

Catholic Education in Ireland – Grand Hotel Malahide 20 March 2019

Good evening.

I have been asked to speak to you this evening about the education system in Ireland.

Last year's abortion referendum was a watershed. We are living in a brave new world. While the referendum marked the beginning, in very real terms, of a cruel and unjust period in our laws in relation to unborn children, it is also symptomatic of a cultural change that has been underway for a long time. We were once a people who held fast to Faith, despite centuries of oppression by the law. Now, we are a people who, in the courtyard of the castle that once symbolised that oppression, dance with joy because we have passed a new law that allows us to kill our own children.

We are witnessing the triumph of a mindset that utterly rejects the idea of objective morality, hates religion in general and the Catholic Church in particular, and adopts a very statist approach to human interactions. This, naturally, has massive implications for those of us who want to educate our children in any way that is at odds with what is now the prevailing mindset.

This evening I would like to remind you what has happened in recent years, in terms of the State's encroachment into denominational education and the freedom of schools – and parents – to teach their children as they see fit. This is not dissimilar to the process that is already well underway in relation to the provision of healthcare through religious institutions.

I'll say a few words about where this is heading in relation to schools and then make some suggestions as to how parents who take their children's religious and moral education seriously might respond to these challenges. I should say that I am coming from a Catholic perspective but what I have to say applies also to other faiths and indeed any parent who is not happy with what is being proposed by the government.

The background to our present difficulties is the resolute determination of our ancestors to ensure – whatever the difficulties – that their children would be educated in the Faith. The Catholic Church stepped into the gap to provide education to the children of an impoverished nation. By the time independence was achieved, the Church had built up a network of schools across the country, on which it was all too easy for the State to piggyback.

With the decline in religious vocations since the middle part of the last century, teaching has become dominated by lay people – that is to say by people who need to be paid. It is not surprising that the State would seek to take advantage of an existing school network to provide education; neither is it surprising that the Church would yield to the temptation to allow the State to pay the salaries of the lay teachers who were increasingly required.

What the Church seems to have forgotten is that close connections between Church and State rarely work out well for the Church. There is wisdom in the old adage that he who pays the piper, calls the tune.

Forum on Patronage and Pluralism

It is convenient to begin the review of the governmental approach over the last number of years with the Forum on Patronage and Pluralism, which was established in 2011. Its report made a number of recommendations, including the establishment of more non-denominational schools; divestment of schools by the Catholic Church in particular; and what is called the promotion of diversity within schools.

I don't know about you, but my own experience of attending Catholic schools was one in which children of other nationalities, ethnic backgrounds and other faiths were accommodated.

Nonetheless, the Forum's report clearly implies that Catholic denominational education is a sufficient threat to the freedom of others to warrant issuing a diversity protocol so that Catholic schools are effectively forced to change, or at the very least adapt, their ethos, for example by removing sacramental preparation from the classroom; by timetabling religious instruction at the beginning or the end of the day, in order to facilitate those who do not wish to take part; by requiring Catholic schools to display religious artefacts of other faiths; and through the introduction of a compulsory course on Education about Religions and Beliefs (referred to as "ERB") and ethics, parts of which are directly at odds with Catholic teaching.

Reading the report one comes away with the impression that it is wrong for Catholics to want a full Catholic education for themselves or their children. The authors of the report seem to be of the view: denominational Catholic education bad, multi or non-denominational education good; integrated curriculum bad, separation of secular and religious education good.

The sub-text in the report is that the preferences of parents are important, but that the preferences of some parents (specifically, those who want a secular education for their children) are preferable to those of others.

Deletion of Rule 68

In 2016, following recommendations in the Forum's report, the then Minister for Education, Jan O'Sullivan, announced the deletion of Rule 68 from the State-promulgated Rules for National Schools. Warming to her theme, Ms O'Sullivan said: "*Rule 68 was a symbol. A symbol of our past, and not our future. The language in the Rule was archaic. And I'm glad it's gone.*"

Actually, the language of Rule 68, if one cares to read it, is rather beautiful and not at all archaic. Presumably Ms O'Sullivan meant that the *ideas* it expresses are archaic, a somewhat different point.

"Of all the parts of a school curriculum Religious Instruction is by far the most important, as its subject-matter, God's honour and service, includes the proper use of all man's faculties, and affords the most powerful inducements to their proper use. 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. The teacher

should constantly inculcate the practice of charity, justice, truth, patience, temperance, obedience to lawful authority, and all the other moral virtues. In this way he will fulfil the primary duty of an educator, the moulding to perfect form of his pupils' character, habituating them to observe, in their relations with God and with their neighbour, the laws which God, both directly through the dictates of natural reason and through Revelation, and indirectly through the ordinance of lawful authority, imposes on mankind."

