

Catholic Primary Schools

A Policy for Provision
into the Future



IRISH CATHOLIC
BISHOPS' CONFERENCE
COMHAIL ÉANPAID CAITLÍCEACH ÉIREANN

Introduction

Irish culture and society are going through a period of accelerated change. Nowhere is this more evident than in the education system. For much of the twentieth century Irish primary schools operated in a society that was largely homogenous, where the level of change was gradual in response to the needs of a fledgling State. With the advent of entry into the European Union and the resultant upturn in the Irish economy the character, nature and quality of life in Ireland has changed. The growth in material prosperity, the questioning of traditional values and the influx of people to Ireland has introduced a complexity to education that is a challenge for both Church and State. This brief policy document is offered as an indication of how the Catholic Church sees its role in the provision of primary education in the years ahead.

1. Rights and Duties of Parents

- 1.1 The Catholic Church upholds the primacy of parents' rights in the education of their children (Declaration on Christian Education [DCE], 3). These rights are well established and recognised in international instruments of human rights. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) declares that 'Parents shall have a prior right to choose the kind of education that shall be given to their children' (Art. 26.3). The United Nations International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (1966) upholds 'the liberty of parents ... to choose for their children schools ... which conform to such minimum educational standards as may be laid down or approved by the State and to ensure the religious and moral education of their children in conformity with their own convictions' (Art. 13.3). The European Convention on Human Rights states that 'In the exercise of any functions which it assumes in relation to education and teaching, the state shall respect the right of parents to ensure such education and teaching as is in conformity with their own religious and philosophical convictions' (Protocol 1, Art. 2). The Irish Constitution 'guarantees to respect the inalienable right and duty of parents to provide, according to their means, for the religious and moral, intellectual, physical and social education of their children' (Art. 42.1). The Catholic Church, in upholding the constitutional rights of Catholic parents to the provision of Catholic education for their children, welcomes the exercise of this right by parents of other faith traditions and none as well.

- 1.2 The Church, recognising that parents have the primary responsibility for the education of their children, strives to assist them in this task. While all parents have both the duty and the right to educate their children, Catholic parents have also the duty and the right to choose schools that can best promote the Catholic education of their children (Can 793).

2. The Role of the Church

- 2.1 The Catholic Church is committed to providing Catholic schools to cater for the needs of parents who wish their children to have a Catholic education. Therefore the children of Catholic parents have first claim on admission to Catholic schools. Wherever possible, in keeping with their ethos, and provided that they have places and resources, Catholic schools welcome children of other faiths or none.
- 2.2 The duty and the right of Catholic parents to choose schools that can best promote the Catholic education of their children (Can 793) will normally be exercised by parents sending their children to Catholic schools where these are available. In the absence of a Catholic school, the duty of providing for Catholic education remains primarily that of the parents with the assistance of the parish. In situations like these, parishes will endeavour, at the request of parents and with their co-operation and support, to provide appropriate religious education and preparation for the sacraments for the children who need it.

3. At the Service of Mission and Society

- 3.1 The Church sees the work of education as central to its mission of spreading the Good News of Jesus Christ. 'The Catholic school finds its true justification in the mission of the church; it is based on an educational philosophy in which faith, culture and life are brought into harmony. Through it, the local church evangelises, educates and contributes to the formation of a healthy and morally sound lifestyle among its members' (The Religious Dimension of Education in a Catholic School [RDECS], par. 34). Hence, the Catholic community gives priority to the faith development of its members, adults as well as young people. The Catholic school seeks to support their religious, spiritual and moral formation as children, and encourages them when they become adults to grow into mature faith. It reaches out to all with an invitation to build together a world founded on justice, truth and love. Thus its mission of evangelisation promotes a greater sense of

responsibility and a right use of freedom, and it prepares people to take an active role in social life and to promote the common good (Can 795).

- 3.2 In the work of education Catholic schools provide an important service to society. They cater for the educational needs of children but they have a particular concern for those suffering any kind of disadvantage. In promoting a sense of responsibility and the right use of freedom they help to form students as good citizens. In emphasising the values of community, justice, respect and forgiveness they help students to grow in maturity and to take their place as responsible members of society (DCE, 1). Catholic education, then, has a dual purpose: its service in the mission of the Church and its service to society.
- 3.3 Following from its dual purpose the Catholic school has a dual character:

On the one hand, a Catholic school is a 'civic institution'; its aim, methods and characteristics are the same as those of every other school. On the other hand, it is a 'Christian community', whose educational goals are rooted in Christ and his Gospel. (RDECS, 67)

There is no contradiction between the civic and the religious goals of Catholic education because the promotion of the human person is the goal of both:

The integral formation of the human person, which is the purpose of education, includes the development of all the human faculties of the students ... [E]very school, and every educator in the school, ought to be striving to form strong and responsible individuals, who are capable of making free and correct choices, thus preparing young people to open themselves more and more to reality, and to form in themselves a clear idea of the meaning of life. (Lay Catholics in Schools [LCS], 17)

4. The Catholic School

- 4.1 What distinguishes the Catholic school is that its concept of the human person is rooted in the teaching of Jesus Christ as embodied in the Catholic faith community. Each person is a spiritual being who comes from God and whose destiny is to be with God when this life is over. The ideal of the Catholic school proposed here is one whose ethos or characteristic spirit is rooted in its 'Christian concept of life centred on Jesus Christ: He is the One who ennobles people, gives meaning to

human life, and is the Model which the Catholic school offers to its pupils' (The Catholic School [CS], 33–7).

