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Divestment of Catholic Primary Schools in the Republic of Ireland – *A discussion paper*

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THE ONGOING DELAY IN DIVESTMENT OF CATHOLIC PRIMARY SCHOOLS

The ongoing delay in progressing the divestment of Catholic primary schools in Ireland is *not* in the interests of children, of parents, of the Church or of the Irish State. It doesn't serve the mission of the Church or the demands of those who, justifiably, seek greater diversity in primary school patronage in this country. This discussion document details the key challenges and opportunities that divestment presents in an effort to move the debate towards a negotiated settlement that is reasonable and respectful towards all parties.

Although this document proposes a clear course of action in regard to divestment, its main purpose is to encourage and prompt a synodal-type engagement by the People of God (lay people, priests and religious) in the future of Catholic schools. To date, debate and discussions on divestment within the Church have largely been confined to the Irish Episcopal Conference and, to a lesser extent, and often indirectly, various lay-led bodies involved in Catholic education. The recent consultation conducted in Ireland as part of the world-wide Catholic Church synodal initiative dealt too lightly with education, touching only on the need for better continuing professional development for religion teachers and catechists and raising the matter of taking sacramental formation out of Catholic schools. Interestingly, Catholic education hasn't featured much as part of the parallel process also underway, the Irish Synodal Pathway. The current apparent inertia is doing no one any favours, least of all the Catholic Church; the political reality is that the opportunity to influence an outcome favourable to Catholic education is fading.

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Insofar as there has been any grassroots engagement in regard to divestment it has been mostly parochial and episodic, usually motivated by news that a local parish school is being considered for a change of patronage. In such contexts, the needs of the Catholic faith community have not always been sufficiently distinguished from those of the geographically local, civil community, with its own interests and priorities, when it comes to the retention or divestment of Catholic schools. Increasingly, it needs to be recognised that the local community and the local faith community, while overlapping, are no longer the same. This is a *key* point: the local community may have mixed motives for wanting their local primary school to remain under Catholic patronage, few of which may have to do with its Catholic ethos. Meanwhile, it may be in the faith community's interests to divest a particular school if, in return, the schools remaining under Catholic patronage are free to embrace their Catholic ethos fully.

Arguing, as this document does, that divestment is in the interests of *both* the Church and the State, it is hoped that what is proposed here will be of interest not only to members of the faith community, but also to parents' representative bodies, teachers' and principals' networks and unions, clergy, elected representatives and civil servants, as well as those lobbying for less Church involvement in education. The divestment process should reflect the synodal process; there should be a sincere and deep listening to and engagement with all those concerned and likely to be affected by it.

Before we look at divestment we need to consider what is *distinctive* of Catholic education and why the Church should continue to support and invest in it.

THE DISTINCTIVE CONTRIBUTION OF CATHOLIC EDUCATION TO CHURCH AND SOCIETY

From the point of view of the Catholic Church, Catholic education is core to its mission (cf. canon 800). The provision of formal education by the Church has a twofold motivation.

The *first* motivation is that all education is grounded in a set of beliefs; there is no neutral or value-free educational system. The Church offers parents an education that is grounded in the distinctive Christian understanding of the human person for those who wish their children's education to be underpinned by this particular perspective. Furthermore, for those who choose to be Christians, the Catholic school provides "a privileged environment" for formation in their faith (*The Catholic School*, 1977). The *second* motivation is the conviction that an education

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founded upon the Christian vision of the human person is a valuable service to society, and so, should be available as an option to those who wish that the beliefs and values of Christianity should underpin their education even if they themselves do not wish to become Christians. In some countries, for instance, the majority of pupils in Catholic schools are not Christian and there is no expectation that they would become such; proselytization has no place in any Catholic school. In such countries, Catholic schools are nonetheless considered a valuable service to society. India, for instance, is but one example.

It is self-evident that many people in Ireland, for reasons that are understandable, have lost confidence in the rich and incomparable contribution of the Catholic heritage to this country. Some of those in Church leadership, however, also appear to have lost their confidence, and this is regrettable. Unfortunately, at times a spirit of defeatism and easy resignation seems evident. Yet the reality is that a genuine Catholic education is needed by our society now more than ever. There are many reasons for this but we will mention just two.

