Religious Education after Vatican II

Gabriel Moran

At the beginning of the 1960s the Catholic Church began a transformation that was almost unimaginable for an institution of its size and age. The Church's leaders sought to direct the change in orderly fashion, preserving continuity with the past while listening to the "signs of the times." Part of what was unimaginable was how traumatic and far-reaching the changes would be. Unaware of the complexity of the task, many enthusiasts of the time supposed that in a few years, or perhaps a decade at the most, the renewed Catholic Church would settle down and go on with its usual work.

These decades after Vatican II have shown that a process of renewal will take many more decades and that the shape of the Church is still emerging. One of the main keys to the process is education: the education of all members of the Church and the education of the Church in relation to the non-church world. So far, interest in educational questions still seems confined to a small band of writers and to some hard-working but overburdened parish staffs and a small number of diocesan personnel.

Not everyone in the 1960s naïvely expected quick success. A group of dedicated Catholic leaders, both lay and clerical, had been struggling with the problems of education throughout the 1940s and 1950s. The North American Liturgical Conference was a gathering place for many of these people, although their interests were not exclusively liturgical. As was true earlier in Europe, liturgical reform was usually associated with biblical, catechetical, and ecumenical...
Religious Education after Vatican II

In this context, the most important council documents on religious education were those that changed authority and worship patterns on the Sacred Liturgy and The Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World. In addition, several other documents in change in the Catholic Church's relation to a divine plan of salvation, the Declaration on the Relation of Church to Non-Christian Religions, which presented a new meaning of "religion in religious education. Each of these four documents, with their limitations, did the essential thing—testing open new possibilities. Hope that history will be kind to the author of these documents. The council for failing to maintain the openness, creativity, and scholarly efforts of the first half of the 1960s.

The Dual Nature of Religious Education

In the latter part of this essay, I describe the Catholic Church's internal language of religious education. But that language needs the context of or what I will call "does," to religious education. The two facets are related, but one must first distinguish before writing. A clear and consistent system builds the groundwork.

The first face of religious education is the fairly common one of a religious group trying to form new members who will carry on to the members of the group. The experienced and devoted members show the learners how to perform the rituals and practices of the group. This work of education can be called formation, initiation, instruction, formation, support, and identity to the individual. The group needs to function as a community that provides a stable framework on which the individual builds. This community, always in formation, will lead to a deeper understanding of the individual. One can be a devout and loyal Roman Catholic and still take the view of the other face of religious education.

The second face of religious education is the providing of an understanding of religion. Whereas the first focuses on what the people believe, this second is mostly an evaluation of what. Can we step back from our immediate involvement and try to understand? The objects to be understood is the alternative to the tendency to attack, belittle, condemn, or dismiss. If we talk about the other people's religious view, we should try to understand it first before we judge or denounce.
Religious Education after Vatican II

of the community's prayer. The young child's absorption of the language is largely through parents and siblings.

In the second sense of religious education, the ages of the audience can be from young child to older adult. But the capacity to understand religion takes many years to develop. Undoubtedly, three- or four-year-olds can ask difficult questions about religion. Similar to children's questions about sex, questions of religion demand simple, honest answers without elaborate explanations. Young children have neither the ability nor the need to study religion. By age five or six children have begun to develop the thinking capacity presupposed in the understanding of religion. Many more years are needed before they can exercise critical judgments about their own religion in relation to the religion of others. Thus, the concentration of so much religious education in the years of elementary school lacks any clear logic. Those years are rather late for the first kind of religious education and rather early for the second kind.

As to the religious composition of the second audience for religious education, a manageable diversity is desirable. Some degree of homogeneity, some basis of comparison, is necessary for understanding anything. "Religions" as used in the modern world is plural in meaning; it was invented to describe the plurality found by explorers, anthropologists, and archaeologists. Many Catholic leaders wish to have Catholics understand their own religion first before encountering others. One can sympathize with that desire but understanding still involves comparison. Often in the past, the comparison was to a straw man, an unintelligible alternative to the one true, and (almost) perfect Catholic Church. The Catholic high school student who went to a secular university sometimes had the feeling of stepping off a cliff upon discovering that the comparisons were not that simple.

That problem is not uncommon as it was forty years ago. Catholic schools do a better job of teaching religion. These days there are better comparisons between a somewhat messy Catholic Church and alternatives that one can understand to some degree. When Catholic students understand Judaism, they do not convert to Judaism; the usual effect is that they understand their Catholicism better. Unfortunately, well-taught religion lessons still reach only a minority of Catholics. We still need a better distribution of resources within the Catholic Church.

