Catholic Education 1964-2019

The provision of schools and providing a Catholic education for every Catholic child has been a priority of the Catholic Church in England and Wales from the early nineteenth century and remains so up to the present day. But, from the middle of the twentieth century it has faced many challenges, the most important one being the growth of a modern secular society. Attendance at Mass has declined and young people and their parents are more questioning about their faith. A culture of consumerism driven by performance-led targets and public accountability drives the State's educational provision- the milieu that Catholic schools are part of. So, this article will first consider what Catholic Education is and why the Church provides it and then examine how the Church has responded to the changing educational world that it inhabits.

What is Catholic Education?

The Second Vatican Council 1962-65) was a landmark ecumenical council of the Church convened by Pope John XXIII to update the traditions of the Church to meet the changing conditions of the twentieth century, a process he termed Aggiornamento. Every aspect of the life of the Church was examined including its educational mission and in its initial conclusions found in the document *Gravissimum Educationis* (1965) an approach to Catholic schooling was postulated that would meet the needs and challenges faced by young people growing up in a modern secular culture.

The influence of the Church in the field of education is shown in a special manner by the Catholic school. No less than other schools does the Catholic school pursue cultural goals and the human formation of youth. But its proper function is to create for the school community a special atmosphere animated by the Gospel spirit of freedom and charity, to help youth grow according to the new creatures they were made through baptism as they develop their own personalities... Since, therefore, the Catholic school can be such an aid to the fulfillment of the mission of the People of God and to the fostering of the dialogue between the Church and mankind, to the benefit of both, it retains even in our present circumstances the utmost importance.[1]

With its use of concepts such as *developing personalities a*nd *spirit of freedom,* the picture of what a Catholic School should be achieving in the education it provides is very different to that of the pre-Vatican church as seen in England and Wales. There were immediate difficulties for both the bishops and those involved in Catholic education as they had been educated in schools that were authoritarian Institutions with strict discipline and where teachers imparted facts and information that were learnt by rote but with little or no understanding of the wider meaning.[2] Yet in the introduction to *Gravissimum Educationis* it is stated that although the Council had identified certain

[1] https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decl_19651028_gravissimum-educationis_en.htmlSection 8 para 1-2

[2] It is worth noting that this was not limited to Catholic schools but occurred in most state schools as well which comes as a surprise to many Catholics who recall the tyrannical regimes of their schools.

fundamental principles of Christian education, they would have to be applied by the different episcopal conferences taking note of their local situations. It also promised some help from a special post-conciliar commission that eventually became the Sacred Congregation for Catholic Education[3], but there was a failure to fully recognise the fact that in many places including England there would need to be extensive programmes of retraining and professional development for teachers, a re-modelling of the teacher training curriculum and some form of re-orientation for the bishops. Without these there was a real danger that the hope for the new Catholic education would remain as words on a Vatican document.

Other principles identified in the document included the universal right to education, the duties and rights of parents, and the relationship between the Catholic School and civic society. Sadness was expressed that there were still many in the world without even the chance of rudimentary training despite welcoming the fact that educational provision was growing. Perhaps one of the most important points made in *Gravissimum Educationis* is an advance in the way a Catholic school is thought of – a transition from seeing it as an institution to the school as a community that includes everyone associated with it. As Cardinal Baum[4] further explained in 1988 that as the church reflects on its mission it gradually develops pastoral instruments to make it more effective. The Catholic school is one of these instruments with the specific pastoral service of mediating between faith and culture, staying faithful to the Gospel while respecting the autonomy and methods proper to human knowledge. He concludes:

At least since time of the Council the Catholic School has had a clear identity not only as as a presence of the church in society but also as a genuine and proper instrument of the church. It is a place of evangelisation, of authentic apostolate and of pastoral action – not through complementary or parallel or extracurricular activity but of its very nature- its work of educating the Christian person.[5]

Unlike many Episcopal Conferences the bishops in England and Wales did not produce any major statements on Catholic Education after Vatican II apart from brief statements addressing specific areas of concern at a given time. It wasn't until 2005 (revised 2012) that Mgr Marcus Stock, who later became Bishop of Leeds wrote *Christ at the Centre: Why the Church provides Catholic Schools* which in his words tries to draw together the key statements from the Church's teaching on the provision of Catholic education to help form a common understanding of the concepts and a basis for discussion about the