- 4.2 The Catholic school also seeks 'to promote the Christian concept of the world whereby the natural values, assimilated into the full understanding of man redeemed by Christ, may contribute to the good of society as a whole' (DCE, 2). Thus Catholic schools have a robust spiritual and moral value system. We believe that this is appreciated not only by the Catholic parents, but also by lay people of other religions or none who want their children to be educated in a Catholic school. This is recognised by the UK Department for Children, Schools and Families in its document, *Faith in the System* (September 2007):

The Government [UK] and the providers of schools with a religious character also recognise that many parents who are not of the faith of a particular faith school seek places in these schools because they value the ethos and character of the school.

- 4.3 The Catholic school welcomes diversity and strives for inclusivity. It is open to people of other denominations and other faiths, welcomes them into its community and respects their beliefs:

The religious freedom and the personal conscience of individual students and their families must be respected, and this freedom is explicitly recognised by the Church. On the other hand, a Catholic school cannot relinquish its own freedom to proclaim the Gospel and to offer a formation based on the values to be found in a Christian education; this is its right and duty. (RDECS, 6)

While it maintains its own ethos and provides religious instruction and formation in the Catholic Faith, the Catholic school sees this diversity as an opportunity for dialogue and understanding with those of different faiths. It seeks to co-operate with parents of other traditions who wish to provide religious instruction for the children in their own tradition. This welcoming ethos explains why Catholic schools are among the most inclusive schools in Ireland today.

- 4.4 The enrolment policy of the school is an important means of implementing its Catholic ethos. This policy will incorporate the Catholic school's commitment to diversity and inclusivity while at the same time protecting the integrity of the school. This will mean setting criteria for admission which will allow the school to discharge its primary responsibility of providing for the Catholic children in its parish.

5. The Reality of Pluralism

- 5.1 Some places are currently experiencing huge inflows of new residents, sometimes doubling or trebling the enrolment of parish schools in the space of a few years. This usually happens because there is no other educational provision in the area. It is sometimes the case that people choose the Catholic school simply because it is the only school available, and not because they wish their children to have a Catholic education. This can cause difficulties for parents who do not share the ethos of a Catholic school. It can also put an unfair financial and administrative burden on the parish. We feel that in such circumstances the Church should not be left with the task of providing for the educational needs of the whole community. As the Catholic Church accepts that there should be choice and diversity within a national education system, it believes that parents who desire schools under different patronage should, where possible, be facilitated in accessing them. In new centres of population it is incumbent upon the State to plan for the provision of school sites and to ensure, in consultation with the various patron bodies, that there is a plurality of school provision reflecting the wishes of the parents in the area.
- 5.2 In some areas where historically there were large numbers of parents who wanted a Catholic school, circumstances may have changed and an existing Catholic school may no longer be viable as a Catholic school. In such a situation an evaluation will have to be made, in consultation with parents and teachers, about the future of such a school. However, such evaluation should take into account not only financial and numerical criteria but also a concern for those who are needy or disadvantaged. In certain circumstances it may be considered desirable to enter into new patronage arrangements, provided these arrangements respect the rights of Catholic parents, in particular in relation to the religious instruction of their children within the school curriculum (cf. Art. 13.3, The United Nations International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, 1966).
- 5.3 Future demographic changes in Ireland, along with other factors such as pluralism of religious belief, may give rise to a situation where it might not be practicable for the parish to provide a Catholic school for its children. In this situation Catholic parents, in common with parents of other denominations in the State, have a right to transport for their children to a school of their own denomination if there is one within a reasonable distance.

Conclusion

Internationally it is being recognised more and more that faith schools make a very valuable contribution to the common good. They coexist fruitfully alongside other models of provision elsewhere and have done so here in Ireland for more than a century. Their value is recognised in the document *Faith in the System*, already quoted:

... the Government [UK] welcomes the contribution that schools with a religious character make to the school system – both as a result of their historical role and now as key players in contributing to the more diverse school system with greater opportunities for parental choice that we seek.

Catholic schools in Ireland have been major education providers since the foundation of the State and before. We trust that they will continue to play a significant role in educational provision in the future.

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