



# CNI

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## **COMMENT - Ireland needs an education system inspired by a passion for education – Archbishop Diarmuid Martin**

The future of education in Ireland is under constant review. It is not simply a question of adapting to the constant pressure of day to day maintenance of schools, or trying to keep within the financial limitations of austerity and post-austerity, or forward planning for new schools at a time of change. The questions we should be asking today concern the basic understanding of what education is about and how to ensure that Ireland can in the coming years be in the forefront of what education is about in the twenty first century.

My aunt was a teacher in Northern Inishowen. I remember going to her school as a young Dublin lad who knew very little about rural life and being surprised at seeing children arrive with turf under

their arms to help heat the school. I was not overly impressed and I think that in the back of my Dubliner's mind my reaction was what like what they said about Jesus: "can anything good come out of Nazareth"!

Yet over the years I have however encountered many highly successful figures who had attended that school. Facilities were far from ideal, but that school had something special: "the Master" was a genius, and he transmitted a passion for learning.

Ireland needs an educational system which is inspired by a real passion for education and which transmits a passion for learning and a passion for an understanding of education which goes way beyond the simple transmission of information. The future of education in Ireland will not be served by polemics or sectoral interests or using education as a political stick either in elections or to score points over people whose views are different.

What should the contribution of Catholic education and of the Catholic school to this future of Irish education look like? There are some who would consider me as somehow less

than favourable to Catholic schools. I have called for divestment or restructuring of the current configuration of patronage to respond to the situation in a changing Ireland. I believe that it is necessary to have plurality if we wish to maintain a proper space for Catholic education in pluralist Ireland.

I have more than once expressed my regrets at the slow pace of change, except in areas where new schools are being planned and built. I have also said that I have no interest in being Patron to any school which does not have an avowed Catholic ethos. Parents who do not wish their children to attend religious education have a right to see their wish respected. Teachers who do not believe should not feel compelled to teach religious education or faith formation. Those who do not believe – who may be very well men and women of great personal integrity and goodness – are in any case not the ones who can transmit what faith means.

That said, I am strongly in favour of the presence of Catholic education as a component of a new pluralism in education in Ireland. There are some who, in the name of pluralism, would wish to exclude denominational education from the

overall framework. That to me sounds like an ideologically truncated pluralism. They say that publicly funded education should contain no traces of denominational education. But if parents, the primary educators, wish their children to receive education with a robust religious ethos, why should a pluralist society exclude support for their decision?

Is there something wrong with Catholic education as an idea and policy? I, as much any person who went through a Catholic educational system, could list a series of its deficiencies. But I can also give examples of how a Catholic education transmitted to me values of intellectual enquiry and searching, of honesty and respect for others, of diversity and indeed a love of learning (not that my educational achievements and results show that my teachers were always successful).

Catholic education is not poison, as one might sometimes get the impression from certain debates. It is up to those of us involved in Catholic education to convincingly show the values of Catholic education and how they find a place within the pluralist systems of many different nations and cultures. Those involved in Catholic education must learn not just to defend

their vision but constantly to improve it. International bodies have criticised the Irish educational system because of the lack of opportunity for children of parents who not believe; but they do not criticise Irish religious and denominational education as such. Catholic education should be a realistic free choice and possibility for parents who genuinely wish it. Baptising children simply to be able to attend a specific school is an abuse of baptism.

Catholic education in Ireland is not perfect. Indeed, it faces its own dangers and temptations. Pope Francis has especially stressed the danger of Catholic education becoming elitist. It is natural that when a school earns for itself a good reputation, that parents will wish to choose that school. But the temptation can easily emerge to look on those with learning difficulties or from different cultural or social background as a threat to such success, a temptation to close ranks. Every Catholic school has an obligation to make an annual examination of conscience and carry out its very own “elitist check”.

When I read school mission statements, I am struck at how individual-pupil-centred they can

be, speaking of opportunity and educational excellence and the personal realisation and fulfilment of the pupils. The mission statement of a Catholic school cannot stop there. Talents and gifts are there not just for us; they are there for the good of society. The Catholic school must imbue its pupils with a sense of responsibility for placing their talents at the service of others and of society. The Catholic school must enable its young pupils to engage with others and to work with young people from non-faith backgrounds and to explore together, to respect each other and to work together for the good of society.

Pope Francis has called for a Jubilee Year of Mercy and the Catholic school must introduce its pupils into understanding what mercy and compassion and care for others involves, in whatever profession or calling that the pupil may aspire to.

The Feast of the Immaculate Conception which we begin to celebrate this evening is about a special privilege granted to Our Lady. But it is also a sign that is addressed to all of us. In Mary, God has shown how he wishes to remove from our sinful world all that is divisive and discordant and conflictual, and what is structurally toxic to

healthy interaction within the human family and within the integrity of creation. Mary's Immaculate Conception is a call to us to work to heal the damage done by the collective effects of human sinfulness.

Catholic education should aim at empowering, generation after generation, young men and women who are prepared to go out into their contemporary world committed to respecting the dignity of every human person, recognising how human greed and selfishness have created new ghettos of un-fulfilment and new peripheries where opportunity is absent.

A Catholic school should offer – offer, not impose; offer, not hide – to all who cross its door, an understanding of that idealism and generosity and a desire to serve which all can experience through an encounter with the person and teaching of Jesus Christ.”