The *first* is the increasing tendency in our schools and colleges to adapt the curriculum to meeting the transient needs of the labour market. This unfortunate development goes hand in hand with prizing training in technical ability over transmitting the treasures of our intellectual tradition and heritage. The loss of an education that enables young people to address life's deeper questions, including questions of ultimate meaning, of vocation, identity and purpose, is undoubtedly related to the rising tide of mental health issues and crises in well-being. Moreover, and bearing in mind that no educational system is neutral, divergent and at times conflicting understandings of what it is to be human are now operative in our schools. Some of these are incompatible with the Christian understanding of the human person. A Catholic school that draws upon both reason and revelation offers a distinctive and unique understanding of human dignity as inherent and as a gift from God, rather than as a project and task left entirely to individuals to achieve for themselves.

The *second* reason is that there is no other educational system as experienced in managing multi-culturalism as that of the Catholic Church. It is the largest non-state provider of education in the world. Globally, the Catholic Church estimates that 35 million children are enrolled in Catholic primary schools, with 19.3 million children enrolled in Catholic post-primary schools and 7.4 million children enrolled at the preschool level (2018 figures). The pivotal role the Catholic Church plays globally "to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote

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lifelong learning opportunities for all”, the fourth of the United Nations’ 17 Sustainable Development Goals aimed at eradicating poverty and protecting our planet, is universally acknowledged. Managing multi-culturalism, integrating migrants and refugees, etc., is already a major challenge in Ireland in the coming years, one to which Catholic schools and Catholic teachers are uniquely well-placed to contribute.

It would take us too far afield to detail fully here what is distinctive about the Catholic vision of education. The Irish Bishops’ *Vision 08: A vision for Catholic education in Ireland* can serve here as a summary. Catholic schools,

- Reflect a distinctive vision of life and a corresponding philosophy of education, based on the Gospel of Jesus Christ.
- Help each pupil to develop his or her full potential as a human being.
- Propose a sacramental view of reality helping pupils to see God ‘in the bits and pieces of everyday life’.
- Aspire to create an open, happy, stimulating and mutually respectful community environment in which pupils are able to develop the full range of their abilities and talents in a balanced, integrated and generous way.
- Transform not only the individual human lives of pupils but also society.
- Value intellectual and practical reason, promoting dialogue and understanding between faith, tradition, culture, and heritage.

Catholic schools can only be authentically such if they are capable of proposing a personal relationship with Jesus Christ as the cornerstone of human dignity, and eternal life as ultimate human destiny. Otherwise, there is no point in the Church investing resources in running or maintaining them (cf. canon 803 §2). To ‘propose’ Christian faith, however, can never be an effort to ‘impose’ it, and pupils who choose to attend Catholic schools yet who decline to become or live as Christians must always be welcomed and treated with equality and respect.

THE CASE FOR THE PUBLIC FUNDING OF CATHOLIC SCHOOLS

The public funding of faith-based schools is questioned in Irish society and Church leaders seem slow to put forward a rationale or defence of it. Yet the Catholic Church’s espoused position is that there is an onus upon the State to provide for faith-based education. This is argued as a consequence of the right of parents to make a genuinely free choice of schools for their children, a right that

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would be violated if their children were forced to participate in lessons or instructions that violated their religious convictions, or, “if a single system of education, from which all religious formation is excluded, is imposed upon all” (*Dignitatis Humanae*, n.5).¹

While one cannot expect an internal Church position to carry weight with the State it must be taken seriously by those in Church leadership. The State, on the other hand, may be persuaded by the fact that the same conviction that underpins the Church’s claim to public funding of schools, namely, the rights of parents to make a genuinely free choice in regard to the education of their children, is also recognised and protected in the Irish Constitution, the UN Convention on Human Rights and in various conventions of the European Union and the Council of Europe.²

The situation in Ireland is unusual, not in regard to Catholic schools being publicly funded, but only in regard to the prevalence and dominance of such schools in the primary education landscape. For instance, one finds the public funding of faith-based schools in countries such as the UK, Finland, and even in France, where the principle of *laïcité*, separating Church and state, applies. It seems that only two countries have constitutional prohibitions on diversity in school choice: Cuba and North Korea. Countries such as the Netherlands have constitutional guarantees with respect to diversity in school choice. Ireland’s current constitutional and legislative framework is well within the norm for EU countries with the possible exception of those previously under the control of the USSR.

