

NOVATE  
VOBIS  
NOVALE

# FURROW

*The*

A JOURNAL FOR THE  
CONTEMPORARY CHURCH

Daniel O'Connell

Catholic primary  
schools -  
on rapidly  
thinning ice

December 2018

# Catholic primary schools - on rapidly thinning ice

---

Daniel O’Connell

The Catholic Church in Ireland invests considerable resources in Catholic education, such as personnel, property, time, land and finance. I think it is worth asking if these resources are well placed in furthering the mission of the Church in Ireland or are there more effective ways that the Church can use these resources in realising the reign of God for Ireland and the world.

For instance, there are currently 2,800 primary Catholic schools in Ireland. Each school has a board of management which has 9 members: the chairperson, the principal, a teacher, two parents, two community representatives and two nominees of the patron – that means there are about 25,200 people giving of their time voluntarily towards Catholic education in their local schools. The patron (the Catholic Church) is directly responsible for inviting three people, the chairperson and two others to participate on the board on its behalf: 8,400 people who give regularly of their time and expertise to the local school on behalf of the Church. I wonder if that is the best use of the talent and ability of these people in the service of the Church’s mission in Ireland today.

In a recent letter to the Irish Times (18th June 2018), Dr. Liam McNiffe describes how the diocese of Kilmore contributed the site and a little over €1.5 million towards the cost of replacing the second level school of St. Patrick’s College, Cavan in 2012-13. The state provided the new school; the Kilmore diocese ensured the facilities were outstanding.<sup>1</sup>

This sort of contribution has been and is being replicated throughout the country. When you consider the substantial investment on behalf of the Catholic Church towards education,

1 The diocese paid for things like: a floodlit all-weather pitch, running track, five hard courts, total refurbishment of an existing twelve room block including provision of a home economics room, three extra science labs (six in total) a small extra canteen, reroofing an existing sports hall, a kitchen, (the state just provides soup and sandwich facilities) a full size stage for school musicals and miscellaneous other extras.

---

Daniel O’Connell is a lecturer in Religious Education at Mary Immaculate College, Limerick

one has got to ask if this is the best use of resources in the service of the Church's mission in Ireland today. Imagine the millions of euros saved, land retained and personal freed up for more imaginative and effective ways that would help the Church in its work of evangelisation. To put it in economic terms, is the Catholic Church getting the return it wants from this investment?

The idea of the Catholic Church withdrawing from education is unimaginable to many. However, there is a growing call in the public sphere for the Catholic Church to remove itself from education or to be removed from education (a process that has begun already by stealth). For instance:

The *Journal.ie* ran a recent headline: "What's next?: Breaking religious influence over education with a Citizens Assembly model. If the constitution is the problem, then the models previously used such as the Constitutional Convention and the Citizens Assembly should be utilised to address the issue" (see June 1st 2018).

A recent *Irish Times* editorial states, "Our school system is not fit for purpose to meet the needs of a diverse society ... The ownership and control of school property is a complex issue, both constitutionally and in terms of property law and rights. There is merit, then, in re-establishing the Citizens Assembly to examine whether constitutional change is required" (June 5th 2018).

One might be tempted to dismiss such headlines and statements as wishful thinking on the part of those who want to see the end of Catholic education. This would be a mistake. A cursory glance over the past few years of Irish society reveals a profound shift in culture and values with regard to the place and influence of the Catholic Church in Irish life. We have only to look at the redefinition of marriage and abortion provision to see the ineffectual nature of the Catholic Church on these matters of public policy. The process of removing religion from public life and confining it to one's private life is well and truly on the way.

There is an increasingly secularising discourse in the public space. Andy McGrady summarises this emerging secular narrative with regard to education as follows:

"Catholic Ireland is dead and it needs to be buried! Faith-based schools are no longer fit for purpose. The control of 95% of primary schools by denominational bodies is colonial and the future is in multi-denominational and secular schools which are based on Human Rights and teach for tolerance, mutual understanding and citizenship.

Faith is a private matter, education is a public good. Publically funded schools should be neutral with respect to all faiths and none. If Catholic schools wish to maintain public

## THE FURROW

funding they must offer a curriculum which is secular and teach about religions and beliefs rather than indoctrinating vulnerable children with outdated doctrines. This will allow them to admit all and employ all. Teachers to be professional must no longer engage in faith formation or catechesis. Catholic ethos must be muted so that all parents can access Catholic schools irrespective of their personal religious belief or secular conviction as of right as their local, publicly funded school.”<sup>2</sup>

How is the Catholic Church engaging and responding to this narrative with regard to its schools – poorly!

