

Chapter 3

The Interdisciplinary Imperative of Catholic Religious Education

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Introduction

Amongst the Pope's titles, that of Supreme Pontiff is probably the most well known. The title of *Pontifex Maximus* has most of the time been understood to mean a bridge builder. In Catholic circles, this has been mainly interpreted in terms of the Pope's role of acting as a bridge between humanity and God. Lately, it has also been interpreted with reference to the will and the need to dialogue with the world and to facilitate dialogue amongst humans. Truth be told, for most part of modernity, this has definitely not been the case. With the advent of enlightenment, secular humanism and the emergence of secular nations, Catholicism entrenched itself within secure confines, viewing change as a threat and therefore militantly condemning it and working against it.

However, as Casanova (1996) notes, these past 140 years have been crucial for the Catholic Church to its becoming a transnational entity capable of establishing a globally recognised moral authority. While it is true that various sectors of society, including media and secular groups, tend to question, if not ridicule, the Church's positions, particularly on gender and sexuality, it is also true that the teachings and actions of the Church have left an impact on societies. The encyclicals *Rerum Novarum* (Pope Leo XIII, 1891), *Mater et Magistra* (Pope John XXIII, 1961) and *Caritas in Veritate* (Pope Benedict XVI, 2009), just to mention a few, influenced concrete economical market and labour conditions, just as the persona of the recent popes have been crucial in preventing wars and facilitating international dialogue and change. Likewise, society at large acknowledges the 1,001 voluntary Catholic entities that give an invaluable service in various sectors in all four corners of the earth.

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All this would not have been possible had the Church not taken to heart its mission to be truly the salt and light of the earth and consequently to dialogue and journey with humanity. The apex of this will to dialogue is summed up in the documents of the Second Vatican Council and specifically in the Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et Spes* (Second Vatican Council, 1965a). Indeed, it is when the Church embraces the challenges of a dialogue with humanity that it can make a significant contribution to humanity. As the Fathers of the recent Synod of Bishops proclaimed, the New Evangelisation,

carefully cultivates the dialogue with cultures, confident that it can find in each of them the “seeds of the Word” about which the ancient Fathers spoke. In particular, the new evangelization needs a renewed alliance between faith and reason. We are convinced that faith has the capacity to welcome the fruits of sound thinking open to transcendence and the strength to heal the limits and contradictions into which reason can fall. (Synodus Episcoporum, 2012, para. 10)

Most post-Second Vatican Council documents dealing with evangelisation and education emphasise the special place dialogue has, or should have, in Catholic schools and in religious education. The Church has developed the notion that schools and religious education are the privileged spaces where the encounter between faith, reason and the sciences is fostered (see, for instance, Pope Frances, 2013; Pope Benedict XVI, 2009; Sacred Congregation for Catholic Education, 1977). Such an understanding automatically calls for the need of interdisciplinarity. Yet, such a call is not always wholly heeded in the development of concrete curricula and textbooks. Although the reasons for this are varied and complex, one may claim that this difficulty is mainly due to the tension that exists between different models of Church and of its interaction with society and, consequently, a lack of clarity in the nature of scholastic Catholic Religious Education.

Being Church

While it is true that the notion of religious education is grounded in the Church’s understanding of the human person (Congregation of Catholic Education, 2009; Pope Benedict XVI, 2009), it is also true that the way the Church conceptualises itself has an equal impact on the definition of the teaching of religion in schools. Regrettably, the latter truth has not received much attention. Our way of conceiving ourselves of being Church determines our epistemological understanding and consequently influences the content and methods of religious education.

