

RELIGIOUS EDUCATION AND FAITH FORMATION
Taking their cue from faith & reason working together

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Are we satisfied with how our faith is being “handed on”? Or, is there something missing?

Faith formation, including religious education, is part of the journey towards a more truly human way of life – for each and for all. But this work is being carried out in a cultural environment that treats faith as an *extra*, not a *requirement* for a fully human life. That is the issue being addressed in this essay.

In the early stages of faith formation and religious education we depend on others for the curricula, programmes and methods of our learning. But our learning is not meant to stop when the time comes to take more personal responsibility for it. So, while this essay concerns what we do in Catholic schools, it concerns even more what we do in Catholic homes and parishes.

Historical shifts:

We all know that there is more to a living faith than just knowing the truths of faith. Theologians and catechists have grappled with this fact especially during the second half of last century. At a seminar in Christchurch in 1975, Fathers A Nebreda SJ and J Calle SJ of the East Asia Pastoral Institute helped us to recognise significant historical shifts in the ways the Church has handed on the faith.

- (a) In the earliest days of the Church, all preaching was around the person of Jesus. In his person God is revealed, and how much we mean to God is revealed. Christian life was the mystery of “Christ among you, your hope of glory” (Colossians 1:27). Corresponding to this understanding of revelation, faith was the acceptance of the person Jesus. His real presence among them made possible their real encounters with him and real union with him. The result was a message they received with power, conviction and joy (cf 1Thes. 1:4-6).
- (b) During the Patristic era, the focus was on the “wonderful things” God had done in history and was now doing above all in the liturgy. (Pope Francis has called the liturgy “the today of salvation history.”)
- (c) In the Middle Ages, when great theological summaries were being written, the focus was on the truths of faith. When it became necessary for the Church to defend itself against various errors leading up to the Council of Trent and the first Vatican Council, revelation came to be identified with the truths taught by the Church. Accordingly, faith was perceived as assent to those truths. This is how matters stood into the first half of the twentieth century.
- (d) But it was now becoming clear that knowing the truths of faith does not always make the difference that faith makes. This led to the kerygmatic movement, which once again focused on proclaiming the wonderful things God had done, in the hope of inspiring gratitude and conversion. But revelation was being viewed predominantly as a past event. The bible was the text. Students became tired of hearing about Abraham and Moses and crossing the Red Sea was not their problem. Kerygmatic catechesis was not connecting with their own experience.
- (e) It was the Second Vatican Council that set the scene for a dramatic change of focus. Knowing the teachings of the Church and of scripture had not been enough to show how God is

present in the here and now of each person's life, inviting their "yes." The focus shifted from revealed truths to revelation itself. Theological anthropology helps us to understand what this involves.

Disconnects:

The Council had said:

...the split between the faith that many profess and their daily lives deserves to be counted among the more serious errors of our age (Church in the Modern World, n.43).

This obviously refers to the scandal caused when our lives are inconsistent with our faith. But it also implies that if people don't experience the connection between their religious faith and their daily lives, they soon begin to see religious practice as an 'extra' – not really needed.

In various ways, faith-formation involves making connections between personal faith and practices which are meant to nurture faith and give expression to faith. But within our culture, there are factors which tend to disjoin personal faith from the practices of faith. We need to be aware of them:

- 1) There has been a kind of evangelical short-cut that considers "religion" to be a "man-made" system that isn't necessary for, and only gets in the way of, simple direct faith in Christ based on the scriptures. This over-simplified disconnect between "religion" and "faith" implies the privatisation of the individual's faith, and has led to an even wider gap – now even the scriptures themselves, and Christ, and the very idea of historic revelation, are lumped in with "religion" and dispensed with in favour of "spirituality." There are others who less ambitiously but faithfully get on with being 'just good Christians.'
- 2) Coming from the opposite extreme, secular culture also sees "religion" as a kind of optional extra to life. It's fine for those who want it, or need it, but one can do without it, and not miss it. It is like a coat that one can put on or take off. It is not part of one's being.
- 3) In between these two extremes, there is the issue of people's readiness. Fr David Ranson makes the frank and disconcerting claim that institutional religion seems pastorally inadequate to engage contemporary people's spiritual journeys. Most often, young people are not yet ready to accept an entire systematic and doctrinal interpretation of their spiritual experience. They are not ready to express their spiritual quest in ritual form, particularly as it is celebrated in many parishes. However, very little else is offered them. Consequently, they experience a significant dissonance between their spiritual questions and the doctrinal answers that religion provides them (Across the Great Divide (St Paul's, 2002 p. 36).

