

# Professional learning resource for religious educators in australian catholic sch...

[Experience](#), [Belief](#)



## **Introduction**

This Learning Resource has been designed for Educators in Catholic Schools in Australia that will be working with both Primary and Secondary Students. It aims to give an overview of the different aspects that have been influencing the teaching of the Catholic faith along the years, especially the last centuries previous 1980s, in particular the influence pre and pro Second Vatican Council. Religious Education teachers should find this learning resource useful to identify where they are in time, in the Church, in the world, and in particular in Australia within the Catholic Church. They will be able to understand better the discipline and the faith they will be teaching and transmitting their students. In order to make sense of things, the context and the history are two very important components.

## **Abstract**

This Learning Resource for religious educators provides a summary of the different elements that influenced the teaching of the catholic doctrine in the classroom settings of catholic Schools. It gives an overview of the history of the church related to the teaching of catholic doctrine to children. It looks not only at the history and how this one influenced the religious education prior to 1980, but also it looks at the other factors such as culture and ecclesial. It also provides the different perspectives or approaches found in the years prior and post Vatican council II and how these have influenced religious education in catholic schools in Australia. The major theme that stands out throughout all the influential factors is the one of methodology

and content. For this reason, this professional learning resource is so important for educators today.

## **Historical influences in religious education**

The historical influences in religious education in Catholic Schools in Australia, are not detached from the historical influences in religious education in the Catholic Church as a whole. In order to understand what religious education is today, all religious and future religious educators must have an understanding and knowledge of the development of it throughout the years.

In early ages of the Church, the truths of the Church were taught at three main schools: the School of Alexandria, Antioquia and Edessa. These teachings were directed to adults. Saint Agustin is one good example. His writings about catechism were principally directed to adults as it was the very early ages of the Church, so most of the baptisms were of already grown men and women. These teachings were given in the form of sermons and lectures (Ryan, 2007).

There was a deep lack of attention to the formation all the way up to the reformation in the 16th century. Throughout the Middle Ages only rich people had access to schools. Most of the doctrine was given at monasteries, inaccessible for ordinary lay people. This one was mainly for clergymen and religious (Ryan, 2007).

There were, however, some movements trying to make the doctrine more available to most Christians, and the response to these were seen later on through the Reformation with Martin Luther King. The reformation brought

the origin of the Catechism. The aim of this one was to provide a strong defense of the catholic teachings, against the criticisms during a period of much turbulence. Ultimately it was a way of defending against heretical views (Ryan, 2007).

Since then, religious education was considered as the instruction of doctrine, in an authoritative way. Doctrine started to be taught at schools. Children had to learn doctrine by heart.

At the end of the 19th century there have been criticisms against the content and method the catechism used at catholic schools. Later on, at the beginning of the 20th century, new movements started to arise. They wanted to improve the methods of teaching catechism. Up to then the emphasis was in doctrine that was studied by heart (Gallagher, 2001). The focus was not in children grasping the message of the Gospel but simply in learning the doctrine.

While in England and Wales they used the Penguin Catechism, containing pure doctrine, before 1950s in Australia, all of the religious education used in schools were not challenging and did not encourage any engagement or deepening in their faith. It was not simply the materials, but the way they were presented that was also challenged (Fleming, 2009).

A new program or series of catholic religious education materials called “Come Alive” was published in early 1970s. This program was created by certain Australian Bishops to adopt the experiential or Life Centered methodology. At the time, the popularity of sciences such as psychology and sociology had an important influence in religious education. The publication of this program started a heated debate between Australian bishops that will

be discussed in another section. The main criticism of this program was also done by a group of Australian bishops, complaining that main parts of the Catholic teachings such as the Trinity, the Pope and the importance of the Sacrifice of the Mass were not addressed correctly or not at all. While the first program focused on the methodology the other complained that it lacked doctrine. The first one was said to be optimistic, the latter pessimistic (Fleming, 2009).

## **Ecclesial influences in religious education**

Prior to the Second Vatican Council, evangelization was seen as an initiation to the sacraments, mainly baptism and confession. First the catechumen were inspired to want to know more about the Gospel, later on, a change of heart, or conversion was looked for, until the persons were ready for becoming full members of the Church (Ryan, 2007).

What it meant was that there were schools where children were receiving Religious Education, but they were not living a Christian life. The reason was that there was a lack of commitment due to receiving only doctrine, which they had to memorize with no connection whatsoever with their own experiences and their own life (Holohan, 1999).

After the Second Vatican Council, the concept of evangelization was renewed, called the “New Evangelization”. It meant that those baptized people who lost their faith, or got lost on the way although still belonging to the Church had to be re-evangelized, as well through a conversion or change of heart (Ryan, 2007).

It meant that the new aim of the school was that students had to learn not

only doctrine, but also they had to grasp the Gospel and develop their sense of being Christians and live their lives accordingly. From then on, there was a difference from then on, between “ catechesis” and “ religious education” (Ryan, 2007).

This decree had a great influence in Religious Education. At the time, in England and Wales the Penny Catechism was criticized for being abstract for children; and similar criticisms were done in Germany (Gallagher, 2001).

