What is a Catholic school? There are many definitions, including this one from *The Catholic School*, a 1977 document from the Sacred Congregation for Education:

Christ is the foundation of the whole educational enterprise in a Catholic school. His revelation gives new meaning to life and helps man to direct his thought, action and will according to the Gospel, making the beatitudes his norm of life. The fact that in their own individual ways all members of the school community share this Christian vision, makes the school "Catholic"; principles of the Gospel in this manner become the educational norms since the school then has them as its internal motivation and final goal.[[1]](#footnote-0)

In my view, a Catholic school models itself on Jesus the teacher. It invites (and that word ‘invites’ is important, because there can be no coercion or indoctrination) young people to learn and live the values of He who is the Way, Truth and the Life. It is a community, of students, teachers, management, parents and the local Church.

We can see from the outset that there are difficulties with that model in today’s world, a point to which I will return, but it is a long, long time since ‘all members of the school community [have shared] this Christian vision’. Not everyone has to be on board with the vision and mission but you do need a critical mass which completely supports it and the rest need to value it, even if they do not share the vision completely.

That is not to imply that people do not value Catholic schools. All the evidence is that they do. But what aspect of it do they value? The kind of excellent education that they provide, or their founding ideals?

Speaking of which, it is not wise to look at the future of Catholic Schools without looking at the past and present. I am going to focus on post-primary education in particular, as it is the area that I know best.

It is impossible to disentangle our history, and the central role of Catholicism, from the history of education in this country. Education was centred on monasteries from about the sixth century, existing in parallel with bardic schools. One of St Brigid’s many achievements was having a double monastery where men and women were both educated. By the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, the major religious orders from the Continent were present in Ireland, like the Cistercians, Franciscans, Dominicans and so on. However, colonisation complicated matters and to take a huge skip forward, the Penal Laws, enacted from the late 17th century, were draconian in intent though not always implemented in such a draconian fashion. Many hedge schools flourished and there is no record of a hedge school teacher being prosecuted. Nonetheless, the aim is summed up well here:

 ‘Edmund Burke, the famous parliamentarian and orator, who was a relative of Nano Nagle on his mother’s side, and had spent his early years in [her home, ]Ballygriffin, described those [Penal] laws in one trenchant sentence: ‘Their declared object was to reduce the Catholics in Ireland to a miserable populace, without property, without estimation, without education’[[2]](#footnote-1)”’

By the way, I find it entertaining when people tout the National School system of 1831 as some kind of wonderful model and even the way forward for primary education today. Remember, the avowed outcome was for an Irish child to become a happy British child. The textbooks referred to Dublin as the second city of the Empire. Every trace of Irish culture was removed, particularly the Irish language.

But to return to post-primary education, at the end of the 18th and beginning of the nineteenth century, a network of diocesan colleges, meant primarily to educate young men for the priesthood but also for civil life began to be established, such as St Patricks in Carlow, St John’s in Waterford, St Flannan’s in Ennis and so on. It was also in the 19th century that there was a veritable explosion of religious orders, particularly among women, starting with Nano Nagle, foundress of the Presentation Order, who had the temerity to set up not one but five schools for poor children, initially without her brother’s knowledge. Mother Mary Aikenhead founded the Irish Sisters of Charity in 1813, the Sisters of Mary Ward, known as Loreto Sisters in Ireland, came there in 1822. Catherine McAuley, who trained with the Presentation Sisters in George’s Hill, set up the Sisters of Mercy in 1831. Finally, there was Margaret Aylward, who established the Holy Faith Sisters in 1867. Along with these Irish foundations, the Daughters of Charity came to Ireland in 1855, when the after-effects of the famine were still being felt. Similarly, Edmund Ignatius Rice had set up his schools for boys, which eventually developed into both Christian Brother and Presentation Brother schools, while orders like the De La Salle’s were also present.

The role of these religious orders cannot be overstated. They not only provided education, particularly to young women, they also provided school buildings and teachers. In fact, the odd system of funding of second level voluntary schools, known as the capitation grant, or in irreverent circles as the headage payment, grew out of the fact that payments were made according to the number of pupils as salaries were not paid to the teachers.

