

SHALL WE LOSE OUR SCHOOLS?

A PRIEST remarked recently that the education authorities had no intention of taking away their schools from Catholics, but merely of making it impossible for them to be continued. In that he was only expressing what has become obvious to everyone who has had much to do with the administration of the Education Act of 1944.

First, there are questions of conscience to trouble the teacher. Morally he or she is responsible to the parents; legally to the education authority. Already problems are being posed that make for conflict between the two loyalties. The teacher's duty is clear; the choice may not appear similar to that which faced St John Fisher and St Thomas More, but it becomes so when it is a question of refusal to sacrifice principles that are rooted in the Faith. The penalty for refusing may not be so great, but as time goes on the testing may well become more severe.

There has been reason for disturbance in the proposed Schools 'Record Card'. This has been described as a 'secret dossier'. It was recommended by the Report of the Committee on the Juvenile Employment Service, and its basic suggestions were accepted by the Government, and have begun to be implemented by some local authorities. The Report required comprehensive information about every child, including not only his or her attainments but details about character, use of leisure, and a report on the home and parents. This was described as 'a highly confidential document'. One form issued bore the heading that it would 'under no circumstances be communicated to parents'.

There is no need to stress that such a report is an abuse of the teacher's function and violates the sacred relationship to the parent as temporary guardian of the child. It is true that there are some homes in which the child needs special protection from unworthy parents, and that it is the business of the State in those circumstances to exercise a particular guardianship. But these may by no means set a standard so as to excuse an enquiry into homes by the school authorities. The teacher remains responsible to the parent, and to the parent alone.

The Record Card, at the end of the child's school career, was to be passed on to the Juvenile Employment Officer.¹ It was his

¹ Now called the Youth Employment Officer. Under some local education authorities, there is a Vocational Guidance Officer.

place to interview the boy or girl, and to advise on the choice of employment. It was even stated that although normally 'a teacher and the parent' should be present, 'there may be cases where it is desirable that the child should be seen by the guidance officer alone'.

It is evident that the authorities had in mind possible direction of labour; the Report, in fact, as much as said so. One of the purposes to be achieved in placing juveniles in employment was, it said, 'to ensure so far as possible that the limited supply of juveniles is distributed in accord with national needs'. The whole situation was intolerable to conscientious parents and teachers, and, apparently as the result of Catholic agitation up and down the country, new recommendations were issued.

These are embodied in the Report of the Secondary School Examinations Council, 1947, issued over an impressive list of signatories. At first sight it seems to meet the chief objections that were made against the other. It does not press for the 'secret dossier', but admits the right of the parent to see the Record Card. Nevertheless it is strongly in favour of 'cumulative records' for pupils, which are to be used by the school 'in conjunction with the Juvenile Employment Service, the parents and prospective employers', as helping to guide pupils 'towards careers which they will find suitable and satisfying'. The school and the Juvenile Employment Service still predominate, and this is made clearer still in the statement in paragraph 30 of the Report, which says: 'The schools alone are in a position to decide what is best for their pupils and they need the utmost freedom and flexibility to give effect to their judgment'.

The recommendation of this revised record, while it seems to concede the right of the parent to see it, still violates the principle that the parents are primarily concerned.² It is to be noted that they only come into the picture at the end. There is no suggestion that they shall peruse it in instalments. The record is a completed one before the parent has the opportunity of checking or questioning the details. The record, moreover, is to act as a 'passport' for the pupil into the sphere in which he gets his living, so that it still carries also the objection that it delineates his character, and so may damn him before he makes a start.

² A record card is now being introduced to satisfy the requirements of Section 13 of the Employment and Training Act, 1948. The Act states that a parent or guardian shall be entitled to examine the particulars furnished by the school in the presence of 'the officer having the custody thereof', but shall not be entitled 'to receive or take copies thereof'. The Act makes no provision for a compulsory interview of pupils leaving school by Youth Employment or Vocational Guidance Officers. Parents should be made aware of their rights to refuse the interview for their children.

It is a feature of Education Acts and regulations that they deny in one paragraph what they assert in another; or else they give in one place a contrary interpretation to that which might have been understood from some other clause. We are reminded of the clause added before the passing of the Education Act, 1944, in response to agitation, recognising the rights of parental choice in education. This reads: 'In the exercise and performance of all powers and duties conferred and imposed on them by this Act the Minister and local education authorities shall have regard to the general principle that, so far as is compatible with the provision of efficient instruction and training and the avoidance of unreasonable public expenditure, pupils are to be educated in accordance with the wishes of their parents'.

This takes away with one hand what it gives with the other, for it leaves the authority to decide what is 'efficient instruction' and unreasonable public expenditure'. In practice it has been found that the wishes of parents can be, and are sometimes, overruled. Already there have been mass protests of parents, and 'strikes' in certain districts, and if there seem to be sufficient grounds for these under a Minister sympathetic to the demands of Catholics, what may not take place if he were succeeded by one who was confessedly hostile?