In Australia, as we mentioned, the “ Come Alive” program brought controversies between different groups of bishops. “ Come Alive” was never completed. Soon after it came out, the critical analysis of it, called “ What is Wrong with Come Alive” also published by certain bishops. There were many lessons that were learned from “ Come Alive” (Fleming, 2009). The council met at the end of a defensive and counter-reformation church, and at the beginning of a modern and historically conscious culture, a pluralistic and open minded arising society. There were radical changes happening, that were bringing the Church towards a greater maturity (Ryan, 1999).

The Vatican Council II had a radical agenda for religious education. This agenda was pushed forward by several catechetical congresses in Eichstatt, Bangkok, Katigonda and Manila all between 1060 and 1967. There were also documents published for the Universal Church and by national conferences of Bishops. The main documents were, “ General Catechetical Directory” published in 1971, the “ Catechism in Our Time” published in 1979 and the Catechism of the Catholic Church and the General Directory for Catechesis published in 1994 and 1997 (Ryan, 1999).

While the General Catechetical Directory made emphasis on the

methodologies, especially due to the influence of the new sciences such as pedagogy and psychology, the Catechesis in Our Time referred specifically to catechesis for children, distinguishing catechesis from evangelization (Ryan, 1999).

## **Cultural influences in religious education**

The Vatican Council II recognized diversity and plurality: two realities of Australia. The cultural mix between 1971 and 2002 was very far, with an important decrease of the number of Christians from more than 50% to less than 30% (Lawlor, 2001).

The Vatican Council II encouraged dialogue and respect towards other religions. It had a direct impact in religious education. There was a shift from a normative and inflexible, classical culture to a new modern, open minded one. There were theological developments at the same time that the world was having important socio-cultural changes, challenging basic assumptions about the faith, structures and activities of the Church (Ryan, 1999).

Australian's constitution has not allowed from its beginnings the teaching of any particular religion in schools. But along the years there have been governments that have allowed certain institutions and religious groups to teach their beliefs as optional courses.

We have mentioned how the Vatican Council II happened at a time of change, not only within the Church but in the World. Pluralism was starting together with diversity and globalization. In Australia, there were new migration rates, new religions, new ways of thinking and the cultural mix started changing.

Christianity in Australia was no longer dominant in teachers and students lives. It was no longer a point of reference for finding meaning in their lives. Students were very much aware that they were citizens of the world, where there are people who believe other faiths, and have other values and other traditions and cultures. Thus, there was an ongoing struggle and a strong need to meet both teachers and students in their own realities in order to teach Religious Education successfully.

There was a need to support students and teachers in their faith, not only in the classroom but outside of it, through activities such as retreats and reflections. As the Vatican Council II addressed the importance of dialogue and open minded, this was also evident in the Australian landscape, and it became a new ingredient in Religious Educations in Catholic schools. While catholic schools acknowledge their faith and the importance of it, there was a need of being open to other cultures and religions (Lawlor, 2001).

### **Educational and theoretical influences in religious education**

The classroom religion programs in catholic schools in Australia were divided into three standpoints influenced by both the history of the Church and the World. These three perspectives were names by Ryan, (1997) as the “catechetical” the “ educational” and the “ phenomenological”.

The Catechetical Perspectives, at the beginning of 1970s, focused on conserving the traditions of the Church while also bringing liberation and transformation of the social and public world. These perspectives, while they addressed the importance of tradition, they also complained that in their own is not sufficient. There is a needed for renewal. Under these



perspectives, teachers in the classroom were meant to be models of Christian life, helping the students find meaning in their life through their faith (Ryan, 1997).

The Educational Approaches, at mid-1970s made a distinction between catechesis and classroom religion teaching. For them, in every setting there was a different way of learning. It is not the same a child learns about the faith in the family setting than at the local parish or at school in a classroom. Thus, while the ultimate goal is to help people to think, feel, imagine and grow in their faith in an intelligent manner, the need to learn and teach differently according to the setting. Religious Education extends from birth to death. This approach requires from the teachers to be more proficient in doctrine, and demands from them to have the knowledge of it as it would be required in any other subject. Under this perspective, there is no need to learn any other world religion (Ryan, 1997).

The Phenomenological approach is identified because of it tolerates all religions and traditions. It helps students to compare and explore other religions. This is the perspective used in most of the curriculums now days in Australian schools because it has a strong methodology and a good flow for classroom programs. None of the teachers or the students is passionate searcher of the truth (Ryan, 1997).

As explained in Lawlor, (2001), there were four important methodological approaches used in the last 60 years in Australian catholic schools. The doctrinal, until 1960s, learning by memory, with no real understanding of the belief, or put into practice, the Kerygmatic, in mid 1960s, based on the Scripture; Religious education uses key stories from the scripture to teach.

The Life Centered methodology wanted to focus in the lived experiences of the students rather than simply on doctrine or the scripture. It was a response to Vatican Council II.

The fourth approach was the Educational during the 1980s. It was a period when the religious education curriculum was modeled based on educational grounds with the influence of science disciplines such as psychology, sociology and pedagogy (Lawlor, 2001).

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