Of course, there were issues with some of the Orders and Congregations, particularly those that involved themselves with industrial schools and Magdalene Laundries. We should never gloss over the damage done to so many people. However, it is also fair to say that the emphasis on the harm done by religious orders has perpetrated another injustice - an amnesia about and a lack of acknowledgement of how the religious orders took on the role of educators, not only on behalf of a fledgling State but long before, and the story of the Irish people would be very different and much impoverished if they had not.

It was the well-known economist, Tony Fahey, who first investigated the economic contribution to local areas in an unpublished PhD thesis. He is the originator, I believe, of the well-known statistic that ‘in 1800, there were 200 religious sisters in Ireland, by 1850, there were 1,500 and by 1900 there were some 9,000. The numbers of male religious and clergy also grew butless spectacularly — the number of priests almost doubled between 1800 and 1900, reaching 3,500 in the latter year (Fahey 1987).[[3]](#footnote-2)

 He made the point that it is now popular to characterise this growth as colonisation of the State’s proper function by the Church, but

 ‘No reserve existed within the public system which could easily have been drawn upon to fill gaps caused by withdrawal or non-activity on the part of the church. State provision might have been somewhat greater than it actually was had the church not been as active, but on its own, it is unlikely to have risen to the levels achieved by the combined church-state provision which actually evolved.[[4]](#footnote-3)

The amount of social capital created by the presence of a convent or monastery school or friary in an area was enormous. It should also be mentioned that Irish religious orders, firstly during Penal times but also later on, took education to the far corners of the globe. At one point, there were more Irish religious sisters in Africa than there were from any other European nation.

The commitment to education of women cannot be overstated, either. My own school opened in 1900 as a primary, secondary and third level institution because at the time, women were allowed to sit university exams but not attend lectures. The Dominican and Loreto sisters organised parallel institutions where women could be educated at third level until the National University allowed them full access to its lectures..

The influence of religious orders is responsible for the preponderance of single sex schools in Ireland, which other countries find curious. It was not until 1931, when the Government first set up VEC schools, now ETB, that numbers of coeducational schools existed. Even then, they were de facto Catholic schools, as were a large number of community and comprehensive schools from the 1960s onwards.

Jumping forward again, huge changes came about with the Second Vatican Council and also, the advent of free education. The 1960s mark the start of the decline of religious orders in Ireland but it was a slow decline - right up until the 1980s they were well able to staff schools.

Since then, many of the schools are now run by educational Trusts, such as the Le Cheile Trust, Ceist, and ERST. There is tremendous commitment from the Trusts to Catholic Education but they run on shoestring budgets and with small numbers of staff. There is also no doubt that the scandals of the last three decades of sexual abuse of children by clergy and in some Catholic-run institutions have been tremendously damaging, too.

Underfunding is a perennial problem for the schools, as well.

The last budget saw the capitation grant restored to €345 per student in the voluntary secondary school - the same amount last given in 2010, and agreed to be inadequate then.

Niamh Dalziel, Research and Policy Officer with SVP says:

“We also know that schools are underfunded. During the period of austerity, the capitation grant, which covers the basic running costs for schools per pupil, was cut from €345 to €309. In 2020, the rate was €316. To maintain the real 2010 value adjusted for inflation to 2023, the grant should be €422 or 33% higher."[[5]](#footnote-4)

The number of post-primary schools has been gradually rising for the last number of years, going from a low of 699 in 2012 to 730 in 2020. This growth has been led by multi-denominational schools, which have increased by 11.5 per cent in the last eleven years from 321 in 2012 to 358 in 2023. In the same period the number of Catholic schools has decreased by 4.3 per cent, from 352 to 337.[[6]](#footnote-5) There is a clear government preference for multi-denominational schools, as can be seen.

As a side note, schools are expected to respond to every emergency from Covid to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, and by and large, they do.

