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Catherine McCormack

Who we think  
we are –  
Discerning  
the Identity  
of the Diocesan  
Advisor

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# Who we think we are – Discerning the Identity of the Diocesan Advisor

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Catherine McCormack

*'The tree the tempest with a crash of wood  
Throws down in front of us is not to bar  
Our passage to our journey's end for good  
But just to ask us who we think we are'*<sup>1</sup>

Frost's poem *On a Tree Fallen Across the Road* invites us to see our challenges as opportunities, to express unequivocally who we are, especially when our identity is ill-defined. Diocesan Advisors have provided a sterling service to support RE teachers and the faith life of schools in Ireland since the 60s, when the emphasis shifted away from the inspection of catechism and towards the support of faith development.

I had the privilege of researching the role<sup>2</sup> as it is currently perceived, with a participant group of DAs in 2018/19. The focus was on their role in second level schools. Each DA that participated in the research, revealed huge commitment to their role and shared joy and positivity, particularly regarding school visits. Alongside this however, I detected a somewhat bleak perception of the future of the role in this time of change for Catholic schools. I glimpsed the mounting challenges as the Advisors spoke about trying to live out their role in a culture in which faith and religion are increasingly annexed in society and sometimes even in schools that are Catholic.

- 1 Robert Frost, *On a Tree Fallen Across a Road* (To Hear Us Talk) The Rattle Bag. London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1982
- 2 *Using Visible or Invisible Maps? A Case Study of the Role of the Diocesan Advisor in Voluntary Catholic Secondary Schools in the Republic of Ireland*. McCormack (2021). Doctoral thesis, Dublin City University.

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Catherine McCormack is conducting post-doctoral research in Mary Immaculate College (MIC), Limerick as part of an initiative linked with Global Researchers Advancing Catholic Education (G.R.A.C.E.) This is an international research-based partnership between MIC and Boston College, United States; the University of Notre Dame Fremantle, Australia; and St Mary's University in Twickenham, London. G.R.A.C.E. also works in partnership with OIEC (International Office of Catholic Education).

## CHALLENGES FOR THE DA AT SECOND LEVEL

A sense of crisis is inevitable for the Diocesan Advisor, and all Catholic stakeholders in this milieu. There had been a long-standing historical arrangement between church and state whereby the two had lived in “peaceful coexistence” (Griffin<sup>3</sup> 2019) with clear boundaries in terms of the provision of Catholic religious education – church had been responsible for the religious education classroom, and the state did not interfere. Within that framework Catholic education stakeholders had a clearly defined identity that they could take for granted and did not need to question it or its relevance. This is no longer the case and the role of the Advisor is unchartered in an increasingly secularised and pluralised society. Demographic trends in the Republic of Ireland uphold the view that Ireland has transitioned to a post-traditional era (Census ROI 2016, ESS 2002-2012). All Catholic school stakeholders, need to be refocussed for this transition.

*Lagging behind*

The Catholic Church and Trust bodies have not invested in evidence-gathering regarding the standards that prevail in Catholic schools. The approach by the DAs visiting schools is supportive but no benchmarks have been developed by which they can judge the school or the RE classes therein. They offer in-service, support the RE team and Chaplain, and provide resources regularly, but there is little evidence of evaluation of either the quality of the religious education offered for non-examination classes or of the quality of ethos in the school.

Conversely, the State Inspectorate has taken charge of its remit and inspections are based on Chemlinsky’s<sup>4</sup> (1997) model of evaluation for knowledge, accountability and improvement. They use what Hall et al.<sup>5</sup> call *visible maps*. There is clarity in the approach by the State. The Inspectorate is thorough, rigorous and transparent, overseen by personnel expertly trained in monitoring and focussed on improvement. It is professional and ultimately respected by stakeholders. It holds schools to account.

