

Marists and Education / Maristes et l'éducation

Some of the Challenges Facing Catholic Education

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Cardinal John Henry Newman who has just been beatified wrote in the 1850's:

“What I desire in Catholics is the gift of bringing out what their religion is — I want a laity, not arrogant, not rash in speech, not disputatious, but men who know their religion, who enter into it, who know just where they stand, who know what they hold and what they do not, who know their creed so well that they can give an account of it, who know so much of history that they can defend it. I want an intelligent, well-instructed laity — I wish you to enlarge your knowledge, to cultivate your reason, to get an insight into the relation of truth to truth, to learn to view things as they are, to understand how faith and reason stand to each other, what are the bases and principles of Catholicism and where lies the main inconsistencies and absurdities of the Protestant theory. I have no apprehension you will be the worse Catholics for familiarity with these subjects, provided you cherish a vivid sense of God above and keep in mind that you have souls to be judged and saved. In all times the laity has been the measure of the Catholic spirit; they saved the Irish Church three centuries ago and they betrayed the Church in England. You ought to be able to bring out what you feel and what you mean, as well as to feel and mean it; to expose to the comprehension of others the fictions and fallacies of your opponents; to explain the charges brought against the Church, to the satisfaction, not, indeed, of bigots, but of men of sense, of whatever cast of opinion.”

On another occasion, while making a tour through Ireland Newman and his travelling companions decided to walk for the day; and they took a boy of thirteen to be their guide. They amused themselves with putting questions to him on the subject of his religion; and as Newman later said that one of them had confessed to him on his return that that poor child had put them all to silence. How? Not of course by any train of argument or refined theological disquisition, but merely by knowing and understanding the answers in his catechism.

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That example surely illustrates the basic, bottom-line defence that Newman hoped all the laity could provide — all of them well catechized and faithful to the promises of their Baptism. That letter, and so very much else with which Newman concerned himself on the laity's behalf, was to do with building up a well-catechized laity and turning some of it into a well educated laity that could take its place in the world and in that world be able to debate intelligently with, and answer accurately the questions of, the Protestant majority. It would not be enough for the layman to say, "I leave it to theologians", or, "I will ask my priest" — he must, as Newman put it, be able there and then to defend or articulate cogently his beliefs.

The need Newman perceived for the laity to have clear convictions about revealed doctrines as well as expertise in worldly affairs and intellectual disciplines led Newman to see that the Church had a definite obligation to support superior higher education for its laity, and this education, he saw, must be suited to the lay life as such; it was not enough for it to be a watered-down type of seminary. All his hard work and many labours at the Catholic University in Dublin were concerned with setting up precisely this sort of establishment and atmosphere in which the Catholic layman could learn and develop. The many intense frustrations of the Dublin years, caused by a deep-rooted mistrust and misunderstanding on the part of the Irish bishops, caused Newman much personal anguish because he realized what was at stake and the supreme folly of throwing over the opportunities provided.

In 1873, Newman had preached at the opening of St. Bernard's Seminary, Olton, and having entitled his sermon "The Infidelity of the Future", he told his hearers:

"I think that the trials which lie before us are such as would appeal and make dizzy even such courageous hearts as St. Athanasius, St. Gregory I or St. Gregory VII. And they would confess that, dark as the prospect of their own day was to them severally, ours has a darkness different in kind from any that has been before it . . . Christianity has never yet had experience of a world simply irreligious. The ancient world of Greece and Rome was full of superstition but not of infidelity, for they believed in the moral governance of the world and their first principles were the same as ours. Similarly the northern barbarians . . . believed in an unknown providence and in the moral law. But we are now coming to a time when the world does not acknowledge our first principles."

...

“The general principles of any study you may learn by books at home; but the details, the colour, the tone, the air, the life which makes it live in us, you must catch all these from those in whom it already lives.”

And therein lies the rub. Where in our catholic schools today do we find the colour, the tone the air of what is Catholic? Who embodies that today in our schools?

Distinction between Evangelisation and Catechesis and Teaching Religion:

One working definition of catechesis implies that the recipient must at least be interested or else you are wasting your time. This raises major issues for the Catholic school of today.

In the 1988 document, *The Catholic School on the Threshold of the Third Millennium*, a picture is painted of a world with an increasing loss of faith, moral relativism, polarisation of rich and poor, materialism, communal and familial breakdown and an insipid apathy where ethical and religious issues are concerned. Moreover faith leadership within schools, formally the preserve of religious, is almost defunct. How then is the charism to be transmitted?

