

A moral and ethical education for the 21st century

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Reinventing Schooling for the 21st Century

Loreto Normanhurst

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I am delighted to deliver this keynote address as a tribute to the splendid educational leadership of Dr Leoni Degenhardt, our host here at Loreto Normanhurst. This year she has been rightly honoured for her contribution to secondary education, most recently with the awarding of her PhD for the thesis entitled “Reinventing a School for the 21st century – a case study of change in a Mary Ward School”.

Leoni has asked me to speak about moral and ethical education by addressing “the question of values and the need for *soul* and spirituality as a core part of life, and therefore of every school.”

I took the liberty of asking a couple of my Loreto friends long experienced in providing soul and spirituality in Mary Ward schools, how I might best do this. They recommended that I address three issues:

1. How to develop a social conscience
2. Being prepared to act on it, knowing that it will go against the grain and will probably get unwanted publicity
3. How to cope with the loneliness and isolation that will inevitably follow.

Having recently published a book entitled *Acting on Conscience*, I am delighted to have the opportunity to wrestle with these issues. I am no stranger to arguments and positions at odds with the prevailing orthodoxy of our politicians and media. I even have the occasional difference of opinion with some of my own church leaders. Following Leoni's directive, "the question of values and the need for *soul* and spirituality as a core part of life, and therefore or every school", we can acknowledge that we are now all well familiar with the public talk of values. Each of your schools now displays a values poster listing Australian schooling values:

- Care and compassion
- Doing your best
- Fair go
- Freedom
- Honesty and Trustworthiness
- Integrity
- Respect
- Responsibility
- Understanding, Tolerance and Inclusion

Many Australians have reservations about a government poster espousing such values with a quote from an English novelist, George Eliot, proclaiming "Character is Destiny". Others wonder about Simpson's Donkey as the emblematic carrier of these values. But most of us do not have a major problem with this particular listing of values. We might quibble with the ordering or wonder whether such a listing of values is a useful pedagogical tool. The major Australian reservation to this listing of Australian values is the very unAustralian idea that government specifies what our values are for us, and then government dictates that we must display the values in our school - otherwise the cheque will not be in the mail. Then again, perhaps this is becoming the Australian way. We do not even espouse publicly our values unless required by government and unless there be

some financial incentive. We are very pragmatic and consequentialist in our reasoning and planning, and thus in our values.

We are looking at the school of the 21st century as a local form of community where values can be enfolded, enacted and espoused. One of the great moral philosophers of our time is Alisdair Macintyre who published his very influential book *After Virtue* in 1981. He wrote:¹

What matters at this stage is the construction of local forms of community within which civility and the intellectual and moral life can be sustained through the new dark ages which are already upon us...This time however the barbarians are not waiting beyond the frontiers; they have already been governing us for quite some time.

I hasten to add that he is not Australian and he wrote these words long before Paul Keating or John Howard was Prime Minister. In quoting him I am not making a party political point but rather a point about our cultural context.

Just last night I returned from three weeks in Western Australia, mainly the Kimberley. I had the occasion to read Macintyre's recently published second volume of essays on *Ethics and Politics*. In his essay, "Social Structures and their threats to moral agency", he considers the case of J, a person like all of us nowadays. He lived an increasingly compartmentalized life. He was a father, a husband, a member of a sports club, a worker in the railways etc. Over the years, he worked hard and was promoted in the railways. "The key moral concepts that education had inculcated in to J were concepts of duty and responsibility".

Macintyre says, "A philosopher who comes across the likes of J will understand his attitudes as cultural parodies, in part of Plato (conceiving of justice as requiring that 'each do her or his own work and not meddle with many things') and in part of Kant (doing one's duty and not for the sake of any further end), authors who had influenced J's

¹ A. Macintyre, *After Virtue*, Duckworth, London, 1981, p. 245

schoolteachers.”² I daresay that many of the teachers in contemporary private schools in Australia pride themselves on imbuing their students with a strong sense of duty and responsibility.

Early in his career J was curious about what “his” trains were carrying – wheat or pig iron, tourists or commuters. He was told by superiors not to take any notice of such things. He was not to be distracted. He should not be a busybody. He should stick to his last, and just to do his job. Over the years he was promoted and became professionally disinterested and uninterested in what or who his trains were carrying and why. Ultimately his trains were carrying munitions and Jews to extermination camps. When confronted with this dreadful reality after the war, he pleaded: “I did not know. It was not for someone in my position to know. I did my duty. I did not fail in my responsibilities. You cannot charge me with moral failure.”

As moral agents, we and our students are responsible for our intentional acts, for incidental aspects of those actions of which we should be aware, and for at least some of the reasonably predictable effects of those actions.