3 Marie Griffin, Catholic Schools in Ireland Today – A Changing Sector in a Time of Change. *Studies – An Irish Quarterly Review*, 108(429). 2019

4 Eleanor Chemlinsky, *Thoughts for a New Evaluation Society Speech at UK Evaluation Society* on 20 September 1997, London. 1997

5 J. Hall, & J. Lindgren, & M. Sowada, Inspectors as Information-Seekers. In S. Van de Walle, and N. Raaphorst, (Eds.), *Inspectors and Enforcement at the Front Line of Government* (pp. 35-58). Palgrave Macmillan. doi:10.1007/978-3-030-04058-1\_3. 2019

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### *Monitoring*

Identifying a school's strengths in ethos has much to recommend it and Archbishop J. Michael Miller<sup>6</sup> (2006) proposes that a Catholic school should *be inspired by a supernatural vision, founded on Christian anthropology, animated by communion and community, imbued with a Catholic worldview throughout its curriculum, and sustained by gospel witness*. Where these are present, the Advisor can work on maintaining and supporting this lived culture. But knowing where each school is at, is essential as a starting point. Miller asks 'how do you know if you are achieving what you say you are?'. In referring to quality assurance Miller proposes that a 'Catholic' accreditation is required, and suggests benchmarks are applied to establish the basis for the standards needed. This process would 'serve to identify, clarify and strengthen its effectiveness in its service of Christ and the Church'.

### *The Handbook*

There are many challenges to determining if a school is living up to Miller's characteristics and in determining if the non-accredited RE therein, is faith-based. One lies in the role descriptor for Diocesan Advisors.<sup>7</sup> The handbook numbers eleven duties. Many of these duties require specialist training that is not currently provided. Sitting on an interview panel, for instance, is an onerous task and under current discrimination legislation offers little scope for exploring faith commitment. So, whilst the Canons expect a teacher of religion to be in accordance with the code, the establishment of this is difficult at an interview which is governed by legislation on discrimination. The Diocesan Advisor cannot therefore seek 'witness' in a teacher of religious education who may have undertaken the study of RE from a purely academic perspective.

The duty of 'engaging with schools and partners in education' is a similarly high-level task and requires much professional direction to guide a broad partnership base. The partners range from school staff and students, to parents, senior management, boards of management, Patrons and Trust bodies and the Department of Education and Skills. The work with members of boards of management for instance, requires in-depth knowledge of legislation that impacts on Catholic schools, as well as being deeply informed on Church doctrine and *formed* for the spiritual

6 J. Michael Miller, *Five Essential Marks of Catholic Schools*. In *The Holy See's Teaching on Catholic Schools* (Atlanta: Sophia Institute Press): 17-63. 2006

7 Irish Catholic Bishop's Conference. *Role of the Diocesan Advisor for Post Primary Religious Education*. Dublin: Veritas. 2013.

needs of the stakeholders. A third demanding task is that of developing links with home, school, and parish. Again, this can be a minefield requiring high level skills and where the home is concerned, can raise issues around the assumption that the home is open to such links developed by the DA.

### *Monitoring non-examinable RE*

Further aspects of the role present challenges also. A concern for the standards of *Religious Education* at senior cycle level, emerged in the study. Currently the State is the accrediting body for the examinable programme and inspects it as such. But religious education outside of the examinable specification is not accredited and is not inspected for summative or formative assessment, or for its value in teaching and learning. The accreditation of the non-examinable *RE* and the mode of ensuring that the work of faith formation reflects the vision of catechesis in *Share the Good News*<sup>8</sup> needs to be prioritised. Deenihan<sup>9</sup> identified the potential weakening of the instructional elements of Catholic religious education considering the State's involvement, especially where there is little or no oversight of what is happening in the non-examinable *RE* classroom. Diocesan Advisors do not have a mandate to enter classrooms and where this has occurred, it is generally due to traditional practice or goodwill. The legality of these classroom visits could be challenged.