The prevailing ideology, however, as expressed in the Forum's report, is that it is better for all children to share in the universal tepidity of a so-called "neutral" scheme of education, where people of all faiths and none join hands and learn together. This, in my view, is an immature understanding of human nature.

For those who hold them, religious convictions run deep. They go to our heart, our very soul. They inform how we behave with our bodies, how we think and discipline our minds, how we love with our hearts. Any attempt, particularly by the State, to usurp the freedom of each of us to decide his own fate and faith in these areas runs the risk of making people very upset and resentful, and ultimately bringing the law into disrepute. It is better that people have the freedom to learn, to worship, to *be* as they are, to live and let live. This way there is a much better chance of true respect amongst people of different beliefs, and indeed genuine interest amongst different faiths.

Education (Admission to Schools) Act 2018

More recent examples of this governmental hostility towards children of faith and their parents include the Education (Admission to Schools) Act 2018, which will apply from this year onwards. What does the Act provide for?

It provides for this: national schools established under the patronage of a particular religious group can favour children of their own denomination in their admissions policy. So, Protestant schools may give a place to a Protestant child over a child of another religion; Jewish schools may favour Jewish children; Muslim schools may favour Muslim children. However, there is one exception; the only denomination that may not favour its own children is Catholicism.

Where a school is oversubscribed, a Catholic child seeking to gain admission to a Catholic national primary school may now be refused a place, in favour of a child of another religion or no religion. The Admission to Schools Act is the latest – but not the first and it is unlikely to be the last – State attack on Catholic education in this country. It enshrines blatant, anti-Catholic discrimination in law. In this respect, it is something of a return to pre-independence normality.

The Provision of Objective Sex Education Bill and the Oireachtas Committee

Then there is the Bill that is currently before the Dáil – the Provision of Objective Sex Education Bill. This Bill, designed by Deputies Ruth Coppinger, Mick Barry and Paul Murphy, calls for the following:

“(1A) When prescribing the curriculum for relationships and sexuality education the Minister shall ensure—

(a) the curriculum is factual and objective, age appropriate, and not gender normative,

(b) the curriculum includes the following areas in a factual and objective manner:

- (i) consent to sexual activity;
- (ii) the different types of sexuality;
- (iii) the different types of gender;
- (iv) methods of contraception, and
- (v) the termination of pregnancy,

(c) the curriculum is delivered in a factual and objective manner in all schools regardless of the characteristic spirit of the school, and

(d) the rights of students to access factual and objective education on reproductive healthcare is guaranteed, protected and upheld in all schools.”

The Bill proposes that schools and boards of management be allowed to uphold the ethos of the school in all areas except RSE. The authors of this Bill – and indeed members of the Oireachtas Committee on Education and Skills, which is examining the Bill – advocate what they call a more objective and fact-based approach to relationship and sexual education (“RSE”). They are critical of the approach that is taken in some Catholic schools, where sex is presented as involving value judgments, and moral questions. But it is nonsense to suggest that any form of secular education can be value free. There are always values, it is just a question of whose values are being promoted.

Take for instance the issue of abortion, which is raised in the sex education bill. Those proposing the bill think that abortion should be taught to children as a right and a good, a freedom for women. As a Catholic, I see it as oppressive of women and a terrible injustice done to an innocent baby. Those are irreconcilable positions. They represent totally different values and worldviews. If people want to raise their children with the belief that human life has no intrinsic value, I am not going to force them to do otherwise. But note: it is the secularists who want to force religious people to be taught something that goes against their traditions, beliefs and conscience. They want to impose their worldview on all children and their parents. So the question is: who’s the liberal now? Where’s the respect for people who don’t consent to their worldview?

In fact those who are calling for a “fact-based” approach to sex education criticise the approach in Catholic schools to RSE, which it said was heavily influenced by a biological perspective and that emotional aspects were not emphasised.

The Facts of Life, as they used to be called, are biological *facts*. The question of emotional aspects and how people ought to behave is entirely different: it is inevitably a moral or value-driven decision, not fact-based. In other words, critics of the Catholic system really want a more subjective, less fact-based system.

Reports stated that the Oireachtas Committee itself recommended that the new sex ed curriculum should cover the negative aspects of pornography to dissuade children and teenagers from it. That in itself is a value judgment – it is saying that pornography is bad – there are others who would disagree – not I, I hasten to add.

Other value judgments made by the Oireachtas Committee on Education and Skills, include the following:

- A criticism of the gender studies strand of the Social, Personal and Health Education (“SPHE”) unit, which only uses the language of “both genders” rather than refer to the spectrum of sexual identities. The irony of the Committee using the term “both” – which is inherently comprehensive, suggesting there are only two – when talking about a spectrum in the next breath, seems to be lost on its members.
- A criticism of the programme as it “constructs” heterosexual intercourse as the primary definition of sex. The language here is positively Orwellian.
- A recommendation that the RSE programme be revised to provide information on contraceptive use, sexually transmitted infections, information around abortion, sexual orientation, gender identity, pornography, consent, psycho-sexual issues and gender equality.
- The committee also recommends that the Education Act 1998 be reviewed so that ethos can no longer be used as a barrier to the “effective” teaching of the RSE and SPHE curriculum.