In total, there were 593 post-primary schools where Ukrainian pupils were enrolled, of which 227 schools had 10 or more pupils and 36 schools had 10% or more Ukrainians enrolled in Table A.2.2



There is a sustained assault from external forces as well on Catholic Schools. It is not just Atheist Ireland - it is regularly painted as extraordinary that Ireland funds Catholic schools, even though it does not fund them as well as ETBs and Community and Comprehensive schools. There have been attempts at equalization of funding between different types of post-primary schools (due to sustained lobbying) but we are not there yet.

But we are by no means outliers in Europe. Only three European countries do not fund denominational schools and one of those, Italy, had until recently a de facto Catholic school system.[[7]](#footnote-6) Some of you will remember the famous Lautsi vs Italy case where a Finnish-born mother objected to the presence of crucifixes in Italian classrooms.

In 2009, the first ruling by a chamber of the European Court of Justice found in favour of Ms. Lautsi. But the Italian government appealed, supported by many other European states and non-governmental organizations. Finally, in 2011, the Grande Chamber, the highest level body of the European Court, overturned the previous ruling with the consensus of 15 out of 17 judges: displaying the crucifix in schools does not violate the freedom of education of non-believing parents.[[8]](#footnote-7)

The Netherlands fully funds all denominational schools. Since 1918, Scotland has funded Catholic Schools fully, as well. In Scotland, there are about 360 Catholic Schools, 2,090 non-denominational, 3 Anglican, 7 interdenominational and 1 Jewish school, all fully state-funded. Scotland also requires some kind of religious observance in all schools by law and in 2017 declared:

11. The Scottish Government welcomes the tradition that, in Roman Catholic denominational schools, Catholic Liturgy will largely shape the nature and frequency of RO activities in the classroom and in the wider school community. So, at times, children and young people will be invited to participate in, and sometimes to lead, prayer and reflection in classrooms and at assemblies. At other times, to honour particular occasions or feasts, chaplains will lead school communities in the celebration of Mass and other forms of liturgical celebration.[[9]](#footnote-8)

France provides almost full funding for Catholic schools who sign a contract with the State and they are allowed to teach denominational religious education which is not permitted in State Schools. Germany funds on average 75% of the costs of Catholic and other denominational schools and demand for these schools is rising.

As our basic law, the Constitution has some important things to say about education and religious freedom. Article 42 emphasises that ‘The State acknowledges that the primary and natural educator of the child is the Family and guarantees to respect the inalienable right and duty of parents to provide, according to their means, for the religious and moral, intellectual, physical and social education of their children ... Parents shall be free to provide this education in their homes or in private schools or in schools recognised or established by the State’. Article 42 continues: ‘The State shall not oblige parents in violation of their conscience and lawful preference to send their children to schools established by the State, or to any particular type of school designated by the State’. The state must ‘provide for free primary education’ and ‘shall endeavour to supplement and give reasonable aid to private and corporate educational initiative, and, when the public good requires it, provide other educational facilities or institutions with due regard, however, for the rights of parents, especially in the matter of religious and moral formation’.

There are also a number of international covenants which protect the right of parents to choose schooling in accordance with their beliefs and values.[[10]](#footnote-9)

But there are internal pressures, too.

32. Conduct is always much more important than speech; this fact becomes especially important in the formation period of students. The more completely an educator can give concrete witness to the model of the ideal person that is being presented to the students, the more this ideal will be believed and imitated. For it will then be seen as something reasonable and worthy of being lived, something concrete and realizable. It is in this context that the faith witness of the lay teacher becomes especially important. Students should see in their teachers the Christian attitude and behaviour that is often so conspicuously absent from the secular atmosphere in which they live. [[11]](#footnote-10)

***Modern man listens more willingly to witnesses than to teachers, and if he does listen to teachers, it is because they are witnesses.*** Pope Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi,* no. 41

Sadly, there is a tremendous weakness of witness in schools - for example, those recruiting new teachers are not allowed to ask about personal beliefs, so other questions have to be proxies for commitment. For example, an applicant might be asked, ‘How would you know this was a Catholic school aside from having the picture of the founder in the front hall?’ The answers are invariably weak and centre around aspects that any good multi-denominational or indeed, schools with an atheist ethos (if we had any in Ireland) would also be legitimately be able to claim - care for students, high standards of pastoral care and so on.

