

Alex Grew 6' Last Night

Andrew Mullins (Australia)

Andrew Mullins has been teaching at Redfield College in Sydney for over 15 years. Redfield was born following the model of other schools instituted by parents and based on the teachings of Blessed Josemaría Escrivá regarding the education of their children. His presentation reflected his experience as an educator who sees how the teachings of Blessed Josemaría contribute to young people's character formation.

First let me begin with a story that ties together many of the principles that we have learned in Redfield about character building from Blessed Josemaría. Some years ago, we received a call from a local shop owner, telling us he had caught one of our 10 year old students stealing some lollies. The boy's tutor, the teacher who was his mentor, spoke to the boy about stealing, made sure the boy faced up to the shopkeeper to apologise, and also told the boy he needed to speak to his father about something important like this. The next day the father rang the school. He was absolutely grateful and ecstatic. He said that his son had spoken to him. He said, "Alex grew 6' last night". They had never had such a good talk. Eight years later in his last months at school, the boy chose to write about that talk with his father as one of the greatest moments of his childhood. What that young man didn't know was that the tutor had rung his father to say, "Don't get angry. Your son has something important to tell you tonight. Use it to talk with him".

This simple story illustrates some principles that we have been trying to put into practice at Redfield since the College began, principles which have come to us more or less directly from Blessed Josemaría. First and last [...] do everything possible to support the work of the parents. Second, foster sincerity. Third, demand with affection.

Blessed Josemaría talked so much about the importance of fostering sincerity in young people, and of the need for parents and teachers to *demand with affection*. Recently at an Australian conference on boys' education one of the key note speakers, well known in Australia for his writings over the years about family and for his directorship of the government funded Australian Institute of the

Family, said, *every piece of research on effective childhood socialisation identifies two broad parameters, emotional support and limit setting...* In other words, all good advice in educating children comes back to demanding with affection.

Although Redfield College only commenced in 1986, we have put great effort into understanding and applying the principles of character formation that Blessed Josemaría taught about the education of young people.

1. FOUR MAJOR ATTITUDES

I would now like to focus on four major attitudes that the boys acquire in a large part as a result of this character formation, and as a result of the teachings of Blessed Josemaría. To the extent that home and school work together, a point constantly emphasised by Blessed Josemaría, these attitudes will be all the more deeply adopted by students.

Every boy in the College takes into life the positive view that one can be a better person, little by little, if one strives to be so, and that this effort to be better is closely tied to happiness. As a parent in the school put it, *We like the personal interest shown in our son — there is someone other than us who wants to be and helps him to be the best person he can be.*

Blessed Josemaría taught us that virtues are the building blocks of happiness. A focus on virtues creates an environment that is more interested in personal convictions rather than in the regimentation and compulsion found in so many educational environments for children. [...] *there is no real education without personal responsibility, and there is no responsibility without freedom*, wrote Blessed Josemaría¹.

We regard virtues as the key to building resilient characters, which are thus fortified against the tragic tides of depression, substance abuse and self harm that are so prevalent in our country. Virtues are the key to turning good intentions into effective action, and leadership. How many young persons we see who are high on ideals but woefully inadequate on personality to put those ideals into practice.

The second attitude evident in students in the College is the determination to be responsible workers, first of all in their studies. Blessed Josemaría's teachings on sanctifying work translate perfectly into the classroom.

It is not uncommon to see the boys place a crucifix or picture of Our Lady on their desk [...] particularly during exams! I remember one father telling me how his son had taught him to better sanctify his work. When they were labour-

¹ *Christ is Passing By*, 27.

ing in their back yard laying turf, his son had asked him, *What will we offer this up for, Dad?* This understanding of the supernatural value of work and of unity of life is directly attributable to the teachings of Blessed Josemaría. There is no danger that as a school we can insist too much on academics, for studies are always in the context of sanctifying one's daily work, and acquiring strengths of character.

Naturally such a positive work ethic should bring academic results well beyond normal expectations. In the last two end of schooling (Higher School Certificate) examinations in New South Wales, Redfield College has ranked in the top 20 schools in the state against some 700 schools. In Mathematics we were ranked second this year. All the other top ranking schools are academically very selective; Redfield alone did not select its candidates on an academic basis. Furthermore, in Australia we are seeing a crisis in boys' education: the average score of boys on this HSC examination is ten percentage points below that of girls. Most of the better performing schools are highly selective coeducational or girls schools.

