

ACADEMIES : POSSIBLE DANGERS AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR THE CATHOLIC ETHOS OF THE SCHOOL

A. INTRODUCTION

Three fundamental questions suggest themselves, in the following order:

1. **What is Catholic** about a Catholic school?
2. **Who** is needed to make a school Catholic?
3. **What structures** are necessary or useful to enable people to make a school Catholic?

In other words, first a **vision** is needed, then the **people** who are suitable and empowered to incarnate that vision. The **structures** (for example, whether or not a school is an Academy), are only tools, to be judged on their usefulness or otherwise in helping them continue to achieve their task.

B. THE ELEMENTS OF A CATHOLIC SCHOOL

Many qualities essential to a good Catholic school will be shared by all good schools; some essential qualities of a distinctively Catholic will be more greatly emphasised by, or exclusive to, Catholic, Christian or religious schools. These include:

1. The fostering of an active, and sacramentally based, life of both public and private **prayer** among all its members, especially its staff;
2. A **moral ethos** which includes:
 - high general standards of honesty, good behaviour and hard work;
 - an understanding of every Christian life as a vocation, and of Christian work as vocational;
 - a pervasive atmosphere of love, respect, affection, trust and concern for the life of the community.
3. An **intellectual ethos** in which:
 - good teaching of the Catholic faith is of fundamental importance;
 - the way that every subject is taught (including importantly the selection of topics) is shaped by a Catholic intellectual vision;
 - the teaching of all subjects reveals the interrelation among different subjects, which reflects the unity of truth and of the created order.
 - A clear understanding of the importance of educating the **whole** person, and therefore supporting a range of extra-curricular activities;
4. A practical recognition of the **wider communities** of which Catholics know themselves to be a part, both ecclesial and social (this will include everything from involvement with the parish and diocese to learning about and fundraising for those in need). Solidarity with other schools in the diocese will be important here.

NB

1. It is therefore a fundamental mistake to think that only, for example, the Head and the RE staff need to think and feel in a Catholic Christian way; the spiritual, moral, intellectual and social ethos of the school needs to be shared to a significant degree by **all the staff**, and to shape the way in which they live, think and teach.
2. The school will need a counter-cultural attitude to **competitiveness**. Doing *well*, that is, flourishing as individuals and as a community, in academic and other areas should not be confused with *doing better than others*. Trying to win has a proper place in artificial contexts like the sports field. In general, though, aiming to succeed should always be integrated with cooperation and community spirit. This should make us uneasy with any enthusiasm for, for example, inter-school rivalry, league-tables or performance-related pay, and conversely make us eager to support inter-school initiatives, especially where a privileged school might help a less advantaged one.

C. THE PEOPLE THAT MAKE A SCHOOL CATHOLIC

1. In order to enable a school to live out this sort of vision, it is essential that the **staff** (including all those who work for the school in any capacity) have plenty of goodwill, commitment and competence. The school will need a critical mass of devout and well informed Catholic teachers, assisted (in most cases) by devout Christians and sympathetic agnostics who are supportive of, and want to learn about, the Catholic faith. Ideally there will be no disaffected Catholics, anti-Catholic Christians or hostile non-believers among the teachers, who might actively undermine the Catholic ethos.

This raises two questions:

- Is the school free and able to **select** the staff that it needs?
- Is the school free and able to allow its staff to continue to **educate and develop** themselves in a desirable way?

2. The school needs **pupils** (along with their families) many of whom are able positively to contribute to its Catholic nature, and the rest of whom are able positively to benefit from it.

Again this raises two questions:

- Is the school free and able to **select** pupils who will most contribute to and/or benefit from being at a Catholic school? Is the school free to exclude pupils who might positively damage the school's ethos?
- Is the school free and able to **educate** pupils into sharing the school's vision?

Here the question of a **critical mass** becomes important, although it seems impossible to lay down fixed rules for it. But the key question is: what balance of committed/uncommitted pupils/parents make it realistically possible for *this* Catholic school also to exercise a mission to non-believers or the uncommitted? This reveals a sharp difference between a Christian and the usual secular understanding of rights and of communities, which creates a difficulty for Catholic schools: the selection policy of a Catholic school needs to reflect the *collective* needs of the school and not only the 'rights' of potential individual pupils.

D. THE STRUCTURES THAT MAKE A CATHOLIC SCHOOL POSSIBLE

There are clearly ways in which conversion to Academy status could **jeopardise** important elements of a school's well-being and ethos, unless these are noticed and safeguarded. In particular, the loss of the relationship with the LA might make a difference. Governors thinking about conversion need to ask:

- Could any of the Catholic elements of this school be endangered by conversion?
- Are there any practicable ways to obviate these dangers?

If the answer to both (1) is 'Yes' and (2) is 'No', then conversion seems a bad idea.

Governors should also be wary here of the trend towards **commercialisation**, and ask whether conversion might increase the temptation to think of business rather than education as the purpose of the school.

Governors also need to take seriously the possibility that conversion to Academy status could **provide opportunities** for a school in some ways to improve its Catholic ethos. (This is true even, perhaps especially, in cases where the school feels that the change is being forced upon them; if so, it is far better to take the initiative to ensure that the change is not simply a negative one.)

It seems to me that Academy status *could* (though will not certainly) give the school greater freedom to:

- employ suitable staff (cf. C1);
- give those staff the freedom to teach as they would like (cf. B3).

To put it bluntly, good staff, who are committed to the school's ideals need three things: **time, creative energy and freedom**. The culture of bureaucracy and paperwork, the obsession with examination results, and the general abandonment of trust in professional judgement has put all three under great pressure in many professions. Could the greater control over the timetable provided by Academy status enable the school to give teachers more of these three essential goods?

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