

# THE CHALLENGE TO CATHOLIC EDUCATION

By MAURICE KEANE

**T**HE ENGAGING pastime of futurology is the occupational hazard of those not wholly absorbed by their work or life-style in the daily struggle for survival. Others see it differently, as a corrosive form of self-indulgence, or as a luxury which those who are engaged in the 'real things' of life can ill afford to enjoy. In the religious field, especially in the catholic Church in this country, discussion about future trends is often regarded as a symptom of disloyalty and lack of faith. Such objections often serve, I suspect, to allay a deeply-felt threat. To take seriously the bulk of present day discussion about future trends is to become aware of the scale of the problems raised, to be daunted by the expertise they seem to require. The ordinary individual can be left with the sense of being a helpless onlooker, hopeless and on the whole depressed.

Yet honestly to confront the future is no academic exercise. For it is by examining trends, however uncomfortable, that we are able to be truthful about the present and about the long-term significance of what we are doing and not doing. This way of looking at the present can be painful but it is crucial. It may spell the end of naïve optimism, but it need not mean scaremongering. Above all it requires us to face and to tackle as realistically as we can, here and now, our responsibilities.

My own concern about the future has to do with a quite specific area: the church involvement of many of the students in higher education with whom I have had contact. In their student days many of them were dedicated and idealistic. In such realms as worship and concern they had acquired a whole new consciousness. I suspect that many of them are no longer involved in the mainstream of the Church. Nor is this pattern simply a continuation of the long-familiar phenomenon of the lapsing or drifting away of the half-hearted. The decision to abandon the active practice of the faith is often consciously made; in young and middle-class groupings it is not uncommon for the whole family to concur in such a decision. Further, the christians who thus disaffiliate themselves are people who only a few years previously had developed a new eucharistic orientation. Perhaps it is only natural that the blame is frequently laid at the door of university chaplains and

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their ilk, who allegedly do the Church a grave disservice by making it difficult for young people to fit into parish life. This objection does not impress me. It is for each of us to convey to one another as best we can the richness and challenge of the christian sign, and this must inevitably involve risks. Nevertheless, it is undeniable that the risk too frequently ends in disaster; and the indications are that, if matters continue to run their course, we are confronted with a disturbing trend which will become more evident with time.

With this in mind I want to suggest, as honestly as I can, some personal observations about catholic education. I offer them in full awareness of the limitations of my experience: full-time involvement in a largely middle-class southern university, and a passing and an occasionally more permanent acquaintance with a variety of catholic schools in the area, private, semi-private and state comprehensive. As formal educational institutions their quality is not in doubt; some are quite excellent and compare very favourably with parallel establishments in the non-catholic sector. It is rather more difficult to determine the value and achievement of the specifically religious side of the catholic schools; partly because there is little agreement about criteria. All would agree, of course, that the aim of catholic education is to impart a christian sense of values and a christian approach to life. But what does this imply in practice? In the popular mind, it is still the main task of catholic schools to ensure a degree of orthodoxy and uniformity in doctrine and morals and a sense of loyalty to parish life and the institutional Church. Even if we accept these criteria, it is doubtful whether they continue to be met. In our present situation these are inadequate aims if the gap between school and the needs of the post-school generation is to be closed. The comments that follow highlight what should be — and frequently are not — the main areas of concern.

## II

There is an alarming unawareness of the deeper implications of christianity in terms of integration into one's total living. Religion is still conceived of as a sunday exercise. In a world so increasingly devoid of myth and symbol, much of our religious language and practice has become totally meaningless. Alongside this goes the sentiment 'of course I try to live out a decent honest life' — but then that is something which most people would claim for themselves and is part of our cultural heritage. Any existential awareness of living as a community

of hope and resurrection with all that this implies in terms of sign and scandal is sadly lacking. There is nothing new in this, but it is accompanied by the undermining of the religious knowledge which for so long has been characteristic of catholic belief. For there is now a charming ignorance and fuzziness about areas of christian doctrine which would have been assumed as quite basic and normative a number of years ago. The catechetical renewal movement has never really catered sufficiently for the fourteen to eighteen-year olds in secondary education. A mental blockage has long developed as a result of excessive indoctrination at the primary level, so that any deepening of understanding at a later stage is strongly resisted and attempts to enforce it often futile. Teachers, not surprisingly, often take the easier way out and spend the time for religion in endless discussion about moral and social issues. The result is that young people in their middle and late teens often have a religious mental equipment of twelve-year olds; this is soon seen as hopelessly inadequate and often rejected. A new interest may emerge but more often the memories of that early jaded palate are still strong.