## PROPOSALS FOR THE ROLE OF DA AT SECOND LEVEL

### *Professionalise the role*

Currently the Advisor is operating in the professional context of a school, with a vocational mission sometimes not fully aligned with the professional skills required to support other professionals. Professionalising the role involves looking at current practices regarding recruitment processes, contracts, training offered, and identifying the parameters of the role. Individual Diocesan Advisors are professional by virtue of their prior qualifications as teachers, but the study findings identified a lack of professionalism in the workings of most of the dioceses in relation to the role. The three key failings identified were: lack of clarity about the purpose of the role; lack of training; and low levels of accountability –

8 Irish Episcopal Conference. *Share the Good News: National Directory for Catechesis*. Dublin: Veritas. 2010

9 Thomas Deenihan, 'Religious Education and Religious Instruction: An Alternative Viewpoint', *The Furrow* 53/2 pp. 75-83. 2002

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all leading to role ambiguity and lack of a clear identity. While the *National Association of Post-Primary Diocesan Advisors* (NAPPDA), is very beneficial for Diocesan Advisors in its provision of collegial support, networking opportunities, spiritual accompaniment and in-service workshops, it does not offer role-specific comprehensive training, or role focussed academic modules leading to accreditation.

### *Recruitment processes*

The mode of recruitment in the study cohort, shows that the majority were recruited through an informal approach by a representative of the bishop. Many were identified locally as people of faith, mainly retired from teaching in a Catholic school. All other professional school personnel undergo rigorous selection procedures. The process is thorough and professional. The filling of the role of Diocesan Advisor should be taken in a similarly rigorous fashion, appointing people who can go on to support Principals, Boards of Management, and teachers in the role, according to the ideals set out in *SGN* (2010). Unless the role is pitched at this level, stakeholders may not have confidence in the relevance of the role to the school community.

### *Contracts*

Advisors across the cohort have different working conditions. Most have part-time arrangements with one and two day per week contracts. This impacts on the range and quality of what can be offered to schools. It also reflects an extremely limited sense of the involvement of the diocese in the work of religious education and in the wider remit of catechesis in the whole school. Diocesan Advisors need to be recruited from the workforce rather than favouring recruits from the retired community. Contracts currently are not standardised and many participants take up the role almost as a gesture of goodwill to the bishop. Others serve in their capacity as religious and clergy, very often fitting the role into a very demanding and busy parish or pastoral schedule.

### *Training*

Sexton<sup>10</sup> identified professional traits including the presence of a recognisable knowledge base. For the study participants, there

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10 Michael Sexton, *Evaluating Teaching as a Profession – Implications of a Research Study for the Work of the Teaching Council*. *Irish Educational Studies*, 26(1), 79-105. 2007

was no uniform knowledge base, and this gave rise to different approaches in enacting the role. There is no set training schedule on appointment and many merely mirrored what the predecessor had done. The need for training considering the complexity of the landscape is evident. An extensive degree of autonomy is also identified by Sexton as a trait of professionalism. The participants could all be said to have this degree of autonomy but sometimes the autonomy slipped into isolationism and participants felt ‘peripheral’ in a changing landscape. Another of Sexton’s traits sees professionalism as intellectually based with extended training and while the participants were not complaining about the level of intellectually based training and continuous professional development, the shortfall in expertise in a changing landscape left some feeling adrift. However, all participants embody what Locke<sup>11</sup> refers to as the service attribute, with a keen sense that a vocation or call is at the heart of their work.

### *Finance*

The fear of many of the participants regarding the future of the role revolves around finance and the ability of a diocese to continue to support a role such as this into the future. Already some dioceses have reduced the provision of the service to one or two days per week. The bishop is central to the question of financial decision-making in this regard. Bishops in smaller dioceses could combine to resource an Advisor between two or three small rural dioceses. Or regional, highly trained Diocesan specialists could coordinate the service. Investment in the structures to support Catholic schools and religious education is needed and investment in the oversight work of the Diocesan Advisor is urgently required if evaluation is to be part of the role in a professionalised way.

