocence of the children, some keen to learn, others not too bothered! Every child is unique. They are totally honest. To get their attention I might say ‘look at me, ugly as I might be!’ And they do then look at me. But to this day, no-one has ever yet said ‘Mrs McGuckin, you are not ugly!’

My classroom is as an extension of home, for both the pupils and for me. I act in loco parentis. There are days when I ask the class if I have offended any one of them or hurt their feelings. Invariably one or two may put up their hands and tell me their experience. I always apologise, but I am also aware that I owe them a duty of care to tell them, if needs be, of where they fall short.

Once when preparing a P4 class for the Sacrament of Reconciliation, I sought to clarify the difference between temptation and sin. I explained to the children that I, as a thirteen year old, thought about taking a fudge bar from the local shop. I had no money to pay for it and the shopkeeper was so busy with other pupils! Unwittingly, I named the shop. Immediately, at the back of the class, a bright young student was waving his two fists in the air and shouting ‘you stole from my granny!’ It was a challenge indeed to persuade him that I had only thought about doing so.

I drive a green 9-seater Land Rover Defender – slowly - to school each day. If I decide to nip out at lunchtime on an errand, invariably to the Reduce, Reuse, Recycle Facility, (otherwise known as the ‘Skip’) I find the Key Stage 1 boys view me as a target. They mimic shooting at me with guns and seem to ‘take me out’! A small part of me thinks ‘just you wait until I am teaching you next year!’ but pretty much my whole being suggests I should play along. So I mimic shooting back at them!

New challenges
The last few years have brought a marked increase in the number of non-nationals in our school. These newcomers and the culture they bring are most welcome. They add greatly, of course, to the challenge of teaching, particularly, when they have little or no English. What a traumatic experience the classroom must be for them. One young man from Eastern Europe springs to mind. For the first month he was completely traumatised.
Not a word did he speak. All we could do was offer him endless kindness. Gradually he acclimatised to the environment and started to speak. His first words were: ‘Guckin, toiletta?’, uttered when he needed out of the confusing environment, namely the classroom, for at least a couple of minutes every hour. In time, and with specialist help within the school, his English improved. He progressed to second level and is now a third year. I met him walking across a car park last summer. He had a broad grin on his face. I greeted him enthusiastically; I was so glad to see him. I said, ‘please talk to me in English!’ He replied ‘what do you want me to say?’ and smiled again!

Children come to school from all sorts of different homes. Each has his or her own story. Sometimes we teachers have an idea of their joy and pain; other times not. Our first duty is to look after their physical and emotional wellbeing. That’s why our recent Inspection focused, to a great extent, on Child Protection and Pastoral Care. Happily, we were considered outstanding on both counts.

**Sharing faith**

Teachers also play an important role in handing on a living faith to pupils. Here at Holy Family there is regular prayer throughout the day, a focus on the Religious Calendar, an altar in each classroom, daily *Alive-O* lessons, weekly Religious Assemblies and ongoing sacramental preparations. Pupils also have opportunities to attend Masses throughout the year. Faith is a great gift. It is important to pass it on. The age-old saying, ‘faith is taught and caught’ is very true. Children can only come to Jesus if they are shown the way through good example and good teaching. No wonder Jesus said: ‘Let the children come to me’ (Mt 19:14)

It is also important that children have an awareness, understanding and acceptance of other faiths and cultures. My P 5 children are currently involved in ‘The Connecting Communities Project’ developed by the Speedwell Trust. They are working, in the spirit of our Holy Family PS motto, ‘Forward Together’, with neighbouring schools and making new friendships.

