

## **Catholic Schools & a Catholic Education**

**D**id you go to a Catholic School? If so, why? Was going to a non-Catholic school ever an option? If you hadn't gone to a Catholic school, would your faith be as strong as it is today? How much was it influenced by your teachers – your parents – your priests?

**A**t a diocesan meeting of school governors, a question was asked as to why priests no longer seem to speak at Mass in support of Catholic schools. The concern that led to the question is the fact that, perhaps for the first ever, birth rates have fallen to such an extent that our primary schools are struggling to avoid a situation of surplus places – indeed some within the diocese have accepted large numbers of non-Catholic children to try to safeguard their continued operation. An additional concern is what is commonly referred to as “leakage” – the number of Catholic pupils who, on leaving our primary schools, then attend non-Catholic secondary schools, academies or technology colleges.

**W**hilst not making excuses, it has to be said that a priest is required to base his homily on the theme of the readings and therefore rarely has the opportunity or the excuse to deviate from that requirement. However it was also acknowledged at the meeting that the current policy of increased parental choice had more to do with the situation than any failure on the part of priests to speak out in defence of Catholic education. Consequently, another speaker suggested, in keeping with so much else in our society, it would seem that results, league tables, and personal preference – even social background – would appear to have more of an influence on parental choice than the once essential value of a Catholic education. However, both the situation and the concerns expressed, provide food for thought and I would take as my starting point two basic principles.

**T**he first I find myself using quite frequently in homilies because it is very apt when discussing the dangers of secular challenges to our faith. In chapter eight of the first book of Samuel, it is recorded that the entire people came to Samuel to demand that, before he died, he should appoint a king to rule over them so they could be “like the other nations”. They had failed to recognise how unique they were in that, unlike the other nations, God was their king. However God sent them the king they demanded and so it was that they descended to the same level as everyone else by abandoning their unique relationship with God, and nothing but struggle and hardship followed. From our baptism we can never be “like the other nations”, like the society in which we live, and to attempt to be so is to compromise our relationship with God and to settle for second best.

The second point of principle comes directly from Canon Law, the law of the Church, as it applies to all baptised Catholics. Most of us (“of a certain age” at least) will have first learned this from the old “Penny Catechism”. The question asked: ‘What is the duty of parents towards their children?’ and the answer was: ‘The duty of parents towards their children is to provide for them, to instruct and correct them, *and to give them a good Catholic education.*’ More specifically, Canon Law says: ‘Parents are to send their children to those schools which will provide for their catholic education. If they cannot do this, they are bound to ensure the proper catholic education of their children outside the school.’ ‘Christ’s faithful are to promote catholic schools, doing everything possible to help in establishing and maintaining them.’ (Canons 798 & 800 respectively) [Which is as good a reminder as any to acknowledge those who do support our Catholic schools by their involvement as members of staff – both teaching and non-teaching – and, of course, those who, over the years and currently, have chosen a Catholic education for their children.]

In this country we are extremely fortunate, some might even say privileged, that Catholic education is free and freely available, whereas in, for example, the United States, Catholic schools charge fees as their only way of funding their budget given that church schools do not receive government funding. If American parents want their child to receive a Catholic education, they must pay for it. For the children of those who can’t pay, or choose not to, many parishes provide Sunday school classes so that everyone has the opportunity to be educated in the Catholic faith and parents can thus fulfil their obligations under Church law. In this country there are no such obstacles to children attending Catholic schools and yet parents (or in some cases children themselves) are opting for state schools despite those same obligations.

The Church makes it very clear, and repeats the message often, that parents are the prime educators of their children in the faith. In establishing Catholic schools, the Church’s purpose is not to take that responsibility out of parents’ hands, but rather to assist them in fulfilling it. That is also the purpose of parish-based sacramental programmes: to complement and assist the prime role of parents in ensuring the faith development of their children. If parents opt out of either of those provisions, where do their children receive the thorough education in the faith that the Church seeks to foster - and teaches is essential to their salvation? Hopefully some of it will come from the home and the faith example of parents... but is it enough? Typical parish statistics would seem to suggest that it isn’t.

At the baptism of their child, every Catholic parent heard the words: *You have asked to have your child baptised. In doing so you are accepting the responsibility of training him/her in the practice of the faith... do you clearly understand what*

*you are undertaking?* And they said they did. The godparents of those same children were then asked: *Are you ready to help these parents in their duty as Christian mothers and fathers?* And they said they were. Parish statistics reflect the typical situation that only around two-thirds of those baptised will still be going to Mass by the time of first holy communion, and less than one-in-ten will still be practising by the time of confirmation. What has happened to the faith journey of the remainder?

