

proclaiming the mission

THE DISTINCTIVE
PHILOSOPHY
AND VALUES OF
CATHOLIC EDUCATION

PROCLAIMING THE MISSION



FOREWORD

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It is particularly fitting that at a time when there is a new awakening of interest in and appreciation of Church Schools that we should ourselves reflect on the purpose and meaning of Catholic Education.

It follows of course that any consideration of such issues must itself take account of the prevailing circumstances and social climate within which we seek to discharge our responsibilities to the children and young people placed in our care.

These young people will come to adulthood in a society increasingly pluralist and diverse in nature and within a world characterised by an accelerating globalisation of economy, media and social mores.

The challenges implicit here are very significant. Already we witness within our community an increasingly utilitarian view of education whilst within society itself, we see a growth in individualism and a resultant underlying loss of social coherence.

The challenges posed by the modern world have long been recognised and in the conciliar document, *Gaudium et Spes*, the Church reminds us of her responsibility to “be aware of and understand the aspirations, the yearnings and the often dramatic features of the world”.

Thus it is the purpose of Catholic Education to prepare our young people for that world not in the narrow sense of simply transmitting skills and knowledge. Education

viewed in this way is effectively starved of belief, imagination and vision, qualities sadly lacking in many aspects of our modern world. Catholic Education seeks to address this deficit. In essence it seeks to be both definitional and inspirational.

This is why Catholic Schools will be happy to be defined by their values: love, solidarity, truth, justice and the pursuit of the common good. These values by their nature carry certain responsibilities. Foremost amongst these is the provision of an education that is essentially liberating, that forms our young people in the fullest sense, not only in terms of their intellectual ability and spirituality, but also as communal beings equipped to live in harmony with others.

The Church has always accepted and sought to honourably discharge these responsibilities and will continue to do so. The Catholic commitment to solidarity, defined by Pope John Paul II as “a firm and preserving determination to commit oneself to the common good”, requires a preparedness to outreach to others and this is a vital attribute of education in a pluralist society.

The rightful place and the positive contribution of Church schooling in a pluralist society are increasingly being recognised throughout Europe. We in Northern Ireland can also be justifiably proud of our Catholic schools.

With my brother bishops I gladly commend this document to all interested in education and hope that it will contribute to the education debate at this time.

Education is, in a very special way, the concern of the Church, not only because the Church must be recognised as a human society capable of imparting education, but especially because it has the duty of proclaiming the way of salvation to all, of communicating the life of Christ to those who believe, and of assisting them with continual care so that they may be able to attain to the fullness of that life. The Church, as a mother, is obliged to provide for its children an education in virtue of which their whole lives may be inspired by the spirit of Christ. At the same time, it will offer its help to all peoples for the promotion of the well-balanced development of the human person, for the good of society in this world and for the development of a more human world.¹

In a timely critique of the dangers of a lack of vision or clarity concerning educational direction, the English educationalist Albert Price argued for 'a credo for education'² which unites vision and practice. Without such first principles education ceases to be a definitional and inspired activity which is intrinsically linked to the process of becoming a fully human and spiritual being, becoming instead - at best - a much more limited activity by which skills and knowledge are transferred from one generation to another.

According to Price the modern concept of education is starved of belief, imagination and vision. So long as the vision of human nature and the purpose of education are ignored or fail to be together in harmony, he argues, all issues revolving around the practicalities of educational implementation, skills acquisition, curricular development, knowledge attainment, and so on are answered in a decidedly one-sided and 'false' sense.

For Price, the Christian ideal of education - education in its true sense - is based on love, solidarity, the common good, truth and justice. It is not an economic or even a political activity. True education is a moral activity which has at its heart the twin notions of the fundamental worth of each person and the notion of a higher common good to which each belongs and through which each expresses his/her common God-given humanity.

The biblical images and practice contained in the teachings by Jesus of the Kingdom offer us a form of educational practice based on the shared vision and ideals which the true Christian educator strives for. Price outlines the challenges facing Christian education in the starkest terms. According to Price:

The contrast between what is happening now and what is actually needed is stark and presents Christian educators with many new challenges. This mission of our Church in education is a great responsibility. We are not Christians for ourselves alone. Nor is our first responsibility the survival of Catholic schools. We are not part of a public education service simply to go with the flow whatever the cost. Our first concern has to be the nature, purpose and practice of education itself. Where there is no true education there is no safe haven for Catholic schools.³

The issues outlined above are challenging - as they are timely. Price invites us to consider not simply the identification of a rationale or a justification for a specifically Catholic system of schooling. He insists that we go beyond that and identify what the true sense of education is - its purpose, goal and practice - and how the Church responds to this. We are urged not to provide some defensive apologia for the continuance of the Catholic education system. Rather we are exhorted to look at the entire educational question within the overall salvific mission of the Church and to state how we can help towards the building of the Kingdom, the salvation of God's people and the liberation of humankind from ignorance, denial of human dignity and powerlessness.

