

The Future of Catholic Education

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The Fundamental Premise of Catholic Schools: A Catholic Attitude to Education

Two years ago, the Catholic Church welcomed Pope Benedict XVI to the United Kingdom. For all who are concerned with Catholic education, a high point of his historic and memorable Apostolic Visit was the Big Assembly, held in St Mary's University College, Twickenham on Friday 17th September 2010.

The assembly drew staff, students and pupils from Catholic schools – maintained and independent, voluntary aided and academies – throughout England & Wales, and gave the Holy Father the opportunity to speak to the people of our countries about the values which underpin Catholic schools.¹

Catholic education is based on our fundamental belief that each and every person is made in the image and likeness of God, and that this divine image in each of us is most fully expressed in the living out of our baptismal calling to know, love and serve God in this world so that we can be happy with him for ever in the next. This means that Catholic education is personal, communal and spiritual at every level, and that our schools are to be imbued with a Christian spirit which is rooted in the Gospels and expressed in the celebration of Mass and the sacraments, liturgies and assemblies, the classroom, the staff room, the dining room, the sports field and the playground – every aspect of their lives.

Our approach to education realises that we will only reach human fulfilment in love of God and neighbour: each person is unique, each is asked to play their part in the human family, and each will only find true happiness in following Christ. In Pope Benedict's words at the Big Assembly:

In your Catholic schools, there is always a bigger picture over and above the individual subjects you study, the different skills you learn. All the work you do is placed in the context of growing in friendship with God, and all that flows from that friendship. So you learn not just to be good students, but good citizens, good people. As you move higher up the school, you have to make choices about the subjects you study, you begin to specialise with a view to what you are going to do later on in life. That is right and proper. But always remember that you are part of a bigger picture. [...]

¹ The word 'school' in this presentation refers to maintained & independent schools & colleges providing education to pupils at primary, secondary and tertiary levels. It excludes institutes of higher education.

A good school provides a rounded education for the whole person. And a good Catholic school, over and above this, should help all its students to become saints.²

By educating children and expanding each person's capacity for love, we develop the whole person, nurturing body, mind and spirit. That is the distinctive Catholic *attitude* to education.

The History of Catholic Schools

The Second Vatican Ecumenical Council's Decree on Christian Education *Gravissimum educationis* (28th October 1965) teaches that the right to education is an inalienable human right:

All men of every race, condition and age, since they enjoy the dignity of a human being, have an inalienable right to an education that is in keeping with their ultimate goal, their ability, their sex, and the culture and tradition of their country, and also in harmony with their fraternal association with other peoples in the fostering of true unity and peace on earth.³

The Church has been intimately involved in education ever since the Lord commanded his disciples to go forth and teach. For Catholic schools, teaching cannot just simply be the imparting of information or training, no matter how worthy or important, because the human person cannot be reduced to facts and figures; rather, as Pope Benedict put it, education is formation: it is 'about forming the human person, equipping him or her to live life to the full – in short it is about imparting wisdom'.⁴ That is why Catholic schools mould their teachers, students and pupils so that they will 'become saints', living icons of Christ.

Our schools do this by providing an all-round, inclusive formation which is human, spiritual, intellectual and pastoral, imbued with a Catholic ethos which is almost impossible to quantify but which is rooted in the Gospels and the teaching and life of the Church. This ethos, which is also expressed in the sense of family that many feel when they enter our schools, underpins their many achievements, which are recognised in the inspection reports produced by Ofsted, Estyn and the ISI. Our schools' academic prowess is rooted in their ethos; by being faithful to it, they are that light which must shine in the sight of others, 'so that, seeing your good works, they may give the praise to your Father in heaven' (*Mt 5:16*).

It is hardly surprising that Catholic schools should aspire to such a high calling and aim for high standards of teaching and learning when we consider that the Church's involvement in education goes back many centuries. In the Middle Ages, monasteries and cathedrals established schools. During the turbulent years of the Reformation, many Catholics sent their children to

² BENEDICT XVI, Address of the Holy Father to Pupils (17th September 2010), http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/speeches/2010/september/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20100917_mondo-educ_en.html [accessed 4th November 2012]

³ SECOND VATICAN ECUMENICAL COUNCIL, Declaration on Christian Education *Gravissimum educationis* (28th October 1965), 1

⁴ BENEDICT XVI, Address of the Holy Father to Pupils (17th September 2010), http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/speeches/2010/september/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20100917_mondo-educ_en.html [accessed 4th November 2012]

colleges in continental Europe so that their children could receive a Catholic education. As penal times drew to a close, private Catholic schools were established in this country, and as the Church found her footing once more, religious orders and parishes established schools, so that the Deposit of Faith could be handed on from one generation to the next.