### *Ownership of non-exam RE*

To regularise the right of a DA to visit RE classrooms, bishops must take ownership of the non-examinable Religious Education and set standards and benchmarks that can be assessed formally. The religious education teacher in this context would have feedback and acknowledgement for the work being doing and indicators as to where the work could be improved. There are hundreds of schools and many RE classes going on within, so the DA must be free to make these formal visits. This cannot be achieved on a one or two-day contract.

11 Terry Locke, *Reshaping Classical Professionalism in the Aftermath of Neo-Liberal Reform. English in Australia*, 139, 113-121. 2004

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### *Role parameters*

Currently there is no agreed approach to the role. Individual Advisors interpret their roles differently. Some view their remit solely as one of support to RE teachers while others prioritise support for the faith life of the school. A decision must be made regarding how much responsibility the Diocesan Advisor has for oversight of ethos across the school as distinct from the remit with teachers of religious education. If the Advisor is to be charged with this responsibility fully then perhaps cooperation could be sought from Patron and Trust bodies on the nature of the information needed and the resourcing and dissemination of this. Otherwise, there is the risk of overlap of provision by the various groups, resulting in either too much or too little information. If the Advisors are full-time professionals with specialist training in all aspects of ethos in a Catholic school, they could develop strong links with patrons via the recently established Catholic Education Partnership (CEP).

### *Stakeholder training and dialogue*

Role-specific training for all stakeholders would support a shared understanding of a Catholic school. This would be a first step in each stakeholder understanding their responsibility for ethos of the school and for the standards that prevail in non-examinable RE.

Much is to be gained by pursuing partnership through dialogue with all the stakeholders, which could then determine the future of the role of DA. If the emphasis in the role is *educational*, the Advisor must have expertise in education at both classroom level and, more importantly, managerial level. It is not enough to be a practitioner oneself; the role must offer more than this. It must offer oversight of the educational remit, understanding the needs of both Church and State.

If it is intended to be chiefly a *vocational role* - to support the catechetical concept of witnesses who can imbue the classroom and school with a rich experience of faith - then a programme of spiritual enrichment needs to be developed and delivered by Diocesan Advisors who are themselves enriched by a depth of spiritual awareness and gifts.

If the role is to be an *evaluative role*, ascertaining if a school is meeting certain benchmarking criteria that allow it to proclaim itself as Catholic, then a model of inspection needs to be developed. While many Diocesan Advisors are contracted for a one or two day per week contract, the likelihood is that many duties of the role will not and cannot be fulfilled. The generation of a revised role



must not happen in a vacuum however, and best practice would see it within a process that allows bishops and others to reflect on the remit and their possible contribution and engagement going forward.

#### CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, it is worth noting that while the Education Act of 1998 currently protects the status of voluntary patrons and trustees in the Republic of Ireland, the State has in recent years, identified a need to re-balance the stronghold of ethos in schools. The abolition of Rule 68 (of the Rules for Primary Schools) in 2016 was one case in point. This rule had given religion priority on the primary school timetable. The Education (Admissions to Schools) Act 2018 further diminishes the Patron's role. This removed the right of schools to use religion as a criterion for admissions thereby allowing for the discrimination of Catholic students in an oversubscribed school. A further shift in respect of ethos has been the subject of debate by the Dáil, in the Oireachtas. The debate in question (26<sup>th</sup> September 2019) was in respect of Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE). Several deputies called for the removal of the protection of ethos in the Constitution to ensure the delivery of a fact based RSE programme.

The Congregation for Catholic Education's document *The Religious Dimension of Education in a Catholic School* (1998) acknowledges the tension between the school as a civic institution with responsibilities to the State and the school as a Christian community that has religious formation as a primary aim. A synthesis must be arrived at so that the Advisor has expertise in all Church and State guiding documents and well as educational expertise in the assessment of non-examinable curriculum-based RE. Spiritual nourishment of the Advisor is also important to enable the DA to support faith leaders and RE teachers. The Advisors would benefit from a professionalised approach, using visible diagnostic instruments by which they could evaluate the identity of the Catholic school and direct their support where it is most needed.