

Gravissimum Educationis 30 Years on

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The Vatican Council issued Gravissimum Educationis on 28th of October 1965. On the 30th anniversary a few reflections may prompt a reconsideration of the document.

Education and schooling are not the same thing. Education, correctly understood, is a lifelong process. Schooling occupies our young days. Although it is a generalisation, I think it is true to say that modern schooling is the product of the Industrial Revolution.¹ Education, by contrast has a longer pedigree. We have schooling because an industrialised nation requires skills best imparted by a schooling process. Recent education reforms (1988 onwards) — particularly under the influence of Toryism — have tried to cement schooling to current economic theory.

The Catholic Church cannot afford to dedicate too many of her resources to reinforcing a particular economic or social theory. Indeed, history shows that the Church has demonstrated wary resistance to such trends. A turning-point arose at Vatican II. In the Decree *Gravissimum Educationis* we read: “Holy Mother Church ... is under an obligation to promote the welfare of the whole life of man.” (In modern — politically correct — speech, we would say *person*, of course). Many, though not all, diocesan education departments concentrate on schooling. This falls under the spell of a myth. The myth suggests that schooling educates. Reality suggests that schooling may open avenues, but education is a most complex process. As the Church slowly climbs out of the shadows of medievalism, we are discovering the need for broader minds, broader concepts of formation. Trends are gradually changing.

Those dioceses whose education departments are pre-occupied with schooling, without an oversight of the *whole person*, put the future Church at risk. Significantly they are in danger of secularisation. Despite their avowed interest in spiritual and moral formation, they remain bewitched. Two influences are particularly at work: firstly, a socio-economic theory which determines that every

undertaking should be cost-effective, and profitable. Secondly, a political world-view that suggests individuals are units within an economic system. They either contribute to — or drain away from — the wealth of the nation. To be dazzled by these principles without a serious Gospel-based antidote is dangerous. It has serious knock-on effects unless diocesan education departments hold a much wider brief. Interaction between people with different interests, angles, points of view is healthier than any monolithic system.

The history of the Catholic Church's involvement in schooling for modern times in England and Wales is one of struggle. On the face of it, Catholic anthropology is consistently at odds with the prevailing political philosophy, whether to right or left on the political scale. There is an old French proverb that says: *You become what you despise*. The Church has persistently aped the society with which it is invariably at odds. To challenge emperors the popes acquired tiaras; to face up to the aristocracy bishops took titles like "My Lord"; priests became like local squires. The trend cascades down the Church's organisation. It is inevitable. This is because the Church needs to be identifiable with the kind of society in which she is planted. Those who promote the prevailing political philosophy hold the public purse-strings. It is from the public funds that Catholic schooling is funded. Consequently there has to be dialogue, symmetry with social trends. Success depends on the ability to communicate. Dependency on public finance — although there are some legal safeguards to protect the Catholic nature of what goes on in schools, — remains today. Indeed — in England and Wales — we cannot afford to be educationally independent. We are just too poor to be so.

I want to draw attention to "education" as a life-long process. It is a thought to which the Church as a local service finds difficulty relating meaningfully. "Education" for most bishops and curial offices in England and Wales really does mean "schools". For fifty years or more Catholic dioceses have poured substantial fiscal resources into schools. This is not just to meet capital building costs, but the whole retinue of services to support schooling.

Recent experience has begun to make inroads into the presumption that if we provided "a Catholic school place for every baptised Catholic" then our future as a Church will be more secure. As a simple proposition this policy has been proved inadequate. Billions of pounds spent on Catholic schooling has not produced a convinced, mature and expanding adult Catholic Church in this country. At least we should be critical, — if we were to judge investment and returns by those famous "market forces" which are the political template for our endeavours.

The State will support our schooling endeavours as long as we produce well-formed citizens. The State is not particularly interested in whether or not such citizens turn out to be good Christians. This is the philosophical turning point.

