

Catechetical and Religious Education for Faith with Families and Children

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Abstract

Catechetical and religious education is a form of ministry working for Catholic educational mission in relation to families and children. Currently, political associations for Catholic education are essential to the character and perpetuation of the Catholic mission. In light of this, Catholicism within its educational parameters faces various issues from its organisational and political structure. Consequently, the need exists for defining the processes to orchestrate Christian education within the church structure. Accordingly, an appraisal is presented of catechesis and religious education, the context in which religious education occurs, education in ministry and mission, and Catholic higher education today.

Introduction

Catechetical and religious education for faith with families and children is a form of ministry of the Word in its own right. It will be shown how catechesis and religious education work together for Catholic educational mission with families and children. An appraisal will be presented of catechesis and religious education, the context in which religious education occurs, education in ministry and mission, and Catholic higher education today.

This Catholic perspective of catechetical and religious education for faith with families and children reflects the mission and dedication of religious sisters, priests, teaching brothers and laity working with Catholic education, faithful to Jesus's call to, "Go and teach all nations".¹ Moreover, it signifies the mission of carrying on this educational work amidst the many challenges of the contemporary world today. These challenges include; quality of online degree courses, reduced government funding, teacher workloads and wellbeing.

¹ *The Holy Bible, NRSV: Catholic Edition* (USA: Catholic Bible Press, 1993), Mathew 28:19-20.34.

Accordingly, an inclusive community focused model is required for Catholic catechetical education with families, children and mission. This model is holistic in that it engages the parish, Family and school in a co-operative dialogue to form, inform and transform persons and communities into Christians living and practicing their faith (a partnership strengthening formation in Christian faith.) This is a view of catechistic education that is relevant to today and the future.²

Catechesis and Religious Education

Catechesis and religious education work together for Catholic educational mission and faith. They are both needed for schooling the Christian person and community and may be referred to as catechetical education. Groome proposes that catechetical education is:

A comprehensive and community-centred paradigm that forges a coalition of parish, family, and school or parish program, engaging all aspects of these communities and their every member in sharing faith together for lifelong conversion as disciples of Jesus for the reign of God.³

This paradigm comes out of the Catholic *General Directory for Catechesis* which outlines the nature and purpose of Catholic catechetical education.⁴ From the Catholic viewpoint, catechesis describes the formative process of nurturing Christian identity whereas religious education is informative pedagogy in a faith tradition.⁵

What is catechesis? the Catholic *General Directory for Catechesis* states that, "Catechesis is nothing other than the process of transmitting the Gospel, as the Christian community has received it, understands it, celebrates it, lives it and communicates it in many ways."⁶ More specifically, the Roman Catholic tradition refers to catechesis as:

...an education in the faith of children, young people and adults which includes especially the teaching of Christian doctrine imparted, generally speaking, in an organic and systematic way, with a view to initiating the hearers into the fullness of Christian life.⁷

Accordingly, catechesis is basic Christian religious education of children and adult converts to Christianity. In Roman Catholicism, catechists are usually lay ministers skilled in the art of

² Thomas H. Groome and Harold Daly Horell, *Horizons & Hopes: The Future of Religious Education* (New York: Paulist Press, 2003), vi.

³ Groome & Daley, *Horizons & Hopes*, 1-2.

⁴ *General Directory of Catechesis* (Strathfield, N.S.W: St.Pauls,1997)

⁵ Groome & Daley, *Horizons & Hopes*, 1.

⁶ General Directory for Catechesis #105

⁷ Catechism of the Catholic Church, paragraph 5 (quoting John Paul II, Apostolic Exhortation *Catechesi tradendae* 18).

catechesis, although the role may be filled by a priest, religious teacher, or church persons. Significantly, the primary catechists for children are their parents and or the community.

Debra Murphy addresses this subject pointing out that her book “seeks to develop an understanding of Christian catechesis as a practice, or set of practices, informed at heart by doxology.”⁸ Nevertheless, the word catechesis for Roman Catholics may invoke boring memories of Catholic doctrine, and for most Protestants the word ‘catechesis’ and its meaning are unfamiliar.⁹ Murphy expands her view of catechesis by stating:

Catechesis, more broadly conceived, cannot be separated from the church’s liturgical, pastoral, and missionary activity as a whole – from the material, embodied witness of Christian communities actively engaged in ministry in the world. And so catechesis in this book is understood to be much more than verbal instruction in church doctrine and dogma.¹⁰

In brief, from the Catholic perspective catechesis is the act of handing on the Word of God, and pedagogy is the science and art of education.

