

**HOMILY FOR MASS FOR
THE CARDINAL VAUGHAN MEMORIAL SCHOOL**

**23 September 2010
Westminster Cathedral**

Just five days ago, Pope Benedict XVI celebrated Mass here in our Cathedral. His Visit has been a wonderful experience for so many in the United Kingdom and we still bask in the glow of its graces. We can recall the warmth of the reception given to the Holy Father. We can visualise again the splendour of its ceremonies, both civil and religious. We can evoke the thrill and excitement of so many who came to see the Pope and to express their respect and love for him. We can treasure the encouragement he has given to us, and the confidence in our faith that we now feel.

The Holy Father is, of course, the sign and servant of the unity of the Church. He is the successor of St Peter, whose commission from the Lord we heard again in this evening's Gospel reading. He is our

secure contact with the Tradition of the Apostles and a vital link between us and the words and actions of Christ himself. He is our Holy Father, whom we love and from whom we can draw such strength. There was on BBC television, on Monday evening, a lovely montage of images of the four days of this Visit. It was set to Lou Reed's song, 'Perfect Day' and as people were seen reaching out towards the Pope we heard the words 'You just keep us hanging on!'

This is true for each of us in the Universal Church. So, too, in the Particular Church, the Diocese, communion with the bishop is an essential part of living Catholic faith. And this is true for every Catholic School, too. As the Second Vatican Council taught us: 'In the person of the bishops, then, to whom the priests render assistance, the Lord Jesus Christ, supreme high priest, is present in the midst of the faithful.' (Lumen Gentium 21)

This is why I am so pleased that we celebrate this Mass here in the Cathedral, at the cathedra, or seat, of the bishop. At this Mass we thank God for the work and achievements of The Cardinal Vaughan Memorial School which are always to be understood as an expression of Catholic faith and a part of the life and mission of this Particular Church, the Diocese.

In this Mass we thank God in a particular way for the hard work and leadership of Mr Michael Gormally who is now stepping down from his involvement in the life of the School after.....years on its staff and thirteen years as its Headteacher. It is a real pleasure for me to take part in this Mass and to thank Michael most sincerely, for I have known Michael since his own days at school – a little while ago now!

During his Apostolic Visit to the United Kingdom, Pope Benedict spoke clearly about the nature and purpose of a Catholic school. We pay undivided attention to what he said, appreciating its clarity for these were words addressed directly to pupils in our schools:

‘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.’

Then the Holy Father added:

‘I know that there are many non-Catholics studying in the Catholic schools in Great Britain, and I wish to include all of you in

my words today. I pray that you too will feel encouraged to practise virtue and to grow in knowledge and friendship with God alongside your Catholic classmates. You are a reminder to them of the bigger picture that exists outside the school, and indeed, it is only right that respect and friendship for members of other religious traditions should be among the virtues learned in a Catholic school.’

These are words which should echo down the corridors, in the staffrooms and offices of every Catholic school, for it is there that the Catholic nature of a school is established or, at times, weakened. Indeed the Holy Father also addressed words explicitly to the staff of our schools:

‘As you know, the task of a teacher is not simply to impart information or to provide training in skills intended to deliver some economic benefit to society; education is

not and must never be considered as purely utilitarian. It is about forming the human person, equipping him or her to live life to the full – in short it is about imparting wisdom. And true wisdom is inseparable from knowledge of the Creator, for “both we and our words are in his hand, as are all understanding and skill in crafts” (Wis 7:16).’

These words express unambiguously the stance that needs to bind a school together, define its ambition and bring together school and parents in a shared endeavour throughout a youngster’s years in school. Nothing less is truly Catholic.

Indeed, as a follow up to this Papal Visit we will spend a year studying more profoundly the Catholic understanding of education, so well explored by the Blessed John Henry Newman and deepening the

culture and ethos of our schools so that they truly conform to this vision.

As I have already said, the key tasks in a school lie with its leadership and the demands of that leadership have been well laid out for us in the reading from St Peter. Applied to the leadership of a Catholic school, his words spell out a spiritual pathway followed by everyone who sees the leadership they exercise as a commission from the Lord and to be lived only in communion with him. In this context in particular, I thank Mr Gormally indeed for his dedicated and resolute leadership. In some ways I would like to use the words of the Gospel: ‘Well done, good and faithful servant’, but the use of these words is reserved to the Lord alone. He alone knows the full scope of our journey through life, and the true picture of our heart and its intentions. His merciful judgement will come only at the end of our journey. For Michael that journey has not

ended. Who knows what lies ahead for you? And how lovely it is to have your predecessor here, as Fr Pellegrini, celebrating this Mass for us all.

I would like to end this brief reflection by returning to the words of the Holy Father. I think they are relevant, as we celebrate this Mass of Thanksgiving for the achievements of The Cardinal Vaughan Memorial School. In them the Pope reflects on the true meaning of success, on the achievement to which we must properly aim. As you would expect, it contains an implicit warning about not setting our hearts on achievement measured in worldly terms alone.

‘The Church does not work for her own ends, she does not work to increase numbers and thus power. The Church is at the service of another: she serves, not for herself, not to be a strong body, rather she

serves to make the proclamation of Jesus Christ accessible, the great truths and great forces of love, reconciling love, that appeared in this figure (of Christ) and that always comes from the presence of Jesus Christ. In this regard, the Church does not seek to be attractive in and of herself, but must be transparent for Jesus Christ...simply a voice of another...for the great figure of Christ and the great truth that he has brought to humanity.'

This, too, is the achievement, the success, that we seek together for our schools and why it is so right that, at this moment, we can do no better than to come together in this healing Sacrifice of the Mass to receive the fullness of the presence of Christ, the One alone we wish to proclaim.

✠ Vincent Nichols