THE LEGITIMACY OF CALLS FOR GREATER DIVERSITY OF SCHOOL CHOICE

It is important to distinguish calls for a greater diversity of school choice, calls which are legitimate and should be supported, from those that seek a fully state-managed, secular education system that would see the withholding of public funding from all other providers (cf. canon 797). The latter would violate the right of parents to choice in regard to their children’s education as already discussed above.

1 Eamonn Conway & Tom Finegan, “*Dignitatis Humanae*: public funding and divesting of faith schools in a liberal state”, *Melita Theologica: Journal of the Faculty of Theology of the University of Malta*, 66/1 (2016) 47 – 68, 2016.

2 See, *inter alia*, The United Nations Declaration of Human Rights (1946), Article 26 (3); The International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (1966), Articles 10, 13 and 18; The Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), Articles 8, 18; Council of Europe, Protocol 1, Article 2 of the Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Human Freedoms; Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union (2000), Article 14; European Parliament resolution, (12 June 2018) n. 76, on the modernisation of education in the EU.

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It is important to state this clearly: the Catholic Church is not responsible for diversifying the primary school patronage sector in Ireland. It is in its interests, however, to *facilitate* diversification through divesting many of its schools and it is difficult to see how diversification of primary school patronage can happen without the Church's active engagement and co-operation. Moreover, as far back as 1977, the Holy See adopted the position that, "The Church upholds the principle of a plurality of school systems in order to safeguard her objectives in the face of cultural pluralism" (*The Catholic School*). If the Church is faithful to its belief in the rights and duties of parents as the primary educators of their children, then it must, to be consistent, support the rights of *all* parents, Catholic or otherwise, to have their children educated in a school where the ethos is consistent with their beliefs and convictions. It should, therefore, co-operate as far as practicable with the State in enabling divestment to happen while simultaneously ensuring it safeguards its own mission in education.

Although divestment remains the responsibility of the State, the Catholic Church in Ireland, by historical accident, is placed in a dominant position in the ownership of schools and should now, in a contribution to the greater common good, seek to assist the State in fulfilling its responsibility to vindicate parental rights to school choice.

THE PRESENT UNTENABLE SITUATION

At present in Ireland, ca. 89% of primary schools, and ca. 50% of post-primary schools are under Catholic patronage. This article concerns itself only with the primary sector as there is little to no pressure for divestment at post-primary level.

Richard Bruton TD, when Minister of Education, initiated a consultation process on divestment to be carried out by the Education & Training Boards. These Boards, it must be noted, cannot be considered a neutral party in the process as they have a vested interest in the Church divesting schools. Their consultation was by way of survey, and directed only at parents of children in *Pobal*-funded, pre-school age childcare. The outcome of these consultations was never published but it is understood that they demonstrated satisfaction with the present school choice by ca. 75% of parents. It seems that some 28% expressed a preference for multi-denominational schools (there is a disparity), of which just under half wanted an Irish language medium option. Satisfaction ranged from 61% in Kinsale to 91% in Donegal.

In separate research, a consultation exercise carried out by a third-party company on behalf of the Catholic education management bodies found around a fifth of parents were dissatisfied by the

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present lack of choice of patronage. While both exercises suffered from limitations, the results are not all that divergent and also tally with the Census 2016 results. It can be said that roughly one-fifth of the population want an alternative to Catholic or religious ethos schools. This figure is also consistent with what is emerging in independent academic-led research currently underway regarding the level of satisfaction with Catholic school management and patronage and which will be available in Autumn 2023.

Aside from parental preference, there is a strong anecdotal basis to the belief that, although the majority are very supportive, significant numbers of principals and teachers working in Catholic schools are not committed to their Catholic ethos, some perhaps being even quite hostile. The reality is that a number of Catholic schools are Catholic in name only. It must be admitted that even where school management is favourably disposed, Catholic primary schools are insufficiently supported in their ethos by their patrons and are therefore struggling. Factors include a declining presence of priests and religious, little or no continuing professional development or faith formation for lay professionals, rising religious illiteracy and increasing secularism, the difficulty of finding Board of Management members committed to Catholic ethos, etc.

