

## Education in Values The Experience of Two Irish-Argentine Schools

By Carla Battezzati

*Throughout the years, Irish-Argentine communities have developed important activities that contributed to the growth of the country that adopted the Irish immigrants in the nineteenth century. In addition, these communities have always struggled to improve the quality of life of their members and to provide a good future for their descendants. For this reason, it is worthwhile to emphasise their active role in education. This article deals with the subject of education in values in Irish-Argentine schools.*

*The aim is to show the way in which Irish educators, from the beginning to the present time, not only strove to give to their community a formal education, but also understood that this had to be based on values that would allow the students to be developed as whole human beings.*

*After dealing with the meaning and significance of values, the author briefly describes the development of Irish-Argentine communities, and chooses two Irish-Argentine schools that will serve as representative examples. These are Saint Bridget's (Colegio Santa Brígida) and Saint Ciarán's (Colegio San Cirano), both located in the city of Buenos Aires, where they continue to flourish after many decades. Their educational projects will exemplify their constant dedication to education in values.*

### **Introduction**

This article will analyse the values inherent in Irish schools in Argentina. After establishing that values are the central pillars of a complete education, we will take a look at the Irish-Argentine community and the educational vision of religious and lay Irishmen who founded schools in Argentina. This will allow us to appreciate the magnitude of the educational work that Irish-Argentines have developed over more than one hundred years. We will refer to two emblematic schools located in the city of Buenos Aires: the traditional Saint Bridget's School founded by the Sisters of Mercy, and the prestigious Saint Ciarán's School founded by Seán Healy, a lay Irishman.

### **Values**

At first glance, values might be considered as 'all that is worthy' (Komar 1996: 150), (1) but it is necessary to go deeper to discover the true meaning of the term and the connection between values, the world and its people. Values can be considered aspects and relations of reality that appeal to us because they satisfy some necessity or because they stimulate us to achieve perfection.

The idea of a link between values and education was strengthened by the publication of Max

Scheler's *Formalism in Ethics and Non-Formal Ethics of Values*. Nowadays, without that conjunction, it is impossible to speak about education. Values are very necessary to sustain - at an institutional and personal level - cultural and educational projects, as they help to design detailed programmes that seek to educate a person, not only in a professional capacity, but in a fundamentally human aspect. The educator is the artist who helps mould those who are educated; his or her final goal is to help students grow and become active members of society.

Taking this into account, the purpose of a worthy educational project is to help the person to develop as a complete human being, developing in the culture and the society to which he or she belongs: 'We have here two natural dynamisms: one that, being imperfect, small, immature, wants to grow and become an adult, and one that, possessing certain perfection, helps us to grow' (Komar 1996: 159). (2)

### **The Irish Community in Argentina**

The Irish-Argentine community is made up of the Irish immigrants and their descendants who settled in Argentina during the nineteenth century. Although many settled in the city of Buenos Aires, Irish immigrants were important colonisers of the rural areas in many Argentine

provinces, mainly Buenos Aires. It was a spontaneous colonisation in which they populated the land, and tended sheep and other cattle. Thus, the growing number of cattle ranches in the province of Buenos Aires soon expanded towards Santa Fe, Entre Ríos and Córdoba.

Once settled in Argentina, many Irish immigrants tried to stay close to their fellow countrymen. They invited priests and nuns who founded social institutions, schools for the education of their children, and hospitals for the attention of their sick, old and destitute. Many of these institutions still exist today.

Anthony Fahy, a Dominican priest, was responsible for some of the key contributions. From his arrival, in 1844, he persistently urged Irish people, then residing in the city, to move out to the rural areas, where paid jobs were easily obtained. Fahy gave extraordinary backing to sheep-farming with his sensible advice. As a result, during his lifetime and for a long time afterwards, some of his countrymen were among the most extensive and prosperous sheep-farmers in the country (Ussher 1954).

Despite his numerous responsibilities, Fahy never failed to show his concern for the material and spiritual needs of his fellow Irishmen. When the situation in Ireland deteriorated, the number of immigrants also rose. Some immigrants arrived in Argentina suffering from illnesses. For their recovery, Fahy rented and prepared a house on Cangallo Street in the city of Buenos Aires. It was inaugurated in 1848 and was known as the 'Irish Immigrant Infirmary'. At first it was intended as a shelter and a nursing home, but it gradually became a permanent hospital for all those who needed medical treatment.

