

“Among the Most Catechised but among the least Evangelised”?

Religious Education in Ireland

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It has been said that the Irish are the most catechised but among the least evangelised in Europe. This article examines the contemporary situation of religious education in Ireland with a particular focus on its ecumenical aspects. It begins by outlining the historical journey in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries that led Ireland to the current situation. On that basis it considers some of the issues that have arisen in recent times that have seen a dramatic change in religious practice in Ireland. It explores the issue of the relationship of parish, school and family.

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Since the coming of Patrick to Ireland in the fifth century, the issue of religious education has been important in Ireland. According to a legend, the Celtic princess Eithne asked Patrick: “Who is God, and where is God, of whom is God and where his dwelling?... This God of yours? Is he ever-living? Is he beautiful...? How will he be seen, how is he loved, how is he found?”¹ To respond to questions such as this Patrick evangelised, catechised and inculturated the Gospel faith. And in a remarkably short span of time, there was a Celtic Christian body of poetry and literature. In particular it was the monastic communities that drove the Irish Christian experience of religious education and the transmission of the Christ-event in the first millennium.² Traces of the *Biblia pauperum*, the religious education carried out in forms other than the written word, are very evident in Ireland. The country is dotted with magnificent Irish High Crosses, there are many ancient Mass vessels made of precious metals, and, of course, texts such as the Book of Kells are well known.

The contemporary setting of religious education is very different. It is post Reformation and all that meant in Irish ecclesial history. Religious education is entering a dramatically critical period. A recent affirmation by the

¹ Whitley Stokes, *The Tripartite Life of St. Patrick*, London 1887, p. 100. See also John McSweeney, “St. Patrick and Celtic Spirituality” in *The Furrow* 41 (3/1990), p. 163-167.

² For an excellent historical overview of Christianity in Ireland see Patrick Corish, *The Irish Catholic Experience: A Historical Survey*, Dublin 1985 and Brendan Bradshaw and Dáire Keogh, *Christianity in Ireland: Revisiting the Story*, Dublin 2002.

Archbishop of Dublin, Diarmuid Martin, expresses for committed Christians the alarming nature of a situation where religious education is so linked to schools: “Our young people are among the most catechised in Europe but among the least evangelised.”³

In presenting the contemporary situation of religious education in Ireland it will be important first to outline the historical journey that has led us to where we are. On that basis, then, I will consider some of the issues that have arisen in recent times and the directions being indicated by church leaders.

Historical Roots

The Nineteenth Century

A detailed review of the historical developments that led to the present situation is beyond the scope of this paper. Yet any consideration of religious education and the transmission of the Gospel in Ireland would be utterly incomplete without outlining major turning points particularly in the last two centuries that led to great emphasis being placed on denominational schools as the principal vehicle for religious education.

Both the Reformation and Counter Reformation in Ireland resulted in a scene that was unique in Europe. The principle “*cuius regio eius religio*” just didn’t work. The established religion promoted by King Henry VIII was the Church of Ireland (Anglican) but that always remained a minority force in Ireland. It had its system of schooling for those in Ireland who came to be called the “Ascendancy”. Parish schools could be set up licensed by the local Anglican Bishop. Following the lead of Luther’s Small Catechism, catechetical texts were adopted by the Irish Protestants for religious education and propagation of the faith. Indeed, the first full book printed in the Irish language was a Protestant catechism published by John Carney, *Canon Treasurer of St. Patrick’s Cathedral*, Dublin on 20 June 1571.

The majority of the population in Ireland was, however, in many ways a “descendency”. Those who followed the Catholic faith, particularly under the eighteenth century penal laws, were prevented from having formal schooling. At this time too many clergy were banished and clerical formation was carried out abroad. Be that as it may, we know that some religious education must have continued alongside the clandestine celebrations of the Mass and other

³ See his address to the Knights of Columbanus, *The Future of the Church in Ireland*, Ely Place, May 10, 2010 (hereafter *Ely Place address*). For the texts of the addresses of Archbishop Martin see the Dublin diocesan website www.dublindiocese.ie