The purpose of this paper is to examine the challenges outlined by Price above, to identify what do we mean by education and what is the mission of the Church in the educative realm. If we accept that every creative process is a unity of vision and practice guided by a deep sense of mission and that education is a creative activity through which we can fully realise our human attributes and help build the Kingdom through which all of God's people come to share and experience their common humanity, then the challenges posed by Price are of such fundamental importance that they must be addressed.

Education must be both definitional and inspirational

Education in the true sense is based on love, solidarity, the common good, truth and justice

Education must be a liberating experience, freeing humankind from ignorance, powerlessness and the denial of human dignity

The Rise of Education

Education is simultaneously a sacred and secular activity

Education has long occupied a position of considerable importance in the process of social formation. The ancient character of education - which was based on a synthesis of religious instruction, knowledge and, of course, philosophy - was concerned not simply with the transmission of 'facts' or atomistic pieces of knowledge to be used in some crude utilitarian fashion by the 'possessor' of knowledge but with the holistic formation of the person. Of course education had and continues to have a practical application. Astronomy and mathematics developed by the ancient Egyptians at the temple schools in Thebes, Heliopolis and Memphis during the Fourth Dynasty (c. 2500 B.C.) were applied to that very crucial area of ancient Egyptian life, namely the River Nile, the sustainer of life. The development of the Egyptian calendar was not simply to facilitate religious ceremonies; it also aided an agricultural people to plan their economic and social lives.

However, alongside this important practical function, education in ancient society also involved a formative aspect without which humankind would be unfulfilled and, in a very definite sense, incomplete. The intertwining and, indeed, interdependence of the secular and the sacred was seen as perfectly natural in the earliest formal Jewish schools, founded in around 530 B.C. by the scribe and teacher Ezra.⁴ The study-house system, along with the synagogues, was concerned with the transmission not just of religious truths but also with a way of life and culture which has at its core the concept of the human subject who is, in essence, a social being who lives in relationship with God and His people (his fellow men and women).

Christian education is the inheritor of this tradition which cherishes the ideal of education as a fully spiritually-necessary and socially-desirable activity. At its core is the notion of education as both, and simultaneously, a sacred and secular activity which requires a synthesis of both elements for a genuine authentic philosophy of education. The promotion of a purely or largely secular curriculum - as appears increasingly possible and, for some, desirable today - was foreign to the Classical-Christian tradition of schooling. To teach simple value-free facts and skills, devoid of value is fundamentally flawed.

In a powerful critique of a value-free model of education the Conference of Major Religious Superiors (an umbrella group of all the main religious orders in Ireland) argued that such a utilitarian model, based to a considerable extent on a value-free concept of knowledge and skills, fails to promote the primary goal of education which it maintained. Our goal is the formation and development of young people as 'communal beings living in harmonious relationship with self, others, God and the environment.'⁵

Paul VI identified education as a basic human need without which humankind would remain enslaved, ignorant, powerless and alienated. Thus he wrote that 'basic education is the primary object of any plan of development. Hunger for education is no less depressing than hunger for food.'⁶ In the Church's teachings there are many excellent definitions of the Catholic sense of education. In its true sense, education is about becoming both human and spiritual simultaneously. It is about coming to know self, others, God and the world. This formative definition of education is clearly expressed in the Vatican II document *Gaudium et Spes*:

Education should pave the way for true brotherly association with other peoples, so that genuine unity and peace on earth may be promoted. For true education aims at the formation of the human person with respect to his ultimate goal, and simultaneously with respect to the good those societies of which, as a man, he is a member, and in whose responsibilities, as an adult, he will share.⁷

The Challenge of the Modern World

The world in which we live today, of course, is a much changed place. Many of the former assumptions cannot unquestioningly be taken as given. The process of secularisation - although by no means completely triumphant - has had notable success in weakening traditional modes of thinking and models of authority. Social changes, particular in relation to the family, have also added to a questioning of what had previously been presented as self-evident truths.

The Church-family-school triangle, upon which much emphasis had been placed by those charged with Catholic education, looks somewhat less certain in today's world. The past few decades have witnessed a revolution, not just in technology, but also in thought and how we relate to/think of ourselves, others and, indeed, God. Everything now is new - and everything past is questioned and suspect. Old certitudes are now treated with a high degree of caution and scepticism.