It should be noted that the Catholic Church need not be the only sponsor of well-taught religious lessons to Catholics. Many of the students who have attended Catholic schools are drawn to different religious groupings in the university. We need other experiences beyond the university with some mixing of religion for the purpose of understanding religion. Such study can be sponsored by a single religious
community, several different religious bodies, or a nonreligious organization. Having a mixed religious group to study religion is still thought to be the exotic exception, rather than a common occurrence. A group of Catholics can understand Judaism, to a degree, and Judaism's relation to the Church. It is nonetheless a sure road to understanding if Jews are articulating the Jewish position.

The distinction I have drawn between the two faces of religious education does not locate people in separate compartments. Each individual at some time in life needs access to each kind of religious education. Both kinds may operate simultaneously, although at some moment in life one of them is likely to dominate. I suggested that in the first few years of life the formation into the religious group necessarily takes precedence. I suspect that in late adolescence or young adulthood, faith is often a severe version. As one's academic ability to understand reaches maturity, one may have resistance to the other kind of education, that is, formation within the community. If that stage can be negotiated without too much sternness, the older adult can hold in a calm and fruitful tension the two kinds of religious education.

A legitimate question might be asked is why these two distinct realities need to have the same name. Couldn't "religious education" serve for one or the other of the two? The answer is that "religious education" already serves for both realities in different parts of the world, instead of introducing ambiguity, I am calling attention to it. I am also suggesting that there is a good reason for it.

In the late twentieth century the world needs both faces of religious education. The comprehensive use of the term advocated here would open a fruitful dialogue between the two of them. Not every religious education would be of both kinds of education. But while concentrating on one kind, the educator has to be aware of another aspect to the work. If there is a linguistic bridge, then the individual's passage from one side to the other might not be a jarring reversal.

Religious education is an idea born in the twentieth century. The widespread assumption in the nineteenth century that religion and education are opposites, that education would slowly eliminate religion, was based on the turn of the century by the premise of the religious education movement. This premise was that religion and education are not only compatible but are beneficial to one another. Religious people were encouraged to "become educated" to be intelligently and freely formed in the practices of their religious life and to understand that 'way of life in relation to a set of practices called "religion." Desuet involvement in religious practice does not preclude understanding religion; it can be a helpful basis for a realistic assessment of religion.

In the other direction, scholars who would explain religion need a feel for religious practice. Someone is not cut off from all understanding of religion by reason of not belonging to a clearly defined religious community. But such a person needs sympathy not antipathy for the actual practice of a religious life. In the past a lot of explaining of religion in secular universities turned out to be in explaining away religion. Presuming that something should not exist is not an effective way of understanding it.

If the term "religious education" covers both the formation of life within a community and an intellectual understanding, which in principle goes beyond the community the need for a respectful and symmetrical dialogue is highly desirable. Academic instructors in religion ought not to be subject to tests of orthodoxy. But such teachers regularly have to examine what motivates their teaching and what is their relation to the religious practices they are trying to illuminate.

A religious education that embraces these contrasting activities—formation into one religious community and an understanding of religious life—is threatened by opposite dangers. On one side an academic examination of religion can take over the term, leaving church, synagogue, and mosque without a link between their internal activities and the rest of the world's educational efforts in religion. This problem does not exist in the United States, but it is found in countries influenced by a British way of speaking about education. In those places, religious education usually means the name of a subject taught in state schools. This usage not only limits religious education to the school but encapsulates it as its main content in the curriculum of the school.

The way people speak is often not entirely logical, and outsiders should not be quick to criticize. But the strange evolution of "religious education" in British English has the effect of excluding church, synagogue, and mosque. The British borrowed the term from the United States before giving it a legal meaning in the 1940s. At that time, the term encompassed both the academic study and worship. When strong doubts arose about a common worship service in government schools, "religion education" tended to become equivalent only to an academic subject. This way of speaking has been in place for only about thirty years and, as educational debates in the late 1950s showed, it is not an entirely clear way of speaking.1

The United States presents not the preferable alternative but the opposite danger. Whatever religious education means in the United States, it does not mean a subject taught in state schools. Its common use in the United States is for an activity proper to church or synagogue but illegitimate in the public school.2 Religious education was invented as a term to bridge the educational work of religious
bodies and the public school, but hardly had the Religious Education Association been founded when the more conservative parts of Catholicism, Judaism, and Protestantism shied away from the term.

