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CATHOLIC RELIGIOUS INSTRUCTION AND
MORAL INSTRUCTION IN CATHOLIC SCHOOLS
Intervention du Comité catholique, mai 1982

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Catholic Religious Instruction and Moral Instruction in Catholic Schools

Much of the controversy which surrounds today's Catholic schools is centred upon the compulsory nature of religious instruction at the elementary level and in the first cycle of the secondary course. Though it was formulated to respect the freedom of conscience of those who do not share the Catholic faith, the clause affording exemption is often a source of dissatisfaction, even on the part of those for whose benefit it was drawn up. At the other end of the scale are those who deeply object to any modification which would seem to relegate Catholic religious instruction to the level of a mere option; they see this as a betrayal of the true nature of the Catholic school.

In recent years the Catholic Committee has given special attention to this question. In many of its documents it has attempted to promote a liberal application of the exemption clause. In the course of numerous hearings and visits to the schools, it has listened to the public, in order to assess the situation and to identify the problem clearly. This has led to an in-depth study of its Regulations, and particularly of those articles concerning religious instruction.

Various events have stimulated this discussion. There was, first of all, the Report of the Conseil supérieur de l'éducation, «Confessionality in Education», published in August, 1981, which suggested the setting up of a generalized system of option between Catholic Religious Instruction and Moral Instruction. There is also the project of educational reorganization with which the Ministère de l'Éducation has been busy for some months. While we have been made aware of a few minor details only of this proposal, it has revived public discussion and given rise to the adoption of contradictory positions. One of those, and not the least significant, is the Declaration of the Assembly of Québec Bishops on The School System and the Religious Beliefs of Citizens; two paragraphs are devoted to the question of the option of moral, as opposed to religious instruction.

The prospect of a Bill which might change the existing situation did not encourage us to adopt a public position. Notwithstanding this fact, it now appears appropriate to publish the conclusions arising from our discussions of recent months. The Committee intends shortly to modify its Regulations concerning schools recognized as Catholic, so as to establish, for each year of both the elementary and secondary courses, a system of option between Catholic Religious Instruction and Moral Instruction.

It is important to indicate the reasons for the Committee's adoption of such a position, and to outline the new responsibilities which this change will imply for all those involved in school affairs. First of all, however, the basic convictions which have led the Committee to adopt its position must be made very clear.

1. A First Basic Conviction: the exemption clause is not, in itself, discriminatory, even in a public school

As early as its Report for 1979-80¹, the Catholic Committee grappled with the problem posed by the exemption clause. We remain convinced that it is an exaggeration to claim that this clause is unjust, or discriminatory. It may be subject to a restrictive application. But it is intended to provide a mechanism for the honest respect of the freedom of conscience of those attending Catholic schools. It is true that it brings about differences in pupils' school experiences: some are enrolled in classes in Religious Instruction, while others follow a course in Moral Instruction. But, this is no new thing in education. As we have stated elsewhere, «If one considers individualized teaching, subject promotion, the options at the end of Secondary studies, special classes, the principles and practices lead to the selection of pupils, sometimes in groups, in order to take into account their interests and rates of learning. To apply them is not, automatically, to discriminate. Discrimination occurs when a person or group is separated from others for ill-treatment, to their detriment.» (p. 77). What is essential, and must be assured at any price, is that the choice made by parents (or by pupils) be clearly respected and that the subject material be of high quality. There is no way of preventing a small minority group feeling set apart, different. This is true for any particular group for whom special services are provided. It is often the price paid for the affirmation of its identity. This is why such groups must be treated with the greatest respect, without, however, any encroachment on the lives of others.

«This being said, the rule on exemption is not a dogma. It is a matter of a practical housekeeping rule, whose relevance and usefulness the Catholic Committee proposes to examine, since there is no denying that its application presents problems..... The rule on exemption is not perfect. But neither is any rule perfect. Every rule will prove inadequate where the spirit of understanding and tolerance is lacking. If, some day, the rule on exemption has to be changed, it will be for educational and administrative reasons, and not in response to questionable ideological objections.» (p. 79).

1. Conseil supérieur de l'éducation, The State and Needs of Education, Annual Report 1979-1980, pp. 65-110.

We believe that change is justified for reasons of social evolution. This belief is based on a second conviction, which it is useful to develop briefly.

2. A Second Basic Conviction: a general option between Catholic Religious Instruction and Moral Instruction is not incompatible within the school which calls itself Catholic

A school which defines itself as Catholic must display those distinct features which give it its particular character, otherwise the word «Catholic» is a sham. These distinctive characteristics may be expressed in a variety of ways, depending upon the socio-political context. There is, effectively, a very close liaison between the school and the community. If, on the one hand, the school be an agent of community change, on the other, it is a reflection of this same milieu. The community influences the school and very largely determines its organization.