Doctrinal vagueness is combined with increasingly subjective morality, or in the less liberated, anxious confusion, or guilt feelings. Young people have often learned rather one-sided private ethics from their moral mentors, as distinct from the new experience of the more urgent and complex issues of social ethics. The result is that, in terms of doctrine and morality, many of the traditional hallmarks of what it meant to be a catholic have become distinctly blurred. The boundaries of orthodoxy are no longer easily determined.

It is important to stress that what I have written, where it is true, will only be seen to be negative from within the premise of a static view of religious education. Seen in another light it is challenging and invigorating and a growth point for the future. Thus it is no bad thing to enter the anguishing no-man's-land where one realizes that external observance of ritual and doctrinal orthodoxy are not the sum total of christian life. The need for an interiorization of faith and a personalized commitment have seldom been so urgently required. In the moral field, one can only welcome the growth towards personal, moral responsibility and maturity even if, as a reaction against past paternalism, there can be an excessive dismissal of the valid teaching and guiding voice of the Church. Perhaps the sins of the fathers are being visited on the children. One of the most naïve and frankly misguided assessments of the present situation is to imagine that the balance can be redressed by a rigorous enforcement of doctrinal and moral uniformity in educational

establishments. There are certain areas in personal growth and heightened self-awareness, misshapen or otherwise, where there can be no retracing of the steps back to a static position. I suspect that any concerted attempt to do so would soon resolve the problem of catholic institutions once and for all.

### III

There is a staggering degree of cynicism and apathy about parish life and the institutional Church at large. Much of this criticism centres around two areas:

Boring unimaginative sunday liturgies with the inevitable tediously repetitive or unintelligible sermon. The absence of a supporting community.

An almost deafening silence on national and international issues that have become so obsessive for all of us, poverty and hunger, homelessness, racial tensions, the failure of natural resources and the destructive dehumanization of super-technology, and the natural effects of the large town.

Sadly enough, parish life means little more to most than worship. There are some excellent parish communities round the country which are dynamic and inspiring, but they are rare exceptions. It has to be admitted that chaplains working in the field of higher education are in a privileged position, in that they are dealing with a homogeneous and idealistic group. This homogeneity may not be altogether one of age but rather of common purpose: in many city universities there can be a very wide variety of non-student participants, single persons of all ages, and family groupings most of whom are 'refugees' from their parishes. Their common bond is to find a meaningful, worshipping situation that will challenge their everyday living. This is an important point, as too often, by way of a rationalization of inactivity, the experience and partial dynamism of some small communities of 300-400 is ignored on the grounds that they are not representative. Mrs Murphy in the pew, so the fantasy goes, does not want change, and change must proceed at the pace of the slowest. I often wonder, when I find myself involved in such fruitless discussion, who is being protected from what. It is unquestionably the case that there are a lot of people who find their faith genuinely threatened by so much in our modern world, and they have to be considered. But amid the hysteria that one often hears at public lectures, and reads of in the letter columns of catholic papers and

journals, it is worth thinking too of the vast number of people who just drift away from the Church because of its increasing irrelevance and petty-mindedness.

Liturgical reforms have been a serious disappointment. For many, all sense of mystery and the transcendent has disappeared into banality. To remedy this is not to turn the clock back as some would want us to do. Can they really imagine that young people would return to the churches if we moved out of the vernacular? We must realize that change has not gone far enough: we have merely been involved in changes. Liturgy is, among other things, an expression of faith; and this differs for different people in the course of their lives. To try to insist on a normative form is to make static what is essentially dynamic. The task of the eucharistic community is to express faith in the living Christ in as meaningful a way as possible. In a world where believing becomes more and more problematic, a great deal of effort and — let us face it — dramatization may be required to elicit any faith-response. The whole person, with his affectivity and intellect, responds in faith. A traditional fear of affectivity explains why so many young people have moved into eastern religions as well as some of the more bizarre 'Jesus freak' phenomena. Within the Church itself the charismatic movement is obviously a manifestation of the felt need to express a loving relationship with God and in turn to experience this reality for oneself.

