Catholic Education in the State Sector from 1902-1964

Since the Restoration of the Hierarchy in 1850, the importance of providing Catholic schools was a constant priority of the Hierarchy and historically a school was the first building to be erected in a new parish. But it was the education that the schools provided which is at the heart of the matter and so the concept of Catholic Education will be examined first. This will be followed by an account of how the Church maintained its presence in the State sector until the time of the Second Vatican Council when a new vision was born.

What was meant by Catholic education

Catholic education was, in the first half of the twentieth century, a continuation of late nineteenth century Episcopal priorities in that the school was a significant building block together with the church and the family in the Fortress triad that preserved the Faith in the hostile environment that the majority of Catholics in England lived in. This environment was characterised by a Protestant order, continuous anti-Catholic prejudice and the growing influence of secularisation that went hand in hand with industrialisation. Although the State did put forward schemes to integrate Catholic children into the state system of education, the bishops, supported by the religious orders (who were major providers of schools) were adamant that the preservation of Catholicism in England required separate provision for schools.[1] Along with what happened in the churches, schools had the duty of imparting and renewing the sacred truths of Christian faith and understanding of its teaching, symbols and sacramental practices to children who mainly came from impoverished working-class Catholic backgrounds. That this was largely made up of immigrant Irish families provided an extra challenge to the Church in that the bishops believed both a cultural and religious environment needed to be created in order to "save" their native Catholic faith from potential corruption in Protestant England. By making schools part of the Fortress, the bishops were maintaining the integrity of the Catholic faith in their respective dioceses and this was and is still a matter of upmost importance to them as the Primary Teacher in each diocese.

Co-existent with this was the educational mission, which Gerald Grace describes as an "internal mission"[2] and took the form of a very clear option to the poor that was primarily directed at children in the Industrial areas of the country. It predates by almost a century the deliberations of the Second Vatican Council which gave a particular emphasis to a preferential option for the poor as a defining characteristic of Catholic Education.[3] The

[1] Their first Joint Statement on Education came at the conclusion of the first Westminster Provincial Synod held in 1852

[2] Grace, G. *Catholic Schools Mission,Markets and Morality* (2002 Routledge) This edition published in Taylor & Francis e-Library, 2005 p25/436

[3] https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decl_19651028_gravissimum-educationis_en.html.

mission as set out by bishops in numerous pastoral letters differed from the later Conciliar documents in that it was considered necessary rather than preferential that elementary schools provided religious personal and educational formation for the Catholic poor that was also of a reasonable quality. Furthermore, they imposed a duty on the faithful as a whole of providing universal access to schools so no child needed to attend a state school, which were seen as Protestant in ethos.

Catholic School Provision 1902-1944

The Balfour Education Act passed in 1902 was a landmark moment for the Catholic Church in England as it secured state funding for the Voluntary schools which ensured their survival. The School Boards, which had been set up under the terms of the 1870 Act, were replaced by Local Education Authorities (LEA's) which took over the responsibility of providing and maintaining adequate facilities for all public elementary schools in their area including voluntary schools. This allowed Catholics to provide their own Religious Instruction while receiving public support from the Rates for books and equipment, cleaning and heating, and teachers' salaries. In turn, the school managers had to provide the buildings free of charge and then keep them in good repair using the rate aid funds. It solidified the dual system of schools, set up up under the 1870 Act, allowing Catholics to keep control over a school's religious character and appointment of teachers while the LEA assumed responsibility for the secular curriculum and the standard of its teaching. Cardinal Vaughan, on behalf of the Catholic Hierarchy welcomed the 1902 Act declaring that:

The general effect of the new law is to make Christian and Catholic education a part of the law and Constitution of England…a large and important advance[4]

The Act also brought developments in secondary and higher education more directly under central control and benefitting from Rate Aid. Before 1902 secondary education was mainly the privilege of children whose parents could afford to pay fees and in the Catholic sector was usually provided by religious communities. However, the pupil-teacher system allowed poorer older pupils to receive training in elementary schools and pupil-teacher centres before going on to college or remaining as uncertified teachers. Likewise, teacher training colleges were provided by the religious communities as it was beyond the resources of most Catholic communities despite the growing need for Catholic schools to be staffed by Catholic teachers. By the turn of the century, it was increasingly felt that secondary schools should be open to all elementary school pupils irrespective of their background, who showed that they could benefit from the opportunity. In 1907, the Free Place system was introduced whereby able children could try for a scholarship to a grammar school. In 1918, the Fisher Education Act raised the

[4] Westminster Diocesan Archives Vaughan Papers 230a January 1903

school leaving age from twelve to fourteen, but with secondary schools still being fee-paying with some free places, most children stayed at their elementary school.

