EREBB Congress Keynote Address
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Schools for Social Transformation

We are gathered here this morning from all quarters of the globe to look once again at what we are doing in our 280 schools scattered across the world in 20 countries.

We are not even two decades into the new millennium and we are challenged as never before to live out the Gospel Values of love, sincerity, freedom and justice for all. In this `new world of consumerism and avarice, where the rich get richer and the poor, poorer, where competition and greed for power have already led to the destruction of vast natural resources, and where children are constantly exposed to messages of self-indulgence and licence, our schools have to be truly places where the "Good News" is lived out, not in precept but in practice.

Our current school system has been designed to cater to the children of middle class urban people even when it runs in a remote village. The clientele who are satisfied with the schooling imparted are the highly ambitious, upwardly mobile, career conscious parents who want good first division marks in the examinations leading on to a lucrative career and who are prepared to pay heavily for the necessary tutors and so forth which will enable their offspring to prosper. Such parents are also the vocal ones who constantly reassure the authorities that the school is doing a good job, and who also provide funding, materials and other help eg. sponsors for school fests, company resources for school outings and so forth. Such `positive' feedback from the well off parents, their high expectations in regard to good academic results, arid their increasing demands for admission exert a pressure on the Principal to maintain the prestige of the school at all costs thereby creating a strongly competitive atmosphere in which the poorest child often gets pushed out, and the whole idea of schools being transformed into centres for justice and liberation is lost in the mad rush for top marks and first positions, getting the best jobs and so forth, so the whole idea of education being a vehicle of social transformation is something which requires our schools to re-examine certain attitudes and norms which need challenging- certain comforts taken for granted by both parents and children, certain myths that have never been exploded. Among them are:

a) The myth that the well off child has a right to the education his father pays fees for. But in most Countries which guarantee equality to all their citizens as long as even one child is denied her/his basic right to a good education being in a good school remains a privilege.

b) The myth that the poor child will not cope with English medium as well as she will in Hindi, Marathi etc. The reason she will not survive so well is linked to the quality of teaching and of care delivered by the school. Access to English in India (as well may be true for other countries) determines the level of post one -finally can hold and therefore one's economic status. Surely the poor have the
right to have the same chance of a job as the rich! So why separate them off when we can provide Education for All"

c) The myth that the poor child will not fit in, will pull down standards, will not be able, or is just plain dirty is not true and can only be handled after some first hand experience.

d) The myth that a good academic result is the sign of a good school — not at all, as Jesus says `even the unbelievers do this' a good Catholic school is one which is "Good News" for all not just the elite who can afford the fees. And "Good News" means good values.

What are Values?

Values are the means by which people steer themselves through life - they are the basis of our decisions and choices because they are born of that craving for happiness which lies deep within every human heart.

Whether our values will lead us to true happiness depends upon what our interpretation of happiness is. If we see happiness as material success, instant gratification, the best PC or whatever, in town, prestige before the neighbours and so on, then the values we live by will be those, if, on the other hand, happiness for us lies in relationships of kindness and human dignity, in peace of soul and freedom and loyalty, then obviously those will be the values we pursue. As adults, we know only too well which of these two sets of values will bring real happiness - but do our children? We have only to reflect on the suicide rates among millionaires to realise that money and happiness are not the same.

In the old days, our parents could pass on their values to us without too much external competition. Now, the family lives in a state of siege. Right within our homes, we have powerful purveyors of values - the TV and Video, and now, the Internet - which are, exceedingly difficult to counteract - self-indulgence, self-gratification, the consumerist values of a very materialistic society and the many programmes attacking or belittling anything spiritual are the counter values against which our education has to stand firm.

Which values do we choose to impart?

There are so many values from which to choose. Is it that each one can choose arbitrarily what she wants and consider her choice as good as any other or is there some external criterion on which we base our choice? For us Christian educators surely the strongest values are those of Christ.

