

# Chapter 9

## School Religious Education in the Classroom: A Reading from the Catholic and Colombian Context



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**Abstract** Using a qualitative methodology, this chapter reflects on ecclesial and educational practices in Colombia. The critical analysis of the general framework proposed by the Congregation for Catholic Education on the teaching of the religious dimension gives rise to a confrontation between identity and religious transformations in Colombian society. It also reflects on how religious teaching in the classroom dialogues with the plural reality of society.

### 9.1 Introduction

The classroom is the place where the application of pedagogical paradigms and approaches, national education public policies, the curricular projects of each institution, the multiform personal and socio-cultural reality experienced by students, the concern of parents, and the didactic actions of teachers converge. Bearing this in mind, this chapter addresses the question of the specific commitment of the Catholic Church to school-based religious education and the way in which institutional guidelines are applied to a particular contextual reality such as Colombia, through projections and proposals that directly affect the dynamics of the classroom.

For this reason, through qualitative research, which focuses on the investigation and careful critical analysis of selected texts, as well as a reflective exercise on ecclesial and educational practices limited to the Colombian context, the general framework proposed by the Congregation for Catholic Education on the teaching of

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the religious dimension will be made explicit initially, insofar as it is a fundamental reference. And, later, some elements of the specific Colombian context will be made explicit, such as its identity and religious transformations, as well as the proposal of the Colombian Episcopal Conference, which makes possible religious teaching in the classroom, in such a way that the Catholic evangelical message can assume the plural reality without renouncing its own believing identity.

## 9.2 Religious School Education in Catholic Education

The Declaration *Gravissimum Educationis* on Christian Education, as one of the results of the Second Vatican Council, reiterates the millennial commitment of the Catholic Church to the educational processes of all humanity, in relation to the contributions that she can make with the objective of fostering social progress and as a consequence of assuming education as an inalienable universal right. But among the different means of exercising the educational service, the “school” stands out as the privileged place of formation (Vatican Council II, 1995: 415). And while it is true that the Catholic school, like the non-Catholic school, provides a cultural and academic formation, “at the same time as it is open to the conditions of present-day progress, it educates its students to achieve effectively the good of the earthly city, and prepares them to serve the spread of the Kingdom of God, so that by the exercise of an exemplary and apostolic life they may be like the saving leaven of the human community” (Vatican Council II, 1995: 415).

Within the framework of this ecclesial purpose, “religious education in the school” is placed in an even more concrete way, which starts from the firm conviction that the educational work must attend to the formation of the religious dimension of children and young people, as a consequence of the project of a truly integral education (Bonilla Morales 2015), which takes into account all the human dimensions, and of the intention to form a synthesis between faith, culture and life. In this regard, the Congregation for Catholic Education has affirmed that religious education “must be imparted in the school in an explicit and systematic way, to avoid creating in the student an imbalance between profane culture and religious culture. Such a teaching differs fundamentally from any other because it does not aim at a simple intellectual adherence to religious truth, but at the personal connection of the whole being with the person of Christ” (1977).

The insistence that religious formation should be part of the curriculum of every Catholic educational institution within the school setting, and even of any school that consciously promotes integral formation, will be a cause for reflection, debate and questioning. Especially because the first declarations of the Congregation for Catholic Education considered that there should be a very profound relationship between religious teaching and formation in the faith from the point of view of catechesis, in such a way that the educational commitment was not simply academic or cultural but predominantly evangelizing.

But this position has become more nuanced with time, so that a clear differentiation was made, without losing the link, between religious education and catechesis, especially because the latter “presupposes above all the vital acceptance of the Christian message as a saving reality. Moreover, the specific place of catechesis is a community that lives the faith in a larger space and for a longer period than the school, that is, for the whole of its life” (Congregation for Catholic Education 1988). While the religious education offered in the school, besides responding to the stages of human life, “taking into consideration the very elements of the Christian message, seeks to make known what in fact constitutes the identity of Christianity and what Christians consistently strive to achieve in their lives” (Congregation for Catholic Education 1988).

