THE EDUCATION OF OUR CHILDREN IN THE FAITH

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THE EDUCATION of children in the faith involves the family, the Church community and the Catholic school community. When we reflect on what has happened in our Catholic communities over the past sixty years, we realise that we face many challenges in the Church, in Catholic schools and in Catholic families.

In the 1950s our local Catholic Church communities were characterised by a strong sense of belonging. The parish, the families and the school all co-operated to evangelise and educate the children in the practice of their Catholic faith. All students in Catholic schools were from Catholic families. Being in the local Catholic school and practising one’s faith—family prayers, Mass and sacraments, including frequent Confession—was the accepted, the proper way of life for a Catholic child.

In the Catholic schools the staff were usually religious sisters or brothers—lay teachers were very rare. The sisters and brothers had little or no professional training to be teachers, but they were very committed to their faith and strove above all to inculcate a similar commitment in their students. The school was an evangelising community.

The burden for the building, maintenance and financing of schools was borne by the Church community. Catholic schools were not funded by the government—there was no 'State aid' for Catholic schools. The sisters and brothers received little income, so that fees were more affordable for families who were usually not well off. Meantime, education in state schools was free.

This was the Catholic school system set up in the late 19th century throughout Australia. It was the choice of Catholic parents, who wanted their children to get a Catholic education. Public school education was secular.

It meant, however, that by the 1960s this system was becoming an impossible burden on the Catholic community. The numbers of religious teachers, though still the majority, was diminishing in the post-Vatican II era, giving place to lay teachers. Vatican II had stressed the role of the laity in the mission of the Church. This was the time of the 'baby boom' and also of the arrival of many migrants. The demand for Catholic school education meant that the limited facilities and resources were more and more inadequate.

Eventually the situation led to strike action. The Canberra-Goulburn diocese, by an action that gained nation-wide attention, showed that without the catholic schools the state education system would be under considerable strain.

The action began in July 1962 in Goulburn when the NSW Department of Education required that the boys' toilet facilities be upgraded at Our Lady of Mercy Primary School under threat of de-registration of the school if it did not comply. The local auxiliary bishop, Bishop John Cullinane, called a meeting of parents and informed them that the school did not have the funds. The meeting resolved that all the Catholic schools in Goulburn should close till the end of term and parents were urged to seek to have their children enrolled in the local state schools which, of course, could not cope with the influx of new students.

This 'strike' action demonstrated to the whole nation that the Catholic school system
was in a highly stressed state and was in need of assistance. And so the question of State aid for Catholic schools became a matter of public debate, though it was several years before such aid was forthcoming.

The lay teachers were now being trained in teachers' colleges run by religious congregations. In 1974 the Catholic Education Commission was established, to co-ordinate Catholic school education. Henceforward Catholic education became more organised and professional. Catholic universities were established.

Meanwhile, the Catholic community as a whole was losing its former cohesion and Catholics were becoming increasingly unchurched. Missing Mass on Sunday was no longer classed a 'mortal sin'. At baptisms and funerals many Catholic adults are no longer able to make the appropriate responses during the ceremonies or to recite the most basic prayers, such as the 'Our Father'. Families are no longer functioning in bringing up their children in the practice of the faith.

And so the task of training our young people in the practice of the faith has largely devolved on the Catholic school and the parish. The school and the parish have to train the children to bless themselves correctly with the sign of the Cross—something that used to be learnt in the family long before they reached school age.

School Masses are usually the only experience the children have of celebrating the Eucharist. This is apparent when the children usually cannot make the responses during Mass without special urging that they find the correct words on the Mass cards.

How far the Catholic community has drifted from the norm can be seen by contrasting the way things are now with the following words in the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy of Vatican II, par. 106 where we read:

By a tradition handed down from the apostles, which took its origin from the very day of Christ's resurrection, the Church celebrates the paschal mystery every seventh day, which is appropriately called the Lord's Day or Sunday. For on this day Christ's faithful are bound to come together into one place. They should listen to the word of God and take part in the Eucharist, thus calling to mind the passion, resurrection and glory of the Lord Jesus and giving thanks to God who 'has begotten them again through the resurrection of Christ from the dead, unto a living hope' (1 Pet. 1:3). The Lord's Day is the original feast day, and it should be proposed to the faithful and taught to them so that it may become in fact a day of joy and of freedom from work.

Now, when parents bring their application form for their child to go to a Catholic secondary school for the parish priest to endorse, they receive a supportive reference when they can tick the 'occasionally' box concerning their attendance at Sunday Mass—we are doing well!

The school along with the parish must now more than ever become an evangelising community. Teachers must be not only professionally qualified to teach. They must also be people of faith and spirituality, people who give witness of their Catholic faith to the children. Hence the faith formation of teachers becomes an essential element of their 'in-service' training. When they teach Religious Education it must be teaching from the heart.

The school and the parish can co-operate, for instance through sacramental programs, and by conducting liturgies that are children-friendly.

Catholic schools are still answering the demand of parents for a Catholic education...
for their children. Catholic schools now are well-regarded, and record numbers of families are sending their children to Catholic schools. Parents want to send their children to Catholic schools because they maintain good discipline and provide quality teaching, and no doubt because they want their children to receive a Catholic education—so the Catholic identity of the school is important to them.

But we also have to communicate to parents that they have a responsibility in providing a Catholic education for their children. As they were told years ago at the baptismal ceremony: ‘In having your child baptised, you are taking on the responsibility of training your child in the practice of the faith’. The family must become, as it was in the past, an evangelising community, along with the parish and the Catholic school.

We can anticipate that the Synod on the Family in October will provide some stimulus to families to accept that responsibility.

Catholic school enrolments are increasing. Catholic schools educate more than 20% of students in Australia. In the Archdiocese of Sydney enrolments are moving towards 70,000. It is anticipated that Catholic schools nation-wide will be required to accommodate a further 100,000 students over the next ten years.

New schools are planned to meet the demand. Without new schools there will not be places for new enrolments. And here again the need for funding arises. Catholic schools are facing the pain of rising costs. They rely on state and federal government funding, but governments, federal and state, provide very little capital funding to Catholic schools. The Catholic community must provide the remainder.

In the federal budget the situation is going to be worse still. The Australian of April 17th, 2015 reported that in a pre-budget submission to the government, the National Catholic Education Commission stated that its real funding will fall by 30% while costs are expected to rise by 54.7% by 2025, assuming that funding is indexed at the average CPI rate of 2.8%. Without sustainable funding, the NCEC stated that fees will increase, schools could close and the quality of education will be compromised.

This will impose additional pressure on government schools when students transfer out of Catholic schools to government schools because they are unable to afford higher fees.

We are again in the situation of July 1962 in the Canberra-Goulburn diocese, but now the problem is nation-wide.

Further reading:
Bishops of NSW and ACT (2007), Catholic Schools at the Crossroads.
Aengus Kavanagh and Leone Pallisier (2014), Will Catholic Schools be Still Catholic in 2030?

Changing circumstances have radically affected the role and composition of the Catholic school in recent years...Many of our young people now have little or no contact with the church outside of school...While our schools continue to embrace their traditional responsibility for religious and other education, they now have a different mix of students and less support for their specifically religious mission from outside the school than they had in the past.