

Comprehensive Schools and the Catholic Community

P. J. O'CONNELL

In a previous article¹ it was assumed that the English segregated school system based on selection at eleven years and the intellectual theories sustaining it were passing away and were being succeeded by various forms of comprehensive secondary education. If this be so, and the events of last summer on the political, social and academic scenes would seem to add confirmation, can the Church sit idly by without examining the meaning that this educational revolution may hold for Catholics and the general community? Understandably the Catholic administrator is concerned, at parish and diocesan level, with providing adequate places for the increasing numbers of children committed to his care; nevertheless the Church has a primary concern for the education of youth whether inside or outside the Church and he will surely wish to ascertain whether any assets of permanent value to Christian life may be obtained from a re-organization of our own sector paralleling the changeover to comprehensive systems in state schools.

Catholic authorities may be reassured that, from the known achievements of comprehensive schools, the adoption by them of the new pattern could have an extremely favourable outcome, if cast within the mould of Christian ideals, on the development and character of the English Catholic community. Initially it may be noted that at such schools a far greater proportion than normal remain on beyond the usual leaving age: for example, in some London comprehensive schools between 40% and 60% is quite common, compared to a national average of 20% in Local authorities which operate a separate school system. Now for decades Catholics have complained that religious instruction, on account of the immaturity of schoolchildren, has of necessity been confined to the penny catechism, and that without a reasoned understanding of the Church's attitude to social, moral and political ideas many were left ill equipped to defend or even maintain their faith in face of apathy or hostility from their fellow workers.

¹BLACKFRIARS, June, 1963.

It should now be possible where children are induced by comprehensive education to complete their teenage years in an academic environment to instruct them more effectively in their Christian responsibilities as individuals, as founders of families and as members of a parish community. It ought to be practicable also to pass over such youth to the various parish organizations which would probably welcome enthusiastic and well instructed members. By means of this kind the Church would be presented with unrivalled opportunities for guiding boys and girls through their difficult teenage years during which it is agreed that religious faith and practice are most severely tested. It is however fair to sound a warning, unless such large secondary schools can be provided with a chaplain the spiritual advantages are more than likely to be frittered away. The centre of such schools must be the Mass, celebrated if possible in a school chapel—without the aid of the Mass it is unlikely that the buffets of opposition to the aims and purposes of the Catholic school from the workaday world can be long withstood.

The fact that more children choose voluntarily to remain on at comprehensive schools shows that those most concerned, the parents, have confidence in them. Research into the GCE results emanating from examples of both segregated and comprehensive systems adds weight to the parents' preferences. In a recent analysis of GCE O-level results something like 50% more candidates for GCE in comprehensive schools obtained a good certificate, defined as five passes or more, than in segregated schools. The Church recognising itself as an educative force cannot ignore the mounting evidence in favour of all ability schools and must surely now ponder whether it can continue to sponsor within its own sector a system so wasteful of God-given talents as represented by grammar/secondary modern patterns. Positive action would of course entail alterations in the character of many Catholic grammar schools which would then have to take within their ambit the entire Catholic community instead of an arbitrary section having its roots more frequently in social class than intellectual aptitude. Such schools have contributed much to the development of the Catholic community in the past: under the changed conditions of today they can be adapted to play an even more significant role but they should not much longer, in the interest of the families and parishes they serve, confine their benefits to an intellectual or social elite. The separate school system, of which they are the leaders, is not necessarily in tune with Catholicism. Furthermore if it be admitted that the

majority of children are likely to progress educationally under a comprehensive system which can deal more justly with their changing and developing talents that is surely a powerful reason for Christians to endorse it. Certainly those who in later life believe that their talents were never given full rein because of the fondness of some administrators for grammar schools and their inevitable corollaries, the secondary modern schools, may come to associate the Church unfairly but understandably with a partiality for conservative solutions or at best an undue apathy in educational affairs.

A comprehensive school would almost certainly serve a group of parishes, although some larger urban churches could probably support one of their own, enabling the parish clergy to concentrate their efforts for youth in one institution. This would seem to demand group work from the clergy to which they may be unaccustomed but this might form a useful precedent for other spheres such as youth and social work where the parish unit is too small frequently for effective action.