Fahy's work also included education. He promoted the foundation of educational institutions and was the creator of the first school for girls of the Irish community, 'the Irish College', with five classrooms and accommodation for twenty pupils. There was also a school for poor girls. In 1856, the Sisters of Mercy, summoned by Fahy, arrived in Argentina. After arduous legal proceedings, they settled in the country.

The Sisters of Mercy, an Irish congregation founded in Dublin by Catherine McAuley in 1831, added to the traditional vows of poverty, chastity and obedience, a fourth one of service, to take care of the poor, the ignorant and the sick. These Sisters combined their efforts with Fahy's. They afforded significant help during the epidemics that struck Buenos Aires during the second half of the nineteenth century (Fahy died in 1871, during an outbreak of yellow fever) and carried out spectacular educational works.

### **Concerns about the Education of Irish-Argentine children**

One of the major concerns of many Irish immigrants was the education of their children. As we explained above, many of them settled in rural areas. This factor made it difficult for their children to receive a formal education, partly because rural schools were scarce and far apart, and also because parents often needed the assistance of their children in the rural tasks. There was also a cultural prejudice: they feared young people would lose their origin language and their culture if they attended common schools and mixed with the 'natives' (Roger 2003).

Therefore many families decided to educate their children with itinerant school masters. According to authors like Thomas Murray (1919), these were men with little or no education, some of them deserters from English or American ships, others globetrotters that did not remain too long in the same place. They were hired by the families to teach their children within the home. These teachers taught reading, writing and basic arithmetic. They received the pay of a rural labourer. Although they settled with the family, the majority of them remained only for a short time.

Religious formation was a problem because these teachers were mainly Protestant or agnostic, while the majority of the Irish families were Catholic. Although the parents had received a religious education, they had little time to teach their children about their faith. Soon the Irish communities understood that something had to be done if they wanted their children to receive a suitable Catholic education

founded on the values and traditions that many cherished as a key aspect of their identity.

Fahy opened a school for Irish girls on Riobamba Street in the city of Buenos Aires in 1857. This school was administered by the Sisters of Mercy. In 1865 this congregation established Saint Peter and Paul's School in Chascomús in the province of Buenos Aires. This second school was closed in 1872 due to an epidemic and the exodus of the Irish to other areas. Shortly afterwards, they opened Saint Joseph's School in the same province.

In 1880 the Sisters of Mercy left the country due to the closure of the Irish Hospital six years previously and the advent of anticlericalism to the political sphere. The Sisters of the Sacred Heart took control of the school and the convent. More schools were created and in 1883 the Irish Catholic Association was founded to administer the school on Riobamba Street.

### **Saint Bridget's School**

The Sisters of Mercy returned to Argentina in 1890. By that time the building was inadequate. Therefore the Irish Catholic Association sold it to another religious congregation who established there the La Salle School. The construction of a new building for the school was undertaken in the district of Flores, on the outskirts of the city. In 1899 the opening of Saint Bridget's School, an imposing building in the Neo-Gothic style, was blessed by the Archbishop of Buenos Aires, Monsignor Castellanos, in the presence of ninety students and hundreds of members of the Irish communities.

Initially the school was directed by the Missionary Sisters of the Sacred Heart, but in 1902 the school was given to the care of the Sisters of Mercy, who remained there until 1979. This institution could house two hundred and fifty boarders, daughters of Irish families, who, in many cases, had limited resources.

When the students finished their primary studies, they could carry on learning English, typewriting and shorthand. This allowed them to become executive secretaries and to find jobs in important multinational companies. In 1948 the organisation of the secondary school began, and

it was recognised by the Argentinean government in 1957. We are able to learn about the pupils' experiences at school thanks to the collection of testimonies compiled by Patsy Farrell, former student and present professor of the Institution, in her book *Nuestros años en Santa Brígida. 100 años de anécdotas y recuerdos* (Our Years at Saint Bridget's: 100 Years of Anecdotes and Memories).