That said, we should not fear the advent of modern living and new modes of thought. Indeed Vatican II, especially *Gaudium et Spes*, explicitly exhorts us to embrace the challenges of the modern world. While acknowledging the negative aspects of many modern trends, particularly egotistic individualism, the persistence of hunger, poverty and illiteracy alongside opulence and wealth, and a shattering of man's relation to God through an unfettered desire for independence - all of which leads to new forms of slavery and a denial of human dignity - *Gaudium et Spes* stresses the interrelationship between the Church and the modern world.⁸

Education should form and develop young people as communal beings equipped to live in harmony with others

Secularisation and pressures on family life have resulted in an increasingly uncertain world and education must respond to the new needs

We are encouraged to enter into critical dialogue with the newness of modern developments. And rightly so. The dialogue between theology and philosophy is a creative and mutually informing one. Theology is nurtured by the insights of philosophy and new modes of thinking. Thus Vatican II correctly identifies and encourages this process of mutual affirmation and open exchange of world views. Nor is the exhortation to engage in constructive dialogue with the modern world limited to the documents of Vatican II. A central driving force of Pope John Paul II's *Crossing the Threshold of Hope* as well as his latest encyclical *Fides et Ratio* is the demand to locate Christian belief in the modern world. It is faith guided by reason which is the bedrock of Catholic doctrine - not the abandonment of reason and its replacement by 'blind' faith.⁹

In Chapter II of *Fides et Ratio* Pope John Paul II speaks of God who reveals Himself in nature. By examining creation, the great scholastic tradition sought to develop the relationship between faith and reason which gives to each its true value. Faith liberates reason in so far as it enables reason to attain correctly what it seeks to know and to place it within the ultimate order of things in which true meaning is found. Reason (or philosophy) - including new modes of thinking - enable faith (or theology) to go beyond the purely and transcendently sacred and to apply itself to the concrete and secular world. The Catholic ethos of education is one which simultaneously engages with and embraces secular society, taking on its wide and varied curriculum but placing it in the even wider context of a social totality or community, hence providing the student and his or her community with the opportunity and means of investigating and experiencing ways of living beyond the purely secular. The centrality of faith in the educative process and the integration of the growth of the student as simultaneously a spiritual and social being brings together a vital unity of purpose of life and belief. The interdependence of the spiritual and formational needs of the student and those of society enables our young people to achieve true personhood as people in relationship with Christ and with each other.

The challenge for Catholic education today is how well that system can prepare its students for the complexities of modern living - including the transmission of those skills which the modern economic system requires, the values necessary for Christian living, as well as fulfilling and the catechetical role which the Catholic school has traditionally played. Indeed, this latter task is a daunting one given the increasing secularism in society as a whole and the accompanying decline in religious practice in the modern world. In preparing people for the challenges of relativism and secularism the school plays a crucial role in the overall process of cathetical formation. In the context of schooling, education is a process by which the cognitive, technical, affective, aesthetic, ethical and religious faculties of the student are developed within a concrete social reality. A primary function of Catholic schooling is to provide forms of learning in which the central beliefs, doctrines and practices of Catholicism take place.

Albert Price points out that education is not simply an information or skills transaction between one generation and the next but is a 'moral transaction [which] takes place in communities, the home, the school, the parish and the locality.'¹⁰ The interdependence between the individual and society - and the respective needs of each - demands that our vision of education promotes the harmonisation of individual and collective aims. The distinctive service which Catholic schools seek to offer is that of empowering the student to realise full dignity as persons in relationship with God and with his/her neighbour in the context of the social totality in which all of us live.

Far from upholding a narrow and pre-given world vision which stultifies or limits the individual in his or her relationship with self, others and the wider community, the Catholic vision of education is truly emancipatory. We can only be free when we are aware of what constitutes genuine freedom. It provides the individual not with an already created dogmatic 'Truth' but with a realisation that perhaps man is not the measure of all things and that there are values which are fundamental to authentic human living and that the secular is enhanced - indeed is only fully realised - by the sacred.

In a world in which there increasingly appears to be a denial of absolute truth and value - including the intrinsic value of each person - a vibrant, living Church is a challenge since, in affirming the fundamental God-given dignity of each person, She provides a powerful criterion against which to measure social action - including the sphere of education. It is only right and just that we should continually ask 'Where are we going?', 'Who is dictating our agenda?', or, as the Jesuit Michael Paul Gallagher so succinctly put it 'Who's writing your agenda for you?'. It is in this context that the current debate concerning education takes on crucial importance. Who is writing the educational agenda for our young people and for what purpose?

What do we mean by 'education'?