The essential connection:

The work of religious educators in that cultural environment is not easy. However, the good news is that personal faith and 'real life' really are connected; we just need to know how, and make the most of it. Pope St John Paul II said it – more than once - in a memorable one-liner:

"The human person is the primary route the Church must travel in fulfilling its mission: the primary and fundamental way of the Church, the way traced out by Christ himself (The Redeemer of the Human Race, n.14).

"... the way traced out by Christ himself..." is depicted in the gospels in all the ways that Jesus reached out to people. In him they saw something that was life-giving. Where today are people to

what awakens people to the emptiness of false paths. (See his description of how “wordless witness” gives rise to life-changing questions in *Evangelisation in the Modern World*, n. 21.)

In the second century CE, St Irenaeus had said “it is the human person fully alive that is God’s glory; and what makes us fully alive is seeing God.” That is why

...the people of God labours to decipher authentic signs of God’s presence and purpose in the happenings, needs and desires in which this people has a part along with other people of our times. For faith throws a new light on everything, manifests God’s design for our total vocation, and thus directs the mind to solutions which are fully human (Second Vatican Council, *Church in the Modern World*, n.11).

Pope John Paul II did not under-estimate young people’s ability to wonder about their place in the world, and to ask why they exist at all. (See his wonderful talk to young people in Kazakhstan (Vatican: Speeches, Sept, 2001). The mystery of our existence is located in the mystery of God’s freedom: “God did not need to create me, so must have really wanted me. Therefore, I am meant to be; my life matters. What more can I know about God’s purpose for me?”

“When I look up at the heavens, which you have made...
ah, what is man that you should spare a thought for him, or care for him at all?” (Psalm 8).

Even allowing for life’s raw deals and injustices, the intimation of being made for better things does not let go. A sense of being made for more is what ‘speaks’ to us in our deepest longings, in nature around us, and wherever human lives manifest love, belonging, goodness and beauty. We should not underestimate the importance of beauty in a world that has become culturally tired of hearing about right and wrong, true and false.

Even the hardened and brazen can succumb before the miracles of life and love. At times it can be harder to believe there is no God than to believe there is. Handing on the faith means helping people to ‘see.’ It takes us beyond religion perceived as a duty into the need and desire to give thanks for what was never owed to us.

The role of those who facilitate this discovery of God in our lives is not so much the role of teacher, or master or even guide. It is more akin to the role of prophets and mystics - those who ‘see’ and ‘listen’ attentively to what is actually there (cf Matthew 13:14-16), and can find themselves in awe of it. That enables them to help others interpret their own experience by recognising the hints of God’s wonderful purpose.

This is also the specific character of a homily as distinct from a sermon: against the backdrop of the scriptures which depict God’s presence in human history, a true homily helps people to recognise the signs of God’s presence in their own lives. Being attentive to the Holy Spirit through respectful listening to one another also leads to “seeing God.”

These ways of seeing need to undergird all methods of education, consultation and pastoral planning, without replacing the methods proper to each, such as school teaching, homilies, seminars, pastoral councils etc. And they highlight the advantage of real presence over virtual presence, even allowing that on-line presence enables longer reach and wider participation.

Faith and reason:

Searching for the signs of God working throughout all creation is so much more than teaching religious truths, and is why we need to get beyond the kind of church-speak that doesn't connect. At the same time, this search honours the connection between faith and reason. Reason without faith cannot know the transcendent dignity of the person, and so a person's worth is ultimately their usefulness to themselves and to others. Conversely, faith without reason easily leads to the absurdities of fundamentalism.

The separation of faith and reason had its origins in an over-interpretation of the Enlightenment's emphasis on reason. Reason had a rightful place in correcting the excesses and abuses of authority, culture and tradition, but not as a complete replacement for faith. Within a short while there was a revolt against the excessive claims made on behalf of reason itself. This gave rise to Romanticism – "the cult of the heart" and individualism. It became a person's sincerity that mattered, more than the meaning of their actions. The Catholic Church still has a hard time convincing people that morality is based on the meaning of one's actions, as well as on their intentions. In post-Modernity it is the individual who gives them their meaning.

Faith and reason together can make a better job than secularism can, of interpreting and safeguarding the very yearnings that modern society treasures, such as the yearnings for tolerance, self-expression, human rights, participation, democracy, etc. Distorted interpretations of freedom, authenticity, honesty, love, tolerance, equality and human rights result from the claim that they mean whatever the individual believes they mean, or wants them to mean.

