The Proliferation of Secularism and the Corrosion of Education

By Archbishop Anthony Fisher OP, and delivered at the Inaugural Kathleen Burrow Research Institute Lecture, on 26 May 2021.

They had barely arrived, 200 years ago, when the colony's first Catholic chaplains, Philip Connolly and John Joseph Therry, set about building a chapel at Hyde Park and a school in Parramatta. The chapel, eventually Australia's mother church and Sydney's cathedral, was dedicated to "St Mary Help of Christians". That title, though an ancient one, had only recently been added to the liturgical calendar. In a mortal struggle for the soul of Europe, the forces of the French Revolution and the Napoleonic empire had sought to wipe out Catholicism in Europe, closing churches, convents and schools, confiscating property and imprisoning two popes. Having exhorted the faithful to pray the Rosary for the Church's survival, Pope Pius VII marked his liberation by instituting the Feast of Help of Christians. For Fr Therry to choose this title for patron of our church and country was clearly a loud statement against any version of secularity antithetical to religion.

So, too, the establishment of the first officially sanctioned Catholic school: though it was open to all, not just Catholics, as our schools have been ever since, Therry was concerned to transmit the faith to a new generation in danger of losing its heritage. As settlers spread through the continent, they brought with them their religious and educational aspirations, and by 1839 there were nineteen Catholic schools in New South Wales. But Catholics were on the whole the poorer part of the population and received little external assistance, and so the facilities, teachers and resources left much to be desired.

Meanwhile, Anglicans, Presbyterians and Wesleyans were also starting schools, for they too believed education was a work of the Church and religious instruction best integrated with the rest of education. Anglican schools were privileged in various ways with crown land, capital grants and recurrent funding. Challenging this sectarianism, the Irish-born whig Governor, Richard Bourke, pushed for equal endowments for "the three grande Divisions of Christianity". Though Catholics represented more than 20 per cent of the population, they continued to receive only 10 per cent of the school funding. Over time the Anglican establishment made its peace with the idea of state schools, as long as church schools were "left without interference". Many Catholics, however, feared their Protestant and indifferentist assumptions and their potential for proselytising. These fears were confirmed when a state Education Council was appointed with entirely Protestant membership and when school inspection and funding authorities demonstrated repeated bias against Catholic schools.

The editor-proprietor Henry Parkes was colonial secretary during the passage of the Public Schools Act 1866. A strong advocate of state schools, he equivocated on just how "secular" they would be and how much the state would support or interfere with surviving church schools. He promoted a settlement whereby state schools would provide a kind of Anglican-lite "General Religious Education" (including prayers, hymns, Scripture and history) and allow some "Special Religious Education" (SRE) provided by visiting denominational clerics; church schools would still be permitted and to some extent funded, but the state would assume a greater regulatory role. For

Parkes "secular" meant non-denominational or neutral; but for others it meant agnostic or even atheist. Cultural historian Christopher Dawson has argued that state schooling was the single most powerful weapon of enlightenment liberalism in reshaping modernity—a rare matter upon which radical secularists and anti-secularists agreed!

Doctrinaire secularism was on the rise amongst Australia's ruling class. Though Governor Fitzroy thought a university modelled upon Oxford would serve "the better advancement of religion and morality" as much as "the promotion of useful knowledge", the University of Sydney was self-consciously non-religious from the beginning. Archbishop John Bede Polding immediately set up St John's College so Catholics would not miss the opportunity of a university education but also so they could be formed in what we would call today "a safe space". (In the next century Kathleen Burrow would be a pioneer in creating such opportunities for Catholic women.) Polding's successor, Roger Vaughan, lived in St John's College through his time as archbishop, and viewed Catholic education as the bulwark against secularisation.

Henry Parkes was Premier by the time of the passage of the Public Instruction Act 1880. Though New South Wales was more tolerant of religion in schools than Victoria and Queensland, and continued to grant a "right of entry" for denominational SRE teachers, the state now took formal command of the curriculum and discontinued state aid to church schools for a century. With the future of Catholic schools very much in jeopardy, the New South Wales bishops issued a pastoral letter in June 1879 with some colourful rhetoric from Vaughan, insisting that true education requires a doctrinal and moral element. If children are denied this, they said:

Their faith is visibly enfeebled, not to allude to their morality: their manners are rough and irreverent: they have little sense of respect and gentleness: they have no attraction for prayer or for the Sacraments … Our clergy look on the future of such wild, uncurbed children with grave misgivings.