In Northern Ireland we possess an inherited school system which is largely Christian and, to a considerable extent, denominational in character. The increasing secularisation of society requires that the relation between education and schooling stands in need of definition, articulation and justification. This is no bad thing. Education continues to occupy - perhaps increasingly so - a central position in the life of society. Not only does it provide young people with the opportunity to play an important role in the economic and political life of a community; it also empowers people to make decisions about every facet of personal and social living.

Education allows the person to be a subject, a person in control of his/her life. Therefore the questioning of the *raison d'être* of Catholic education is, indeed, timely for

Catholic Education must embrace the modern world and enable our young people to address the complexities and challenges of modern living

Catholic Education seeks to develop faith guided by reason

Catechesis is central to Catholic Education

We can only be free when we are aware of what constitutes genuine freedom and education must lead us to this truth

Catholic Education must not only prepare students for the world of work but for life in and for the community

unless there are valid reasons for a specifically Catholic system of education to exist, in terms of the holistic formation of the young people who undergo Catholic education and the contribution to society as a whole, then, perhaps, one must question whether or not such a system should be encouraged.

Much of the current debate on education today is confused by a distinct lack of agreement on what is meant by 'education'. Education has become very much a flag or slogan used by politicians to indicate a high degree of progressive and future-oriented policies. However, what is actually meant by education is of crucial importance to the social debate. There are, of course, many differing and different concepts and definitions of education ranging from the Christian-humanist affective to the utilitarian instrumental.

In terms of the modern debate it could be said that we are dealing with - in their purest forms - effectively two distinct and mutually opposing views of education. Each starts from a different viewpoint of humanity and with a different concept of what constitutes the goal of education and each posits radically different forms of educational practice. Indeed, even the language used in each vision of education differs greatly from one another: formation, nurture, child-centred, the whole person, empowerment, etc. - very much the concepts and vocabulary of the Classical-Christian model and of ethos statements - has been replaced in modern educational jargon by language which would not be out of place in any bureaucratic economic enterprise.

The pursuit of academic excellence is a Vital component of Catholic Education

We are in danger of increasingly falling under the sway of a market-driven system of education with league-tables of quantitatively measurable criteria and with teachers being reduced to deliverers of a curriculum rather than teachers (in the vocational sense) of children. We are urged to regard parents as customers, students as consumers or educational units and schools as institutions of educational throughput and production rather than communities of learning. The value of a school is not how it helps in the formation of the student, rather it is assessed primarily in terms of an academic audit in precisely the same fashion as any economic plant.

Of course what is being described here is a purely idealistic construct and schools - like all human institutions - contain a mixture of elements and visions some of which are in direct opposition to one another. However, the CMRS's analysis above is valid in that it identifies in the clearest possible terms the respective philosophies which underpin educational practice and alerts us to the dangers of ignoring some current trends in education.

In its response to the Green Paper on education which proposed radical changes in the Irish Republic's education system in February 1993, the CMRS criticised what it saw as an increasing partial and distorted vision of education in Ireland and argued that such a view only

Catholic Education seeks a synthesis of conscience and competence

serves to further house the spirit of the enterprise culture, with its accompanying values of possessiveness, individualism, fragmentation, consumerism and lack of caring in the minds of young people. Thus the CMRS warns:

If, in practice, education is to be reduced to preparing individuals to compete in the job market, it leaves people and communities completely ill-prepared for the major tasks of life - relationships, parenthood, community-building, self-expression, leisure, and many, many others.¹¹

Some might argue that in expressing these concerns the CMRS is ignoring the quantitative aspects of educational practice or calling for their abolition. This is not the case. There is a clear understanding in the CMRS's position that the pursuit of each student's intellectual development in the full realisation of his/her God-given talents and the turning of these talents to the service of all must remain a crucial part of Catholic education.

It is incorrect to suggest that within the Catholic vision of education - or, indeed, any other similar pedagogical outlook - the quantitative and the qualitative stand in diametric opposition or that one cannot have both quantitative assessment and holistic formation. Indeed, if education is to serve the student and society fully then there must be a clear recognition that in the pursuit of excellence the quantitative aspect does play an important role.

In this context, therefore, formal testing can play an important and useful part in the overall educative process and this will necessitate quantitative assessment which is of crucial importance to students, parents, teachers, schools and many other social elements. If used correctly it can help to improve educational practice, the quality of learning and academic achievement - all of which are important for the student and the other members involved in the educative process. Without some means of assessment poor educational practice remains hidden and students - more often those from socio-economically deprived backgrounds - suffer. The goal must be to provide excellence in education without sacrificing the Catholic vision of education which places the child at the centre of the enterprise.