It must also be acknowledged that many parents have not made a choice for Catholic education as such, but rather have opted for what is available, and Catholic schools are often the only available convenient choice.

It must further be acknowledged that in far too many Catholic schools the right of parents to have their children withdrawn from religious instruction is *not* being upheld. This is simply unacceptable. It is both wrong in itself and completely inconsistent with a Catholic ethos. One cannot argue for the freedom ‘for’ religion if, at the same time, one does not defend the equally valid right to freedom ‘from’ religion. Independently of what happens in regard to divestment, this needs to be addressed as a matter of urgency.

THE RADICAL OPTION

There is strong political agreement in favour of significant divestment at a policy level, and this is supported by the vast majority of the media and the NGO sector. Some within these spheres are in favour of more radical change, that is, the removal of all religious ethos from schools. These are a minority, for now. It is important to note, however, that should divestment fail to deliver significant change in the near future, their numbers are likely to grow. Therefore, the clock is ticking. This more radical position

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would require a constitutional change by referendum, one that is likely to be carried at a national level. While divestment is often unpopular at local level, the majority of the voting population are not directly involved with schools (i.e. with children enrolled) and so are likely to vote on the matter in the abstract and in accordance with the prevailing anti-Church sentiment.

ALL IN FAVOUR, BUT NO ONE WILL MOVE DECISIVELY

Despite media opinion pieces to the contrary, Catholic patrons (the bishops) are also committed to divestment. There is increasing acceptance that the Church does not have the resources to maintain an enormous system of schools, and especially to provide personnel committed to Catholic ethos for all of them. As things stand, Catholic patrons have the worst of both worlds. They are responsible for maintaining and managing many schools that are not, in any meaningful sense, part of the Church's mission, while at the same time they are criticised for wanting to cling at all costs to a dominant place in the Irish educational landscape.

This situation has to *change*. Patrons have reiterated their position recently, namely, that they are not willing to force any school to divest, but rather wish to secure the agreement of the local school community to do so. This is problematic, because, as we have already noted, what is in the best interests of the Church's mission in Catholic education may not coincide with local wishes on the ground.

Similarly, the state and all major political parties are in favour of divestment, but individual TDs and local Councillors are nervous about enforcing it on any community and tend to engage in lobbying against divestments in their own constituencies should there be any local opposition. So, divestment is a policy that has strong support *nationally* at a theoretical level, but weak support *locally* at a concrete level. Both Church and State, it seems, would prefer if the other took responsibility for the change and neither are willing to do it against the wishes of a local community.

ADDITIONAL POINTS OF TENSION AND RESISTANCE IN COMMUNITIES

There are a number of other points of tension and resistance that must be considered.

One major consideration is that the majority of parents in most schools are satisfied with the present school, in its ethos and governance. While in a town with several Catholic primary schools, there may be a sufficient number of parents in favour of a non/multi-denominational school, they are likely to be in a minority

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within any one school. The decision, as it is currently framed, is one for an individual school, rather than for a community as a whole. Even when taken as a whole-of-community decision, each school is likely to resist change on a ‘why us, why not them’ basis.

That can be overcome where there is sufficient support by school leadership in favour of change. This is to the credit of principals, as it shows the trust and high regard they are held in. Many school leadership teams, boards and principals and in-school management teams, can be opposed to any change on the basis of being content with the ethos of the school, and also with the governance model that Catholic patronage offers, being one grounded in subsidiarity and offering schools significant autonomy. The Department of Education’s preferred patrons to take over divested schools are the Education and Training Boards. These offer a very different model of governance characterised by far more central control. Understandably, then, teachers can be wary of divestment in these circumstances. Another concern of teachers is access to main redeployment panels. Should teachers have to quit a school because of the loss of a teacher they could find themselves with few employment options.