In our different roles, we acknowledge the authority of evaluative and normative standards embodied in our particular social and cultural order. But as moral agents, espousing the virtues of integrity and constancy across roles and in each of our roles, we also acknowledge standards independent of those embodied in our social and cultural order – standards we can use to critique our social and cultural order.

Macintyre posits an “indispensable moral maxim” for us in the modern world: “Ask about your social and cultural order what it needs you and others not to know”.³ We must presume J was sincere. Macintyre is adamant that even if J did not know, he and others like him “remained guilty and .. their guilt was not merely individual guilt, but, the guilt of a whole social and cultural order”.

² A. Macintyre, *Ethics and Politics*, Volume 2, Cambridge University Press, 2006, p. 186

³ *Ibid* 203

We might debate the extent of J's guilt, but we cannot seriously question his responsibility – individual and collective. Looking back, J and his associates should be heard asking, “How did we let that happen? How did we contribute to that situation? How could we have avoided that situation, or at least helped to put a stop to it?”

In our increasingly globalised world, we and our students need to be educated into acknowledging the interdependence of our situation with the situation of others who do not enjoy our peace, security and abundance. We need to take a stand in solidarity, overcoming the social isolation imposed by our privileged place of peace, security and abundance.

These separate worlds strike me every time I go somewhere like the Kimberley and then return to the old Sydney certainties. Here we are in the midst of all the discussion down south about sexual abuse on Aboriginal communities in the north and the need for urgent action from Canberra. While I was at Turkey Creek I heard the wonderful news that local artist Shirley Purdie had just won the Blake prize for religious art. The local community was bemused and a little hurt that the southern media had said next to nothing about Shirley's win, preferring to focus on controversy over losing entries depicting Osama Bin Laden as a Jesus figure or Mary clad in a burkha.

On Saturday, I heard the story about Shirley's painting from Sr Teresa RSJ, a Josephite sister who has worked in the Warmun community at Turkey Creek for decades. In the lead up to Good Friday, she told the community that they would need some images to use for the Good Friday procession when church members paraded through the community, praying at various houses and public spots in the community. Shirly produced her painting and individuals copied an item each from her painting and displayed it outside their home. This work of art was designed for liturgical worship. It is a good news story for all Australian Christians.

But most Australians in the south remain untouched by such a good news story. We have been preoccupied by the so-called Northern Territory intervention. We know little about it but say to ourselves, “If Noel Pearson gives it the tick, the government must be doing something right. It’s worth a try.” Even those citizens and media personnel who should know better have gone along with the mantra, “The government has to try something. Nothing else has worked. Let’s give them the benefit of the doubt.” Even a cursory glance at the politics should give us all pause. The government has given Noel Pearson and his Cape York Institute \$48 million to trial some new welfare programs on four Cape York communities in the next three years. Meanwhile it has imposed compulsory, untested land, welfare and workplace reforms on 73 Northern Territory communities – reforms which would never be agreed to by Noel Pearson for his own communities. How can we expect this to work when we are not listening to the Northern Territory Aboriginal leaders and the Northern Territory Government – the very ones who will be responsible for delivering long term reforms once the Canberra spotlight has burnt out as it always does? How can we get things so wrong when so many people presumably have good intentions? Government does not commit \$560 million dollars to a reform package without having some good intentions.

On Saturday I was privileged to attend the funeral of a prominent Aboriginal artist (Paddy Bedford) at Bow River station in the East Kimberley. That old man’s work now adorns the new Musee du Quai Branly in Paris. One of his relatives wept by his coffin and proclaimed, “With his death, there are no more old people behind us.” The local community art adviser, Tony Oliver, introduced Sir William Deane who gave a eulogy at the funeral. He described the meeting of these two noble, humble men some years before at Wyndham when Sir William was Governor-General. These two men had embraced as brothers, holding hands while the old man observed that though Sir William was a white man, they were brothers. In his eulogy, Sir William recalled the story of the massacres which the old man had told him about. During our culture wars, some conservative commentators have been critical of Sir William for peddling a black armband view of history describing massacres in terms not fully consistent with the written historical

accounts. Unlike his critics, Sir William had actually heard the oral history of those like the old man who knew what they were talking about.

The New South Wales governor Marie Bashir wrote a remembrance of the old man: “What shall always remain in my memory about this noble man was his great dignity and spiritual strength. There was also his ability to make the best of things despite adversity. In this way, his life became remarkable. ...My life has been enriched by knowing him.”

All this is going on while our parliamentarians with the support of all major political parties are passing laws interfering with the land rights and welfare rights of Aborigines in the Northern Territory without consultation and without the consent of the leaders of those communities to be affected.