A Catholic vision of education

The Catholic vision of education stands in marked contrast to that of the pure 'market-driven' model outlined above. The goal of Catholic education must be, above all else, the formation of the student. The needs of society, of 'the real world', must be taken on board, but not at the expense of the human needs of the young person. Education cannot be neutral. It is directed either towards the dignity of the student and the humanisation of society or towards another social agenda which may

not necessarily view these goals as being of primary importance. In the quest for meaning and continual renewal of a genuine and fuller understanding of Catholic education, it is necessary to ensure that formal schooling becomes a humanising and incarnational activity and experience.

Of course education must aim at excellence, competence and empowerment. The Catholic educator must be interested in enabling young people to take up roles of leadership and responsibility in society and this necessarily involves the attainment of academic success. Yet we aim to form Christian people of competence and conscience, people who can play a full role in society with a Christian vision and value system, a concern for their fellow humans and a deep desire to put their talents at the service of others.

To do less than this is to run the risk of reducing education to a simple acquisition of value-free 'facts' or skills to be traded on the market for individualistic and egoistic advancement and betrays not only the Church's mission but also the individual who receives such 'education'. The true test of Catholic education is not simple quantitative results but how the students uses his or her gifts and talents. What students do with their empowerment and knowledge is of paramount importance - the putting into practice the Word which underpins the Church's mission and justifies Her involvement in the educative realm.¹²

The pursuit of the maximisation of the students' potential rightly remains an important goal for Catholic education. The position of the individual in society and his or her life-chances can, of course, be greatly enhanced by a good formal education. And this involves the acquisition of academic qualifications. The ultimate aim of Catholic education, however, is the full growth of the person, a fully alive person for self and others, in complete communion with Christ and each other. To do otherwise is unworthy of the person created in the image and likeness of God as well as being potentially dangerous to the student as a social being.

There is, unquestioningly, a radical and challenging dimension to this vision of education - no less challenging than the Christian message of the Sermon on the Mount (Lk. 6:20-23). The challenge of Catholic education in many ways mirrors the challenge of Christian living itself. The linkage between education and Christ is made clear by the Sacred Congregation for Catholic Education thus:

The purpose of instruction is education, that is, the development of man from within, freeing him from that conditioning which would prevent him from becoming a full integrated human being. The school must begin from the principle that its educational programme is intentionally directed to the

growth of the whole person. Christ is the foundation of the whole educational enterprise in a Catholic school. His revelation gives new meaning to life and helps man to direct his thought, action and will according to the Gospel, making the beatitudes his norm of life. The fact that in their own individual ways all members of the school community share the Christian vision, makes the school 'Catholic'; principles of the Gospel in this manner become the educational norms since the school has them as its internal motivation and final goal. The Catholic school is committed thus to the development of the whole person, since in Christ, the Perfect Man, all human values find their fulfilment and unity. Herein lies the specifically Catholic character of the school.¹³

There is no room for ambivalence here. Catholic education is about the whole person, the school as a genuine Christian community, unity and freedom. Knowledge is not about power and possession but about becoming truly human and being socially responsible. The distinctiveness of Catholic education rests upon Catholicism's commitment to 'catholicity' - a universal concern for and identification with the other. This is no simple extension of the secular notion of 'tolerance', the idea that each person has the right to have their views respected or, at least, tolerated.

The pivotal notion in the Catholic world vision of seeing each person as a fundamental spiritual being, formed in the image and likeness of his/her Creator, redeemed by Christ and confirmed in the Holy Spirit places enormous responsibility on social practice. The Christian answer to Cain's question (Gen. 4:9) - 'am I my brother's keeper?' - must be a resounding 'yes'. The Final Judgement in Matthew (Matt. 25: 31-46) is neither an option nor an exhortation but a command and a responsibility. This, in turn, involves a deep eucharistic sense of sharing, salvation and, especially, justice. Communality or solidarity is not simply a response to social problems but is an integral part of the Church's salvific mission and is based on the Church's understanding of the nature of humanity and God. According to John Paul II:

Beyond human and natural bonds, already so close and strong, there is discerned in the light of faith a new model of the unity of the human race, which must ultimately inspire solidarity. This supreme model of unity, which is the reflection of the intimate life God, one God in three Persons, is what we Christians mean by the word communion.¹⁴

The true test of Catholic Education is how a student uses his or her gifts and talents

The goal of Catholic Education is a fully formed individual in communion with Christ

Christ's revelation gives meaning to life; Catholic Schools must help students to share fully in that message

Knowledge is about becoming truly human and socially responsible and the Catholic School should exemplify this message