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sacramental events. What are described as “hedge-schools” became a vital organic force arising from the desire of Irish Catholics (for the most part now living in poverty) to give their children a Catholic education. Indeed, in 1824, a census of schools found that the vast majority of Catholic children attending school received instruction at the “hedge-schools.”⁴

Catholic religious education was characterised by a flourishing of catechisms encouraged by the Council of Trent (1545–1563). The Irish emigrant Franciscan, Bonaventure O’Hussey, for instance, published a Christian Catechism in the Irish language (*An Teagasg Críosaíde*) in Antwerp in 1611. Later in the seventeenth century the Bellarminian tradition of catechisms became available through the catechism of Theobald Stapleton, a priest from the diocese of Cashel who published a Latin-Irish catechism in Brussels in 1639. The eighteenth century in Ireland saw the diffusion of major catechisms by Michael O’Reilly of Armagh and, most famous of all, James Butler of Cashel. This latter Catechism for the instruction of children went on to influence catechesis not only in Ireland (where it gave rise ultimately to the Maynooth and the Green Catechisms) but all over the English-speaking world, wherever Irish missionaries went.⁵

However, in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries a new configuration of things began to emerge. The Relief Act of 1782 restored to Catholics the right to teach in schools and ten years later removed the legal necessity of getting a licence from the Protestant bishop of the diocese. Catholic Emancipation in 1829 opened the way for a new springtime in Catholic initiatives. Founders of new congregations of religious women and men, whose outreach was particularly to the poor and destitute, set about establishing schools.

A major turning point came in 1831 when a national school system of elementary education was established. In his letter to the Duke of Leinster inviting the Duke to become Chairman of a Board of Commissioners for National Education, the Chief Secretary for Ireland, Lord Stanley underlined how the system was to be one of mixed education and this was intended “to unite in one system children of different creeds”. That meant alongside combined instruction for secular subjects, an anthology of biblical extracts would be taught to children of all creeds, while more doctrinal religious instruction was to be provided voluntarily by the denominations. It was a

⁴ Rosalind M.O. Pritchard, “The Self-image of Primary School Teachers: Ireland and Germany” in *Studies* 75 (1986), p. 295-307.

⁵ See Patrick M. Devitt, *That You May Believe: A Brief History of Religious Education*, Dublin 1992, p. 67.

system from which was to be banished in the words of Lord Stanley, “even the suspicion of proselytism”.⁶ Values of peace and tolerance were to be promoted. A lesson about how Christians should endeavour to live peaceably with all was to be displayed prominently in all national schools. National teachers were to be persons of Christian sentiment.⁷

The reaction by church authorities varied.⁸ The then Catholic Archbishop of Dublin, Daniel Murray, supported the initiative, taking up a seat on the Board of Commissioners for National Education. He saw it as a chance for many Catholics to receive education. But Catholics weren't without reservations. The great lay leader, Daniel O'Connell objected to the rule requiring the reading of the Scriptures in schools! The Presbyterian Church, most of whose members lived in the North of Ireland, boycotted the system for some years until they secured sufficient concessions from the Board of Commissioners. The established Church of Ireland tried to influence the tenor of the curriculum and contents of textbooks but, being largely unsuccessful, set up their own system in 1839 called the Church Education Society. Catholics now found they were able to draw upon the public funds available for setting up schools. This was much resented by the Church of Ireland because in practice it allowed the Catholics to dominate education in most parts of the country.

Fears of proselytism, concern about cultural identity and community distrust meant that by 1850 the system of national education in Ireland had become, de facto, a denominational one. In other words, each denomination had control of its own schools, teachers and religious instruction. Increasingly, during the second half of the 19th century, due to the sustained campaigns engaged in by the different denominations, the national school system became, step by step, de iure a state-supported denominational system. A Catholic figure of major significance in all of this development was the new Archbishop of Dublin, Dr. Paul Cullen, who opposed mixed education.⁹ Cullen was determined that the Catholic Church in Ireland would have an education system not just open to Catholics, as had hitherto not been the

⁶ The text of Lord's Stanley's letter to the Duke of Leinster reproduced in Áine Hyland and Kenneth Milne, *Irish Educational Documents*, Vol. I, Dublin 1987, p. 98-103.

⁷ See Áine Hyland, “Schools and Values” in *Studies* 75 (1986), p. 250-266.