This issue of asking responsibilities of students brings to mind a story. In accord with Blessed Josemaría's advice to trust young people with real responsibilities, we have always sought to give the boys jobs to do. There was a time that, when the College was small, students used to answer the telephone. One day the student picked up the phone and in his best voice said, *Redfield College. Can you help me?* At that moment we realised that the College needed a secretary to answer the College phone. We looked for other jobs to give the boys!

Third, we see that students become 'self starters' in their spiritual lives, learning to value the Mass, prayer and sacramental life as the primary sources of grace [...] from the little Downs child in our youngest class who delights in going right to the front of the chapel to pray right in front of the monstrance on First Fridays, to our school captain who kneels praying in the chapel for fifteen minutes every school day morning. It is beautiful to see how boys 'take off' in their studies and even in classroom leadership when they start to put time into personal prayer.

At the start of last year, to accommodate the numbers of boys wanting to attend daily Mass, we have doubled the size of the chapel so that it now seats approximately 100. Against a national backdrop of only a few percent of 17 and 18 year olds practising their religion, at least a third of our oldest class would choose to be at Mass each school day in the year that has just ended. Positive peer example helps many boys gain good habits of attending Mass and having frequent recourse to the sacrament of reconciliation. I remember one boy telling me in our last tutorial before he left the College in 1993 that the most important thing he had learned in the school was to get to confession regularly. He still drops in to see the chaplain.

Fourth, we are seeing a disposition on the part of the boys to put themselves at the service of others. Many boys are involved weekly in visits to aged care homes, and to a major children's hospital to work with sick and disabled children. As a school last year we raised money to rebuild the small Nahaek Catholic school which had been burned down during the civil disturbances in East Timor. One of our oldest classes led the fundraising. Many students have taken part in service projects; two months ago a group of twenty Year 10 students carried out a project in an aboriginal community in the far north west of New South Wales. It was a great help to the locals and an eye opener for our students.

This spirit of service is evident also in the relationships between the students. From the earliest years of the College we have emphasised loyalty and genuine open-hearted friendship between the boys. I can think of numerous occasions when boys and old boys have spoken directly to their classmates when they have been concerned for their friend's moral well being. In recent weeks our oldest class met with Archbishop Pell prior to graduation. He gave them some tips preparing them for adult life. He advised them to keep up daily prayer, regular confession, decency, and that they look after each other. All this advice resonated in the hearts of the boys.

2. EDUCATING FOR CHARACTER

Schools seem to adopt one of three possible approaches. First, too many schools have a low level of demand in academics and social behaviour. Their students have little asked of them, a lot given to them, and are totally under-prepared in life. Two, another type of school demands a great deal academically but does so in a way that children are not encouraged to grow in strength of character, or virtues. Consequently these students too are also at risk, for they can be bereft of the character development they need before the pressures that society, media, and peer group are constantly exerting. A third type of school challenges students in both their studies and to grow in all aspects of their character development, including their faith. Blessed Josemaría would be telling us who work in these schools that we should not be afraid of demanding a great deal but we must do this with tremendous respect and regard for the students. In my experience, I see that students thrive on high expectations and personal encouragement.

Demanding of children involves correction, which in an ideal world is calm and kind. One story. Recently a teacher coaching a junior rugby team, a very successful rugby team, became very upset with one of his thirteen year old players who was not taking the team drills seriously enough. He sent him to get changed, but the next day, feeling he had been too cranky apologised to the boy.

With a smile the young man said, “It’s OK sir, you have to correct me!” If only we all reacted that way at times.

Speaking to teachers during his catechesis in Spain in 1972, Blessed Josemaría advised that teachers should show the boys great loyalty, let them see that they are loved, that the teachers sacrifice themselves for them, that they have enough knowledge, and that they know how to communicate it to them with good humour, with clarity, and with the gift of tongues so that they understand. This is because teachers cannot demand of boys what they do not have themselves.

Anyone of us who has come into contact with the teachings of Blessed Josemaría knows that our lives are only worth the love we put into them. My aim as a teacher is to give this authentic example, reinforcing the example of parents, so that the young people in my care grow with resilient characters, and are made fully capable of acting in every moment of their lives out of love. The society of the future will be in good hands if it is guided by persons of virtue who act out of love for their fellow men and women.

In our society we see persons who have the skills of leadership, skills such as public speaking, planning, knowledge of the political process, etc, but who lack the personal character, the virtues, necessary for true leadership. The four attitudes outlined above are essential foundations for future service to society [...] as Peter Drucker has emphasised, self management is the key to effective leadership of others. Without a determination to be the best person one can be, without the virtue of industriousness, without a humble acknowledgement of God, and without an habitual readiness to serve, civic responsibility becomes wishful thinking or worse, corrupt self service.