Acknowledging the artistic genius of Purdie and Bedford, their nobility as human persons, their distinctiveness as individuals, and the uniqueness of their culture, we need to be more respectful of their kinsfolk rather than treating them as a problem to be fixed with our ingenuity, resolve and generosity.

Given that not even Noel Pearson would agree to emergency response measures for the Northern Territory being imposed on his own communities, how can we sit by, like J disinterested and uninterested, presuming that the government in Canberra is doing the best possible for these people? One of the effects of the NT emergency response is that all Aboriginal parents on the 73 NT communities are being treated as if they are child neglecters or abusers. The legislation and policy changes have been posited on the most simplistic racial stereotyping. We have done nothing to enhance the dignity of the parents living on those communities.

At the Bow River funeral on Saturday were judges and members of the board of the National Gallery of Australia. One of the judges was Ron Merkel, the Federal Court judge who had been involved in some of the more memorable cases when I used to attend the Woomera detention centre in 2002-3. I used to meet with a group of Palestinians

whose refugee claims had been rejected. They had no homes to which they could go. The Australian government was having great difficulty in moving them. In the end, one of the Palestinians, Akram Al Masri, decided to challenge the legality of his detention in the Federal Court. His case was then listed before Justice Merkel. I felt obliged to inform the Palestinians that the judge was Jewish with a fine reputation for upholding human rights. It was unimaginable that he would discriminate against them on the basis of their race or religion. Akram won his case and was released from detention. The next time I returned to Woomera, the three remaining Palestinians were like the little green bottles on the wall. There was one less of them. They decided that they would also like to take a case to court. Their first question to me, with a smile, was, “Do you think we could get the Jewish judge again?” In the middle of the Australian desert, in one of the most wretched institutions ever erected on Australian soil, some of the most complex conflicts seemed resolvable. There is hope when persons are treated with dignity and respect under the rule of law regardless of the history and the politics.

The detention centres at Woomera, Curtin, Port Hedland and Baxter have now closed. They were cruel and inhuman places. Most Australians tolerated them for as long as the government said they were needed. There were some Australians, including protesters, who took a stand in conscience and said that such institutions should not exist for the long term detention of asylum seekers including innocent children. Unlike J, they informed themselves and made it their business to know what their government was up to in their name and ostensibly in their interests. They took a stand for a more moral and ethical society.

Undoubtedly our schools are very good at educating those politicians and civil servants and contractors who set up places like Woomera in the national interest. How good are we at providing the education and the encouragement for the protesters and public intellectuals who make a difference too?

Reflecting on Australia Day earlier this year, I recalled two significant Australian events 40 years ago when I was a school boy. I was twelve years old, having just been promoted

to the large dining room at my country boarding school at Downlands College, Toowoomba. The school was conducted by the Missionaries of the Sacred Heart. It was 3 February 1967. Breakfast started at 7.45am. The din of 300 boys at table was always deafening once the supervising priest declared, “Deo Gratias”. For the first and only time in my five years at the school, a handful of senior boys called for a minute’s silence at 8am to mark the hanging of Ronald Ryan in Melbourne Jail. As Ryan dropped, you could hear a pin drop in faraway Toowoomba, Queensland. The recollection still brings goose bumps. This was wrong. It should never happen again. How could a nation do this? All Australian jurisdictions then abolished the death penalty. Thank God, Pope John Paul II updated the Catholic Catechism just prior to his own death to provide:

The traditional teaching of the Church does not exclude recourse to the death penalty, if this is the only possible way of effectively defending human lives against the unjust aggressor. If, however, non-lethal means are sufficient to defend and protect people's safety from the aggressor, authority will limit itself to such means, as these are more in keeping with the concrete conditions of the common good and are more in conformity to the dignity of the human person.

The ambivalence of many Australian Catholics about the imposition of the death penalty on Saddam Hussein shows just how infected we are by consequentialist reasoning about moral questions. The practical, hands on, Aussie approach often plays fast and loose with moral reasoning about what is right and wrong.

We think it is wrong for foreign states to impose the death penalty on Aussie drug traffickers and drug mules. But we apply different reasoning to non-Australians facing death at the hands of the state. Sure, Saddam Hussein was a murderous thug. The death penalty is either right or wrong. Could innocent human lives be effectively defended in Iraq by keeping Hussein in prison rather than killing him? If so, it was wrong to kill him, no matter what positive political consequences apologists thought might come from the execution, whether televised or not. It is very regrettable that Alexander Downer, the Australian Foreign Minister, claimed that Saddam’s “death marks an important step in consigning his tyrannical regime to the judgement of history and pursuing a process of

reconciliation now and in the future”. The televised images of his death did undermine such reconciliation. The execution was wrong regardless of its consequences.