The recent effort to start or re-start a Catholic-Protestant-Jewish dialogue on education is admirable. However, it may obscure the fact that their original partners in dialogue in the 1970s decided to address the question of religion in the public school, they felt it necessary to withdraw from the Religious Education Association and start an organisation that came to be known as the National Council of Religion and Public Education. The split was an unfortunate one, and neither organization has flourished. Both groups may run interesting conferences and publish journals, but they have not been able to include on any national scale the badly needed discussion of religion and education. Christian, Jewish, Muslim, and other religious groups on one side of that relation, religiously affiliated schools, private schools, and the public school on the other side. This relation, so central to the United States, does not have a framework for discussion.

The renewal of the term "religion education" since the 1960s was largely fueled by Catholic enthusiasm. From being slightly suspect and culturally alien until 1960, the Catholic Church found itself to be a major player in control of educational language. Today no individual institution has the power of the Catholic Church in determining the meaning of "religious education" in the United States. The drawback is that public schools (even if Protestant Christians) can be scared off by a term that Catholics wield as their own. It is incumbent on Catholics that in using the term "religion education" they are careful not to speak as if they were the owners of the term.

The Internal Language of Catholicism

This last point brings me into the second part of this essay: the Catholic Church's internal or intramural language of religious education. The direct reference is to the first face of religious education but with implications for the second face. The Catholic Church has the right and the duty to preserve its own internal language. What can be called religious education in that language are practices which, while formative of church membership, maintain a tension with a universal calling. When the Catholic Church forgets that it shares in, rather than owns, religious education, a strange inversion of language can occur: Catholic religious education becomes a small and segregated part of the Church's work. To this day many people use "religious education," as interchangeable with "catechism." Even Andrew Greeley's writings after Vatican II have described a conflict of Catholic school versus religious education/catechism. I do not argue with Greeley's data or his case for the Catholic school. I would think one good reason for supporting Catholic schools is that they provide religious education. I do not understand why Greeley accepts and affirms a language that cuts off the possibility of educational discussion within the Catholic Church and the Church's alliance with other educational bodies.

Catholic education since Vatican II has focused around the term "catechetics" and its cognates "canchsch," "catechizer," "catechetics" and "catechism." All but the last of these words was unknown to most Catholics before 1960. After the council, catechetical language quickly swept the field, but there were and are ambiguities. We are still early in the game of developing a language that will lead to cooperation rather than fragmentation in the Catholic Church's educational efforts.

After Vatican II the way to describe church activity has been with the idea of ministry. The council did not emphasize this term but the experience of Vatican II clearly inspired its novelty. Before the council Catholics either did not use the term "ministry" or used it to refer to the clergy. Some people still use the term to mean nothing but the clergy: an unhelpful reaction by other people is to use ministry for everyone's work in the Church except the clergy's. Overall, there has been progress in the Catholic reappropriation of the term to refer to the five, six, eight, or some small number of areas that define the essential work of the Church. It is a small progress that the Catholic Church now has names for certain people doing certain tasks that are crucial to church life.

Within the Catholic Church there would be general agreement that catechizing can be called a ministry. Unfortunately, most Protestant Churches resist catechetical language, even though it can be found in early Protestant history. This fact does not invalidate its usage as a language of intimacy within Catholicism. Although it is largely a post-conciliar phenomenon, catechetical language has roots in the New Testament and the early Church.

It is important while preserving this language that it be kept in tension with language that transcends the Catholic Church. For example, I have often heard it said that "a catechist is not a mere teacher." This deals is an unwise acceptance of a dichotomy. "Catechists" need some of the connotations of "teachers," and the modern secular meaning of "teacher" needs challenge by the activity of such people as catechists. Jozefow Polkowiak begins his book on the images of Jesus with the image of teacher, which, according to Polkowiak, was the most universal
and least controversial title of Jesus in the first century. Losing hold of that title is a devastating loss for Christians.1

When people say a catechist is not a teacher, I think, they mean to distance themselves from the image and connotations of school teacher. There could be a helpful distinction here if made without disparagement to either side. The contrast is not between catechist and teacher but instead between different kinds of teaching.

The Catholic Church needs a kind of teaching that is not burdened with the assumptions of the classroom. Likewise, academic instruction should not be burdened with the role of catechizing. Teaching that is appropriate from the pulpit or in preparing a person for sacramental initiation may be inappropriate in the classroom. I find it frustrating that many elements from chantology and the Vatican seem to have no suspicion of this distinction. Most people who work in classrooms every day do not discover this difference very quickly.