More broadly, the local community, which has supported its Catholic school for generations, is invested in it and has a shared sense of ownership of it, and therefore tends to be unsupportive of change. The land upon which the school is built may well have been donated to the Church specifically for that purpose; communities will, often for generations, have fundraised for building and other projects. Understandably, they may fear seeing their community’s investment transfer to the State. The evidence, unfortunately, is that the State, when running things directly, doesn’t necessarily manage them any better than when they are run by voluntary organisations with State support, as can be seen with the health services.

The local faith community will have additional concerns: given the discriminatory restrictions in force arising from the Education (Admissions to Schools) Act 2018, they have no guarantee that their children will be guaranteed a place in a neighbouring Catholic school should they sacrifice their own.

DIVESTMENT IN THE INTERESTS OF THE CHURCH’S MISSION

We have already mentioned *three* reasons as to why divestment is in the interest of the Church’s mission:

- The lack of resources, especially personnel, required to maintain a large infrastructure of Catholic primary schools genuinely committed to and living Catholic ethos.

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- The Church's commitment to the principle of plurality of school systems.
- The risk that if the Church does not work with the State to facilitate change, then it will be forced upon it by constitutional referendum, with a resulting radical removal of faith from the Irish publicly-funded school system.

In addition,

- The Church upholds the principle that parents are the primary educators of their children and have the right to determine the type of school their children attend. As things stand, however, the Catholic Church's dominant position in the primary school sector is *de facto* facilitating the denial of this right to some parents.
- Ideally, Catholic schools should be staffed by people committed to working for Catholic education. The present dominance means that many of those working in Catholic schools are there because they have little other choice, some of whom may be hostile or indifferent to the ethos. This is in no one's interests.
- Parish priests, already thinner on the ground and with increased workloads, find it increasingly difficult to maintain a presence in such a large number of schools under Catholic patronage. In addition, they bear the additional burden of having to stretch a diminishing cohort of committed Catholics willing to serve on Boards of Management across so many schools, some of which are, in any case, *de facto* secular.
- As the debate over divestment drags on and remains unresolved we can expect the Church to find itself *only nominally* in control of the governance of its schools because any possibility of these schools being authentically Catholic will be steadily eroded by changes to the curriculum (e.g., ERB & Ethics) and to the legislative environment (e.g., the Education [Admission to Schools] Act 2018). This is seen by many in the Department of Education and the corridors of power as a viable Plan B should divestment fail. This outcome, however, would be the worst of both worlds for the Church's mission: in charge of Catholic schools but not in control, yet without a meaningful voice in their own schools.

The Catholic Church in Ireland needs urgently to develop a strategy that will result in a sufficient number of schools for parents (Catholic or otherwise) who want a Catholic education for their children and staffed by people who wish to work in Catholic education. These schools will need to be sufficiently supported by their patrons and those acting on their behalf. For the strategy to

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succeed, anything from 400-800 schools will have to be divested or at least a number sufficient enough for the State to agree to a deal on terms favourable to the Church.

There is no denying that this level of divestment will be difficult. It will be difficult for Catholic parents who will no longer be able to take for granted that their children can attend a Catholic school locally. It will be difficult for the many extraordinarily dedicated teachers, chaplains, principals and members of Boards of Management who are currently working tirelessly, selflessly and generously to support the Catholic ethos in their schools and who may now find themselves faced with its transfer to a secular patron. It will be difficult also for patrons who will face criticism and unpopularity from local communities and even local clergy. The reality, in fact, is that change is *inevitable*. The only choice is whether to embrace and seek to determine it, or be overtaken by it.

TERMS AND CONDITIONS FOR DIVESTING SCHOOLS

We now turn to the terms and conditions the Catholic Church needs to insist upon in order for its mission in Catholic education in Ireland to continue on a renewed and secured basis. These conditions should be tabled now and agreement sought in regard to them *before* any further divestment of school patronage or indeed of patronage of any Catholic educational institutions, whether primary, secondary or tertiary, is consented to. What is being insisted upon here is in line with what would be considered reasonable in other jurisdictions and reflects provisions already in place in other countries.

