

LUX EDMUNDI: REFLECTION: OCTOBER, 2017

The phrase “Culture Wars” would suggest to many the on-going debates in the USA between those who support, respectively, traditional and liberal values. The phrase also calls to mind the *Kulturkampf*, the struggle - in the German states but also in other nineteenth-century European polities - to separate Church and State and to ensure that the Catholic Church, in particular, confined its activities to the sacristy, leaving governments in sole charge of the public square.

The Republic of Ireland is caught up in its own *Kulturkampf* right now. In the 1980s, the then Taoiseach, Garrett Fitzgerald, declared what he himself called a “constitutional crusade”. He did not specify the objectives of this particular struggle but it was understood that it would entail the implementation of a “liberal agenda”, including the removal from *Bunreacht na hÉireann* of the provision recognising the “special position” of the Catholic Church “as the guardian of the Faith professed by the great majority of the citizens”.

It was always on the cards that, as did the various Culture Wars before it, this “constitutional crusade” would come eventually to deal with the role of the Catholic Church in education in the Republic of Ireland. If truth be told, very few in the 1980s thought that that particular item would come up for consideration quite as soon as it did. The Church, it seemed, was just too embedded in the education system, too strongly rooted in virtually every single community in the land, for any Irish government to risk anything remotely like a real challenge to its place in the governance, management and leadership of Irish primary and post-primary schools. The universal disgust at revelation after revelation of the sexual abuse of children by priests and religious, the consequent efforts of too many authorities to conceal these sinful and criminal depredations, did, almost overnight, what centuries of persecution had failed to do, *viz.*, dissolved the unwritten, but heretofore apparently unbreakable, covenant between Catholics and their pastors in all to do with schooling.

The immediate focus of this particular aspect of our “culture war” at the moment is the Education (Admission to School) Bill, which seeks, *inter alia*, to eliminate any kind of religious test as a criterion in the admission of students to recognised schools in the Republic of Ireland. In an answer to the Seanad on Thursday, 12th October, 2017, Minister Bruton said that he was working closely with the Attorney General to ensure that any such provision would be found “to be robust”. This response indicates, surely, that there is an increasing awareness – fostered, perhaps, by the new Attorney General - that it might not be easy to draft a form of words that would balance the right of a child to attend the school of its parents’ choice and the right of every religious denomination to manage its own affairs, so as to give any resulting Act a good chance of surviving the challenges to its constitutionality that are almost bound to come.

Seldom today do we mention the Church Militant, i.e., the People of God “wrestling” (cf. *Eph* 6:12) its pilgrim way towards Heaven. There are times, though, when, to protect what matters to us, we must “fight the good fight” (cf. *I Tim* 6:12). Now is such a time for all who think the rights of faith-based schools are worth fighting for. As citizens and as believers, we must now “speak truth to power”. We must, at the very least, alert our respective school communities to this threat and, in so doing, alert our political masters to our determination to bring our struggle to the highest courts in the land and, right of rights, into the polling-booth itself.