When Jesus was asked what we should do to gain eternal happiness He replied 4'ou will love the Lord Your God with all your heart and with all your mind, and your neighbour as yourself" Later on, St. John takes this mandate further – "if you do not love your neighbour whom you see, how can you love God whom you do not see?" This is the bedrock on which all 'happy, peaceful and caring societies have to be built. And it is a mandate echoed in the scriptures of all the great religious traditions I of which we have many in our pluralistic secular Indian society. If this value of love I were lived out on a global level we would have no corruption, no exploitation, no ethnic cleansing, no wars, no communal tension, no caste differences, apartheid, would never have happened

Unfortunately more than ever in our new technological world this value of love is being ignored in the mad rush for more and more money, more and more power, more and more pleasure. The fact that the world is becoming more polarised with those who have, on one side and those who have not on the other, both within and between nations, and that these tensions, are in many places breaking out in violence and anarchy, can no longer be overlooked. How can we, as educators, stand firm against this current of a consumerist, materialistic, selfish society which is sweeping our young people of their feet. Unless our schools are places where youngsters experience this great value of love and its attendant
values of sincerity, freedom and justice, they will miss out on an essential facet of their education which cannot be made up later on.

In India as in most third world countries there is a vast chasm between those who have wealth and those who are deprived. This gap continues to grow because love and justice are not values much practiced in today's consumerist society. In more and more situations disparity reaches a flash point where violence sets in and those deprived try to take by force what they believe to be rightfully theirs, while those who have riches react repressively. Hence, any Value Education Programme which allows children to grow up ignorant or indifferent to the needs and anguish of fellow human beings is doomed to failure. And it is not sufficient for children to be told about the other side of life they need hands on involvement. So to really become a place where these Gospel values are lived out, the school needs to become a Resource Centre for the poorest of the poor a where the values of God's Kingdom are practiced by all on a daily basis.

In running such a school every Principal has to attend to the intangible aspects of education, which are more important although they often get much less attention than the tangibles.

The tangibles are those aspects of the education process which are measurable in quantitative terms eg. class work, corrections, tests, lessor plans, punctuality, order and most of all, results.

The intangibles, on the other hand, are much less easily assessed as they centre around the quality of what goes on in an Institution viz. how people relate to each other, what their values are, their level of care for the people, the dignity, forgiveness accorded to one person by another. Little of this can really be measured, of course, in quantitative terms, but the wellbeing of the school community is surely dependent upon such intangibles, which affect the child and her development as a happy, caring, competent adult much more than the academic, information-based aspect of education. In fact, it is attitudes which often determine, more than anything else, whether a poor child will survive and blossom or drop out.

Let us keep in mind that the tangibles are important — what I advocate here, however, is that we move beyond the tangibles into that area of our educational ministry which challenges us to be more than just a 'good school' -- the area that challenges us to be 'a School for the Kingdom'. What is the Kingdom? Redemptoris Missio sees the Kingdom as 'transforming human relationships growing gradually as people learn to love, forgive and serve one another. Its nature is one of communion among all human beings with one another and with God". The Kingdom is the concern of everyone. Working for it means "acknowledging and promoting God's activity, working for liberation from evil in all its forms". However, the Kingdom is not a concept or a doctrine but above all a person - Christ, who came to bring us the 'good news' that God really loves the world and each one of us.

What implication has all this in the running our schools? Especially in the running of our schools for a majority of well off students who do, indeed, appreciate what they receive in our institutions, our fine educational and cultural traditions, our discipline, our good results and clean values. But is it enough? Where is the witness to the way Christ lived His life - related to His Father and to people around Him? 'He went about doing good'. Is this the way our schools are seen by those on the outside? People 'outside' perceive us from their respective standpoints. The well off clientele who have had, have or hope to have offspring in our schools see us as an excellent educational opportunity, imparting a well-disciplined, all round development and preparing a poised and competent individual for society. The poor around us, if we enter at all into their scheme of things, mostly see us as a source of 'hand-outs' even when their children come to school to us. So where is the building of Kingdom relationships where people put themselves out for others - where 'a man lays down his life for his friend?'

This is why there has been so much talk at Church level, on our option for the poor. Basically there is no option in this - if we fail in this, our witness to the Kingdom lies wide open to doubt, we are as 'clanging brass and clashing symbols'. As Christ Himself has said "How easy to be kind to those from whom we can
expect a return”. Especially in India, where the concept of return expected for service rendered makes our behaviour of not expecting a return authentic and consistent with the message of Christ.

