

What is religious education?

Religious education is a form of the ministry of the word in its own right. As an activity of evangelisation, it is a means of handing on the Christian Faith. For students in a school, it 'makes the Gospel present in a personal process of cultural, systematic and critical assimilation' [GDC 73]. Its aim follows that of a school, and [RD 69]:

The aim of the school is knowledge ...

Knowledge here means more than acquiring factual information. Religious education seeks to help students [RD 69]:

- ❖ to learn the teachings of the Gospel
- ❖ to develop 'a sense of the nature of Christianity' and of 'how Christians are trying to live their lives'.

Knowledge to enlighten students' experiences

Different philosophies of education have different ideas about knowledge. For the Catholic educator, the purpose of knowledge is to enlighten students' experiences so that they are enriched by them. This important Catholic educational principle is spelt out in *The Catholic School*, along with the consequence of ignoring it [CS 27]:

(The school) must help students spell out the meaning of their experiences and their truths. Any school which neglects this duty, and which offers merely pre-cast conclusions, hinders the personal development of its pupils.

Following this general principle, religious education in a Catholic school will be particularly concerned with those experiences that are related to students' religious development [CS 19; GDC 51]. Its pedagogy, like that of other subjects, will reflect a Catholic understanding of education.

Without reference to students' experiences, religious education would be too abstract to contribute to their 'development from within'. Nor could it promote students' religious development as effectively, for, as will be discussed later, experience is a 'locus' for God's Revelation [152 (c)].

Religious education as an education activity

A Catholic understanding of education shares with a number of other education philosophies the idea that education is concerned with the development of the human person from within. In the words of *The Catholic School* [CS 29]:

It must never be forgotten that the purpose of instruction is education, that is, the development of man from within, freeing him from that conditioning which would prevent him from becoming a fully integrated human being. The school must begin from the principle that its educational programme is intentionally directed to the growth of the whole person.

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Yet, like other philosophies and approaches to education, Catholic education has its own distinctive vision of 'the educated person'. Again, in the words of *The Catholic School* [CS 47]:

The Catholic school differs from all others which limit themselves to forming men and women. Its task is to form Christian men and women, and, by its teaching and witness, to show non-Christians something of the mystery of Christ ...

The characteristics of 'the educated person' that a Catholic school is called to promote are beyond the scope of the present discussion. They can be found scattered through the various official documents published by the Congregation for Catholic Education.

Religious education in a Catholic school needs to be 'educational', therefore, according to the criteria of *Catholic* education. Some of these differ from the criteria of other education approaches for, as pointed out already, Catholic education has its own answer to the question: 'What is the educated person?' Trying to make religious education in the Catholic school 'educational' according to the criteria of other education approaches will hinder its effectiveness in students' lives and development.

Religious education responds to students' faith situations differently

As an activity of evangelisation, how religious education seeks to provide for students who are *believers* will differ from how it seeks to provide for students who are *searchers or doubters* or who are *non-believers*. While its general aim is knowledge, its content must serve the evangelisation process. This means it must serve the progressiveness of God's act of Revelation to students, acknowledging the fact that [GDC 75]:

The life and faith of students who receive religious instruction in school are characterised by continuous change. Religious instruction should be cognisant of that fact if it is to accomplish its own ends.

Firstly, where students generally are believers, religious education needs to help them understand better the Christian message (being received through family and parish catechesis) by relating its content to four levels of human experience. These are:

- ❖ the great existential concerns common to all religions (such as questions about God, life after death, right and wrong, the problem of evil)
- ❖ the great concerns common to all human beings (such as the meaning of life, the secret to relationships, and the search for personal meaning)
- ❖ the different visions of life found in the culture in which students are living (for example, by critiquing secularism, materialism and individualism against the Christian message)
- ❖ the major moral questions confronting humanity today (for example, social justice, family and human freedom).

Secondly, where students generally are searching or have religious doubts, religious education should seek to help them:

- ❖ to understand exactly what faith in Jesus Christ is
- ❖ to understand what response the Church makes to *their* questions
- ❖ to examine more deeply *their* choices.

