

A STRAW IN THE WIND?

Some notes on the 'Religious Education Curriculum Directory for Catholic Schools' issued by the Bishops Conference of England and Wales, January 1997.

WILL IT PUT MATTERS RIGHT?

The ever-mounting crescendo of concern shown by faithful Catholic parents over the current failure of Catholic Schools to give acceptable instruction in the Truths of the Faith confirms once more how right Abraham Lincoln was when he said that though you can fool some of the people all of the time, or all of the people some of the time, you can not fool all the people all the time. Now the time seems to have come when modern catechetics, in undisputed power in our schools since the nineteen sixties, has been shown to be the useless pretence it is. Despite being inundated with well-documented complaints, our Bishops only listen to their modern catechists and give first loyalty to them instead of to the children entrusted to their care by faithful parents. This has forced Catholics to turn to Rome for help. Now Rome have insisted that the Bishops of England and Wales produce a National Curriculum for religious education as a beginning in the long haul back to sound religious instruction in our schools.

The very fact that this document was in preparation helped to silence parents' concern. For example, at the Catholic Women's League National Council meeting in September 1996 a Resolution was proposed asking the Bishops to take action about *'the material used for Religious Instruction in our schools'*. But the Resolution was not carried because the 941 delegates were assured that the Bishops were even then working on a curriculum which would put matters right. Now that the document is published we can examine just how far it goes in putting matters right. The Curriculum is written in two parts. Part One covers the General Principles of Religious Education in Catholic Schools and Part Two covers the content of what is to be taught at each age from four to sixteen years of age.

PART ONE - GENERAL PRINCIPLES.

This talks about catechesis generally and says adult catechesis *'is the chief form of catechesis'* though it doesn't say how adults are to come to classes if they have already left the Church after leaving school. Important though adult catechesis is, there is no question that proper instruction in school is its essential prerequisite.

Page 7 of the Curriculum goes on to claim that *'Religious Education in school leads children and young people in to an exploration of the different aspects of religion and thoughtful reflection on religious belief,'* and talks about *'familiarising young people with the main landmarks of the world of religion'*. Is this really why parents send their children to Catholic schools? No, on the contrary, they send their children to Catholic schools to be taught the Truths of the faith handed down to us from the Apostles.

On page 8, we find the assertion that *'sound teaching of the truths of faith'* is to be shared by family, parish and school. While all three do share in forming good Catholics: the family teaching good practice in the home and the parish forming practice in liturgy and the Sacraments it is the schools which have the responsibility for teaching the Truths of the Faith. This is why they were built - so that Catholic children could be given lessons in Doctrine, in their own age groups, by professional teachers trained to do it effectively.

Page 9 describes religious education as a real challenge because schools have to respect *'the diversity of our multi-cultural and multi-faith society'*, reflected in the classroom. If this *'respect'* leads to compromises on the Truths which must be taught it is not only misplaced, it is cheating the children of their God-given heritage.

Page 10 lists some vague aims which not only include respect for Truth (which is fine) but also *'respect for the views of others'*. Of course we must respect others as persons but respect for false beliefs is inconsistent with respect for Truth.

Part One ends with a page on Methodology which only emphasises personal experience and adaptation to the needs of pupils. While both these are required to a certain extent, if they are given too much prominence they will be counter productive. A clear and authoritative presentation of Catholic Doctrine must form the main part of every religious lesson if the children are to have a good understanding of the faith.

The final paragraph, on learning formulas by heart as required by the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, limits this learning to, *'texts from the Bible, the liturgy and the traditional prayers of the Christian faith'*.

To sum up: Part One, in my opinion, could be dispensed with entirely. All that is needed is good teachers who know and love the Faith enough to want to teach it to the children who are entrusted to them so that they, too, will know and love the Faith.