In London, Cardinal Manning, Archbishop of Westminster between 1865 and 1892, worked hard to establish schools in some of the poorest areas, to rescue children from the workhouses, and to resist over-intervention by the State; he insisted that parents had the right to educate their children in accordance with their conscience, and that no parent should pay more for the education of their children than did their neighbours.

Parishes built schools before they built churches, celebrating Mass in the classroom each morning before educating the young people of their community. Many parish priests and members of religious orders gave their lives to this project, which was paid for by the huge sacrifices made by the Catholics of our countries. Our Catholic schools are the result of that vision, and we can be immensely proud of our forebears and grateful for all their hard work. We can only look forward to the future if we can understand how we have reached the present.

Catholic Schools Today

The Church has never been attached to one 'model' of Catholic school. In different countries, the relationship between Church and State is often typified and explained by the support which they offer Catholic schools. In the United States of America, for example, the strict if at times ironic separation between Church and State means that Catholic schools receive no public funding and are maintained thanks to the fees paid by parents, the generosity of parishioners and, for many years, the unpaid work of priests, monks and religious brothers & sisters. In Ireland, on the other hand, the Church has a virtual monopoly on maintained schooling.

Here in England & Wales, our schools are the product of our own history, and are necessarily influenced by the relationship between the Church and the Government – and we deal fairly and equally with governments of all political persuasions, because it would be wrong for the Church to align herself with any one ideology.

The 'dual system' was enshrined in the Education Act 1902; this, in turn, led to the establishment of voluntary aided schools by the Education Act 1944. In the 1980s, we saw grant maintained schools and now we have academies, both transformational and conversion. We also have free schools, and in a sense many of our schools were established as 'free schools' – groups of priests, religious sisters and parishioners banding together to establish schools. We also have parents who teach their children at home. So, there is a real diversity in the provision of education, whether faith-based or not, in our country – and this is likely to continue and develop.

Government policy cannot but have a massive effect on our own educational policy, not least because maintained schools are maintained at public expense. The taxpayer, including the Catholic taxpayer, has a legitimate interest in Catholic schools. However, the Church's consciousness that we should use the opportunities afforded us by the Government for the *libertas Ecclesiae*, the Church's God-given freedom to advance her cause, means that we must always have a hard-headed approach to examining Government & Opposition policy, and work with the government of the day to protect and develop our schools.

So, as I wrote in the preface to the forthcoming republication of Mgr Marcus Stock's excellent work *Christ at the Centre*:

The Church's involvement in public education goes back many centuries. In England & Wales, we have different types of Catholic school, both maintained and independent. Within the maintained sector, we now have academies – conversion and transformational – and voluntary aided schools. In the midst of this legitimate diversity, all Catholic schools share something in common: they are rooted in Christ, who is to be the centre of their life.

This 'legitimate diversity' means that Catholic schools are truly Catholic not only in their teaching but in in their crossing of social and cultural divides:

- According to the latest CES census, there are 2257 Catholic schools in England & Wales; 2118 are maintained schools and 139 are independent schools. 29 of these schools are run jointly with other religious organisations. There are 1815 primary schools, 380 secondary schools, 15 tertiary colleges and 47 all through schools.
- One in every ten primary and secondary schools in England is Catholic; in Wales, 5% of primary schools and 7% of secondary schools are Catholic.
- There are 838,756 pupils in Catholic schools in England & Wales – 744,944 in maintained schools in England, 29,509 in maintained schools in Wales and 42,801 in independent schools.
- 70.8% of pupils attending maintained Catholic schools in England are Catholics⁵; in Wales, the proportion is 59.6%. 36.8% of pupils attending independent Catholic schools in England & Wales are Catholic. Only 0.01% of pupils in Catholic schools are withdrawn from collective worship.
- In England, the average Catholic primary school in England has a roll of 250 pupils, very close to the national average. Catholic secondary schools are slightly smaller than average, with 970 pupils compared to the national average of 990. In Wales, the average Catholic primary school has a roll of 206 pupils compared to the national average of 186, and secondary schools have an average of 888 pupils compared to the national average of 896.
- There are 47,242 teachers working in Catholic schools in England & Wales, 55% of whom are Catholic.
- More than 99% of Catholic schools, maintained & independent, have a policy requiring the wearing of school uniform.
- Catholic schools in England are much more ethnically diverse than the national average. 33.5% of pupils in English Catholic primary schools are not in the white British category, whereas the national average is 27.6%; in secondary schools, the proportion is 28.7% compared to 23.2%. Catholic schools have higher than average proportions in the white