Catechizing is a form of teaching in which words predominate (in contrast to most teaching where words are secondary). In this respect, it is similar to school teaching. However, school teachers work in the context of classrooms and an academic curriculum; catechists work in the context of sacramental life. School teachers teach religion; catechists teach the Gospel and Christian doctrine. The catechetical venture is firmly within the framework of forming people to lead a Christian life. Catechizing is one of the ministries of the Catholic Church wherein the Gospel is announced, to be followed by an explanation of Christian doctrine.

This description of the catechetical as a small but important aspect of Catholic religious education turns on a strong tendency of recent decades. People who take to a minor task have a natural tendency to expand the conception of what they do beyond the boundaries that history, logic, and other people have determined. The catechetical aspect of the Catholic Church tends to overreach its place within the ministries of the Church. Some clear distinctions would avoid bruised feelings and stimulate cooperation. Who, for example, is the relation between liturgy and catechetics? People whose main interest is liturgy tend to speak as if liturgy included catechetics. People who promote catechetics sometimes speak as if liturgy were part of catechetics. Both positions are intelligible depending on what one's interests lie, either assumption is helpful to cooperation. For the present context, catechetics needs the help of liturgy, but liturgy is not a part of catechetics. Liturgy is crucial in the formation of Christian life. By being itself, liturgy is formative and educational; it is no instrument of anything else.

The National Catechetical Directory says that the tasks of the catechist are "to proclaim Christ's message, to participate in efforts to de-
within the Church as well as language of encounter between church and non­church world. In 1970 I wrote an essay which a journal misleadingly titled "Catechetics R.I.P.?" What the essay actually says is: Now we need other educational language that would complement the catechetical. A quarter century later I would assert the same statement even more strongly. Laypeople, theologians, parents, school teachers, parish administrators all have a part in the Church's educational mission and provide a context for catechizing.

The educational formation of a Catholic rests first not on catechisms but on worship and service. No educational reform within the Church can be successful if it is concentrated on catechisms, CCD, and textbooks. One learns to be a Catholic by participating in the liturgical life of the community. Perhaps the most successful educational model that has been developed since the council is the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults. Here the role of the catechist is clearly situated in relation to sacramental life. The best renewals of parish life have carried this spirit into other formats. Educational programs based on the liturgy do not have to be elaborate and complex, suitable only for experts. All parishioners ought to be invited to take some part.

A service element can never be absent from programs of Catholic formation. Unlike liturgy and catechisms, service knows no church boundary. The language of feeding the hungry and clothing the brother is genuine without any theological preparation. When wounded is intelligible without any theological preparation. When wounded is genuine drawing people toward a center. It also impels them outward to serve those in need within the Church community and beyond.

The chief religious education that the Church provides to the rest of the world is in struggles against injustice, in the willingness of individuals and communities to protest against all forms of violence, when such witness is evident, then Christian explanations of what it stands for are intelligible to all and persuasive to some. If the witness is missing, then almost nothing said by church spokespersons is suspect. The Church's books and pronouncements cannot educate if the world is not heard.

Two Testing Points
I would finally like to mention two litmus tests of how religious education is faring within Catholic Church three decades after the council. Also important for my purposes the question. How is religious education faring in relation to the Catholic Church? The first litmus test is graduate programs of religious education at Catholic universities; the second is the Director of Religious Education movement. Immediately after the council a number of M.A. programs in religious education sprang up across the United States. Many of them were small and had little backing, they tended to wither quickly. Other programs were well planned and the universities offered resources to allow development; some of these programs prospered and turned out hundreds of graduates, to the benefit of parishes and Catholic schools.

For more than a decade there has been a drift away from the term "religious education," to describe these programs. A common alternative is "pastoral ministry," which may start out as a parallel program and then gradually absorb the religious education degree. Although this shift of names may be realistic and helpful for individuals concerned with jobs, I suspect that something is lost in this transition.

Universities have a responsibility to consider this issue carefully. I understand why a seminary would call its degree program "pastoral ministry"; the seminary is in an ecclesiastical institution whose purpose is to train ecclesiastical ministers. The same is not true of a university, even one with a religious affiliation. The Catholic university's mission is to maintain a healthy tension between church and non-church worlds. A major part of its mission is to pose a challenge to the secular assumption that education excludes religion. The existence of a religious education program in a Catholic university ought to be a pro to every school of education in the country. Why is religion neglected when every school teacher in the country has to deal with it?

