

Prof Tan Cheng Han:

CONCLUSION



Good afternoon everybody,

First let me begin by thanking several important people. First, our volunteers who worked so very hard to put together a coherent and reflective programme for all of you. Second, to the Principal and staff of St Gabriel's for their very warm hospitality today, thank you very much. Everything has gone well so there is nothing to apologise over. And, of course, Fr Gleeson for spending so much of his time on his presentations, for coming out to Singapore and for agreeing to spend a few extra days here interacting with different segments of our educational community. Thank you very much, Fr Gleeson.

I always find it very difficult to do the closing at ACCS's Catholic Education Conference because I never know exactly what is going to happen in the course of the day. So, if there are any inadequacies in my closing, I beg your forgiveness. However, there is one silver lining: I always tend to keep to the time allocated to me so you won't have to endure me for more than twenty to twenty-five minutes.

I want to start off by saying that I work at a university, as you might have guessed by now, and each year in August, when the freshmen join us, the different departments will have a freshmen welcome ceremony. One speech generally goes along these lines: the speaker will talk about the many advantages of an education at the university, e.g. the pedagogy, the curricular offerings, the overseas exchanges, the internships, the extensive alumni network, etc. Then, the person will go on and say to the freshmen: "We hope that you'll benefit from this and that you will, at the end of three or four years, go out and do great things that we will be proud of. And, of course, to do great things you need to have integrity, honesty, decency. A good speech, very compelling.

But, to my mind, both incomplete and inadequate. Why do I say this? I say this because it arguably approaches education from the wrong front or with the wrong presumption or starting point. A Catholic education, in my view, has a different starting point: we start first and foremost with wanting to develop students with Gospel values, students who are not self-interested only. Of course, all of us are self-interested to a certain degree, but we want our students to have a vision that goes beyond themselves, we want students who are able to care for other people also, we want students who want to serve others. That's why I like what the former Jesuit Father General said about being men for others. I think that's a powerful statement: to become women and men for other people, to live not for ourselves, not only for those immediately around us but to live for other people also. That's a compelling philosophy, a powerful motivation that can lead to a very fulfilling life. And because this is our starting point, our starting point being to form people, because this is what we want to develop in our students, we give them a good education. So, a good education is not the starting point, rather it is a means as when we give our students a good education, we empower them to have the tools to help other people in future, to find themselves, to find where their talents lie, and to have the skills and the knowledge to be able to live their lives in useful service to men and women around them. We want them, in short, to do well academically so that they can better serve others. And, because we want them to serve others effectively, we develop them holistically.

I wear many hats because in addition to my work at the university, I am involved in a number of other fields as well. And you know what? When I look around and I see people who are successful in life, there is almost one universal trait that runs



through many of them – not all of them but many of them – these people have a vision beyond themselves. So, when we give our students a vision that goes beyond themselves, we are, in a sense, maximising their opportunities to do well later in life. And, in that way, also bring back glory to the school. It becomes a wonderful virtuous circle. This is what I would call enlightened self-interest when we develop our young boys and girls in a holistic manner. We also make them more capable of succeeding later in life, because people who truly succeed are those who also care about other people. And that makes perfect sense, because when you care about other people, you are less selfish, you are more prepared to go the extra mile, you're more prepared to be a team player, you don't feel that all the glory needs to come to you, you are happy to share it with others and others are, therefore, more than happy to work with you as well. When you, however, only focus on pure academics, you're creating a very narrowly focussed person, who will probably, never fulfil her or his fullest potential.

So, our education, in this sense, is not only a functional one as Fr. Gleeson has said. This is why our Catholic identity in our school is a verb: we are actively moulding young people to be Christ-like. And, to be Christ-like is to be deep and not superficial, to be universal – because, amongst other things, we care for other people also. And this is why relationships and community are important in our schools, and, like Christ, we offer our students a vision beyond the economic, beyond the material. So, Fr Gleeson, rest assured that I was listening to you and a lot of what you said makes a great deal of sense for our Catholic schools. The verb that is Catholic identity – Fr Gleeson speaks of it as a verb – calls for practical action on the part of our schools; it calls our schools to be places of prayer, places where we speak of the example of Jesus and explain to our students that it is his message of love for others that guides what we do. Catholic schools should not and do not proselytise but we must constantly hold Jesus up as the inspiration and example of what we want to achieve.