Bernini’s Chair of St. Peter at St. Peter’s Basilica in Rome may illustrate the point. The monument, which dominates the Basilica’s apse, is a large reliquary for a wooden chair which was purportedly used by St. Peter when teaching the Romans. It is a symbol of Peter’s teaching authority as well as his primacy over the other apostles. The first symbol that meets the eye is the sumptuous stained glass window depicting the Holy Spirit in all his glory surrounded by a multitude of angels. The rays coming from the light emanated by the Holy Spirit, and the glory of God,

symbolised by a gilded cloud, crown the throne. The throne is suspended above four figures representing four doctors of the Church: St. Athanasius and St. John Chrysostom, hailing from the Eastern Churches, and St. Ambrose and St. Augustine, representing the Western Church. The four saintly bishops look down at the faithful while pointing to Peter's Chair. The symbolic and theological significance of the monument is clear. Revelation comes from the Holy Spirit who guides Peter and his successors. The teaching is then passed immutably from generation to generation, from the bishops to the faithful.

The hierarchical model of the Church, or as Avery Dulles (2002) labelled it, the institutional model, is evident just as much as the epistemological understanding that truth and doctrine come from God and are handed on unchanged from the apostles to their successors, to the laity. The monument perfectly emulates the model of the Church that has dominated the modern period and was so well reflected in the age of the catechisms. Dulles pointed out that through this model, bishops were considered to possess the truth which they had the duty to impose on the faithful through juridical and spiritual functions. Since one needs only to repeat the truth handed down by the institution, one does not need to understand it. Indeed, this relationship between ecclesiology and the notion and methods of religious education was made evident in the studies conducted by both Rummery (1977) and Baumert (2013) while researching the history of Catholic Religious Education in Australia and the United States, respectively.

The advent of the catechetical movement at the beginning of the twentieth century, that is, when there was evidence of some dialogue between pedagogical approaches and the systematic way of presenting truths, coincided with the appearance of the first cracks in the fortress mentality of the Church (Buchanan, 2005). Together with the catechetical movement, the liturgical, the biblical and the ecumenical movements pointed to the need for renewal or for rereading reality through the sources and to the need for dialogue with the real world as well as with the world of academia. Change did not happen overnight. Those who advocated for dialogue with the other sciences were most often lone voices. For instance, Rummery (1977) notes that in the Australian context, the voice of Br. Hanrahan was in total dissonance with the rest of his colleagues at the Catholic Teacher's Conferences of 1922, 1928 and 1936. While he advocated the use of the best pedagogical sciences, others insisted on morality and religious principles, with Br. Placidus insisting in 1936 that revelation and authority are more important than the human way of reasoning.

A debate within the Church on the way it conceives itself occurred during a new phase of modernity, at a time when nation states were now established, when the industrial and technological revolutions were taking place, when Western nations were becoming urbanised and above all when schooling was becoming available (and compulsory) to all citizens of Western societies. Since the Church understood itself to be a militant Church continuously under the attack of secularism and the new sciences (Pope Leo, 1897), it understood the catechetical method that had been in use for more than three centuries as the most appropriate approach to combat heresy and defend the faith (Buchanan, 2003). Catechisms were originally developed as a means for the faithful to know their identity and the truth and for the Churches to delineate what is acceptable and what is not.

During the modern period, the Catholic Church made formidable use of the tools of printing, catechetical confraternities and social networking. Yet, in employing such tools it impoverished the creative force of the Word. Truth was now contained in a book which had a beginning and an end and that followed a logical sequence. The Catechetical Method was in many cases reduced to rote learning. Knowledge rather than wisdom was privileged. The affective dimension was taken care of through socialisation and piety activities organised by the parish. The tragedy of this was that this paved the way to a reductionist understanding of Truth and worst still to a further dualistic understanding of cognitive and affective knowledge.

The slow but steady change within the preconciliar Church led to an exploration of different models. As Dulles (2002) aptly pointed out, there is a plurality of models of church and indeed even various ways of conceptualising the same model. This signifies the plurality and catholicity of the Church. In its recent documents, the magisterium tends to point more towards the mystery and communion aspects of the Church (Pope John Paul II, 1988).