The committee recommends that RSE and SPHE be taught at primary level in an age and developmentally appropriate manner. But again, who is to say what is appropriate at what age? What if the Department or the school says one thing, but you as a parent, who know what’s best for your child, say otherwise? The report states that resources to support teaching have been developed in partnership with the Department of Education and other Government Departments and agencies, including the HSE, the Gay and Lesbian Equality Network (GLEN) and the HSE Crisis Pregnancy Programme. Their views on sexuality will clearly be very different from the Catholic worldview.

The point is that there is no such thing as purely objective education – and particularly when it comes to sex education. This is recognised in an Oireachtas Spotlight report from September 2018, which clearly states that “sex education is not an unambiguous, value-neutral concept, but one that is contested”. It also admits that “The aim of this Spotlight is to consider the national and international policy architecture for school-based sex education, *which favours a liberal and morally relativist approach*”. Moral relativism is the opposite of the Catholic worldview.

The same report highlights an in-depth Irish study, which found that about 25% of under 18s had had sex, and of them most were in the 17-18 age bracket. It also found that there was a significant increase in substance abuse in those who engage in early sexual activity. But despite this finding – a fact, one might call it – I did not hear it mentioned once by the Oireachtas Committee on Education and Skills who were going on about fact-based sex education throughout their hearings.

My point is that secularists and atheists are attempting to foist their values and worldview on everyone else. That is fundamentally at odds with diversity and respect for freedom of conscience, freedom of religion and freedom of thought. The bill that is before the Dáil at the moment proposes that all schools must teach children – including primary school children – about contraception and abortion, and how to access them, as if they were rights and goods in themselves. These are not facts, they are value judgments – bad ones in my view – but nonetheless value judgments and it is simply dishonest to claim anything else.

NCCA

Next I want to turn to the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (or NCCA). This is perhaps more significant than the Bill before the Dáil. Why? Because this is a statutory body of the Department of Education and Skills, advising the Minister. While the NCCA states that it is not responsible for implementing curriculum change, it “supports educational change in early childhood settings and in schools by developing a range of support materials such as examples of practice, online toolkits and planning resources, and by working with those introducing new developments to practitioners and teachers”.

In 2014, the NCCA published a consultation paper on a proposed new course entitled Education about Religions and Beliefs and Ethics (or “ERB and Ethics” for short). The final report was published in 2017. The consultation paper makes for interesting reading.

The main thrust is that children should not be taught religion, but should be taught *about* all religions, on the basis that they are all of equal validity. Of course the point about religions is that they claim to be true, and so if you tell a bright child that they are all the same, they won't fail to understand that this can only mean that they are all equally false. That is the secular approach, not that all religions are valid, that all are equally invalid – it is a parity of disrespect.

The Report states, among other things, that “the curriculum also enables children to ... contest prejudice and the worst effects of stereotyping.” It says that ERB and Ethics “will give due attention and respect to the diversity within religions and beliefs to avoid falling into the trap of broad generalisations or stereotyping”.

It then goes on to say that while denominational religious programmes may contain content on moral norms and character formation, they tend to draw on what they call a “realist epistemology” while they suggest that ERB and Ethics should draw on a “critical, pluralist and inquiry based epistemology” that emphasises autonomy in learning. The implication being of course that Catholics are not capable of critical thinking or valuing autonomy in learning.

The astonishing level of prejudice and stereotyping in this paper appears to have escaped the attention of its authors, deafened, apparently, by their own calls for action against prejudice

and stereotyping. They conclude, seemingly without any evidential basis, that “teaching Ethics through a “faith lens” is not a “recommended approach” for a national curriculum in Ethics”. I wonder what they would make of Christ as a moral teacher? Too faith based?

There is a real sense that the NCCA and the Forum on Patronage and Pluralism see Catholic education as a form of indoctrination. What they either don't realize or seek to obscure is that indoctrination is exactly what they are proposing in a system in which it is impossible to “opt out” of ERB and Ethics.

And now they are at it again in a paper published last November entitled “Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) in Primary and Post-Primary Irish Schools”. There is a lot of talk about “the need” for quality Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) programmes in schools being highlighted again and again in work with young people and the need to update current curriculum programmes. But actually, this is less about updating the lesson, and more about fundamentally changing it.

They refer to international best practice being an approach that addresses the realities of young people's lives, the diversity of sexuality and gender identities, and the challenges young people face in navigating relationships in a positive, healthy way. They talk about a positive and enabling approach to teaching children about sex and sexuality, without seeming to give any thought to the fact that the vast majority of these children are underage and it is illegal for someone to have sex with them.

