



CONFERENCE HIGHLIGHTS

Archbishop William Goh, in his homily at the opening Mass, stressed that in a rapidly changing world where values are being eroded, Catholic educators cooperate with the grace of God by laying a foundation for the transformation of minds and changing lives. He reminded the participants that we cannot short-change the young by only imparting academic education. He said that education without moral values destroys lives, and that they may be successful, rich and powerful, but their hearts and souls are empty. Catholic educators are called to form future leaders of honesty, leaders with values of the Gospel who understand the meaning of life and who are compassionate. What distinguishes Catholic schools from secular schools are the values centred in Christ, His message and person. If Catholic educators do not give them Jesus, they have done an injustice to our children. A Catholic school must promote Jesus. We must not be afraid to speak explicitly about Jesus. If we lack courage in proclaiming Christ, we are short-changing the parents and their children. A Catholic school is a community where the love of Christ is experienced and others will believe because they experience love through this community.

Fr Edward Seah presented what has been done after the last Conference in 2013 based on the seven areas for improvement: a) updating of the directory of Catholic educators, b) formation of chaplaincy teams, c) strengthening of parish-school partnerships, d) encouraging greater laity involvement of the alumni and parents, e) conducting formation and induction programmes, f) supporting the Catholic ethos self-assessment framework, and g) the implementation of the CME and RE programmes in Catholic schools.

Fr Christopher Gleeson, SJ highlighted that character is what we are "when no one sees but God." Another way of describing 'character' is a song-line. Catholic school's most important song-line is Jesus. They should be places where the song of Jesus is heard and loved. Moral virtues are honed through practice and faith is not a landscape to be seen, but eyes for seeing. Our Catholic identity is a verb, not a brand, but a way of acting and doing things. Like love, it is an ongoing process of becoming in a particular cultural context. It's not something static that we achieve once and for all. Jesus is the master story-teller. He uses parables to form people. He expected his disciples to chew on the parables for a while, to unlock the flavour, leading them to discover the answers themselves. So, evangelisation brings the gospel to where people are, not where we want them to be. The Church grows by witness and not by proselytising. We need to be attractive, to walk at the periphery so as to be in touch with reality. The identity of Catholic schools is all about universality, openness to all. How deeply do we respond to our students' needs? How deeply do we help our students see the real beyond the virtual? How deeply do we invite our students to think? How deeply do we form our students' inner persons?

Four types of Catholic schools were presented: monologue schools, colourless schools, colourful schools and dialogue schools. A good Catholic education helps people to see with "incarnation eyes"; to see God's signature in everything and in everyone. Catholic schools seek to offer an integral education. It is an education for excellence in humanity, that is, forming better human beings, people with a heart, with compassion and understanding. Our life is a journey and we are in transition. We are in education for transformation and Christ offers us a vision full of humanity, full of care and concern for others.



Richard Rohr's principle, "you can only lead others as far as you yourself have gone", is an important reminder for teachers in the way they lead the young people in their care. Teachers lead others to the depths to which they have been led; they can only transform people to the degree they have been transformed. Education is about transformation of hearts and mind.

Pope Francis said that "to educate well we need to step out of ourselves and be among young people, to accompany them in the stages of their growth, placing ourselves at their sides". This refers to the story on the road to Emmaus where we can learn from the six stages in Jesus' accompaniment with two disciples. 1) Walking with the disciples; 2) Listening with reverence to a story; 3) Storytelling to offer a deeper vision; 4) Disposing, not imposing; 5) Blessing is healing; 6) Community-building where relationships become important.

Breakout Session

The participants were assigned to different groups for the breakout session. A total of 26 groups were formed to share and discuss the questions which serve to elucidate and contextualise what Fr Gleeson has shared in his talks.

Four pre-selected groups presented their outputs:

Representative from Pre-schools (Francis Mahendran)

There are daily assembly prayers. Values and Catholic teaching are integrated into the curriculum and some even practice meditation. Kindergartens are 'dialogue' schools and this promotes universality. Parent-school partnerships are being worked on for better collaboration. However, there is high turnover rate of staff which results in inconsistency in the rolling out of values programme. Some teachers forget to show compassion as they get into the daily routine and parish kindergartens do not seem to get enough support from parish priests.