To finish, a prayer:

*Let them come, don’t stop them’*
*He eagerly said.*

*And the little ones climbed right up to His head.*

*He folded and blessed them and gave each one their say*

*And we saw Christ’s laughing face all that day.*

*Blessed were the children who answered His call.*

*And blessed is the child’s heart alive in us all.*

Cruachhás an Oideachais: achmainn no oiliúint

Táimid ag fulaingt tréimhse i saol na tíre nach bhfaca muid riamh. Tá aird lucht teagaisc agus lucht léinn, chomh maith le cuid de na tuismitheoirí, dírithe ar cheisteanna airgid, rud nach doiligh a thuiscint. Tá buaireamh ar thuismitheoirí faoi chuidiú chun chuidiú airgid a thugadh sa bhliain 1916. Ó lá inniu, tá buaireamh Naheana faoi thuismitheoirí, rud a bhíonn ina n-áthas do thuismitheoirí i spéarsa gur tháinig bás ar an mhúinteoir. Tá staidéar le gach duine a thugadh san oideachas a d'fhág teagasc a bhíonn in ann an mhúinteoir a thabhairt do thuismitheoirí.

Ní hiontas mar sin go bhfuil díospóireacht an oideachais dírithe ar chúrsaí airgid agus ar cheisteanna den chineál. Ach nach féidir linn ceist a cheart eile an cheile a chur -- an é seo ar fiancruachhás ata i gcúrsaí oideachais agus scoláireachta? Nach féidir linn faoi chúrsaí airgid a sheasmitheoirí a bháis i gcéad uair. Tá aird a' dhuine a bhíonn in ann i gcúrsaí oideachais a thabhairt d'fhéadfadh sé a dhéanamh.

Ní thuigim mar sin go bhfuil chumhacht an oideachais i bhfeidhm i stair na tíre. Ní lándar ar an mhúinteoir a d'fhágtear súil ar na mbunruitheoirí a thabhairt d'fhan. Tá aird a' dhuine a bhíonn in ann an mhúinteoir a chur i gcúrsaí oideachais a d'fhágtear súil ar na mbunruitheoirí a thabhairt d'fhéadfadh sé a dhéanamh.

Tá in ann duit ábhar a dhéanamh i stair na tíre agus nach bhfuil aithne ann ar an mhúinteoir a dhéanamh.

Caring for the World
Seán McLaughlin is a Fifth Class pupil at St Mary's National School, Castlefin, Co. Donegal

At school we have been thinking about our new Pope, Francis, and especially about the way he has reminded us of our duty as human beings to care for the world we live in. Our faith teaches us that God has created our world and given it to us to care for and look after. In the very first verse of the Bible in Genesis 1:1 we read, ‘In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.’ He made the day and the night, the dry land and the sea, the sun and the moon, plants and living creatures and us. And God saw that this was good.

So we have a duty to respect and protect all the good things God has made. Like Adam and Eve we are called to make good use of the world’s resources. We must make sure that we stop polluting and damaging our planet, using up the world’s scarce resources. We sometimes forget that our world is a gift from the Creator; it is not something that we humans have made. God has given us this world and we give honour and praise to God by looking after it well. Just as looking at a beautiful picture like the Last Supper gives us an idea of the genius of the great painter Leonardo da Vinci, so taking a moment to enjoy the natural world around us is a great way of getting more in touch with God.

I live in a beautiful county and locally I love to walk along the banks of the river Finn or through the woods of Drumboe. These places are lovely. At school we have learned about what the Native Americans say: ‘We do not inherit the earth from our ancestors; we borrow it from our children.’ We must pass it on in good shape to the next generation. So I think Pope Francis is right in saying ‘Let us protect with love all that God has given us!’
Reflective Awareness as Part of Daily Living


Recently I came across Claddagh Duff, a painting by the Belfast artist, George Campbell. An old grey church stands on a hilltop above those rough, rock-strewn shapes that pass for fields in the west of Ireland. Dwarfed by the sheer size and scale of the church and obscured by the mesmerising tones and textures of the artist’s pallet, two shawled women of the land have stopped to talk on the way home from Mass. In this landscape of exquisite shade and detail, the women are practically invisible. Yet once the viewer’s eye is drawn to them, they are virtually impossible to ignore: their rough, homespun shawls, like tabernacle veils, concealing divinity. Slowly, imperceptibly, Campbell fulfils the true vocation of the artist, perhaps the true vocation of the Catholic teacher and of every Christian. He invites reflective awareness.