"Irreligious" schools would stud the colony with indifferentists and infidels, reduce it to barbarism, and be "absolute peril to religion". Denying state aid to Catholic schools was also a grave injustice to Catholic taxpayers and families. Priests were directed to preach against these evils and advised not to absolve "such parents as are willing to expose their children's souls to the blighting influences of an alien creed or secularist system". Vaughan issued a rolling series of pastorals and orations expanding on these themes. He quoted the newly created Cardinal Newman on "the great apostacy" that would "block out all religion", "throw off Christianity" in particular, and "substitute a universal and thoroughly secular education" for the authority of the Church. State schools, Vaughan warned, would be "seed-plots of future immorality, infidelity, and lawlessness".

With this campaign the number of Catholic schools doubled in the 1870s and 1880s, and by 1883 four out of five Sydney Catholic children were enrolled. Gathered in Plenary Council in 1885, the Australasian bishops declared their common determination to give families in every town and suburb the choice of a Catholic school. That was made possible by the arrival by that time of Charity, Mercy, Presentation, Dominican, Loreto, Brigidine and OLSH sisters, Christian, Marist and Patrician brothers, and Benedictine and Jesuit fathers, as well as home-grown Good Sams and Josephites; more orders came in the following decades. With meagre resources, religious built and ran most Catholic schools for more than a century, with the help of lay staff, some of the calibre of

Kathleen Burrow. Catholics seethed at the injustice of having to pay full taxes while being denied access to education funds. Yet even without them, they built the world's most comprehensive system of Catholic schools relative to population, out of solicitude for their children and in response to the threat of secularisation.

After the Second World War, Catholic education faced new challenges due to large numbers of baby-boom and migrant children, population shifts from rural centres, the rise of new suburbs, and the decline in religious vocations. There were as many as eighty students in a class in third-rate facilities. When in 1962 the Canberra-Goulburn diocese found itself unable to comply with directions to improve toilet facilities in its Goulburn school, Bishop John Cullinane famously instructed families to shift their children to the state school. Unable to accommodate them and facing a major public reaction, Prime Minister Menzies re-introduced some state aid for church schools. This was amplified in the following decades under the Whitlam, Howard, Gillard and Morrison governments. Not only did this correct a historic injustice towards Catholic families, it allowed their schools to aspire to first-rate facilities, teacher training, pedagogy and curricula. Now, after two centuries, Catholic education serves over a million students at a time—an enormous contribution!

But it was not uncontested. The "Council for the Defence of Government Schools" opposed state funding of church schools and pressed a much more radical secularism in education; though they lost the famous *DOGS case* in 1981, moves to cut Catholic school funding recurred from time to time, most recently under the Turnbull-Birmingham government. Parts of the educational bureaucracies, teachers' unions and media remain unrelentingly hostile to Catholic education. So each generation must make the case afresh for social support for these schools. By the late twentieth century, a century after establishment Christians had acquiesced in the forfeit of state aid to church schools, evangelicals came to see that state schools, far from being essentially Christian, were often seriously secular, and began building their own network of low-fee "Christian schools" modelled on the Catholic ones. That church schools in Australia were conceived, in significant part, as a response to secularisation is an important part of their story; but it would be naive to imagine that they have been immune to secularising trends themselves.

Challenge: competing secularities

For the first 150 years or so Catholic education in Australia was self-consciously a response to secularisation; in the following fifty years it was as often infected by it as converting or preventing it. But there are many competing secularities. In some parts of the world it's said with respect to church and state that "ne'er the twain shall meet": religion must be kept out of the public square. In other places religious institutions dictate terms to government and society, even to non-believers. Some countries, such as the US, mix both extremes.

The Australian take on these things has been to distinguish church and state, recognise that each has its own sphere of activity, goals, methods and actors, and seek as far as possible to "live and let live". This disinclines Australians to radical ideological divides and allows that God and Caesar need not be enemies: mostly they leave each other well enough alone; where they intersect, they will

sometimes be rivals for people's loyalty; but often they will find ways to collaborate to their mutual advantage. This Australian live-and-let-live, co-operate-when-you-can version of church–state relations has underpinned Catholic schooling in recent decades: the Catholic community puts in most of the cost of land and buildings, the Commonwealth contributes the salaries, and the parents and states put in the rest. Church schools teach the same curriculum as other schools, if sometimes with a particular accent, as well as their own spiritual curriculum, with which the state does not interfere. It mostly seems to work well, even if, as I said at the beginning, every generation must make the case for this anew and the relationship necessarily evolves over time.