Let me briefly explain. The schooling system that emerged in post-17th century Britain was largely tied to forming productive citizens who would support and make profitable a Protestant empire. The change is terribly simple to perceive. The State's interest in education is now principally concerned with keeping the nation solvent in the midst of post-Imperial material decadence. Profitable paganism suffices.

In the half century since the 1944 Education Act, and the thirty years since *Gravissimum Educationis* appeared there has been rapid social and economic change in both Church and State. There is a whole sheaf of things which have vitiated the original 1940's proposals for a partnership between Church and State in schooling. Above all we are at variance on the issue of what human beings are for. Human life has become a commodity. It can be readily aborted, life-saving health-care is at the mercy of those who set and control budgets. Other trends are significant. We must count the following. First, we inherit a Church in turmoil, itself struggling to lay down the trappings of imperialism and come to terms with democracy. Secondly, an enormous reaction among ordinary folk to misguided rulers who abused authority and who turned them into cannon-fodder for two World Wars. Thirdly, the emergence of liberalism as the prevailing philosophy of challenge to such capricious and misguided authority. Alongside that there is a catalogue of reactions. Fourthly, the emerging influence of the social sciences as channels to discover more deeply the phenomenon of mankind. Humankind has become quantifiable. In the midst of this we have a 19th century Catholic Church gradually losing its grip. It is failing to read the lessons of its own signpost document from Vatican II: *Gaudium et Spes*. Secular schooling itself is dominated by an outlook of discovery rather than revelation. Anything and everything delivered by schooling on the strength of authority is to be challenged in every educational department, — including religion.²

It is into this recipe that the ingredients of Catholic schooling have been mixed over recent years with varying success. But the outstanding emphasis placed on schooling by the Catholic hierarchy in these islands, with its subsequent high rates of investment, has left other aspects of the Church's involvement in human development neglected. The pressure to keep up with the pace set by the politicians

is considerable, and extremely expensive. The State invests in schooling because the survival of the nation depends on it. The Church invests in schooling for quite different reasons.

There is also a predominant attitude struck by parents who must legally send their children for free schooling. Like most boons, there is a positive and negative side to this. Some parents get involved. Some parents may abandon all formation of their children to those who operate the schools. Significantly the occasions when school governors make an annual *Report to Parents* — as required by the Education Act — are often the least-attended meetings, unless there is a crisis of some kind. In denominational schools parents inevitably abandon their children's religious formation to their teachers. The whole social dimension of formation within society has changed significantly.

The Catholic Church rarely, if ever, produces anything startlingly new. The burden of *Gravissimum Educationis* concentrates, in No 5, on the school as something of "outstanding importance". The foundation for this emphasis is largely the reaction of Popes Pius XI and XII to educational trends being set in Europe during the first part of this century. In particular the growing influence of psychological theories, mainly centred in Germany and Austria, caused them concern. Such theories, which do not promote a Christian or Catholic view of humankind, could — and indeed did — produce whole societies of young people alienated from a true vision of human dignity. They could be manipulated through schooling. Fascism and Communism were but two socio-philosophical systems which flourished in the first half the 20th century with the help of applied schooling systems. The long-term effects of this were oppression and repression, revolution and war. Vatican II's document on education was compiled with this experience in mind. It is worth asking whether we ought not to look at this again.

Because so much of *Gravissimum Educationis* concentrates on the formation of the young it is read by most people as a manifesto for Catholic schooling. It is this, of course. But it has much more written beneath the surface. Principally the document speaks about Christian formation within and alongside the prevailing culture.³ There has to be a dialogue between Church and State. This dialogue, however, is not conducted by children. It is conducted by mature Christian adults. One of the principal failures of our investment in Catholic schooling is that we have failed to produce articulate Christian adults in any significant numbers. Catholic formation has largely ceased to be effective by the time a person reaches teen-age years. It is getting better. But there is

no real inroads or investment being made into adequate formation of young adults, or the maturer Catholic.