PART TWO - PROGRAMME OF STUDY

This covers the content of what is to be taught. It is divided into four sections - Revelation; Church; Celebration; and Life in Christ. Each section deals with Key Stage 1 (Infants), Key Stage 2 (Juniors) Key Stage 3 (11-14 yr olds) and Key Stage 4 (14-16 yr olds). Each of the pages is divided into two - one, above the lesson material, is headed *'Teachers will offer pupils opportunities.....'* and the other is headed *'The desired outcome for pupils will be knowledge and understanding of.....'*

Evidence shows that, rather than just *'offering opportunities'* to reflect and investigate, teachers who present well-substantiated material achieve the best results in subjects such as religious knowledge. To list the *'desired outcomes'* makes better sense but unfortunately the outcomes listed are vague and very low in expectation.

REVELATION includes some teaching about God, although not all His attributes are covered. Unfortunately there are several errors and omissions. For example: The Incarnation begins at the Nativity with no mention of the Annunciation; the children are not taught that they have spiritual, immortal souls made in God's image, and are capable of reason and choice; the word *'soul'* is never used; Heaven, Hell and Purgatory are all omitted; the death of Jesus on the Cross is taught as the way He *'expressed His Love for His Father and for all the World.'* (It is, of course, more than that); there is no preparation for the Sacraments of Penance, Holy Communion and Confirmation which are received by this age group; and angels are not taught at all.

CHURCH This section contains some doubtful and incorrect statements. For example: *'The Church on Earth is always in need of renewal'*. The Church's mission to teach the Truth and to channel Grace is reduced to *'advocating the cause of the poorest...'*. The Pope is treated on the same level as the bishops. *'The Church is men, women and children who try to follow the example of Jesus.'* *'..... the Church's faith in Jesus deepens and is handed down through Christian communities'*. (What about the Pope, infallibility?). *'.....the Church is present wherever the people of God live the Christian life'*. (This seems a little vague to say the least). There are several references to respect for other (man-made) faiths and even *'other churches'*. Children should be taught to respect other people but not their false beliefs. The word *'Christian'* is often used as equivalent to *'Catholic'*. They do not mean the same.

Nowhere are the children taught that the Catholic Church is the One True Church as affirmed in the Second Vatican Council document *Lumen Gentium* and in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*.

CELEBRATION. This covers the Liturgy, the Sacraments and Prayer. Sadly the word *'Mass'* is avoided and *'Eucharistic Sacrifice'* substituted. This leads to confusion between the Mass and Holy Communion all through this area of study. Sacramental celebrations are described as *'signs of grace'* when the description *'channels of grace'* would be more accurate, as they are so much more than mere signs. The sections on Baptism omit any mention of cleansing from Original Sin. The sections on Penance do not explain that priests have the power to forgive sins but simply state that *'individual Christians are called to be God's instruments of reconciliation'*. Sections on the *'Eucharist'* do not teach the Real Presence clearly. It is made equal to the unsacramental presence in *'Word, priest, people'* and described as *'in bread and wine'*. The section on marriage, even for the older pupils, fails to mention the existence and reliability of Natural Family Planning, as well as the importance of chastity and fidelity. Also omitted is any mention of the grave depravity of homosexual acts and that contraception is intrinsically evil. (Catechism n.2357 and n.2370)

LIFE IN CHRIST. Human dignity, law, Grace, Sin. Here there is the inevitable emphasis on *'self esteem'*. Sin and forgiveness are dealt with, but a firm purpose of amendment is omitted. Grace is mentioned, but unfortunately not enough, and the importance of Truth in the Church is not made clear.

IN SUMMARY it can be said that this Curriculum is an improvement on anything which has gone before and we must be grateful that Rome insisted that our bishops commission it. But clearly there is much room for improvement. Perhaps it was a mistake to expect that the same catechists who wrote or promoted the discredited Schemes (which led to the present crisis) would be able to write a perfectly sound curriculum. A revised version, correcting the faults listed above and making good the omissions, needs to be compiled by Catholics faithful to the Church's teaching.

THE CATECHISM OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH. The Catechism is referred to but, unfortunately, the paragraphs quoted are not always the most appropriate. It would be better to give the doctrine that is to be covered and then leave teachers to look up the relevant paragraphs in the Catechism's comprehensive index.

TEN POINTS FOR ACTION.