⁸ For an account of the reactions of the different denominations see John Coolahan, *Irish Education: History and Structure*, Dublin 1981, p. 14-19. And for a study of these reactions see D.H. Aksenson, *The Irish Education Experiment*, London 1970.

⁹ See Ciarán O'Carroll, *Paul Cardinal Cullen: Portrait of a Practical Nationalist*, Dublin 2008.

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case, but one that would give the strongest possible guarantee of being truly Catholic. He won the Holy See’s approval for his view.

These developments were taking place at a time when waves of evangelicalism in England and Ireland were resulting in the establishment of a number of education societies that sought to convert Irish Catholics to Protestantism through reading the Bible. It was also the time when the structures and disciplines of the Tridentine Counter-Reformation were being applied systematically to Irish Catholicism. Relations between Catholics and Protestants in Ireland underwent fractious deterioration and, as Michael Drumm comments “on no issue did divisions focus so clearly as on education”.¹⁰ This controversy reached even into the University level over the so-called Queen’s colleges.¹¹

The First Half of the Twentieth Century

By 1900 a denominational school system was well in place. The Catholic bishops, at their national synod at Maynooth that year, were pleased to report that “the system of national education... in a great part of Ireland is now in fact, whatever it is in name, as denominational almost as we could desire”.¹² At the dawn of independence from Britain, the sentiment was expressed that

“The only acceptable system of education for Catholics is one in which Catholic children are taught in Catholic schools, by Catholic teachers, under Catholic control”.¹³

In 1926 the new Free State recognised the integral role of religious education in the life of a school. In that year a Government sponsored conference on the national school curriculum under the chairmanship of Rev. Lambert McKenna, S.J., included the following statement in a report to the Government:

“Of all parts of the school curriculum Religious Instruction is by far the most important, as its subject matter, God’s honour and service, includes

¹⁰ Michael Drumm, “The Place of Theology and Religion in Higher Education” in: Pádraig Hogan and Kevin Williams (eds.), *The Future of Religion in Irish Education*, Dublin 1997, p. 32-47, here: p. 35.

¹¹ See Fergal McGrath, “The University Question,” in: Patrick Corish (ed.), *A History of Irish Catholicism: Vol. V: The Church since Emancipation*, Dublin 1971, p. 84-142.

¹² See Ignatius Murphy, *Catholic Education: Primary Education*, Dublin 1971.

¹³ See the declaration by the Clerical Managers’ Association issued in 1921, a key moment in modern Irish History, in *The Times Educational Supplement* of 29 October, 1921.

the proper use of all man's faculties, and affords the most powerful inducements to their proper use. We assume, therefore, that Religious Instruction is a fundamental part of the school course. Though the time allotted to it as a specific subject is necessarily short, a religious spirit should inform and vivify the whole work of the school. The teacher while careful, in the presence of children of different religious beliefs, not to touch on matters of controversy – should constantly inculcate the practice of charity, justice, truth, purity, patience, temperance, obedience to lawful authority and all the other moral virtues. In this way he will fulfil the primary duty of an educator, the moulding to perfect form of his pupils' character, habituating them to observe, in their relations with God and with their neighbour, the laws which God, both directly through the dictates of natural reason and through Revelation, and indirectly through the ordinance of lawful authority, imposes on mankind."¹⁴

The Government of the Free State endorsed this statement and inserted the above paragraph into the Rules and Regulations for National Schools, where it became enshrined as a fundamental part of the national school system. It is still a fundamental rule for national schools (Rule 68) except for one change – the admonition of teachers to be careful in the presence of children of different religious beliefs not to touch on matters of controversy was removed in 1965. This change strengthened the denominational character of national schools.¹⁵ All the churches approved this denominational arrangement. For the minority churches it helped confirm and strengthened their identity. In the newly established partitioned Northern Ireland controversies over schooling also emerged between 1923 and 1947. Ian Ellis' judgement is that Churches occupied "entrenched, sectarian positions" regarding education in Northern Ireland.¹⁶

The constitutional position with regard to education in the Free State of Ireland (later to become a Republic) is set out in Articles 42 and 44 of the Constitution of Ireland, 1937. Under the Constitution each and every denomination has the right to establish schools, and to provide a denominational religious programme therein. Parents who wish an education

¹⁴ *National Programme Conference – Report and Programme*, Dublin 1926.