Hence, what is religious education? Religious education is a form of the ministry of the Word. As an activity of evangelisation, it is a means of handing on the Christian faith. For school students, it makes the Gospel present in a personal process of cultural, systematic and critical assimilation.¹¹ In Australia, individual dioceses manage the operation of their own schools. There are also a significant number of catholic schools run by religious congregations. Nevertheless, state Catholic Education Commissions (granted with civil and canonical power) handle policy and funding matters. State Catholic Education Commissions embrace diocesan, congregation, education, and community representatives and are the authorities collectively responsible for the receipt, distribution, and accountability of annual funding.¹²

Religious Education and Catechesis

What is the relationship between religious education and catechesis? Religious education and catechesis are two forms of the ministry of the Word. Although distinct from each other, one complements the other. Religious instruction strengthens the faith of the believing student, in the

⁸ Debra Dean Murphy, *Teaching That Transforms: Worship as the Heart of Christian Education* (Grand Rapids MI: Brazos Press, 2004), 11.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 11.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 12.

¹¹ Gerard J Holohan, *Australian Religious Education – Facing the Challenges* (Perth, W.A.: NCEC, 1999), 27.

¹² Susan Pascoe, “Challenges for Catholic education in Australia,” in *International Handbook of Catholic Education: Challenges for School Systems in the 21st Century, Part I* by Gerald R. Grace and Joseph O’Keefe (Netherlands: Springer, 2007), 788.

same way as catechesis augments knowledge of the Christian message. However, the relationship between these two forms of the ministry of the Word in respect to doctrinal instruction in schools and catechetical instruction are distinctly different.¹³

Nevertheless, religious education and catechesis are both evangelisation activities working in a complementary relationship. Both contribute in different ways to the advancement of Christian faith. Both entail sharing faith, even to the point of the teacher and catechist sharing their personal faith experiences.¹⁴

However, due to this closeness of purpose there are still elements of confusion between the roles of catechesis and religious education. These relate to misconceptions that religious education and catechesis are one and the same activity. Three serious consequences arise from this confusion:

Firstly, there can be the expectation that religious education can displace the need for catechesis. Secondly, the perception that catechisation of students in religious education negates the role of catechesis through families and parishes. And thirdly, misperceptions between religious education and catechesis lead to mistaken expectations about the content and pedagogy of religious education.¹⁵

In what context does religious education take place? Context refers to the locations, conditions, and circumstances within which a certain incident or phenomenon transpires. In this instance, context refers to the standing of the locations, conditions, and circumstances within which education takes place. Notably, it is more than physical. It includes attitudes, emotions, relationships, cultural traits, and numerous other factors that influence the environment individuals live and learn in.¹⁶

Challenges facing Catholic Educators

Within the context of the broader Church and the local political environment there are challenges facing Catholic educators in Australia. As with many other developed nations, the Church in Australia finds itself at odds with rising secularism, individualism and consumerism. Similarly, the Catholic Church faces an ageing clergy and diminishing numbers of priests and religious. Sadly, there is the issue of clerical sexual abuse. Relevant this issue, Susan Pascoe makes the point that: “The blight of sexual abuse cases is yet to be fully accommodated within legal and

¹³ Holohan, *Australian Religious Education*, 30.

¹⁴ Holohan, *Australian Religious Education*, 30.

¹⁵ Holohan, *Australian Religious Education*, 33.

¹⁶ Karen B. Tye, *Christian Education in the Small Membership Church* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2008), 1-18.

canonical authorities. Tensions occasionally arise between those parties advocating conflicting theological perspectives. Furthermore, active parish involvement is declining.”¹⁷

The decline in parish involvement of children and families has been hastened by the sexual abuse scandals. Anderson and Johnson refer to the church as a ‘sanctuary for children’ and devote a chapter to the subject in their book, ‘Regarding Children.’¹⁸ They highlight how our appreciation of ‘childness’ was revolutionized by Jesus through his notion of childness being a condition for discipleship.¹⁹ However, as Anderson and Johnson note, “... the church has participated in the ‘culture of indifference’ toward childhood through its silence and complicity in instances of child sexual abuse.”²⁰