In the following section, I will outline some of the external and internal forces that are slowly but surely eroding the Catholic identity of our schools. The points made below are necessarily blunt as there is not sufficient space in this article to outline the complexities of each one.

### EXTERNAL PRESSURES

#### NATIONAL COUNCIL FOR CURRICULUM AND ASSESSMENT (NCCA)

1: EDUCATION ABOUT RELIGIONS, BELIEFS AND ETHICS (ERB & ETHICS)<sup>3</sup>  
As the name suggests, the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) sets out the curriculum and assessment for schools in Ireland. It is a statutory body. At the moment, the national curriculum requires that children study Religious Education for two and a half hours a week. The content of this subject is left up to each patron to decide. So, Educate Together schools and Community National Schools will teach Religious Education in a way that is in keeping with their own ethos and identity. The same for Catholic and Protestant schools. In Catholic schools, the religious education programme is called Grow in Love. However, the NCCA is looking at inserting another programme/curriculum into all primary schools called Education about Religions, Beliefs and Ethics (ERB & Ethics). This proposal is fraught with difficulty. First, does the NCCA consider it appropriate to have two separate religious education programmes running concurrently in the schools? One of these programmes will be designed by the state and the other by the Patron body of the school. Will this not lead to confusion when these programmes inevitably take different viewpoints to the meaning and purpose of life, an understanding of the human person, what is good and bad, right and wrong and will it be in keeping with the characteristic spirit of each school?

2 McGrady, A. (2017) Narratives and Alternative Narratives, Chairperson’s Address at CPSMA AGM, 3rd March.

3 NCCA (2015) Education about Religions and Beliefs (ERB) and Ethics in the Primary School: Consultation Paper, Dublin: Government Publications

## CATHOLIC PRIMARY SCHOOLS - ON RAPIDLY THINNING ICE

The primary school curriculum is already packed full. Is it the intention of the state to restrict the amount of time given to denominational Religious Education in order to make way for this new subject/curriculum called ERB & Ethics? It is not difficult to see how parents would react if their children had to spend time studying two forms of Religious Education in the school day.

Another difficulty with the approach of ERB & Ethics is clear from the very name. There is a separation of religion from ethics. This may give the impression to children and teachers that religions are about beliefs and rituals and that an ethic for life stands outside a given religious tradition. Nothing could be further from the truth – there is an ethic running through all the major world religions. Children need to have access to this essential element when studying religious traditions.

Another problem with ERB & Ethics is concerned with the nature of ethics or whose ethics? While we all think it is a good idea to study ethics, we must remember that ethics is not neutral and there are different ethical ways of acting and behaving. For instance, some ethical traditions privilege the rights of the individual over the community. Other ethical traditions claim that the person is inherently social and must take greater cognisance of their relationality and obligations to their neighbours when making decisions. So, what ethical traditions will the state emphasize in ERB and Ethics and will they be in keeping with an ethic that has grown up over the centuries in the Christian tradition?

The simplistic imposition of ERB & Ethics as another subject in all schools, without cognisance of how the aims of this programme are already being met in Religious Education will undoubtedly lead to confusion.

### 2. REDEVELOPMENT OF THE PRIMARY CURRICULUM

#### PROPOSALS FOR STRUCTURE AND TIME ALLOCATION IN A REDEVELOPED PRIMARY CURRICULUM<sup>4</sup>

The NCCA is currently reviewing the curriculum governing primary schools re what we teach and how we teach it. It recently launched a possible outline of what the new curriculum might look like. As you can see from the diagram below, the NCCA has listed all the subjects currently taught in the curriculum in the top box, called Minimum state curriculum time (60% of school time). However, there is no Religious Education proposed in the new primary school curriculum. It is simply left out. There is no explanation for its removal and there is no research offered as to why this might be a good idea.

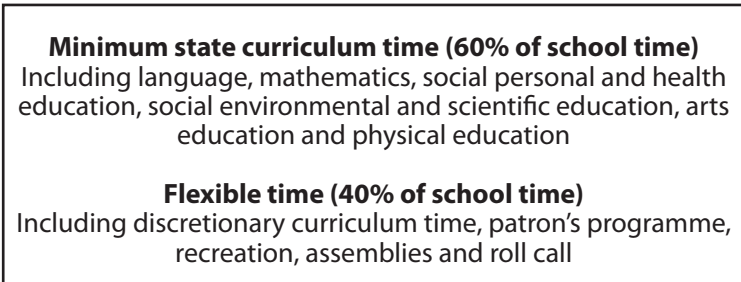
4 NCCA (2018) *Primary Developments: Consultation on Curriculum Structure and Time, Final Report*, Dublin: Government Publications.