¹⁵ *Rules for National Schools. Rule 68*, An Roinn Oideachais 1965.

¹⁶ See Ian Ellis, *Vision and Reality: A Survey of Twentieth Century Irish Inter-Church Relations*, Belfast 1992, p. 68. On the legislation under which religious education operates in Northern Ireland's schools, see David Armstrong, "Religious education and the law in Northern Ireland's Controlled Schools," in *Irish Educational Studies* 28 (3/2009), p. 297-313.

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for their children which is not denominational in character may seek to establish their own grouping to manage a school. Otherwise they must send their children to denominationally managed schools where they may opt out of Religious Instruction. The State, through the Constitution, guarantees to respect the “inalienable right and duty of parents to provide, according to their means, for the religious and moral education of their children”, and seeks to support these rights by providing for a system of free primary education which does not “affect prejudicially the right of any child to attend a school receiving public money without attending Religious Instruction at that school”.¹⁷ At the primary level, the Department of Education provides no curricular guidelines for either a programme of Religious Education or of Religious Instruction but states briefly that “the prescribing of the subject matter of Religious Instruction, the examination of it, and the supervision of its teaching are outside the competence of the Department of Education”.¹⁸

The Constitutional provisions allow for quite a pluralistic approach to religious education. In fact, in time multi-denominational schools, special schools and schools run by the Muslim community have also been established. All of these schools are in receipt of State aid on the condition that they are conducted in accordance with the Rules for National Schools. The system of national schools is then a state-aided as distinct from a state-owned and administered system, a distinction which derives from Article 42 of the Constitution.

The Second Vatican Council

By the time of the Second Vatican Council, the situation was ostensibly quite positive for the Catholic Church (as indeed also for the other churches) in terms of denominational schools. By and large schools were in the control of churches and they could control the religious education. Indeed, the integration of religion within the whole curriculum was recommended in the Department of Education’s 1971 Curriculum Handbook for Teachers. The understanding and practice of the Education Act (1997), in effect, also makes it compulsory for the ethos of a school to permeate the school day, i.e., have an integrated curriculum.

The practice, however, did not always match the theory. The Educationalist Pádraig Hogan comments that “in the eyes of the official powers of church and state, the national school was seen primarily as an arm

¹⁷ *Bunreacht na hEireann*, Articles 42. 44.

¹⁸ *The Curriculum Handbook for Teachers* (1). 23. The Department of Education, 1971.

of ecclesiastical rule and as an instrument of state policy. Unfortunately, its integrity as an educational institution was honoured more often in the breach than in the observance”.¹⁹ Writing about Catholic schools, Archbishop Martin has described the situation as follows:

“The school in Ireland then became a rather authoritarian school system, with Victorianism, Jansenism and older Irish penitential spirituality combining. Questioning was not encouraged. Questions of faith were to be accepted in obedience. It was presumed that all students in Catholic schools were believers and that they would make the First Communion and Confirmation when they reached the appropriate class.”²⁰

Lecturer in Religious Education, Patrick Devitt also points out that the identification of Religious Education and schooling risked narrowing the concept of catechesis: “It came to be seen as a task to be completed during the period of formal schooling”.²¹ Unfortunately, that task also got associated with the Catholic Church’s high degree of control in the so-called “managerial system” of schools in Ireland. The system of clerical management and departmental inspector “cast long shadows over the lives of many teachers”²² and this eventually led to ambiguous feelings regarding the Catholic Church’s involvement in schools. All of this is reflected in literature.²³ Bryan MacMahon, for instance in his book, *The Master*, while recounting many inspiring sides of clergy and lay teachers alike, also tells of the rigidity of the faith that teachers were expected to pass on and the fraught relations with clerics. In time this negative reaction would deepen.