Representative from Primary schools (Aaron Soon)

School values are used as central themes during the year and Values education lessons include stories from parables. External rituals such as prayers and Masses are present in school life. Strong parent support groups in schools provide

the much needed community support (e.g. religious education, prayers) to enhance Catholic identity of the school. At St Gabriel's Primary School, Catholic boys attend classes where the MOE curriculum merged with biblical values is taught while the non-Catholic boys attend classes where the MOE curriculum merged with the Founder's values is spoken about. There is a need to have more Catholic vendors like the Redemptorist Mission Team to organize retreats/talks based on the MOE and Catholic curriculum.

However, Catholic teachers are apologetic about their faith, hence faith is not explicitly shared. There is a dichotomy between MOE syllabus and Catholic curriculum. Only one school managed to try to merge the two curricula. Lacking a critical mass for personal witnessing at school level also makes it difficult to execute a school's Catholic programme. Some schools lack a chaplaincy team.

Representative from Secondary schools (Denis Leong)

Most Catholic schools have maintained the Catholic ethos. Some schools have allocated time for teachers to listen to students at least once a semester and schools do listen to the students at the periphery. There is a large spread of religious programmes, strong values education programme and elements of hospitality present. However, some teachers lack the time and energy to be the person of Jesus, class sizes may be too large and sometimes the image projected by the Catholic staff are not aligned to the values of the school. The level of competency must be raised so that the teachers can teach religious education. Not all teachers subscribe to values and there is a need for a clear direction by the Archbishop for the Catholic schools.

Representative from Tertiary/CJC/Polytechnics (Eugene Yeow)

The identity of the Catholic school is seen in practices like Masses, prayers and reflections. The programmes in school are inclusive and embrace all in the community. Teachers do share faith stories and promote values with their students. However, there are teachers who cannot give what they do not have. For some, there is a lack of expression or personal belief of who Christ is in the lives of the teachers. There is an emphasis on community building but the journey with the students tends to be confined to the classroom. Since the paymaster is not the diocese, the teachers and school leaders would prefer to remain within the boundaries set by the Ministry of Education. In addition, teachers may find it difficult to balance the need to have good grades with time for character formation. The teacher is in the frontline of the faith and needs a faith community in the school for support. There is a need to have a common understanding of a Catholic school on the level of the diocese rather than different versions of it depending on the sponsoring authority. There is a need for a dialogue between the Church and the Ministry of Education on how flexible we can be to express our faith.

Closing Address by Prof Tan Chang Han

Catholic education must start with wanting to develop the students with gospel values so that they can become people for others and serve others. A good education empowers the students to have the knowledge, skills and the tools to help others. These students will have an enlightened self-interest to become holistic persons who care for others. Therefore our Catholic identity is a verb. It is to be universal and deep, not superficial. Catholic education offers a vision beyond the economic/academic.

Our Catholic identity calls for our schools to be places of prayer and the proclamation of Jesus Christ in an unoffensive, inclusive and loving way. Christian values can be transmitted in a "tactical" way. On the way into the hall, there is a poster on care for the environment. As a Catholic school, we believe in preserving the environment. We can tell our students that the world is created by a loving God and we should be the stewards of creation. In addition, the Charities Week campaign is not merely the collecting of money to fill the envelopes. The amount in the envelopes is not important. What is important is that the students can reflect about others who are in need just as Christ thought about us who are in need.

I was not a Catholic when I was a student in SJI but the messages that I received in school were a comfort to me, like "the Peace of God which surpasses all human understanding."

ACCS will gather and distil all the thoughts and feedback received today and there are three practical steps that we will take, namely.

- Greater consensus on the essential elements of Catholic ethos, that is, the baseline that all Catholic schools should have. We will have a consultation with the SMCs and the school leadership.
- More formation programmes for Catholic teachers to live their faith better in the work place.
- The Church will have to dialogue with the MOE as Catholic values will reinforce values education. Catholic ethos is not an add-on. Our starting point is different; we give a deeper and more profound understanding of values education.