

LUX EDMUNDI: REFLECTION: NOVEMBER, 2016

The editors of *Cherishing all the Children Equally? Children in Ireland 100 years on from the Easter Rising* (2016, ESRI) conclude: “On the basis of the evidence presented throughout the book, it would appear, regrettably, that the answer must be “No”. Much progress has been made over the last 100 years (particularly since the late 1970s) in the ways in which we think about children and view them as holding rights. ... Nonetheless, it is unfortunately the case that much of the evidence presented in the series of essays in this book indicates that a great deal remains to be done to address some marked inequalities in child outcomes. In many aspects of their lives (albeit different to those of 1916), the outcomes and wellbeing of children and young people continue to be shaped, and indeed limited, by the circumstances of the family into which they are born (pp. 294-5)”.

In this, in the studies emanating from *Growing Up in Ireland*, in research across the globe on children and childhood, the evidence for the negative effects of socio-economic disadvantage on virtually every aspect of child development, especially in education, is massive and incontrovertible: The children of the Haves learn more and learn better than the children of the Have Nots.

In many countries, education is deemed the best way to break this cycle of disadvantage. Thomas Davis (1814-1845) put it well: “Educate that you may be free”. Davis probably wrote and worked from a secular perspective. Like the Nano Nagle (1718-1784) before them, his contemporaries, Edmund Rice (1762-1844), Catherine McAuley (1778-1841), Mary Aikenhead (1787-1858), wrote and worked from a religious, specifically a Catholic, perspective. They committed themselves by vows of religion to “a most serious application to the instruction of poor [children] in the principles of religion and Christian piety”. Driven by the conviction that what is done to “the least” is done to Christ himself (*Matthew* 25:31-45), they performed the Works of Mercy, and, assured that those who did so would shine like stars for all eternity (cf. *Daniel* 12:3), they instructed many unto justice.

The different religious congregations established by these people ensured that the original charism would survive and thrive. They took steps to ensure that the vision and mission they had inherited would neither depart from their schools nor die with them. They set up bodies to succeed them as Patrons/Trustees, managers and leaders, of the schools. In effect, the likes of CEIST, ERST, Le Chéile and PBST are there to ensure that the educational faith of our Founders lives on, in, and through them. To that end, these bodies, in their turn, have established boards of management to conduct the schools on their behalf, and, especially, to uphold, and to be accountable to their respective patrons for so upholding, the “characteristic spirit” of each school, the definitive constituent of which must be the founding charism of the school in question, its “ethical” DNA, as it were.

We do not know how our Founders would read any publication of the ESRI. We do know, though, they gave their all “to instruct the ignorant”, to provide as many as they could with the emancipatory and empowering capacities of a Catholic education. It is impossible to think that they would rest easy with the findings of investigations such as those cited here at the outset. They would take time and thought to ascertain before the face of God whether they and their schools were part of the solution or part of the problem. If we are to retain any moral entitlement at all to their name and to their charism, we can do no less.