It is true that at this time in Ireland, there existed a social catechumenate that enabled the faith to be passed on as a life experience with school, family and parish working together. Nevertheless, an observation by Rumery holds true also for Ireland that

“when schools took over more and more from parents the task of teaching religion... religion as a life to be lived gradually succumbed to the notion of religion as a series of propositions to be committed

¹⁹ Pádraig Hogn, “Religion in Education and the Integrity of Teaching as Practice. The Experience of Irish National Schools in Changing Times” in: Irish National Teachers’ Organisation, *Teaching Religion in the Primary School: Issues and Challenges*, Dublin 2003, p. 63-74, here p. 66.

²⁰ Address to the Newman Society, Oxford, 4 June 2010.

²¹ P. Devitt, *That You May Believe*, p. 68.

²² *Ibidem*

²³ See Francis McManus’ *Flow on Lovely River* and John McGahern’s *The Leavetaking*, Brian Friel’s play, *Philadelphia Here I Come* and Bryan Mac Mahon’s book, *The Master*.

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to memory after careful analysis... it is quite possible for the child catechized ‘in the faith’ to withhold his personal consent or simply to go through a process of learning about something which has no effect on his personal faith.”²⁴

The Second Vatican Council was a key moment of transition. The Church was spoken of as “intimately linked with humankind and its history”, the ecclesial character of other Christian churches was recognised with dialogue encouraged on the basis of a theology of communion, and religious freedom underlined. Dermot Lane comments that

“This new spirit of dialogue initiated at Vatican II heralded an approach to education that is open and attentive to the voices of others in the world-wide conversation of humanity about the meaning of life.”²⁵

Following the Council, various programmes of religious education were developed by the Catholic Church at primary level. It is important to note of course that the works of Jean Piaget, Ronald Goldman and Lawrence Kohlberg were also becoming better known at this time and this led to greater awareness of pedagogical and epistemological issues in the field of Religious Education. The new approaches were more child-centred and experience-focussed. One lecturer in education commented at the time that “nothing less than a revolution has taken place in religious education.”²⁶

The *Children of God* series (the religious education programme to be followed in primary Catholic schools for half an hour each day) that came into operation during the seventies and eighties was quite kerygmatic in tone. Though containing anthropological or experiential moments, the programme reflected Josef Andreas Jungmann’s approach that promoted an integrated education in faith within a coordinated pastoral plan. Significantly, The Church of Ireland, Methodist and Presbyterian Boards of Education adapted the Children of God Series for use in their schools. The Christo-centric influence of Jungmann was equally noticeable at secondary level in Ireland in text books such as *Christ with Us, Saved in Christ, United in Christ and The Christian Way, According to Your Word, You Gather a People*. Later programmes also included introductory material on other churches, ecumenism and dialogue.

²⁴ Gerard Rummery, *Catechesis and Religious Education in a Pluralist Society*, Sydney 1975, p. 28.

²⁵ Dermot Lane, *Catholic Education and the School: Some Theological Reflections*, Dublin 1991, p. 4.

²⁶ See John E. Greer, “The Irish Primary Catechetical Programme” in *The Furrow* 28 (1977), p. 667-678, here p. 667.

The new developments were welcomed by teachers and students. Admittedly, some commentators felt the new directions resulted in a weakening in the actual content of the faith being taught. Now the classroom emerged as a space where the students engaged with religion in a way that was pleasing for them.²⁷ The bad news, however, was that the classroom was increasingly the only space where the students were so engaged with religion. While in theory the religious education of children was meant to involve a partnership of home, parish and school the reality was increasingly understood to be very different. The “three islands of religious experience”, the school, the home and the parish, were drifting apart. The *Primary School Religious Education Programme* (hereafter referred to as the *Alive-O* programme) sought to address this. Yet as faith shifted it became increasingly difficult to establish the intrinsic link between the faith expressed at home, liturgical instructional at school and the doctrinal and existential elements of Christian formation hoped for by the Church.