These women of the district are Claddagh Duff. They are truly Church. The grey edifice on the hill is bricks and mortar. These women of the district, flesh and blood, are living tabernacles, daily bearers of the Mystery. So with us. We the teachers, carriers of the Mystery; the children and young people entrusted to our care, recipients and beneficiaries of the reflective awareness that we foster in ourselves and in them.

When the Jewish people reflected on the Exodus Event, their escape from slavery and oppression in Egypt, to eventual freedom in the Promised Land, a new, shared communal awareness gradually dawned, as they discerned the hidden presence of Yahweh in their collective deliverance. The telling of the Old Testament Exodus Event is a near-perfect biblical example of the emergence of reflective awareness within a faith community. As the artist uses canvas and pigment to prompt such awareness in the minds and hearts of those who enjoy the fruits of his artistic genius, so the biblical writer employs the power of poetry, prose and story-telling, while we as Catholic teachers draw on our teaching skills and on the fruits of our own reflective thinking, to awaken similar in-depth insight and awareness in those we are called upon to teach.

Those of us who wish to engage in such a process, to discern the hidden presence of the Lord in the bits and pieces of everyday and to sustain such reflective awareness throughout the course of our lives, might well choose to have recourse to art, poetry and to the biblical narratives. These provide deep well-springs of inspiration, wisdom and spiritual insight. The more immediate raw materials of such reflective awareness, however, are the events, encounters and experiences of our own varied and disparate lives. Even those work, rest or play incidents, which at first sight seem banal, insignificant or trivial, may on reflection, be infused with eternal resonance.

Discerning the hidden presence of the Lord in our lives may also raise difficulties. Those who claim to hear God’s voice, who claim unambiguous and unequivocal access to the mysteries of God, may indeed be sainted individuals. They may also be entirely or to some degree, deluded. Bible teaching and the long tradition of the Christian Community, suggest that the Lord has a profound respect for that sanctity of freedom at the core of individual lives, limited and contingent as it undoubtedly is, given the chance vagaries of birth, upbringing and unequal access to life’s many and varied opportunities. We will find this constantly to be the case in the wide range of children and young people we are called upon to teach. The challenge for us is not to force or impose, but rather to bring them to that point where they might wish to freely choose those values, attitudes and behaviours which we have discerned to be truly life-giving.

The Lord seldom gate crashes our lives. Instead, it seems, he prefers to move gently, mysteriously and at times unexpectedly, writing straight with crooked lines in the shifting sands and changing fortunes that comprise our brief, human span. Discerning the Lord’s hidden presence, requires that we walk tentatively, prayerfully and humbly through the shadows, the joys, sorrows, achievements and failures of our personal and professional lives, towards the light of our eternal tomorrow.

The novelist, Keith Ridgeway, recently returned to Ireland after a decade in London, has confided that he writes because he doesn’t quite know how to live. I have some sympathy with his predicament. My own writing provides respite, escapism from routine, a putting away of my public self. Much of it is done at night. The hours of darkness provide private, undisturbed, reflective time and a sense of security which daylight denies. Reading and writing poetry have become part of the pattern of my life. One of the great advantages of poetry is that it doesn’t require lengthy periods of time. Reading a poem may just take a few minutes. The rewards, however, are disproportionately rich, as the words, imagery and emotive power continue to ring in the mind and imagination for hours, even days afterwards.

Fostering a discipline of continuous learning and serious reading, will be vital for effective teaching. My own involvement with poetry is partly prayer, partly study. All during my life I have felt drawn to both. I still love to say the traditional Catholic prayers that I learned in childhood. Their language and resonance are familiar, reassuring and constant. Although some of the ponderous, heavily Latinised new translations that Catholic congregations received recently, are truly dreadful in their syntax and vocabulary, I continue to celebrate the sacraments and liturgical prayers of the Church with a deep-down joy that is largely undiminished.