The proposed Record Card is evidence that parental rights are not paramount in the eyes of the authorities, and the agitation still being continued against it both by parents and teachers points to the fact that there is complete difference of outlook on a vital question of principle between the education authority on the one hand, and the Catholic community on the other. What will be the position of the teacher who refuses to regard himself as a State servant, and insists on carrying out his duties as *in loco parentis*?³ What, moreover, will become of our Catholic schools which are, *ex professo*, responsible to parents primarily?

These are by no means the only difficulties. There is another series of questions raised by the requirements of the 1944 Act as to school buildings. Schools built years ago, or comparatively recently, are now condemned as hopelessly inadequate, although constructed in accordance with the authority's specification. Nor is it

³ Already this possibility seems envisaged. Subsection (4) of Section 13 of the Employment and Training Act, 1948, states: 'If any person contravenes or fails to comply with any requirement imposed on him by regulations made under this section, he shall be guilty of an offence and liable on summary conviction to a fine not exceeding ten pounds'.

usually just a question of alteration or addition. A school, comparatively new perhaps, is condemned out of hand because playground space is only a fraction of what the authority deems it ought to be. The cry is now for 'open spaces' for the children, though the trend for generations past has been to take them away from the natural open spaces, the countryside, and to herd them in towns. The authorities are just beginning to see that it is not natural for children to be cooped up, but they do not propose the obvious solution, the return to a more natural way of living.

The authority requires new sites to be found, even though towns are choked up and there are no new sites to be found. It requires entirely new schools in place of many that are serving their purpose admirably. In the district there may be a non-Catholic school half-empty. We do not need a large measure of imagination to guess that the next move may be to require our children to help fill it. One often hears the remark from Catholic parents: 'The State is bound to find a place for my child in a Catholic school'. But local authorities by no means think like that, and the fact is that large numbers of Catholic children are having to be refused entrance to Catholic schools because there is no more room and permits for rebuilding cannot be obtained.

The raising of the school leaving age, and the consequent retention of children who otherwise would have left school, prevents places being found for young entrants. In some districts this is to some extent being overcome by the offer of schools which normally take young fee-paying pupils to give free places to children whose parents cannot afford to pay. The Catholic child is thus saved from having to attend a non-Catholic school. But the delicate question of social standing is apt to arise, though this should not do so in a society which has come to accept mixing of ranks, even if only by the scholarship system.

Even when the authority does not require a new site to be found, but permits the existing structure to remain, Catholics are put to enormous expense to bring it into line with a new standard. Parents should note that no such standard is demanded for homes. Whole families may pig anywhere, while grandiose schemes for schools are going forward. At one average-sized secondary school, the amount to be found is £32,000, in addition to other sums for ordinary extension.

It has been argued that Catholics can well afford to pay now that there are no school fees in aided schools. But the argument is fallacious as every ratepayer knows. The steep rise in rates following

the remission of fees is only a reminder of the cost of 'free' State benefits.

Not long ago a priest heroically began to raise funds for schools by means of a football pool, and it has been suggested that this method should be extended to the whole country. It has, of course, been criticised by those opposed to gambling ventures. But even those who have no objection to it on that score would do well to consider carefully to what use school buildings subscribed for by Catholics may eventually be put.

There can be no doubt that the ultimate objective of State legislation is a vast, uniform, educational system, from which Catholic schools will have no option to contract out. What has been decreed in the past may easily be paralleled in the future: school premises, brought up to date, may well be out of date again tomorrow. Some authorities are in favour of the comprehensive school: that is, one in which the three 'sides', grammar, modern and technical, are catered for in the same establishment. The London County Council Education Committee announced not long ago that plans were being prepared under a 'multilateral' scheme for secondary schools, which would provide 'all types of education' under one roof for more than 2,000 children. The Report of the Committee explained the scheme as 'a system of comprehensive high schools throughout the county providing for all pupils equal opportunity for physical, intellectual, social and spiritual development which, while taking advantage of the practical interests of the pupils, should make the full development of personality the first objective'.

Catholics, because of the comparative smallness of their numbers, are hardly likely to be able to compete with such educational Big Business. The future requirements in the standard of school building are likely to be more stringent than ever. There may be appropriation in the years to come on a larger scale than that threatened in the recent Act. In contributing to a rebuilding programme we may be preparing a handsome multiple gift to a future materialistic authority.

It is said that Catholics will never surrender their schools. That is true; but the solution of the immediate problem is to refuse to surrender our rights. It is essential that we go slow in meeting every new demand. Recent experience shows that the determination of parents, teachers and ecclesiastical authority to fight injustice produces results in our favour. It will be the continued refusal to surrender on all these matters of principle that will ensure our final victory.

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