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Parent power

The row between families of pupils at a high-achieving Catholic comprehensive and the Archdiocese of Westminster has developed into a deep rift. According to one parent at the Cardinal Vaughan Memorial School, the biggest casualty is the collapse of trust in the diocese

The meeting was billed as a chance for dialogue and a clearing of the air. On Monday evening, around 400 parents of boys and girls at the Cardinal Vaughan Memorial School in west London gathered to share their concerns for the future of this high-achieving comprehensive with the chairman and diocesan-appointed members of the governing body.

It had been hoped that Archbishop Vincent Nichols would send a representative to this “turn-down-the-temperature” session, prompted by a long-running dispute over admissions, the process for appointing a new head, and the composition of the governing body, which has ended up in the Supreme

Court and on the front pages of newspapers under distressing headlines about “Catholic parents fighting their bishop”. But, citing legal advice, the diocese didn’t turn up.

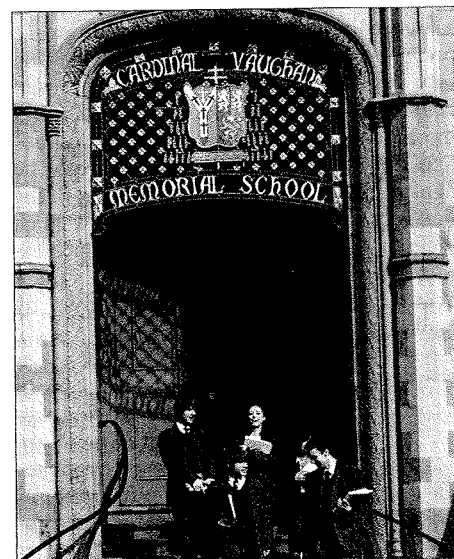
My son is at the Vaughan and each and every day I say a prayer of thanks. It is a model Catholic community, expertly led, bringing out the best in every child from its comprehensive intake academically, spiritually and emotionally. So far I have tried to steer clear of this very public scrap – “the shenanigans” as one well-placed insider calls it – because it seemed to me that both sides, the diocese and the Parents’ Action Group, were taking such antagonistic positions that they were simply postponing the day when this eminently resolvable dispute could be sorted out.

However, sitting on Monday evening in the school hall for two-plus hours of heated debate, I was saddened to witness only the breakdown of trust between parents and the diocese. Time after time, the embattled chairman of governors, John O’Donnell, clearly a decent, well-meaning man, told questioners that he could not comment on diocesan policy towards the school because he didn’t work for the diocese, nor could he convey their concerns to Archbishop Nichols because, as a foundation governor, he did not represent the parents, but was a diocesan appointee.

Putting to one side the inherent contradiction in what he said, his stance begged a fundamental question. Who is the diocese? Who is the Church? Is it just Archbishop Nichols, his auxiliaries, his priests and the officials they employ to advise them on schools’ policy? That makes it sound like a business. Or is it, in that wonderfully resonant phrase of Vatican II, “the people of God”, in this case Catholics in Westminster?

Surely, we are all the diocese? It includes all of us, sees us all serving each other, spends the money we give it and – according to its own description – works to make the Catholic education of children a three-way partnership of trust between parents, parish and school.

Recent events surrounding the Vaughan have seriously depleted that residue of trust and made talk of partnership sound hollow. What happened in that school hall on Monday night was akin to a mini Arab Spring. Here was a group of intelligent, articulate adults, denied a voice by the powers that be, standing up and demanding one. Their principal concern was not, as has sometimes been alleged,



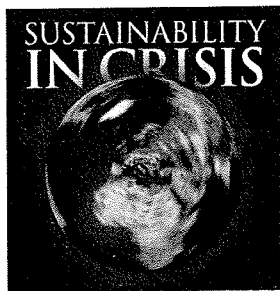
The Cardinal Vaughan Memorial School in Kensington, west London

simply for the fate of their own darlings currently at the school but, as one after another stressed, about preserving both the Catholic ethos of the Vaughan, and the life chance it has given countless generations of young men and women in Westminster. These parents wanted the school to continue that work for generations to come.

The clash over a particular set of circumstances at the school seemed to have brought to the surface a deeper concern among this cross-section of the Catholic laity. They felt the ecclesiastical hierarchy was treating them as disobedient children, with their concerns (well-founded or not) simply swept aside. It all came down, speaker after speaker made plain, to trust.

In a narrow sense, the parents don’t have trust in the governing body, reconstituted recently by the diocese to contain a majority of appointees with no children at the Vaughan. And, more widely, and more worryingly, these loyal, Massgoing Catholics, who for years have dutifully chipped in to every second collection for the Catholic Education Service, no longer trust the diocese to know better and make decisions on their behalf regarding schools.

There are many reasons, way beyond the actual dispute, why that trust has been lost. Some are to do with history and the social context in which our national Church operates.



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One of the greatest successes of Catholic education in this country has been to turn out Catholic parents, like those gathered in the school hall, who know how to question and who are not content simply to be told what to do when they judge it misguided.

My mother would no sooner have publicly contradicted our local bishop about his handling of my Catholic school than she would have missed going to confession regularly. But the Catholic demographic has changed; old ethnically Irish habits of deference to priests have been replaced by a more European Catholic mentality where clerics are viewed with suspicion. Yet our bishops – for the most part the products of an old-style seminary education that started in teenage years and nurtured in them a sense of being placed on a pedestal – struggle to deal with an articulate laity.

If they intend to carry on handing down decisions from on high, then they need to be willing to seek ways that make the claim of seeking a three-way partnership over the education of children between parents, school and parish into a reality.

But there is another aspect to this breakdown in trust. It was the elephant in the room on Monday evening. “Trust us to look after your children’s best interests” is, I’m afraid, a hard sell indeed for the bishops when Catholic church leaders have been exposed as having abused the trust placed in them by the laity to cover-up the activities of paedophile priests. In such cases, what dioceses saw as their best interest – protecting the good name of the institutional Church – was the very opposite of what parents would have done. Their first instinct is to protect their children.

The long-term consequences of the abuse scandal within our Church have yet to be fully grasped by our leaders. They seem to think that, now they have put first-rate and rigorous child-protection measures in place, their leadership role is once more secure. Yet the rebuilding of trust requires time, humility and a good deal more engaging, listening and working tirelessly to achieve a consensus.

Surely, children’s Catholic education is one of the areas where a childless hierarchy has to concede that the laity, who struggle day-to-day with the business of bringing up their offspring in the faith, does actually have something valuable to say. So, please listen to us, explain clearly and openly why you are doing what you are doing, and learn to see that trust as reciprocal. When you hear accounts of the depth of unhappiness, such as that on display on Monday evening, then carefully consider how constructively to move forward, including the sort of compromises that will rebuild partnership. That is what leadership is about.

When Cardinal Basil Hume, 20 years ago, faced a similar dispute with Vaughan parents, he was wise enough, when it was clear that he hadn’t won the argument, to think again. He later made a public apology. That is one reason why Catholics trusted him.