

Homily of Cardinal Seán Brady, Archbishop of Armagh and Primate of All Ireland, for the Mass of Thanksgiving for the Bicentenary of St. Nathy's College, Ballaghaderreen, Co Roscommon

"A truly human education, a truly Catholic education is about the formation of the whole person: of mind, body, spirit and soul" - Cardinal Brady

Bishop Brendan, Fr Convey, distinguished guests, pupils past and present:

Thank you for your kind invitation to be here today. It is a great privilege to play a part in the bicentenary celebrations of this highly acclaimed and internationally respected school. The contribution of St Nathy's College to the life of this nation has been immense. We come to celebrate that proud history. We come to pray that the Lord will continue to bless its pupils, staff and parents, with an even brighter future.

In a short time we will plant an oak tree in the school grounds to mark this bi-centenary. The oak tree is a symbol of life and inner strength, a strength that is achieved through patient endurance. The oak is the fruit of a tiny acorn which becomes one of the strongest trees of all.

No doubt this is what the founders of St Nathy's had in mind when they chose the school motto "RoburNathaei" ("The Strength of Nathy"). When we think of strength we are inclined to think of physical strength, of the ability to prevail over others. Well, even on the sports field, you quickly learn that physical strength alone, without character, conviction and direction is not very effective. It is one thing to be strong. It is another to be skilful, motivated and persevering. That is why education can never be about the formation of the body or the mind alone.

A truly human education, a truly Catholic education is about the formation of the whole person – of mind, body, spirit and soul. It is about providing a rich soil in which the human person can grow in:

- strength of character,
- strength of conviction,
- strength of purpose, and
- strength of faith, hope and loving concern for others.

These are the values that have animated life and learning at St Nathy's College since its beginning. This has been the 'ethos' which has offered direction and purpose to so many. So many young hearts and minds have grown to maturity in the classrooms, the sports fields, the playground and the chapel of this venerable and venerated College for two hundred years. What a remarkable achievement by any standard.

The goal of all education is to help pupils grow. They are to grow to their full human and spiritual stature. For that to happen they have to aspire to high ideals. The teachers in St Nathy's were outstanding in encouraging their students to reach for the stars. Of course, encouragement is vital at that stage of life.

To aspire to high ideals one has to be oneself inspired. You have to have spirit. You have to be soaked in the riches of your own culture and tradition and religion. This takes us back, once more, to the strength of Nathy – to the strength of the Spirit of wisdom and courage, of knowledge and understanding. I am convinced that a well-rounded education, built on high ideals and inspired by excellence, is one of the hallmarks of the College we honour here

today.

You could say then that St Nathy's can be compared to a great two-hundred year-old oak, surrounded today by its many acorns, acorns who have accomplished many great things through inner strength and patient effort. Each of you will have your own particular memories, your own particular journey of growth in strength and maturity to recall. I hope today will be a day of remembering old friendships and renewing youthful dreams. I hope it will be a day for giving thanks for the part played by this great oak in giving nurture, direction and strength to your pursuit of those dreams.

To study the soil in which this great oak is planted, I consulted Father Liam Sword's 'A Hidden Church – the Diocese of Achonry 1698-1818'. It was here that I found a wonderful chapter entitled 'An ScoláireBocht – Hedge Schools'.

In this chapter Father Sword challenges the common assumption that in the eighteenth century there was a lack of education among the Irish. For example, he quotes a French traveller as saying in 1779: "It is a great mistake to suppose the peasants in this country either ignorant or stupid". The general standard of education in Ireland was, in fact, higher than was generally supposed.

This is further evidenced by the fact that the Poet, Sean Ó Gadhra from the Parish of Kilshalvey, composed poems not only in Irish and English but also in Latin. All Achonry priests who studied on the continent had to do so through the medium of Latin, which suggests that a high standard in this classical education had already been acquired here at home. So, the soil from which this great oak grew was clearly that of great respect for education and learning.

It is clear that in St Nathy's great value has always been placed on the service of others, especially those in need. As recently as 2007-08, for example, €20,000 was raised for charitable causes. But this is no new development. On the morning of 31 January 1972, the day after Bloody Sunday, money was given in abundance to support the families of those who lost their lives.

Of course, some past pupils gave more than their money. Many have given their lives to the service of the citizens of this country. They reached the top in education, business, the professions, the media, the Civil Service and the security services. Some gave in other ways. This is borne out in the marvellous collection of some fifty-five reflections and memoirs of past-pupils of the College, collated by Fr Leo Henry and published for this bicentenary. The first contribution in the book is from the late Bishop Thomas McGettrick. After finishing the Leaving Cert in 1923 he went first to Maynooth and then to St Patrick's Missionary Society, Kiltegan. Only sixteen years after the Leaving Cert he became Bishop of Ogoja in Nigeria in 1939 – quite an achievement and something only a man with the 'strength of Nathy' would be up for at such an early age!