[3] The CCE published three documents in the years following the Council: in 1977, The Catholic School; 1982 The Lay faithful in schools and 1988 The Religious Dimensions of Education in a Catholic School
[4] Prefect of the Congregation for Catholic Education
[5] Congregation of Catholic Education, *The Religious Dimensions of Education in a Catholic School* (1988)

Catholic identity and ethos of individual Catholic schools. [6] He sums up that the identity and purpose of the Catholic School in the 21st century is fourfold:

- to assist in the Church's universal mission
- to assist parents in the education of their children
- to serve the needs of the local Church
- to be a service to society

He concludes by reflecting that in the evangelisation of culture and contributing to the common good the Church recognises that Catholic Schools can play a deliberate and vital role and that is why in England and Wales the Catholic Church continues to provide Catholic schools.

The Comprehensive System 1964-1979

From the time that the 1944 Education Act passed into law there was some questioning as to whether the Tripartite system was fair and just.[7] Some felt it was too rigid and questioned whether it was realistically possible to place all children in one of just three groups. Others saw the system as fundamentally unfair for, although it was intended that all three types of school would be of equal status that was not the case. Grammar schools were better funded and resourced, whilst modern schools rapidly became the poor relation that the "failures" attended. There was also no mechanism for children who were late developers to move upwards. However, the Labour government that came into power in 1945 considered that equality of opportunity meant access to different types of school appropriate to the child's age, ability and aptitude and enforced the Tripartite system, as did the Conservative government that was in power 1951-1964. However, opinion in the Labour Party began to change making the case that equality of opportunity did not mean access to a specific type of school, but access to an appropriate education within a common, comprehensive school.[8] There were concerns about the efficacy of the 11+ particularly the use of an intelligence test and its effectiveness and accuracy. It had also been noted by educationalists that the main beneficiaries of the grammar schools were on the whole from the middle classes, which had the corollary for the mainly working-class Catholic population that most of its children were attending a modern school. Labour too picked up on the social divide:

The present separatist system tends to divide society by preventing mutual understanding between those with greater and less academic attainment ... Most of

[6] Stock, Marcus, Christ *at the Centre.Why the church provides Catholic schools* (2005 rev 2013 The Incorporated Catholic Truth Society) Preamble 6

[7] Secondary education was by selection and divided into Grammar Technical and Modern schools. See article 5xiv *Catholic Education 1902-1964*.

[8] West, Anne, *School Choice (and Diversity) in the UK from 1944* (2023 Journal of School Thought 17) 5

country … developed on separatist lines without much consideration of merits … partly because much educational opinion at the time favoured separatism.[9]

By the time of the general election in 1964 the change to comprehensive schooling had become official policy of the Labour Party:

Labour will get *rid of the segregation of children into separate schools caused by 11-plus selection: secondary education will be reorganised on comprehensive lines.*[10]

The Catholic response was on the whole favourable towards the idea and the Catholic Education Committee (CEC) stated that there was no objection on religious grounds for

There were many who held that the comprehensive pattern was more in keeping with the general Christian philosophy of the equality of all men before God. [11]

In fact, the first Catholic Comprehensive school was already in existence: St Joseph's in Swindon, the first purpose-built Catholic comprehensive school opened in 1958 and by 1964 there were ten others with around 5,514 pupils.[12] Taking power after the general election Labour kept its manifesto pledge and by July 1965 had *requested* that all LEA's submit plans for the reorganisation of secondary education along comprehensive lines.[13] However, once again the question of financing the necessary changes came to the fore. Catholic policy was stated to be one of cooperation in any local plans for reorganisation that might be put forward but since Catholics had paid to create the tripartite system they should not have to pay again to alter it.[14] In 1965, Archbishop George Beck, who was the lead bishop on Education laid bare the fact that even without secondary reorganisation it would take between twenty and thirty years to pay for existing schools and in January 1966 following their plenary meeting the bishops stated that the only way Catholics could fully participate in comprehensive reorganisation was with government financial aid.[15] No help was immediately forthcoming, but in 1967 the capital cost grant was raised to 80%. By then Circular 10/66 had outlined the ways comprehensive education could be implemented by local authorities. The least expensive option was the provision of all - through schools for children aged 11-18; the most expensive meant providing first Schools for children aged 5-9; middle schools for 9-13 and upper schools for 13-16 followed by a sixth form college or college of further education. Most schemes involved substantial capital expenditure for the Catholic population and there was an added problem in that dioceses covered multiple local authorities who might choose different schemes. Despite the policy of cooperation, it proved to be an impossible task in some