The second event in 1967 was the constitutional referendum of 27 May when Australians voted overwhelmingly to amend our Constitution so that the Commonwealth Parliament could make laws for the benefit of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders. There was a strong expectation that the discrimination and exclusion of the past would be put behind us and that indigenous Australians would see themselves as having an assured place at the table, especially when their own interests were at stake. I have no recollection of that referendum when I was a school boy. I can remember the ditty from the previous year about the change to decimal currency. But presumably because there were no Aboriginal students or teachers at my school, the 1967 referendum just did not register in my adolescent consciousness. Perhaps I was well on the way to becoming a good Mr J deserving attention by Alasdair Macintyre.

In May 1997, Patrick Dodson presided at the Australian Reconciliation Convention which honoured those pioneers who worked for the 1967 referendum change. At the celebration dinner, Archbishop John Bathersby observed to me that there were very few Catholics involved in that 1967 campaign. On the stage, there were retired Anglican and Uniting Church clergy but no Catholic clergy.

I have forgotten much of the detail of my own school education but I do know that Downlands College, Toowoomba, being all boarding and all male back in the 1960's, did not claim inclusiveness as one of its long suits. I neither noticed nor was I troubled. I got into serious trouble with one of my former Jesuit provincials when I had honestly told a reporter that I could not recall any of my previous teachers who taught me much about justice. I was a sufficiently precocious student that I would have told any teacher proclaiming a social message to stop pushing his political agenda down my throat. On reflection, I told the reporter that there were a couple of teachers who were demonstrably unjust in their actions. They taught me much about justice. I appreciated Downlands because it was a school which provided the space for us to get a hearing and to reflect

upon unjust practices within the school. Perhaps this was the first step towards heightening my sense of inclusiveness and social justice.

At school I was never much good at football with the result that I was always playing in the Cs or the Ds. The Ds always had to play on a sloping field. I once suggested that the As should play on the sloping field because they were more fit and had better ball skills. They would profit more from the variety of challenges on the sloping field. Those of us who were less fit and less able would profit more from the level playing field. Needless to say, there was no change. It never occurred to me to put the same argument about teachers. Being in the A stream, I expected to have the best teachers. A compelling case could have been made for making the better teachers available to the C stream. Those of us in the A stream would have got by fairly well anyway. This did become an issue when Bruce Dawe, the leading national poet, came on the school staff in 1969. He was not allocated to the A stream for Senior English because it was thought best that we have the tried and tested A stream teacher who delivered the best results in the public exam.

When I became a teacher in a school for one whole year in 1981, I had cause to reflect on how you provide a comprehensive education for adolescents. Being a lawyer, I was sent by my Jesuit superiors to teach “veggie maths” to Year 10 boys at Xavier College in Melbourne. I had given up trying to teach them any maths early in the piece. Occasionally I would deliberately use big words, hoping at least to expand their vocabulary. There was only one boy in the class who did not play up constantly. One day I turned from the board and spotted him throwing a ruler across the room. I exclaimed, “Master Minahan, would you please pay at least a modicum of attention.” Matthew Vaughan, a red head and one of 12 children, immediately piped up, “Oh Sir, don’t be so bombastic.” The rest of the class was a write off. Shortly thereafter the deputy headmaster asked if anyone had ever sat in on one of my classes. I was full of dread as he said he would attend first class after that morning break – veggie maths. We walked into the room and then for 40 minutes, every time I asked a question, 22 hands shot in the air: “Sir, sir”. They were never right, but they were so keen and so co-operative. As the

deputy head left at the end of class, James Tehan said, “You owe us one now, sir.” That relationship of solidarity endured for the rest of the year.

Xavier College was a good school and many of the boys came from privileged backgrounds. A few of the teachers were hopeless. One night I asked the headmaster why he tolerated these hopeless teachers. He said, “Some of our boys are used to having the best all the time and they think they can always get their way. I think it is an integral part of their education that they occasionally not have the best and realise that there is nothing they can do about it.” From anyone but an outstanding Jesuit headmaster I would have taken this to be an elaborate rationalisation for failing to act. I was convinced that this was part of the headmaster’s strategy for providing a moral and ethical education in that privileged environment.

How do we create a school community “within which civility and the intellectual and moral life can be sustained through the new dark ages which are already upon us” as Macintyre put it?