In this way, the ecclesial documents reflect the tension between catechesis and religious school education, marked by complementarity and distinction, which will later be reflected in the classroom due to the option that the teachers have since, on the one hand, it is possible to use the contents and the dynamics proper to catechesis, especially the pre-sacramental one, where traditionally students who have previously embraced the Christian message of salvation, who usually come from a Catholic family or community, and are willing to deepen their life of faith and even to witness as believers, are instructed; and, on the other hand, the same ecclesial documents have proposed school religious education as a process of acquiring knowledge about Christianity which does not necessarily imply its adherence. Nevertheless, for the Congregation of Catholic Education, catechesis and religious education in schools are complementary in the measure that the Catholic school, besides teaching the Christian tradition, when it addresses a population of believers generates a valuable contribution to the life of faith, just as catechesis, besides strengthening communities, also provides relevant knowledge about Christianity.

Difficulties then arise when, within the area of a Catholic educational institution, those responsible for religious education find themselves faced with a panorama that is no longer what it used to be, that is to say, it is no longer homogeneous, the Catholic creed does not predominate, on the contrary, neither students nor parents are willing to accept a catechetical formation in the classroom or to demand adherence to a faith within a particular institution, since there is certainly full freedom in a world that is diverse or plural in matters of religious experience. As a matter of fact, the same Congregation for Catholic Education pronounced itself at the turn of the millennium on the panorama of socio-religious transformation: “the phenomena of multiculturalism, and of a society that is more and more multiracial, multiethnic and multireligious, bring along with them enrichment, but also new problems. In addition to this, in countries of ancient evangelization, a growing marginalization of the Christian faith as a reference and light for a true and convinced understanding of existence” (2000).

This scenario of tension is what Catholic educational institutions are experiencing, since there are more and more students who belong to non-Catholic religious and ecclesial communities, as well as others who declare themselves to be atheists or indifferent to religion, who on some occasions attend “forced” religion classes, deny this formation or resort to laws that give the possibility of not attending these classes,

such as access to non-specific religious formation from the history of religions, or formation on ethics and values, among other options. “There are cases, more and more frequent, in which they are not only indifferent or non-practicing, but lack the slightest religious or moral formation. Additionally, in many students and in families, a feeling of apathy for ethical and religious formation” (Congregation for Catholic Education 2000).

Faced with the plurality of experiences or responses to the religious dimension, in different countries some lay and secularist movements have opted for radically defend the fundamental right to freedom of conscience, rejecting all types of religious education in schools (Delgado 2011; Magendzo 2008), while the Catholic Church has turned to both the fundamental right to religious freedom and the right of parents to educate their children according to their preference, as expressed in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (United Nations General Assembly 1948), in order to defend religious education. In the same way, in the face of the pretension of some States to decide on Catholic religious education, the Church has defended these same fundamental rights, considering that it alone is responsible for establishing what would be the appropriate content for the teaching of the Catholic religion in the school environment, particularly under the guidance of the Episcopal Conferences. And, in the same way, it respects the religious freedom of those who are not Catholic and who attend Catholic educational institutions, avoiding any kind of coercion (Grocholewski 2009).

### **9.3 The Context in Which We Respond in the Classroom: Towards the Colombian Case**

The guidelines on school religious education that have come out of the Second Vatican Council and the Congregation for Catholic Education are a valuable guide for Catholic educational institutions around the world, as well as for teachers who take on religious education in the school and the challenges of this formation that are presented daily in the classroom. But since the contexts are not the same and it would be very difficult to describe them in their entirety, this study will now be limited to the Colombian context, to school religious education in Colombia, with the clear awareness that it shares several elements with other Latin American countries and also has its own particularities.

For this reason, it should be made explicit that this reflective proposal is limited to education and religion as complex and converging elements. In this way, it is important to remember that the religious experience in Latin America is very different from the European experience or from other regions, specifically insofar as Latin American religiosity has survived the predictions that established the end of religious experience, based on some of the postulates of secularization that range from privatization, to individualization, indifference and atheism.