⁵ 'Catholic' means a person who has been baptised into the Catholic Church or received into the full communion of the Catholic Church having been baptised in another Church or ecclesial community.

Irish, white other, mixed/dual, black/black British and other ethnic groups, and lower proportions in the Asian/Asian British categories.

- Wales is much less diverse ethnically than England and Welsh Catholic schools reflect this; however, they are still more ethnically diverse than the national average. In Welsh Catholic primary schools, 24% of pupils are not in the white British category, whereas the national average is 9%; in secondary schools, the proportion is 16% compared to 7%. Catholic schools in Wales have higher proportions than average in all the minority categories, including Asian/Asian British.
- Catholic schools are generally performing well, although there is still underperformance to be tackled. According to the Department for Education, 74.7% of English Catholic primary schools have Ofsted grades of 'good' or 'outstanding', compared to the national average of 64%. At age 11, pupils in English Catholic schools outperform the national average English & Maths SATs scores by 6%. In the number of pupils achieving 5 'A*' to 'C' GCSEs including English & Maths, Catholic schools outperform the national average by 4.9%.
- Catholic schools have more pupils from deprived areas than national school average, with 20% of pupils at Catholic secondary schools in England living in the most deprived areas compared to the national average of 17%. This means that our secondary schools in particular can claim to be more socially diverse than community schools, which tend to have smaller catchment areas that may encompass just part of a town or city rather than the larger area traditionally served by Catholic secondary schools.

All our schools, without exception, have a role in educating children from all backgrounds with many different gifts, interests and abilities so that they will not just be successful on a personal level, but by benefitting from their Christian formation will be able to contribute to the common good of our society.

Three Issues affecting Catholic Schools

1. Academies

Academies were introduced by the Labour Party, and entrenched by the current Coalition; it is highly unlikely that an incoming Labour government would reverse the academies programme, but no one knows what the future will bring, ten or twenty years down the line. Just as the VA system cannot ever be a shibboleth to be defended at all costs, neither can the academy.

The implementation of the Coalition's policy on academies meant that the Church in England & Wales had to decide whether we could, and then should, allow our schools to become academies, either as conversion academies or as transformational academies. In doing so, we had to base our judgment firmly in the Magisterium, in particular Catholic social teaching and the importance of doing what is right for the common good, the wider community, and the poor & marginalised.

At the moment, we have 148 academies – 74 primary, 72 secondary, 1 all through & 1 middle deemed secondary – in thirteen of the twenty dioceses in England.⁶ Although the overwhelming majority of schools are still VA schools, the number of academies is growing and will continue to grow. In the Diocese of Nottingham, for example, over one third of schools are now academies – most of these are conversion academies, but our Diocesan Education Service has become a sponsor which has enabled some schools which were identified by the Department for Education as requiring special intervention to become transformational academies within the Catholic sector; it has been a great success.

So a process of discernment within dioceses, and between the CES and the Department for Education, enabled us to conclude that VA schools could, but would not have to, convert to academy status. We did this by working with the Department for Education and not against it, and the CES has developed excellent conversion policies and documentation, including memorandums of understanding between the diocese and academy, which satisfy the requirements of the Bishops and the Government and which have been found useful by most dioceses who have considered or are considering conversion to academy status. These policies, for example, protect the Bishop's role in the appointment of directors of academies and members of local governing bodies in multi-academy trusts, the teaching of religious education, the appointment of practising Catholics to certain positions, and admissions.

Rapid changes in the educational landscape mean that we must be prepared to innovate and adapt, wherever appropriate, to fulfil our mission in Catholic education. Our support for the voluntary aided sector will continue – the VA system has served us well, and many schools have excellent relationships with their local authorities. Appropriate arrangements will be made to support schools in their own particular situations, including protecting the right of schools to remain voluntary aided, to become part of a federation or to become academies.

