

Bishop's letter February 2012

Dear Friends

In December new Boards of Management for the 29 primary schools in the diocese with which I am involved as Patron took office – they will serve for a four year period up to 2015. We wish all concerned, and in particular the Chairpersons, well in what is a demanding and responsible task.

As I move around the diocese these days, few if any issues are raised with me with such a note of concern as that of the future of schools, both primary and secondary. Everyone knows that we live in an atmosphere of governmental austerity and cost-cutting, not least in the educational sector. There is no point in pretending that the State has money it does not have, or that key economic choices in this land are often being made to-day other than by outsiders, or that much will be achieved simply by raising a clamour in defence of whatever happens to be the local status quo. That said, many people in the diocese are rightly perturbed about issues ranging from school transport cuts, to the staffing and future of small national schools, to the 'incentivising' of school amalgamations (which seems to be the government's desire), to the continuing perceived ideological threat to the future of fee-paying boarding schools in the 'Protestant' sector, to the long-term future of the grants system associated with the SEC. It should be acknowledged that these are issues which can be significant sources of stress to dedicated members of the teaching professions themselves. Indeed I am planning to gather primary school principals and chairpersons during the coming weeks so that we can share insights about the very specific challenges and anxieties some of our schools now face.

On the day before writing this letter I was taking assembly in Kilkenny College and decided to talk to the students themselves on these very subjects – for often we do not hear the voices of those who are actually being educated within the system as we have it. Why do they feel they were sent to a Church of Ireland school? Would they make the same choices for their own children, even if it involved significant personal cost? What are the things that are most notable about the atmosphere of a school and which determine its ethos? I suggested to them that they might bear in mind were the Minister for Education and Skills suddenly to enter the room and question them words which apply to our educational aspirations every bit as much as to our faith – 'Always be prepared to give to those who ask of you a reason for the hope that is in you' (see 1 Peter 3, 15)

In the current debate this seems to me to be the core of the matter. Economic considerations aside, stakeholders like ourselves in education in these times of change need to be able to articulate with fluency and conviction reasons why the churches should continue to be involved in education, why we would be willing to change certain things and would be anxious to defend other things. Our reasoning needs to be persuasive and cogent, not least in the presence of those who might not have a natural sympathy with our presuppositions. Simply supporting the 'status quo' or resisting change in a defensive and uncritical way is not going to be good enough. There is no doubt that the educational climate in this land is rapidly changing and we do well to take our part in controlling change rather than in trying to push back a tide. So, in a reasoned, realistic yet hopeful way we do need to be able to give to those who ask of us answers to some key questions such as these . . .

- What is the real nature and purpose of the link between a primary school and its surrounding parish community? Are the positive effects of that link clearly and demonstrably visible?

- In a church that constantly proclaims its ecumenical commitment, is the education of our children something our consciences require us to do essentially denominationally as opposed to something people of faith should increasingly do together? And if the churches do retain ‘control’ of schools, is their motive to offer a faith-based educational option to the wider community as opposed largely to serving their own self-interest?
- What at the end of the day is faith-based education as opposed to secular education and how can its attributes be discerned in practice?
- What is our long-term vision for how the churches can be effective and generous partners in Irish education?
- Can we invariably say that members of the Church of Ireland who have never attended a Church of Ireland school have somehow lost out in terms of their spiritual and faith formation? Or do they bring to the life of the church wider perspectives which would otherwise be neglected?
- In what way are our various schools across this state actually characterised by the quality of their spirituality and prayerfulness? Are these things always in practice the overarching priorities we assume them to be or do faith matters somehow and perhaps inevitably become ‘squeezed’ in the context of an ever more crowded school programme?
- How do we balance our continuing commitment to having a large, esteemed and fee-paying secondary school in this diocese with our obvious desire to become involved in and affirming of as many local secondary schools as possible?
- How, in a ‘new Republic’ about to celebrate the centenary of formative events such as those of 1916, are we to convince tax-paying citizens that the nation is enriched and energized by having a significant number of schools where the Church of Ireland continues to be influential?

When, as one day inevitably will happen, the current economic crisis passes, these are the questions that will continue to matter. The future of our role in education depends on our intelligent and creative contribution across the board to public debate. There is much to think about here as we head into the springtime – always (to paraphrase 1 Peter just a little) be ready to give to those who ask of you reasons for the aspirations that are in you.

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We look forward to the institution of the Reverend Patrick Burke, at present curate in Douglas, Cork, to the incumbency of Castlecomer Union at 7.30 p.m. on 22<sup>nd</sup> April and we congratulate the Reverend Canon Peter Cole-Baker who has been appointed to the chapter of St Canice’s Cathedral

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