Proclaiming the Good News demands dialogue and reconciliation with others

The clearly communal understanding of the nature and mission of the Church, the inclusive sense of community 'made for each other' implicit in the notion of *koinonia* or 'communion' permeates Catholic teaching on education and suggests a pursuit of knowledge, truth and understanding based on inclusion and dialogue. Education in the faith is not simply education about the faith - although it does involve that as well. Sacramentality - perhaps a more distinctive feature of Catholicism (as well as other denominations) than some other expressions of Christianity - is not limited simply to the seven liturgical sacraments but infuses all of human living in what Karl Rahner called 'the liturgy of life' or Aquinas held to be 'seeing God in all things'.¹⁵

In encouraging a faith rooted in justice Catholic Education

For Catholic education the formation of the student in sacramental consciousness is not a simple transmission of 'the faith' or the mechanistic 'learning' of Church dogma. The actual proclamation by word and example of the Good News, outlined in Paul VI's *Evangelii nuntiandi*, involves dialogue with others, reconciliation, celebration and liberation. In reality, the true sense of proclamation involves the coming together of these elements in actions in everyday life.

The distinctive formation associated with Catholic education extends beyond the transmission of beliefs to the religious, moral and social personhood involving - unapologetically - 'the communication of the living mystery of God'¹⁶ and a celebration of the Good News of human dignity and the offer of salvation. The joyful and celebratory practice of this sacramental consciousness presumes a profound sense of openness and freedom by which people are free to respond to the call of the Good News and the salvation offered. This is only right and proper since any diminution of openness or restriction on freedom or conscience would be a denial of the human dignity of the subject.

Catholic Schools are not defined by labels or pupil intake, but in their values

Thus, far from being a restriction on the freedom of conscience, the aspiration of Catholic education is to proclaim and assert that freedom of conscience in a mature and non-coercive fashion.¹⁷ This is true freedom, a true sense of proclamation, the true holistic formation of consciousness. Education for sacramental consciousness involves encouraging students to employ their critical powers in order not just how things are but what they might become. When Christian faith impacts upon people's imagination and knowledge, the integrity of the Christian mission becomes clear and that which was hidden, or overlooked, comes into view. Catholic education, therefore, aims at enabling people to become agents of history - rather than its passive observers or even objects and victims - through encouraging a faith that does justice.

Catholic Education is rooted in the Gospel

What makes a school Catholic?

The communal characteristics of the particular society conditions and permeates the content and process of the pedagogy of the schooling system of the respective society. A school influences the identity, perspectives and values of those whom it educates. In short, schools tend to reflect the society in which they exist. Secular schools, therefore, tend to reflect and reinforce the values of secular society. In the same way Catholic schools must aspire to realise in its students - as well as in all others involved in the education process - the communal values which underpin Catholic education.

It is simply not sufficient to define a Catholic school in terms of numbers of students/teachers/trustees/etc. who 'happen' to be Catholic. The qualifier 'Catholic', as Groome points out ['What Makes a School Catholic?'],¹⁸ is of crucial importance of the debate on Catholic education, particularly in an increasing secular society. While it is important to avoid the charges (and dangers) of exclusion and sectarianism, it is imperative for the integrity of Catholic education - and its institutional expression in Catholic schooling - that this qualifier in the educational sphere is made clear.

There are, of course, numerous educationalists, theologians and philosophers who have sought to identify what makes a school 'Catholic'. Concepts such as commitment to tradition, communal emphasis, holistic vision of humankind, sacramentality, the promotion of human dignity and so on are common place throughout Church documents and other writings on Catholic pedagogy. The American educationalist Anthony S. Bryk identifies that which is specific to and definitional of Catholic schooling: namely the 'inspirational ideology' which (should) underpins Catholic schools and the 'Catholic tradition of the common good'.¹⁹ This notion of the 'common good' is inclusive and involves the Gospel sense of solidarity and identification with the other as expressed so profoundly in parable of the Good Samaritan [Lk. 10: 25-37].

The Catholic commitment to solidarity sets no limitations. John Paul II defines solidarity as 'a firm and preserving determination to commit oneself to the common good ; that is to say to the good of all and of each individual'.²⁰ There is no exclusion allowed here, nor any demand that each person must be possessing of explicit faith before solidarity is extended to that person. Christian solidarity is a recognition that all people are 'living images of God, redeemed by the blood of Jesus Christ and placed under the permanent action of the Holy Spirit'.²¹

The promotion of the common good is intrinsic to Catholic faith and not an optional extra. The true sense of solidarity involves a form of duty towards the larger community of one's fellow beings. It is this vision of 'reaching out' and 'other-directedness' which Bryk argues characterises Catholic schools and which is not only noble

and desirable but is, in fact, an essential task in pluralist, secular society and has particular importance for Northern Ireland and all societies which experience such division.

