

A NOTE ON COMMUNITY SCHOOLS

By RALPH WOODHALL

THERE ARE two difficulties in presenting the case for more community education in catholic schools. First, the social problems created by modern urban development cannot be solved by the unaided efforts of the schools. It is right to expect that all the resources of the Church be mobilized for this task. Yet our schools do represent a very large part of these resources. Secondly, it must be admitted that we cannot say in advance what demands will be made on schools which give themselves to community service and to the study of the particular social problems of their environment. Teachers who are asked to take part in community education might be excused for thinking that they are being asked to sign a blank cheque. Apart from all other considerations, they will be concerned with the real needs of real people, and these differ from place to place.

The following notes are based on the primary experience of teaching in grammar schools, and of subsequent involvement in some of the projects of an educational 'Priority Area' scheme. Of course, there are many other approaches to the question: it needs to be studied from many different view-points. In my experience, it has become clear that we urgently need community schools; but equally clear that it is no use trying to lay down precise guide-lines for their development. At the same time, I believe it possible to work out a generally acceptable policy. To begin with, we should attempt to answer the following questions:

1. How will community schools fit into the pastoral policy of the whole Church?
2. What is new in the work of a community school at the present time?
3. In default of a complete programme, what are the more urgent needs in social education?

1. The work of any particular school can only be *part* of the Church's pastoral concern for the community as a whole. This means that we limit the responsibility of the teacher; but it also means that teachers need to make themselves aware of what is being done, and what

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can be done, in the community at large. The pastoral question is how to make the various activities of formal education co-operate, in present-day conditions, towards building up a more humane and a more christian order, how these activities can help society become more united, more just, more open to all human values and more likely to be a field in which all can exercise christian responsibility. The school, for its part in this enterprise, must be an expression of the Church's concern with cultural values.

Vatican II set out this pastoral question on a large canvas.¹ The Council recognized that the social and cultural conditions of mankind are changing so rapidly and radically that we can rightly speak of a new era.²

It is a duty particularly appropriate to this age, especially for christians, that they should strive vigorously to implement certain decisions in the economic and political fields, both nationally and internationally. These decisions must give all men a recognized right to human and civic culture favouring human dignity and free from all discrimination on grounds of race, sex, nationality, religious or social conditions.³

According to the Council, the time has come to share more widely the advantages of education; in this way, a door will be opened for effective missionary activity. But the difficulties are not ignored: 'What must be done to ensure that all men share in cultural values, when the culture of the more sophisticated grows ever more refined and complex?'⁴ This is surely an immense question, and there is no suggestion that quick answers will be found. But is it possible to look for the way ahead. No one can say that it is not the concern of the schools, although the scope of educational policy should be larger than the school.

2. Next, we must ask ourselves where we can place the community school in this large framework of the Church's cultural mission. Does it have a new function? As usual in questions of practical christianity, the answer must be 'yes and no'. We have to be like the scribe in the gospel, finding in the treasures of christian tradition new things and old. Certainly, christian schools have often been a valued asset in the community, and christian teachers have often been very much at the service of the community. But there is a new situation and a new range of needs.

¹ *Gaudium et Spes*, 53-62.

² *Ibid.*, 54.

³ *Ibid.*, 60.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 56.

In the past, community provided a very stable framework indeed. When the vast majority of mankind could expect to live and die within a few miles of the place of birth, the links of community life were obvious and hardly needed reinforcing, although they did need a christian interpretation. Modern urban development has changed that. The old patterns of community life have been dislocated, so that innumerable families and individuals are left in isolation without worthwhile human contacts. This dislocation has brought widespread social evils in its train — loneliness, distrust, fear, violence and crime. If we are not to resign ourselves to these evils and to a continued worsening of the urban situation, we must think about how community life can be strengthened. There may be situations (as in some new housing estates) where it is necessary to rebuild community life from scratch.

This is not to say that there are no compensations in the new situation. Christian writers have pointed out, following Harvey Cox, that there is nothing sacred, from the christian point of view, about the old village community. Many migrants from the countryside have shown that they were glad to be free of the constraints of rural life. They have often preferred to make friends of someone in the next street rather than next door. Now a pattern of human relations based on free choice may well be more attractive than enforced conformity to the social norms of village life. Still, something is wrong when people do not even know their next door neighbour. There is an immense amount of loneliness in cities and it is not easy to see how to overcome the barriers.