Precisely because the Church is a mystery, no one model fully encapsulates the nature of the Church. In this understanding, different models complement each other, thus allowing a multitude of ways of being Catholic, of being Church and of acting in the world. Dialogue, respect and a childlike trust in God's providence are indispensable to this understanding, since it intrinsically acknowledges that God is eternal and that no human reasoning and language may fully explain Truth. Likewise, and exactly because the Church is Christ's mystical body incarnated in so many diverse spatial and temporal contexts, both *ad intra* and *ad extra* dialogue are essential in order to have a more complete understanding of the whole of reality and Truth. The implication of this way of conceptualising the Church for Catholic Religious Education is that religious education cannot ever be presented as the bearer of truth that is to be handed down to students, but rather that it should be proffered as a space for communal pilgrimage, where, in dialogue with past generations and contemporary humanity, as well as with the different fields of knowledge, we discover and reappropriate meaning together with a healthy understanding of reality as always intended by God.

Nature of Catholic Religious Education

While the post-Second Vatican Council Church has been rather fast-paced in insisting on the need for dialogue and in reconsidering its anthropological and ecclesial models, the same may not be said for the rethinking of the nature of Catholic Religious Education.

A quick browse through Church documents of these past five decades shows that a new understanding of religious education as a discipline in its own right, distinct from catechesis, has been very slow to take ground. Thus, for instance, while the Synodal Fathers of the Second Vatican Council were agreeing on the need of open-

ing the Church to dialogue, they still understood the teaching of religion in schools in terms of “giving the doctrine of salvation in a way suited to their [students’] age and circumstances” (Second Vatican Council, 1965b, *Gravissimum Educationis*). It therefore transpires that the Synodal Fathers still valued cognitive knowledge that needs to be transmitted and adapted to the requirements of students.

Likewise, although *Catechesi Tradendae* (Pope John Paul II, 1979) gives specific attention to the issue of religious instruction in schools, it is evident that it still considers it to be part of catechesis. It advocates for the respect of religious liberties of students and for their right to advance in their spiritual formation and more specifically to their right to be educated in faith. It was only in 1981 when Pope John Paul II was addressing the priests of his own diocese that for the first time the principle of distinction and complementarity between catechesis and religious education was acknowledged. Pope John Paul II maintained that religious education should be marked by the aims and structure of the school. Such a religious education carries out the dual role of fulfilling the right and obligation of every human person while at the same time it is a service that society renders to catholic students. Yet, the Pope insisted on the intimate relationship between catechesis and religious education since both disciplines have the same audience and the same content. Religious education, thus understood, may be considered to be both a pre-catechetical activity as well as an opportunity for one to delve further into specific themes of catechesis (Pope John Paul II, 1981).

However, this elucidation took quite some time before finding a definite place in the official Church’s position on the subject (Congregation for the Clergy, 1997; Congregation of Catholic Education, 1988, 2009). Then again, notwithstanding the elucidations of the Circular letter on Religious Education, some feel that the repeated indications on the distinction, yet complementarity, between religious education and catechesis still lack clarity (for instance, Franchi, 2013).

This feeling has thus given leeway to national episcopal conferences to interpret these indications in their own way. True enough, in his first Apostolic Exhortation, Pope Francis (2013) called for less centralisation and for the need to find ways of how episcopal conferences may, without diminishing the Petrine Ministry, live the autonomy enjoyed by the ancient patriarchates. This call would seem to legitimate the more catechetical and cognitive-oriented approaches adopted by a number of national episcopal conferences. However, it is questionable whether these localised decisions respect the proper vocation and true nature of Catholic Religious Education as developed in a post-Second Vatican Council era.