Catholic schools must be not simply institutions of learning but are what Bryk calls 'voluntary communities' in which the student, as 'a person-in-community',²² is actively engaged with teachers in a process of mutual formation and affirmation. This implies a 'buying into' the ethos of the school on the part of parents, students, teachers, other members of staff and school governors and trustees to a much higher degree than in schools guided by a market or individualistic ethic. According to Bryk personal experiences in a voluntary community have additional inherent value beyond purely instrumental value. The shared vision of a moral imperative and the distinctive inner life of the Catholic school stands in marked contrast to the individualism and managerial ethic of much of modern society.

The ethic of genuinely Catholic schools must be based on a form of communalism through which their members derive support from others with whom they share the vision. The sociologist James Coleman points out that a shared social outlook or set of values - what he refers to as 'social capital'²³ - can have considerable impact on academic achievement.

For Coleman social capital - the extent to which parents reinforce each other's social norms, the degree to which these values are passed on to their children and the closeness of the community to their institutions such as churches, schools, etc. - can be a powerful factor in enhancing human and social development. When social capital is high - when a community shares core values and virtues, Coleman argues, - educational attainment can be considerably improved.²⁴ The effective school, he maintains, does make a difference.²⁵ The crucial question is 'a difference to what?' Catholic schools must aim at promoting a shared vision based on community and solidarity in order to further the personal and social formation of young people.

The Need for Renewal

In our modern society many of the characteristics and principles outlined above are under assault. A sense of tradition is often seen as misguided and stultifying, the communitarian and solidaristic ethic of Catholicism at odds with the strongly individualistic orientation of consumer society and the significance of symbolism is often portrayed as quasi-mysticism and the abandonment of rationality. Furthermore, the challenge to Catholic schooling comes not only from outside of the system.

The diminution of vocationship itself - even among some Catholic teachers - leads to what James Arthur refers to as 'the ebbing tide' of Catholicity in Catholic schools.²⁶ Arthur suggests that there is a danger of Catholic schools, especially at post-primary level, losing

their 'holistic' character - i.e., their concern 'with the transmission of Catholic faith - its beliefs, values, character and norms of conduct'²⁷ - and becoming what some have deemed as schools based on 'dualistic' or 'pluralistic' models. The latter models, for

Arthur, effectively separate the secular and religious elements of education and regard the ethos as something additional to the secular academic programme. Rather than the ethos driving school life, the religious elements - in so far as they can be deemed to exist at all - are to be 'bolted on' in an artificial fashion to the life of the school. Arthur paints a futuristic picture of bland secular schooling in which Catholic schools have lost much of their rich distinctiveness, in which sacramental life and the consciousness which goes with it have been reduced to perfunctory genuflections and gestures and which are increasingly dominated by a market-driven ethos.²⁸

For some Arthur's analysis is too pessimistic and based on the 'Golden-age myth' of a non-existent past in which no questioning of the Church and Catholic schooling took place.²⁹ Yet, he does alert us to developments which, if unchallenged, will seriously weaken the very positive contribution which Catholic schools have made to social well-being and to the salvific mission of the Church.

The Modern Challenge

Catholic schools face challenges from a new culture of education which involve the commodification of education and the marketing of the individual school and the celebration of school 'success' in the purely materialistic and competitive terms. The struggle between the common good and the advancement of an individual school's self-interest presents Catholic schooling with a most serious ethical dilemma. Dan Murphy makes two substantial points in relation to this issue. The first, in fact, reinforces claims made by Fr. Donal McKeown in 1997 concerning academic achievement in Catholic schools in Northern Ireland.³⁰ Dan Murphy points out that research from a wide range of educationalists including Coleman, Hoffer and Kilgore, Greeley and Rossi, Bryk and Convey (in the USA), Praetz, Parrington, Fahy and Flynn (in Australia), provides compelling and overwhelming evidence 'on the worth of denominational schooling... when judged by the norms of basic educational accountability'.³¹

Indeed, he goes on to suggest that 'denominational schools are frequently victims of their own success, their standards of academic excellence and their highly disciplined ethos frequently making entry into them highly competitive and forcing them to operate selective admission policies to cope with the numbers seeking places in them'.³² And this, of course, challenges the Church's mission to the poor and disadvantaged. Gerald Grace alerts us to the temptation of 'playing the market' by adopting a more calculating policy on school admissions, examination entrants, exclusions, etc. In an

Catholic schools, in furthering the personal and social formation of young people, must promote a shared vision based on community and true solidarity

The struggle between the common good and self interest presents Catholic Schools with a serious ethical dilemma