2. The Relationship between Parish & Schools

As we have seen, the primary purpose of any Catholic school is assisting parents in bringing up their children in the practice of the faith and promotion of the common good through the education of children. The 'home – school – parish' mantra is still very much rooted in our Catholic psyche. But we only have to look at our parishes on a Sunday to see that there is a disconnection between what happens on a Saturday evening and Sunday morning in churches and what happens between Monday and Friday in schools. Ask many parish priests and they will tell you about the blip in requests for Baptism when children are three or ten, and the various problems associated with preparation for First Holy Communion.

Yet both our schools and our parishes are Catholic, and a big question for all of us concerns how we can reconnect the two in such a way that our schools and parishes don't become parallels, since parallels never meet. So we do have to remind schools that, in the midst of their other academic studies, they must remember their mission to hand on the Deposit of Faith – an especially pertinent matter in this Year of Faith. When children are brought to be baptised, their parents and godparents accept the responsibility of bringing them up in the practice of the faith.

⁶ There are 22 territorial dioceses in England & Wales. Of these, 19 are exclusively in England, two in Wales and one with territory in both England & Wales. Other particular Churches in England & Wales are the Apostolic Exarchate for the Ukrainians, the Military Ordinariate & the Personal Ordinariate of Our Lady of Walsingham.

Although that responsibility is shared by the parish clergy, catechists and schools, it cannot be abdicated to the Church by parents, just as the wider education of their children cannot be abdicated to the State – and although it is primarily the responsibility of the parish priest to ensure that his parishioners are prepared to receive the sacraments of initiation, the school has an important role to play in this, by teaching the faith.

Although we have formal audits of the faith life of our schools in the Section 48 inspections, perhaps the Year of Faith will give us an opportunity to look afresh at questions such as: Is Mass celebrated in school regularly? Is there a chapel, or at least a prayer space, in each school? Is there a Crucifix in a prominent position in each classroom? Is RE taught according to the new *Religious Education Curriculum Directory*, so that our young people know and understand the faith? Is the handing on of the faith in liturgies and in RE really at the heart of the lives of our schools? Are prayers said each day (and I would be saddened if they were not)?

All of these things matter, because the way in which we live expresses what we believe. If Christ is at the centre materially as well as formally, our parishes and schools will be lively, faith-filled communities, playing their role in what we might call the ‘re-Christianisation’ of society or the ‘re-engagement’ of faith and daily life.

Furthermore, we cannot forget the home, and schools and parishes can work together to support the home life of our children; for many of them, the only place of stability and security they know is their school, and it is in the most difficult of circumstances that the school can do so much good in supporting pupils and their parents, both in school and at home.

3. The Teaching of Religious Education

As you may be aware, the teaching of religious education is a statutory requirement in all maintained schools in England & Wales. However, the Government has decided that RE will not be a core subject of the English Baccalaureate, although it will still be possible for pupils to study RE to GCSE and A-level.

The diminution of RE throughout the maintained sector would be a retrograde step for society; our culture is formed and informed by religiosity and in particular Christianity, RE helps pupils to learn about themselves and the spiritual side of their lives, and comparative religion helps to build a tolerant and understanding society. That is why at its most recent meeting, the Bishops’ Conference of England & Wales affirmed ‘the important role that good quality religious education, taught with proper academic rigour, plays in the education of young people and in developing the spiritual dimension of the human person,’ and urged both Her Majesty’s Government and the Welsh Government ‘to safeguard the place of religious education in the curriculum of all schools,’ and the Department for Education to think again about its omission of RE from the English Baccalaureate.⁷

This exclusion of RE poses a particular problem for Catholic schools: if RE is not funded properly, and teachers are not prepared properly, our schools will suffer because RE is *the* core subject in all our schools, a logical consequence of Christ being at the centre of their whole life.

⁷ <http://www.catholicnews.org.uk/Home/News-Releases/Plenary-November-2012/Religious-Education>
[accessed 21st November 2012]

Indeed, the celebration of Mass in Catholic schools and other forms of corporate worship should, along with the study of RE, inform every aspect of their life, including the teaching of all other subjects. That is why the Bishops will continue to make representations to the Department for Education in England and the Department of Education & Skills in Wales to make sure that RE is adequately funded with provision being made for the training of suitably qualified teachers in the discipline:

The Bishops' Conference reaffirms that Religious Education is the core subject in Catholic schools and academies requiring 10% of curriculum time. In view of the recent reallocation of resources in initial teacher training to English Baccalaureate subjects in England, the Bishops' Conference seeks assurances that the supply of highly qualified religious education teachers will be ensured as a matter of government policy.⁸

The new *Religious Education Curriculum Directory*, which the Bishops have described recently as the 'foundational document for the development of religious education in Catholic schools, academies and colleges in England and Wales',⁹ will help to ensure that the Catholic faith is taught in its fullness; the *Directory* is organised around the four constitutions of the Second Vatican Council and based on the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, and all RE schemes which are prepared for use in Catholic schools, at primary and secondary level, should be in accordance with it.