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[9] National Archives *Comprehensive secondary education. Memorandum by the Secretary of State for Education and Science* CAB 129/120 (1965)
[10] Labour Party, Labour Party election *Manifesto* (1964)
[11] CEC, *Report 1965* p37
[12] Arthur, James *The Ebbing Tide* (1995 Gracewing) 94
[13] DES Circular 10/65 July 1965
[14] Beck, G. A. *Times Educational Supplement* 08.05.1964 p1250
[15] Arthur James, ibid p96

cases especially over the age of transfer between schools. This was particularly acute at the top end of the age range where Catholic numbers were usually too small to establish separate sixth form colleges if that was the adopted local authority scheme. It meant either retaining 11-18 provision as in Luton or losing Catholic education for that age group as happened in Wakefield. A few sixth form colleges were established as in Middlesbrough where the boys' Catholic grammar school- a Marist foundation became a co-educational sixth form college and took in a higher proportion of non- Catholic students.

The process of comprehensivisation, which took over a decade to become established was particularly hard for the religious communities. They were already facing a fall in the number of vocations that became a crisis after the Second Vatican Council and limited their everyday involvement in the schools. Their secondary schools were usually single sex establishments, but the comprehensive system was intrinsically co-educational and so they needed to change. Many of them were Direct Grant schools, but that status was under threat and finally abolished in 1976. At that point they either became Independent Grammar schools or were handed over to diocesan care becoming VA schools with many eventually becoming co-educational. Within a few years their role was reduced to that of membership of a school governing body and most Orders have now severed their links and withdrawn from education completely. The withdrawal of the religious communities from the classroom exacerbated the problem of recruiting enough Catholic teachers to maintain the catholicity of the schools. The religious, by their very presence had imbued their schools with its Catholic identity but now Catholic schools were vulnerable in the sense that the Catholic identity had to be established by the head teacher and senior leadership team supported by practising Catholic teachers and this was becoming harder to achieve particularly in secondary schools where there was an increasing number of non-Catholic teachers were employed. Recognising the danger to the Catholic ethos in schools the Hierarchy reiterated their position first established in the post-1944 framework for Voluntary Aided Schools that the senior leadership team and heads of RE must always be practising Catholics and that wherever possible a high proportion of the staff should be Catholic. This policy became even more important after the 1988 Education Act introduced market values into Catholic education and is still in place today. [16] In 1991, the Catholic Certificate in Religious Education (CCRS) was introduced by the bishops. With the loss of many Catholic training colleges many Catholic young people who were interested in teaching in the Catholic sector had no specific training to prepare them for the role. Additionally, completing the course was considered to be of particular help to primary school teachers who would be responsible for the teaching of RE to their class.

[16] This requirement was formally consolidated and explicitly clarified in the 2014 Bishop's Memorandum on Appointment of Teachers to Catholic Schools. It also applies to newer roles such as CEO's of Catholic Multi Academy Trusts and ensures staffing decisions align with Canon Law and a diocese's Trust documents.

The Religious communities were not the only group in Education affected by the deliberations of the Second Vatican Council. Everyone from the bishops downwards were affected in some way. But the changes in Catholic schooling and education were accompanied by changes in general educational practice. For example, in *Gravissimum Educationis* parents were reminded of the importance of their role as a child's first teacher and their importance was echoed by the *Taylor Report* of 1977 that recommended parental representatives became part of a school's governing body with an equal say. This was enacted in the *1980 Education Act a*nd applied to all schools in the State system. Teachers too were finding their role was changing both in terms of their classroom practice and within Catholic education. Traditionally the overriding aim of the Catholic teacher was seen as passing on their faith and a received culture. This was becoming less acceptable and instead education

was a process in which teacher and pupil cooperate in a critical evaluation of received culture and changing society"[17]

