

Keeping the faith - New trends in Catholic education



Setting up Catholic schools as a priority in the nineteenth century, Cardinal Manning alluded to Satan trying to separate religion from education. Today, more and more non-Catholics attend these institutions. Is this welcome, or does it dilute their ethos?

Anyone witnessing the morning rush into school at some of the Catholic comprehensives in England's northern towns and cities will notice girls in headscarves and boys in skullcaps and turbans among the pupils.

According to the latest census of Catholic schools published by the Catholic Education Service of England and Wales (CES) the overall percentage of Catholic pupils in Catholic state schools fell to little more than 70 per cent last year. In Catholic sixth-form colleges the figure was closer to half.

In the Welsh dioceses of Menevia and Wrexham half, or even less than half, of pupils in Catholic secondary schools are from Catholic backgrounds, while in some northern English towns a number of church schools in inner-city areas now have a majority of Muslim children on their rolls. The proportion of Catholic children at one church primary school in Blackburn, for example, fell so low recently that the local diocese took the decision to withdraw from the school.

In other areas with declining numbers of baptised Catholic children and fewer children from other faiths, Catholic schools are increasingly filling their rolls with children of no faith at all.

Equally startling were the figures for teachers, which showed that only 45 per cent of those working in church secondary schools in England and Wales are practising Catholics. Catholic educationalists blame this on the closure of a number of Catholic teacher training colleges where Catholic trainees were actively encouraged to take jobs in Catholic schools. The Equality Act is said to be another factor that allows Catholic schools to specify that they are seeking Catholic applicants for key posts such as heads, deputies and heads of RE. “You also have to remember that there is a relatively small pool of Catholic teachers anyway, and the emphasis really is to recruit teachers who are the best for the job,” said Mgr George Stokes, director of education at the Diocese of Brentwood.

There are now around 2,300 Catholic schools in England and Wales serving more than 780,000 children. But their Catholicity, the distinctive ethos that sets them apart from other faith and secular schools, has been called into question in recent years following a significant rise in the proportion of non-Catholics on their rolls.

Following the re-establishment of the Catholic hierarchy in England and Wales in 1850, the Church set about creating hundreds of schools to cater for the needs of its growing congregation. The building of Catholic schools was initially given greater importance than the creation of new churches, with many used as centres of parish life and places of worship as well as for education. They were seen as playing an essential role in the formation and development of Catholic children and the reinforcement of Catholic values and teaching.

Cardinal Manning, who oversaw much of this early growth as Archbishop of Westminster, spelled out the importance of Catholic education to the future of the Catholic faith when he said: “Satan knows well that if he can separate religion from instruction, he has cut through the roots of the Christian civilisation of the world. For that reason all the art, all the wiles, all the frauds, all the false politics of this day, are directed to what is called secular education, national education, imperial education – anything you like, only not Christian education.”

The demographic trend revealed in the CES census has been welcomed by the organisation’s director, Oona Stannard, and some head teachers, who believe it reflects the success and attractiveness of Catholic education in general. Others have raised concerns over what they believe is a gradual dilution of the Catholicity of church schools, while some have questioned the very purpose and direction of Catholic education itself.

Among those most concerned are parents, many of whom, given the choice, will select a school where the majority of pupils are Catholic. As one parent explained: “I think it is a little unrealistic to expect Catholic teenagers actively to spread the faith in schools where most are non-Catholic. Young people tend to want to try to fit in with their peers.”

Another parent added that a shortage of Catholic children would present a dilemma for a Catholic school, saying: “There comes a point where the ethos of a school could be somewhat diluted by the presence of large numbers of non-Catholics.”

However, head teachers of Catholic schools with a majority of non-Catholic pupils insist this is not the case. Sean Hayes is the head of St John Fisher Catholic High in Peterborough, Cambridgeshire, where nearly one in five is from a Muslim background. He and other senior staff are Catholic, there are religious statutes around the school and regular Masses. Mr Hayes, a 52-year-old who has led St John Fisher for the last four years, says that Muslim parents, for example, want their children to be educated in a faith environment and believes that many would send their children to a state-funded Muslim school if available locally.

Indeed, making provision for children of other faiths is now common in Catholic schools – including St John Fisher – with more than 60 per cent reporting that they have done so, according to the CES. These allowances range from permitting Muslim pupils to wear elements of Islamic dress to allowing children time off to observe key religious holidays.

“The last bishop [of East Anglia, Michael Evans] made it clear that Muslim children should not be asked to attend weekly Mass because it might put them in the position of having to refuse,” said Mr Hayes. “We make it voluntary.”

John Mannix, director of schools for the Diocese of Plymouth, is passionate about the opportunities he believes are presented to the Church by having large numbers of non-Catholics in its schools. Fewer than half of pupils in church schools in Plymouth are Catholic – the lowest proportion of any diocese in England and Wales.

“The Catholicity of our schools is not defined by the religious backgrounds of the children they take in, but by what they have to offer children,” said Mr Mannix. “[Catholic schools] are one of our most important tools for evangelisation. They can show children the good things Catholicism has to offer.”

This message is echoed by Peter Eccles, head teacher of St Boniface Catholic School in Plymouth, where 55 per cent of pupils are from non-Catholic backgrounds. The 42-year-old said he would be happy to make provision for pupils of other faiths if this was requested, but added that “this had not come up” so far. Asked whether Catholic schools with a large majority of non-Catholic pupils should continue as church schools, Mr Eccles said: “I think where a Catholic school has even 10 per cent Catholic pupils, there is a purpose for a Catholic school to exist. Perhaps where 90 per cent of the pupils are, say, Muslim, other issues may arise, but having a large majority of non-Catholics at the school does not necessarily mean there is not demand for a school with a Catholic ethos.”

However, some Catholic heads are less inclined to make allowances for non-Catholic children. Brian Conway, head teacher of Notre Dame RC School in Norwich, which is around 20 per cent non-Catholic, recently refused a request from a Muslim pupil to wear an Islamic skullcap. He said that maintaining its Catholic ethos was of “paramount importance” particularly given its status as “the only Catholic state [secondary] school in Norfolk”. Non-Catholic children at the school are also compelled to attend Mass twice a term, and to visit the school’s chapel once a term.

Something Catholic heads seem to agree on is the importance of maintaining free or reduced-price transport for their pupils, many of whom – particularly in rural areas – travel up to an hour or even more to get to lessons each day. At least 17 councils in England have announced plans to cut subsidised or free transport for children attending faith schools in order to reduce costs – leaving many families unable to afford to send their children to their chosen Catholic school.

Head teachers fear the number of Catholics on their rolls will be seriously reduced as a result of the cuts, which some dioceses are planning to challenge in the courts. St John Fisher is one of the schools that will be affected if the local council goes ahead with plans to cut transport for denominational schools from next year. “We have been trying our best to attract Catholic pupils but this would make that more difficult,” said Mr Hayes.

Here lies one of the key dilemmas for Catholic schools – do they allow in more non-Catholics when too few Catholics request places? Where does this end? Is there a demographic “tipping point” when a Catholic school with a large majority of non-Catholic pupils is no longer truly Catholic? Those teachers and other educationalists I spoke to seem to believe that there is, but most suggested that the Catholicity of a school is about more than just demographics.

Mr Mannix summed this up when he said: “When a Catholic school is completely Catholic, should that be celebrated? Surely welcoming children from other faiths or no faith and allowing them to walk

alongside Catholic children and seeing the Catholic life is more beneficial for us all.”

Sam Adams - The Tablet