If RE is taught well, in both style and content, it will go a long way to addressing the disconnection between many pupils & their parishes to which I have already referred; it will also ensure that RE is seen as a subject which is not only at the heart of Catholic schools but also, I hope, included in the English Baccalaureate as being worthy of study in its own right.

The Bishops believe that parents not only choose to send their children to Catholic schools because they achieve, on average, higher results than non-Catholic schools, even though they have more pupils from deprived areas than the national school average; rather, it is because there is something distinctive about Catholic schools – the Catholic ethos. It is this ethos which underpins all that happens in our schools, including: our respect for each child and wanting them to achieve all that they can achieve: the tangible community & family atmosphere of our schools; and even our behaviour & disciplinary policies, among others.

When parents choose to send their children to a Catholic school, they do so in the knowledge that they will receive a Catholic education, which is why the teaching of RE is not only at the very heart of the curriculum but 'its exclusion from the core academic subjects as defined by the English Baccalaureate effectively limits the ability of parents to choose schools and academies, and their right to ensure the education of their children is conducted in conformity with their own religious and philosophical convictions'.¹⁰

⁸ *ibid.*

⁹ *ibid.*

¹⁰ The Bishops resolved at their most recent meeting: 'The Bishops' Conference recognises that all parents and legal guardians have the right and duty to educate their children. Catholic parents have an additional duty and right to choose those schools and academies which best promote the Catholic education of their children (cf. can. 793, §1). Mindful that religious education is at the very heart of the curriculum in Catholic schools and academies, its exclusion from the core academic subjects as defined by the English Baccalaureate effectively limits the ability of parents to choose schools and academies, and their right to ensure the education of their children is conducted in conformity with their own religious and philosophical convictions (cf. European Convention on Human Rights, Protocol 2, Article 1). The Bishops' Conference therefore requests the government to uphold parents' rights in this regard.'

The prime responsibility for the education of children is that of their parents. Schools assist parents – who still have the right to educate their children at home – in doing this, and parental choice, which is so prominent a feature of the current Government’s policy, must also be at the heart of ours: Catholic parents pay tax, and therefore surely have the right to decide that they want a Catholic education for their children. This is important not only in the debate about RE, for the reasons which I have already outlined, but also, for example, in that concerning the provision of transport to and from Catholic schools and the establishment of new schools.

Conclusion

One of the most important choices which parents are asked to make is where to send their children to school, and those parents who entrust their children to a Catholic school have made a wise choice. Our schools do have a future, but only if they are true to their distinctive ethos and promote high standards of teaching and learning. In choosing a Catholic school for their children, parents can offer them an excellent formation, because our schools not only help Catholic parents to bring their children up in the practice of the faith, but recognise that true fulfilment of the human person can only come through discipleship of Christ, whose grace will enable all those who attend them and form part of their family to ‘have life, and have it to the full’ (*Jn* 10:10).

This brings me back to the distinctive Catholic *attitude* to education, to which I referred at the beginning of this presentation. I believe that we can look forward with confidence to a future in which our young people will continue to receive a Catholic education of the highest standard in schools which truly are the light of the world and the salt of the earth:¹¹

The Christian life is a call to a deeper communion with God and with one another, and this finds particular expression in our schools, which are rightly recognised as being families themselves, where no one is a stranger and where everyone, whatever his or her background or academic ability, is welcomed, treasured, supported and helped to become the person whom God calls them to be.¹²

<http://www.catholicnews.org.uk/Home/News-Releases/Plenary-November-2012/Religious-Education> [accessed 21st November 2012]

¹¹ Cf. MCMAHON, MALCOLM, ‘Preface’ in FRANCHI, L. & MCKINNEY, S. (eds.), *A Companion to Catholic Education*, Leominster 2011

¹² *Ibid.*