The Church's concern for those on the margin of society is increasingly threatened by a world where the profit margin dominates

The rejection of “exclusivity” and a commitment to inter-faith understanding must be a central goal of Catholic Education

evocatively entitled paper, ‘No Margin, No Mission’³³ the US Jesuit Joseph O’Keefe identifies the tension between the ethic of modern capitalist society, profit margin, and the educational mission of the Church. In particular, O’Keefe argues (albeit in an American context), the Church’s traditional concern for the educational and spiritual needs of the ‘have-nots’ and its preferential option for the poor are threatened by the profit margin ethic which increasingly dominates society today.³⁴

Of course the contribution of any education system to the common good cannot be measured by academic criteria alone. In any society - but especially one such as our own which has experienced the appalling effects of division - the question of how far denominational schooling promotes religious tolerance and multi-cultural consciousness among its students is of paramount importance. This is not just important in the pluralist age of today but is closely bound up with the authentic Christian message and Christian values. Far from promoting religious exclusivity or even divisiveness, Murphy points out that research from the USA and Australia ‘suggests that pupils in Catholic schools are less prejudiced in religious matters than those who attend public (secular) schools.’³⁵

Catholic Schools must be communities of caring, sharing people with Christ at their centres

It appears that much can be achieved through a strong ethico-religious formation which allows denominational education - at its best and most enlightened - to go beyond the simple goal of tolerance towards a genuine understanding of other traditions, both religious and non-religious. Murphy concludes that ‘such a process enables denominational schools to maintain their own religious identity while relating it to the conditions of social, cultural and religious pluralism in which they exist.’³⁶ Ever mindful of the dangers of exclusivity, Catholic education must strive towards the goal of greater inter-faith understanding based on a holistic vision of man, a fellow spiritual and spirit-filled being, a brother and sister in Christ.

Far from being outdated and passé, there is a pressing need and a renewed purpose for Catholic schools in today’s society. Indeed, one might argue that those values exemplified in the Catholic vision of education are needed more than ever today. The ideal which ought to be promoted is one ‘where spiritual and moral culture is given precedence over [simple] material success, where education is seen as a service and not a product, and where notions of the common good and of the well-being of community institutions take precedence over individual self-interest.’³⁷

The Catholic school must aim at nurturing in the student a sense of self-esteem and a concern for others rooted in the certainty of God’s love and an awareness of student’s unique role in the building of the Kingdom

In a social order which increasingly tends to view people as economic units there is a moral imperative on the Church to keep an explicit link between Christ and a person-centred education and to realise this unity in practice in contemporary Catholic schools. Informed by an ethic of value openness, intellectual challenge and an overriding concern for the common good and service; schools can make a real difference and become

reflections of the community we call the people of God. In this way Catholic educational institutions become communities of sharing and caring people in which God is not a marginalised ‘God of the gaps’ but is, in fact, at the centre of the educational vision, practice and experience. The vital unity of purpose and faith, of belief and action, is expressed succinctly by Price thus:

Our schools and colleges are established to raise communities of people united by common beliefs which provide an inspirational philosophy to guide both their planning and action in education towards individual fulfilment and universal salvation. Catholic schools and colleges are asked to form a ‘distinctive service’, offering an induction into a way of life in which belief is put into practice.’³⁸

The challenge to Catholic schooling is immense and the outcome, to an extent, uncertain. However, as Joseph O’Keefe correctly points out, ‘one truth remains: the strength of Catholic schools is in mission, not margin.’³⁹ Education - if it is to advance the Kingdom - must involve reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it. It must, in other words, be both critical and creative. It must liberate the imagination’s true potential. It must look to the past in order to understand who we are, to allow us, in turn, to envisage what we can become. It must allow us to forge new pathways, create new models, restore man to his true role of creative subject, the maker of his own history, the shaper of his own destiny. It must be about the whole of man in all his multiple dimensions. The Catholic school must aim at nurturing in the student a sense of self-esteem and a concern for others rooted in the certainty of God’s love and an awareness of the student’s unique role in the building of the Kingdom. What must be developed then, in any genuinely Catholic school, is an education that will foster the human potential of its pupils in all its multiple dimensions, that will, to paraphrase Coleridge, bring the whole soul of man into activity.

The need for genuine value-based education has, perhaps, never been greater. Perhaps some in education have allowed others to dictate the educational agenda where the needs of industry and the ever-growing consumer culture seek to assert priority over the needs of our young people. It is timely, therefore, for those associated with Catholic education to take a clear and courageous stand, certain in the validity and usefulness of our Catholic vision of education for our young people and society as a whole - never losing sight that it is the student who is the goal and centre of the educative process. Our young people deserve no less.

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