

SCHOOLS AND EDUCATION

by
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THE PROTESTANT FAITH

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This week is Education Week. In view of the recent decision of the Australian Labour Party to follow the Liberal Party and to offer state aid to denominational schools, the question of supporting from public funds schools which cater for only a section of the population comes to the fore-front again. The controversy goes back many years. When New South Wales was founded, neither the Government in England nor in the Colony, took a direct part in education. This was left to the various denominations. The Church of England took the lead and the other denominations made their contribution and established schools roughly in proportion to their numbers in the population. The result was, as might be expected, that in the strong population centres there were redundant and competing schools, conducted by each of the denominations, while sparsely populated areas were hardly catered for at all.

In 1836 Governor Bourke planned to introduce a national school system. He advocated "schools in which Christians of all creeds are received, where approved extracts of the Scripture are read, but no religious instruction is given by the master or mistress, such being imparted one day in the week by ministers of the different religions attending the school to instruct their respective flocks." The basic principle of Bourke's proposals was one of combined secular education but separate special religious instruction. This was in 1836, but it was not till 1880 that Bourke's scheme was implemented in our present Public Instruction Act. It is interesting to note that when the Governor first suggested the scheme he was warmly supported by the Roman Catholic Bishop of Sydney, Bishop Polding. I quote from page 17 of "Catholic Education in New South Wales" by the Reverend Brother Urban Corrigan.

"Bishop Polding, as head of the Catholic Church in Aust-

ralia, was frankly anxious to adopt Bourke's plan in the hope that when children were educated together, religious animosities would be broken down. This view is expressed in a long letter that he wrote to the "Australasian" under the pen name of 'Catholicus Ipse', part of which was as follows: '... after the success the system has met with in Ireland it deserves a trial. There it has smoothed down animosities, it has encouraged the spread of education, it has introduced a nobler range of feeling than heretofore degraded the national character under the influence of Charter House and the Kildare St. Schools. '... I can readily conceive that the conversation on religious subjects, which will take place sometimes even among boys, will clear away many of the prejudices which were heretofore deemed sacred, that it will not be easy to poison the friendships that have been formed at school by the insin-

uation of deadly enmity. . . . True religion enshrouds not herself in prejudices, these she regards as habillements degrading to her beauty."

Thus Bishop Polding commended a State schools system in which all children were educated together but in which facilities were given to the churches for teaching special religious instruction to children of their own flocks. He saw it as an invaluable means of uniting the community and breaking down the prejudices which segregation leads to. This scheme is the system of education now in operation throughout most of Australia. Though it was commended by Roman Catholic authorities when first suggested in 1836, by the time it was adopted by N.S.W. in 1880, the Roman Catholic Church had changed its attitude from support to one of bitter opposition to this system. The Roman Catholic bishops of New South Wales, headed by Archbishop Vaughan, declared in a pastoral letter at that time

"We condemn Public Schools first because they contravene the first principles of the Christian religion, and secondly, because they are seed-plots of future immorality, infidelity and lawlessness, being calculated to debase the standard of human excellence, and to corrupt the political, social and individual lives of future citizens."

It may well be asked, what brought about this dramatic change in the attitude of the Roman Catholic denomination towards our present system of State schools? The answer is not far to seek. Between 1836 when Bishop Polding approved the scheme and 1880 when the scheme was adopted the Vatican at Rome had condemned the public school system in favour of the parochial schools system. In particular, public schools were condemned in paragraph 48 of the Syllabus of Pope Pius IX in 1864. In due course all parishes were required by the Vatican to conduct parochial schools. This attitude is now

incorporated in the Roman Catholic Code of Canon Law of 1917. Thus Canon 1374 of the Code states: "Catholic children shall not attend neutral, non-Catholic nor mixed schools, that is to say any schools open to Catholics and non-Catholics alike."

As a consequence of this over-ruling from Rome, the members of the Roman Catholic Church in Australia now have no power or authority to use their own judgment and to decide for themselves what system of education is in the interests of their own children, or of Australian society, or of our nation. When they were so free, Bishop Polding spoke for them and advocated our present system of State education; but now this liberty has been taken away through the decision of the Vatican, and consequently Australian Roman Catholics are obliged to attack our public schools system in favour of a parochial and denominational school system.