- The present arrangements with respect to the recruitment of school staff must be maintained, and, in particular, guarantees given concerning the right of patrons to insist on relevant qualifications for teaching in a Catholic school. Patrons must also be able to determine the content and level of these qualifications.
- Patron bodies must be able to insist upon and direct induction and continuing professional development for staff in Catholic schools. They must also be able to conduct Whole School Evaluations, including in regard to ethos, and receive the same concessions and supports for these professional services that the State affords to other patrons.
- The present provisions contained in sections 9 and 15 of the Education Act, 1998 must be maintained, that is, that Boards of Management continue to have the duty to uphold the ethos of the school and be accountable to the patron for same, and that

no Catholic school can be compelled to teach anything contrary to its ethos. Schools must be granted an unchallengeable legal basis upon which they can give full expression to their ethos.

- A mechanism needs to be put in place to ensure effective and fruitful collaboration between Catholic patron bodies and the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment. Currently, despite being the largest provider of patronage, the Catholic Church is merely one voice among many on the NCCA representative councils. The relationship with the NCCA needs to be recast to ensure parity of esteem for the Catholic voice in curriculum design and implementation.
- The right of Catholic patrons to determine a programme of religious education in their schools must be guaranteed, and secured with a time allocation in the national curriculum.
- Care needs to be taken that those living in disadvantaged areas are not further disadvantaged by being deprived of a Catholic school; it would be unacceptable if divestment impacted disproportionately on less affluent areas.
- Funding parity must be maintained between the voluntary and ETB sectors – the significant differential between those sectors at post-primary must not become a feature of the primary sector. The differential mainly occurs at the level of management body/patron funding. Any additional funding going to the ETB sector should be matched by funding to the Catholic management body, that until now has been relying on the voluntary services and goodwill of parish personnel.
- The so-called “Baptism barrier” legislation is now itself a barrier to divestment. Catholic communities cannot be expected to hand over their Catholic schools without any guarantee that their children will find a place in a neighbouring Catholic school if they so wish. The Education (Admission to Schools) Act 2018 must be repealed so that Catholic schools, where they are oversubscribed, can prioritise the enrolment of children of that faith.
- Catholic trustees must become legally entitled to allocate funds generated from the lease of former Catholic schools to other patrons for the purposes of Catholic education. This is important as there are some impediments with respect to it in existing legislation. Furthermore, the State is apparently seeking to negotiate leases that are below commercial value. Apart from the fact that this may be contrary to Charities legislation, the lease value of the school should be maximised so as to fund supports for Catholic education.
- In areas of significant population growth, where new schools

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are being built, Catholic patrons will be able to compete for the patronage of such schools on an equal basis with other patron bodies, and that Catholic patronage will be supported where a clear parental demand exists.

- Where a school has been divested to non-Catholic patronage, the State commits to supporting a plurality of school choice, even where falling numbers may imperil the continuing existence of a non-Catholic school.

NEGOTIATING WITH ONE VOICE

One long standing difficulty in negotiations with the State on divestment has been the *plurality* of organisations on the Catholic side, with over 40 separate patronage bodies at primary and post-primary levels. No single entity is authorised to negotiate and agree on a settlement on their behalf. This causes a difficulty not only for the State, but even more so for the Church, because it results in a lack of unified purpose and a dissipation of its power and resources. The need for a singlemindedness and unity, for coherence, for joined-up thinking and joint action, on the part of the patrons/bishops, cannot be stressed enough. *One* voice is needed, with full authority and informed by a clear mandate in regard to what patrons wish to secure. There is also a need to draw upon the best legal, financial, public relations and negotiating expertise available.

The State has indicated a timeline terminating in 2030. This seems reasonable with respect to the needs of all parties.

DISCONTINUING UNILATERAL DIVESTMENT BY INDIVIDUAL PATRONS

It is imperative that *further* divestment, beyond what may be realised by the pilot reconfiguration process currently underway, should cease until negotiations are concluded. Continuing unilateral divestment by individual patrons locally can only undermine a negotiated settlement at national level. There will be a temptation, once the pilot projects are complete, for patrons to satisfy the demands of particular local communities. Pressure will also be brought to bear by the Department of Education, campaigning groups, other patron bodies and the media, for Catholic patrons to accede to these demands. This pressure must be resisted.