In April I had to abandon the Kokoda trek and return home with renal failure. In preparation for the trek, I spent some time with an old friend John Honner whose father Lieutenant-Colonel Ralph Honner, the commander of the 39th Battalion, is one of the heroes of Kokoda. John told me that the key to understanding his father was to appreciate that he was brought up along the Rabbit Proof Fence in outback Western Australia, his own father having been a country police officer. Ralph’s brothers stayed at home and helped with the wheat harvests. Ralph was the only one to receive an education because he won a scholarship to the Perth Modern School. Aged 12, he lodged in a boarding house for commercial travelers, returning home just once a year. He had read the whole of Shakespeare by the time he was 14. His school mates included some of the greats like HC Nugget Coombs. Having studied law, he was one of the first to sign up to serve his country in war. His enlistment number was 15. His life-long friend and author Peter Brune says that when Ralph Honner arrived at Kokoda and “cast his experienced military eye over his new command, he most definitely did not see

defeatism, exhaustion and hopelessness but the lofty, ageless nobility of the eternal soldier.” Reflecting on Kokoda long after the war, Ralph Honner wrote, “That glory is not of the exultation of war but the exultation of man, the nobility of man sublimated in the fiery crucible of war, shining faithfulness and fortitude and gentleness and compassion elevated from dross.”⁴ Your task as educators is to build capacity and durability by enhancing the sense of dignity, self-determination, worth and mystery of the human person who comes from dust and dross.

Your role as educators is to place before your students, staff and parents that “indispensable moral maxim” enunciated by Macintyre: “Ask about your social and cultural order what it needs you and others not to know”.⁵

The history wars continue to keep us all entertained and on our toes. In his recent Sir John Latham Memorial Lecture, Keith Windschuttle lamented, “Our middle class, tertiary-educated left, with its campaign for the 3Rs of refugees, reconciliation and republic, is essentially evangelical. These days, there are fewer Protestants among the movement and more Catholics -- most notably William Deane and the Brennan family -- while the majority are now secularist, though no less evangelical for that.” Having healthy parents, six siblings, 21 nieces and nephews and one grand nephew, I am at a loss to know what it is that the Brennan family has been up to collectively. I am one of those Australians who favours more humane treatment of refugees, reconciliation between all Australians, and a head of state who is one of us. Mr Windschuttle recently turned his attention on one of my more conservative Jesuit brothers – Fr Chris Middleton, the principal of St Aloysius College. He thought Fr Middleton was one of a rag bag lot who were peddling conspiracy theories in our schools with a history unit about the sinking of the SIEV-X, a boatload of 353 hapless asylum seekers who perished at sea en route to Australia.

The Siev X incident followed upon the 2001 Tampa election when we were convinced as a nation of the need to ship hapless Iraqi and Afghan asylum seekers from Christmas

⁴ Quoted by Peter Brune, *A Bastard of a Place*, Allen and Unwin, 2003, pp. 126-7

⁵ A. Macintyre, *Ethics and Politics*, Volume 2, Cambridge University Press, 2006, p. 203

Island in the Indian Ocean across to Nauru in the Pacific Ocean all in the name of border protection. It also followed upon the now infamous Children Overboard affair in which our defence personnel were required to stand by with Canberra tying the hands behind their backs as they watched a boat break up and sink with asylum seekers forced to go into the water before Canberra gave the go-ahead for rescue. Canberra then falsely claimed, and knowingly failed to correct the false claim, that these asylum seekers had thrown their children into the water so as to blackmail our navy personnel.

Eventually our Parliament reported on its “Investigation into a Certain Maritime Incident 6-8 October 2001”. Politicians from government and Opposition reported:

- 3.38 The Committee notes that the consequence of the fact that the asylum seekers were not embarked on HMAS *Adelaide* as soon as any concerns about the seaworthiness of the vessel were expressed was that they all, women and children included, were forced to enter the water when the vessel sank.
- 3.43 The Committee is concerned at the *personal* consequences that may be suffered by commanders such as Commander Banks if these situations ‘go wrong’, and at the government’s apparent obliviousness to the risk it is asking these individuals to run.

Then came SIEV X and the loss of hundreds of lives at sea when a boatload of asylum seekers perished en route from Indonesia to Australia.

In the April issue of *Quadrant*, Fr Middleton in replying to Mr Windschuttle’s charge has given eloquent expression to those characteristics needed in our staff, students and alumnae if we are to build capacity and durability for moral leadership in our schools and community, regardless of their views on the 3 R’s. Middleton wrote:⁶

Whatever about the merits of such a unit in a History programme, I am immensely proud that the unit’s developer, Donald Maclurcan, is an Aloysian graduate (SAC 1999). Here was a young man who felt passionately about an issue and did something about it. He put in the hard work over time, sought professional assistance, and developed a unit around a topic he cared about, and then set out to promote its use. There is a lot talk in our society about apathy. Don did something. There is a lot of talk about poorly prepared argument. Don put the material together thoroughly and thoughtfully. There is a lot of talk about mindless passion and obvious bias, but while the topic reflects Don’s concerns about the important issue of

⁶ C. Middleton, “Teaching History”, *Quadrant*, April 2007, p. 6

asylum seekers, he has prepared a unit that allows students to come to different conclusions. Those who know Don know that this effort is entirely consistent with the integrity with which he goes about life. I might not agree with some of Don's history, nor with some of his politics, but it is a sad day when we fear genuine debate and argument in history or politics.