Ultimately the Church has something more radical to offer humanity than does secularism because its gospel is about a love for life and for the world that does not stop at what can be merited or deserved or found useful. Nothing more fully embraces the world as it really is than love poured out where it is not merited, or is even undeserved – like God's love for us; (see 1 John 4:17).

A Catholic culture:

God's presence among us reaches its summit in the person of Christ. It is above all in the liturgy that we touch "the mystery which is Christ among you" (Colossians 1:20). The point of "full, conscious and active participation" is not to multiply activities, but to actively let oneself be absorbed by the mystery unfolding around us, in a community that becomes "one body, one spirit, in Christ" (Eucharistic Prayer III).

Such absorption calls for responses that involve body, mind and spirit - attentive listening, gestures of adoration and reconciliation, songs of thanksgiving and joy, times of stillness and silence. The physical setting, the symbols, and the 'atmosphere' at any liturgy are intended to deepen our awareness of being in God's presence. The capacity of young people to be absorbed by "the mystery" of Christ among us should not be under-estimated. It is one of the things they can feel strongly attracted to, as the history of Taizé demonstrates dramatically. We need to enhance this dimension of our liturgies. It attracts. It is remarkable how ANZAC services can attract young people.

When young people find the liturgy "boring" it is sometimes because we are not relating it to their own experience. The Mass has been designed by adults for adults. Making adaptations to better engage children or young people is justified by the paramount law of proclaiming the mystery of God's presence to all, and therefore doing so in accordance with their circumstances of age, culture, condition, etc. Failure to adjust to the needs of a particular congregation is failure to make the liturgy accessible to people according to their capacity to receive.

Adaptations must always respect the main structure of the liturgy and the purpose of its particular parts. That is because it is the Church's liturgy we celebrate, not something of our own making. There is a process of authorisation for those adaptations that are intended to be ongoing, but smaller accommodations are made for the occasions they are needed. That need takes priority over routine.

Just as 'seeing' God's presence in creation involves the experience of it, so too does 'seeing' God's presence in human lives and history. In the wake of Jesus' resurrection, His disciples' education-in-faith started with their experience of life-changing events. The experience came before understanding. That has not changed. Learning the meaning of Christian faith comes from the experience of participating in it. Participation gives us glimpses of 'something more.' Experiences that touch hearts expand the awareness we have from rational analysis. It's a bit like the way hearing live music reveals something more about the notes than does reading them on the score. Ritual and other experiences of Christian community can do that too.

These experiences of the faith are normally more sharply focussed within the community that still commemorates Jesus' life, death and resurrection. That community embodies a culture that is formed by the combined experience of its scriptures, liturgies, devotions, hymns, literature, art, vowed lives, work for justice and peace, contribution to health care and to education, personal sacrifice, faithful lives... Something within that culture connects with what we have been made for.

However great the community's own shortfalls, it is where the desire to belong can still be mysteriously stronger than what offends. It is where faith is caught as much as taught. And it is the context in which reason draws out the meaning of this faith, and its application in life's ever-changing situations. Catholic education includes the ways homes, parishes and schools support each other in deriving their identity from that culture.

Catholic education's many layers:

Catholic education is a many-layered thing. Our earliest ancestors learned to use reason and make choices. They already had some life-skills, such as using a stone to crack nuts open. Whether or not we call these early learnings 'education,' they were enough to get us down and out from the trees. Education became part of life. Later levels of education incorporated and exceeded earlier levels.

Learning life-skills progressed from cracking nuts to planting potatoes and catching fish to computer technology and now AI. Many thousands of years have passed and we are gradually learning to use freedom responsibly. Hurricanes come along to remind us that misusing our freedom has consequences, like heating up the atmosphere to bring about bigger floods, fires and droughts, and less food. Or, chain-saws, drills and excavators ravage habitats and livelihoods, which they do only because the rest of us provide a market for what they plunder. So, we need criteria for determining what kind of developments are good. Life-skills education showed up the need for moral education. Education that looks no further than the development of skills, even high tech skills, is severely truncated.

A deeper and wider appreciation of human life is shown in those cultures which remember our dependence on nature, that we are part of it, and need to look after it. Caring for nature is what Māori tradition calls kaitiakitanga. So too, the need to look out for one another is essential to truly human living. Māori call this whanaungatanga. Others call it 'community', understood as a way of being there for one another. It involves the kind of self-giving and receiving of one another that is life-giving.