Students woke up between 6:00 and 6:30am, went to mass (when it was mandatory to do so), they had breakfast, cleaned the school according to 'charges' ordered by the Director and had Spanish lessons until noon. They had two breaks. During one of them they ate fresh bread, and those that had money could buy chocolates. The second break was after lunch. After lunch, they took sewing or embroidery classes and then English until teatime at 3:30pm. After another break they had time to study, and then they prayed and had dinner. The girls had to be in bed by 8pm (with time, this was changed to 10pm). Visitors were received during the weekend if the students demonstrated good behaviour, and during the week if their relatives came from rural areas. Sometimes, the Sisters allowed the girls to use the radio and dance. Most of the outings were related to religious events.

The study of the English language was organised on the basis of the programmes of the Asociación Argentina de Cultura Inglesa (Argentine Association of English Culture). The students sat their final exams at the end of their third year of studies. Reading all these testimonies about the daily life of the students and all their beautiful memories it is possible to understand the love and respect that the students and former students felt for the school, the Sisters and their classmates. Patsy Farrell recalls:

*I will always feel grateful, first to my parents who sent me to Saint Bridget's School as a boarder (...). I want to thank my dear Sisters of Mercy who formed us, not only intellectually, but who taught us to be good people. They have been our mothers and aunts. Thank you! Thank you very much! You are the living testimony of Christ, an example to follow. I will continue fighting for the unity of all the former students, to keep us together, because while we are*

*together, you and your lessons will be alive. You are and will be the fundamental pillar of our dear Saint Bridget's School (Farrell 1999: 64). (3)*

As of 1979 and until 1999 the Congregation of Saint Martha was established at the school and took care of the spiritual needs of its educational community. The direction of the school was then transferred to a highly qualified team of lay educators. At present Saint Bridget's is a Catholic, bilingual school, co-educational since 1989. And just as on the first day, it promotes a solid education, nestled in Christian values. Those who run the school have always had the vision that education is meant to aid students to find their purpose in life, to better understand themselves and to adapt to a changing world. This institution considers that, in order to develop human potential in the intellectual, social, moral, affective and spiritual spheres, education has to be sustained in the values that reflect the evangelical message.

On Saint Bridget's website we read:

*Our school instructs children and young people in the fundamental truths of the Doctrine of the Church. The languages are conceived as a tool of communication with other linguistic communities and a key to understanding other cultures. (...) We consider that an international education and formation based on our national identity complement each other. (4)*

Thanks to those values it is possible to say that Saint Bridget's is an institution committed to the aims of the Irish Catholic Association. On the school's website we further read:

*We set out to train young Christian people to become managers of the culture of peace, justice and honesty, within a framework of academic excellence and promotion of each human being. We rely on God's help, more than a century of educational experience, the qualifications and human qualities of all the actors who form this educational community. (5)*

We can state that the purpose of this school has always been to obtain a solid and complete education of the individual, based on Christian values. This has allowed them to search for peace, understanding and respect between all peoples. Their desire, as educators, has been for

the students to develop self-discipline and responsibility that allow them to develop intellectual autonomy, solidarity and cooperative work.

On the basis of what is mentioned above, another pillar of fundamental importance in its present educational project is the promotion and maintenance of the Irish traditions through the use of English as a second language and the teaching of the history, culture and traditions of Ireland using different tools, for example: traditional poems, songs, typical dances, dramatisations, videos and multimedia presentations.

### **Saint Ciarán's School**

Saint Ciarán's was founded in 1933 by Seán Healy (1896-1982) and his wife Winifred Kelly (1900-1990), both born in Ireland. Seán Healy was a pharmacist and a teacher of the Irish language. He migrated to Brazil and after becoming ill with malaria, he moved to Buenos Aires, in search of a more benign climate. Once settled, he worked at the Buenos Aires English High School and soon he was Director of Saint Lucy's. After that experience he decided to create an environment in which he could educate his pupils with humanist ideals (Roger 2003).

The founders named the school in honour of the Irish saint, founder of Ireland's most important monastery and forerunner of the universities that were created there some centuries later. The slogan of the school, *veritas praevalabit* (the truth will prevail) summarises the philosophy of the school. The school was initially located a few blocks away from Saint Bridget's and in 1935 it was moved to its present building located in Rivadavia Avenue in the district of Caballito, in the city of Buenos Aires.

