

*Catholic Primary Education:
Facing New Challenges*

Catholic primary schools have been an integral part of parish life in Ireland for long over one hundred years and have been maintained with relative stability through significant social and political change. However, in the past few years their role and identity have been more critically questioned than at any time since the nineteenth century. There are approximately 3,400 primary schools in the country, comprising 92 per cent of educational provision at that level, serving about 1,360 parishes. These are remarkable figures by international standards. The economic boom that occurred from the late 1990s until recently saw a real change in the demographic make-up of the country. New immigrants from Eastern Europe, Africa and Asia have changed the racial, ethnic and religious profile of most schools in the country. Over the same period levels of participation in church life have declined dramatically, so that the role the parish schools previously played in supporting parents in the faith formation of their children can no longer be assumed to be operative in all cases. The demands of business and industry are responded to more immediately now than in the past, so that a more utilitarian or instrumentalist view of education is beginning to take hold. Such an approach is a serious challenge to the Catholic view of education, one that is much more holistic and more open to the development of a child's spiritual and moral development. Finally, some political agendas are seeking to determine a less majoritarian role for the Catholic Church in educational provision, a view not necessarily shared by all citizens. It is against the background of these considerations that the current collection of essays is being offered.

In response to some of these societal changes, the Minister of Education and Skills, Mr Ruairi Quinn, established a Forum on

Patronage and Pluralism, in April 2011, to prepare a report on primary school patronage with a view to establishing how and where it ought to be possible to create greater diversity in primary school provision. He deemed this important because the vast majority of all primary schools in the State are under Catholic patronage, which is an anomalous situation given the demographic profile of the primary school population. However, as the research carried out by the Catholic Schools Partnership has pointed out, patronage is not a concept widely understood by parents: ethos and the teaching of religious education are identified as the defining elements of the Church's involvement in primary education. This is but one example of the complexity facing anyone attempting to understand or to reform the current situation. The reality of faith-based schools is multi-faceted and there is no single issue, which if addressed, will provide an easy or neat solution to the perceived problems of the moment.

The Irish Episcopal Conference, also recognising the complexity of the current situation, issued a joint pastoral in May 2008, entitled *Vision 08*, in which the bishops set out their vision for Catholic education in Ireland into the future. In the opening paragraph of that document they acknowledged that the role of the Church in education has become an issue of intense debate, North and South, especially because of the growing cultural and religious pluralism on the island. Some of these issues made national headlines over the past few years as Catholic primary schools in the greater Dublin area were unable to cope with the numbers of children seeking enrolment and criteria for admission came under scrutiny. At the same time there are many primary schools in rural parts of the country with significant numbers of non-Christian pupils, thus presenting new challenges to teachers, pastoral carers and boards of management. In Northern Ireland the issue of denominational education has been regularly debated over the past forty years. Debate, too, has been taking place around the role of the Churches in education in Britain and France in recent years as the wider debate about the place and role of religion in public life has resurfaced with fresh intensity. Although secularisation may appear to be the dominant mood, religion and its concerns have proven to be remarkably resilient.

Since the foundation of the State the Churches and various religious congregations have played an enormously significant role in the field of education as teachers, principals, managers and trustees of our schools, often making huge financial investments in the enterprise. Over several decades there has been a gradual and almost imperceptible change going on here, so that now there are very few religious personnel involved directly in the day to day life of schools.

In the past there were so many clergy and religious involved in educational provision that they and others could assume that they were indeed providing a Catholic education for their pupils. For the most part, what was meant by a Catholic education did not have to be spelled out in any great detail. A quick look at the school environment and the timetable would soon inform you of the fact that you were in a Catholic school. Most of the teaching staff, too, were committed to their faith and, like the majority of other members of the Church, were largely unquestioning of its authority.

We are now in an entirely different situation and it has become more urgent for the Church to spell out more precisely what it means to be a Catholic school. The old assumptions no longer hold. The case for a Catholic school, or indeed any denominational school, has to be more persuasively made. This is what the bishops were doing in their brief pastoral letter in 2008. In fact, their pastoral may be seen as an initial contribution to this task, as it ends with an invitation to begin a wider conversation among all the partners in education, so that the role of the Catholic school might be better articulated and understood.

This debate about the future of Catholic education in Ireland is an important one for both Church and society. On the one hand, the Church and its educational mission cannot be merged uncritically into the dominant agendas of the wider society. On the other hand, it cannot attempt to create an enclave that insulates itself from society and thus become a sectarian enterprise. It needs to be able to articulate what is its distinctive contribution to education and the common good. The argument has to be made as to why it deserves its place in the educational enterprise. A genuinely Catholic education can never deny the person

an opportunity to explore what is genuinely human, whether the issue is discussed by the humanities or the hard sciences. Neither can it deny the person an opportunity to explore issues of meaning and value, faith and conviction. A genuinely tolerant society will see the value of supporting such an exploration as it will allow all of its members to enhance their own self-understanding and their understanding of their fellow citizens.

As a response to the invitation issued by the bishops in their pastoral letter, *Vision 08*, the McAuley Conference held at Mary Immaculate College, University of Limerick, in May 2009 addressed the issue of 'Catholic Primary Education: Facing New Horizons'. The current collection of essays represents some of the papers presented at the Conference as well as a number of others that have been specially commissioned for this volume. The essays here do not propose to cover all of the issues that are currently being debated in the public forum. Nevertheless, they do address some of the key issues that have to be considered by anyone who wishes to be informed about the provision of primary education within a faith-based context.

The topics covered include some broad discussion about the very nature of education and the challenges it faces in a society so preoccupied by economics and technology and in danger of losing sight of its more deeply rooted values of truth, freedom and empathy. This is followed by an exploration of the rationale for the Church's involvement in educational provision, especially in the light of its official teaching. This is further amplified by an exploration of the nature of, and challenges to, the Catholic Primary School in twenty-first century Ireland, taking into account current Irish and European legislation and directives in this area. In order to give further context to the reflections, a brief history of the Church's involvement in primary education in Ireland is provided, as well as two points of comparison, one from Australia and the other from Scotland. There are then two reflections on the perspectives of patrons and managers on primary school provision, examining some of the more specific legislative and administrative issues in these domains. A parent then reflects on her personal experience of being involved with the primary educational system, showing

the unexpected consequences for her and her family. Finally, the collection ends with a review of what it means for a school to be a learning community, contributing to the formation of a learning society.

As this volume goes to print, the report from the Forum on Patronage and Pluralism is still awaited. Its findings will inevitably evoke further discussion of the role of the Catholic Church in the provision of primary education. Meanwhile, it is hoped that the essays in this volume will make a helpful contribution to the ensuing debate and draw attention to important values and perspectives that have to be borne in mind as we reimagine and reconfigure the role played by Catholic primary schools in a country undergoing significant social and religious transformation.

Eugene Duffy