Many pastors hold up their hands in despair and say: What can we do? The answer lies largely in their own hands. It is a matter of examining their own formation and gradually evolving ways and means of sharing that with the people among whom they live. But to do that they need investment and resources. They need formation themselves, and in their turn they need to be able to give formation to Catechists. The catechist takes his or her model from the processes of the Rite of Christian Initiation for Adults.

The RCIA has been widely misunderstood in this country. It has been promoted as a *liturgical* phenomenon. Some dioceses have placed the care of RCIA into the hands of their Liturgy Commissions. This means that the ongoing processes of adult formation in the faith are going to be unsupported by — and certainly have little or no feedback into — the education departments of those dioceses. This means that the spiritual growth, the ever-widening appreciation of the faith by adults, cannot form and inform the work to be done with children. That prunes the flower from the bush. Stunted and frustrated growth will result. The Vatican Council specifically commanded both the methodology and the experiences of adult formation in the RCIA to be the pattern of growth for the whole Christian community. It is not a matter of composing programmes which are “lookalikes” across the age-ranges. The process is a life-long one across all the developmental stages of humanity. The experiences of one age must inform and interact with all the others.

Any vision of education — whether secular or religious — which works narrowly will ultimately fail. Secularly, young adults will not have relevant skills to produce the national wealth. Religiously, young adults will not be able to articulate their beliefs convincingly. In both spheres the learning processes extend well beyond schooling, into the world of family life, work and leisure. The danger is that dioceses may set up “Departments” to superficially deal with these aspects of life, but in doing so they may significantly fail to communicate with one another. The departments thus become compartments, sometimes with water-tight doors separating them.

The sad thing about *Gravissimum Educationis* is that its vision was undeveloped, and the Fathers of the Council did not pass on to consider the hugely important field of adult formation. This is understandable, because even at the heart of the Vatican such issues came under the provenance of *The Lay Apostolate*. There has always been considerable *voluntary* effort by lay men and women who wished

to further their formation in the faith. But they were neither organised, nor funded, nor supported significantly by dioceses. Tiny minorities of Catholic adults found their way into such organisations. The vast majority enjoyed adult formation through one medium, and one medium alone — the Sunday sermon. The completion of *Gravissimum Educationis* actually comes in the demands of the *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*. If Christ's layfaithful (*Christifideles Laici*) are to do what is expected of them in that document they have a need — indeed a right — to adequate and substantial formation as adults.

A few visionaries and luminaries perceived this. The Venerable Cardinal John Henry Newman was one — and Cardinal Cardijn was another. Significantly the century that spanned their work saw little, if any, formal adult education in the Catholic Church. What they wanted, and what they actually produced were merely models that tackled specific areas of need. Both were greeted with a measure of suspicion by the hierarchies of their time. Their visions, however, are rapidly being proved to be significant. What we have today, dotted up and down the country are some bold attempts that need encouragement. They also need some significant investment. As we witness a growing struggle to provide significantly Catholic education in secondary schools, the need to form both young and mature Catholic adults in the faith will increase significantly. Dioceses will neglect this at their peril.

- 1 This article is the by-product of considerable historical study which cannot be reproduced here. Briefly, two impulses provided the background to the development of modern schooling. Empire and industry basically fuelled the notion of *Great Britain* and its subsequent Commonwealth. Most trace the origins of modern schooling to the latter part of the 18th Century. The age of Paine and the *philosophes* paved the way. I would agree, but take the philosophical issues much further back in time.
- 2 It is impossible to list all the possible influences. Each one of these topics merits an article by itself. The intricacies need to be weighed and carefully balanced.
- 3 Cardinal Ratzinger made a profound and insightful contribution to this debate at Hong Kong in the spring of 1995. He really was appealing to local churches to look more closely at the implications of placing "world" and "church" into two separate boxes. A fruitful adult dialogue is demanded if the church is to survive.