Along with this public and liturgical prayer, I continue to find the roots of personal prayer, in my daily life experience. Having described an event, an encounter, an experience in poetic form, the joy and the challenge is then to draw prayer from the heart of it, reflecting and praying out of my own lived experience, in all its myriad forms and manifestations, seeking to discern the hidden presence of the Lord at its heart’s core. This is the calling of poet, priest, Catholic teacher and all the baptised: discerning the hidden presence of the Lord in our broken lives and encouraging others to do the same.
Frank Duff died in 1980. At the funeral Cardinal Tomás Ó Fiaich described him as ‘a man of personal charm, self-effacing modesty and unshakable courage.’ He suggested that Duff was ‘the Irishman of the century.’

In her book Frank Duff: A Life Story (London: Barns and Oates, 2011) Finola Kennedy gives us a comprehensive picture of a man who lived in extraordinary times and who achieved extraordinary things. Duff was born in 1889 and grew in in a comfortable Victorian Dublin home. He was educated at Blackrock College and showed considerable academic promise. His father’s premature retirement in 1904 due to illness meant that as the eldest in the family he choose not to go to university but to follow in his father’s footsteps and enter the Civil Service. In the entrance exam he took first place in Ireland, joining the Land Commission in 1908. Very early in his new career he developed a new method of calculating annuities, an achievement that brought him to the attention of his superiors.

As Ireland experienced the turbulence of the development of the new State Duff continued to work as a civil servant, serving briefly as personal secretary to Michael Collins. He remained a civil servant for 26 years acquiring the organisational skills that would be of benefit to him in later years.

In the course of his spare time activities Frank Duff had been a member both of the St Vincent de Paul Society and of the Pioneer Total Abstinence movement. It was his membership of these organisations combined with a reflection on de Montfort’s book True Devotion that led to the beginning in 1921 of the new organisation that was to become the Legion of Mary. Finola Kennedy tells us that the first meeting was ‘almost accidental’. Significantly, the first meeting incorporated the words from Matthew 25: ‘When you did it to these the least of my brethren you did it to me’.

Since then the Legion has grown to a world-wide organisation with members in almost every country. In the course of time Frank Duff developed a handbook to guide and support members. In Chapter 2 we read the following:

‘The Legion of Mary is at the disposal of the bishop of the diocese and the parish priest for any and every form of social service and Catholic action which these authorities may deem suitable to the legionaries and useful for the welfare of the Church. Legionaries will never engage in any of these services whatsoever in a parish without the sanction of the parish priest or of the Ordinary.’

It was in Dublin, then, that the Legion began its two-fold mission of prayer and apostolic work. The National Archives of Ireland paint a dismal picture of Dublin in 1911, describing housing conditions as ‘the worst… of any city in the United Kingdom.’ Endemic poverty was not confined to Dublin, with people leaving the countryside in the vain hope of a better life in the city and thus swelling the ranks of the unemployed. These were some of the social conditions inherited by the new state and it was amongst these people that the Legion developed under Frank Duff.

The legacy of poverty produced in Dublin city an area known as the Monto, considered by some authorities to have been the biggest red-light district in Europe. It was among the women that worked here that the Legion began its work. In 1922 it opened a hostel, Sancta Maria, for prostitutes who wished to seek an alternative life. Later in 1927, a hostel for homeless men, the Morning Star was opened. In 1930 the Regina Coeli, a hostel for homeless women, including those with children, was opened. In the latter instance Duff displayed a revolutionary and compassionate concern that was by no means universal.

Dr Kennedy provides us with an excerpt from an official 1948 report on the home: ‘The hostel is not an ideal home for mothers and babies. It has however since its inception, filled a want and it does something no other home in Éire succeeds in doing. It keeps mother and child together.’

This was not the only area of social concern where Duff differed in outlook from the official line on social matters. He spoke quite trenchantly on the practice of the State ‘simply shovel[ing] children into industrial schools.’

Notwithstanding the reference in the handbook to the relationship between Legion and bishop, the development of the Legion was not without tension between it and the hierarchy. This review is not the place to revisit these but Dr Kennedy places a well-chosen quotation from Edmond Flood OSB at the head of Chapter 20: ‘This is the heart of the matter. A heavy brake on true progress in the Church had largely been the unconscious attitude that lay people were there mainly to be disciplined in their wider spheres of activity.’ That tension existed elsewhere in Frank Duff’s interests. This apparently tireless man founded the Mercier Society in 1941. This was a group hoping to develop ‘mutual understanding’ with members of other Christian denominations. In 1942 a similar group was established with members of the Jewish community. Both were closed due to ecclesiastical restrictions.