It is the Middletons and Maclurcans who give us hope that we can provide a moral and ethical education for the 21st century. At this conference, you have the opportunity to exchange stories about those in your school communities who have felt passionately, put in the hard yards, sought professional assistance, and made a difference. Let's not settle for political correctness whether of the right or the left.

Let's stay with Fr Middleton for a while. He has just announced the withdrawal of his school from Amnesty International, and the establishment of a Benenson Society, Peter Benenson having been the Catholic lawyer who founded Amnesty. Fr Middleton wrote in these terms to his school community:

It is with regret that I confirm that St Aloysius College is severing its association with Amnesty International. At their meeting last week in Mexico Amnesty confirmed that it was abandoning its long-held policy of neutrality on abortion. This means that the College and many other schools, I believe, will no longer support Amnesty groups. I raised these concerns with Amnesty a year ago, and have since canvassed the arguments in the media, as recently as a fortnight ago in an article in *The Australian*.

Many people will argue that we should remain inside Amnesty, because of the overwhelming good that it does. Indeed, some of the strongest proponents of the change are counting on this sentiment. What is different about abortion, unlike, for example, promotion of gay rights, is that this policy explicitly excludes some of the most vulnerable members of society – the 'unborn human' – from its campaigns for human rights. To my mind this goes right to the core of Amnesty as a human rights organisation and as a body that gives primacy to conscience. It strikes against the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of the Child which states that every child "needs special safeguards and care, including legal protection, before as well as after birth." This is surely a crossing of the Rubicon, a qualitative difference to other points of disagreement within an organization. Consequently, we feel we have no choice but to leave Amnesty.

I agree with Fr Middleton that Amnesty International's process has been lamentable. I agree that they should have remained neutral on abortion. I have some question (and

difference of perspective) on the co-operation point now that Amnesty has made the policy change. With Amnesty having made the policy change, ought Catholics to avoid assisting and working with Amnesty in all circumstances, including attempts to relieve the plight of prisoners of conscience in jails conducted by totalitarian regimes, even if Amnesty International is the only (or by far the best) avenue for networking and exerting pressure. I could see my way clear to joining an Amnesty campaign for the release of such persons, and I could see my way clear to making a donation for the ongoing work of Amnesty, though with a tinge of regret that it has changed its policy on abortion. I would note that the moral risk of my donation in part going towards a pro-abortion campaign would be similar to the moral risk of part of my taxes contributing to the payment of the medical bills of women having abortions.

In the end the difference of perspective between Fr Middleton and me may simply come down to viewing the glass half empty and the glass half full, once we consider the consequences. Can we more efficiently and with less room for misunderstanding uphold the human rights of persons by setting up a Benenson Society and co-operating on particular campaigns with Amnesty or are we best remaining members of Amnesty while avoiding participating in their pro-abortion activities?

In a school committed to moral and ethical education, I think either outcome is justified. The good thing is that there has been spirited discussion and truthful dialogue in at least one school community and a strong statement of moral values by that school community to the public, in the face of an obscurantist approach by Amnesty which has acted with the lack of transparency which often is the hallmark of the oppressive regimes with which Amnesty has cause to join issue – seeking to shame dissembling state officials.

Respectful dialogue and fearless discussion are the keys to constructing schools as those “local forms of community within which civility and the intellectual and moral life can be sustained through the new dark ages which are already upon us.”

Earlier this year, I spent a month in Papua – the west of the island of New Guinea taken over by Indonesia in 1963 and oppressively administered ever since. It took the arrival of 43 Papuan asylum seekers on a boat last year to convince me that it was time to go and see the situation next door. These people have known endless oppression for four decades and they live just 300km from our shores. One Papuan priest looked me in the eye and said, “We are your neighbours.” There is a well known parable about all that. He was prompting me to action.

A woman in Jayapura told me that she was very sad that Australia had taken no notice of her people for more than 40 years and that it took just one boatload of asylum seekers to make Australians curious, if not interested, in the people next door.

