

RELATIONSHIP AND SEX EDUCATION IN SCHOOLS

(A letter from Bishop Mark Davies)

Dear Head teachers and Governors,

It has been a great joy as your Bishop to see the mission of our schools across the Diocese. It is always impressive to witness your faithfulness and dedicated work, all of which make Catholic Education possible. For this I am truly grateful and wish to thank you on behalf of the Church.

The enduring witness of Saint John Fisher and Saint Thomas More remind us how we might one day face a choice between our faithfulness to Christ and His Church and an intolerant ideology pursued with all the force of the State. One of the challenges we face in our Catholic schools is how to remain faithful to Christ and the teaching of His Church in a culture that has substantially abandoned the Christian vision of life. Nowhere is this challenge more acute today than in the area of human sexuality. A number of teachers, parents and clergy have been in touch with me to express their growing concern with regard to the statutory introduction of Relationship and Sex Education. Many speak of the dilemma of wanting to remain faithful to the teaching of Christ and His Church while recognising how society has dramatically changed in its attitudes and mores.

The national Catholic Education Service assures us that it is not the intention of the government to provoke a conflict with the Christian conscience. And yet I am sure that those who have contacted me have reason to be concerned by this extension of the powers of the State and by its potential impact not only on the rights of parents but on freedom of religion and indeed the common good of the whole of society. The advice received to date by our education officers is that this legislation changes nothing in the teaching and practice within Catholic Schools; nor, we are reassured, does it offer an opening for the introduction of ideological agendas in the form of teaching materials contrary to the Christian vision of marriage and human sexuality. The Government has given its clear assurance that questions of relationships and human sexuality may continue to be taught according to our faith and with respect for the inalienable right of Christian parents to pass on this faith to their children. I wish to state unambiguously that, as your Bishop, this is my clear expectation

and direction in the face of anyone who seeks or claims to form our children and young people in ways contrary to Christian faith and morality.

I am writing this letter to you as those who hold positions of leadership and responsibility in our schools. I want to support you in these confused times in your vital Catholic witness and encourage you to study and reflect on the Church's teaching in order to propose it with greater confidence and joy. Pope Francis has spoken strongly on these questions and we have helpfully received from the Congregation for Catholic Education in Rome a new document "Male and Female He Created Them," which addresses the educational crisis and the path of dialogue on the question of gender theory.

I am aware that it is sometimes difficult for the Church's teaching to be heard, received and understood, particularly in cultural conditions which incline people to think in radically different ways and where individuals feel under threat to accept and outwardly conform to a new, secular orthodoxy. We respect and value all people, no matter how much their views or lifestyles may be at variance with the teaching of Christ. Pastoral charity must always mark our response to others even in the most challenging circumstances; for in imitation of her Master, the Church is called to love all people in a charity that embraces even those who disregard or disagree with her teaching. The Catholic Church firmly believes that she has received this teaching from Christ and she must always remain faithful to it. We must also be ready to ask those who today challenge the Church's teaching on human sexuality to respect the integrity of this teaching. We ask them not to misrepresent Christian doctrine as somehow promoting the disregard or even hatred of other people, for this would be a complete parody of the truth.

At the perennial heart of Catholic sexual morality lies the dignity of the human person made in the image and likeness of God, redeemed by Christ, and called to eternal life. As Christians, we recognise that through the grace of our Baptism we are sons and daughters of the Father in Jesus Christ and temples of the Holy Spirit. This is the light in which we ultimately perceive how to treat each other and what is consonant with our human dignity and calling, and what is not.

A great challenge for today

The Second Vatican Council clearly taught that the well-being of the individual person and the whole of society is closely bound-up with the healthy state of

married and family life (Cf. *Gaudium et Spes* n. 47). Created in the image and likeness of God, man and woman are made to complement one another and to live a life of mutual love and respect. This life-long, faithful union of man and woman open to new life is written in our very nature and lies at the heart of the Creator's plan for humanity; it cannot be changed by arbitrary public policy. The teaching of Christ and His Church recognises marriage as the only morally appropriate context for a sexual relationship and enables us to see that any use of the gift of sexuality outside of marriage is morally wrong. For the same reason, the Church calls all the baptized without exception to live a life of chastity, that pure love which orders the right use of our sexual desires at all stages of life. To remain faithful to the teaching of her Lord, the Church proclaims this truth even when this truth it is not accepted or even mocked.

I recognise this teaching is a great challenge for many today. The Gospel is and always has been challenging. There is no Christian who, in his or her human weakness, does not struggle to live the full demands of Christ. However, with the strength that comes from God – the grace freely given, particularly through prayer and the sacraments – it is possible for every one of us to grow in the joy and peace of virtue and holiness. This is surely what we desire for all our children and young people.

We also recognise that when we fall and repent, the mercy of God lifts us up again so that we can set out on our journey anew. In the Gospels we see that Our Lord is both intransigent in the face of sin and merciful, patient and full of goodness towards the sinner. Like her Lord, the Church must unfailingly proclaim the fullness of the truth but this should always be done with charity and understanding for those who fail or struggle to live that teaching. The same teaching of Christ that challenges us to live the truth and use the gift of sexuality for our ultimate good also prohibits anything that would promote hatred or unjust discrimination against any person.

I ask you to share the direction and encouragement of my letter with your teachers. And in my responsibility as 'first teacher of the faith,' in this Diocese I wish to ask our teachers to be very vigilant in ensuring that any of the resources they use do not, however subtly, propose teaching or a view of life contrary to our Catholic faith. I am conscious of the many documents you must read in the management and governance of our schools and so I attach for your convenience the latest document from the Congregation for Catholic Education.

Let us turn to the example and intercession of Saint John Fisher and Saint Thomas More: Like them, may you and I leave for generations to come the example of our faithfulness and the legacy of Catholic Schools and Colleges worthy of their name. However

United with you in this prayer and witness,

+ Mark

Bishop of Shrewsbury