The school became more and more the main and increasingly isolated protagonist of religious education.²⁸ Pleas were made for a greater appreciation of the role of parents and priests:

“Parents and priests are involved in the work to deepen conversion, explaining the importance of basic attitudes of openness and conversion within the life of faith. Parents are the primary teachers of the faith and the parish is called the pre-eminent place of catechesis”.²⁹

By the early 1990s, it was becoming clear that even explaining the meaning of ceremonies and the meaning of the creeds was an activity that “will probably be more in demand than ever before.”³⁰

The challenge of linking faith and justice became an important theme in the schools themselves:

“In the 1990s catechesis will need to draw upon such modern disciplines as social analysis. She will need to devise fresh approaches to religious education which emphasise the justice concerns of faith. One example would be the shared praxis approach of Thomas Groome, an Irishman

²⁷ Martin Kennedy, “Islands Apart: The Religious Experience of Children” in *The Furrow*, 50 (1999), p. 527-533, here p. 527.

²⁸ P. Devitt, *That You May Believe*, p. 115.

²⁹ Pope John Paul II, *Catechesi Tradendae*, ns. 68 and 67.

³⁰ P. Devitt, *That You May Believe*, p. 117.

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who devised a strategy for rooting faith in tradition while it sprouts towards the Kingdom.”³¹

The Current Situation of Religious Education in schools

Dramatic Changes

Currently, there are 3,157 primary schools in Ireland, the vast majority of which are Roman Catholic, 190 are Church of Ireland (Anglican), 18 Presbyterian, one Methodist, one Jewish, and two Muslim. There are 40 multi-denominational schools throughout the country. At secondary level most schools are still run by religious orders or trustees appointed by them.

A positive development in the first decade of the third millennium has been the introduction of religious education into the syllabus for the State exams at second level. It is now on the curriculum for both Junior Certificate and Leaving Certificates. The Syllabus states:

“Religious education should ensure that students are exposed to a broad range of religious traditions and to the non-religious interpretation of life.... Religious education, in offering opportunities to develop an informed and critical understanding of the Christian tradition in its historical origins and cultural and social expressions, should be part of a curriculum which seeks to promote the critical and cultural development of the individual in his or her social and personal contexts.... religious education can justly claim an integral part of any curriculum which aims to promote the holistic development of the individual in the light of the stated aim of education.”³²

Despite this important step, however, the first decade of the third millennium has ushered in a time of enormous transition in religious education in Ireland. The changing cultural context of religious education has been summarised by Dermot Lane in terms of the advent of modernity overnight, scandals in the Church, the rise and fall of the Celtic Tiger (the economic boom), the ambiguous return of religion, the reality of multiculturalism and the turn to spirituality.³³ The religious demography of Ireland has changed.

³¹ *Ibidem*, p. 116. See Thomas Groome, *Christian Religious Education*, San Francisco 1980.

³² Department of Education and Science, *Religious Education Syllabus*, Dublin 2003.

³³ See D. Lane, *Challenges Facing Religious Education in Contemporary Ireland*, Dublin 2008, p. 11-22.

Schools formerly administered by religious orders have been transferred to trusts made up wholly or partly of lay people. The issue of school patronage has become debated. Secularists/Humanists claim it is hard to find non-denominational education, especially in rural areas where the pressure to not be different is greater. They seek legislation to establish non- and multi-denominational schools and refer to the conventions, councils and committees in Europe for support. The training of teachers is another serious issue in Ireland as most institutions are denominational. Though terms such as denominational schooling, non-denominational schooling, inter-denominational schooling and multi-denominational schooling are now much used it is not so clear what is meant.

Given the strict link between schools and religious education in Ireland it is not surprising that when faith practices began to shift, a multi-denominational organisation, *Educate Together*, set up by parents in 1984, following demand for multi-denominational education, has begun to grow in popularity. In the context of the Northern Ireland problems, schools are sometimes seen as part of a culture that fosters sectarianism.³⁴

In a poll reported on 30th June 2008 only 43 per cent of all those with children under the age of 15 said they would like to see the 2½ hours now spent on teaching religion each week retained, though more than 95% were either satisfied or very satisfied with their decision to send the child to a denominational school, and 70% said that the religious education and worship are the most important aspects of primary schooling.³⁵ However, a national survey published in 2009 clearly indicates a need for religious revival in Ireland.³⁶

The 2009 reports on abuse of children in religious run institutions and dioceses³⁷ (see the Murphy and Ryan Reports) have undermined the moral authority of the Church and their role in schools. Often the churches are seen as simply power-hungry in wanting to retain control of schools. Education becomes a point of tension in Church-state relations.³⁸

³⁴ On the theme of sectarianism, see the Irish Inter-Church Meeting Report of the Working Party on Sectarianism, Belfast 1993.