Pluralization is found, but the privatization of the religious does not seem to work in the Latin American context; neither does individualization, and we can say that the religious transformation in Latin America questions the idea of the end of religion in modernity. It lets us understand that the paradigm of secularization, which European and American sociologists thought was universal, is in fact very regional, and that what is happening to the peripheries of the West is a completely unprecedented process which questions the paradigm and which therefore deserves to be examined very closely in order to rethink the development of religion in late modernity. (Bastián 2015: 323–324)

In Latin America and Colombia the religious transformation is particular, since there are considerable religious manifestations in public spaces, which are not limited to the private sphere, which contradict the logic of privatization of the religious. Likewise, there are processes of consolidation of large faith communities, in contrast to the individualization of other regions of the world. Similarly, here atheism or religious indifference do not predominate, which is standardized in Europe, although this thought and way of life is certainly on the rise. What can be identified is the minor presence of indigenous cultures and communities of African descent that have been discriminated against and excluded for centuries, as well as the presence of other religions that are gaining presence, although Christianity continues to be the predominant religion (Marzal 2002). But this majority of Christians does not represent a uniform block, nor does the Catholic Church exercise the same influence as it did in the previous two centuries (19th and 20th), since the religious panorama responds to a growing mutation that has generated many difficulties in understanding its complexity and carrying out an exercise in classification.

In this sense, Bastián considers that one way of explaining this phenomenon is from the globalization of religion in Latin America where “the religious is developing more and more, through configurations in networks, from needs and demands, on the part of groups or individuals in search of identity, cultural and social promotion, personal restructuring or alternative methods of health and well-being” (2015: 325), since finally these movements of the religious field respond to the logic of the diversification of the religious market (Berger 1971: 177). Moreover, for some sociologists it responds to the relationship between organizations that produce symbolic goods of salvation and those who consume them (Bourdieu 2000; Mallimaci 2001).

These would be the shaping elements of a religious expression that is dynamic, that is constantly transforming and giving rise to a truly pluralistic Christianity in Latin America. Consequently, in addition to the schism of the East and the schism of the West, with the divisions that they generated in world Christianity in the eleventh and sixteenth centuries, there has now been a new exponential division between different forms of Protestantism and especially Pentecostalism, with the reconfiguration of Christian churches that hardly even themselves find room among the traditional standards.

However, it is necessary to mention that in Colombia Catholicism assumed a fundamental role in the process of articulating the nation, so much so that in the middle of the twentieth century 99% of the population considered itself Catholic, until in the 1960s a transformation took place due to the evangelical conferences that arrived in the country considering it a land of mission, to the idea of freedom of

conscience and worship present even in the Second Vatican Council, to the external socio-political landscape (World War II, Cold War, communism, liberation theology, industrialization and urbanization), internal rural-urban migration due to violence, especially in the period from 1948 to 1953, urban transformation, the relationship between the Catholic Church and the National Front that divided power between liberals and conservatives, as well as the violent persecution of Protestants (Bidegaín 2005). It should even be mentioned that the changes in the religious panorama in recent decades are also due to bad examples and problems caused by the lack of effective pastoral projects.