Despite this situation, the basic locations for passing on Christian faith to the young are the family, the parish and the school. Religious education does not work in isolation. It is influenced by the moral trends and the attitudes of society to religion. Significantly, the furthestmost influence comes from students’ religious experiences in their families, parishes and schools.²¹

Relative to schooling, Grace and O’Keefe question why Catholic education is performing comparatively well compared to other institutions:

Why is it that Catholic schools appear to be succeeding? Researchers point to several characteristics of Catholic schools that help boost student achievement, including the focused mission of Catholic schools; high expectations for all students; the inclusion of nonminority and minority children; safe and orderly environment; flexible principal leadership and school-based management of Catholic schools; relevant curriculum; high levels of parental involvement; and dedicated staff.²²

As with all schools, a well-defined and motivated mission is the focus of the Catholic school, uniting the teachers and staff in their commitment to education, children and families. Anderson & Johnson suggest that churches and families should be in partnership forming faithful Christians. They propose that the church and the family should share increasingly in the difficult mission of developing children into adult, receptive and faithful Christians.²³

¹⁷ Susan Pascoe in Grace and O’Keefe, *International Handbook*, 791.

¹⁸ Herbert Anderson & Susan B.W. Johnson, *Regarding Children: A New Respect of Childhood and Families* (USA: Westminster John Knox, 1994), 111.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 111.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 111.

²¹ Holohan, *Australian Religious Education*, 36.

²² Susan Pascoe in Grace and O’Keefe, *International Handbook of Catholic Education*, 24.

²³ *Ibid.*, 120.

Hence, the context within which religious education should be appreciated “is the Christian witness, primary proclamation and catechesis students are actually receiving (or not receiving) in their families, parishes and Catholic schools.”²⁴ Should we adhere to Beckwith’s views, formational children’s ministry is achieved by shaping children using story, ritual and relationships for “God gave us the Bible as a storybook.”²⁵

The Bible: God’s Storybook

Within the Catholic education system, the Bible (God’s storybook) is continually being reviewed to determine its relevance as a Catholic text for schools, thus, seeking to clarify its relevance in changing times, specifically its content and context. Accordingly, The Catholic Education Commissions in Australia are appraising their school review processes to ensure they incorporate procedures which energetically evaluate the degree to which schools adhere to their vision and mission.²⁶

Accordingly, Christian education with families and children takes place within the educational processes of educational ministry, which is transforming ministry. Christian education includes information, formation, transformation and intentionality. Groome makes reference to this when discussing effective total catechetical education. Groome makes the point, “That catechesis should inform, form and transform people in Christian faith; it requires ‘integral formation rather than mere information’ (no.78).”²⁷

‘Information’ refers to the biblical story and vision, theological tradition and the story of the present faith community. ‘Formation’ refers to people being shaped in a community that is a living faith whether formal or informal. ‘Transformation’ refers to the heart of the gospel where people are converted by encountering new ways. Thus, there are new ways of seeing, loving, gracing, and growing through the Holy Spirit in discipleship and engagement in God’s mission of learning, teaching and being.²⁸

²⁴ Holohan, *Australian Religious Education*, 36.

²⁵ Ivy Beckwith, *Formational Children’s Ministry: Shaping Children using Story, Ritual, and Relationship* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Books, 2010), 23.

²⁶ Susan Pascoe in Grace and O’Keefe, *International Handbook of Catholic Education*, 793.

²⁷ Groome & Daley. *Horizons & Hopes*, 16.

²⁸ Course notes, Ministry with Children and Families – Deidre Palmer, Session 5, April 11th 2014, p. 2.

Shared Christian Praxis

An effective way of learning, teaching and being with people is referred to by Groome as 'shared Christian praxis.'²⁹ 'Shared'- as its learning and teaching is practised through a community dialogue of love, humility, faith and hope. 'Christian'- as it is practiced according to the Christian story and vision, and 'praxis' as it is a way of knowing through reflective action. The process for shared Christian praxis commences with a focusing moment and five movements. The movements flow from naming, reflection, knowing faith, dialectics, to decision and praxis response.³⁰

In conjunction with shared Christian praxis is the employment of an effective Christian education design. This design follows a procedure of content, process, presence, engagement, connection and creativity. Shared Christian praxis and Christian education design help the realization of Christian hope for the children and families with whom ministry applies. They also assist in planning the processes, programs and events that support the realization of effective catechesis and religious education.³¹