Ireland

Most staffs throughout the length and breadth of the country are invariably a mixed group varying greatly in their allegiance to church and catholic values. Some are in irregular relationships, some are non practicing Catholics, some are disinterested, some are hostile to matters spiritual. My own life experience in education, informs me that an increasing number of teachers no longer subscribe to the Catholic ethos. At best they have become nominal Catholics who adopt an à la carte approach to faith issues; at worst they are hostile and cynical about catholic values. It is rare to find teachers who have a zeal for the proclamation of the faith.

A fundamental question needs to be posed in the midst of such realities. Can such a disparate group foster a Catholic ethos within a school? The fact that the school has a religious mission statement or Catholic trustees or a Catholic Board of Management or even a Catholic principal does not in any way guarantee the catholic ethos. Unless a significant number of the practitioners at ground zero level are committed the project is doomed to failure. Heretofore, the *raison d'être* of a catholic school was what it had to offer. Of course, students and their families were free to accept or reject the Catholic vision of life

which ultimately depended on the quality of the teachers presenting this vision.

As Vatican II pointed out in its Declaration on Christian Education "...the Catholic School depends upon them almost entirely for the accomplishment of its goals and programmes." (no. 8)

If we examine the religious views and practice of those second level students who have left our Catholic Schools in the last decades we will discover that the vast majority of them do not visibly espouse gospel values. Schools have not had the desired effect. Obviously the school alone cannot be asked to shoulder the blame for the marked decline in faith but one can and indeed should ask questions about the name under which they operate.

If they are not true to their mandate or are unable to deliver it then in all honesty they should be redefined under a different nomenclature.

In their work, *A sense of Mission: Defining Direction for the Large Corporation*, Campbell and Nash (1992) suggested that successful mission statements share four qualities in common:

- 1.They present a clear statement of purpose
2. They present a clear strategy of how that purpose will be achieved
- 3.They have a clear statement of the values or morally based beliefs of the organisation.
- 4.They offer a clear statement of behavioural expectations or standards of behaviour for employees.

Too few of our schools have such clarity.

James Hitchcock in his book *Recovery of the Sacred* points out that "strong and vital communities are likely to be precisely those which have a significant common past of which the community is keenly aware." He acknowledges that 'a community that seeks to live primarily in the past will petrify' but equally one that 'loses contact with its past or comes to repudiate much of its past is likely to disintegrate."

There is a dangerous and growing tendency to seek accommodation with a secular liberal agenda that questions the existence of any ultimate truths and pays deferential homage to the voracious appetites of the market economy. The very legitimacy of the Catholic school itself is now being questioned because of its support for an extended curriculum that challenges the rationale of the league table syndrome, the exalted cult of the individual and the uniformity of "the get and have it your way mentality."

The Catholic school of today needs to enter the debate not in an apologetic nor in a confrontational manner but with confidence and competence. Don't give the naysayers a clear run. Challenge their assertions of sectarianism, antiquated models, control freaks. Be familiar with the worldwide research that lauds the successes of the Catholic school not in a triumphalist way but calmly and factually. Point out that the combination of the Catholic ingredients, community, forgiveness, liturgy, relationship, communion of saints, the theological lens from which we view the world enriches not only the life of the individual but also the community at large. Education within the Catholic mindset is never only for the aggrandisement of the individual. It calls its graduates to be people for others, to use their skills and gifts for the building of civil society and the building of the Kingdom of God. As Catherine McAuley, founder of the Mercy Sisters put it. She wanted her schools to develop young women 'fit for the world and not unfit for heaven.'

Learn about the tradition from which our schools came. We have a rich and vibrant history largely forged by religious orders and clerics, in turn funded and supported by the generosity and selflessness of the wider community. To lose that religious memory would be to lose a core part of our identity. We hold a treasure which needs to be showcased in all its splendour. This means that the story of the individual congregations, the founder's charism, the struggles to be recognised and to be established need to be retold. New teachers and students and parents need to be inducted into the tradition. Of course tradition needs to be something living and vibrant. Otherwise as Hitchcock reminds us it will 'petrify'. What is the importance of the charism today? How should it be lived? How can we protect it and help it to thrive and prosper?