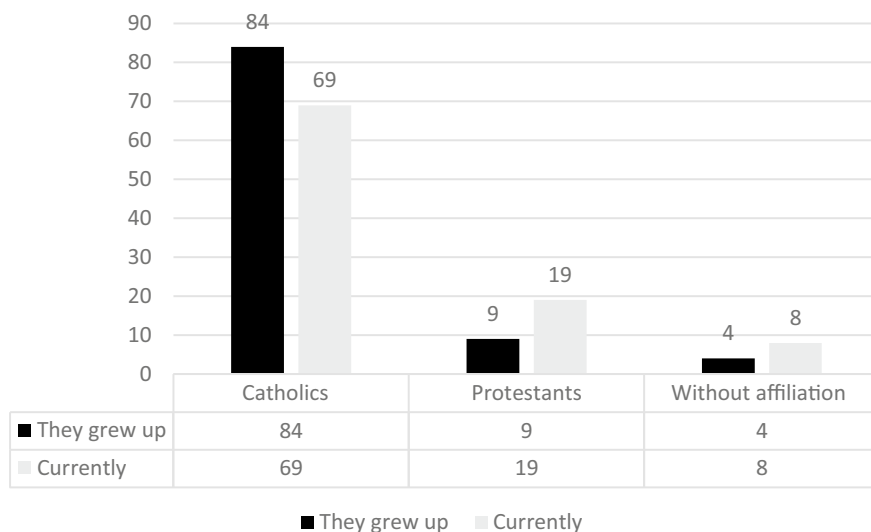
In this scenario, the Protestant community numbered between nine thousand members in 1930. By the 1990s it was approximately four million, in exponential growth according to the current mutation of the Pentecostal churches and movements. Likewise, there has been a process of recognition and recovery of some Amerindian communities. Something similar occurs with the rituals that come from communities of African descent, while Eastern rites are gaining followers from different social classes and even Jewish and Muslim communities are gradually growing. In addition to this gradual religious development, there was a progressive de-institutionalization of religion, until the official rupture of the State with the Catholic Church through the Political Constitution of 1991 and the space gained by political movements of Christian inspiration that facilitated the free and constant creation of churches (Bidegaín 2005).

Some elements of this mutation can be seen in the percentage presented by research that has been able to determine the number of believers who were born or raised within the Catholic, Protestant or unaffiliated sphere, but who subsequently changed their way of thinking and living the religion. Thus, in Graph 1 it can be seen that there is a decrease in the percentage of Catholics (adults who grew up in this faith), since many of them abandon their affiliation to this Church, while the percentage of Protestants and people without affiliation is increasing (Fig. 9.1).

Similarly, it is striking for the Colombian context that the research *Religion in Latin America: Widespread Change in a Historically Catholic Region*, carried out by the Pew Research Center, presents the result that this country has the highest percentage of Protestants coming from the Catholic tradition (Fig. 9.2).

#### **9.4 Religious Education in the Classroom: Perspective from Colombia**

This undeniable reality of pluralism and religious mutation in Colombia, beyond the concepts, classifications and reflections that can be made, is transferred in a parallel way to the experience within the classroom, where the Catholic school perseveres with its mission to educate in the religious dimension. This implies a great challenge insofar as the religious education teacher cannot carry out a homogeneous process, nor can he or she take it for granted that everyone is Catholic, but must have a high



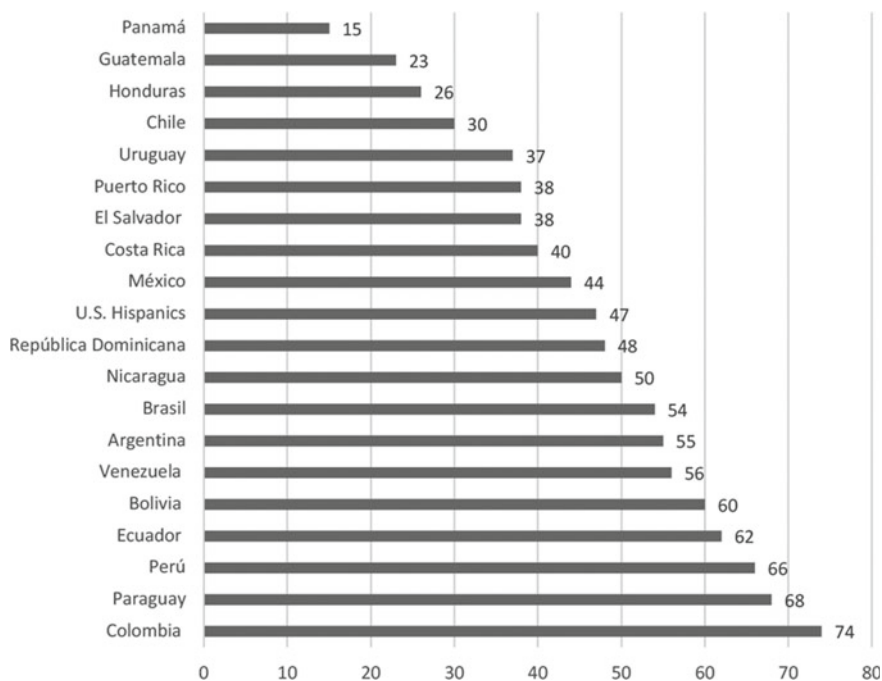
**Fig. 9.1** The change in religious identity in Latin America (*Source* Pew Research Center [2014]. This same study aims to project what religious behavior will be like around the world in the next four decades. For the particular case, they consider that the Christian majority that Colombia had in 2010, with 92.5%, in 2060 will not have greater variation, going to 91.8%, which includes the group of Catholics, along with other types of Christianity [Pew Research Center 2015])