There is progressive secularisation from within because schools are a microcosm of society. Teachers are affected by exactly the same factors that drive secularisation in Irish society. Very few of them have a personal commitment to faith. Don’t get me wrong - they are wonderful teachers and caring people, but they do not have a formation in the Catholic faith.

Similarly, the first generation of lay principals were invariably people of faith who had often worked alongside members of religious orders for years. As that first wave begins to retire, that is no longer true.

So, what is the future of Catholic Schools and the young people within them? Honestly, I do not know. It all depends on how much people are willing to sacrifice in order for them to survive.

In the immediate term, what can be done?

* Support and praise what your local Catholic school does well
* Get involved - volunteer where you can
* Discuss, thrash out, model with your own young people at home what faith means.
* Work on providing your young people with Catholic peers - Youth 2000, Catholic Scouting Organisations, Catholic religious movements, and so on.

Laypeople are going to have to step up to the mark, too.

Pope Francis has also often spoken about Japan and the torture and persecution of Christians from the seventeenth century onwards which meant that the church was effectively underground and without priests for more than two centuries. When missionaries were finally allowed to return in the nineteenth century, they found faith still alive, and people had been validly baptised, married and received Christian funerals.

How much do we value Catholic education? When people truly value something, they find ways not only to preserve it but to pass it on to others. The Irish Church is not facing any challenge as serious as the Japanese Christians of the seventeenth century, or even our own era of Penal laws.

The most commonly repeated phrases in both the Old Testament and the New Testament, are variants of “be not afraid!” It is an appropriate message for Christians in the times ahead.

1. The Catholic School, no 34, <https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/ccatheduc/documents/rc_con_ccatheduc_doc_19770319_catholic-school_en.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-0)
2. Sarah McDonald, *New Book Highlights Nano Nagle’s Contribution to Social Justice*, Catholic Ireland <https://www.catholicireland.net/new-book-highlights-nano-nagles-contribution-social-justice/> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
3. Tony Fahey, The Catholic Church and Social Policy, p.146, in Values, Catholic Social Thought and Public Policy, eds Brigid Reynolds, s.m. and Seán Healy, s.m.a., CORI Justice, Dublin, 2007 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
4. Ibid, P146 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
5. Parents critical of communications around schools voluntary contribution, SVP May 2023, <https://www.svp.ie/news/parents-critical-of-communications-around-schools-voluntary-contributions/> Accessed January 26th, 2024 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
6. Statistical Bulletion - Enrolments 2023 Department of Education, p 8 <https://assets.gov.ie/279917/69f31a1b-f929-40b8-a64b-36941413a2e8.pdf> Accessed January 26th, 2024 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
7. For this section, I have drawn heavily on extensive research by Paul Meany, former principal of Marian College, Ballsbridge, and now president of the European Committee for Catholic Education (CEEC). See, in particular, Paul Meaney, *Catholic Education – the International Context,* in Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review, Vol. 108, No. 429, Catholic Education in a New Ireland (Spring 2019), pp. 32-46 <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.35939/studiesirishrev.108.429.0032> [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
8. Paolo Fucili, *Continued Controversy over Crucifixes in Classrooms*, Catholic World Report, <https://www.catholicworldreport.com/2021/11/29/continued-controversy-over-crucifixes-in-italian-classrooms/>

Accessed February 2nd, 2024 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
9. Curriculum for Excellence: Religious Observance, published March 2017, Scottish Government; <https://www.gov.scot/publications/curriculum-for-excellence-religious-observance/> Accessed February 2nd, 2024 [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
10. Meany, 2019 [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
11. Sacred Congregation for Catholic Education, Lay Catholics in Schools: Witnesses to Faith <https://www.vatican.va/roman\_curia/congregations/ccatheduc/documents/rc\_con\_ccatheduc\_doc\_19821015\_lay-catholics\_en.html> [accessed 1 January 2024]. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)