

When are Catholic schools no longer Catholic?



Does the proportion of Catholic children in Catholic schools actually matter? According to the latest census data from the Catholic Education Service of England and Wales (CES), Catholic schools in some dioceses, such as Plymouth, are more likely than not to have a majority of non-Catholic pupils.

The CES, and many head teachers, don't seem to view this as a problem. They think the Catholic ethos of these schools will be maintained so long as the leadership of senior staff are practising Catholics. But in reality, how easy - or logical - is it to maintain a Catholic school when in some cases more than 80 per cent of pupils are from other faiths or none? What is the point of compelling a class, if, for example, more than eight out of ten of the children are Muslim, to attend regular Mass?

According to the CES survey, more than 60 per cent of Catholic schools now "make allowances" for pupils of other faiths, which includes allowing Muslim pupils to wear headscarves. The right of Muslim girls to cover their heads if they wish should be respected, but the real question is why are they attending a Catholic school? One answer is the low number of Muslim or other faith schools available in most areas. As one Catholic head teacher I spoke to recently said: "Many parents of faith just want to send their children to a faith school, and a Catholic school is sometimes their nearest, or only local faith school."

Another answer is the difficulty some Catholic schools have in attracting enough Catholic pupils to fill their rolls. Which brings us back to the purpose of Catholic schools. Should Catholic schools take in children of other faiths - increasingly a majority - simply for the sake of staying open, and if so, should they be prepared to jettison aspects of their Catholicity - such as compulsory Mass attendance or Catholic iconography?

I would argue that it is possible to retain the Catholic ethos of a school even if a significant proportion of pupils are not Catholic, but that there is a limit, or demographic tipping point, when it is simply farcical for that school to continue as "Catholic". Oona Stannard of the CES believes the data shows the popularity of Catholic education. Fair enough, but to maintain a truly Catholic culture there needs to be a core community of Catholic pupils and teachers. And if that's not possible, the school's leadership and the diocese should face facts and let the school go.

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