

Religious Instruction In Elementary School

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Some time ago Fr. Carl Pfeifer and I were invited to speak at a Religious Education Conference on Long Island, New York. We had missed our train and were waiting in a small passenger's shelter for the next train. It was raining and cold and already quite late. A man joined us in the shelter. He was waiting for the same train so we began chatting. He told us a personal story that has much to say about elementary school religious education.

He claimed that when he graduated from eighth grade at the local parochial school, he was awarded a gold medal for being the outstanding religion student in his class. Instead of being flattered by the award, he said that he was so disillusioned that he stopped going to Mass from that day on.

Later on during the war he met a Methodist chaplain who guided him into Methodism, which he practiced until he was out of the Army and back in New York. Some years later he became friends with a Cath-

olic priest and began again to identify himself as a Catholic.

We asked him why he abandoned Catholicism at the very moment he was named an outstanding Catholic student. His answer was thought-provoking for religious educators.

He indicated that while he was in the upper grades of elementary school, he had many questions about life, many questions in religion class and wanted to share some of his thoughts, hoping that his teacher might be able to help him better understand what he was experiencing and questioning.

He knew his questions were honest questions. He was certain his instructor knew they were good questions. Yet time after time there was no time to share his thoughts and his questions were passed by with an explanation: "That is a very good question, Jim, but we must go on with our lesson. We have much to cover." His teacher then proceeded to explain answers to questions he neither had nor could really understand.

It was this very effort to share thoughts and find some answers to very real questions that led him, he told us, to give up a tradition that seemed to have so little to do with life-experience. He believed that religion must have more to say about life than what he was

learning in religion class. Not finding meaning for life in Catholicism, he stopped giving witness to it.

This true story highlights one of the important reasons for the different emphasis in religious education today, a difference noticeable already in elementary school.

Vatican II has helped us realize that religion has everything to do with life, can help us make sense out of our lives, and may enable us to reach the deeper dimensions of our experience.

The religious education of the child needs to begin within the realm of his experience and for the most part stay within that realm. Part of the work of religious education enables the child to make greater sense out of the experiences he has and the questions that rise up in himself.

There was a time, as the story in the beginning illustrates, when religious education was based on the theory that the child must learn in elementary years what he would later need to understand and practice as an adult. His early religious instruction was viewed primarily as a preparation for later life. If he knew by heart the essentials of Catholic faith and morals, then he would be equipped to draw on them in more ma-

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ture years. The obvious implication was that the elementary school child should learn all of Catholic doctrine before graduation even if he was unable to understand it all at the time.

While there is some merit in viewing education as preparation for adult living, religious educators—and secular educators, as well—realize today that the best preparation is to enable the child to integrate his learning into his present experience. The primary focus of religious education on the elementary level is not on conveying all the truths that may be needed in adult years, but on helping the child live a life of faith now.

The emphasis is today less on "covering the matter" than on

enabling the child to draw upon his Catholic tradition to make sense of his present life. He needs to know God now. He needs to pray, to reflect on his experience and that of others in the light of Christ, and in some instances he needs to modify or change his behavior.

Therefore, the new texts deal, in part, with the questions and experience of the child. In this way, from the very start, religion is within the context of life—experience, which is precisely where Christ is with us "always and everywhere." There is no less teaching of doctrine, but the doctrines are learned according to the capacity of the child in relation to his experiences and questions.

Q. and A.

By **FATHER RICHARD P. MCBRIEN**

Q. There has been a lot of talk lately about the wealth of the Catholic Church. Each charge seems to encounter a denial. As a lifelong Catholic I am disposed, of course, to believe the leaders of my own Church. Even so, this wealth-question has me troubled. Isn't the Church supposed to imitate Christ? He certainly was poor. Of all the critical things that I hear said about the Church, cynical remarks about its wealth head the list. Is the Church too rich?

A. I don't know if the Church is too rich. The question is not how much wealth it has, but how it uses the wealth it has.

On the one hand, the Church is called upon to follow the path of poverty "in communicating to men the fruits of salvation" (Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, n. 8; see also the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, n. 89). In this regard, the Church is only imitating the spirit and style of Christ himself.

On the other hand, "the Church needs human resources to carry out her mission" (n. 8). If the Church were completely without financial resources, it could not be an effective agent for social and political change, nor could it provide the many supplementary charitable services which it now makes available to people whom the government cannot adequately help.

As it is stated in the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, too much wealth can imprison a person, or a community, in "a kind of splendid isolation," while extreme poverty can actually cripple human freedom (n. 31).