There is an almost universal desire and need for moral leadership from the teaching Church in this country; though this can mean quite different things to different people. For some it is a cry for the familiar clear-cut rules and categorical statements of what is right and wrong. For the perplexed and anxious younger generation it is a plea for relevant contribution towards some of the critical social issues that are vexing society. In some parts of the world, oppression and gross social injustice are calling forth heroic gestures on the part of the Church, and they are a comforting solace to those who feel concerned. In our home situation we appear to have advanced very little from a 'pelvic obsession'; and some of the valuable social critiques made in other areas go unheard. Outstanding work is being achieved by individuals and some small organizations, but there is little feeling of 'ecclesial' identity with some of the more pressing social issues. At the root of this, I suspect, is fear of 'humanism' under any guise, which in turn manifests the urgent need for a deepening of the theology of secularity. An inadequate understanding of the relationship between the Church and the world is at the heart of so much of the misunderstanding and bitterness that can enter religious dialogue.

Without having any statistics with which to back up the statement, I suspect that there has been a very sizable disaffiliation from the Church over the past few years and that it is steadily gathering momentum. Some would argue that the Church is rapidly becoming a middle-class *élite* in the country; whereas others would see the loss more markedly in the more reflective and educated social groupings. Clearly geography and local circumstances play an important part here. Among the young this is not the usual drifting away of people who will return when they 'get a bit of sense'.<sup>1</sup>

A great deal of this may seem excessively pessimistic; but if we are attempting to shape the future rather than have it forced on us then there is much that is positive in the trends. We are moving away from a 'socialized' religion, and many people are prepared to go to heroic lengths to maintain a living faith in the Church. The desire of many to relate to a meaningful and challenging Eucharistic community means that the phenomenon of 'shopping around' is with us to stay, even if we remain officially committed to parochial boundaries. Rahner's 'basic communities' are rising up in our midst; and they are often drawn together in eucharistic fellowship by their concerted efforts to 'sign' the presence of the kingdom in the world around them. This in turn will mean engagement in social problems at more than the first-aid level, which in the final analysis merely prop up an inadequate and unjust social system.

#### IV

At a time when, especially in deprived areas, the state educational system is almost on its knees and threatened with collapse, a very real argument can be made that there is a different atmosphere and spirit in the parallel catholic system. On one level, this cannot be denied. It is certainly easier to teach there. Without any arrogance, there is by and large a more caring atmosphere and sensitivity, as well as an authoritarian structure in the background, to which one can appeal even in the case of a child who may long have stopped the formal practice of religion. But there are levels at which this has to be scrutinized. In Lambeth, there is great competition, even among non-catholics, to get

<sup>1</sup> Since I wrote this paragraph my impression has been confirmed by two articles: A. E. C. W. Spencer in *The Month*, April 1975, 'The Demography of Catholicism'; and Anthony Archer O.P., in *New Blackfriars*, May 1975, 'Where are the Simple Faithful?' Although one may not accept all the facts and conclusions of these writers, the situation is surely so grave that honest and serious study is needed.

into the catholic schools. Teachers do not get the 'stress' money that their colleagues receive in the non-catholic sector, because they do not have the same problems. A bishop, deeply involved in the whole educational scene in the country, pointed out that much of the popularity of the catholic schools in the area stems from the fact that there are few coloured people in our schools there. Very few asians and not many west indians are catholics. This is a sobering reflection. On a wider canvas, we have the appalling experience of what recently happened in Boston, Massachusetts, with the irish catholic community.

On a deeper level I remain to be convinced that the products of our schools are essentially different from their non-believing contemporaries. On some very isolated moral issues there is no doubt a difference; but on the broader issues of monetary ambition, prosperity, prejudice and all that is so distorted about our modern materialism, we set before our young the same kind of values. Even though we may pray more for and collect more money for the hungry of the world, we project the same image. Nor can this really be otherwise when we remember that we are so heavily committed to the private and semi-private sector of education. What was a sound and even necessary policy at an earlier period when the catholic community in this country was emerging out of rural Ireland, is socially and morally more questionable in today's world.

