

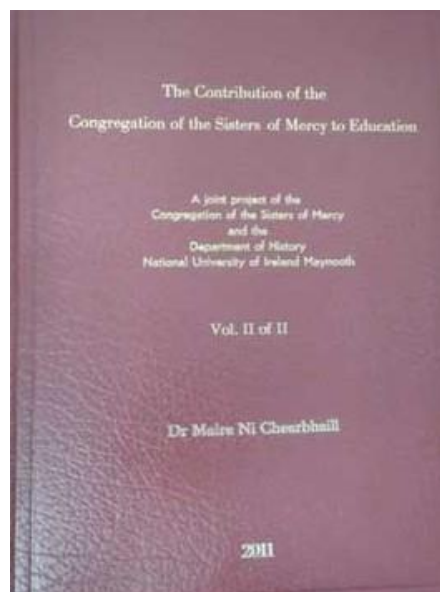
A Legacy In Our Own Time



A 'legacy' I've always imagined as something enjoyed by the legatee or beneficiary after the demise of the donor. However, at the Annual CEIST Conference last month I found myself having a re-think!

Catherine McAuley was passionate about education and we're all familiar with the place of 'the schools' in her Rule and Constitution of The Sisters of Mercy. Education was a great part of her legacy to all of us: it's in our DNA. When she took leave of this world in 1841 there were twelve convents and as many schools; Mercy communities accepted inherited responsibility for this very special ministry of education and through the dedication of thousands of sisters and co-workers over the years and around the world it grew beyond all imagining.

In Ireland the extent of that growth is expertly recorded in the work of Máire Ní Chearbhaill: *The Contribution of the Sisters of Mercy to Education* (2011). Speaking at the launch of the two-volume work, Professor Colm Lennon said he was struck *'by the adaptability and resourcefulness of the Sisters of Mercy in their response to social and cultural change from the early nineteenth century...their work anticipated and indeed contributed to the curricular developments in later twentieth century comprehensive and community schooling'*.



Máire Ní Chearbhaill's book

In response to the urgings of the Second Vatican Council, taken seriously by religious congregations, the Sisters of Mercy and others began to examine their trustee role in Catholic education and concluded that change was beckoning; old ways had to be replaced while there was still the time and energy. Joan Chittester, amongst others, was telling us that what we needed was a 'spirituality of diminishment'; that the function of religious life was to be 'presence and prophet to the world not a labour force. Not even for the Church...': *Fire in these Ashes*: (1995). The Second Vatican Council, in *Perfectae Caritatis* (1965), had suggested 'fostering more effective co-operation [among individual institutes] for the good of the Church'. The nature of the change in the Irish context was heralded in the CORI (Conference of Religious Ireland) publication: *The Trusteeship of Catholic Voluntary Secondary Schools* (1996). It concluded that there was 'no solid basis for believing that the continuation of Catholic education depends on the direct involvement of religious'.

Our diminishment was a providence and so too was the leadership of the day in the Mercy and Presentation congregations. These women exercised their role with wisdom, foresight and practicality: they were proactive in making the change. They set up a five-person task group, with a professional project manager, and the goal of preparing an alternative trustee model for their secondary schools within three years. The process was to be consultative and inclusive; school staffs, boards and parents were to be consulted. Other congregations and bishops who were trustees of diocesan schools, were invited to participate through a series of meetings; three congregations joined the process and these had one school each, bringing the total number of schools involved to 112, with a pupil enrolment of over 54,000. Over seventy of the schools were Mercy. The task-group was answerable to the provincial leaders of the congregations to whom they reported monthly; professional legal, financial and property expertise was enlisted. The outcome was the setting up, in June 2007, of two Companies: CEIST – *Catholic Education an Irish Schools Trust* to act as trustee of the enterprise of education and EDUCENA (derived from the words *education* and *enabled*) which was to receive ownership of the school properties and be the on-going funder of CEIST. Both CEIST and EDUCENA are registered under Irish Company Law and are also Public Juridic persons with Canonical Statutes. It was a huge undertaking and a great act of faith.

This brings me back to the September 2018 Annual CEIST Conference. Having been a member of that original task-group, I could not have imagined that eleven years later so much would have been achieved. As an 'invited guest' it was wonderful to see principals, deputy principals and chairpersons of school boards in such numbers so enthusiastically participating in a uniquely and explicitly Catholic school gathering. In keeping with the recent visit of Pope Francis to the World Meeting of Families Festival in Dublin, the theme of this year's conference was 'CEIST: a unique family'. The keynote speaker was the inspiring Ms. Pat Coyle of the Jesuit Education Office; in a number of workshops teachers from schools around the country shared 'good practice' and new initiatives that might be replicated in other schools. The one I attended was given by a Home Economics teacher from Ennis who had last year completed an MA in Christian Leadership in Mary Immaculate College, Limerick. She outlined how she has integrated 'Laudato Si' into her teaching of the Home Economics Syllabus!

What made me feel that I was witnessing the realization of 'the legacy' was listening to CEO, Dr. Marie Griffin, in her opening address, proclaim in confident and strong terms that CEIST schools were Catholic schools and as such, had both a moral and legal right to be just that in the Ireland of to-day; she announced that the theme for the years ahead in the schools would be Ethos; she thanked the school leaders for the many achievements of the last year – not least,

the incredible response to her appeal for volunteers to assist at the Papal Mass in the Phoenix Park in August. She had hoped that maybe two to three hundred might come forward; the reality was an astounding 1,500 students of CEIST schools together with chaperons in the person of Principals and Teachers. The logistics were enormous – registration, ensuring every student had ID, Garda Vetting, transport, overnight accommodation and food! Three Dublin host schools emerged where students and staff alike were welcomed to spend the night in their sleeping bags on classroom floors. The ‘guests’ were fed and even entertained to music and dancing! A video montage of photographs was evidence of very happy and capable young people in the service of others. Mary O’Keeffe, Principal of St. Brigid’s, Callan, gave an exciting account of that school’s volunteer experience. Marie Griffin thanked the Mercy and Presentation congregations for their generous sponsorship.

The opening prayer was accompanied by the wonderful choir of Presentation Wexford and at Mass on the second morning the liturgy was enhanced by the equally wonderful choir from Caritas College, Ballyfermot. The Mission articulated for the new trust - ‘To provide a holistic education in the Catholic tradition’ – is consciously being worked on. It strikes me that the response to the visit of Pope Francis highlighted, in particular, two of the five values articulated in the CEIST Charter: *Promoting Spiritual and Human Development* and *Creating Community*. Catholic education is alive and well even amidst the challenges of the twenty-first century.

A legacy from William and Catherine Callaghan, selflessly used for others by Catherine McAuley, was the foundation of Mercy; Catherine saw her legacy enable Catholic education. In our time, we are seeing the legacy handed on to CEIST continuing to enable the same gift to others. Catherine, Nano Nagle and the other founders must be smiling on us from heaven!

The ‘legacy’ is being well used. A sincere ‘thank you’ to Marie and her staff at the CEIST Office for their commitment, dedication and creativity in their work with the school communities; ‘thank you’ to Bernard Keeley and the Board of Directors for their leadership in striving to bring about the Vision of ‘A compassionate and just society inspired by the life and teaching of Jesus Christ’. CEIST Charter (2007)

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