As Mgr. George Beck told the Vatican II Education Working Party the role of Catholic schools was no longer as a part of an outdated fortress subculture but poised to:

take the full richness of faith out into the community, to shed new light on truths which whatever discipline they belong to, reflect the one eternal truth that is God Himself.[18]

For some years the idea of a child-centred education had been quietly advocated by educationalists, but the publication of the *Plowden Report* on Primary Education in 1966 catapulted it into the national conscience and it changed how education in both stages of schooling was delivered almost overnight. With a core principle of fostering the Holistic development of every child it fitted the new aims of Catholic education in England and in particular banished for ever the rote learning of the catechism that had dominated Religious Instruction for over a century. On Easter Sunday 1971, the Congregation for the Clergy published the *General Catechetical Directory* to replace the old Catechism.[19] It was the first universal document to implement the catechetical and theological reforms of Vatican II regarding Religious Education. It was addressed to bishops and served as a guide for the renewal of the Church's teaching mission in the light of Vatican II. It encouraged a move away from the memorisation- based methods of teaching towards a more comprehensive life-centred approach and emphasised that teaching must be adapted to reflect the age, culture and life situation of the student. In response, the bishops of England and Wales commissioned programmes of study that were developed in the 1970s by a committee under the chairmanship of Bishop David

[17] Konstant, D., Ed. *Signposts and Homecomings: The Educative Task of the Catholic Community: A Report to the Bishops of England and Wales* (1981 St Paul Publications)
[18] https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decl_19651028_gravissimum-educationis_en.html Para7
[19]https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cclergy/documents/rc_con_cclergy_doc_11041971_gcat_en.html

Konstant. While initially helpful to teachers as guides on what to teach their major drawback was that no resources were produced to help deliver the curriculum. For teachers who were grappling with both a new method of teaching, and a new broader curriculum focused not only on the tenets of Catholic Faith but including themes from Catholic Social Teaching such as the common good and learning about world faiths, the lack of relevant age -related resources was a fateful flaw. Later programmes were more successful in this regard such as *Here I am* for primary schools and *Icons* for secondary schools, but all have had their critics as well as their supporters.[20] However, upon the horizon Catholic Education was about to face changes which challenged it as never before.

1979-1997 Catholic Education and the Market Economy

The Conservative governments who were in power from 1979-1997 fundamentally changed the school system in England and Wales. Early in their time they restored the right of local authorities to have selective grammar schools if they so wished but of much greater significance was the introduction of market-orientated reforms, which were, as George Grace noted "to *demonstrate, quite dramatically, the limitations of Catholic symbolic power in education in changed cultural, ideological and political conditions"*[21] The 1980 Education Act aimed to bring market forces into education by encouraging competition between schools to appeal to parents. It required local authorities to make arrangements to enable parents to express a preference for the school they wished their child to attend together with a formal right of appeal if they were refused. A further Act in 1988 required schools to admit children up to their physical capacity- a "standard number" that was decided by the Secretary of State based on the numbers in the school during the year 1979/1980 and could only be altered by the Secretary of State under the provisions of Section 28 of the 1988 Act. The admissions policies of each school had to be agreed with the local authority at the start of each school year and would normally include a figure of 10-15% of non- Catholic admissions in order to protect the Catholic ethos of the school. Although, there was some protections for schools with a religious character the right to control admissions previously exercised by the governing bodies was gradually being eroded. If a Catholic school had surplus places the local authority could give them to unassigned children regardless of the fact it might breach the non-Catholic quota. As Arthur points out the ability of the Education Reform Act to protect the character of Catholic schools was wholly inadequate and an LEA with very different priorities can implant them in Catholic schools. [22] The full consequences of this for

[20] For example, see articles in Hayes, M. And Gearon, L eds. *Contemporary Catholic Education* (2002 Gracewing) partic. P195

[21]Grace, G. *Catholic Schools Mission, Markets and Morality* (2002 Routledge) This edition published in Taylor & Francis e-Library, 2005 p25/436
p59/436