In her history of free, compulsory and supposedly secular education in Australia, Catherine Byrne bemoans the all-too-friendly relationship between church and state in New South Wales, which she thinks has led to a faux secularity. She insists that any genuine secularity in education requires state control in place of "clerical influence", teaching based on sound rationalist principles and eschewing all religious doctrine, and an inclusive, agnostic regard for all faiths and none. But her "caffeinated" secularity is only one version of "neutrality": one that denies religion is a fundamental good of human beings, presumes the perniciousness of clergy and doctrine, and ignores the role of the spiritual in supporting the very respect and care that underpin Western democracies and even secular tolerance.

Probably the greatest contemporary authority on the secular is the Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor and his magnum opus, *A Secular Age*. By his account religion has been retreating from the public square on-and-off for centuries now, and belief and unbelief have become rival accounts of reason, nature, community and happiness. Whereas in the "enchanted" world of pre-modernity people's self-concepts, communities and cosmologies assumed God's active presence, belief in God has become difficult for many in the progressively disenchanted scientific age.

Of course, Christianity has itself been responsible for some secularisation. Other civilisations put sacred and profane power in the hands of the same people and identified their interests; religious leaders and texts controlled civil life. Christianity insisted, however, that some things be rendered unto Caesar and some to God, as Jesus put it, or that there is a city of God and a city of man, as Augustine put it, even if the two interpenetrate and we bring the one Christian conscience to both. It was upon these ancient and medieval reconciliations of the transcendent and secular that liberal democracies were ultimately built. But that ancient compact had already begun to unravel, on Taylor's account, in the Renaissance and Reformation. Here were opened the gates for a godless humanism which disembeds individuals from society, society from the cosmos, and the cosmos from God and which has spread from elites to whole populations.

Thus while there remain many fragments of the old enchanted order with its sense of divine grace, providence, mystery and hierarchies, there is a new epistemic order in which individuals acquire knowledge empirically with the aid of "disengaged reason" and a "modern moral order" in which each self is subject only to itself and collaborates with others only when mutually beneficial. Contemporary humanity is marked by "expressive individualism" but there is a feeling of malaise, loss, meaninglessness. As a result of certain key influencers of the past two centuries, the materialist view is now regarded as adult, the spiritual as childish; following reason, sustaining life, and maximising production and consumption are all that matter now, however unsatisfying that is. In this world there are no more angels and saints, martyrs or heroes; bibles and popes have no magisterium; there is mimesis no longer of the Christian story in art, architecture, literature and

music; and if the old social and cosmic imaginaries have been displaced, the new ones "fail to touch the bottom of anywhere".

Here in Australia we have certainly experienced the social and cultural shifts identified by Taylor and others. Added to continuing secularisation, the child sexual abuse crisis helped magnify disillusionment with institutional religion and accelerate disaffiliation and disconnection. Various ideologies and interests now coincide to marginalise Christians: we might consider the recent New South Wales government decision to exclude faith providers from cemeteries and "nationalise" the Catholic Cemeteries Trust; or the Bill before the Queensland parliament requiring Catholic facilities to allow others to provide euthanasia on their premises! For all its talk of tolerance, post-liberal secularism is all-encompassing, and ultimately intolerant of both religion and liberalism also. Its influence upon the unsuspecting has left many in a kind of spiritual desert with no moral compass and no one to accompany them through their struggles.

The corrosive effects of secularisation upon the Catholic DNA are evident in our institutions: many RE teachers no longer practise the religion themselves and are unacquainted or out of sorts with substantial parts of the doctrine and morals they are charged with teaching; an increasing proportion of students and their families are not even nominally Catholic or Christian but "nones"; others, though officially "Catholic", have so little connection with Church outside school that when we draw them to Mass they are in unfamiliar territory, unsure of how to comport themselves, respond, or participate in treasured prayers and hymns.

Nonetheless, Christianity is remarkably resilient and secularisation has not moved uniformly in the direction of the diminishment of religion. Here Taylor joins Peter Berger and Rodney Stark in rejecting "secularisation theory"—the thesis that as individuals and communities modernise religion automatically declines. Nonetheless, an individualism that equates to doing your own thing, being non-judgmental, and being "spiritual" rather than religious, has been deeply corrosive to the Catholic DNA. Institutions (such as religious charities) can look big and strong but be mere shells of their former selves, having lost their founding inspiration and sense of mission; spiritual practices (such as rites of passage, meditation and pilgrimage) can likewise survive for a time as penumbra of the old religion. But religious institutions and practices can also be renewed: Taylor points to examples of Christians adapting to modernity, responding to and even rivalling unbelief. We are "just at the beginning of a new age of religious searching, whose outcome no one can foresee".