**A** starting point in trying to find an answer is the fact that babies and toddlers have no personal choice in being baptised; sacramental promises are made on their behalf by parents and godparents. However the condition for making those promises, as we've said, is the recognition on the part of parents that ahead of their child is a life-long process of faith development and learning, the responsibility for which (at least in the childhood years) is rightfully theirs as the child's parents.

**I**n due course most of those children will attend Catholic primary school but, as we've also said, in terms of faith development the school exists to support and encourage parents in their duty toward their children and not to take that responsibility out of their hands. Consequently both the school and the parish rely on parents to provide personal example, support and encouragement to their children in the practice of their faith – and there is absolutely no substitute for personal example. If parents are not very strong in their own practice, why would their children experience their faith with any more conviction? In other words, if it isn't a value to their parents, why would it become a value to the children? Faith development doesn't happen genetically like their teeth coming in or their bones growing; it has to be fostered and nurtured and, to begin with at least, the best place for that to happen is within the context of formal Catholic education reinforced by the experience of faith-in-practice at home.

**T**he question then has to be asked: if parents opt to send their children to non-Catholic schools, are they able to make up the level of faith education that their children miss out on as a result? If that isn't going to happen, it would seem a very high price to pay for whatever benefits education at a state school is supposed to bring.

**O**f course, learning within the context of a Catholic school has to do with a great deal more than simply acquiring Catholic knowledge – as important as that is. The Catholic school seeks to make faith values the basis of everything else that it does in developing and educating the individual. In a very real sense this is a second curriculum underpinning the academic one, a second agenda but not a hidden one – far from it in fact. It's what gives a Catholic school its particular character and nurtures the ethos that so many non-Catholic parents seek in sending their children to our schools - a fact that makes it all the more puzzling as to why Catholic parents

would opt to send their children elsewhere. No matter how well they may subsequently do academically, the danger is that there will be an inevitable void, a “space that is God-shaped”, and the risk is whether that space can be adequately filled after the fact. I’m not suggesting that it can’t be, I’m just wondering why take the risk in the first place?

**B**eing a Catholic is a life-long process of learning and development, but the foundations have got to be strong in order to support what God wants to build and to withstand what life will throw at it. Building the best possible foundation means thoroughly grounding children in their faith from an early age and the best way of achieving this, I would suggest, is ensuring that they attend Catholic schools. At one time, contemplating anything else was almost unheard of – if you were a Catholic you went to a Catholic school, that’s what Catholics did. And if someone for some reason opted not to, the parish priest would be round to the house to find out why. That’s probably what we priests don’t do anymore, we don’t hassle people like we used to!

**O**f course parents now have a right to choose, a right extended to them by the law. However they also have a spiritual obligation to their Catholic children, an obligation accepted at baptism and enshrined in *God’s* law. However, in a toss-up between the law of the land and the law of God, sadly all too often God seems to come off second best these days. Above all else that was said at the governor’s meeting, that was perhaps the greatest cause for concern.

**T**he trend being followed in terms of parental choice also has worrying implications for our Catholic schools. The falling birth rate is reflected in falling numbers applying to our primary schools, with the result that some, perhaps many, will have to either amalgamate or close. We simply have too many schools for the number of Catholic pupils available to attend them. And if governors accept any and all other applicants simply to fill spaces (as they are now obliged to do in law), at what point do they effectively cease to be Catholic schools?

**W**hen Catholic pupils then move on to secondary education, the numbers opting to attend more conveniently located secondary schools, or who are attracted by the “glitter” of newly established academies or technology colleges, and the often vast proportion of nominally Catholic pupils who are no longer practising their faith, all serves to raise a very real question mark over the future of catholic secondary education. It also raises very real concerns over the handing on of the faith from one generation to the next, the wide open spaces increasingly visible in our churches, the crisis within parishes as fewer and fewer young people and young families step forward to take over the torch of responsibility and involvement, and, of course, the continuing decline in vocations to priesthood and religious life.

**F**or the time being, perhaps the best we can do is to pray about these concerns. It might also be that there is someone you know (but who isn't at church!) who could benefit from reading this handout – in which case pass it on! But yes, above all else in the meantime, let's not forget the power of prayer.

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