probability of having a heterogeneous group in their religious experience, since the classroom clearly reflects the religious experience of society.

Therefore, in the context of the plurality of religious experiences, there is the “demand for a religious education that responds to the confessional diversity of the students; at the same time, there is a growing concern to give a religious formation that allows for the understanding of diversity and the affirmation of tolerance” (Bidegáin 2005: 21). The acceptance of this contextual challenge and the way it is put into practice in the classroom are the elements that differ according to the religious, theological and pedagogical presuppositions, as well as by official provisions or textbooks that mark out guidelines of formation with diverse nuances.

From this perspective, it is worth highlighting the work of the Congregation for Catholic Education, which has insisted on several occasions on the need to be more and more aware of the plurality of cultures and to identify the tension generated by religions, not to simply accuse religions of being the cause of the various territorial forms of violence, insofar as the causes are diverse and generally go beyond the single individual or institutional religious experience, but to prevent the religion or experience of faith within a culture from being manipulated since, through widespread intercultural education, the relations between different religions and cultures can provide greater social stability and personal maturity (2013).

Likewise, an intercultural dialogue implies the recognition that living out of faith cannot be limited to the private sphere, but is open to the integrity of life, both in



**Fig. 9.2** Protestants who grew up in Catholic circles (**Fuente:** Pew Research Center 2014)

the private and public spheres. Only in this way the true encounter with difference is possible, whether it is with atheists or with people who live other religious forms or belong to other Christian communities that can carry out different forms of dialogue: “there is a dialogue of life, sharing joys and sorrows; there is a dialogue of works, collaborating in the promotion of the development of men and women; there is a theological dialogue, when possible, with the study of the respective religious heritage; there is a dialogue of religious experience” (Congregation for Catholic Education 2013). All these forms of dialogue, fortunately, can also be transferred to the formative experience within the classroom, promoting the dialogue of differences.

In this way, Catholic educational centers have the possibility of making a reality of the project of achieving a synthesis between faith, culture and life, without dogmatic or closed attitudes that would deny the evident religious plurality present in public and private, denominational and non-denominational schools, since the reality that children and young people will face is equally plural. And the best training they can receive in the religious sphere is that which prepares them, from school and the classroom, to strengthen their identity, while at the same time recognising the difference they will find in their families, in their neighbourhood, in their city.

Therefore, the challenge for religious school education in the classroom consists in responding to this type of pluralistic education, in proposing a Catholic religious education that presents with clarity and relevance one’s own tradition, but respecting



the legal context of freedom of conscience and religious freedom, while at the same time educating in intercultural, interreligious and interecclesial (ecumenical) dialogue, since in this way religious education will coherently provide preparation for life, for living with those who are different.

The manner in which this is done may vary, but in consequence of what has been stated here, any area plan or curriculum on school religious education cannot be set aside for the specific educational context experienced by each student present in the classroom. Moreover, the pattern will be marked precisely by the experience of the group of students, by the different ways in which the students live their religious experience and create a relationship.