[22] Arthur ibid p 204

Catholic schools operating in a market economy can only be fully understood when looking at the new delegated budgetary provisions enshrined in the 1988 Act which tied funding directly to the number of children on a school's roll where the governing body of a Catholic school might feel driven by a need to survive by expanding its numbers rather than preserving its Catholic ethos. The 1980 Act also changed the name and make up of school management boards who, in Catholic schools looked after school affairs on behalf of the Trustees which are the Bishop and Trust board of the diocese. Now known as governing bodies and their role redefined to be more strategic and legally accountable, the Act mandated the inclusion of at least two parent governors elected by the parents whose role was to be responsive to parents concerns rather than those of the Trustees. The *1986(2) Education Act* established for the first time a new partnership between parents, teachers and the Church whilst also starting a shift of power from LEAs to schools. The governing body was made responsible for the conduct of its school in regard to its management, discipline, suspensions and admissions and also required them to hold an annual meeting for the parents at which they justified the way in which they had conducted the school. At least one foundation governor had to be a parent of a child in the school.

The enactment of the *1988 Education Act* brought about the biggest change in education since 1944. It fundamentally restructured educational provision in England and Wales and drove forward the policy of the Conservative government of moving education away from local government control towards a centralised business model for schools that focused on performance, league tables and public accountability. A National Curriculum standardised learning for pupils of compulsory school age defining ten core subjects plus Religious Education. It established four key stages with standardised assessment tests (SATS) in Mathematics English and Science at the end of the first three key stages to measure performance. A new exam, the GCSE which replaced O levels and CSE 's assessed 16-year-olds and A-levels were retained for 18-year-olds who stayed on at school beyond the leaving age. The legislation also allowed maintained schools to "opt out" of local authority control and become grant-maintained, (GM) funded by central government. In so doing, they gained more autonomy, including responsibility for admissions. Finally, as mentioned above the Act introduced Local Management of Schools (LMS) which moved financial control from LEA's directly to school governing bodies allowing schools to manage their own budgets. The justification from the government was that "school autonomy and parental choice – combined with the National Curriculum – are the keys to achieving higher standards in all schools"[23] The final piece of legislation was enacted in 1992 by means of the *Education (Schools) Act* which instituted independent inspections of teaching and educational standards to be carried by a new body the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) and the reports

[23] Department for Education and Welsh Office Education Department 1992, p.15)

published thereby giving more information to base their choice of schools on. Much of this agenda raised concerns and had consequences for Catholic education which will now be considered.

The new culture of education which celebrated an ethic of success of both individuals and individual schools sat (and still sits) uneasily alongside Catholic values in education which places a spiritual and moral culture above that of material success. Catholic Education is not a product but a service where the concept of the common good of a school community is placed above individual self interest and the challenge to Catholic and school leaders has been to find a balance between Catholic and market values that does not compromise the Catholicity of Catholic schools. Catholic bishops opposed the Act primarily because they feared it would marginalise religious education within the National Curriculum, weaken the Catholic ethos of their schools and undermine the established partnership between the Church and the LEA's. In regard to RE not being counted as a foundation subject, the bishops were concerned that leaving it as a separate requirement meant it would compete poorly for time and resources against other core subjects. In Catholic education RE is considered as the core of the core curriculum not merely another humanities subject and they feared that the new curriculum would reduce the 10% of school time devoted to RE in Catholic schools as it was not included in the same assessment structures as core subjects. Another area of grave concern to the bishops who are a Trustee of every school in their respective dioceses was the legislation that allowed schools to opt out of local authority control and be funded directly by central government becoming grant- maintained. The bishops felt that this would destroy the solidarity of the Catholic school system by encouraging schools to act independently of diocesan authority and disrupt the "dual system" of Voluntary Aided Schools. The introduction of open enrolment which made it more difficult to restrict admissions to Catholic children and the potential for pressure to help establish new types of schools with a religious character such as joint church schools that would erode the distinct faith-based ethos of Catholic schools was also a matter of concern together with the amendments to the Bill that talked of "predominately Christian" content that might weaken the specific denominational Catholic character of their schools in favour of a general watered down Christian ethos. The final point of conflict was the transfer of power from local authorities to the Secretary of State which was viewed as removing an established and stable funding and logistical support mechanism for the schools. Despite reassurances on the place of RE the bishops' concerns fell on deaf ears and the Act passed into law.

