

***Speech made by the Bishop of Tuam on the Education
Debate at the General Synod in Dublin.***

Your Grace, members of Synod,

In my diocese we have just six of the 174 Church of Ireland primary schools. Three of these are now on the 'danger of closure' list. That is, they are likely to become one teacher schools on the new teacher/pupil ratio and that, in my view, will inevitably result in a downward spiral leading to a further reduction of pupils and closure.

We may understand why the Minister doesn't want to make a special case for minority schools. However, in the rural dioceses by treating us in like manner to all others, we are in effect being treated unfairly in that a disproportionate number of protestant schools will be affected with, often, no prospect of amalgamating with another – distances involved are just too far.

So the dilemma for us is that while not wanting to be treated differently, we do need to be treated differently if there is to be fairness and justice. We are different and without an acknowledgement of that difference, large swathes of the country will be left without a protestant primary school.

As a Patron, I am conscious of three concerns –

First that as a Church, in these times of austerity we must be prepared to take our share of the pain – take it we should but in equal measure only, as **fellow citizens of the state**.

Secondly, I'm aware that my task as a patron is to ensure that Church of Ireland people have available to them, in as much as is possible, the **opportunity to have their children educated in a Church of Ireland school**. My fear is that the West of Ireland, which currently has no secondary

schools between Sligo and Limerick, is now destined to have half its primary schools eliminated – and that is contrary to the undertakings given to the minority community when the Irish state was set up.

Thirdly, my concern is for **the children** – they deserve the best we can offer and my view is that, even if we can work around the health and safety issues, one teacher schools cannot offer pupils the variety and the teacher and peer stimulus that is required for a balanced and broad education.

So in all three concerns, I find myself thwarted. Unintentionally, I believe, Mr Quinn is in danger of discriminating against and irreparably damaging the protestant community and I urge him to re-think the implications for rural schools and the communities of which they are the life blood.