

# RESPONSE TO NCCA CONSULTATION ON ERB AND ETHICS

## INTRODUCTION

I respectfully make this submission as Patron of one hundred and sixty-four Catholic primary schools in Kildare and Leighlin Diocese. At the outset, I need to situate my background and experience in the area of Primary School education, an experience that shapes my outlook and thinking now in one of the larger dioceses. I was Parish Priest of a very large parish in St. Mary's, Drogheda for fifteen years: 1998 - 2013. As Parish Priest, I was immersed completely in the provision of education at both primary and second level in a typical commuter belt parish, where like many of its sister parishes in the early and mid noughties, the provision of school places was very much secondary to the residential building boom.

Similar to other towns, St. Mary's Drogheda had two large single sex schools, one of them housed in a Dickensian building built in 1858, the second a more modern Boyd Barrett structure but without any footprint to expand. I am aware of the value and special place of the local primary school in the life of a parish community, a value and a place that is rooted in its culture and ethos, and I recognise the contribution which single sex schools have made, and continue to make. I also firmly believe in the value of coeducation, and over the years in the parish, I steered an amalgamation project that witnessed the two schools becoming one on a greenfield site provided by the parish in a bespoke building generously funded by the Department with the help of European Structural Funds. I have no doubt that today it is the largest single primary school in the country with a pupil roll in excess of 1,100 pupils. It is aptly described by many as "a big school with a familial feeling". I believe firmly in the value and special place of the local primary school in the life of a parish community, a value and a place that is rooted in its culture and ethos.

Returning to my role as patron of one hundred and sixty-four Catholic primary schools, there are a further nine schools in Kildare & Leighlin Diocese, whilst under different patronage, have requested recognition as Catholic schools and avail of the full support of the Diocesan Education Office. Within these 173 schools there are 2139 teachers and a total of 37, 982 pupils. The schools in my diocese serve the most diverse of populations from the largest which has more than 1000 pupils, 67 staff, caters for 12 different faiths from 15 nationalities, to the smallest with one teacher and just 14 pupils. We believe that each child in our schools is wonderfully made in the image and likeness of God. It is this understanding, together with an ethos that roots us in gospel values, that charges us with the responsibility of enabling each and every child to become the very best they can be spiritually, intellectually, morally, physically and culturally, and to begin to form people who will serve the common good and

work for a just society where all are truly equal. This understanding of Catholic education is further articulated by the Irish Episcopal Conference as follows:

*'Catholic schools in Ireland are a living expression of a long and varied tradition of education inspired by the life of Christ as lived in the Church. Such schools emphasise the dignity of the human person as a child of God called to work with other persons in creating an inclusive community in service of the common good; where knowledge is sought and respected while faith is nurtured and challenged.'*

As Patron, I am ultimately responsible for protecting the ethos or characteristic spirit of the schools in my diocese. The Education Act (1998, Section 8: 12b) states that the Board of Management

*'uphold, and be accountable to the patron for so upholding, the characteristic spirit of the school as determined by the cultural, educational, moral, religious, social, linguistic and spiritual values and traditions which inform and are characteristic of the objectives and conduct of the school.'*

It is my duty to ensure that the Boards of Management of those schools of which I am Patron are empowered to do this work. I believe that the current NCCA proposal to introduce Education about Religion and Belief and Ethics represents a threat to the ethos of Catholic schools and will make the work of upholding the characteristic spirit of our faith based schools almost impossible. I also find it difficult to imagine what ethical issues that are compatible with a Catholic ethos are not already being taught in our schools. I propose to confine my remarks in this submission to the concerns that arise from this area of the proposal.

## **KEY CONCERNS**

### **CONFLICTING WORLD VIEWS**

The NCCA proposal is underpinned by a secular post-modern world view. Within this postmodern world truth can be created, no single religious tradition has a privileged position, reason seeks an understanding of belief and the emphasis is firmly placed on rational thought, self-determination and critical evaluation. In our Catholic faith tradition, truth is revealed by God, faith seeks understanding, critical reflection is on a lived experience of faith and reason is enlightened by faith. The NCCA proposal suggests that children look at religious beliefs and traditions as something to be interpreted by them. This approach encourages children to see their religious identity or belief as just one among many others, all with equal weight and validity. There is no space for the child to be formed by the experience of a specific religious identity as currently happens in a faith based school. The postmodern world view promotes a pluralist approach to religion while in a faith based system children are taught to both respect and learn from other religious traditions. The new Pre-school and Primary Religious Education Curriculum for Ireland formalises the learning about other religious traditions within the

Patron's programme in an age appropriate and educationally sound manner. At the same time informal learning about each other's faith traditions is part and parcel of everyday life in the increasingly large number of our schools that are inclusive of children of all faiths and other stances for living. The NCCA Consultation Document posits that '*ERB and Ethics will recognise the role of teachers as nurturing children's dispositions.*' (p22) The document goes further when it states that:

*'A child-centred approach requires the teacher to be a facilitator in the child's learning process; to listen effectively and facilitate good questioning among children. Empowering children to lead aspects of lessons by relating teaching to their personal experience of religion and beliefs provides an environment where teachers and children are partners in education. Staying open-minded, fair, balanced and non-judgmental is important. Teachers when dealing with their 'unknowingness' of religions, beliefs and cultures become co-learners in this dynamic, fostering a disposition of openness and flexibility.'* (p22)