With the legislation put into practice, it did not, as some of the bishops feared, destroy the Catholic school system and the Catholic ethos of schools, but it did significantly damage the unity of the church on education by reducing the absolute power of the bishops in favour of governors and parents. The Church, as represented by its Hierarchy was accustomed to conflict with state agencies in education every time major reforms

were enacted; what was new was dissent and resistance to its policies and leadership by sections of the Catholic community. Historically, educational issues had brought together bishops and laity in concerted action, which had been very effective in advancing the Catholic cause but this broke down over a range of issues during the late 1980's and 1990's. Research has shown that the fundamental principle at stake each time was the relative influence and control of the Hierarchal power in regard to a newly empowered laity especially parents in the determination of educational policy and practice.[24] Catholic bishops insisted that under the provisions of Canon Law they were the guardians of the distinctive mission of Catholic schools and therefore the communicators of the Catholic position on controversial issues. But the Conservative governments of Margaret Thatcher and John Major had enacted a raft of statutory powers to centralise state control of education transforming the whole context for policy negotiation and which took precedence over canon law. This had been done to overcome resistance to their plans from educational bureaucrats such as the unions and LEA's but included the Catholic Hierarchy as an educational bureaucracy! Instead, they adopted the ideological concept of parentocracy, or "parent power" in schooling as a mechanism to stimulate competition between schools, diversify the school system and boost school efficiency and effectiveness in order to counteract, as they saw it, the vested interests of education professionals. This was clearly seen over the question of Grant Maintained schools. A considerable number of school governing bodies attracted by the idea of financial independence opted for Grant Maintained status against the advice of their bishops and in the case of one London Comprehensive went so far as to threaten to take the Cardinal Archbishop to court over their "rights".[25] Parentocracy challenged the hierarchy in two ways in that parents as a group were given precedence in the educational decision making process over the entire Catholic community of which they were but a small part and secondly in some schools it had radical implications for the Catholic ethos as the drive to be top overrode any other consideration.

In an attempt to overcome the challenge of parentocracy, the Hierarchy released a number of statements defining the Catholic position on schools most notably *The Common Good and Education* (1997) which received praise from beyond the Catholic community. They emphasised that consideration of the commitments to the community and the common good in educational policy had precedence over individual and group parental rights. As James Arthur concluded:

the Church's distinctive mission places greater emphasis on the right of the whole Catholic community in determining the future of Catholic schools. The Church does not

[24] Eg Arthur, J., "Parental Participation in Catholic Schooling: A case of Increasing Conflict "British *Journal of Educational Studies* Vol 42:2 (1994) pp174-90

[25] See Grace ibid 66/436

recognise that the rights of parents and pupils already placed in Catholic schools can override the rights of the whole Catholic community.[26]

But as the case of Grant maintained schools show, the guardianship of a distinctive Catholic mission had passed in practice, from the bishops to the newly empowered school governors and parents which had the potential for long term implications for the future direction and nature of Catholic schooling.

Academisation

It was a matter of great surprise to many that the incoming Labour government of 1997 wholeheartedly embraced the ideology of a market driven education system and only tinkered at the edges in order to restore their non-negotiable educational principle of no selection on the grounds of ability. The fears of the bishops regarding long-term structural changes which had arisen in the years since 1988 were mitigated in 1998 when the incoming Labour government abolished Grant Maintained status by means of the *Schools Standard and Framework Act* bringing them back under Local Authority control and allowing the Church to re-establish all its schools as Voluntary Aided. The Act restored the comprehensive nature of education by placing a "general restriction on selection by ability or aptitude." which meant that no admission arrangements for a school in the maintained sector could make provision for selection by ability unless this was a "permitted form" of such selection, or the school was a grammar school. The Act also established a new legal framework for admissions with two key mechanisms being introduced: the Schools Adjudicator who was responsible for ruling on objections to schools' or local authorities' admission arrangements and the School Admissions Code. In addition, the Act allowed for the creation of new state-funded voluntary-aided religious schools, catering for different faiths and denominations. Subsequent legislation in 2000 allowed for the introduction of a network of city academies in England. Academies (the word "city" was quickly dropped) were closely modelled on the City Technology Colleges that had been introduced by the Conservatives in 1980 and essentially were private schools paid for by the state. They were outside local authority control and were to be public/private partnerships. It was intended that businesses, churches and voluntary groups would build and manage them and have control of the governing body. As with the previous CTCs, they had to offer a "broad and balanced" curriculum but were not required to follow the national curriculum, and sponsors could influence what was taught. However, unlike CTCs, they initially seen as a way of turning around failing schools and improving schools in poor areas. The academies programme was massively expanded after 2010, which transformed the educational landscape. Following the 2010 general election, the Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition government (2010–15)