Recent history is a striking example of this fact. During the fifties, for example, the French schools of Québec were Catholic, just as surely and as massively as was the social milieu, strongly influenced by the Catholic Church. In such schools the religious atmosphere permeated everything; that the teaching of the Shorter Catechism be not compulsory for everyone, without exception, was inconceivable.

During the sixties, the social fabric changed. Religious unanimity weakened; the consensus dissolved. There were more and more claims to the right of religious dissent, though a large majority retained their adherence to Catholicism. A vast educational reorganization was undertaken. It was at this time that the Catholic Committee laid down, by Regulation, another way of carrying on religious instruction. It was always to be offered, but, at the same time the schools were required to provide a course in moral training for all those seeking exemption from religious instruction. Further, in conformity with the new Course of Study, which introduced a variety of options, pupils in the last years of secondary school were given the possibility of electing to follow a course in moral training, a course in Catholic religious instruction, or a course in religious instruction of a cultural nature. All this was done in order to respond more adequately to the needs of a milieu which had become more heterogeneous.

We must not, however, imagine that experience was everywhere the same. In certain milieux, where there remained a strong Catholic majority, there were very few requests for exemption. In some English communities, instead of seeking exemption, many pupils enrolled automatically in the nearest Protestant school. This contributed to the development of a type of Catholic school quite different from the large French polyvalents, with their markedly heterogeneous enrolments.

It is possible at this point to go into greater detail and to note the various forms assumed by Catholic schools in the different countries where they co-exist with schools of other types, whether their creation is a reaction to the existence of others of a secularizing nature, or, again, whether they receive grants from the State².

A School Which Must Preserve Certain Essential Characteristics

Despite these variations in form, certain essential characteristics remain unchanged. As we stated in a recent pamphlet, «The Catholic school is that which has at the heart of its educational project and explicit reference to the Christian faith, which is basic to its educational and cultural activities». Returning to our earlier comments, we would add that such an educational project should develop in three main directions. These are concern for the education of the whole person, priority for human relations, and at the same time explicit and reverent reference to the Christian faith. «To this end, the Catholic school must offer courses in Catholic religious teaching and furnish pastoral activities which provide young people with the possibility of extending their religious culture and of putting into practice Christ's message in the Gospel⁴».

Must such religious instruction be compulsory for all students, in order to preserve the school's Catholic nature? We do not believe so. Even when offered as an option, Catholic religious instruction remains an essential part of the Catholic school. Moreover, other elements join together to emphasize the religious nature of the institution. Suffice it to mention but a few: pastoral activities, support activities of an educational and religious nature, staff attitudes, relationships within the Catholic community, student educational projects and the general atmosphere of the school. To conceive of the offering of Catholic religious instruction as an option is not to betray an ideal, to abandon an historic right. Is it not, simply, to be responsive to the real needs of an evolving community which is becoming more and more pluralistic?

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2. On this subject the 15 December, 1981, copy of the magazine «Informations catholiques internationales» contains an interesting article. The situation in which Catholic schools find themselves is discussed in the cases of countries as different as Great Britain, Scotland, Portugal, Chile, Mexico, Venezuela, New Caledonia, Zaire, Japan, Hungary, the United States, the Netherlands, the Federal German Republic, Belgium, Québec, and particularly, France.
 3. Catholic Committee, C'est-à-dire. Regards sur les mots qui servent à dire l'éducation chrétienne, 1981, p. 19.
 4. Ibid., p. 19.

3. Our Evaluation of the Situation: a system whereby Moral Instruction is offered as an option to Catholic Religious Instruction appears to us as desirable in today's context

It must be readily understood that the reasons which bring us to modify our Regulations are, above all, of a social and educational nature. It is a question of responding more effectively to needs which are obvious and of raising the level of moral and religious training. Not only is the system of options compatible with the basic concept of the Catholic school, but it is also eminently desirable in the present context. We shall briefly explain why this is so.

Under the new system, parents will be obliged to indicate each year, at the time of registration, whether they wish their child to follow a course of Catholic Religious Instruction or of Moral Instruction (except after Secondary III, where the choice becomes the pupil's). One may venture to hope that the effect will be beneficial, in that it will focus attention on the fact that it is parents who are primarily responsible for the moral and religious education of their children. While they may rely on the school to provide part of such training, they may not completely abdicate their responsibilities. They will be required to examine the question each year, and to make a choice.

In this way, those parents who wish their child to receive religious training will see that they must become personally involved. They will not be able to rely automatically on the school. They will have to take up a stance. It will be easier, perhaps, for them to realise that they must provide that follow-up which will permit the school catechism to bear the fruits expected of it. Many are the teachers of religious instruction who complain of the uselessness of their efforts, because of the many parents who ignore what the school is attempting to do.