If our schools are to be ‘good news’, then that genuine care for the down-trodden, the marginalised, the ‘aneiwm’, will have them at the very heart of the school - where they will be loved and treated as equals, where their presence will be taken for granted, where their absence will create a vacuum that would be unthinkable. And we do this because we have so experienced God’s love for us and we have been so moved that we find it impossible to run a school in India that ignores the anguish of so many around us. We feel drawn by Christ’s example and His Spirit in us, to inconvenience ourselves and to challenge our teachers and students and parents to inconvenience themselves for the needs of others, and one of the great needs and one we are best equipped to meet is education.

But this is where, if our education is to be a vehicle of social transformation, I would like to share with you the steps I took to achieve this in my own school in Loreto Sealdah. I started this movement because I felt a certain uneasiness at being part of a formal system imparting “quality education” to a privileged few, while millions of their less fortunate peer groups get virtually nothing at all.

It has involved opening up our school more and more to underprivileged youngsters from slum areas and pavements, to produce a healthy mix of children from all social, financial and religious backgrounds, resulting in a school population of 1400 students – of which 700 are totally free and from the nearby slums, and the other 700 come from homes which can afford the fee so that I have stability to pay the teachers.

They are supported in their needs e.g., food, uniforms, medicines, money to meet-the rent when eviction threatens and specialised teaching, to cope with classroom.

These children, in their turn, along with those who pay fees are involved in reaching out to others even less privileged than themselves through a broad spectrum of services, touching as many as possible…..

In this way Loreto Sealdah seeks to become a Resource Centre for the community creating in the process dynamic people, with the values of giving, sharing and extended love - a vibrant, living instrument for human change.

In our effort to see that all our students have the opportunity to live out the values of love, sincerity, justice and freedom all are involved in

- **Our Rainbow Programme** - where we keep Our school gates open all day long and welcome into our school children who live by their wits on the streets, at their convenient times These children are taught on a one to one basis by the regular students who start teaching from 10 years of age in Class V until they finish school. They have two periods a week allotted for this on their time table so that throughout the day we have 50 potential teachers all free and ready to teach whoever comes, in this way children from the streets whom we call Rainbows can progress at their own pace and when they are ready for a class at their own age level, can be slotted into school.

- Every week, our students ranging in ages from 10 years old to 17 years old fan out into villages outside Calcutta where they teach 2628 village children, on what we call our Rural Child to Child Programme.

- Our teachers run special courses in Activity Based Primary Teaching in a course we call Barefoot, designed to turn young people who have not finished High School into effective primary teachers in their own villages. We have trained over 4000 such so far, and have now embarked upon training trainers who can train teachers in the field.
So at all levels, both students and teachers are busy reaching out beyond themselves to people in need and creating an ethos in the school where sharing and working together takes precedence over personal ambition and high marks. Not that excellence is not striven for - it is, but the motivation is service to others rather than personal advancement.

What do we need for this transformation?

- A School ethos and Atmosphere favourable to the development of Values as well as an effective method of reflection on the experience provided in the school for their development.

The school has had to see itself in the total perspective of India where millions have no access to education at all. This has led to a determination and readiness to share whatever is available in expertise, facilities, service, and time. We had to ensure that the idea of education for community as distinct from education for competition was thoroughly explored by teachers, senior students and parents. When these two areas support each other then values are interiorized and become part of the life pattern of the youngsters.

The children carry out a reflection on Education for Competition Vs. Education for Community which results in the creation of an atmosphere in the school of sharing rather than competing, a 'we receive to give' mentality. We thus become a resource centre for the community to serve the best interests of the poorest of the poor. Our creativity is constantly challenged to find ways and means of stretching resources to reach as many as possible. Once the children are relieved of the need to compete to come first they are freed from that tension and so can concentrate fully on reaching out to those in need around them.

All over the world in our 280 schools we have a resource which can be extremely powerful when we combine our advocacy with actual practical work by involving the children and providing them with the challenge. Let us leave this conference filled with God's Love to reach out to spread his Kingdom through all our schools.