Our schools should also be places where the Christian perspective is made known, and actually this can be done with

relatively little effort on our part if we think carefully about it. For example, many schools will, at some time in the school year, do something that focusses on the need to preserve or be conscious of our environment. As I walked into the hall, I noticed one of the posters just outside it having an environmental theme. Why should the environment be important to us as a Catholic school? Perhaps like any secular school, we need to worry about the earth because without it humanity will perish. Our children, or our children's children, may not have such good lives if the environment continues to deteriorate. So just for self-interest we need to be mindful of the environment. Fair enough, that's certainly part of the perspective, and a legitimate one but, as a Catholic school, can't we go further? Can't we also say "as a Catholic school, on top of all of this, we also believe in preserving the environment because we believe that the world was created by a loving God, and we should therefore be stewards of this beautiful creation that God has left in our hands"? It is like preserving the heritage and the tradition that your parents hand down to you. We preserve them not only because they are right, but because we are stewards of what our parents have given to us. And that adds another dimension that could make it even more profound and real for our boys and girls.

Then, we have Charities' Weeks, which we are in the midst of now. I'm also on the board of Caritas Singapore and I chair the fundraising committee so it is in my self-interest that you all participate in Charities' Week. But, I would say, I don't care whether your school contributes one cent or one thousand dollars, but I would so love it, wearing my ACCS hat now, if the schools would take the envelopes, give them out to the students, and say: "Look, it doesn't matter whether you give anything, or whether you just give ten cents. But we're giving you the envelopes because we want you to reflect on how there are other people out there who are in need, who are much more in need than you. We want you to think about them as Jesus thought about us when He came down for us." So it's an opportunity to transmit the Christian value of being a good neighbour to those in need. Or we can use the seasons, e.g. the Easter season, to transmit a Christian value. When we go around the school, are there Gospel messages? Many passages in the Gospel resonate with young people. They can bring comfort to our students as they navigate the uncertainties of life. So these are all things that can be easily done, and clearly reflective of Catholic identity.

Our Catholicity must be integrated, embedded, in the ordinary things that we do. In doing so, we create a community and we bolster each other, as one of the earlier speakers spoke about.

I also want to take this opportunity to thank you for your collective reflections. The next step is for us, at ACCS, together with those of you involved in the planning of this conference, to distil all the thoughts with a view to determining what practical next steps to take. But I can highlight three that I think we will definitely be looking at.

First we should come to a greater consensus on what are the essential elements of Catholic ethos that we want to see in all our schools, ideally. A conversation has started already with members of the Catholic ethos working group. We have come up with a paper to outline what some people refer to as a baseline of the things we think all Catholic schools should try to have. We intend to consult the SMCs and the school leadership of all the Catholic schools to see if we can come to a broad consensus of what it is we want to see in every Catholic school.

Second, we also realise that we need to try to create more formation programmes for Catholic educators out there who want to live their faith better in the workplace. One principal said passionately to me: "You know, I wish I knew now what I did five years ago, when I first became a principal. When I first became a principal, I was grappling in the dark, not quite sure what to do. If only I knew then what I know now." I think the Church should play a bigger role in trying to provide this kind of formation.

Finally, I think once we work through all this and we have a consensus of where we want to go, then it would be necessary for the Church to engage in a broader dialogue with our stakeholders, because it is important for people to understand that when we speak of Catholic ethos, we are doing something that reinforces what is important to Singapore today, which is values – inculcating values in our children. That's what Catholic ethos is all about, except that Catholic ethos is much more profound, because it's fundamental to our schools, it's not an add-on. The reason why I contrasted the freshmen speech at the start of my conclusion and what our Catholic schools are all about is that our starting points are different. And because our Catholic starting point is different, what we can give to our students is so much deeper and so much more profound and in there lies the value, the true value, of a Catholic education.

Thank you very much for spending your time with us today, thank you.