Despite the funding for running costs coming from rate-aid, the financing of schools was still a matter of great concern to the Hierarchy who, following the Universal Church teaching, remained adamant that every Catholic child should have a Catholic Education and that Catholic parents had the right to insist on a Catholic school for their children. Canon 1374 of the Code of Canon Law promulgated in 1917 actually prohibited Catholic parents from sending their child to a non Catholic school unless access to a Catholic school was restricted in some way and the parents had sought permission from their bishop to send their child to a non-Catholic school. The Catholic population was still growing and though immigration from Ireland continued it was on a reduced scale. However, many parishes owed their existence to large Irish populations particularly in the industrial North and London. New schools needed to be built and the cost of this was borne by the Catholic population through donations, subscriptions and other fund-raising efforts. In spite of the limited financial resources the expansion of Catholic elementary schools was impressive. In 1903 there were 1,058 Catholic elementary schools;[5] in 1944 this number had risen to 1,361[6] and an estimated 90% of Catholic children were receiving a Catholic education.[7] The secular curriculum, which they followed remained much the same as the late C19th based around the so called "3R's" (Reading, Writing and Arithmetic) and which aimed to *assist both girls and boys, according to their different needs, to fit themselves, practically as well as intellectually, for the work of life.*[8]

Secondary school provision was predominately in the hands of the religious communities particularly the female communities such as the Faithful Companions of Jesus (FCJ) in Middlesbrough and the Bernardine Sisters in Slough. As a result, there were far more convent schools for girls than there were for boys although it has been estimated that in 1944 similar numbers of girls and boys were in Catholic Secondary education.[9] Religious Communities also monopolised the provision of Catholic teacher training colleges with all eight that were in existence in 1944 being run by religious, training their own members as well as lay students. Just as the secondary schools and colleges were single sex establishments so too the curriculum that they were trained to teach was differentiated. Girls were taught less Maths and Science but were instructed in "housewifery".

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[5] Board of Education *Statistics of Public Education 1903*
[6] *Catholic Directory* 1944
[7] Norman E., *Roman Catholicism in England: from the Elizabethan Settlement to the Second Vatican Council* (1968, Oxford University Press) 122
[8] Board for Education. *Code for Elementary Schools 1904* Introduction
[9] Evennett, O., *The Catholic Schools of England and Wales* (1944 Cambridge University Press) 38-53

In Religious Education the *Catechism of Christian Doctrine,* or *" Penny Catechism"* consisting of 370 questions and answers, which was approved by the bishops attending Second Provincial Council of Westminster in 1855 was used. It summarised the basics of Catholic Doctrine regarding Faith (the Apostle's Creed) Hope (common Catholic prayers such as the Lord's Prayer and the Hail Mary all in Latin) Charity (the Ten Commandments) and the Seven Sacraments. Children were expected to learn it by heart together with some Biblical History. It was Instruction rather than Education for much of the teaching was a drill- like process to ensure the rote learning of the questions and answers. By 1942, some dioceses were unhappy with the status quo and began to issue their own schemes though still based on the questions and style of the Penny Catechism. For example, Westminster introduced a simpler catechism for eight-year-olds while Birmingham used a modified scheme known as the "Sower" where formal catechism began at eight, but only answers within their understanding were learnt. These new schemes were designed to be more age- friendly and corresponded with the three stages of schooling. They were also linked to the sacramental preparation for First Holy Communion at age 7 and Confirmation at age 14. In addition, many schools included a weekly school mass in the timetable. Both the May Day procession where the statue of the Blessed Virgin Mary was crowned with flowers and the Corpus Christi procession where the First Holy Communicants processed behind the Blessed Sacrament became important events in the calendar. Through their Catholic schooling children learned to be part of the Catholic community and what their roles in it would be. Attendance at Sunday Mass was expected and absence was punished in school the next day. Boys learned to serve the Mass and sing in the choir and maybe find a priestly vocation. Girls might aspire to join a female religious order or become lay teachers. But for those girls without a religious vocation the ultimate expectation was marriage to a fellow Catholic and passing on the faith to her children. Much of the pattern to Catholic life that was established with the help of Catholic education in the first half of the century would endure until the late nineteen- sixties when it was forced to re assess itself in the light of Vatican II and at the same time face the challenges of a world that seemed intent on throwing out the societal norms that had previously held it together.