As a general rule, the Church, as any other large-scale organization, should be accountable to its members and, where required, to the various governmental agencies. The mission of the Church, after all, has been given to all its members. And if the Church's resources are for the sake of her mission, then all of her members must somehow participate in those policy decisions whereby such resources are obtained, invested, and disbursed.

Q. The documents of Vatican II seem to stress constantly the importance of the lay person in the Church today. Don't we have to clear up all this confusion in the Catholic Church, the doctrine, teachings, etc., before we can expect the lay person to assert his role in the Church? I personally feel too confused to offer my services in something such as religious education for the young.

A. As a first step, you and your friends might consult the documents of the Second Vatican Council to see just what the council has said about the role and responsibility of the Laity. Chapters II and IV of the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church would be the place to begin.

Herein, we are reminded that the laity participate in the total mission of the Church, alongside clergy and Religious (n. 30). Your share in the work of the Church is not something which your bishop or pastor gives you; rather, it is given to you by the Lord himself, especially at baptism and confirmation (n. 33).

To dispel the confusion on wider issues of doctrine and teachings will require more than a reading of certain passages from the council documents. You need systematic instruction, guided reading, and supervised discussion. If you really want to be a serious and effective member of the Church, there is no other way.

What I am suggesting is that adult education remains on the Church's list of major unfinished business. Until pastoral leaders do more for their adult parishioners than provide healthy and harmless entertainment (fashion shows, sports nights, etc.), people such as yourself are going to remain confused and ineffective. You should do whatever you can to promote some program of adult education in your parish.

If this proves to be impossible, you should write to your diocesan office of religious education and see where such programs are already available.

One final comment: I support your unwillingness to teach in the parish religious education program for the young. You recognize that teaching is a very serious responsibility. Children can be harmed by an incompetent person and particularly by an insecure or defensive person. It is better that there be no religious instructions at all if the only people available to teach are unqualified for the job.



Contemporary socio-economic, political and racial issues are now very much stressed in forming the Christian conscience.

Catechetics Now Focused on Life

By **FR. CARL J. PFEIFER, S.J.**

Basic changes in religious education are experienced by almost everyone in a parish. They are not limited to new textbooks, but are found as well in Sunday sermons, weekend retreats, and adult discussion groups. One of the changes which causes much concern is the emphasis in religious education on the opportunities, challenges and issues of contemporary life.

Vatican Council II describes this new direction in religious education in several important passages. Motivated by faith God's people "labors to discern authentic signs of God's presence and purpose in the happenings, needs, and desires in which this people has a part along with other men of our age" (Church in the Modern World, II).

Perhaps an example would help clarify this approach to religious education and also indicate how traditional it actually is. Reflect on the well known incident in the life of Jesus, recorded in St. Luke's Gospel, chapter 24. It is the account of Jesus' conversation with the two disciples on the road toward Emmaus Easter Sunday afternoon. Notice how Jesus begins with their experience and helps

them make sense out of it and recognize Him in the light of their tradition.

The two disciples were walking along the road from Jerusalem to Emmaus. They were dejected after the events of the previous Friday and Saturday. Their hopes were shattered and their lives emptied of meaning because they had given up everything and followed Jesus. Now He was dead. The two were so preoccupied with their sadness that they hardly noticed the stranger who joined them. He observed immediately how troubled they were and asked them why they were so downcast.

Then Jesus recalled with them one of the major teachings of the Scriptures. "Was it not ordained that the Christ should suffer and so enter into his glory?" Beginning with Moses He recalled passages from all the prophets, helping the disciples make sense out of their experience in the light of the Scriptures. Gradually they experienced a lifting of their sadness as they began to recognize from their tradition the true meaning of the experiences of Friday and Saturday. The death of Jesus was not the tragic end of all they valued; rather it was in some mysterious way just the beginning. There was little

reason for such deep sadness.

Sometime later, as the sun was setting, and they sat together at table in an inn, Jesus took bread and broke it and gave it to them to eat. At that point, "at the breaking of the bread," they recognized the stranger. He was no stranger at all, but was Jesus, no longer dead, but fully alive and with them. Their joy was exuberant and they actually walked all the way back to Jerusalem that evening. Jesus was alive and was with them already along the way but they were not able to recognize Him until He "opened the Scriptures" and "broke bread" with them.

The process is clear from this incident. Jesus began his "instruction" with the life-experience of the two disheartened disciples. He helped them reflect on that experience in the light of their tradition so that they were able to discern the deeper meaning of the experience and better understand the "doctrine" of the prophets. Then He helped them realize that He was present with them even when they did not recognize Him. Jesus did not underplay any of the teachings of the Scripture, but He drew upon the traditional teachings in reference to the actual experience of the two disciples.