³⁵ See the Report published on 7 April 2008 by the Council for Research & Development of the Irish Catholic Bishops' Conference.

³⁶ Micheál Mac Gréil, *The Challenge of Indifference: A Need for Religious Revival in Ireland*, Maynooth 2009.

³⁷ The Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse (commonly known as the Ryan Report, it related to abuses in Reformatory and Industrial Schools run by the Catholic Church) and the Dublin Archdiocese Commission of Investigation Report (commonly known as the Murphy Report, it relates to the clerical sexual abuse scandal in the Catholic archdiocese of Dublin.)

³⁸ See John Coolahan, "Church-State Relations in Primary and Secondary Education" in: James P. Mackey and Enda McDonagh, *Religion and Politics in Ireland at the turn of the millennium*, Dublin 2003, p. 132-151.

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Affirming Denominational Schooling but recognising the need for renewal

In response to the dramatic changes, on the one hand, the churches defend their right to be patrons and run schools in accordance with their ethos with religious education within the programme. Yes, changes in the religious demography of Ireland make it necessary to look at relinquishing ownership of some Catholic schools and looking at new models of shared provision in some cases. Nevertheless it is felt by church leaders that there is a case to be made for denominational schools. In a 2008 document the Bishops Conference (*Vision 08: A Vision for Catholic Education in Ireland*) underlines the civic value of Catholic schools that today are also open to other denominations. In his address to the 2009 Synod, the Archbishop of the Church of Ireland defended the choice of parents to send children to schools of a particular religious ethos. At the annual conference of the Association of Management of Catholic Secondary Schools the theologian and educationalist Michael Drumm said that there was a danger that Ireland could “sleep-walk” its way into losing its Catholic schools. Gordon Linney too, former Archdeacon of the Church of Ireland believes Irish education would not be well served by a “one-model-fits-all secular system.”

While supporting Catholic schools, Archbishop Martin nevertheless advocates that greater choice of schooling will be of ultimate benefit to denominational identity:

“I am not sure however that we all really have an understanding of what Catholic education entails. Many people send their children to what is today a Catholic school not primarily because it is a Catholic school but because it is a good school. I am not sure that parents would change their children from that school if it were to become simply a national school. The level of parents’ interest in Catholic education will only be objectively measurable when they have real choice.”³⁹

Schools themselves need to be renewed. Commenting on Catholic schools, Cardinal Brady has stated:

“Renewing our stewardship of Catholic schools has to involve renewing our commitment to respecting and promoting the right of children in our schools to be led and formed in authentic worship of God in the Catholic tradition.”⁴⁰

³⁹ See the *Ely Place address*.

⁴⁰ Cardinal Brady, *Address to the Conference on Catholic Schools in Ireland organised by the Diocese of Ossory*, 7 May, 2010, Kilkenny, Ossory 2010.

While Archbishop Harper at the 2009 Synod suggested that

“there should be issued a policy imperative for all schools to create purposeful partnerships across all the perceived divides... A deliberate policy of inclusivity through partnership could redress any perceived divisive effects of separated education.”

Resolution of the issue of Church schools and religious education will need to revisit the Christian origins to discover the real meaning of education in a Christian context. Michael Drumm comments that “all of these schools were an effort to reinterpret the message of Christ in a particular time and place” and so by revisiting the origins “we might encounter again the energy which unleashed this Christian vision of the world.”⁴¹

Evangelisation more than Catechesis, Community not only School

Aside from renewal, there is also a sense that, as one man put it at a recent meeting of the Dublin Council of Churches, all of our Churches are today “wearing the wrong clothes”, clothes that were measured in times when we were all a lot fatter and when styles were very different. While the 2008 document of the Irish Bishops Conference can state that

“in primary schools in particular, initiatives in faith formation, the sacramental preparation of pupils, and after-school programmes... are of increasing service to the parish and the wider community”⁴²,

nevertheless Archbishop Martin judges that

“we have invested in structures of religious education which despite enormous goodwill are not producing the results that they set out to do.”

