

**International Conference**  
**"Towards European Integration: the role of the**  
**International Movement of University Students"**

**"The Pastoral Initiatives of the Irish Episcopal Conference**  
**in regard to Universities in Ireland"**.

Dear Distinguished Delegates,

I have been invited to speak in regard to the pastoral aspects of the Irish Episcopal Conference toward University life and students. As we are a relatively small nation, comprising almost four million inhabitants in the Republic of Ireland and some one and a half million in the North of Ireland, the opportunities for our young people to engage in a course of studies at third level in Universities and Institutes of Higher Learning are quite significant. Statistically there are seven Universities in the Republic of Ireland and sixteen Institutes of Higher Education in the Technological field, with an overall student population of 1,263,000(one million,two hundred and sixty three thousand). In Northern Ireland there are two Universities, two Colleges of Education and seventeen Institutes of further and higher education with an overall student body of 118,006( one hundred and eighteen thousand and six) students. Each college has a Chaplaincy Team, headed by a Chaplain appointed by the local Ordinary. Once a year the Chaplain of these Institutions presents to the Meeting of the Irish Episcopal Conference a detail of the pastoral life of the College or Institute. Every campus has now become a veritable parish within which the students live and work, interrelate and interact, and the Chaplain with his Chaplaincy Team is responsible for the pastoral care of "his Parish". This "parish" of the University Campus reflects every much the reality of the wider world outside. Ireland has become quite recently a multi-cultural society. From being a country, which in the past was marked very much by an emigration outward flow, it has now become a nation of welcomes where immigration has become part of everyday life. Combined with the Socrates/Erasmus Programme of International student exchange our third level colleges are now centres of learning where nations and cultures meet and interact.

The Episcopal Conference of Ireland, through the individual Chaplains/Chaplaincy Teams promotes and encourages good pastoral practice and this requires that individual Chaplains be well formed and well chosen. If pastoral ministry and outreach in the University sector are to become effective it is essential for the Chaplain

- to be a faith presence on campus, visible and available
- to be a living and credible witness to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. (Students will be impressed not so much by words as by seeing the Chaplain living in fidelity to his calling)
- to be part of a team who are committed to Jesus Christ and his Kingdom and who give expression to that through the life and work of the Chaplaincy.
- to provide in the Chaplaincy a place of welcome and hospitality to all students irrespective of their faith background or attitude.
- to provide pastoral support and care to all students and staff who seek/need it.
- to co-operate with other areas/departments in college to promote the development of the whole person (physical, emotional, social, spiritual as well as intellectual) and to foster the spirit of a caring community.
- to be a prophetic voice within the college community, challenging the values of success, competition, career, social status, wealth and self-interest and witnessing to the Gospel values of care for the weak, respect for each person, social justice and concern for the wider community.
- to provide spiritual and moral support to students and staff, individually and in groups; to help people encounter the love and compassion of Jesus Christ; to offer spiritual direction and guidance in individual prayer.
- to foster a living faith community and to lead people in liturgical worship.
- to invite students to more active participation in the life of the Church, whether liturgically (i.e. as Eucharistic ministers, Proclaimers of the Word, folk group, choir etc.) or through social engagement (i.e. St. Vincent de Paul).

- to provide opportunities for students to develop and use their various gifts and talents and to participate in the pastoral care of their fellow students (others).
- to encourage and support those students who are considering a vocation to the Priesthood and Religious life.

The Emmaus experience, that of Jesus walking with His Disciples, listening to them, evangelising them by explaining the message, to the point where they invite Him to stay with them and eventually break bread with them which leads to recognition, is one which serves well in the University ambient. The first task of the University Chaplain, as of any Christian Minister, is to get to know his flock. As only a tiny proportion of students will ever actively seek out the Chaplain/Chaplaincy, he will have to find creative ways of meeting them. The Chaplain will have to be patient in waiting for the appropriate moment to meet the students and to be available to them. They must see that he is interested in their welfare as students and meeting them wherever they are. Unless the Chaplain is prepared to meet students on their terms (i.e. in contexts where they are more comfortable), he will always remain something of an outsider. Students, for whatever reason, often have negative expectations of Church representatives. The essential work of the Chaplain often consists in dispelling fear or mistrust and building a rapport based on mutual respect, friendship and trust.

Jesus walked for some time with His disciples on the road to Emmaus and listened to their stories before He ventured to speak (lead them to a new perspective). The experience of those who minister on campus is that the informal, social contact with students quite often encourages them to become more involved with the life and work of the Chaplaincy. In what can sometimes appear a busy and impersonal university campus, the Chaplaincy seeks to be a place of welcome for all, staff and students alike. The essence of good pastoral care is mediating the unconditional acceptance and compassionate love of Christ. In an educational institution where people are often judged primarily in terms of their success academically, Chaplaincy can witness to a valuing of people for whom they are.

