

Sister Judith Russi in conversation with Raymond Friel
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For anyone who has, like me, had the privilege of enjoying Sister Judith's company and witnessed to the dynamism of her presentation, this interview recalls the joy and engagement of the experience but also offers me the added benefit of listening again and picking up the bits I missed and, allowed for a reassessment of the importance of some particularly challenging moments.

In an exchange that quite rightly focusses upon Sister Judith's remarkable contribution to the development of Catholic education in England and Wales, there are those asides and forays into the wider issues that confront our Church and which impinge upon the ability of schools to speak authentically in guiding the formation of our young people. She demonstrates an acute understanding of that contextual element that cannot be ignored. In a very real sense, although Sister Judith is immediately identifiable within the Church's educational mission, it is her acute understanding of the pressure points and the tensions that emerge in a classroom setting, where Church teaching is challenged by society's demanding questions that point to her real value as a witness to a Church in transition.

There is a repeated affirmation for the way in which Pope Francis is leading the Church and an admiration for his willingness to engage in those difficult conversations. Her dismissal of that feature of her own education which inflexibly provided trite answers, that simply have not stood the test of time, lies at the heart of her advocacy of the dialogical approach of our present Holy Father. Her unwillingness to rush to easy answers to difficult questions is alluded to and comes across as a mark of the maturity in her own thinking and innate wisdom, a tribute to a lifelong religious formation.

This perceived caution, one of the features that I had previously missed, has provoked this listener/reader into re-evaluating Sister Judith as a disciple for a Church in transition. Her vigorous and challenging rhetorical style, when critically examining the Church's foibles, masks to a degree a more considered and subtle evaluation of its transitional state. It is a mark of a loving filial attachment to the Church, gently formed by the Sisters of St Mary of Namur who educated and formed a self-confessed unruly pupil, who can now present as a charismatic and convincing advocate for its educational mission.

The absence of the same deeply formative preparation for leadership of a Catholic school with the demise of our religious orders is just one of the topics to emerge in an evaluation of Catholic education's challenging issues. This however, like a number of others, is being addressed and Sister Judith is remarkably well placed, as Director of the charity EducareM with involvement in the National Retreat for school leaders and the National School of Formation, to speak with confidence that corrective measures are in place to rebuild a system fit for the needs of our schools in the times in which we live.

Having spent a life time in Catholic schools and read every document and a good many books published in the last fifty years, I just love the economy of her "street definition" of what characterises a Catholic school: *"... the purpose of a Catholic school is very clearly the transformation of the person for the transformation of society. Our task as educators is to help the child find the gift and learn how to use it and have the wisdom to know when to use it."*

What I do admire about Sister Judith is her absolute zest for life, her commitment to her vocation, her unshakeable faith in and love for the Church and the confidence she shares with Pope Francis in the future, going as far as allowing him the last word:

"For Christians, the future does have a name, and its name is Hope."

Willie Slavin