He continues, “Our young people are among the most catechised in Europe but among the least evangelised.”⁴³ He raises the question:

“We are also deluding ourselves if we think that what is in fact presented as a curriculum for religious education and formation in faith is actually being applied everywhere. There are clear indications that in the face of so many other curriculum pressures and extracurricular activities

⁴¹ *Address to the Conference on Catholic Schools in Ireland organised by the Diocese of Ossory*, 8 May, 2010, Kilkenny.

⁴² See Irish Bishops Conference, *Vision 08: A Vision for Catholic Education in Ireland*, Maynooth 2008, p. 7-8.

⁴³ *Ely Place Address*.

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religious education is in fact being shifted to the margins of school life in many Catholic schools. We have great teachers; teachers committed to Catholic education. But the system is also such that teachers who do not share the Catholic faith find themselves teaching something of which they are not convinced. Catholic schools have contributed greatly to integration in Irish society. Catholic identity is more than vague ethos; it is also about witness.”⁴⁴

The place of the parish or local community in religious education has begun to be underlined much more clearly. Archbishop Martin has noted how the system of religious education in Ireland has ended up in recent years bypassing parishes. Due to the drop in the number of priests and the increased work load, the link between sacramental preparation and school has deepened and the link between sacramental preparation and parish diminished.

“A form of religious education which is separated from the parish or some other non-school faith community will almost inevitably cave in the day that school ends. Sacramental formation belongs within the Christian community which welcomes and supports each of us on our journey.”⁴⁵

From this comes the need for a more demanding catechesis, within a parish framework, for those who wish to come forward for admission to the sacraments:

“Admission to the sacraments is not something which is automatically acquired when one reaches a certain class in school.”⁴⁶

All of this in turn requires renewal of the parish! And for this Archbishop Martin underlines the place of Scriptures:

“... The Irish Catholic tradition has greatly neglected the place of the scriptures. Catholics do not know the scriptures. They do not know how to use the scriptures. We do not take the time to encounter Jesus in the scriptures.”⁴⁷

Together with the Church of Ireland Archbishop of Dublin, John Neill, Archbishop Martin has launched a project of distributing 250,000 copies of

⁴⁴ *Ibidem.*

⁴⁵ *Address to the Newman Society*, Oxford, June 2010.

⁴⁶ *Ibidem.*

⁴⁷ *Ibidem.*

the Gospel of Saint Luke to further a biblical renewal in the diocese. Each month a group of biblical and pastoral scholars prepare an “e-good news letter” helping priests and people to know how to use and interpret the scriptural texts that will be found in the liturgy in the month ahead. There are interactive link-ups between parish scripture and *lectio divina* groups.

Parishes need to become place of encounter with the person of Jesus Christ if religious education is to really have its effect. Again Archbishop Martin:

“young people need to be initiated into the search for God in another manner, through encountering the God who is revealed in Jesus Christ. They have to be led to encounter Jesus Christ as a person with whom they can enter into a relationship and who will lead them to understand that God is not just an ultimate cause, but that God is love. The Catholic Church in Ireland needs new forms of evangelization which involves strong scriptural renewal.”⁴⁸

Conclusion

At this transition time, the issue of religious education in Ireland is very much central stage. However, it has nearly always been so in the past two hundred years. The particular history of Ireland has very much shaped a particular framework of religious education and of schooling in Ireland. But clearly new directions are needed today. Renewal at all levels is the order of the day, also in the area of religious education.

In Ireland that renewal is being re-positioned within the larger need of a new evangelisation on the island of “saints and scholars” as it was once known. It is a time of beginning again with the Word of God as something to be lived together. Perhaps an overlooked dimension in all of the discussions is the prophetic charismatic element of the Church that is constantly opening up new forms of community life within our churches. New ecclesial communities and groups have the potential of becoming intermediate points where the encounter with the person of Jesus Christ can happen.

For a country that has a Christian heritage stretching back to the fifth century and beyond, one that has seen many transition periods in the faith journey, faith suggests that God is still at work in all of the current crisis, leading the Church in Ireland forward “into the deep” so that it may cast out its net once more and in the way best suited for today (cf. Lk 5).

⁴⁸ *Address to the Newman Society.*

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