Pastoral care takes many forms. Many students look for counselling of one kind or another. Once they have overcome their initial fears, they will really appreciate the opportunity to share

something of their journey, especially if it has involved hurt, pain rejection or loss, with someone they can trust. The Chaplain can fill that essential role of being the faith-friend, the journey companion.

University life often covers the formative years of a young person's life. It's a time for forming new friendships, developing one's interpersonal skills, discovering one's own identity, including one's sexual identity. It can be fraught with insecurity. There is peer pressure to experiment with alcohol, drugs and sex, to fit in with the crowd, to belong. There are so many opportunities, especially for the student who has come from a sheltered background, and the freedom can be difficult to deal with. International students are often shocked by the extent to which the student social scene revolves around alcohol and this is a particular problem in Ireland generally. In this world of University endeavour where every student carries within himself/herself the treasures and gems of his/her person and, at the same time, the hurts and the pains of life experience, there stands the Chaplain whose role is to witness to Christ's healing and liberating love and point the way forward to a more meaningful and fulfilling journey of faith with the Lord. On that journey of faith the Chaplain is ever present with the student body and co-operates with other student support services in promoting a more cohesive approach to student welfare and the development of the whole person.

The Bishops of Ireland are fully conscious of the impact of current affairs in Irish life on student life in the University. They encourage their Chaplains to assist and guide individual staff members and faculty departments in providing pastoral care for their students, especially at times of crisis, such as the sudden, and at times tragic, death of a student or staff member. Suicide is a regrettable and recently highlighted feature of modern life in Ireland and, when it involves a university student, the impact on his/her friends, classmates, teachers and family members is immeasurable. Our Chaplains are well placed to co-ordinate a response that is understanding, compassionate, constructive and, above all, faith orientated, thus facilitating students in their moment of grief and enabling them to support one another and the deceased student's family. A well prepared Funeral Liturgy with the full participation of the student body in its preparation is a moment of great grace for the whole University and through the Guidelines for Catholic Funerals, issued by the Irish Episcopal Commission for Liturgy, the University community is enabled to experience, through the richness of the Liturgy, the healing power of Christ's Resurrection. In

uniting students, staff and the grieving family in prayer and support, such occasions witness to the fact that the University is a Community of Christian care as well as of academic excellence.

In recognition of the huge challenge posed by the transition from second to third level education- and in Ireland this is the reality for the majority of students – the Bishops have encouraged the Chaplains in their endeavour to set up and provide training for peer orientation programmes, whereby continuing students assist in the orientation of incoming students into College life. The recent establishment of a Niteline (a Samaritans-style student helpline) service in several third-level institutions in Ireland is another example where students have been supported in providing pastoral care for their peers.

If it can be awakened, there is a hunger in the hearts of many young adults for a personal encounter with the Christ of the Gospel. We are witnessing in Ireland a cultural shift from a sacramentally focussed Church to one which emphasises the richness of faith experience. Many students are indeed open to God but have little real understanding of their faith and they lack the vocabulary to articulate their inner experience. They welcome the opportunity to meet in small groups to explore their faith understanding, to deepen their knowledge of God and of the Church and to share with one another their questions and experiences. Following on the theme of the encounter of the Disciples with the Lord on the Road to Emmaus, we have encouraged the Chaplains/Chaplaincy to promote various faith programmes (e.g. Lectio Divina, Alpha, etc) by which the Scriptures are opened to the participants (Lk. 24:27) and they are encouraged to reflect critically on their faith and on their culture. Introducing them to different methods of prayer (e.g. Taize, meditation, examen of conscience, adoration) enables the students to deepen their personal spiritual lives. As a result of this experience, some students then take the further step in seeking individual spiritual direction.

The Bishops have always encouraged, whether it be for second or third level educational institutes, the provision of a Chapel or space for Liturgical celebration and prayer on campus. This is found to be a most important asset to effective ministry among students. In the intimacy and informality of well celebrated Liturgy, which addresses the students' needs and situations and in which they are actively and creatively involved, the Breaking of the Eucharistic Bread takes on a whole new meaning for them (Lk. 24: 30-32). It is vitally important for the life of the Church today in Irish society that the Chaplains, as also their counterparts in pastoral life in the

Parishes, promote a truly collaborative ministry encouraging all to become engaged in putting at the service of the whole Community their talents of nature and their gifts of grace so that they may all experience Church in its true sense, namely the Family of God's People. The Church in Ireland has often been criticised for being a 'clerical Church', the contrast between the 'us' and the 'them' has too often been highlighted to the detriment of true evangelisation in which all are called to be involved. The Holy Father, Pope John Paul II, has pointed to the way forward by calling all to the way of 'new evangelisation', new in ardour, new in its methods, new in its expressions. He has challenged us to 'launch out into the deep for a catch'. In the 'parish setting' of the University Campus the Chaplain/ Chaplaincy Team is engaged precisely in this, in launching out and in gathering in. This is precisely what the Emmaus experience calls for: encountering the ambient, walking the journey, explaining the message, accepting the invitation to sit down at table, Breaking the Bread and opening up a new and exciting vision in faith. This calls for us Bishops to be ever close to the life of the young students at University level and particularly to be actively in support of our Chaplains.