Response: Cultivating sacred memory and imagination

Reflecting on the slide in American culture, Cardinal Francis George of Chicago once predicted that he would die in bed, his successor as archbishop die in prison, and *his* successor die a martyr in the public square. (Since Cardinal Clancy died in bed, and Cardinal Pell went wrongly to jail, I can only presume a grisly end is in store for me!) But often missed is the fourth part of George's prophecy: that the bishop who follows after these three will pick up the shards of a ruined society and help slowly rebuild civilisation, as the Church has often done before.

In the last section of his very rich work, Charles Taylor proposes a moral space with a horizontal dimension that gives full scope to human rights and flourishing, and a vertical dimension that

aspires to wholeness and transcendence, responds with love and forgiveness, and resigns itself to trust, self-sacrifice and death in hope of the beyond. In such a space people of faith may yet survive, even thrive. Taylor concludes that "Our age is very far from settling into a comfortable unbelief ... The secular age is schizophrenic, or better, deeply cross-pressured." Recent spiritual conversions or "epiphanic" experiences of some Catholic artists and writers signpost the path of beauty to God and to a moral-spiritual life amidst the "secular wasteland".

How, then, might schools resist kinds of secularisation that are corrosive to Catholic identity and mission, while pursuing other proper goals? How might they pick up the shards of our past and contribute to spiritual and civilisational rebuilding? Instead of addressing the politics of inclusion or exclusion of faith in the public square, or intellectual arguments for and against particular secularities, I will focus on an aspect of secularisation to which Pope Benedict XVI drew particular attention: its eviscerating effect on memory, imagination and will, and its tendency to immunise people against the spiritual, often by injecting them with weak doses of a dead spirituality, "Christianity lite". Our Catholic faith is, however, incarnational, sensual, sacramental, liturgical, "full-cream Christianity". It is more tangible than doctrines and curriculum, and more spiritual than social justice and service—sacred as all these are.

Hoc facite in meam commemorationem: do this in memory of me.52 In many ways our world has amnesia. Ask people to put Martin Luther King, Aristotle, Martin Luther and Aristotle Onassis in chronological order and many would have no idea. A woman once asked if I could instruct her for reception into the Catholic Church: her reason was that she needed a tradition, history or genealogy she could rely on, be part of, be at home in. Some people think memories and history are a constraint on creativity but, as she appreciated, memory as much as present perceptions feeds imagination. Those without a sense of history are not only doomed to repeat the worst of the past: they live in the present rootless and with no well-founded identity. People with amnesia are not freer, they are more constrained! Those with a good memory—of history and geography, arts and sciences, music and poetry, philosophy and theology, leisure and travel—as well as a good imagination, have the best minds, for they can draw on what was, and is, and is to come, for being and doing here and now.

One of the great challenges for maintaining a Catholic culture in our schools is the recovery of sacred memory. The hermeneutic of rupture, with its lazy talk of pre- and post-Vatican II, gives the impression that people lived in darkness until the invention of goodness in the 1960s. Now I, for one, *was* invented in the 1960s and I count the Council and its popes great graces to our Church. But they did not simply happen, like a big bang. They were part of a long Catholic tradition which is in continuity with the Church and the teaching of the apostles and the "faith of our mothers" passed on to every generation, for living and loving, developing and communicating. If the idea of traditioning —passing the baton on in the faith relay race—is at the heart of the Catholic conception of revelation and education, then we must recover for our schools a sense of sacred history and ecclesial tradition to feed the young memory and imagination.

That is more difficult in an Australia that has turned its back on the humanities, both at a tertiary level and more recently in schools. It is intellectually and culturally impoverishing. But it is also highly problematic for Catholics because so much of our faith is carried not by creeds and catechisms so much as by art, music, literature and the rest. Where secularisation occasions an

intellectual and spiritual narrowing, the liberal arts challenge us and convey us beyond ourselves and our limited experience, enriching the present and offering hope for the future.

Anyone who thinks *things couldn't be worse* or that *no one could get through this dark time the better for it*, lacks imagination or a good library. The liberal arts as imagination food allow us to piggy-back on other people's memories and imaginations, inspiration and civilisation.