According to the NCCA, it shifts the focus from an almost exclusive concern with the biological aspect of reproduction and prevention of HIV/STIs and unwanted pregnancy to a broader spectrum of topics, including the psychological, social, cultural and interactive aspects of sexual health and wellbeing. They say this approach is positive and enabling as opposed to approaches that are fear-based or concerned almost exclusively with the risks and dangers of sexual activity.

I have to say, I didn't realise that most young people have to be convinced that sex is fun and exciting and positive. It's almost like they want to persuade the children to engage in sexual activity.

The only mentioned goal of the NCCA, it seems to me, is to “empower children and young people to make conscious, healthy and respectful choices and have safe and fulfilling relationships”. What business is it of the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment what kind of relationships people have? Should they not be more concerned with the educational achievements of students? And if, as it seems, they are a machine to distribute government propaganda in relation to lifestyle and sexual choices, surely they should be concentrating on things that affect society in a tangible way: STDs, teenage pregnancy etc.

This is another example of a very statist approach to this subject: the encroachment of government bodies into areas that really should be of no concern to it, and that are more properly the concern of parents. But the NCCA also has something to say about parents: they refer to parents being tentative, apprehensive and lacking in confidence in talking to their children about sex and refer to “some instances” in which young people employ tactics to block out parents' attempts at initiating conversations, suggesting that, for these young

people, parents are not the preferred source of information about relationships or sexual health.

They say it's better for these children to access information through school rather than seeking it out online, where they may stumble across pornographic material which is "problematic on a number of fronts, not least in its portrayal of sexuality and gender stereotypes". Yes, that's the problem with pornography.

Are they really so naïve to think that a teenager will forego pornography and rather listen to a teacher talking to him? What will prevent someone accessing pornography, if not a moral view that it is wrong? If you don't believe it is wrong, then why wouldn't you? How can you know it's wrong unless you accept that there are some sexual behaviours that are morally wrong, that sex involves moral choices? Which brings us back to the fact that it is not possible to have a value-free education when it comes to RSE, it is just a question of whose values prevail.

As far as I am concerned, I think it should be the parents' values, whatever world view they have. The State should be there to support parents in raising their children, not the other way around.

And that is where I want to finish this evening. It is possible that many parents are not aware of these developments. Few enough of us have the time energy or interest to pay close attention to the proceedings of Oireachtas Committees or to read their reports and many of us believe – perhaps naively – that things at school have not changed significantly since our own school days. So if you are surprised or even shocked by what you have heard in relation to the way the wind is now blowing, raise it with your local TDs.

It seems to me that it may now be time for the Church to get out of education – at least in its current partnership model with the State. As I said at the beginning, when you pay the piper, you get to call the tune. The bishops' error has been in allowing the State to call the tune. This only changes when they start paying the piper themselves. The language of the former Rule 68, to my mind, signifies the proper position that religious instruction should have in a school environment. It is not merely an adjunct or afterthought. It should inform and vivify everything that happens in the school, in the same way that our faith should inform and vivify our lives.

To achieve this, I think the Church needs to consider consolidation of its resources into a smaller number of more authentically Catholic schools. It is likely that these schools would need to be private, although it is to be hoped that arrangements would be made to assist parents who are committed but lack the means to pay fees in having their children attend such schools. Even then, there may well be difficulties in relation to the appointment of teachers, as the tyranny of employment equality legislation runs deep. However, the chances of such schools being able to provide an authentically Catholic education without excessive State interference are certainly greater.

I am conscious that this is a very radical approach and at odds with what most of us are familiar with. But the tragic reality is that nominally Catholic schools in Ireland have for decades been failing to pass on the faith. The steadfastness of our ancestors has given way

to a fickle fascination with every passing trend of modernity. If we are to rediscover the grit and determination of the past, something has to change. For those of us whose children are currently in school, the only viable option may be to continue to fight a rear-guard action and to insist on our children being withdrawn from classes in which particularly offensive principles are being inculcated, but this is not a satisfactory long term solution.

Church leaders have to know how parents feel. Not only does the Constitution recognise parents as primary educators of their children, but so does the Church – in fact the primary duty of parents, according to the Church, is to educate their children. This being the case, Catholic parents living in a hostile environment, deserve the support of their bishop at the very least. The Bishop owes no duty to educate children of other faiths – indeed we're constantly being told that this is unacceptable. So it is time for our bishops to support parents who are feeling increasingly beleaguered and establish authentic Catholic schools that will reflect the way that Catholic parents want to educate their children. We must follow the example of the persistent widow in Luke, Chapter 18, who kept returning to the judge asking for justice until he finally got so sick of being bothered by her that he gave her what she asked for. That is what we need to do with our bishops.