Perhaps Harvey Cox is right in principle, and perhaps his analysis is an indication of how christians could develop community education. But first we must face the unpleasant facts of city life. We may concede that his 'megalopolis' can stand for freedom of choice and richer possibilities of human development. It *could* mean more scope for christian responsibility. But we must also acknowledge the disappointing results of experience: these potential values are not being realized except by a fortunate few. The rest fall between two stools: they have lost the security and warmth of the older forms of community life and have not gained by the greater opportunities which should be available, because they simply do not know how to make use of the services offered, or to make the necessary contacts. This harsh reality could be modified by education. If people are to live decent lives in large cities, they must be shown the ropes. If city dwellers appear apathetic and unwilling to try to improve their lives, it is largely because they are baffled by the complexities of the way life is organized. In the inner city, especially, the majority feel that all the cards are stacked against

them in the political, legal, bureaucratic, educational and economic games by which their life chances are determined. They honestly believe that nothing they can say or do will ever alter the situation for the better. The only reasonable chance for themselves or their children, it seems, is to move out of the inner city. The solidarity of community responsibility is thus undermined by the drain of successful talents towards the suburbs.

Much more could be said about the disorganization of community life, and not only in the most deprived areas. But this seems enough to underline the fact that, although the welfare state has reduced the incidence of material destitution, there is still plenty of misery in our cities, due largely to inability to build up the co-operation on which decent human life depends: loneliness, isolation and distrust. Are our educational resources being made available to help in this distress? 'He who is in possession of the good things of this life and sees his brother in need and closes his heart against him, how can the love of God be in him?'⁵

Many in the teaching profession will answer that they are doing their christian duty in the best possible way by helping their pupils to pass exams and get the best possible jobs. They may add that they do what they can, within the limitations of the teacher-pupil relation, to ensure that the talents they discover are going to be at the service of the community at large. This is a very fair answer for the individual teacher to make; but the question still remains whether our educational resources are being applied in the way best suited to the present time. The question is directed to administrators of catholic schools perhaps more than to individual teachers. Here, some reflections on the history of our schools may be in place.

The national schools of Britain in the nineteenth century were part of a great drive towards material progress. Individual initiative was in demand for industry, and the schools supported this by inculcating individual responsibility and all the virtues associated with the 'protestant ethic'. Parents valued the schools because they saw in them a chance to give their children a better start in life than they themselves had enjoyed.

Our catholic schools fitted into this scheme quite appropriately. We had depressed catholic populations in industrial areas, and it was a work of charitable and apostolic purpose to help develop a catholic professional class. This was an élitist policy with the best possible motive: the service

⁵ 1 Jn 3, 17.

of a community in need. It seems to me that, as far as can be judged from our older generation, this policy succeeded in inspiring a genuine spirit of service. (I think especially of an older generation of teachers, who were often prepared to sacrifice their own prospects of material advancement, in order to serve the community.)

In the educational policy of that time, it was the task of the school to encourage personal ambition where appropriate. The life of the local catholic community was strong enough to keep the pupil aware of the needs of the community and to remind him that purely personal ambition was not particularly admirable. Also there were strong links between school and community, such as we rarely have nowadays because teachers do not stay long on the same staff. (In the case of inner city schools, they rarely belong to the same community as the parents.)

This particular kind of élitism hardly makes sense any longer as an educational policy, especially after the 1944 Education Act with the adoption of the tripartite system. We are no longer concerned with looking for a minority of talented pupils to provide for the needs of the community. We are supposed to be giving all pupils a fair chance to climb the social ladder; at least, that is what the new ideal of 'equality of opportunity' seems to come to in practice in most schools. When *all* are supposed to be competing for success in school and in later careers, it cannot be taken for granted that competitiveness will be subordinated to the good of the community, or even that it will find any place in a scale of christian values. No matter what individual teachers may say, the organization of most schools tends to suggest to children that the supreme value is competitive success and getting on in life. There is a real danger that children will be confirmed in the belief that personal worth is measured by our positions in the meritocracy, and that it is right to despise those who fall behind in the race of life.