Those whose socialising is limited to mainly virtual presence (on-line) leaving less time for real presence to others, and are becoming non-participants in community events, service associations etc. A diminished form of real presence to others can be a diminished form of living. That makes it a moral issue, as well as a health issue.

Becoming one's true self by being "for others" involves working for the personal, social and economic development of all. But the requirements of justice and the common good cannot be achieved without the transformation of culture, and personal 'conversion.' That's because social and economic practices are the progeny of how we think and what we value. "There can be no new humanity without new persons..." (Pope St Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, n 18).

Cultural deterioration is evident in report on Pope Francis' recent visit to Louvain University. A spokesperson condescendingly explained that Francis "may not have fully grasped how deeply our culture believes that each person defines their own origin, purpose and standards. Contrary to what he preaches and hopes for, the individual has overtaken the concept of the person." (La Croix) Yes, Pope Francis certainly believes that persons are essentially relational, and that the autonomy of individuals is not absolute, even if that is what "our culture" wants us to believe.

Unsurprisingly, he is not on his own:

Human beings are not free-floating agents capable of re-shaping themselves in any way they choose; this happens only in on-line virtual worlds... Our experience of the world is increasingly mediated by screens that allow us to easily imagine ourselves in alternative realities or as alternative beings.... The real world, however, continues to be different: wills are embodied in physical bodies that structure, and also limit, the extent of individual agency." (Prof. Francis Fukuyama, *Liberalism and its Discontents*, 2022.)

Notwithstanding occasional throw-backs and cultural deformities, contemporary culture and moral education do have some important points of contact and are able to support each other. This was recognised by the Catholic Church's Second Vatican Council:

The dignity of the human person is a concern of which people of our time are becoming increasingly more aware. In growing numbers people demand that they should enjoy the use of their own responsible judgment and freedom and decide on their actions on grounds of duty and conscience, without external pressure or coercion (On Religious Liberty, 1; also Church in Modern World, 17)

Honouring this reality leads to formation aimed at helping others to understand issues and to choose well. It moves away from the social patterns and leadership styles that were more typical of feudal societies and that prolonged over-dependence and personal immaturity. "A major function of schools is to produce critical thinkers, discerning consumers, and perceptive citizens." (Cardinal T.S. Williams).

Teaching is a more subtle process than indoctrination. It involves respect for learners' right to reason and to freedom. At the same time, it does not leave young people to drift aimlessly, based on false understandings of freedom. Moral education needs to be common ground for all educators. It does not succumb to the illusion of thinking education needs to be morally 'neutral,' because that deprives them of the attitudes and skills needed for questioning current values within society, and allows the impression that all views are equally valid and immune from criticism. That is not neutrality; it is just a different set of values. (see Ivan Snook and Colin McGeorge, "More than Talk" –

Moral Education in New Zealand, Dept. Of Education, Wellington 1978). Full rolls and waiting lists at faith-based schools show that people realise this.

The need for values - moral education – is enhanced by religious education. To really know ourselves we need to know God. That's because when we know we have been personally and gratuitously chosen and called into existence by God, we know the greatest thing we could ever know about ourselves. When moral education takes this leap, life takes on meaning, and has a whole new feel to it. It becomes thanksgiving. Being called into existence by God is the basis of each person's fundamental dignity, equality, and right to be loved regardless of their condition, their circumstances and even what they have done.

In turn, religious education becomes Christian education when we discover in the Person, life, death and resurrection of Jesus how much we really do mean to God. This is the point of Catholic schools. But not only schools: the General Catechetical Directory reminds us that education-in-faith is even more for adults. We grow *into* it, not *out of* it.

Alongside others who provide Christian education, we are partners in a great enterprise – enabling young people to grow as persons. But we also have reason for maintaining the distinctiveness of Catholic education. Our immediate ancestors were concerned to preserve our Catholic identity in an environment that was mainly Protestant. That has largely changed. The need now is to preserve our Catholic identity in an environment that is mainly secular – not for the sake of separating ourselves, but for the sake of taking our place in that kind of society without losing our bearings. If Catholics are to be able to take their place and make a positive contribution to society, they first need to experience their own identity, savour it and nurture it. They need to discover why they are Catholics and why they can be proud of it. Out of that strength they can be a leaven in the dough of a society that is crying out for meaning.