#### *Some practical suggestions*

It might quickly be inferred that I would argue for the abolition of catholic schools. That would be precipitate folly, given the financial commitment and resources involved and the level of self-awareness the Church has reached in this country. One suspects there will always be a place for religious schools; but perhaps a number of uncomfortable questions need to be asked.

Given the crippling financial involvment and deployment of resources, should we not expect as a matter of urgency a greater return? Should not our christian schools — and I stress *christian* because I hope more shared christian education will evolve — be cases for radically alternative values and educational methods that are seen to work? This would involve a number of risks: we have all been trapped by the examination snare. But we have surely to rise above that tyranny if our world is to have any future at all. Some christians, at least, are called to embody an alternative living and value system if we are to help bring redemption to our troubled world. This radical change in

thrust and direction may mean a lowering of academic achievement, though I am not convinced that this necessarily follows. Perhaps we all need to be reminded, and effectively witness to others, that human happiness and fulfilment are not tied to paper qualifications. The young of today are expressing more and more dissatisfaction with the educational system. In the religious context they long for an alternative to the options open to them at present. In an earlier age they would have been excellent material for religious orders. As educators we should be happy to challenge them at this level, even if it leaves them with a period of restlessness and dissatisfaction with the *status quo*.

Should we not seriously challenge our involvement in the privileged areas of education? This is not to say that some Catholics will not be able to choose to have their children educated at independent schools, but that at least religious orders will, where possible, move out of that sector. There has been too much rationalization for too long. This is not unrelated to the whole question of vocations. I have been privileged to know many extremely idealistic young men and women finishing their university career, for whom the notion of entering a religious order, heavily committed to the education of the well-to-do, was grotesque.

Should not our schools, where retained, be first and foremost living and dynamic Christian communities? Clearly most imagine that they are, or strive to become, such. But our society is longing for real community. A primary task should be for us to try and create this effectively in a eucharistic context.

Should we not stress as a matter of primary importance the need for adult religious education, and channel our resources there? There has recently been much talk of this; but what I am suggesting is something much more radical. For too long our faith has been over-cerebral. Imparting information in the early years has been uppermost, and what we have experienced recently is a re-vamping of the same programme. But youngsters have stopped listening by the age of twelve; and to re-engage their interest in the later teens, when they are able to conceptualize, is almost impossible. We go on hoping that something will have rubbed off, but the evidence at the moment does not support this. I have been amazed at the number of young university students who regret that they are so ignorant and uninformed about their faith; but under present circumstances they admit they would not listen to any formal instruction during the middle school years. Perhaps we should run the risk of minimizing formal religious instruction in the early years and attempt more and more to catechize from within, as a response to the growing experience of the young person. This could

well mean a lessening of the need for catholic primary schools. More responsibility for the early years would be placed in the hands of parents, who in turn would have to question their own christian self-awareness. Alternatively, it might well be that experiment, carefully monitored over a period of years, would retain primary schools and minimize catholic secondary education. This could inject a new sense of urgency into the parish, as it could no longer be quietly assumed that the religious formation of the young teenagers was being looked after in the school.<sup>2</sup>

Should we not seriously consider our duty to be a 'leaven' in the dough and not merely to stand apart from the mass? This again reflects our theology of the Church and (or in) the world. Chaos begins to flourish around us, while we remain complacent and detached. In my own experience in a very large (2000 students) comprehensive school in Bristol in the middle of a highrise jungle and an educational stress area, the most effective group of teachers is made up largely of catholics who have moved out of the catholic system because of the challenge to themselves as educators.

Should we not be more courageous in becoming involved in 'Christian' schools of all denominations? Two or three of these are already in existence in the country or about to begin, but they do not signify any real trend. The committed christian presence in this country will become much smaller in the coming few years and our differences have to be submerged. Already the young are baffled by what they see as an increasingly meaningless differentiation. We have reached ecumenical stalemate at the grass-roots level, and in a very real sense further advance will only be made when there is a cry from below of 'enough is enough, away with our differences'. We look to the young for that utterance.

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<sup>2</sup> In this context the proposed plan of Fr Kevin Nichols, to study the whole area of religious formation in the town of Luton over a period of three years is to be welcomed. It may perhaps raise basic questions and resume a debate that was regrettably suppressed a number of years ago.