Through art, poetry or music we can experience a sort of transport, shock or thrill that intimates something greater, deeper, sublime. This sense of more enlarges the soul. Some artistic expressions, Pope Benedict said, are true roads to God, the Supreme Beauty, and help us to grow in our relationship with Him in prayer. Back in 2002 he gave a philosophical reflection upon beauty in Plato, Augustine and von Balthasar, among others. He went on to say:

The encounter with the beautiful can become the wound of the arrow that strikes the heart and … opens our eyes … For me an unforgettable experience was the Bach concert that Leonard Bernstein conducted in Munich after the sudden death of Karl Richter. I was sitting next to the Lutheran Bishop Hanselmann. When the last note of one of the great Thomas-Kantor-Cantatas triumphantly faded away, we looked at each other and spontaneously said together: "Anyone who has heard this knows that the faith is true."

When asked what to do about personal suffering and non-clinical depression, that most commonsensical of theologians, St Thomas Aquinas, suggests having a good cry, getting lots of sleep, keeping company with sympathetic friends, having a warm bath, reading something true or contemplating something beautiful, or any other form of licit fun. Contemplating the true and beautiful helps. G.K. Chesterton once mischievously pointed out that people have been converted by almost everything that happens in Church—the sound of bells, smell of incense, rustle of vestments, devotion of the people—but never by the sermon! While this may not do justice to preachers, Chesterton's point was that there are things more deeply affecting than words. We might consider in the school context the crucial place of a sacred visual and musical culture, of various experiences of encounter with Christ such as eucharistic adoration, pilgrimages, retreats, immersions and festivals, of rhythmic prayers like the Rosary and Angelus, each whetting the spiritual appetite, communicating the ineffable, and persuading the rationalistically resistant.

None of which is to condone a sentimentalist or uncritical faith. Without rational thought and spoken discourse, even the most beautiful art can be little more that titillation. Likewise mystical or highly emotional experiences demand interrogation and articulation as we sift and inform our faith. Even as we emphasise the *via pulchritudinis* in some contexts, we should never underestimate the power of words and thoughts imaginatively employed (the *via veritatis*) which, when combined with lived witness and divine grace, are like magnets to Christ.

Catholic schools have achieved a great deal for children in spiritual *formation* (how to pray and worship) and in catechetical *information* (about what the Church teaches). We could give many examples of the "value adding" of the Catholic school in terms of appreciation and exploration of the spiritual dimension of life, pastoral care, moral values, youth ministry and more. But do we really appreciate the unique opportunity of having over a million students in our Catholic pre-schools, schools and tertiary institutions? Does anyone imagine we've exhausted the potential of

the Catholic school in Australia in evangelisation, catechesis and religious education? Have we integrated faith into the non-RE disciplines or is it all put into the RE layer of icing on an otherwise secular academic cake, which people take or leave? Are we feeding our students' imaginations and memories with faith-imbued liberal arts and sciences, to underpin their faith and nourish their souls in the years ahead? Have we done all we can to ensure that they emerge as well-formed and informed people of faith, saints for our times, each in their own way?

Conclusion

Long after our founding fathers and mothers made Catholic schooling the Church's principal response to Australian secularity, St John Paul II said that "the educational sector occupies a place of honour" in the new evangelisation. His successor agreed that Catholic schools are "an essential resource for the new evangelisation" when they maintain "their distinctive identity in fidelity to their founding ideals and the Church's mission in service of the Gospel". Providing young people with a sound faith education was in Benedict's view the most urgent internal challenge faced by the Church today. Pope Francis has echoed this, saying education is "key, key, key" to evangelisation. Sounding like Archbishop Vaughan in his insistence upon the integration of Christian doctrine and secular knowledge, the Holy Father said:

Catholic schools, which always strive to join their work of education with the explicit proclamation of the Gospel, are a most valuable resource for the evangelisation of culture, even in those countries where hostile situations challenge us to greater creativity in our search for suitable methods.

Contemporary secular culture is in some ways as inhospitable to Catholic faith as communist or Muslim-majority cultures, and thus every bit as much in need of evangelical creativity. We must counteract secularity's immunisation of our children against faith, awakening in them an appetite for God, and helping them find answers to their deepest longings. This may require even greater intentionality than it did in 1821, and the conscious reworking of strategies, pedagogy and curriculums.

Christ came that we might have life, life to the full (John 10:10). My school motto was "*Quantum potes, tantum aude*" —as much as you can do, that much dare to do—a pretty good aspiration, and not just because it comes from Aquinas. We want every young person to dare to do. We seek to extend them intellectually, never accepting that they are doomed to mediocrity, never gaming the system for ATAR over excellence, never focusing merely on "job readiness". We seek to stretch them spiritually, feeding their minds, hearts and souls with the richness of our Catholic tradition, hopefully giving them the wherewithal for human and spiritual flourishing in the decades beyond school. What an exciting challenge!