I believe that this is nothing new, it is already happening in our Catholic Schools. Our teachers are leaders in facilitating the integration of children of all faiths and different stances for living into the welcoming and hospitable environment that is the Catholic School. They have already become co-learners with the children in their classrooms as they learn from one another about different ways of living in the world. Their classrooms are places of mutual respect, tolerance and more importantly care for one another. Our Catholic schools are recognised as places of inclusion and welcome and this is affirmed by the **Report of the Chief Inspector (2010-2012)** when he states that

*'During notified WSEs 96% of schools were found to be managing their pupils effectively by, for example, fostering respectful pupil-teacher interactions, by cultivating an inclusive, child-centred ethos and by using positive strategies to promote good behaviour. Incidental inspections similarly found that the management of pupils was effective in practically all (96%) of the classrooms visited.'*<sup>ii</sup>

Given that almost 93% of primary schools were under the patronage of the Catholic Church during that time period it seems fair to extrapolate that the vast majority of our schools were among that 96%. I am led to wonder again what ERB and Ethics will add to the classroom experience in the Catholic school, except perhaps to cause confusion and increase an acknowledged already overloaded curriculum

## **THE TEACHER**

As Patron I am concerned about the teacher in the Catholic school who will be required to teach out of the conflicting philosophy of education proposed by the NCCA in relation to ERB and Ethics. In speaking to principals and teachers, I have heard their concerns as people of faith being asked to teach children about religion from a position of sceptical reason, from a position where no one faith tradition is privileged, where truth is merely a social construction rather than something revealed and living, and where children and adults are co-authors of the framework within which they live and find meaning, rather than finding meaning for life because of the faith tradition in which they live. The NCCA Consultation document acknowledges that the introduction of a separate subject that requires teachers to teach out of a pluralist approach during one part of the day, will be particularly demanding of the teacher in the denominational school whose task it is to maintain the ethos of the faith based school in which he/she teaches.

*'There is also the challenge for teachers who will be engaged in teaching denominational programmes and faith forming on the one hand; and teaching about religions and beliefs from a pluralist perspective on the other.'* (p23)

The teachers in our schools believe that they are already attaining most of what is contained in the proposed ERB and Ethics programme of learning through their engagement with the Religious Education, SPHE, SESE curricula and the Green Schools' programme and cannot see the need for another curriculum area.

## **THE PARENT**

Catholic parents have an inalienable right to faith based education for their children. This right is enshrined in our Constitution (42.1) and reasserted as recently as 2012 in a government report

*'Religious groups are free to establish their own schools to cater for members of their particular faith. This religious freedom is a core element in our system at primary and secondary level.'*<sup>iii</sup>

In a faith based school, religious education cannot be compartmentalised but must be fully acknowledged as part of the lived reality of the Catholic families who desire that children be educated in this way. Parents have a right to expect that the ethos of the school that they have chosen for their child will be supported at all times. The proposal that at some point of the school day, children and their teachers will be expected to suspend their belief system and construct a different reality is problematic for parents who believe that the Catholic school is there to support them as the primary educators of their children in the ways of faith.

## THE CHILD

Finally, I wish to come to the person at the centre of all that we do in Catholic Education, the child and his/her relationship with Jesus Christ which we are called to foster and develop throughout the journey through the primary school. I have already referred to the fact that Catholic schools also seek to help children to become adults who have respect for, and are eager to understand and enter dialogue with those who have different stances for living. Pope Francis states that

*An authentic faith which is never comfortable or completely personal – always involves a deep desire to change the world, to transmit values, to leave this earth somehow better than we found it.*<sup>iv</sup>

It is this authentic faith that we seek to develop in our Catholic schools. In order to grow in this kind of faith, children need to learn in an environment that supports their faith and the faith of their family and the community in which they live. The approach suggested by the NCCA will require children to stand back from their faith, to engage with their faith in a way that may actually undermine their ability to immerse themselves in their own religious tradition. This cannot be acceptable in a Catholic school.

In speaking of the child, I also wish to speak of those children in our Catholic schools whose parents do not wish them to participate in the Patron's programme of Religious Education. This is a very small group; 1.2% in a recent survey conducted by our Diocesan Education Office. However, despite the small numbers, I am very conscious that there is a need to find an appropriate way to engage these children in thinking and learning about Religious Education. I remain convinced that the proposed ERB and Ethics is not the approach required for those children in faith based schools. Perhaps what is needed is a set of guidelines which could then be adapted and implemented by the Patrons with parental approval for the Catholic school context.

I welcome the opportunity to engage in dialogue with the NCCA in this consultation process, and can only pray that the concerns, opinions and suggestions offered from a faith based perspective will be received in the spirit in which they are submitted.

**✠Denis Nulty**

**Bishop of Kildare & Leighlin**

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<sup>i</sup> Catholic Schools Partnership, *Catholic Primary Schools Looking to the Future*, 2012)

<sup>ii</sup> Department of Education and Skills, *Chief Inspector's Report 2010–12* (Dublin, 2013), p. 34.

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<sup>iii</sup> Government of Ireland, *Ireland's Fourth Periodic Report under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights* (2012), p. 168.

<sup>iv</sup> Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2013), #183.