

Response to media questions about why parents enrol their children in Catholic schools

Media question: It seems some parents will go to extreme lengths to try to get their children into the Catholic schools around the country, some even having their children baptised purely for school entry. Are you concerned about people taking advantage of the faith like this?

Our Response: These people are not taking advantage of faith. Baptism is not simply a ticket to Catholic education. In fact as part of the Rite of Baptism, parents are asked: “Do you accept the responsibility of training your child in the practice of the faith?” So, parents are involved in the faith journey of their children from before the first day of their child’s enrolment right through their schooling and beyond.

Sure, it may be the case that when parents are thinking about their children’s schooling that they also begin to re-engage with their faith. That’s great. But it is wrong to suggest that baptism is compulsory for enrolment into a Catholic school. It’s not. It’s an expectation to do with a faith journey, not an administrative requirement.

There are several key points that need to be understood about why our schools exist and what it means to send a child to them -

What Catholic schools do is to partner with parents helping them educate their children in our faith. Our schools exist is to provide an education grounded very strongly in the teachings of Jesus Christ through a Catholic worldview.

Formal reception into the Catholic Church is through participation in the Sacrament of Baptism. It is the gateway to a lifelong journey of Christian faith. Of course that journey varies hugely from family to family, but the point is a parent’s responsibility for the faith of their children doesn’t end with baptism it begins with it. Families enrolling their children in our schools are taken on that journey with the parish and an engagement with that is expected and explained prior to enrolment.

We are limited in the number of students we can enrol in our schools. They all have maximum roll restrictions. If demand for education from the local Catholic population outgrows the number of places available at any one school, we must go through a consultation process with the Ministry of Education and the local state schools to ascertain if roll growth is permissible. This is a Ministry of Education, not a Church, decision.

We are also restricted in the number of places we can offer to students from families without an established religious connection in our schools (non-preference students). These places are generally highly sort after when they are available. The restriction is a government cap (not a Church one) - usually 5% of the total school roll.

Media question: In Ireland 24 per cent of parents surveyed said they would not have baptised their child if they did not need baptism to gain entry to school. Do you believe the same issue exists in New Zealand? Are you aware of this happening? Is it something you monitor if children are practising or not?

Our response: That is not our experience here. Our experience is that parents and grandparents - including those who may have become distanced from the Church - delight in seeing their children grow in faith.

Practicing of faith is not monitored, it is encouraged. Our schools, through their entire school programme, seek to assist all parents to walk the faith journey authentically with their children. There is an expectation that they will engage with and participate in the liturgical and spiritual life of the school and parish community in order to do this.

Media question: What do you think smaller Catholic schools offer that make them so desirable for parents to go to these sorts of lengths?

Our response: As we've indicated, we don't agree with the "these sorts of lengths" comment. This perception is inaccurate.

There is a multitude of reasons why our schools are so appealing to parents. And it is worth noting that we have a huge variety of families in our schools, and we have a particularly successful engagement with ethnic minorities and lower socio-economic families. This passion for students who benefit from a hand up comes from our faith. Religious foundations underpin the whole schooling experience. Our schools strive to educate in a manner which reflects our basic belief that we are all made in the image and likeness of God and are good; that we all have an innate dignity that must be respected and that we come to a deeper awareness of the implications of this through our relationship with Jesus Christ and his community, the Church.

That means the driving force in our schools is to 'be the face and hands of Christ' to those we encounter. We know the lived reality of this deep conviction attracts some parents to our schools and of course it may well mean that others decide against our schools, particularly when parents sense that there is an expectation of participation.

Undoubtedly though there is a growing phenomenon in NZ society of parents seeking out schools with the clear value systems which they want for their child's formative education. In our Catholic schools this is overtly presented and comes from our religious and spiritual base. All schools have values. Ours, and other Church schools, have faith too.

Media question: In Ireland, a country torn by religion, they are looking to change their admission rules. Their education minister said he plans to limit or remove the role that religion can play in the school admission process as the system is 'unfair' and does not reflect the reality of modern Irish society, where the number of Catholic-controlled schools is now well ahead of the proportion of families who are practising Catholics. Do you think New Zealand should look at following suit?

Our response: Firstly it is not fair to Irish people to say that Ireland is torn by religion. That is an outmoded judgement which can cause great offence today.

The Irish schooling system is fundamentally different to our system, and it would be inappropriate to draw connections between the two systems. However, it needs to be said that religion should not be used as a measure of unfairness. Faith based schools are not pretending to reflect what someone else defies as 'reality'. They are an option within a wider system. No-one obliges anyone to go to a Catholic school or an Anglican school.

The Catholic Church's involvement in education is fundamentally a work of charity or service. We have a huge network of schools across Asia, including predominantly Muslim countries like Pakistan and Bangladesh, offering schooling to poor students the large majority of whom are not Catholic. This is a massive social contribution the Church makes to societies and nations.

In New Zealand, we greatly value our government state schools and respect them. We are not in competition with them. If you took religion out of Catholic integrated schools in this country it would be a bit like taking sport out of Sports Academies. That kind of shallow thinking reduces parental choice and enhances nothing. Our schools' Special Character is guaranteed by the Crown through the 1989 Education Act. We appreciate and respect that and so work closely with the State.

The Catholic Diocese of Palmerston North April 2018