- This Curriculum Directory for Catholic Schools must be revised so that it no longer contains doctrinal error and so that the serious omissions are made good.
- The people authorised to do this should not be the catechetical 'experts' responsible for previous Guidelines, discredited religious education Schemes, and this first edition of the Curriculum.
- The revised Curriculum should consist of the doctrine, morals and prayers to be covered each year. Key Stages are far too broad an area.
- The 'jargon' used in the present Curriculum must be avoided. If we produce a simple straightforward document, it will be easier for teachers to use. Parents who see what their children are learning at school can then work with the teachers.
- There is no need to select Catechism paragraphs for the teacher. As long as everything to be taught is listed, teachers can look up the relevant paragraphs for each topic for themselves. The Catechism has a perfectly adequate index.
- The methods used can be left to professional teachers but, to ensure that the children are being taught effectively, regular class inspections by sound and experienced Catholics must be arranged.
- The time available for religious instruction is precious. None of that time should be wasted on classroom lessons about sex, on lengthy liturgies or on trivialities.
- The teacher vital. He or she must be a well-informed practising Catholic who is in good standing with the Church and who loves the Faith. As an American priest put it to me: 'We wouldn't let someone who hated baseball coach our kids in it so why let someone who doesn't love the Church teach religion?'
- Any books used to supplement the Curriculum and the Catechism must be absolutely sound on Faith and Morals. Until such books can be prepared in this country, books from Australia and America should be used.
- The revised Curriculum could have an appendix explaining how to teach the basic mysteries of the Faith such as: the attributes of God; the nature of Spirit; The Blessed Trinity; Sanctifying Grace; and so on.

All this seems fairly straight forward, but there is a problem - and that is (with a few exceptions) the teachers who are now giving religious lessons in Catholic schools. To be fruitful, the Faith must be taught with enthusiasm and at present most teachers are not enthusiastic about either the Catechism or the Curriculum. It will take drastic action to change this but with determination and with God's help, it can be done.

UNDERSTANDING THE PROBLEM

We are asking religious education teachers to make a tremendous shift in professional attitude if religious instruction is to be effective again. The first essential is that we understand that this will not be easy for them. Everything possible must be done to smooth their path. While well-meaning people repeatedly claim that *'the schools are doing a wonderful job'* there will be no incentive for any change. We will have to be brutally honest about the tragic results of modern religious education - giving facts and figures to substantiate our case and making comparison with the results of previous sound religious instruction.

Excuses such as claiming that it is impossible to teach religious education because the home (i.e. the Catholic parent) fails to teach it, or because there are children in the class who are non-Catholic or not practising, must not be used to explain failure. At present children from good homes are not being taught the Truths of the Faith at school - much to their parents' distress. Doctrine can be, and must be, taught at school whether everyone in the class is Catholic or not.

Once all this is established we can start teaching the teachers. If all they have received is modern catechetics it should be no surprise to find them suspicious of, or downright hostile to, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* and the revised Curriculum. When I attended a Conference on the Curriculum as it now is, I saw how angry the teachers were that they had not been consulted; that it contained so much dogma; that it was prescriptive; that it didn't devote enough time to other world religions; and that there was no space for the lengthy human experience that they were accustomed to teaching in place of the Truths of the Catholic Faith. Their confusion is genuine, but would they be as concerned about a new secular syllabus?

There is no doubt that teachers will have to be given intensive in-service training on the methods and the aims of religious instruction in a Catholic school. Sadly, that training will have to extend to the Truths of the Faith as taught by the Church down the centuries and now contained in the Catechism. This cannot be given by our present diocesan catechetical 'experts' who are largely responsible for the crisis in religious education in the first place. No company would stay in business very long if it persisted in using staff and methods that consistently failed to produce good results. To teach the teachers new personnel will have to be recruited who are faithful to all the Church's teaching. This will not be easy, but with God's help it will be possible. We have seen already how dioceses in America and in Australia have reversed the catechetical revolution and are obtaining excellent results. We must pray that this Curriculum will be the straw signalling the wind of change which is so desperately needed in this country's present religious education.

(Editor's note: Ten years after this paper was written we still have a long way to go)

www.catholicassociates.com

e-mail: mfandra@hotmail.com