The Changing Nature of Religious Education

Spatial and temporal contexts influence identity. This is especially true for the ministry of the Word since it takes on the same method adopted by the tripersonal God whose words

... expressed in human language, have been made like human discourse, just as the Word of the eternal Father, when He took to Himself the flesh of human weakness, was in every way made like men. (Second Vatican Council, 1965c, *Dei Verbum*, para. 13)

Likewise, just as Christ took on the limitations of human flesh, so the eternal Word continues to take on the limitations of human language. This limitation is consequently, and apparently paradoxically, the very source of the creativity in which it is communicated. For while the Word remains one, it takes on the limitations and diversity present in humanity.

Given that pedagogical methods and tools are developed to respond to the requirements of a specific context and age, understanding religious education through a contextual lens appears to be the most appropriate way. Thus, for instance, the Catechumenate responded perfectly well to the needs of the emerging Christian communities which were as yet minority groups and whose main audience were adult converts. Likewise, during the middle ages in Europe, preaching became the preferred catechetical method, given that the majority were illiterate and given that society was predominately Christian. Although catechisms already existed in the fifteenth century (Braidó, 1991), these became the preferred catechetical method of the modern period due to the invention of print and due to the perceived need to control and delineate what is acceptable knowledge. The logic of the catechism follows the logic of the printing medium. The medium of the book may provide the illusion that truth may be contained. During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, this tool was accompanied by a variety of community initiatives including the catechetical confraternities, an increase in sacramental practices and piety. Yet, in adopting and privileging the tool of the catechism, the Catholic Church was falling prey to reductionist logic.

The catechism responded perfectly well to the new instructional ethos that was being developed. As Hamilton (2003) noted, the sixteenth century was a turning point in the history of instruction. Indeed, this century was not only characterised by the catechisms of Luther, Canisius, Auger, Trent and Bellarmine but also by the educational ideas of Pierre de la Ramée, also known as Peter Ramus, a sixteenth-century humanist converted to Calvinism.

Ramus was pivotal in proposing a method of instruction that organised knowledge in small pieces and he also developed textbooks. For Ramus, summarising, connecting and breaking knowledge in small, efficient and effective pieces served the purpose of useful instruction needed for a quick digestion of knowledge (Hamilton, 2003, April; Triche & McKnight, 2004). His method led to the separation of knowledge from orality and the organising of knowledge in hierarchical steps. This continued to reinforce his modernist dualist conception that the mind is superior to the body which led him to equate thinking with dichotomising knowledge (Triche & McKnight, 2004). Such a way of thinking and methodology led to the fragmentation of knowledge and consequently difficulty to view and understand the whole.

Ramus's method was popularised by Calvinist and Puritan universities to such an extent that it found its place at the basis of modern public schooling (Doll, 2012;

Triche & McKnight, 2004). As Doll (2012) aptly noted, curriculum is the product of Protestant culture.

From a Catholic stance then, while it is legitimate to creatively adapt according to the geographical contexts of where Catholic Religious Education is being imparted, the Catholic understanding of knowledge and the new understanding brought about by the Second Vatican Council lead the context of time to take precedence over the spatial context. This is especially so with regard to what makes religious education distinct from catechesis.

The School as the Source of Identity

The events that occurred at the end of the nineteenth century and at the first half of the twentieth century, together with the inventions in the field of communication, have brought about a transformation in the way society is structured, in the relations between people and their environment and in the way we conceive knowledge. Late modernity, post-modernity, post-post-modernity, hyper-modernity and meta-modernity are a few newly coined terms that point to a general sense that the current period is different from the previous one.

The nature and purpose of schools has changed drastically during these past one and a half centuries. While it is true that during the early modern period, literacy did not occur mainly in schools, most of the schools of this period emphasised religious and moral instruction (Maynes, 1985). By the late eighteenth century, as the State introduced public and compulsory schooling, the aims and nature of schools changed. These were mainly influenced by the changing milieu of the period. In Europe, the urbanisation, the enlightenment and the rise of capital brought about various discussions on philosophies of education and schooling, amongst which the control of governments over the population and the economic benefits of education (Maynes, 1985). Religious instruction served as a means of bringing about homogeneity as well as creating moral order (see, for instance, Morandini, 2003).