## THE FURROW

Therefore, it appears that the state is now trying to impose a subject/curriculum called ERB and Ethics while removing Religious Education from the curriculum.

That being said, in the lower box in the diagram, entitled Flexible time (40%) – along with recreation, assemblies, roll call – something called the ‘patron’s programme’ has been inserted.

Figure 3: Proposed model of time allocation for primary schools



The Patron’s Programme refers to that subject where the Minister for Education and Skills ensures that ‘a reasonable amount of time is set aside in each school day for subjects relating to or arising from the characteristic spirit of the school’ (Education Act 1998, 30 (2) (d)). So, technically, Catholic schools will be able to teach their religious education programme, *Grow in Love*. However, the Department is removing the requirement for primary schools to teach any form of religious education to their students. In other words, the state is absenting itself from any responsibility for the religious literacy of its citizens.

Another more subtle difficulty with this proposal is that the NCCA have removed religious education/Patron’s programme from the rest of the subjects in the top box. It no longer sits beside Maths, Science and History and all the other subjects. And such a move prevents it from taking part in the integrated curriculum. By placing it outside the first box where all other subject of the curriculum are named – it seeks to marginalise Religious Education and not have it talk to or interact with the other subjects on the curriculum. This approach flies in the face of a Catholic philosophy of education – where subjects need to interact with one another in a critical and thoughtful manner.

### 3: OVERALL PHILOSOPHY, VISION AND PRINCIPLES OF NEW CURRICULUM

As mentioned above, the NCCA is currently redeveloping a new curriculum for all primary schools in Ireland. The curriculum

outlines the overall philosophy and approach to be taking to the education of children. It outlines the vision, principles, values, objectives and features of education of children. The current national curriculum for primary schools takes a broad holistic view of children. It talks about nurturing ‘the child in all dimensions of his or her life – spiritual, moral, cognitive, emotional, imaginative, aesthetic, social and physical’ (p.6) and it ‘takes cognisance of the affective, aesthetic, spiritual, moral and religious dimensions of the child’s experience and development’ (p.27). Much of this understanding of the human person resonates well with a Christian view of the human person in particular and a Catholic philosophy of education in general. Consequently, the efforts of denominational education and the wishes of the state are sufficiently harmonious to allow for a meaningful partnership. However, this may not be the case in the future; early indications from the NCCA would one give pause for thought.

In the ‘Proposals for structure and time allocation in a redeveloped primary curriculum’ there is no mention of the religious, spiritual or moral development of the child. One might argue that this paper was more concerned with structure than philosophy. Yet, it seems a little strange to put together a structure of education without a philosophy or agreed aims and principles of education – not unlike putting the cart before the horse.

As part of this process of redevelopment of the national curriculum, I understand that the NCCA hope to publish a suite of discussion papers from a range of researchers and experts on the underpinning vision and principles in primary education. Towards this end, the NCCA hosted a conference in March, 2018 where two papers were presented with regard to some possible philosophical underpinning for the future curriculum. Neither of these papers mentioned the spiritual, religious or moral dimension of the child and the role of education. As I write, I’m not aware of any plans from the NCCA to host a conference where an alternative philosophy of education, one that is much more holistic in its understanding of the human person is due to be held.

Therefore, it ought to be noted, with some alarm, that in the first two public iterations from and on behalf of the NCCA with regard to the redevelopment of the primary curriculum, a holistic view of the human person has not been articulated. The absence of any mention whatsoever of the spiritual, moral and religious development of the child ought to be of considerable concern to anyone who cares about an education system that caters for the whole child. If the new curriculum were to emerge that did not have this fuller anthropology as part of its philosophical underpinnings, it would make further involvement from the Catholic Church in

## THE FURROW

education very difficult. How could the Catholic Church implement a curriculum on behalf of the state that is out of keeping with its own identity and worldview?

### 4 DELETION OF RULE 68 FROM RULES FOR NATIONAL SCHOOLS

In March 2016, Minister Jan O’Sullivan removed Rule 68 from the Rules for National Schools. This was a recommendation from the Forum on Patronage and Pluralism. The Rules for National Schools were drawn up in 1965 to govern primary schools and they have no statutory power. The part of the rule that the Forum found problematic stated: “Of all the parts of a school curriculum Religious Instruction is by far the most important ... Religious Instruction is, therefore, a fundamental part of the school course, and a religious spirit should inform and vivify the whole work of the school”. While the language is clearly anachronistic and Church leaders no longer claim such a privileged place for Religious Education, the religious spirit should still “inform and vivify the whole work of the school”. In actual fact, there is a legal responsibility on the Board of Management to ensure the realisation of the characteristic spirit of their school.

