

Education for the Marginalised

One of three reflections at the prayer service before the Pope's arrival at St Mary's, Strawberry Hill

Many of us were first drawn to religious life by the examples of those religious men and women who taught us. Perhaps many of you can say along with me that you were drawn to work in education because it has proven to be one of the most effective ways in which the Church has demonstrated its solidarity with the poor and the marginalised in our society.

So much of our work in education has been built on the conviction of our founders that we must give everything to serve Jesus in our fellow men and women; the Jesus who chose to be poor, associated first and foremost with the poor, preached the kingdom amongst the poor and instructed his disciples to make the poor their special concern.

In the middle years of the nineteenth century, not long after Catholic emancipation, members of many of our religious congregations got to work amongst the poor of Britain's rapidly expanding industrial cities.

A good number of the Catholic schools familiar to us today owe their origin to pioneering work done by our forebears at that time. Their energy and determination, often in the face of great odds, saw to it that the children of those who had least had an education which provided them with many more opportunities in life than would otherwise have been the case. Not only did the work of these pioneers help transform the lives of many individuals, it also helped in time to transform the character of the Catholic community of our country and the contribution it has been able to make to the common good.

Catholic education continues to embody this tradition. Our partnership with the State enables our schools to serve young people regardless of their families' ability to pay. This makes so many of our schools, as is well known, models of service to the community and of social cohesion. In the nineteenth century we opened our doors to the children of recently arrived immigrants and the same is true today.

Many of our Catholic schools, privately and state funded, have a particular emphasis on teaching young people to develop their talents to the fullest in such a way that they put them at the service of those who need them most. Some are twinned with schools in disadvantaged areas of our cities, many have programmes at home or abroad which enable their students to experience at first hand lives so very different to their own and in a way that is often life-transforming.

We cannot forget the many members of our congregations who left this country for good to make their homes in far distant lands where they established schools

for some of this world's poorest people. In so many cases, these schools are now the responsibility of religious congregations based locally. Some of their members now in their turn come to assist us in our work of educating - in schools, parishes, social projects and refugee centres - the most vulnerable in our society.

We religious are called to be people of hope: to announce hope and to embody hope. When seen through the lens of the Gospel, our world gives reason for much hope. For this way we can see Jesus at work in our world, renewing our history and always making something new. Perhaps we can see this Jesus most of all in our young people. May their education continue to be our service of hope, for the greater glory of God and the common good.

Michael Holman SJ