Thirdly, where students generally are non-believers, religious education needs to assume the character of a missionary or *primary proclamation* of the Gospel, helping them to appreciate the importance of making a basic decision about religion for their lives. This means [GDC 51, 56, 61, 117]:

- ❖ raising students' religious awareness
- ❖ helping students to understand what Christian salvation means in the light of their experiences of evils in human society and of personal weaknesses
- ❖ presenting the Christian message in ways that relate it to the human heart and its aspirations
- ❖ showing how the Gospel fully satisfies the human heart.

The demands for a good religious education

The *Directory* stresses that religious education needs to have the same educational demands, depth and rigor as other school disciplines. Examples of 'other school disciplines' that apply to Australia include history, literature and science [RD 58, 60, 62]. Religious education needs to promote, in a more immediate way than do other school subjects, a systematic and critical dialogue between culture and the content of the faith, particularly the culture of young people [GDC 73 n 41].

Religious education needs to enter into dialogue with other school subjects. It needs to contribute to students' understanding of [GDC 74]:

... the origins of the world, the sense of history, the basics of ethical values, the function of religion in culture, the destiny of man and his relationship with nature ...

As an evangelisation activity, religious education has a confessional character (that is, it promotes a critical understanding of the beliefs of a particular religious faith or 'confession'). As a ministry of the word, it is different from religious studies and the comparative study of religions. Its concern will be to provide for the right of students [GDC 74]:

'... to learn with truth and certainty the religion to which they belong... The confessional character of religious instruction in schools ... is an indispensable guarantee offered to families and students who choose such education.'

Good religious education is fundamental in a Catholic school. Without it, the school will not succeed in forming 'Christian men and women'. It would be like other schools 'which limit themselves to forming men and women' [CS 47].

What is the relationship between religious education and catechesis?

Religious education and catechesis are two forms of the ministry of the word. Though distinct from each other, one complements the other [RD 69]:

It is evident that religious instruction cannot help but strengthen the faith of a believing student, just as catechesis cannot help but increase one's knowledge of the Christian message.

To appreciate each, it is essential to be clear about the relationship between these two forms of the ministry of the word. The *Directory* repeats the words of Pope John Paul [GDC 73]:

... there is an absolute necessity to distinguish clearly between religious instruction and catechesis.

Even the Second Vatican Council distinguished between 'doctrinal instruction in schools' and 'catechetical instruction'. This distinction continues to be maintained in the Code of Canon Law [eg CD 13, CIC 761]. Its importance is so great that religious education and catechesis have been made the responsibilities of different Vatican Congregations – religious education being the responsibility of the Congregation for Catholic Education, and catechesis, the Congregation for the Clergy.

A COMPLEMENTARY RELATIONSHIP

Religious education and catechesis are both evangelisation activities. Both contribute to the development of Christian faith, though in different ways. Each involves sharing faith, even the relating of personal experiences of faith by the teacher and the catechist.

Young people can have 'moments of faith', 'faith insights' and 'leaps of faith' in religious education, as well as in catechesis. This is so because each is an evangelisation activity in its own right. Such moments, insights or leaps are not restricted to catechesis.

Where students have negative attitudes, and resist discussion of religious issues, they may be closed to the effects of religious education as a ministry of the word – at least initially. In these situations, religious education can still serve the evangelisation of students, but as an activity of Christian witness.

Secondly, mature Christian faith involves all dimensions of the human person — cognitive, religious, affective, spiritual and moral. Catechesis aims to mature a person's conversion at all these levels into a living, explicit and fruitful confession of faith [GDC 66]. This faith will be spiritual, liturgical, sacramental and apostolic [RD 69].

Religious education, concerned with students learning 'with truth and certainty the religion to which they belong', provides for the 'search for greater understanding' characteristic of Christian faith [CCC 158]. In this way it complements catechesis that has been received, is being received, or that is yet to be received.

Thirdly, both religious education and catechesis respond in different ways to people in different faith situations. And, unlike catechesis, religious education can be offered to non-believers. The selection of content in both will vary

according to what is appropriate to people's faith situations. Both aim to serve the pedagogy and progressiveness of Revelation.

Fourthly, both religious education and catechesis draw upon the human experiences of students and those receiving catechesis. Religious education aims to help students understand the religious meaning of their experiences, whereas catechesis aims to help catechumens 'read their own lived experience' to discern their experiences of God in daily life [GDC 152–153; CS 27 etc].