Roman Catholics sometimes support their claims for State aid by urging the rights of parents. It is true that parents have supreme rights in the education of their children, but it ill becomes Roman Catholics to press this argument, for in that Church the rights of parents are subordinated to the authority of the Church. Thus Canon 1374 which I have already referred to, explicitly takes out of the hands of the parents the choice of school. The Roman Catholic Canon Law states "The Bishop alone has the right, in accordance with the instructions of the Pope, to decide under what circumstances it may be tolerated that Catholic children should attend other than Catholic schools." Again, in Roman Catholic countries such as Spain, Protestant parents are allowed no rights whatever with regard to the religious or other instruction of their children; but are compelled against their conscience to send them to attend religious instruction given by Roman

Catholic priests. Thus Protestant schools in Colombia, South America, have in recent years been closed by Roman Catholic authorities on the ground that they must "prohibit every form of protestant educational work", in accordance with the Concordat between the Vatican and Colombia that "Education must be directed and oriented by the Catholic mission without interference from any other denomination." In Roman Catholic countries, Protestants, whether parents or tax payers, have no rights. But in Australia, no Roman Catholic is required to support by taxes protestant religious instruction, nor are his children required to attend such.

In 1880 when our present Public Instruction Act was passed, the Protestant denominations had numerous and excellent parochial schools. However they loyally co-operated with the new Act and allowed these schools to lapse, while their ministers entered the public schools to give regular weekly

religious instruction to the pupils attending the Government schools. The Roman Catholic Church, however, not only forbade its children to attend the public schools, but in order to give point to the accusation of Godlessness, for a great many years refused to enter the public schools to teach religion to such Roman Catholic children as might be attending. At the same time it maintained and built up, at great personal sacrifice in some cases, the Roman Catholic school system, in accordance with the directions of the Vatican. The proposal to subsidise these schools out of the taxes is most unjust to the Protestant majority of the community, who co-operated with the government policy, closed their own schools, and directed their efforts to providing at their own expense teachers of religion in the State schools.

The present Act was passed by Parliament by a majority of more than five to one in the Legislative Assembly.

If the policy established by that Act were not to be reversed it should only be done as the result of the clearest expression of the public will through a referendum. If it were reversed, then undoubtedly the Protestant denominations would co-operate with the new policy in re-establishing, over a period of years, denominational schools in the main centres of population.

In the Catholic Weekly of December 9 last the Premier was reported as saying he favoured a dual system of education. If this is now to be the government policy the only fair way of implementing it is to distribute government funds in accordance with the size of each denomination in the community so that each may conduct their own schools. It is most unjust that the bulk of this money should go to subsidize schools which happen to be in existence because they have been maintained in spite of (almost in defiance of) government policy of the last eighty years.

However, it is to be earnestly hoped that there will be no permanent reversal of policy to the old system of government support from public funds of denominational schools, even though both parties have at present endorsed state aid for vote catching purposes, for a return to the dual system would have some very deleterious consequences. For example, it would deepen and make permanent the unhappy segregation which Bishop Polding saw to be so unfortunate a consequence of parallel educational systems, and so divide and fragment the community still further. It would mean supporting with public money the indoctrination and teaching of religious and moral tenets which a large section of the taxpayers deplore. But perhaps most significantly it would lead to the general lowering of educational standards; for it is impossible with limited funds and limited staff to build and support redundant schools with inadequate equipment without damaging the standard of education. Under

a system of State aid for church schools the major denominations would all be entitled to receive public money for schools and this would lead to duplicating, triplicating, quadrupling schools in districts where one central school would be able to provide a much higher standard of education. By drawing off money and pupils from the state schools, it would deal the excellent educational system of the Department of Education a deadly blow, from which it could never recover.

It is well known that a large section of the Roman Catholic population do not favour the church school system and so it is much to be hoped that our Roman Catholic brethren in New South Wales will find ways of reverting to the early policy of Bishop Polding, and allow their children to attend state schools in which so many members of their communion are already teachers, while at the same time taking full advantage of the provision

of the present Act which allows children to be given special religious instruction in the tenets of their own denomination by the accredited teaching of their own communion. Moreover, the various Boards and Committees which control curricula, examinations and teaching in the State schools have serving on them official representatives of the Roman Catholic Church.

Meanwhile, we must all continue to protest against the injustice of being taxed to maintain a sectional and sectarian school system. I suggest you express your opinion by letter to candidates of both parties at the coming election, and ask them how they stand on the question, always remembering that we must deal with this deeprooted division in our community in a spirit of love, and firmness. It is not beyond the power of God to heal our divisions and to bring fellowship in the place of animosity, but it will not be at the expense of fairness, or in the interests

of political expediency.

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14 August 1966
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