It seems to me that the value of the Church's involvement in third-level education can never be overestimated. In an age where young people will be increasingly less around the Church, it is vitally important that the Church seek to be close to them, where they are and as they are. Thus it is vital that the Church continue to provide resources and personnel for University Chaplaincies and this, we Bishops in Ireland, will continue to do. The Church's presence in the University is not, in fact, a task that would remain, as it were, external to the mission of proclaiming the faith. The Message of Jesus Christ and the teaching of His Church are integral to the overall formation of the human person and the vision of life imparted is vital for the cultural, intellectual and social life of the individual and of society. Indeed, "the synthesis between culture and faith is a necessity not only for culture but also for faith. A Faith that does not become culture is a faith that is not fully received, not entirely thought through, and faithfully lived" (cf. Cong. For Catholic Education, Pontifical Councils for the Laity and for Culture in the publication: 'The Presence of the Church in the University and in University Culture' May 22, 1994. Cf. Also Letter of Pope John Paul II instituting the Pontifical Council for Culture, May 20, 1982).

In its endeavour to promote a healthy 'synthesis between culture and faith' in University life, the Bishops of Ireland do not underestimate the difficulties which their Chaplains may encounter. From the Reports we receive we note that, while there may be some outright hostility or

indifference to the Chaplain's pastoral role in the University, generally speaking there is support for and appreciation of it, with some ambiguity regarding his more overtly religious role. In a secular educational institution, where tolerance, intellectual freedom, scientific method and open enquiry are valued, there can persist a perception that religious faith inevitably conflicts with these values. We encourage the Chaplains/Chaplaincy to acknowledge these concerns and to be seen to welcome open and honest intellectual enquiry, to foster ecumenical understanding and inter-faith dialogue and to organise lectures and seminars that promote an exchange of dialogue and debate across the various academic disciplines in the search for Truth.

Let me conclude, my friends, by sharing with you some of the concerns which our Chaplains have expressed to us as an Episcopal Conference:

- The Chaplains are faced with the daily task of promoting the value of a truly caring Christian Community in a society increasingly oriented towards the individual as consumer, where the virtues of self-reliance and competitiveness are espoused and whose cultural icons are the radio-headphones, the mobile phone and the personal computer;
- There is need to address, in Ireland, the continuing social inequality in access to third-level education;
- In a Country which is finding it difficult to come to terms with the new phenomenon of immigration and where there is some suspicion of and hostility towards refugees, the Universities can give witness to the cherishing of every person, irrespective of their race, colour, creed or cultural background. Chaplains have a vital role in helping to ensure that the pastoral/religious needs of students from other faith traditions are being catered for and, through inter-faith encounter, they can encourage Christian students to deepen their respect for and understanding of different faith traditions;
- The need for the Chaplain to be rooted in a life of prayer and of personal commitment to Christ and His Kingdom and to reflect, with others, on the vision and experience of Chaplaincy, so that he can overcome the temptation to be constantly doing. It is recognised that the Chaplains can only spend quality time with others when they have, first of all , given that time to themselves and to God. The need for ongoing formation and theological updating is most important for the effective ongoing ministry of our Chaplains and we Bishops must facilitate them in obtaining this necessary ongoing formation.

- As the Students in University are preparing for professional life in the world, it is important that they be prepared for active faith-life after their College years. Many students are drawn more fully into the faith-life of the Church through their experience of University Chaplaincy. With the Chaplains/Chaplaincy Team they have walked their journey of faith. They have found in the Chaplaincy an intimate and friendly atmosphere, meaningful liturgies, the opportunity to participate in Bible Study, faith discussion, prayer groups and retreats and they have valued the support of their like-minded peers. It is small wonder that some of them experience feelings of spiritual loss and abandonment when they leave University. This is a problem for the Bishops and Pastors of Parishes to address. We must ask ourselves how can we expect young Graduates from University to insert themselves into the life of the local Parish when, in fact, they may have been ignored or forgotten by the ecclesial Community during their course of studies? What sort of structures and life-lines do we have in our Parishes in order to accommodate, in a meaningful way, these young adults so that they may be sustained in their faith commitment and contribute in a significant way to the faith-life of the community?

The Emmaus disciples, having recognised the Lord at the Breaking of Bread, went back to their community and told their story with enthusiasm. I pray that, in our pastoral planning at diocesan and parish levels, we may recognise that everyone has much to offer, especially those who have been nurtured in faith by our Chaplaincy programmes during their student days. May we all together bring to fruition that call to universal holiness, which is the hallmark of the Christian vocation. May we recall those words spoken to the youth of the world by Pope John Paul II, as he bade them farewell from Rome in the Great Jubilee Year, “ If you are what you should be, you will set the world ablaze”. These words re-echo the words of Jesus Himself: “ I have come to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were blazing already!” ( Lk. 12: 49).

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