Of course, not all teachers who teach in a Catholic School need to be Catholic but a significant cohort need to be committed advocates of the Catholic ethos. In the past, few if any questions have been asked about such a delicate topic at interview because there was a fear that it could be perceived as discriminatory. Yet the 2002 Education Act allows for the "characteristic spirit of a school to be protected." In order to so protect that spirit, it would seem eminently reasonable that we place significant emphasis on the people whom we appoint to carry the ethos of our schools.

The government need to be challenged about the current inequalities that persist within the funding and personnel allocations to Catholic

schools. For example, if you are a Community or VEC school you will most likely be entitled to a paid chaplain, if you are a Catholic voluntary school most likely you will not. Such blatant injustices need to be highlighted by all Catholic stakeholders and if governments do not listen to the reasonableness of the arguments against such inequitable treatment they can be persuaded by cohesive lobbying in electoral campaigns.

Finally the future of the Catholic School depends on whether enough people want it or not. Edmund Rice, founder of the Christian brothers, on one occasion bought a slave boy, ‘Black Johnny’ from his owner in order to set him free. He saw himself in the business of purchasing freedoms through education for the poor and the impoverished. In Ireland of the 21st century, the poor are still with us, notwithstanding the Celtic Tiger’s roar. The Catholic school needs to stay close to them. And whatever material poverty is among us it is dwarfed by the much greater poverty of the spirit. The Catholic school is in the business of proclaiming the good news, announcing the Lord’s year of favour, setting the prisoners free. “The fields are ripe for harvesting. Pray that the Lord will send labourers into the harvest.”

The Sacred Congregation for Catholic Education asked all Catholics to consider the “Catholic School’s fundamental reason for existing” in its publication, *The Catholic School* (1998). It proposed education not merely for the sake of knowledge but ‘as a call to serve and be responsible for others.’ Inter alia, it exists as an educational service ‘to the poor or to those deprived of family help and affection or those who are far from the faith.’ Moreover, it advocates a working for the common good as a genuine working for the building up of the kingdom of God. It underlines the primacy of the spiritual and the moral life, the dignity of the person, the importance of community and the moral commitments to caring, social justice and the common good as visible fruits of the faith.

Catholic education aspires to produce persons of conscience and competence, aware of their image and likeness to their creator, aware of a divine call to become gospel creators rather than gospel consumers, people with a universal concern for and solidarity with others. At the heart of a Catholic vision of education is the synthesis between faith and life.

Gap between Gospel and Culture

Unfortunately, there is a real and present danger that education is being reduced to a merely functional role. Too easily it could become a commodity. Already there are ominous signs. Consider the growth of the grind school and the clamour for league tables where the success of the individual school or the individual student is lauded to the detriment of other individuals and other schools. Such developments do not rest easily with Catholic values in education which affirms a moral and spiritual culture over material success, where education is seen as a service not a product and where notions of the common good and of the health of the community take precedence over individual self interest.

Horizontal and Vertical

Catholic schools not only engage students at a horizontal, humanitarian level to respond ethically and morally to issues such as euthanasia, abortion, justice, poverty but more importantly, they seek to engage them with the profound questions of life. They struggle to develop in them a spiritual antenna which leads them to wonder about the vertical dimensions of our faith as mystery and encounter with God. They attempt to create a Catholic world nurtured by story, liturgy, symbol, testimony and witness. They thicken the ethos of the school by enshrining prayer, iconography, community-formation and reflection as core elements of the school's life. As St, Gregory of Nyssa put it, "Concepts produce idols. It is only wonder that comprehends anything."

Today, perhaps more than ever, the Catholic school is needed. It is needed because it paints a picture of the world wherein we find God in all of his people and in all of life. It is needed because it has an eschatological dimension (it points to life beyond the here and now). It reminds us of the communion of saints who have gone before us and who are united with us. It reminds us of the ultimate questions about existence. It calls on us to balance these truths with the demands of the here and now. It is needed because it offers a much wider curriculum than the academic, the sporting, the moral and the pastoral. Invariably, it will include all of these because a Catholic school in flow will be a good school by any standards. But and this is a major but, all of the other dimensions are coloured by the spiritual lens which sees the young person as child of God, coming from God and returning to him. That is the *raison d'être* of the Catholic school. Parents who know that this is important, even if they temporarily lost sight of it themselves or have drifted from the practice of their own faith, will still want to choose such schools for their sons and daughters.