

The Role of a Catholic Educator

By Katharine Bird
NC News Service

Father Francis Kelly is the dynamic executive director of religious education for the National Catholic Educational Association. Though his headquarters are located within the NCEA's offices in Washington, D.C., Father Kelly logs thousands of miles in his travels across the United States.

In a recent interview, Father Kelly explained that he once gained a visual image of the task facing religious educators while he was a seminarian in Rome.

"I was sitting in the ancient Roman Forum, imagining what it was like in its heyday with its gold glittering roofs and its temples dedicated to the pagan gods," Father Kelly said. "The Forum represented the culture of the Roman Empire, with its money and prestige."

"Then I imagined Peter coming into the Forum and looking up at the overpowering symbols of that pseudoreligious establishment." But far from being overwhelmed by its majesty, the priest continued, Peter plunged right ahead and "began to teach about a Jewish carpenter."

Father Kelly thinks the task of religious education is "no different today than it was for Peter. The goal, in the words of Vatican Council II, is to make faith living, conscious and active," he said.

Formerly diocesan director of religious education in Worcester, Mass., Father Kelly said the perennial challenge for religious educators is "to lead people to a rational understanding of the traditions of our faith and at the same time to convince them that faith is a way of living which includes prayer and service."

Asked how he would prepare youths to live in a rapidly changing world, Father Kelly said he would concentrate on two areas: First, he would help students "to see Jesus as Lord and to develop a strong, personal relationship with Jesus." If students learn this lesson well, he added, "they will retain a sense of direction no matter what is going on" in the world around them.

Next, Father Kelly would try to give students a "sense of optimism despite the problems" of today which, he thinks, can generate a sense of defeat in people.

Educators would do well to follow the example set by Pope John Paul II, Father Kelly recommended. The pope "presents himself as a hopeful, happy, optimistic person." In the process, he shows himself able to relate well with youth.

Father Kelly also paid tribute to the crucial role of parents in helping children develop religious values. "Our ability to love and to trust starts in infancy and the child's relationship with his parents has much to do with his or her ability to grow into a mature relationship with God," he explained.

The priest pointed out how difficult it is for religious educators to try to teach that

the "Eucharist is a family meal of God's people where we experience unity and love if the child has no experience of this at home."

On the other hand, the NCEA official made clear that he doesn't think parents should feel inadequate to act as educators. Parents are not expected to take over the job of the trained religious educator, he explained. Instead, the parents' role is to "impart the basic religious values of trust, love, compassion." And they do this, and also teach reconciliation and forgiveness, in the course of their day-to-day life, he stated.

Father Kelly meets frequently with diocesan religious educators. This helps him keep a finger on emerging trends in religious education. Asked what has been the greatest change over his 13 years in religious education, Father Kelly answered unhesitatingly: "The ever-wider involvement of lay people."

In 1969, Father Kelly attended his first national

meeting of directors of religious education. Then almost "everyone was wearing a Roman collar," he explained. Recently, he returned from Texas where he attended a similar meeting. This time, "70 percent of the full-time directors of religious education were lay people," he remarked.

Father Kelly thinks this development stems from the church's understanding that bringing the Good News to people is "the task of all the people of God." The religious educator added that he "never fails to be impressed and edified by the laity's commitment and dedication to the teaching ministry."

The priest arrived for our interview fresh from work on an NCEA report that discusses a new national survey. The survey was conducted over five years with more than half a million Catholic students.

"The study is intended to help parishes evaluate the religious knowledge, personal beliefs, religious attitudes and practices of Catholic school


and CCD students," he explained.

The next step, he indicated, is to initiate a dialogue among groups involved with religious education. A conference this fall will constitute a step in this direction, he indicated.

The hope, Father Kelly concluded, is to develop a new action plan for religious education. He sees this as a practical implementation of the U.S. National Catechetical Directory.




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