

LUX EDMUNDI: REFLECTION: NOVEMBER, 2015

In his Address on the occasion of the launch in his diocese of both *The Catholic Pre-School and Primary Religious Education Curriculum for Ireland* and the new Primary School Religious Series, *Grow in Love*, Archbishop Michael Neary of Tuam stated: “In an increasingly pluralist society, where there are more and more people of different faiths, we have to be clear about the difference between Catholic schools and other schools. We have to be clear about our own identity, what our schools are about and why they are important. We have Catholic schools because parents want them. It is parents who must insist that the religious ethos of our schools is respected and not abandoned. For those who do not want faith education for their children, it is appropriate that non-faith schools be provided”.

We are here reminded of the importance the Catholic Church has attached – not least in the face of totalitarian regimes whose policy was the opposite - to parental rights in respect of education. It is a core principle of Catholic social teaching that it is the parents who are the primary teachers of their children. This principle is clearly and emphatically presented in – to go no further than comparatively recent Church documents - the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, the Code of Canon Law and the *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*.

It is, however, crucial to recognise that emphasis on the rights of parents must not be taken to mean, or to entail, that faith-schools exist, or that they engage in faith formation, solely at the discretion of parents. Christian schools, Catholic schools, exist on foot of an express and specific divine commission. Their first beginning, in fact, and their last end is obedience to the command of Christ to his Church to go out into the whole world to “make disciples”. First, last and always, Catholic schools are instruments of evangelisation. To hand on the Good News proclaimed in, and by, Christ Jesus is, for them, an ontological imperative. It is their *raison d’être*, the ground and the test of their identity and integrity. Catholic schools cannot stop proclaiming Christ without ceasing to be themselves, without ceasing to be Catholic. They must, of course, provide for those who want a Catholic education for their children and, in the absence – however unlikely - of such demand, they would certainly have to take stock of their predicament. Such predicament, though, could not be deemed to countermand the precept of Christ to “make disciples” and any decision to disregard that precept, to consider it inoperative, its implementation inopportune, would be of doubtful validity.

Beyond that, it bears emphasis that the responsibility for providing secular schools for secular parents lies with those parents themselves and with the State. The notion that the “pluralisation” of educational provision in the Republic of Ireland is primarily the duty of Catholic school authorities is a product less of logic than of spin and this reddest of red herrings, this most *non* of *non sequiturs*, must go unchallenged no longer. Catholic authorities may contribute to this process, including by divesting themselves of schools and other properties for that purpose. But any such decision is their exclusive prerogative and any such divestment must itself be effected in accordance with the relevant provisions of civil law and/or of canon law as appropriate. The State has no right to expropriate Church property and, for that matter, no bishop has any authority, under either Irish law or Church law, to alienate any property that it is not his to alienate. Besides, the Pope apart, no ecclesiastical authority has any right to mandate the Ordinary of any diocese, even of a suffragan diocese, in this or in any other matter and has no right – and, really, no business - “volunteering” what belongs to, and/or is held in trust by, others, for this or any other purpose whatsoever.