Duff was present as a lay observer at the Second Vatican Council and an incident recorded by Dr Kennedy might be seen as vindication for his work. As Frank arrived Cardinal Heenan announced the fact and 2,500 bishops rose and gave him a standing ovation. Frank later observed: ‘The notion [of apostleship] which used to be regarded as a Legion fad has been taken up wholesale and set forth in the eighth chapter of the De Ecclesia decree.’

In her biography of Frank Duff Finola Kennedy has not only given us detailed and in some instances unexpected insights into the life and times of a more complex figure than one might have expected but she has also reintroduced us to one whose insights have a resonance for our times. She records a memorandum written by Duff for Eamon De Valera in the 1940s:

‘Our present position is that of disillusion, disheartenment, utter perplexity, cynicism, apathy. In such a mood, and with the misgiving creeping into so many hearts that the nation is no more than a big racket, what chance is there that children will serve it worthily or sacrifice themselves for it? Elemental instinct in us rebels violently against the notion of mere exploitation in the name of a sacred cause.’

Plus ça change…”
What’s wrong with the Church today?

Terry Brady teaches at St Colm’s High School, Twinbrook, Belfast

As a Religious Education teacher in Belfast I keep company with fellow RE specialists, including some prospective and newly qualified ones. We discuss many issues, some theological, some catechetical, some to do with ecclesiastical politics. No issue tends to raise blood pressure among us more than the question: ‘What’s wrong with the Church today?’ It is a question that RE teachers face daily in their classrooms, and our pupils expect honest, straight responses. An answer to it in my teaching requires me to draw upon my own resources of faith, prayer, reflection and theological understanding. And in doing so I am often reminded of St Peter’s question: ‘Lord, to whom shall I go?’ (Jn 6:68).

In such endeavours I find encouragement in the story about G. K. Chesterton’s award-winning essay. In the 1930s, a prominent newspaper in London offered a prize for the best essay answering the question: ‘What’s wrong with the world today?’ One guideline: the shortest essay wins. I read the various entries some time ago and found them fascinating and insightful: ‘Communism is at the root of all that’s wrong with the world today, and here is why ...’ ‘War is what is wrong with the world today, and here are the reasons ...’ ‘The unjust distribution of wealth is what’s wrong with the world today, and let me tell you why ...’ etc. But Chesterton’s won. ‘What’s wrong with the world today?’; he responded: ‘I am’.

There it is. Shortest essay won. Two words. One cannot be more succinct than that! On reflection, it is clear that all the other entries blamed external, systemic, causes for everything wrong with the world. Chesterton looked inside, not outside, and blamed himself. So what am I thinking? I am thinking that Chesterton has identified a core Christian ‘value’ in his very short essay. After all Jesus taught that ‘The Kingdom of God is within,’ and that to change the world, one needs to start with oneself. To improve the outside, begin inside; to reformat the system, begin with the self.

In the course of many discussions with teachers, parents and pupils I have discovered that many today are expert at diagnosing what is wrong with the Church. Even more so the scholars I came across while completing my doctorate in theology at Maynooth. Nearly all seem to agree that the problems are on the outside. Both ideological poles seem to have it figured out, and I include among them many RE teachers. One side says excommunicate dissenters, bring back Latin, turn the altars back around, and fire most bishops. The other one chants let priests marry, ordain women, drop liturgical norms and fire most bishops. (On firing bishops, both sides agree!).

Now I consider myself a bit of a theologian: through my studies and personal experience I know the necessity of systemic change in the Church. The Church is always in need of reform as the Latin exhortation Ecclesia semper reformanda reminds us. I urge all RE teachers and prospective Catholic teachers to take this exhortation seriously. But by it I mean more than reforms of external church structures, changes on the outside. It must firstly be about a change of heart, our hearts, the need for interior renewal.