Christian Education of Children

Where Christian education takes place is underscored by the Bible's role in the Christian education of children. Bible insights inform a ministry with children. This includes how the Bible has been comprehended by great artists. Paintings and photographs of biblical lands, peoples and ruins assist children to interpret the Bible, with writing, drawing and music supporting children in articulating their learning.³²

When contemplating the relationship of children to the Bible a number of considerations should be noted. These considerations relate to how, when, where and why the Biblical story is communicated to children. They refer to the purpose, processes and settings in which the Bible can transform people's lives and social contexts. The associated resources for Christian education highlight six perceptions of the Bible that pertain to teaching. These perceptions are the Bible as; the written and interpreted Word of God, an interpretation of God's Word, a source book, a history of God's people, and a witness to Divine-human encounter.³³

²⁹ Thomas Groome, *Sharing Faith: A Comprehensive Approach to Religious Education and Pastoral Ministry, The Way of Shared Praxis* (Oregon: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1991), 134-145.

³⁰ Course notes, Ministry with Children and Families p.2-3.

³¹ Course notes, Ministry with Children and Families p.4.

³² Iris V. Cully, *The Bible in Christian Education* (Minn: Fortress Press, 1995), 80-81.

³³ Dorothy Jean Furnish, *Experiencing the Bible with Children* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1990), 17-27.

Small and Large Church Environments

This Divine-human encounter suggests the role of Christian education in small church environments should not be overlooked. Christian education is a vibrant ministry, especially for small churches. Despite their limited numbers small churches can generate ideal opportunities to form and disciple faithful followers of Christ. Significantly, they highlight the position of caring, nurturing relationships in all church settings as a foundation for excellence in Christian education. Tye makes the point that:

Because of our attempts to be like the ‘big guys,’ we often miss the creative possibilities that reside in the small membership church for doing the vital work of education and formation, of equipping the saints for ministry.³⁴

On a larger scale, Catholic higher education today accepts a vital duty in passing on a fertile faith tradition to young adults by Catholic colleges and universities. With these institutions becoming increasingly professional and diverse, questions arise as to how they continue to address the religious mission central to their character and calling.

These questions relate to how Catholic colleges and universities are noticeably different from other institutions, private colleges and universities. Are they still searching for truth and God? Do they cultivate students in a faith that does justice, or are they motivated by careers and lifestyles? And, does this educational experience result in a personal encounter with the Divine mystery revealed in Jesus?³⁵

In the broader context, researchers such as Murphy question how the biblical and theological content of Christian education has been co-opted by an emphasis on learning experiences, and modernity’s perception of what it means to be human. Thus, Murphy draws Christian education back to its integral relationship with Christian worship where Christian persons and communities are formed.³⁶

Conclusion

In conclusion it has been shown how catechesis and religious education work together for Catholic educational mission and faith with families and children. This has been achieved by observing: (1) how catechesis and religious education instruct the Christian individual and

³⁴ Karen B. Tye, *Basics of Christian Education* (USA: Chalice Press, 2000), ix.

³⁵ Thomas P. Rausch, *Educating for Faith and Justice: Catholic Higher Education Today* (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2010), xi-xiv.

³⁶ Murphy, *Teaching That Transforms* 9-25.

community. (2) How religious education takes place in the context of locations, conditions and circumstances. (3) How Catholic education ministry and mission systems are seeking to clarify and uphold Catholic character in changing times by examining ways to assess the Catholicity of their schools. And, (4) how today contemporary Catholic higher education engages in passing on the Catholic faith tradition to young adults in Catholic colleges and universities.

Significantly, the political associations of Catholic schooling in different contexts are essential for the character and perpetuation of the Catholic educational mission. Increased research is mandatory for this strategic matter. Challenging issues faced by Catholic education in Australia occur within the framework of the wider Church and local political situation. Caring and nurturing relationships in all church settings establishes the foundation for quality Christian education.

Catholic and Christian education necessitates returning to its primary connection with Christian worship. Thus, initiating several areas of debate; firstly, has the biblical and theological content of Christian education been overshadowed by an over-focus on learning experiences and modernity's view of what it means to be human? Secondly, is an appreciation of Christian formation a pressing priority of the contemporary church? Thirdly, is this task undermined by alien assumptions residing at the core of the 'religious education' establishment? These questions require confrontation by both Catholic and Christian educators. Accordingly, a theory and practice is urgently required for Christian education that stems from the predominant mysteries of Christian worship and the Church's mission, including participating in God's calling to justice, peace, reconciliation and love.

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