Finally, as forms of the ministry of the word, both religious education and catechesis are means through which the Holy Spirit continues 'to dialogue with humanity' [GDC 50, 142]. Indeed, attempts to hand on Christian faith that fail to reflect this 'dialogue' are neither effective religious education nor effective catechesis [cf RD 71–72]. In a person's life journey, the Holy Spirit continues to build upon what has been learnt in religious education, as well as upon what has been received through catechesis [GDC 142].

This is not an exhaustive list of ways religious education and catechesis complement each other. Pope John Paul pointed to other similarities in an address to the clergy of Rome [*L'Osservatore Romano* 1981 p3]:

... the subject addressed, in fact, is the same student; and the objective content on which the formation turns, though in different ways in the teaching of religion and in catechesis, is also the same.

The Pope went on to explain that religious education complements catechesis in three ways. It:

- ❖ lays a foundation for possible future catechesis (eg for students who as yet have had little or no family or parish catechesis)
- ❖ supports catechesis currently being offered (eg in the family and the parish)
- ❖ reinforces catechesis already received.

YET DISTINCT

Yet religious education and catechesis differ in many ways. One is that the basic concern of religious education is learning. Its task relates to the cognitive and its objectives are educational — cognitive and affective.

The basic concerns of catechesis, on the other hand, are not only cognitive, but experiential (in the sense of 'what constitutes the nucleus of the Christian experience') and behavioural as well [GDC 35, cf 67]. Its objectives relate to its six interdependent tasks [GDC 85–87]. The objectives of catechesis reflect its more comprehensive nature [GDC 67]:

... catechesis is principally distinguished from other forms of presenting the word of God by its comprehensive and vital deepening of the mystery of Christ ... in such a manner that the entire person, at his deepest levels, is enriched by the word of God.

Secondly, religious education does not presuppose that students have Christian faith. As pointed out earlier, it can be offered even to non-believers [GDC 75]. Catechesis, on the other hand, presupposes a stage of Christian faith in those receiving it [RD 68]:

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... unlike religious instruction, catechesis presupposes that the hearer is receiving the Christian message as a salvific reality.

The nuances of 'receiving the Christian message as a salvific reality' are beyond the present discussion. In a Catholic school, this reality can simply mean that students have a basic sense that a catechesis activity is related to God who helps and who hears prayers.

Thirdly, religious education involves a pedagogy based upon Catholic educational principles. The processes of catechesis, on the other hand, are formational and based upon the principles that underlie God's Revelation process. As noted earlier, the processes of catechesis are likened by the *Directory* to 'an apprenticeship of the entire Christian life', which is much more than 'instruction' [GDC 67].

Fourthly, the communities required for religious education and catechesis are different. Religious education occurs in a school, whereas catechesis requires a community, particularly a family or parish community, that is [RD 68]:

... living out its faith at a level of space and time not available to a school: a whole lifetime.

This is not to suggest that catechesis activities cannot take place within a Catholic school community [RD 69]:

The distinction between religious instruction and catechesis does not change the fact that a school can and must play its specific role in the work of catechesis.

Finally, religious education and catechesis have different time requirements. Religious education requires sufficient time for students to achieve the cognitive and affective objectives of a topic. It then moves to the next topic. However, catechesis can require several years before a person is ready to move to the next stage of conversion [RCIA 7 (b)].

Examples of differences between religious education and catechesis found in *The Religious Dimension of Education in a Catholic School* and the *General Directory for Catechesis*, are outlined in Chart Three.

CHART THREE

	CATECHESIS	RELIGIOUS EDUCATION
AIM	To promote maturity of Christian faith	To promote understanding of Christian beliefs and practices
PROCESSES	Formation	Education
METHODOLOGY	Reflects the divine pedagogy	Catholic educational pedagogy
LOCATION	Mature family, parish and Catholic school faith communities	School community
READINESS	Depends upon stage of conversion	Depends upon religious learning readiness
PRINCIPLES	Catechetical principles	Catholic educational principles
RECEIVERS	Groups at same stage of conversion	Students within the same school Year Level
INCULTURATION	Gospel presented in an inculturated way	Content inculturated in a context with the same systematic demands and rigor as other school disciplines
DEPTH	Needs to be appropriate to the receivers' level of conversion	Same depth of knowledge as other school disciplines.