The Second Vatican Council was a great reforming Council, and its sixteen documents need to be read afresh by us today. Their central theme is the call to holiness of life, to a return to basics in the shape of conversion to Christ and the embrace of his Gospel. An old teacher of mine at Rome’s Angelicum University used to comment that the downside of the Council was that in its wake more attention was paid to its less significant teachings like the language of the Mass, or the simplification of religious habits and relaxation of Friday abstinence, than to its bold call for all of us to embrace pure discipleship. It is easier to change the outside than the inside, as we are witnessing again with recent external changes in the translation of the Mass.

It seems to me that the ‘blame game’ stretches back to the Garden of Eden when Adam blamed Eve, Eve pointed the finger at the Serpent, and Satan grinned! He loves it when we blame someone else or each other. Perhaps I am being rather thin-skinned here: but, then, a good percentage of yelling about ‘What’s wrong in the Church today?’ tends to be aimed at RE teachers, particularly theologically active ones! Reading an article in a prominent Catholic quarterly recently, I noted eleven such examples. The message seemed to be that problems in the Church today are the fault of RE teachers. It reminds me of the position that bishops find themselves in today, blamed for so many things! I recall with some humour Napoleon’s threat to Cardinal Consalvi: ‘My Lord, I intend to destroy the Church’. ‘Your Excellency’, replied the sage old cardinal, ‘good luck! Eighteen centuries of bishops have been unable to do that!’

I don’t know about you, but I have to admit that I am quite content to postpone and even avoid the Lord’s call to pure discipleship, conversion of heart and repentance. It seems easier to call others to conversion and to concentrate on outward or systemic change. Nevertheless, in my heart of hearts, I know that Chesterton was right and that I must begin with myself if I am to seek to answer the question, ‘What’s wrong with the Church today?’ What do you think?
The Heart Transplant: A Reflection
Aine McNally is a fourth-year student from Newry, Co. Down at St Mary’s University College, Belfast studying to become an RE secondary teacher. She is a wife and mother of two children.

A few years ago I found myself in a very dark and difficult place. I had reached this point through years of trying to cope with an impossible situation. I was in a lot of pain, I was hopeless and helpless. I looked to many people for answers to my problems but no one could help. I wanted it all to stop; I wanted it all to end. It felt like time had stood still and that this pain was never going to relent.

It was suggested to me that I should pray, and I did so only as a last resort. I turned to God for help. The first thing I felt was a sudden peace that surpassed understanding. Over time I started to visualise God as a doctor who could heal my hurt, pain and brokenness. After many ‘consultations’ I received my diagnosis; my prayer scan revealed an image of a heart. This heart was cracked in hundreds of places. I was shocked, for I knew I had been through a lot of difficulties in my life and that my heart was sore, but I did not realise the extent of the damage. My heart was so fragile and I saw that at any moment it could disintegrate, and that I would be unable to piece it back together again.

I was reassured from previous experience, however, that this doctor could keep me alive and heal me when the time was right. I waited patiently. And in time my prayers were answered: after many months my doctor gave me the good news. He revealed that I was to have a heart transplant. I was delighted and elated and felt I was being given a second chance to live and love again. I realised this transplant could only be done by a specialist and I accepted it with trust and gratitude. So I had my doctor and I had my diagnosis but who would be the donor?

An organ donor gives life to another, usually following a tragic accident. It was then that it struck me: I realised that the Lord was not just the doctor who diagnosed my broken heart; he was also the donor who died so that many could live. It was from that very moment that my little, fragile, damaged heart was removed and replaced with a large heart that had the capacity to hold the love that God had for me.

So what does my new heart allow me to do? I have a heart now for God’s mission; the bewilderment and brokenness are gone. This heart has not only given me the capacity to give love, but also to receive love. The things that are closest to God’s heart are now closest to mine, because they are one and the same. I can also see the things in life that cause heart disease and thus help others to find a diagnosis. I tell people about the brilliant doctor who saved my life and I enjoy life free from the brokenness of my past. It was my trust in God that has given me this new life. Jesus turned and saw her: ‘take heart daughter he said, your faith has healed you’ and the woman was healed from that moment on ….’(Matthew 9:22).