The identification of education with schooling has led schools to become compulsory in most countries. Consequently, the audience and objectives of schools were amongst the first elements to change. While it is true that international declarations speak of the right for an education that fosters holistic development (see, for instance, United Nations, 2001), it is also true that many governments have recently been focusing the aims of education mainly on economic requirements (see, for instance, Council of the European Union, 2011; Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2010). The understanding that investment in education is directly proportional to an increase in the country's GDP and that further investment in quality education could yield profits led to a more competency-based education. Thus, for instance, in a paper presented to the OECD, it is suggested that the aim should be to boost the average scores of the international assessment

programme The Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) by 25 points. The authors suggest that such a measure would increase the GDP of OECD countries by between 90 to 123 trillion dollars (Hanushek & Woessmann, 2011).

These considerations have an obvious impact on the teaching of religion in schools since religion is not normally considered as an economically utilitarian subject. It tempts countries to take a utilitarian stance in the development of curricular frameworks. Issues related to time allocations, amount of resources and, to a lesser extent, learning outcomes in religious education come to the surface. These considerations influence State schools as well as faith schools.

Due to historical and contextual reasons, a number of countries still offer a denominational religious education in their State schools. Thus, although it is safe to state that Catholic Religious Education is predominantly found in Catholic schools, one should not dismiss the considerable catholic population that receives its religious education in State schools. Consequently, the aims and nature of religious education are influenced by, if not largely dependent on, the purposes of the school, the school climate as well as the school population.

While it is true that the Church requires parents to choose schools that cater for the catholic education of their children (Congregation of Catholic Education, 2009), this is often not the case. As research constantly shows, there are various factors that influence parental school choice, chief amongst which is quality education (see, for instance, Denessen, Driessena, & Slegers, 2005). The audience that is present in schools, including Catholic schools, is thus diverse and not necessarily pertaining to the practising catholic community. This renders the teaching of religion in both Catholic and State schools less and less part of the catechetical mission of the Church since, by its own nature, catechesis requires a believing community that has already been converted to Jesus (Congregation for the Clergy, 1997). The final goal of catechesis is to help the individual enter into full communion with Jesus Christ (Congregation for the Clergy, 1997). Indeed catechesis should be rooted in a process that facilitates the deepening of faith.

This condition is most of the times difficult to fulfil in a Catholic school context, let alone in State schools. Although most students might have been baptised, they are often not in contact with the faith community. Even though the school population is composed of a considerable number of students and families who can be described as culturally Catholic, this does not necessarily mean that they have made a clear and conscious decision to live the Catholic faith to the full.

Both the school population and the aims of education are being developed by the different stakeholders, making it difficult for religious education to operate in catechetical terms. This, together with the Church's renewed understanding of itself and of its role in the world and in the context of a nonfragmented notion of knowledge, requires a clear definition of religious education. In this reality, while still holding its place within the evangelising mission of the Church, religious education will be better placed within the diakonia ministry of the Church rather than within the realm of the ministry of the Word.

The Dialogical Imperative

Pope John Paul II (1981) claimed that religious education in State schools is a service that society renders to Catholic students. This, he argued, respects their rights of freedom of conscience and religion. Furthermore, it may also be argued that given that the State has the duty to educate students holistically, formal education has to nurture every student's transcendental dimension. In a changing global scenario and with the Church's commitment to dialogue, Catholic Religious Education in Catholic schools and especially in State schools should be mainly conceived as part of the pre-evangelisation mission of the Church that is to contribute to the renewal of humanity (Paul VI, 1975, para. 24).

Humanity yearns for meaning. Yet, with the fragmentation of reality, it finds it difficult to translate this yearning into a concrete language. As part of its service to human renewal, the Church needs to contribute towards the awareness and understanding of those tools that have sustained and contributed to the development of individuals and society. Consequently, the Church is duty bound to help individual students access, understand and take advantage of the wisdom that different generations of believers have put together in the quest to make sense of reality and live the good life.