[26] Arthur, J *Parental Power* p188

enacted *The Academies Act,* which enabled LA maintained schools to apply to "convert" to academy status. Increasingly, schools became part of "multi-academy trusts" as opposed to being single academy trusts with the multi-academy trust board becoming the admission authority for all schools in the trust. Reforms to the curriculum and assessment also took place in 2014-15 resulting in the inclusion of more demanding content the aim being to improve standards overall.

On the surface it appeared that education in the Catholic sector was, on the whole successful. Catholic schools mostly achieved well against the performance targets set by the government that on paper indicated success and were highly regarded in their localities. Many were over-subscribed by parents attracted by academic success, good discipline and a reputation for spiritual and moral excellence; features lauded by Cardinal Hume in 1997.[27] However, although the new Labour government had resolved the problems posed by Grant Maintained status, its wholesale adoption of a centralised market-driven education system meant that the questions it posed for Catholic Education had not gone away and its leaders were still struggling to find a response. This was despite a more sympathetic tone coming from the government who, led by Tony Blair cleared the way for a new generation of state funded religious schools of all creeds. However, in 2006 the Secretary of State insisted that all new schools with a religious character including Catholic schools admit 25% of their pupils from other faiths to promote community cohesion. The bishops, through Archbishop Vincent Nichols, the chair of the Catholic Education Service and its director Oona Stannard protested pointing to the fact that Catholic schools had already admitted an overall total of 30% non-Catholics and were happy to do so providing it did not disadvantage local Catholics and that the majority of their schools were in fact culturally diverse. Backbench Labour MPs with large Catholic communities in marginal seats also protested talking about "alarming levels of concern" from their constituents.[28] After nine days the proposal was quietly dropped. In many ways it was a theoretical problem for a falling birth rate meant new Catholic schools were not required, however a similar problem arose with the 2010 *Academies Act* which imposed a 50% on reserved places in new schools with a religious character. Probably agreed as a compromise position between the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats whose manifesto aim was to close all schools with a religious character, it was completely unacceptable to the Catholic bishops who imposed an effective moratorium on building new schools and though there have been parliamentary initiatives to reduce the cap, these have faltered due to General Elections and leadership changes. Catholic schools did benefit however from the *Building Schools for the Future* programme which began in 2004 with the aim of rebuilding or refurbishing every secondary school in the state sector. It was funded by a public-private partnership and

[27] Grace G. "Catholic Education in England and Wales" in Hayes M. And Gearon, L. Ed's *Contemporary Catholic Education* (2002 Gracewing) p 4

[28] Baker, Mike *Why the U turn on Faith schools?* (news.bbc.co.uk 04.11.2006) accessed 11.05.2026

prioritised Local Authorities with levels of high deprivation in the first wave. In 2007 a similar scheme for primary schools was launched again initially targeting those areas of high deprivation. Both schemes were cancelled in 2010 as part of the Coalition government's austerity programme. However, they left the Catholic Church with a portfolio of new and modernised school buildings at no cost to their communities.