A NEGOTIATED SETTLEMENT ACROSS PRIMARY, SECONDARY AND TERTIARY LEVELS

While the above directly concerns itself with primary schools, guarantees about ethos for post-primary level must also be secured. Parity of funding, for instance, is needed between the voluntary

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and state sectors at post-primary and ought to be a concern of the negotiation.

Similarly, guarantees of funding and autonomy for third-level Catholic education should form a part of the new settlement with the State. There is at present no vision whatsoever for Catholic third-level education emanating from the Irish Episcopal Conference and this is a serious deficiency that needs to be rectified urgently. In an address to the Pontifical Irish College in Rome on 11 October 2019 to mark the canonisation of John Henry Newman, Archbishop Diarmuid Martin observed that, “the main universities (in Ireland) proclaim themselves to be, by definition, exclusively secular and thus they shun any real place for religion in their culture.” Yet just three years previously in 2016, two publicly-funded Catholic teacher education colleges in Dublin, St Patrick’s Drumcondra and the Mater Dei Institute, were incorporated into Dublin City University *without* any debate within the Church, with minimal and, arguably, ineffectual concessions granted regarding the training of teachers for Catholic schools. In Autumn 2022, Mary Immaculate College, Limerick, announced that it is negotiating a “closer structural alignment” with the University of Limerick, a term widely considered a euphemism for incorporation. Yet in 2016, the campus of St Patrick’s College, Thurles, worth several million Euro, along with a multi-million cash endowment, was handed over to Mary Immaculate College without any binding provisions in regard to its ethos or the training of Catholic teachers.

Given the loss of these colleges to the mission of the Church is it worth considering, whether, as part of the negotiations in regard to divestment at primary level, a publicly-funded Faculty of Education at the Pontifical University Maynooth could be established to train and accredit teachers for Catholic schools, perhaps doing so jointly with Maynooth University?

In any case, *nothing* should be agreed in regard to divestment until *all* is agreed. It would be tactically imprudent to negotiate piecemeal as this only leans into the State’s current strategy of ‘salami-slicing’ the Catholic presence in education.

IDEAL OUTCOME

The *ideal* outcome achieves the conditions stated above and secures the divestment of a sufficient number of schools that: a) serves the purposes of the mission of the Church, and b) serves to provide a choice of school within convenient travel distance of the vast majority of communities in Ireland. The Church should consider the approach of identifying particular schools with the

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intention of retaining, say, one-third of the present number. This choice should be informed by geographical spread (ensuring convenience of access for the greatest number of pupils) and practical considerations such as potential for future development or the property being adjacent to parish property in a way that would make separation impractical (for the school or parish).

Catholic patrons should then offer the remaining two-thirds, some 400-800 schools, to the State, for divestment to other patrons. The deal should be that the concessions to the Catholic Church are granted on the basis of the offer of these schools for divestment and not upon the State's capacity to implement the divestment, a matter over which the Church has no control. In order to facilitate the process of divestment, the Church should consider making arrangements for temporary co-patronage of schools.

CONCLUSION

These reflections are offered in an effort to provoke discussion *within* the faith community, while at the same time providing a sense of direction and purpose to a process that is taking far too long to progress. It is hoped that they will be received in that spirit and serve the re-founding of the Catholic Church's mission in Catholic education in Ireland for the coming generations.

Asking for Help. The second insight offered by the Prodigal Son parable is about having the humility to acknowledge that sometimes we need to ask for help. That's not easy. Failure can lead us to focus on ourselves, and to say, with a blend of shame and pride, 'If I've fallen down it's up to me to pick myself up again.' That's often like trying to scrape yourself off the floor by the scruff of your neck. If you have no other source of support, however much you try, all you will manage to do is hurt yourself. Other people need to help you to get up. The Prodigal Son recalls in his loneliness the one person who can help him: the good father who loves him and who is doubtless waiting for him. He therefore dares to ask for help – his action in musical terms might be compared to an overture that will segue into a brand-new opera.

- JOSÉ MARÍA R. OLAIZOLA S.J., *Dancing with Loneliness*, Dublin: Messenger Publications, 2023, p. 85-6.