Saint Ciarán's was originally a school for boys (boarders, day pupils and half-boarders). As time went by, the school opened its doors to girls, who at the beginning did not share lessons with the boys. For the first few decades, English lessons were in the charge of Irish teachers, but gradually they were replaced by Argentine teachers. Although it was a bilingual school, and Spanish was not the children's first language,

Healy doubled the number of subjects and added new ones, such as singing and drawing lessons and gym, because he thought that they could help develop the students' discipline, perception and concentration. Other new features were the Kindergarten, the sports field and the buses that serviced the families within the city of Buenos Aires. The founders retired in 1960, after handing over the administration of the school to their children.

Through the years, the institution fortified its humanist profile. In the intellectual scope, Saint Ciarán's has always worked with the aim of developing all of the students' capacities, giving them a very solid base in languages and human values. Concerning spiritual, moral and social aspects, the educational project seeks to help the students realise their potential and use their talents to help others. They strive to develop the students' virtues and turn them into responsible citizens. They promote respect towards their elders and loyalty towards their equals, as a fundamental necessity for coexistence.

It is necessary to emphasise that, although it is a lay school, it includes a chapel and Religious Studies is an optional subject that, according to their website, provides 'a space for formation and growth in the faith, the aim of which is to promote a personal encounter with Christ'. (6) The students also have the option of being prepared to receive the sacraments. There are liturgical celebrations and catechists offer spiritual support. At present, Saint Ciarán's has an honourable reputation within Argentine education and like Saint Bridget's, has opened its

doors to those who want to be part of their project, regardless of their ethnic origins.

### Conclusions

We can see that bilingualism allowed these Irish-Argentine schools to provide their students with an enhanced formal education. This feature allowed Irish-Argentines to integrate into the country where they had been born, while keeping their ancestors' language and ways. The key role given to the Catholic religion was another remarkable factor, evident even in the case of the schools founded by lay Irishmen, such as Saint Ciarán's School.

For Irish educators, education in values has always been closely bound up with religious education. Seán Healy considered that through education one has to obtain much more than academic abilities. He affirmed that the good teacher is one who helps the student to develop his character, instils moral values, and virtues like truth, loyalty and honesty, which are the basis for a successful life. To disregard this could be disastrous for young people.

For the Irish educators who developed such an extraordinary task, education without values was impossible. These came hand-in-hand with their religious beliefs and their traditions, which survive up until the present time. Since the very beginning, they knew that the goal of education is to foster values in the individual and in society, because only through values is human realisation really possible.

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### Notes

- (1) Todo aquello que vale.
- (2) Aquí se encuentran dos dinamismos naturales: de quien siendo imperfecto, pequeño, inmaduro quiere crecer y hacerse adulto, y de quien poseyendo cierta perfección, lo ayuda a crecer.
- (3) Siempre estaré agradecida, primero a mis padres por haberme enviado al Santa Brígida y pupila (...) después quiero agradecer a mis queridas Sisters of Mercy (...) por habernos enseñado no sólo lo intelectual sino a ser buenas personas. (...) Han sido nuestras madres y tías. ¡Gracias! ¡Muchas gracias! Son el testimonio vivo de Cristo para imitar. Seguiré luchando para que todas las ex alumnas estemos unidas y juntas porque mientras estemos juntas, ustedes y sus enseñanzas estarán vivas. Son y serán el pilar fundamental de nuestro querido Santa Brígida.
- (4) Nuestro colegio forma niños y jóvenes en las verdades fundamentales de la doctrina de la Iglesia. Los idiomas son concebidos tanto como herramienta de comunicación con otras comunidades

lingüísticas y como llave para comprender otras culturas. (...) Consideramos que la educación internacional complementa la formación en las raíces del ser nacional.

(5) Nos proponemos formar jóvenes cristianos gestores de la cultura de paz, justicia y honestidad, dentro de un marco de excelencia académica y promoción integral de la persona humana. Contamos con la ayuda de Dios, con la trayectoria de más de un siglo en educación, con el perfeccionamiento y calidad humana de todos los actores que integran esta comunidad educativa.

(6) Un espacio de formación y de maduración en la fe, cuyo fin es generar en el alumno un encuentro personal con Cristo.

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