

LUX EDMUNDI: REFLECTION: JANUARY, 2017

On Monday, 5th December, 2016, the Minister for Education and Skills, Richard Bruton, TD, published the General Scheme of an Education (Parent and Student Charter) Bill and an associated Regulatory Impact Analysis Report (both readily available at the website of the Department of Education and Skills, www.education.ie). The CPSMA Newsletter for December 2016 described this as “by far the most significant piece of legislation to affect schools for some time”.

The various bodies representing school patrons, managers, teachers, principals/deputies, parents, students, will have their own internal discussions. They will feed their conclusions and recommendations into the national debate and seek by all lawful means to influence the legislation for – as they see it – its betterment. There will be concern on all sides, not least that those who manage our schools day-to-day, and who will inevitably carry the additional and heavy responsibility for operating the eventual Act, have all the supports they will need to implement the provisions of any such Act as effectively as possible.

It is worth emphasising, though, that both Church and State in Ireland may be deemed morally obliged by their own respective principles to support this Bill, to contribute to its formulation, to cooperate towards its enactment and towards its implementation once enacted. *Bunreacht na hÉireann* makes strong provision for the respective rights both of parents and of children. It is generally agreed that this Constitution, adopted by the citizens of the Republic of Ireland in 1937, was influenced in its drafting by the teaching of the Catholic Church, especially in those articles which deal with the family, education and religion and there can be no doubt whatsoever that the *Magisterium* of the Catholic Church has long insisted that the rights of parents in relation to the education of their children are God-given, sacrosanct and paramount, something for which popes and bishops will always “speak truth unto power”.

It may, therefore, be deemed nothing less than providential that a bill along these lines will be processed by the Oireachtas in 2017. This, it should be noted, is a year of preparation for two major Church events to be held in 2018, *viz.*, The Ninth World Meeting of Families on the theme “The Gospel of the Family: Joy for the World” to be hosted by the Irish Church in Dublin in August, and the XVth Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops on the theme “Youth, Faith and Vocational Discernment” to be held in Rome in October.

The give a statutory basis to home-school relations, to enable parents and/or students vindicate their respective rights in their dealings with school authorities, would seem to accord very closely with the Social Doctrine of the Church and to constitute as such a fitting means, an actual grace, by which the People of God in Ireland ready itself, under God, to make its contribution to these events. When all is said and done, the objectives of the Bill in question here would seem to be such as Catholic schools might seek to achieve anyway. We must, of course, be unrelenting in challenging the powers that be lest they require us by law to make bricks without straw. We must, though, also challenge ourselves to acknowledge and accept our prior and abiding responsibility to treat all with whom we deal in our schools with the respect to which, as sons and daughters of our Father in heaven, brothers and sisters in Christ, they are entitled. The Catholic school should, in this, be an “upper room”, a place where we whose Master washes the feet of the disciples, always use our authority, not for power but for service, not for our own good but for that of those we are called by God to shepherd.