For their part, those parents who prefer that their child follow a course in Moral Instruction, will have no special or extra steps to take. They will be in the same situation as everyone else. This should eliminate a great deal of tension.

In thus permitting those involved to make their choice as part of the normal process of registration, the new system will enable the school authorities, as well as the teaching staff, to identify real needs more clearly and to meet them more adequately. Both Catholics and non-Catholics should find this to their liking.

We are, nevertheless, aware that in some areas there may be problems of organization. One thinks immediately of those communities which have remained more or less homogeneous, where it is probable that only a relatively small proportion will opt for Moral Instruction. Our attention

has also been drawn to the case of some English communities where those not wishing to receive Catholic Religious Instruction have traditionally been enrolled in Protestant schools.

4. A Necessity: responsibilities to assume

The establishment of a new system, such as that presented here, opens the door to the infusion of a new dynamic into Catholic schools. More interested pupils, more motivated teachers, more involved parents are all elements susceptible of giving Moral and Religious Instruction a new image and of improving its quality. But this will not come about automatically. Measures must be taken to enable all those involved to become aware of their responsibilities and to assume them. Without being exhaustive, these include:

- a) The School Authorities. The school authorities are, first of all, responsible for seeing to it that courses in Catholic Religious Instruction and Moral Instruction are available to all, within the prescribed delays, at all levels of the elementary and secondary course.

A mechanism must also be established whereby parents (or pupils) may exercise their choice as part of the formalities of registration.

Another essential task, upon which much of the success of the operation depends, is to ensure that both parents and pupils are adequately informed. They must be clearly and objectively informed as to the content and details of the various courses. Too many ambiguities have existed in the past. These must be eliminated, if serious and responsible choices are to be made.

Finally, here as elsewhere, the teachers responsible for all of the courses must be assured of sound pedagogic support. It is quite possible that problems will arise in the first years of application of this new system, because there is no way of predicting enrolment in the various options.

- b) Parents. It will be up to parents to make a choice for their children between Catholic Religious Instruction and Moral Instruction, until Secondary IV. It is vitally important that they make a reasoned judgment, being fully aware of the possible consequences, in terms of the child's faith and participation in the sacramental life of the Church. They must, then, pay attention to the religious training of the child and become involved therein. As the child grows, they must ensure its participation in the decision-making and so prepare it gradually to assume this responsibility from Secondary III onwards.

Parents must be particularly careful to ensure continuity through their choice, in order that the child's training be coherent. Even though the choice between religious and moral instruction is to be made annually, it is to be hoped that the decision made at the beginning of each of the primary or secondary cycles will be repeated for subsequent years of the same cycle. Were a child to shift regularly from one course to the other, there is no way of ensuring adequate training in either field.

- c) Teachers. Teachers must also come to grips with this new system. The establishment of this option invites them to become particularly aware of what it is they must teach; the course in Moral Instruction is not one in Catholic Religious Instruction, nor is the latter, even though it includes a significant moral dimension, a course in natural morality. As far as this is concerned, teachers must, in all conscience, assess their personal interest and belief in the Catholic Faith. Article 25 of the Regulation of the Catholic Committee provides for exemption, on grounds of conscience, from the teaching of religion. The freedom of conscience of both parents and pupils must also be respected. This can only be the case where teachers are free to follow their own conscience and to be honest with themselves. In this area deep seated attitudes and personal convictions are worth much more than words.

Finally, it is vitally important that those teachers involved in either of the courses receive adequate in-service training.

- d) The Christian Community. Before closing, mention must be made of the role of the Christian community. If education in the Faith be given solid support in the school, it both begins and finds its expression within the family and the parish. The coming years will surely see, within the Christian community, the development of new initiatives, aimed; for example, at supporting parents in the choices which they face, at supporting teachers in their role as educators in the Faith, at welcoming young people whose religious training is inadequate for admission to the sacraments.... The listing of all that will be required we leave to those in positions of responsibility.

In short, it is a question of community involvement, in order to improve the quality of teaching and of the schools.

In Conclusion

The decision to amend our Regulations has not been taken lightly. After thorough discussion, we believe that what we propose responds to the needs of the future and will enable those public schools recognized as Catholic to become real educational communities, responsive to the diversified expectations of society.

Nota bene

The revised articles of the Regulations of the Catholic Committee do not enter into effect in September, 1982. On the other hand, some schools may be ready to apply them in September, 1983. The Committee feels that these new provisions might be applied in 1983, but on an optional basis. However the system of options concerning Catholic Religious Instruction and Moral Instruction will become obligatory in September, 1985, for all schools recognized as Catholic.

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