

**The Iona Institute
23 Merrion Square, Dublin 2**

In defence of denominational education

April 4, 2008, Tara Towers Hotel.

Opening remarks by David Quinn

Good morning and thank you for coming to our conference, the second to be organised by The Iona Institute. This is being co-hosted with The Word Magazine and I'd like to acknowledge the help of its editor-in-chief, Fr Vincent Twomey, and its tireless editor, Sarah MacDonald.

I'd also like to thank Senator Ronan Mullen for agreeing to chair the conference, and, Michael McGrath, John Murray and Oona Stannard for agreeing to address it and also to all of you for coming.

The conference has been organised against a background in which the very existence of denominational schools is being called into question. This challenge to denominational education is not being made in Ireland only. It is also being made in England and Wales, and in Scotland.

This is why we are so keen to hear from Michael and Oona. What has been their experience? How have they handled the challenge? What is the nature of that challenge? How strong is it? What is the politics of their situation and where have denominational schools found political allies? How did they go about finding those allies? How hard was it?

John Murray of Mater Dei will provide a philosophical defence of denominational education. Often it is only when something is challenged that we are forced to think through its rationale and there is a danger, when placed under severe pressure, that we will not be able to find a rationale. This is what makes John's talk so important. His talk, incidentally, will be made sent to all those who contacted us by email, as will the other talks for which we have a script. Anyone

who has not contacted us by email can still do so by emailing info@ionainstitute.ie.

As we know, the latest round in the debate over denominational schools erupted last September when it emerged that an 'emergency' primary school had to be established in north county Dublin to cater for the children of mostly immigrant parents.

It was in this context that accusations of social division, segregation, and even 'educational apartheid' again arose. Words such as these are very loaded and should only be used with great care. They are extremely serious accusations to lay at the door of faith-based schools and they require a very considerable level of proof before they should be used at all.

We need to point out that it is not up to faith-based schools to prove themselves innocent of these charges, it is up to those who use them to prove guilt. When a politician or a union official or a commentator accuses a faith-based school of being divisive, they must be asked, each and every time, to justify this or else they should withdraw the charge.

That said, the wish for a system of schooling that promotes social integration is a worthy one. If it could ever be shown that faith-based schools were indeed harmful to the social fabric we would have to take note and assess their future.

I will not go too deeply into this topic as it will be addressed by other speakers. Suffice it to say that to date there is little or no evidence that faith-based schools are socially damaging. On the contrary.

It should also be noted that countries which have a system of schools that puts social integration as its number one goal – arguably France is such a country – still suffer from social tensions. For example, the rioters that took over parts of Paris in August 2006 came from State-run schools.

In addition, while integration is a worthy goal, there are other social goods that must be taken into account when constructing a system of schooling. A very obvious one is parental choice. Parents are, of course, the primary educators of

their children and schools must reflect their choices to a large, though not exclusive extent.

The Iona Institute recently commissioned an opinion poll on the subject of parental choice. It was conducted by Red C and based on a nationally representative sample of 1000 people.

It put two statements to respondents and asked them which was closest to their point of view. Both statements concerned publicly funded schools. I think the statements capture the essence of the arguments put by the two main views in this debate.

The first statement read: 'In order to promote social integration all children should go to the same kind of schools'.

The second statement read: 'Parents should have the right to choose from a variety of schools for their children'.

Twenty-six percent of respondents agreed with the first statement, while 73pc agreed with the second statement. That is, almost three-quarters of us agree with the principle of parental choice. This shows overwhelming support for the position of the Church in this regard and it is a figure we should be willing to quote often. The results can be emailed to anyone who requests them.

I want to make two other points before finishing. The first relates to a recent action by the European Commission that is little known but could impact very severely on the freedom of action of faith-based schools.

The Commission has accused Ireland of being in breach of the EU's equality directive. It has told us that the exemption faith-based organisations currently enjoy from aspects of equality legislation – the exemption enables them to protect their ethos – is too broad.

Ireland rejects this interpretation but according to Professor Gerry Whyte of Trinity College Dublin, based simply on the facts of the case, the European Commission may well be correct.

If it is, then the European Court of Justice may well find against our exemption in which case the ability of faith-based schools to protect their ethos will be greatly restricted.

The final point relates to the position of the INTO with regard to denominational schools. This position is ambiguous to say the least and it might be said the organisation is trying to have it both ways. INTO Secretary-General, John Carr, has said he is in favour of denominational schools, but he has also said, in a speech in November at an INTO conference on school governance, that he has strong misgivings about a plurality of schools developing. He fears this would lead to a 'two-tier', 'segregated' system of education which sees Catholic children going to one kind of school, and most other children going to another kind, maybe the proposed new VEC model.

It is hard to see how you can be in favour of denominational schools and also to fear that their continued existence alongside the proposed new system of primary schools would be divisive. I think the INTO owes to it all those with an interest in the future of primary education in Ireland to clarify exactly what he has in mind with regard to denominational schools. I think this is only fair.

With that, I will hand you over to Senator Ronan Mullen who will explain how the morning will proceed.

Thank you.

ENDS