On an occasion like this the story of past pupil Jack O'Brien of Donamon also deserves to be told. In 1950 he found himself, a Columban Priest, stationed on the border between war-torn North and South Korea. At one stage he and his colleagues, Patrick Brennan and Thomas Cusack, were offered safe passage to the south. They took the unanimous decision not to accept the offer. They stayed at their posts with their terrified parishioners. Eventually they were arrested and taken north with American prisoners of war. On 24 September, before the

army of occupation retreated, they massacred the prisoners.

In the words of the lovely tribute, published recently in the Souvenir Supplement of the 'Roscommon Herald' and the 'Western People', for the families and friends of those three valiant priests, "There was no information, no traditional Irish funeral, no grave to grieve by, no goodbyes, just a great silence in a land thousands of miles away".

These are only glimpses of the great legacy of generosity, courage and strength of character and virtue which echo down the corridors of this great school. If these walls could speak they would regale us with words of enthusiasm and encouragement. I have no doubt they would speak to us of facing the challenges of our time – in the Church, in our economy, in our personal lives - with similar strength, born out of patient endurance and a deep trust in God.

In a few days time, during his visit to England, Pope Benedict will beatify Cardinal John Henry Newman. During 1856 – 57 Cardinal Newman was in Dublin. There he preached a series of eight sermons in University Church. The theme for the second of those sermons was: 'O God be merciful to me a Sinner'.

All today's Readings celebrate the mercy of God. Of course strict justice would have struck down the worshippers of the Golden Calf and Paul who had done all he could to injure and discredit the faith. But fortunately for them, and for us, the justice of God is tempered by mercy. In fact nothing shows forth God's love so clearly as God's willingness to forgive. Strength is at its greatest when it is expressed in patient forgiveness, understanding and mercy.

This message is expressed so well in one of the stories which caught my eye in the book by Fr Henry. There the Parish Priest of Tubbercurry recalls how one day he noticed a fellow student who was very down.

When he asked him what was the matter he replied that he had fought with someone two days before and couldn't pray. He explained that he couldn't say the Our Father because he couldn't get past the line, 'Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us'. This young student knew what God is saying to us so clearly in each of our readings today.

Great oaks from little acorns grow. From formation in virtue in the home and the school, mercy, forgiveness and understanding grow. I sometimes wonder if we are in danger of losing our sense of mercy and forgiveness in Ireland today. Mercy has been defined as the compassionate care for others. It is the kind of care that takes on the burdens of another as one's own. We are certainly a generous and tolerant people.

But are we truly merciful and forgiving? Have we become too aggressive and impatient in relation to the weaknesses and failings of others?

For Cardinal Newman, mercy was the defining characteristic of the Christian faith. Is it too much to hope that it might one day be the defining characteristic of our society and culture as well?

In his Pastoral Letter to the Catholics of Ireland, Pope Benedict has this to say. "A young person's experience of the Church should always bear fruit in a personal and life giving encounter with Jesus Christ.

That encounter takes place within a loving community.” As I read the reflections and memories of the Nathy’s past students I came to the conclusion that St Nathy’s was, just such a community, caring, loving and nourishing.

How refreshing to find people who acknowledge that this was in fact the case. I am thinking of the 2009 Leaving Cert pupil, who could only hope that those who came after her would have as many great experiences as she had – in a place where every student is shown how to care, not only for themselves, but for others.

The life-giving encounter with Jesus Christ is not only inspired – it is also inspiring. It inspires people to speak and do as Jesus did – the same Jesus who welcomed sinners and ate with them - the Jesus who broke down the walls of division, the Jesus who came to set us free from oppression.

I venture to suggest that today St Nathy offers three gifts of strengths to the College dedicated to his memory:

- Strength of conviction to the parents,
- Strength of purpose to the teachers and
- Strength of character to the pupils.

A Strength of conviction that builds not just houses but homes for families. Homes furnished with curtains and carpets certainly, if possible, but, above all, with faith and prayer as well.

A Strength of purpose to the teachers that inspires them to be witnesses as well as teachers to all that is good and true and beautiful.

A Strength of character that makes the St Nathy student faithful - faithful to commitments undertaken, faithful to themselves and their creator and to others, especially their spouses and children.

Archbishop Joe Cassidy once said “I was genuinely lonely the day I left the College”. May every student genuinely feel lonely the day they leave St Nathy’s but may they soon realise that they need not feel lonely for long because St Nathy’s will have prepared them well for all that lies ahead.

RoburNathaeiabu!