If the Church wants to be true to its dictum, that

the joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the men of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ (Second Vatican Council, 1965a, *Gaudium et spes*, para. 1),

it must use and speak the same common language of humanity and, through dialogue, facilitate an understanding of the whole. Humanity has been wounded by the fragmentation of knowledge and consequently by the fragmentation of reality itself. By presenting a religious education that adapts the catechism of the Catholic Church, the Church is reinforcing the fragmentation of reality. It continues to present a specialised knowledge and to impose the jargon of the faith community that developed over the span of 2,000 years.

The aim and nature of Catholic Religious Education in a post-Second Vatican Council period should be tripartitely dialogical, in that it is called to dialogue with students, with the fragmented disciplines of knowledge and internally with its own pedagogical development. None of these dialogues precedes the other but they must be conducted simultaneously.

First of all, dialogue with students necessarily means a dialogue with the reality they live in. Rather than simply transmitting, or at best helping them to make sense of the language of faith, religious education should move a step further and facilitate a process whereby they get a language that equips them to critically engage with their experiences and reality. In and through dialogue, one discovers the seeds of the Word and the consequences of reading reality and acting with or without the Word of God.

Secondly, dialogue with other disciplines is conducted in the knowledge that as Catholics we developed a language through which we could perceive, interpret and creatively construct the reality we live in. Catholicism holds that, as the mystical

body of Christ, we are helped through the grace of the Holy Spirit to understand and see creation through the lens that the Father originally intended it to be. The consequences of our beliefs have influenced the course of history and civilisation itself. Orphanages instead of infanticides, corrective facilities, hospitals, the arts, scientific endeavours, diplomacy and the development of such concepts as person and rights are only a few of the many areas to which the Catholic community has greatly contributed.

The contribution that the Catholic community has made during these past two millennia not only equips religious education with a language that enables it to dialogue with a diversity of disciplines, but it could also promote dialogue amongst disciplines. Indeed, most of the concepts and discoveries were made in a belief that just as the triune God is one, so is the apparent diverse reality.

Thirdly, there is also a need for an internal dialogue conducted through the belief that religious education is inherently interdisciplinary. On the one hand, due to its religious nature, religious education is called to draw from the wisdom, the reflections and theology constructed by the believing community. However, being a pedagogical discipline, religious education is also called to take note of and follow the advancements made in the educational sciences. Grounding religious education in the current theories and practices of theology and the educational sciences enhances the credibility of the subject. If no real dialogue is initiated, the subject risks irreversibly enter into a ghetto reserved for irrelevant scholastic optional choices. Furthermore, due to its audience and their own reality, besides engaging with research in the fields of instructional science, it is also called to enter in dialogue with and to integrate the knowledge learnt from such humanistic disciplines as sociology, philosophy and psychology.

Conclusion

Catholic Religious Education is either interdisciplinary or it is not Catholic at all. The developments that occurred in the Church and in society offer clear opportunities for the Church to render a service to humanity through dialogue. Although connected to each other, the school (and more so the Catholic school) and the faith community have distinct responsibilities and finalities. These differences, together with a fragmented way of conceptualising life, should make us acknowledge the necessity of the definite separation of catechesis from religious education. The Church in its desire to enter into a new phase of evangelisation should welcome the opportunity offered by religious education to prepare the way for explicit proclamation of the Word for those who consciously and willingly wish to be initiated in the listening of the Word through catechesis.

Just like her Master, the Church walks with, serves and dialogues with humanity. It is in these processes that it can share the light of Divine Wisdom and invite humanity to a renewal of personal and communitarian life. This may be achieved if Catholic Religious Education were understood as distinct from catechesis and faithful to its true nature and thereby be dialogical.

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