Catholic School Provision 1944-1964

Butler's Education Act of 1944 was one of the most significant pieces of legislation enacted by any government in the first half of the twentieth century. It set up a universal and compulsory state funded education system for all children between the ages of five and fourteen in England and Wales. It also altered school provision in line with Hadow Report of 1926 which had recommended the reorganisation of education into two stages: Primary (5-11years) and Secondary (11-14 years). Primary education was further subdivided into Infants (5-7 years) and Junior (7-11years). The break at eleven was thought to be most helpful in terms of providing a viable proposition for separate secondary schools and the Act also included the intention of raising the school leaving

age further to fifteen when economic and social conditions allowed. This happened on 1st April 1947. Although some reorganisation of schools had already begun under the aegis of the Hadow Report until curtailed by the outbreak of war, it was not a legal requirement and it is estimated that about 45% of Catholic schools in the Primary stage had complied.[10] The Act retained the Dual System of secular and church schools offering two alternatives for the Voluntary schools which allowed them varying levels of Independence and funding. Controlled schools received 100% funding from the LEA who also appointed the teachers and two-thirds of the governing body. Religious Education was to be taught in accordance with the Trust Deed or existing practice of the school, or in agreement with the "Agreed Syllabus" of the LEA. The Catholic Church was not willing to accept Controlled status on the grounds it would destroy the Catholic ethos of its schools so, despite the financial hardship that it would entail, their schools became Voluntary Aided.

The Framework for Aided Schools established in 1944 provided a specific division of responsibilities between the Church, the Local Authority and the national government. The Catholic diocese or religious order own the school land and buildings and appoint a majority of the school managers (later termed governors) to ensure the school's religious character remained protected. Because of this unique status, the governing body became the admissions body and able to prioritise Catholic children. The Framework also introduced specific staffing policies by giving governing bodies the right to appoint "reserved teachers" selected for their competence in teaching religious education in accordance with Catholic doctrine. It was also generally accepted that headteachers would not be appointed unless they were practising Catholics. The Religious Education and daily collective worship (the latter was a requirement on all schools mandated as part of the 1944 Act) were controlled by the diocese and have to align with Catholic doctrine. The Local Authority paid the running costs staffing and teacher's salaries and in return the governing body became responsible for half the costs of external repairs, capital improvements and new buildings. During the period of time that the Act was going through its Parliamentary process the bishops, who were later joined by representatives of parents and teachers, had lobbied hard for a 100% maintenance grant on the grounds of equity, but it was an unrealistic demand which failed, although further legislation in 1959 raised the grant to 75% and in 1975 to 85% .[11] One other concession that was made was extending the 50% grant to cover the costs of new schools where a school had been transferred to a new site because existing premises could not be upgraded to meet school building regulations or as result of slum clearance programmes. It did not cover the founding of new schools in new areas of population or as a result of the reorganisation process.

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[10] Beales, A.C.F. *The Struggle for the Schools* in Beck,G., The English Catholics 1850-1950 (1950 Burns and Oates)393

[11] Beales, ibid pp394-401

The 1944 Act, although it made free secondary education compulsory for all children did not specify its structure but merely stated it should be according to age, ability and aptitude. The pre-war *Spens Report* (1938) had proposed a tripartite system of schools, which was taken up by the authors of the Norwood Committee in 1943. Adopted by most LEA's, grammar schools provided an academic education for higher ability children; technical schools provided a general education, focusing on technical subjects; and secondary modern schools provided a general education, but emphasised practical subjects. A new examination, the 11-plus decided which type of school fitted each child best. In practice however the secondary school provision was largely bipartite with very few technical schools being established and this was also true in the Catholic sector.

