

Catholic Schools Week

The theme for Catholic Schools Week 2020 (26 January–2 February) is ‘living in harmony with God’s creation’. **Msgr Dan O’Connor**, episcopal vicar for education in the Dublin archdiocese, reflects on the place of the Catholic school in the life of the parish.



Illustration: Brendan McCarthy

Many years ago I was at an education conference where the keynote speaker was the late Archbishop Donald Caird, the Church of Ireland Archbishop of Dublin and Glendalough. One line from his address has stayed with me: he said, ‘The parish school is the heartbeat of a parish’. In the sprawling suburbs of our city, just as in rural, two-teacher schools, the primary school is the centre of the community.

Many of us have benefited from the care and example of our primary

and post-primary teachers. They have been anchors for us at difficult times in our lives and have guided us in choosing a career. Catholic Schools Week is an opportunity for us to celebrate all that is good in our schools, and give thanks for all who work with and for the students in our Catholic schools.

When a child is baptised, the parish, at the baptism ceremony, promises to support the parents in teaching the child about Christ and forming the

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child, with the parents, into a member of the Catholic community. The Second Vatican Council's *Declaration on Christian Education (Gravissimum educationis)* states that as a person at baptism becomes a child of God, they are entitled to a Christian education and to be gradually introduced to the mystery of the saving life of Jesus Christ.

Catholic primary and post-primary schools are part of leading a child in the life of Christ. Parents, by their example, are the first educators of the child in all things including the faith. The local parish and school support the parents. This can be seen especially at the time of preparation for First Penance, First Holy Communion and Confirmation when the home, parish and school together, cooperate in sacramental preparation and the student's family faith and the parish faith is enriched.

The home, the school and the parish do not operate separately in preparing a child for living as a citizen of their country and as a member of the body of Christ. Teachers, chaplains and catechists in Catholic schools, along with those working in community schools and colleges such as chaplains, are part of that triangle of faith formation.

Each year we celebrate Catholic Schools Week and the theme this year is based on Pope Francis' docu-

ment *Laudato Si'*. Living in harmony with God's creation will help families, schools and parishes reflect on the gift of God's creation and how we, encouraged by the teachings of Pope Francis, live in harmony with God's creation.

In several of our Catholic schools there is the Green Flag Programme and in that state-sponsored programme, our Catholic schools have included the teachings of Pope Francis as outlined in *Laudato Si'*. Our students have a deep awareness of the need to care for the gift of life from beginning to end, and of our obligation to care for the earth as seen in many recent gatherings.

Catholic Schools Week is a time for giving thanks for all we have received through our schools such as: the vision of Nano Nagle, Catherine McAuley, Teresa Mulally, Mary Aikenhead, Edmund Rice, Margaret Alyward, Bishop Delany of Kildare & Leighlin, who all established Catholic schools in difficult times in Ireland. They were men and women of courage who took the words of Christ to their hearts and shared their vision with pupils and parents at a time when Catholic schools were not allowed.

We have reason to celebrate Catholic Schools Week in memory of those gone before us and in thanksgiving for our communities of Catholic primary and post-primary schools that are the heartbeat of a parish. 