So what does the deletion mean? On the one hand, it changes nothing in particular, as the Education Act protects the characteristic spirit of the school and the current curriculum requires Religious Education be taught for two and a half hours each day. Instead of updating the Rule, it was simply deleted, weakening the Catholic identity of schools from an historical and cultural point of view.

### 5 SCHOOL ADMISSIONS

An Amendment to Education (Admission to Schools) Bill 2016 on the role of religion in school admissions and was approved by government in May 2018. This means that oversubscribed Catholic primary schools will no longer be allowed to discriminate on the basis of religion in its admissions policy. So, where there are not enough spaces for the amount of applicants, the school cannot prioritise Catholic applicants over children of other faiths or worldviews. The so-called Baptism Barrier has garnered regular front page headlines and featured on the national news in the past couple of years.

Taken together:

- Education about Religions, Beliefs and Ethics (ERB & Ethics)
- Proposals for structure and time allocation in a redeveloped primary curriculum
- Overall philosophy, vision and principles of new curriculum
- Deletion of Rule 68 from Rules for National Schools
- School Admissions



## CATHOLIC PRIMARY SCHOOLS - ON RAPIDLY THINNING ICE

these issues illustrate the systemic challenge to the identity and purpose of Catholic education in Ireland. These threats all come from outside of the Catholic Church. An emerging concern is connected with the fit between the beliefs of some student teachers and belief and ethos operative in Catholic schools.

### INTERNAL PRESSURE

#### THE NEED FOR CHANGE

One of the challenges going forward will be having the teachers and staff to work in Catholic schools who both appreciate and understand Christian faith in general and the Catholic tradition in particular. According to the most recent census in 2016, 79% of the population in Ireland identified as Catholic and 10% said they had no religion (this does not mean that they identify as atheist, as many in this category identify as spiritual). However, if we take figures from the European Social Survey (ESS) we get a different result. According to the ESS, 69% of the population self-identified as Catholic in 2014 and 26% said they had no religion (again, this does not necessarily equate with atheism). While compared to other European countries, Ireland is still exceptionally religious – these figures ought to give us pause for thought when looking at the make up of our schools. At the moment, 95% of primary schools are denominational in character and 89% are specifically Catholic. Quite simply, there are too many Catholic schools. Action to address this imbalance has been remarkably slow. While there are a range of difficulties involved in the process of divestment, of the 2,800 Catholic primary schools in the state, only about 10 have been divested. The prolonged delay is eroding the credibility of Catholic providers

### BELIEFS AND PRE SERVICE TEACHERS

In a recent quantitative survey of first year students entering a college of education in Ireland<sup>5</sup> preparing to become primary school teachers (a four year degree programme) the vast majority identified as Roman Catholic (94%), with a very small number identifying as Protestant (1.28%), Orthodox (.85%), Muslim (.43%) and those with no religion (3%). In answer to the question, ‘Do you believe in God?’ 84% said ‘Yes’, with 2.5% describing themselves as atheist. It is interesting to note, that while 94% self identified as Catholic, only 84% said they believed in God. Of the students who said they believed in God, only about a third of them believed in a personal God, about half imagined God to

5 O’Connell, D., Ryan, M., and Harmon, M. (2018) “Will we have teachers for Catholic primary schools in Ireland?” in Bittle, S., (ed.) *What ought to be happening in RE in Catholic schools? Perspectives from England, Ireland and Scotland*, London: Peter Lang.

## THE FURROW

be something more akin to a spirit or life force and the rest were unsure. Nearly all these respondents had been to Catholic primary and secondary schools.

Over half of these students attend a religious service at least once a month (outside of weddings, etc.) and almost 63% believe that God is important in their life. When they were asked if they thought the Church is giving adequate answers to moral, social and family problems in this country, 75% said 'No'. But 70% of them get comfort from religion and half pray at least once a week. The two greatest influencers on their view of religion and religious practice was their mother and their school.

Before we look at the significance of this data, we must make a proviso. This research is quantitative and as such, is a blunt instrument and only provides us with a broad overview. So, we cannot infer too much, with the qualitative dimension. But nevertheless, it does give us an outline.

It indicates a growing disconnect between the beliefs of some aspiring teachers and the identity of the Catholic primary school. A fit can no longer be assumed about the values and beliefs of newly qualified teachers and the characteristic spirit of the Catholic school. It cannot be presumed that all newly qualified teachers appreciate or believe in Catholic education. The belief in the person of Jesus Christ, as revealing both the face of a Trinitarian God and their human identity – made in the image of God – ought to be part of the DNA of a Catholic school. However, without enough staff in a school who share this belief that may not be possible. If enough staff in a Catholic school do not believe or appreciate the Catholic approach, there will be no Catholic education.

