

■ Next month sees an international conference at the Vatican to mark the fiftieth anniversary of the Second Vatican Council's declaration on education. Some have dismissed it as vague and irrelevant, but **Sean Whittle** argues that it has a surprisingly modern message

OVER THE past three decades, the place of education within politics has radically changed. In the 1970s when Margaret Thatcher was Education Secretary, the post was regarded as a junior role. When Tony Blair swept to victory in the late 1990s, it was under the mantra of "education, education, education" and the position of Education Secretary is now a coveted job in the Cabinet.

At the same time, on a wider social level we have become increasingly concerned about education. The question of which school our children and grandchildren will attend causes considerable angst. Both politically and socially, we are far more bothered about the state of education than we were two generations ago.

These developments make the Second Vatican Council's document on education, *Gravissimum Educationis*, appear rather trite. Who could disagree with its declaration that education is very important and the Church supports it?

PROMULGATED ON 28 October 1965, in the middle of the closing session of Vatican II, it contains 16 paragraphs and around 5,500 words. There had been eight draft versions of this document before it was finally approved. By the time of the sixth version, in the fourth session of the council, it was realised there was not going to be enough time to deal properly with Catholic schools or for a separate document on universities and higher studies in theology.

The final title reflected a desire to formulate a more inclusive statement about education, embracing universities alongside Catholic schools. There was also a deliberate desire to avoid equating the meaning of "Christian education" with mere attendance at a Catholic school.

A third way for Catholic schools



Changing priorities: Margaret Thatcher, left, in 1973 as the Tory Education Secretary, then seen as a junior role. In 1997, when David Blunkett, right, held the same post for Labour, it was a prime Cabinet responsibility. Photos: PA

Gravissimum Educationis, like all the other documents of Vatican II, is a compromise document striving to engage with the *aggiornamento*, the "updating", that John XXIII called for. Naturally, the Council Fathers wanted a document that reaffirmed much of what Pius XI had stated in 1929, in his encyclical on the Christian education of the youth, *Divini Illius Magistri*. This is still the only papal encyclical on education.

However, *Gravissimum Educationis* recast the language and tone of the encyclical as it explained the Church's commitment to education. The declaration begins by stating the universal right to education and the concept of "Christian education" before dealing with issues relating to schools and then higher education and theology.

Soon after Vatican II, the declaration was regarded as one of the weaker conciliar texts. In 1966, Bishop Christopher Butler described it as a "statement of basic positions". The future Benedict XVI, Joseph Ratzinger, cited the document as an illustration of the way the Council Fathers had begun to run out of steam by the final sessions.

IT HAS BECOME even harder to be overly positive about this text because of the events of 9/11 and the rise of Islamic State. There is a growing suspicion about the place of religion in society. It is becoming harder to assume that religion is a good thing and to respond to claims about it serving the common good. *Gravissimum Educationis* operates with the assumption that when religious people educate, they are doing something that serves the common good. Today this fundamental assumption is being challenged.

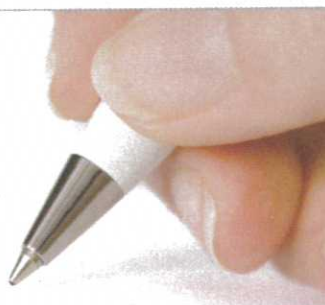
However, the style and tone of the document is more important than the content. It is free from the defensiveness of Pius XI's encyclical and far more progressive. References to original sin have been gently jettisoned. Crucially, there is little emphasis on Catholic education preparing students for death and the afterlife.

The declaration is deliberately written in open and optimistic terms, and is peppered with theological slogans. It presents the importance of education, using the language

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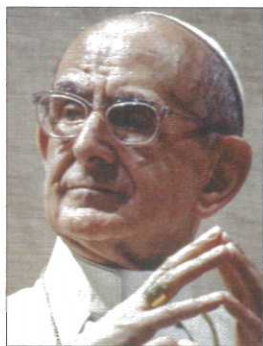


of human rights, deliberately echoing the United Nations Declaration on Human Rights. It asserts the right of the child to a moral and religious education, and maintains that baptism bestows a right to a Christian education.

Moreover, the declaration states that the presence of publicly-funded Catholic schools allows the state to provide parents with some choice over schools. Given the contemporary preoccupation with parental choice, the Council Fathers were ahead of their time. The declaration explains that Catholic schools can, and should, be an aid to the mission of the Church.

Interestingly, the treatment of Catholic schools moves from an overtly catechetical vision to one where those who are “strangers to the gift of faith” can be educated free from evangelisation or tacit catechesis. Rather, the Catholic school will take care of their educational needs. This is suggestive of there being different kinds of Catholic schools: some that catechise Catholic children and others that welcome non-Catholics.

A third kind of Catholic school is called for, says the document, aimed at those who are poor or in need, both Catholic and non-Catholic. Here, the vision of Catholic education is more about serving the needy than on nurturing the faith of Catholic children. The Council Fathers were aware that in many parts of the world there were very few Catholic schools and it was not



Pope Paul VI, in an undated picture, who promulgated *Gravissimum Educationis*

possible for many Catholic parents to send their children to church schools.

Gravissimum Educationis chose not to reaffirm earlier injunctions that prohibited Catholics attending other schools, and at the same time it opted for a more inclusive stance. Fifty years on, certainly in the United Kingdom, this could be significant. For the last 20 years, large numbers of Catholic parents have chosen not to send their children to Catholic schools and many Catholic schools are populated by children who are “strangers to the faith”.

Traditionally it is argued that Catholic schools exist in order to help Catholic parents exercise their political right to bring up their children within their preferred religion. But according to *Gravissimum Educationis*, any school that gives due regard to moral education and religious education could be suitable.

Perhaps the real insight of Vatican II's declaration on education is that it is open to differing accounts of what Catholic schooling might involve. Since it was published, some substantive documents on education have been issued by the Congregation for Catholic Education. While they contain many helpful insights, this proliferation of education texts blurs some of the positive insights of *Gravissimum Educationis*. The declaration has the advantage of saying less rather than more about Catholic education and schools.

Perhaps it is time to exploit the vagueness in Vatican II's education document by developing a non-confessional account of Catholic education. Instead of attempting to justify Catholic education via parental rights and catechetical imperatives (derived from the “rights” that follow baptism), the focus should be on developing a theory or philosophy of education that is open to all, especially the poor and needy, that does not seek to evangelise or catechise.

Indeed there are sound theological reasons for doing this, using the writings from theologians such as Karl Rahner. *Gravissimum Educationis* contains some insights that have the potential to guide our theology of education and it deserves another reading.

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