

## **LUX EDMUNDI: REFLECTION: EASTER 2016**

In the state that emerged from the struggle for Irish independence a century ago, there was no doubting the status of the Catholic Church. It was not, as such, a church by law established, but it was readily accorded – and as readily accepted, if not, indeed, expected – authority and even precedence in all kinds of areas in the public square. There was, it must have seemed, no need for the Church to have the kind of specifically Catholic bodies, professional, social and political, which, even in other Catholic states, were considered necessary to protect and promote its place and its rights in the scheme of things. Since the great majority of the members of such public and private bodies as existed or emerged in those decades could be expected to be practising Catholics, more or less loyal to the Church and faithful to the Hierarchy, it is possible to see how it might have been thought that there was little if any need in Ireland for, say, a formally constituted Christian Democrat party, Catholic trades union, or, indeed, associations of Catholic parents, Catholic teachers, and the like. It may, in fact, have been the case that Catholic ecclesiastical authorities would have been less than welcoming of any organisations which, good intentions notwithstanding, might have become an alternative, rather than a subordinate, voice to that of the Hierarchy, certainly in anything as crucial to the Church as education.

Experience these last few years suggests that, not least in respect of Catholic schools, their patronage, management and ethos, the Ireland adumbrated here is dead and gone. In national discourse on education, Catholic authorities may now expect no favours at all; may, indeed, expect disfavour, covert or overt; and must, in any event, fight their corner to win and hold their due.

It may be that the moves at national level to consolidate and coordinate the multiplicity of bodies which currently oversee and/or represent Catholic involvement in primary and post-primary education indicate a realisation that changed times and circumstances necessitate changed structures and approaches. It looks, on the face of it, that a top-down approach has been adopted in these moves. This may, in fact, be necessary. If, though, there is not a corresponding movement from the bottom up, if schools and boards and principals and staff and parents and students and communities are not considered part – and an essential part at that - of this process of re-structuring Catholic education in Ireland, then the effectiveness of whatever emerges will be impaired and may be deemed something for a “them” with no place, no need, maybe, even, no respect, for any “us”.

Experts in school management advocate “distributed leadership”. The Inspectorate commends a team approach to in-school management. It is generally accepted that, in effecting change, the process can be as important as the product; that people are more likely to support what they have helped build. It would be a pity if those accustomed to participatory management at the chalk-face encountered an older, more paternalistic, ethic at work in the board-room; if, in any of the representative and other bodies envisaged here, schools were always the object, and never the agents, of change; informed and consulted it might be, but always and only by invitation, by grace and favour rather than by right, there being no legal or other provision for anything else.

“May the Light of Christ rising in glory dispel the darkness of our minds and hearts”