When that boat arrived in Australia, our government was anxious that there not be a flow of refugees from Papua. They wanted Parliament to extend the Pacific solution because it was “necessary to prevent Australia from being used as a staging post for political protests”. Independence for Papua is now virtually inconceivable. Papuan leaders and church groups speak not about independence, but about the need for Papua to be a Land of Peace – *tannah damai*. It was not always preposterous to consider that at some time in the future the people of Papua might be free and independent. Throughout the 1950s, the Menzies government was adamant that Melanesia and Indonesia were distinct entities and that “the people of West New Guinea have little in common, except a past common administration, with the peoples of Indonesia”. Our government joined others at the UN in signing off on a deal which saw sovereignty in Papua transferred to Indonesia in 1963 with provision for a later “act of free choice” in 1969. By then, there was no choice at all.

When I was flying home from Papua, a Garuda flight attendant sat down next to me. I told her that I was sad because my friend Liz O’Neill, the Jakarta embassy official, was one of the five Australians who had died in the tragic plane accident at Yogyakarta two days before. She then told me that she too had lost a friend who had been a steward on that fateful flight which claimed 21 lives.

We held hands briefly. It was a special moment. Liz would have smiled – Liz whose human touch constantly broke through barriers and brought people together in the midst of tragedy - Liz the daughter and sister schooled in faith, the wife and mother nurtured in love, the friend and diplomat dedicated to hope in our shared humanity. She spent her last years dedicated to creating good relations between neighbours, between Australia and Indonesia, especially in the midst of tragedy. She was the beneficiary of a moral and ethical education, having developed soul and spirituality as a core part of her life.

In considering the third Loreto point, I note that we can all get a bit weary in taking a stand on complex issues of conscience, especially when we receive friendly fire. I get into trouble every time I go to Western Australia nowadays. The local Catholic paper *The Record* has little interest in reporting my position on proposed new laws which raise ethical concerns. They prefer to report on my failure to comply with every Vatican utterance. Just two weeks ago, *The Record* purported to report my remarks about proposed new laws on stem cell research under the headline, “Embryo research OK: Jesuit – The Church teaches research on embryos left over from IVF process is not morally permissible. Jesuit Fr Frank Brennan says it is.” (*The Record*, 22 August 2007) I made no such claim.

The partisan church tabloid confused three issues. There is a need to distinguish (1) what is morally appropriate for childless Catholic couples wanting to avail themselves technical assistance with the bearing of their own children, (2) what ought the law be for regulating experimentation on human embryos already in existence but with no further prospect of implantation, and (3) what ought the law be for permitting the creation of human embryos for experimentation. I will comment on each issue. You will note that it is the third point which is presently newsworthy in light of the fact that it is to be debated in the Western Australian Parliament shortly.

(1) Any priest with pastoral experience knows good Catholic couples who have had children conceived through IVF. When such a couple has sought my pastoral or moral

advice, I have discussed with them Cardinal Ratzinger's 1987 statement *Donum Vitae* which says that all IVF is unacceptable. I have acknowledged that such a couple, having vowed on their wedding day to accept children lovingly from God, could - after prayerful reflection, in good conscience - avail themselves of IVF as a form of technical assistance to rectify their infertility. If they used their own gametes, insisted that doctors not produce embryos excess to IVF requirements, and refused permission for experimentation on those embryos remaining after successful implantation, they could be acting in good faith, embracing life and the fullness of their marriage vows. Such a practice of IVF could be morally permissible.

(2) In 2002, the Commonwealth Parliament legislated to permit scientists to experiment on excess IVF embryos with the permission of the parents. The Parliament legislates for all Australians, not just for Catholics who would follow *Donum Vitae* to the letter. In 2002, the majority of our politicians decided that, as the excess embryos were going to die anyway, they would remove the legal prohibition on all experimentation on those embryos. Parents could continue to refuse permission for experimentation.

If a politician, I would have been wary about supporting the 2002 law for fear that it would open the door for the creation of embryos just for experimentation. But if there could have been a guarantee against that slippery slope, I would probably have voted for such a law, making research on embryos left over from IVF legal, though not, in my opinion, morally permissible. If I were a scientist, I would not think it right for me to experiment on these embryos. I would counsel any scientist who sought my pastoral or moral advice to avoid experimenting on human embryos. However I will continue to respect those scientists of a contrary moral view who think it appropriate to experiment on embryos for the good of humanity when such embryos are going to succumb anyway. When the 2002 law was reviewed in 2006, none of our church leaders argued strongly for a repeal of the law permitting experimentation on excess IVF embryos with parental consent. Such experimentation provided only that it is for the good of humanity is probably in accord with contemporary Australian values.