In the context of this country, the Episcopal Conference of Colombia has proposed the “Standards for School Religious Education”, assuming in a consistent manner its ecclesial task. It is a guide or a booklet that in its last edition includes precisely the document *Educating for intercultural dialogue in the Catholic school of the Congregation for Catholic Education*. In addition to reminding religion teachers of the legal framework in force in the country in religious and educational matters, it presents a curricular proposal structured around an axis for each grade (from pre-school to eleventh grade), four approaches developed in each grade according to a systematic vision (anthropological, biblical, biblical-christological and ecclesiological), questions on problems, themes or content associated with these questions, as well as measurable learning standards (learning to know, learning to do and learning to live in community) (2017).

In particular, it can be highlighted in this document of the Colombian Bishops’ Conference that “just as the first approach allows the perspective of non-Christian religions to be presented, the fourth approach opens up the space to present the ecumenical perspective, that is, the convictions of the churches, which recognize each other as Christians” (2017: 20). Similarly, in the problematic questions, themes and approaches there are also some explicit references to this same intention to form in knowledge and dialogue with difference.

Likewise, as a specific tool for the classroom in the area of school religious education, these Standards propose as a methodology for each class to carry out an “investigative” process, assuming research as “a method that is connatural to school education and to the challenges and demands that are made on education today, among which is teaching children, adolescents and young people to learn and teaching them to use what they have learned in the construction of their identity and in their daily lives” (Bishops’ Conference of Colombia 2017: 25).

In order to carry out this research dynamic, it is proposed to begin with an invitation addressed to the students, so that they can analyze a problematic situation that may come from Sacred Scripture, the life of the Church, the social-religious context, personal life and even an event related to other areas or disciplines. The analysis of the situation leads the students, in the classroom, to formulate the problem and to pose questions that specify the research route, delimiting the problem they are going to work on. And since religious education does not consist of a process of indoctrination, among all the students they pose hypotheses that attempt to solve the problem question, through a process of critical dialogue, debate and consensus.

The hypotheses are then grounded through a consultation of documents from the Magisterium of the Catholic Church, from other fields and even through testimonies. And, later, one of the hypotheses is accepted as the most pertinent and is formulated in a conclusive manner, although the formulation of this response can be presented through other didactic means (Bishops' Conference of Colombia 2017: 26–29).

## 9.5 Conclusions

Certainly, the Catholic Church reaffirms its mission to facilitate and promote educational institutions through which it renders a valuable service to society and, at the same time, carries out processes of evangelization, but with the clear conviction that the space for catechesis is not the same as that of the school, since in school spaces no type of proselytism or religious coercion should be carried out. But since an integral anthropological vision of education considers the formation of the religious dimension to be fundamental, the Catholic Church sees the need to carry out a process of religious education from the classroom, since it is a fundamental area that requires formation through a face-to-face subject.

In this sense, the main purpose of the Catholic educational project is to fulfill its ecclesial mission and thus be a ferment in society, transforming school communities towards processes of humanization that begin in the classroom and then expand to all the scenarios where it can be present. However, in the face of religious diversity that is being transformed in an exponential manner, as can be seen from the example of the Colombian context, this task requires a much broader dialogical view, which motivates students to strengthen their own religious experience, as well as the capacity to enter into a constructive dialogue with those who believe differently.

Of course, the recognition of religious diversity in Catholic schools and from the classroom does not mean giving up one's own experience. Thus, if a parent is interested in educating his or her children in the Catholic faith, he or she will certainly seek to ensure that religious education is preferably in line with his or her religious ideal. But this necessary formation offered in schools or colleges must seek a healthy balance in presenting Christianity in depth, with all its particularities, while at the same time making known other non-Catholic Christian realities, other religions and religious movements proper to their context, so that both prejudices, which are almost always unfounded, and fears of those who think, believe and celebrate differently are dissipated.

Finally, the proposal of the Colombian Episcopal Conference, through the "Standards for School Religious Education", is a valuable attempt to facilitate religious formation in the classroom and the constant renewal of this work material, which is welcomed in most of the Colombian territory. It allows us to recognize our shortcomings, to strengthen our most valuable elements and to make progress in this ecclesial challenge, accepting the purpose of making coexistence possible in the midst of diversity, promoting dialogue as a permanent way of recognizing others and differences without losing our own identity as Christians and Catholics.

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