Catholic families tend to be larger than non-Catholic ones and feel more intensely as a result the impact of the segregated school system. They are often poorer as well and suffer from the financial burdens represented by different uniforms, fares and holidays. More significant still for the large Catholic family are the problems of a social order set for them by the varying traditions of secondary schools, if, as is not uncommon, their children are of varying ability and interests and have to attend separate secondary schools from the age of eleven onwards; these traditions may bring about divisions in the home, particularly if a brother or sister feels that more family resources are devoted to the economic demands of a brother or sister attending a high class convent or grammar school. Such roots of family disharmony can be avoided where all members frequent the same secondary school absorbing the same loyalties and traditions.

If the Catholic administrator after due consideration of the benefits of comprehensive education for the family, the parish and the community, favours its adoption he will have no shortage of examples how comprehensive education may be best given at the secondary stage. Perhaps it will suffice to state that there are two main concepts:

(1) a single comprehensive school for boys and girls from 11 to 18 years.

(2) a 'two-tier' system of junior high schools (11-14 years) and senior high schools (15-18 years).

The advantages of both kinds of comprehensive education may be studied in two recent publications. Robin Pedley's *The Comprehensive School* advocates a two-tier system such as that practiced by the Leicestershire County Council, and *London Comprehensive Schools*, by the Inspectorate of the London County Council, sets out the achievements of a large scale application of the comprehensive idea in sixteen secondary schools. Before the Catholic administrator however decides which pattern to adopt he will no doubt consider the existing situation in his diocese regarding the Catholic school structure and only then determine the means he will employ to bring about non-selective education so as to enlist the maximum goodwill from the relevant parents, staffs, governors and parishes involved in such a radical reorganization.

Although a few Catholic comprehensive schools have been founded the general pattern in our urban areas is one of separate secondary schools from eleven years onwards. This is not surprising where the Local Education Authority itself sponsors a parallel system but there are examples of Catholic Authorities showing a preference for grammar and secondary modern schools where the prevailing pattern is a comprehensive one. In such cases, probably, the majority of parents would have been happier to send their children to comprehensive rather than secondary modern schools, especially those who cherish educational ambitions for their children and refuse to accept the finality of an unfavourable result at the eleven plus examination.

In the average urban area there may be found a grammar school for boys and almost certainly a convent high school for girls frequently situated some miles distant from the children's homes together with a local mixed secondary modern school. In such cases it may be simplest for the administrator to opt for Dr Pedley's scheme of two-tier education, the secondary modern schools becoming junior high schools and the grammar schools retaining a significant role as senior high schools.

In those cases where there are not, within reasonable distance, Catholic grammar schools then the secondary modern schools can be converted into comprehensives provided the entry can be raised to five or six forms (or about 150 to 180 boys and girls), the minimum number on which an adequate variety of courses suitable for children of all abilities may be based. A change of this character may be undertaken in several ways, by the amalgamation of two separate-sex schools, by extensions on the same site or by the acquisition or erection

of additional accommodation adjacent to the main building. What is perhaps even more important than building considerations is that the Catholic Education Authority should then abandon selection and ensure that these schools are not simply large secondary modern schools but truly comprehensive by making them cater for the full ability range within the parish boundaries.

Finally, there are many areas in which no Catholic school exists but for which one is scheduled and in that case the simplest foundation would seem to be, where numbers justify it, a large comprehensive school which, with its excellent facilities, should be not only a school but a centre for youth and adult activities and societies and thus become a focal point of local Catholic life and action.

If the Catholic authorities carry out a large scale transformation of their sector or one in keeping with the changes to comprehensive schools made by their local authority, they ought not only to receive the respect and support of educationists but of the community in general. Happily the indications are that many in high places realise that moral and religious training alone can stem the prevailing decline in morals, particularly among the young: both the recent authoritative reports on education, the Crowther Report and the Newsom Report, have stressed the necessity of moral and religious training. When a state document advocates Christian teaching and a knowledge of the 'personality of Christ' (Newsom) one may perhaps be forgiven for hoping that the moment is favourable for a general advance in Catholic education on a scale greater than any hitherto and in keeping with highest standards and ideals of modern educational thought.