

Prudence, not prurience



The generally favourable comparison between the denominational (usually Catholic and Anglican) and nondenominational sectors is said by secularist opponents of church schools to be solely due to selection procedures being biased towards the middle classes, and hence nothing to do with what goes on in the school under the label “religion”. The reply, especially from the Catholic sector, is almost the exact opposite – that it is precisely the ethos of the school, formed by religious teaching and practice, which gives it its character and explains its success. The intake of a Catholic school is usually a true reflection of the community it serves, not a cherry-picked elite.

But there has been a need to say more about this sometimes mysterious ethos, the key ingredient in helping a school to flourish. The Catholic Truth Society has just published guidance for schools in England and Wales which discusses this at length.

Written by Mgr Marcus Stock on behalf of the Catholic Education Service, it updates the Church’s understanding of what that ethos should be at its best, with a strong primary focus on the person of Jesus Christ. Catholic schools, it says, should place Christ at the centre of everything they do, “integrating gospel values and the teaching of the Catholic Church into every aspect of learning, teaching and the totality of school life”.

It explains at length what this should mean, emphasizing human dignity and the service of the common good as well as the central role of worship and the fostering of good relationships.

Maintaining the Catholic ethos must mean ruling out certain things that are incompatible with it, and guidance is offered to help governors and head teachers deal with the delicate human

issues that can arise. As well as a preference for practicing Catholics – those who attend Mass weekly – both for parents of pupils applying for places and for teachers wanting to work in such schools, it offers more stringent requirements for key positions like school governors, head teachers and their deputies, and teachers of religion.

It is not difficult to work out that they would apply, for instance, to individuals in civil partnerships (or one day, gay marriages) or who have remarried after divorce. It is a humane approach that leaves room for exceptions in suitable cases. Interpreted with compassion and common sense, it should not encourage anything like a witch-hunt or intrusive scrutiny into an

individual’s living arrangements: the temptation to use it that way must be resisted. Prudence, not prurience, should be the watchword.

The key adjective for “ethos” is “distinctive”, which can often mean refusing to go with the world’s values but following the Gospel instead. It also means locating the school not just in

the local secular community but in the parish and diocese, and seeing it as a vital agency of evangelisation. The more the school reflects Christ in its character, the more this will be true. And the better the school will be, by any measure.

The Tablet