COMMON CONFUSIONS BETWEEN CATECHESIS AND RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

Even today, it is still not uncommon to find the misconception that religious education and catechesis are the same activity. The misconception leads to three particularly serious consequences.

Firstly, there can be the expectation that religious education can fulfil the aims of catechesis. It is not realised, for example, that whereas all receiving catechesis need to be at the same stage of Christian faith, those receiving religious education do not. As mentioned earlier, it can even serve non-believers [GDC 75].

Secondly, to imagine that students are being catechised in religious education classes invites the neglect of the catechesis they need in their families and parishes. Parents may say, 'I can leave the faith development of my child to the school'. The effect of this is that students' Christian faith will lack essential nutrition, and not develop.

People in fact are seeing the consequences of inadequate catechesis when they make comments such as:

- ❖ 'How can students have had a good secondary religious education if they no longer go to Mass?'
- ❖ 'If primary religious education is effective, why do teenagers lose their faith when they go to the secondary school?'
- ❖ 'The decline in the religious practice of so many young people means the religious education in our schools must be failing'.

Such statements reflect mistaken expectations about what religious education can and ought to achieve. They fail to recognise that, for Christian faith development, students need good family catechesis, good parish catechesis and good religious education. The neglect of catechesis for many children and adolescents today is a major cause for the loss of interest of many young people in the Church.

Thirdly, to confuse religious education and catechesis leads to mistaken expectations about what ought to be the content and pedagogy of religious education. This is reflected in comments such as:

- ❖ 'There should be more catechesis on Mary to help children develop greater devotion to her'
- ❖ 'More time should be given to devotions in religious education'
- ❖ 'Students should attend a weekday Mass in their parishes as part of their religious education'
- ❖ 'During religious education, children should study the readings for Sunday Mass'
- ❖ 'Students should spend RE time in adoration before the Blessed Sacrament'.

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These are catechesis, not religious education activities. The same confusion is reflected in comments by religious education teachers who say:

- ❖ 'The faith level of my class is such that they are not ready to move on to another topic'
- ❖ 'This content is beyond my students' stage of faith'
- ❖ 'How can we teach about the Eucharist, when most students today come from 'un-churched' families?'
- ❖ 'I am a failure as a RE teacher because most of my students have stopped going to Mass after leaving school'
- ❖ 'I see RE as sharing faith, so I do not follow its educational objectives if students start discussing faith issues'
- ❖ 'There can be no assessment in RE because you cannot assess students' faith'
- ❖ 'Learning hymns for Mass or any other religious celebration is an RE activity'.

SOME IMPLICATIONS FOR RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

Religious education is an important form of the ministry of the word. However, it is clear that much more is needed for the evangelisation of the young.

Hopefully, the *Directory* will encourage dioceses and parishes to address systematically the question of how to provide more effectively for the evangelisation of children and teenagers, particularly their catechesis. This question is beyond the present discussion. However, unless it is faced, the young Catholics of today are unlikely to become mature participants in the Church of tomorrow.

Secondly, confusion between religious education and catechesis becomes most obvious perhaps in debates about what ought to be the content of religious education. At times, critics of religious education do not realise that, in fact, they are criticising the quality of the family and parish catechesis being offered to young people today. This discussion is not about the content of catechesis, but about religious education. The content of religious education will be discussed in Part Two under the question: 'Does the content reflect the conciliar renewal?'

Current diocesan religious education programmes

Documentation provided by dioceses to the committee for the Religious Education Curriculum Project, established by the Australian Catholic Bishops' Conference, shows that no current diocesan RE programme seeks to offer catechesis. Each seeks to meet educational aims. None reflects confusion between religious education and catechesis.

All have educational objectives to be achieved within a term and school year. All aim to deepen students' understanding, and none envisages that all students in a classroom are at the same stage of conversion.

What is the relationship between religious education and catechesis?

Religious education needs to be 'catechetical' in the sense that it *complements* the primary proclamation or catechesis students may be receiving in their families, parishes or Catholic schools outside the religious educational programme, or that they may receive in the future.

Discussion starters

What is meant by religious education?

'Religious education complements catechesis'. How does it do so? What is your reaction to this statement?

'There is an absolute necessity to distinguish between religious education and catechesis' [GDC 74]. What are the consequences of confusing the two?

