



address by **CHRIS GLEESON SJ**

Thank you for the opportunity to say a few words today and congratulations on both the initiative and the outcome in producing this fine booklet on Congregational Schools in New South Wales. I have had 12 years of working in this particular fine school at St. Ignatius - in two segments - so I am not unaware of the richness of the contribution made by NSW Congregational schools described so eloquently in the booklet.

This is not the first time that I have stepped into the shoes of one, Gregory John O'Kelly. I have never stepped into his episcopal shoes previously, but I succeeded him here at Riverview as Principal in 1993 with both admiration at what he had built and apprehension at the size of the debt he generously bequeathed to me. In 1989 he was invited to give a paper on 'teaching values' at an independent schools conference here in Sydney, but declined in favour of speaking in his preferred medium - the after dinner speech, where he could regale his audience with his many stories and anecdotes. I duly stepped into his shoes to give the paper and interestingly, an invitation to write a book issued from the giving of that paper. It saw the light of day in 1993, published by Hodder and Stoughton. I doubt whether any such invitation will issue from these few words.

I just want to take one aspect of the booklet and make a few comments about it. I very much agree with the author's thoughts about the strengths of charism in congregational schools and its provision of "links to a bigger church world." On the other hand, the author wisely points out that "charism does not exist for itself. It is fundamentally an instrument for building up and renewing the whole Church. Any tendency to use charism to create what one writer terms a 'parallel church' would be quite contrary to the spirit of the various founders"

My strong sense is that Congregations and those who work with them continue to take this caveat very seriously. For the past two years I have been a member of the inaugural Edmund Rice Education Australia (EREA) Board, to which the Christian Brothers have entrusted the responsibilities of managing their 40 or so schools in Oceania. This is no fly by night decision. The Brothers spent seven years preparing for this new structure, so much thought has been given not just to maintaining the Edmund Rice charism but to developing it as much as possible. I have also heard people saying around the Board table that the spirituality of Edmund Rice must be seen as a pathway to Jesus and not an end in itself.

Let me quote from a Letter to all EREA School Principals in January this year, written by EREA Executive Director, Wayne Tinsey, formerly the Director of Catholic Education in the Maitland/Newcastle Diocese, and a man steeped in the ways of systemic Catholic education.

"Last week I received a letter from a Brother asking what were the true values upon which our schools were operating. This was in response to an article which challenged the commitment of many Catholic schools to social justice and the pursuit of agendas broader than excellence in the academic and financial arenas.

"I include the following extract from a talk I gave last year at several end of year functions. I hope that it highlights the broad understanding of excellence that we pray that our schools will embrace.

"Tonight we celebrate excellence and the wonderful achievements and talents of our students in 2008. Perhaps it is appropriate on such an occasion that we reflect for a time

on how we define and understand 'excellence' in our school and in our lives in general. Let me first talk about our college. Our college has a long and proud tradition of excellence in Catholic education and the formation of young men. To be an excellent Catholic school, this College is challenged to make the Christian Gospel visible and active in its structures, priorities, and school culture. Not only must mission statements, policies and RE classes be inspired by the Gospel but so must all elements of a school's life and culture. To make the Gospel real in college life, we struggle with important questions: What is celebrated in this school? What is not celebrated? How are resources spent? Which voices are listened to? Who is welcomed? Who is excluded? How are we defining success for our students? What values are continually reinforced in our assemblies, bulletins and year books? How is injustice challenged in this school? How are the less able, the less articulate, and the less presentable cared for?"

In May this year Wayne Tinsey wrote a very fine position paper for EREA School Principals entitled "An Option for the Poor in Edmund Rice Schools", in which he demonstrates his awareness that there are some concerns about the emergence of EREA in the wider community. He writes:

"Concern is being raised in some external forums around the country as people wonder what will be the future of this well known group of schools which will imminently separate from its parent body, the Congregation of the Christian Brothers. Will they set themselves up as a separate system? Will they want to receive government grants centrally and redistribute this funding in a way that negates or damages relationships to local Church structures? Will they set themselves up as a powerful independent schools' system and aspire to all that might mean? At the same time, some voices from within the Edmund Rice family have also expressed concern that by becoming independent of the Province, we might lose our way in terms of our core mission and our link to the deepest aspirations of the Congregation and the broader Church."

In arguing that EREA schools have a central mandate to embrace and implement 'an option for the poor', Wayne Tinsey proceeds:

"As Catholic schools in the Edmund Rice tradition, we are works of and for our Church; an inclusive Church that shows deep love for the poor and marginalized; a Church which strives to usher in the Kingdom of God- the promise of fullness of life and true freedom for all in our troubled world. The Charter for Edmund Rice Education and the broader foundations upon which we stand clearly direct our mission to the 'margins', to the disadvantaged, to those who lack hope. The Church we serve promotes service and compassionate engagement with the world as indispensable to the way in which Christians worship a loving God who stands with and for the poor."

As a Jesuit and hopefully someone bringing another set of objective eyes to the EREA Board, I am convinced that its policies and procedures are in keeping with the best of Congregational School practice outlined in this fine booklet being launched today.

By way of conclusion, in the EREA we have but one example of a Congregation being absolutely true to its charism and looking for new ways of putting this charism at the service of the Church in the new millennium. It is a bold innovation.

There will always be skeptics about change, of course, even in high places, but we must make change our friend. It was John Henry Newman, soon to be a Saint I hope, who said once: *"To grow is to change, and to become perfect is to have changed many times."*