It is surely an essential part of christian education to teach that each person should make the most of his abilities, not out of mere selfish ambition but rather as a matter of using his talents in the service of the Kingdom. It is also essential to give some idea of how this works out in practice. This means some sort of initiation of the young christian into the christian community. It is by no means easy. I have suggested that our schools in former times, were able to do this because they could assume that some at least of their successful pupils would come back to help their parish and neighbourhood. Our present pupils, when they face the prospect of adult life, do not have such clear models of christian service before their eyes. They need to be taught something about the possibilities of christian service and of community life in the modern world.

The new models of community are bound to be more complex. Most people will have to live their lives in more than one community. So it is quite appropriate that community education should take varied forms. One is the more traditional form of community service: helping in the neighbourhood. Another is to recognize the complexities of urban life and study the wider community, its needs and the opportunities it offers. Both can be the concern of the school.

3. Modern developments make it necessary for schools and colleges of education to take up the task of developing community education, including the systematic and integrated study of the environment. It would be a tragedy and a scandal if christians did not take a full part in this. But, as a discipline, community education is in its infancy. While watching its development, we can press forward with some straightforward practical applications of the principle that the school is at the service of the community.

a) Many schools throughout the country plan experience in community service for their pupils. In many cases, it has been tried as a solution to the problems caused by the raising of the school-leaving age. It is good if this is intended to raise the morale of non-academic classes, but it is most unfortunate if the school gives the impression that community service is only for those who are not good enough for examination classes. In fact, the experience of schools which have an imaginative approach to community education and environmental studies is that participating in community service and other social activities is not a handicap in academic work, but quite the contrary. Many teachers find this hard to credit. They ought to consider, in any case, whether it is really good for the spiritual life of a pupil to encourage him to concentrate so single-mindedly on scholastic progress.

The experience of community service can be integrated with the other work of the school. For instance, if pupils have the experience of helping handicapped people, they should be led on to investigate what provision the local authority actually makes for their welfare, what the statutory obligations of that authority are and what citizens can do to ensure a generous carrying out of the obligations. Further, awareness of local needs can be integrated into a study of local history and geography.

b) In any community school, the strongest links should be with the parents of present pupils. Many will say that the principal responsibility for social education, as well as for the whole of christian education, lies with the parents. This cannot be denied; but it should not be said

without at the same time recognizing that, where our christian families succeeded in the past, they had the support of stable and reliable community links, often based on the extended family. Something needs doing to supply for the present lack of community support. Often in industrial towns and cities the isolated family is left to cope with all the problems of bringing up children without support.

Many schemes could be devised for schools to help parents. But perhaps the most valuable is the simplest. A school which always welcomes parents and maintains close relations with them will automatically bring the parents together and build up valuable links of community support.

c) A school is obviously more effective if it is clear that it is there to help the whole community with its educational resources. This is especially true where an area is deprived of the sort of premises needed for community activities. We ought to strive to make our schools as available as possible for adult education (formal and informal), for cultural activities, for meetings of community associations, etc. Especially in view of the financial sacrifices catholics have made for their schools, it is wrong that the resources of school buildings should be left unexploited and empty for such long periods. Of course, there are practical difficulties. The answer is to encourage groups of parents and local residents to share the responsibility of caring for the buildings while they are put to such cultural use.

I think it would be fair to finish with a disclaimer. There can be no such thing as a standardized community school. Primary and secondary schools have quite different opportunities and problems. What works in one district will not necessarily work in another. The important thing is to have schools which are sensitive to the social needs both of their pupils and of the surrounding community.⁶

⁶ Of considerable significance for the modern apostolate of the jesuit teacher are the following citations. The first is taken from the directives of the 31st General Congregation (Chapter) of the Jesuits (1966); 'Secondary schools, be they old ones retained or new ones founded, should improve continually. They should be educationally effective as well as centres of culture and faith for lay co-operators and the families of students and alumni. Thereby they will help the whole community of the region . . .' The second is from a letter of Fr General Pedro Arrupe S.J. to the jesuit scholastics of the english province, January 1974; '... a jesuit hardly justifies apostolically his presence in a school by being merely a good teacher even of religion. The school, its students, its lay teachers, the parents become the total community to whom he is sent, to exercise what apostolate he can, often as much outside the classroom as in it, in collaboration with other jesuits, lay teachers and parents. The school must be a centre of radiation to a much wider circle than the students, or it will not be effective'.