One success that the bishops did have during the progress of the Bill in Parliament, was the insertion of a clause that permitted an element of parental choice in that children were to be educated where possible in accordance with their parents's wishes thereby allowing them to choose a faith school. It was incumbent upon for the Church therefore to provide enough school places at both primary and secondary level for a Catholic population that was still increasing through a surge in Irish immigration and the post war bulge in the birth rate during the 1950's. It was both a logistical and financial challenge for a community that remained mainly working-class and was, in many ways one of the most disadvantaged groups in the state education system. The 1950's was the period that saw the development of the "affluent society" with full employment, a social security system and economic growth. It was also increasingly a consumer society where people wanted more and better education in order to get well-paid jobs. But there was a growing awareness that not everyone was enjoying the new found affluence and the extent of under-privilege was highlighted in the reports of different commissions such as the *Newsom Report* published in 1963 that reinforced the premise that social factors including geographical region, social class and type and physical condition of schools had deprived poorer children of adequate educational opportunities.

The Religious communities were still major contributors to Catholic Education providing a grammar school education through their schools which had become Direct Grant establishments such as the Bar Convent School in York. In the case of their schools which had not taken that route they were either handed over to the relevant diocese and became VA schools or remained Independent fee paying schools such as St Bernard's in Slough. Whichever route was taken the Religious Communities still found themselves shouldering a huge and expensive burden in order to bring their buildings up to the standards expected by the government which ranged from 100% for the Independent schools and up to half the cost for those in the State system. Parishes and dioceses also faced huge burdens at a time of soaring costs. In 1939, the church estimated that it cost £60 to provide one school place; ten years later, according to Diocesan Returns the cost varied between £191-£400. Likewise in 1943 the Treasury had calculated that the cost to

the Catholic Church would be just under £10million. By 1949 it had soared to over £60million.[12]

Despite the financial burden the scale of what the Church achieved was remarkable, but it was not enough to meet the aim of a place in a Catholic school for every Catholic child. Between 1955 and 1965 the numbers of pupils in Catholic primary schools had risen from 390,000 to 443,000 and in secondary schools from 69,000 to 196,000.[13] But this was only 60% of the total eligible to a place according to Diocesan Returns. The main cause was insufficient funding despite the increased grant to 75% in 1959. For example, Wakefield, a fairly large city in the West Riding did not have a Catholic Secondary school until 1967. Its children either attended the local secular schools or travelled to other towns such as Leeds where there were schools run by Religious Communities. The Catholic Church had also become a lone voice in petitioning the government for increased funding for the Methodist Church had transferred its remaining schools to the local authorities before the 1944 Act and the Anglican Church had opted for the majority of its schools to become Controlled thus considerably lightening their financial burden. Although the provision of schools remained a priority there were other financial burdens on the Catholic Community. New parishes required churches rather than meeting for Mass in the school hall. The Catholic teaching profession had become a predominately lay one and although salaries were paid by the local authority, they needed to be trained preferably in Catholic training colleges and this sector too was expanding both in terms of colleges and the number of students, who from 1960 undertook a three year course rather than the previous two year course. However, the numbers entering the profession were not growing quickly enough despite the expansion of training and from the early 1960's there was a significant increase in the number of non-Catholic teachers being employed especially in the secondary sector. Another change was a move away from parochial oversight of education towards a diocesan-led approach with Diocesan Directors of Education being appointed.

However, new emphases in how the Church understood its mission and changes in how the State pursued its education policies coalesced during the mid 1960's and how the Church in England met these twin challenges and then tried to preserve a resilient concept of Catholic Education in the light of an ever-encroaching secular State is the subject of a separate article.

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[12] Beales, ibid 402

[13] Gosden, P., *The Education System since 1944* (1983 Oxford)

Further Reading

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