



CATHOLIC MENTAL HEALTH AND MENTORING RESOURCES

▶ LOOK TO THE FUTURE WITH CONFIDENCE & HOPE ▶

An introduction by Fr David O'Malley STB

We need to congratulate the Archdiocese of Birmingham and the Kenelm Youth Trust for this timely resource as schools return after Covid-19. There is a wide spectrum of speculation about how young people will return to school from getting back to normal, business as usual to a darker prediction that young people will return damaged and academically irredeemable in their school life. Quo Vadis takes the positive view that young people are resilient and will be able to adjust to a new situation, perhaps better than the adults around them. Young people in lockdown will have experienced less formal education but they will also have learnt many different things about themselves, family, engage imagination, resolve conflicts and manage time. Young people never stop learning and so they will come back to school with a different experience, they will have changed.

Quo Vadis is timely because it arrives at a point where schools have an opportunity to press a re-set button in many areas and re-balance the life of their community. All disruption creates opportunity for change and Quo Vadis gives schools some of the tools to look again at some of the following balance points in the years ahead:

- Home and School relationships- How will home study or the lack of it change schools work with parents? Some parents' views on teaching have become more appreciative and supportive of school due to home schooling. Some parents have not been able to engage in their children's learning at all. How will the school build on that experience?
- Pastoral specialism and a pastoral community- Quo Vadis opens up the inner world of the young, not just to discover problems but to uncover the skills that allow pupils to support each other better in the future. How might the pastoral aspects of school be shared more consciously by pupils in their own peer relationships?
- Talking and listening- The traditional direction of communication in formal education is from teacher to pupil. Quo Vadis suggests that huge benefits come from reversing that direction as well. Such a change can ease the stress and anxiety that blocks learning and builds an educating community. How might form tutors work differently?
- Optimism and pessimism- Quo Vadis challenges us to accentuate the positive, not as a kind of escapism but as a source of energy to deal with the negatives that inevitably arise. Celebration, affirmation, recognition need to be re-balanced with challenge and criticism especially for the vulnerable pupils and staff.

Many teachers and chaplains reading this will quite rightly say that we are already doing these things. The aim of this resource is to provide some tools that can support that re-balancing in the opportune time after a break. The resource also comes at a time when there is a heightened awareness of community as a powerful and healing element in society. The possibility of compassion, mutual support, interdependence and togetherness seems to have been enhanced by the experience of Covid-19. The opportunity for schools to harness this new focus might depend upon capturing that awareness in the memories and thinking of pupils about lockdown, using the tools provided by the Archdiocese of Birmingham.

So far so good. But this resource does something more. It integrates this thoughtful and therapeutic approach with the faith dimension of the school. It engages positive psychological language to present the Gospel and the presence of God as it emerges in lived experience. In theological terms it is incarnational, it recognises that God meets us first of all in our experience. That is the holy ground and burning bush that schools must approach with reverence and sensitivity. These tools help every school to step onto the holy ground of young peoples' experience not as amateur psychologists but as fellow pilgrims in the search for meaning. Therefore, this resource begins with experience, reflecting, remembering and sharing but also moves beyond into a broad spirituality supported by the Gospel. It introduces the possibility of personal prayer in class and the chance to consciously grasp how meaning is emerging in pupils' lives.

There is of course a darker side to the experience of Covid-19 and we realise that many pupils will return not just academically disadvantaged but also weighed down with memories and experiences of loss at many levels. Some may need specialist support from Camhs and school pastoral support teams. Quo Vadis is suggesting that a school that is more aware, more compassionate, more cheerful can ease many of the serious issues that return with some pupils. The Africans have a saying that it takes a whole village to raise a child. That could apply equally to a school. Combining the insights of positive psychology and the Gospel provides both the language and the meaning to support Jesus' invitation to life in John's Gospel (10:10)

In Catholic thinking we speak of a "preferential option for the poor" suggesting that our focus needs to be on disadvantage. So many of our Catholic schools demonstrate this deep concern for those in their community who are most at risk. It is characteristic of many of our church schools. This resource, arriving in the wake of lockdown, provides an opportunity to articulate this option for the poor because it opens up the value of interdependence and the need for us to assume responsibility for others. We are our brother and sister's keeper. It is only together that we can build the common good and our Catholic schools can model that common good and send out into society pupils who will become super spreaders of the common good for the whole of their lives.

I hope that many schools across the country will adopt Quo Vadis and commit to the training involved not simply as another educational tool but as a way to "re-wire" meaning, optimism compassion and the experience of God in the school community.