I am not suggesting that the Catholic university simply try to hold on to the population and program it had for a decade or two after the council. The programs were nearly always work on the educational side family education, counseling, administrative skills, as well as academic curriculum. The language of ministry as the core of the work of religious education is appropriate in a university that is Catholic. But in a Catholic institution, that is, a university; religious education ought to be an integral part of a school of arts and sciences and/or a professional school for the preparation of educators.

Within the Church, the university ought to be challenging the diocesan and parochial structures to come up with jobs that have intellectual substance and professional standing. The university ought not to accept whatever ecclesiastical language seems fashionable. A master's degree should do more than prepare a person to be a general assistant to the pastor. Specific educational jobs should be available within parishes, in religiously affiliated schools, and in other schools for which a religious education degree would be preparation. Such jobs will not be there unless the university stands behind religious
Religious Education after Vican II

165

Church and from outside the Church. Expecting religious education in the Catholic Church means marshaling resources internal to the Church to face toward the rest of the world.

Internal to the Church, there is a need to link the formative work of many ministries. The pastor does that in one way but there is room for another person doing it with explicit educational intent. The D.R.E. has to link message, worship, community, and service by invoking the program of the director rather that the program itself.

The Director of Religious Education also stands at the intersection of the Church and non-Catholic world of education. On one side, the Church is clearly the most dramatic one.

As in most reform movements, there is a moment when creativity is demanded by the exigencies of the time. As Catholic schools disappear and teaching staffs shrink in size, the Church was faced with either simply shrinking its educational work or trying new forms. In some places, the D.R.E. movement may have been interpreted as the cutting of the teaching staff from eight to one. In other places, a norm the parish would examine itself and start using its resources differently. I wrote in a book in 1970 that if you are being hired as U.K., it is probably for the best at reasons or for the worst of reasons; and it would be advisable to know which it is before being hired. I believe at the time that the movement did not have the luxury of being a modest success. I still believe that success at all it has to be the forerunner of a rethink of the Church’s education.

Directors of Religious Education are among the most intelligent, loyal, and hard-working people in the Catholic Church. But they remain too isolated to accomplish the great claim of their title: the directing of religious education in the Catholic Church. The isolation is mostly not of their own making. However, they have not helped their own cause by talking about Directors of Religious Education as constituting “a profession.” Although any group can claim to be a profession, the claim gets you nowhere unless there is a sufficient base of knowledge and an institutional support to make the claim credible. Otherwise, creating your own profession simply has the effect of isolating the group.

The choice for more people who wish to have the respect professional claim is to get help from one or more existing professions. Directors of Religious Education need help from church ministers and professional educators; they need support from within their own

Notes

1. For a summary of Bishop Harvey on the point, see Gabriel Moran, Religious Education as a Second Language (Birmingham: Religious Education Federation, 1973).


The Reality of Vatican II Appendix Doctrinal Development on Religious Liberty. A funny thing about Vatican II â€” they say a funny thing happened on the way to the forum, and thatâ€™s certainly true of the fate of the documents of the Second Vatican Council on their way to the larger forum of the Church in which they were implemented. This situation calls to mind the tendentious collection of essays by forty Catholic scholars published about 20 years ago under the title of Modern Catholicism: Vatican II and After. In a 1991 review, Piers Paul Read notes the unfailingly Modernist trajectory of the contributors, culminating in this: Most revealing is a section by F. J. Laishley, head of the department of Christian Doctrine at Heythrop College, on the Councilâ€™s â€” Unfinished Businessâ€™. The Second Ecumenical Council of the Vatican, commonly known as the Second Vatican Council or Vatican II, addressed relations between the Catholic Church and the modern world. The council, through the Holy See, was formally opened under the pontificate of Pope John XXIII on 11 October 1962 and was closed under Pope Paul VI on the Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception on 8 December 1965. Vatican II -- book review: legal education and religious perspective, By REVEREND RAYMOND C. O’BRIEN, Anthony J. Scanlon*. As a result of Vatican II every Catholic institution has had to redefine itself. Some Catholic educators, in the years immediately after Vatican II, saw a need to radically alter the legal structure of Catholic education, along the lines of Jacqueline Grennan’s reform of Webster College in St. Louis.” Others wanted to remain Catholic in the juridical sense, but with much less introspective apologetics and far more involvement in the secular community.