We live in culture where belief in God is considered old-fashioned and often ridiculed, the Catholic school should be a place where one can wonder and question and doubt and investigate belief in God in a safe and reflective manner. In a Catholic school, belief in God should be seen as something reasonable and sensible. It will highly problematic for all involved, if an emerging primary school teacher, who does not believe in God or think much of the Catholic Church, or have any appreciation for the Catholic intellectual or social tradition, felt they had to get a job in a Catholic school because there are so few alternatives. The best teachers are those who teach with integrity. There will be little point in having Catholic primary schools if there are not enough teachers who want to be there by choice. Given the large numbers of schools, we are fast heading into such a scenario.

### CONTINUAL PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT (CPD)

Finally, I'd like to turn my attention to the role of the Catholic

## CATHOLIC PRIMARY SCHOOLS - ON RAPIDLY THINNING ICE

Church in the continual professional development of teachers in Catholic primary schools. The Education Act allows that ‘a reasonable amount of time is set aside in each school day for subjects relating to or arising from the characteristic spirit of the school’ (1998, 30 (2) (d)). In the case of a Catholic school, this particularly takes the form of Religious Education. This is the one and only area in which the patron, rather than the state, mandates the programme of study. The Church cannot expect the state to support and resource staff of Catholic schools in the area of Catholic characteristic spirit. While there is some initial education in this area when students are studying for their education degree at college, the real need emerges when they become teachers facing real issues and challenges, such as:

- In what sorts of ways does the characteristic spirit of their school help every child to thrive and realise their full potential – what does such a vision require of teachers personally and collectively?
- How is the Catholic school really appreciative and welcoming of children from different world religions and worldviews and how does this play out in Religious Education – where some children opt out of this class?
- What is the value of a Catholic education in a world where there is a plurality of possible approaches to education today?

In a recent document on education,<sup>6</sup> Pope Francis has written ‘The overlapping presence of different cultures is a great resource, as long as the encounter between those different cultures is seen as a source of mutual enrichment.’ The Catholic Church in Ireland can help teachers to unlock this great resource of different cultures in a way that will enrich the lives of all children. Some few diocese have already adopted a deliberate approach to resourcing teachers in a planned, sustained and meaningful way. Some parishes also resource and support their teachers in an organised and practical (after all, the school is an extension of the parish). Others need to follow suit as a matter of urgency. Otherwise, we can expect a drift towards schools which are Catholic in name only.

### WHAT NOW?

Quite simply, the Catholic Church needs to do three things.

- 1) It needs to decide if it wants to continue putting resources into providing primary education and if so, then articulate a comprehensive vision for what this will look like in the Ireland of today and into the future.

6 Congregation for Catholic Education (2013), *Educating to Intercultural Dialogue in Catholic Schools, Living in Harmony for a Civilization of Love* available: [http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/ccatheduc/documents/rc\\_con\\_ccatheduc\\_doc\\_20131028\\_dialogo-interculturale\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/ccatheduc/documents/rc_con_ccatheduc_doc_20131028_dialogo-interculturale_en.html)

## THE FURROW

- 2) Work out a deal with the Department of Education and Skills, where it will divest/lease schools for other forms of patronage in return for more control over its own curriculum, identity and ethos.
- 3) Put together a strategy of CPD where it can resource and assist personnel in Catholic schools in how to serve all the children in their care out of a Catholic vision of education.

This will require the bishops to identify resources in terms of excellent personnel who can oversee these three, interconnected areas. If this does not happen, Catholic schools will simply slide further and further out onto thin ice and inevitably sink into a secularised form of education.

### **Action and the Holy Spirit.**

What is a hero? A hero is a person who takes action to help people. That is what the Holy Spirit calls us to do. When the Spirit descended on Mary after the angel Gabriel told her she was to be the mother of Jesus, what did she do? She took action. She packed her things and journeyed to her cousin Elizabeth. To do what? To serve her. When the Holy Spirit descended on Jesus after his baptism by John, what did he do? He took action and did what? He began his ministry and began serving. When the Spirit descended on the apostles at Pentecost, what did they do? They relinquished fear and began serving the people. Not just one group of people but all people, of all nations. We too are called to serve, to not be afraid. With the Holy Spirit already dwelling in us, there is no time to waste.

– SACREDSpace, Dublin: Messenger Publications, 2018, p.1.