The Catholic Church was slow to embrace the Academies programme, and it was 2005 before the first school converted to academy status. However, after the passing of the 2010 *Academies Act* and following government reassurances that ownership of land and premises would remain with diocesan trustees, Bishop Malcolm McMahon, the lead bishop on Catholic education matters announced that subject to the agreement of the diocesan bishop, the trustees and its governing body Catholic schools could become academies. Opinion was divided on the subject meaning that the Catholic Church was, as in the debate about Grant Maintained schools, no longer united in its education policy. The Archdiocese of Liverpool were not convinced by the argument for Academies and pursued an anti-academy policy while in the diocese of Nottingham the first Catholic Multi Academy Trust (CMAT) was set up in time for the start of the new academic year in September 2011. The three dioceses in Wales were not involved as the Welsh Senedd did not pursue an academy policy. Further discussions resulted in the 2016 *Memorandum of Understanding between* the Department for Education and the Catholic Church, which established a formal partnership regarding the governance, ethos, and academisation of Catholic schools in England. It protects the religious character of schools and ensures the Church maintains control over school standards and defines how the DfE, Regional Schools Commissioners, and dioceses can work together to support underperforming Catholic schools. With these added reassurances many more dioceses decided to go down the pathway of academisation and organising their schools into Multi Academy Trusts. But there have been issues. Firstly, concerning the structures of MATS with some dioceses favouring a "top-down model with centralised supervisory structures and others favouring a "significant autonomy" model involving maximum delegation to individual schools and a lighter supervisory structure. Problems too where individual schools did not want to academise but felt coerced into it. Concerns were also raised about what might happen to the good reputation that Catholic Education is generally held in if a Catholic MAT was found to be failing. Questioning too, from both teachers and parents about the level of renumeration given to MAT leadership teams and its impact on individual school's funding. It is important however that the Church gets Academisation right for it is clear that this is the only way forward for education in England.

Under the *Education Act 2005* (*Section 48)* independent statutory inspections for schools with a religious character were introduced to ensure that schools maintain their religious ethos and in Catholic schools this covers its Catholic Life, Collective Worship and Religious Education. However, Canon Law 806(1) establishes a diocesan bishop's

authority to oversee and inspect all Catholic schools in their jurisdiction to ensure they maintain its Catholic identity and standards and so the inspections are carried out both canonically and under English law. In November 2019, the Bishops' Conference agreed a new National Framework governing the Inspection process which allows all inspectors, after undergoing training, to be accredited on behalf of their bishop to inspect schools in any diocese. As a result, it is required that all inspectors are practising Catholics. Inspections operate separately from Ofsted and usually happen every five years. Its outcomes are published in a report that highlights both strengths and weaknesses as well as noting areas for development with copies going to the bishop and the school who send it out to parents and publish it on their website.

Since the C19th Catholic education has generated an extraordinary level of social cohesion on both ethnic and sociocultural levels. Over the past two hundred years Catholicism in England has largely been an immigrant faith beginning with the substantial number of Irish who came seeking refuge from the potato famine and now it welcomes people from all over the world similarly seeking a better life for themselves and their families. Catholic schools have played an important part in integrating and assimilating these waves of immigration and as a result are the most ethnically diverse schools in the country. Similarly, the fact that many Catholic schools have catchment areas that are up to ten times greater than those of the local state maintained schools, means that they bring together pupils from a much more diverse area than their own immediate geographical area and as a result many have proportionally more pupils from disadvantaged areas than local neighbourhood schools. Historically in England, Catholic schools in particular have always been regarded by some elements in society as an aberration and it was a hard struggle to achieve parity of funding and acceptance in the state sector. Schools with a religious character are once more a controversial topic in the modern world with well organised, well-funded and highly vocal pressure groups campaigning for their closure on the grounds that their secular values are neutral, unlike those of religious faiths. It is enshrined in both canon law[29] and civil law that parents, not the state or secular pressure groups, have the right and obligation to choose a school for their children that reflects their values and beliefs and the Catholic bishops in particular have never ceased from making sure that this principle is not legislated away in the name of progress and modernity. But alongside this is another threat seen in the changes in educational policy over the last half century where education has become a vehicle for economic benefit and a milieu where Catholic education has no option but to sit and try to survive with its integrity intact. It might even be argued that given the vicissitudes of the history of Catholic education in England and Wales, the extent to which the Bishop's Conference has now committed itself to Academisation, combined with the tendency of successive governments to significantly tinker with education provision that this might

[29] Code of Canon Law 1983 Canons 793(1) and 797

be the last throw of the dice for Catholic Education in England. But as Pope Benedict XIII warned in his address at St Mary's University Twickenham in 2010

Education is not and must never be considered as purely utilitarian. It is about forming the human person, equipping him or her to live life to the full- in short, it is about imparting wisdom. And true wisdom is inseparable from the Creator, for "both we and our words are in his hand, as are understanding and skill in crafts" (Wis. 7:16)[30]

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Further Reading

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[30] Pope Benedict XIII *Address to the World of Catholic Education* St Mary's University Twickenham 17.09.2010