(3) In 2006, the scientists wanted to force open the door, permitting the creation of embryos specifically for destructive experimentation and the harvesting of embryonic stem cells. I strongly opposed such a law on the basis that one ought not to create human life just for the purpose of destroying it. At least the excess IVF embryos are created with a chance at life. Morally there is a difference between creating embryos only for destructive experimentation and creating embryos which are available for selection and successful implantation. This is now the issue confronting the WA Parliament.

Addressing these three issues, I have not found it helpful to describe a human embryo of less than 14 days as a human person or human being with a soul. It is human life in its earliest form and should be treated respectfully. Given that the majority of embryos do not naturally implant or thrive, it would be a significant theological challenge to posit that the majority of human beings with souls do not live beyond a few cell divisions. Given that an embryo can twin at 14 days, it is another theological challenge to posit that a human being with a soul can become two human beings each with a distinctive soul. I do not believe that the disposal of a beaker of human embryos is morally equivalent to the shooting of a room full of people. I believe that the creation of human embryos for destructive experimentation is morally wrong. I think the WA Parliament should vote against the *Human Reproductive Technology Amendment Bill* introduced by Mr McGinty. Such reportage by church newspapers does become a little wearisome.

Mind you I am kept on my toes by those Catholics ever on the look out for my errant ways. As the editor of that paper told me last week: “We think you sail close to the wind on a lot of these issues.” On a lot of these issues, we are irrelevant to the public moral discourse and to the moral formation of our students unless we are sailing close to the wind. Staying safely anchored in port cushioned by Vatican declarations might assist the individual Catholic who has resolved to be guided always by Vatican declarations regardless of their mode of argument or their authoritativeness in the hierarchy of Vatican and papal declarations. This approach is fine for the individual Catholic who has to consider only what is best for his or her own moral situation. It does nothing to assist in the resolution of what ought be the law or social policy in a pluralistic society like

Australia. It is not trumps in the engagement with young minds seeking integrity and constancy in their own lives in light of the experience and reflection on experience of their friends and fellow citizens, most of whom do not regard themselves as bound by all Vatican declarations. Since 1968, the Vatican is seen to have a distinctive mode of argument about issues of life and sexuality – a mode of argument which is not self-evidently right for many persons of goodwill whose reflection on experience is at various with what the Vatican claims to be the natural law. Our graduates have not only to live in a pluralistic society, but have to be equipped and emboldened to participate in the deliberations of such a society, respecting the moral perspectives of those very different from themselves.

After the New South Wales parliamentary debate on stem cells, Cardinal George Pell gave a lengthy interview to Monica Attard on ABC radio. I hope I am not one of those clergy who, according to His Eminence, “on questions of public morality strut around like peacocks and would certainly never dream of mentioning that those who differ from them on issues of public morality have any right to a primacy of conscience, and then when they come to matters of personal morality, on sexuality, marriage, family life, abortion, euthanasia, stem cells, immediately appeal to this chimerical primacy of conscience.”⁷ Having publicly argued the church case in recent national debates on euthanasia and stem cells as well as on Aboriginal and refugee rights, I hope I can be seen as one with a consistent life ethic and a consistent approach on the primacy of the formed and informed conscience.

When contemplating the guilt or responsibility of a whole social and cultural order, we want our students not to be caught in the compartmentalized lives driven by duty and responsibility in their roles but with insufficient attention to integrity and constancy in their lives across many roles, as moral agents. There may well be times when they will have to take a stand on their own, feeling unsupported by the authorities in their social and cultural order (even including church leaders).

⁷G. Pell, Interview with Monica Attard, ABC Radio, 17 June 2007

I dare to say that the school providing a moral and ethical education for its graduates of the 21st century will be producing APEC demonstrators as well as government advisers and heads of state. It is often left to the protesters to proclaim from the rooftops those things which the social and cultural order want us not to know.

When confronted with the loneliness and isolation of decisions made in good conscience, against the tide of prevailing orthodoxy, those educated in an Australian Mary Ward school should find rest and comfort in this year's Blake prize painting of which the judges said:

The winning work by Shirley Purdie is simply delicious in colour, texture and feeling. It is a marvelously realised painterly journey that recreates the stories told to the artist in childhood of the Stations of the Cross in Warmun country using a breathtakingly beautiful natural ochre palette made from the earths eroded from the very Kimberley rocks whose mobile shapes enclose and frame the vignettes of story. A solidly honest, confident, and true painting it becomes a meditation on traveling within the artists country following a remembered and cherished biblical journey of suffering and pain towards redemption, and perhaps as well asks us to reflect on loss, pain and the journeys we all need to make towards each other.

When our graduates reflect with integrity and constancy on the loss, pain and the journeys we all need to make towards each other, they do us proud as the builders and sustainers of school communities “within which civility and the intellectual and moral life can be sustained” no matter how dark the times, nor long the tunnel.