Roots & Wings

The Periodical of the Professional Society of Religious Educators

Volume 10 No 4 December 2024

## Editorial

Welcome to the 4th issue of Roots & Wings for 2024. In this issue, among other offerings, we put before you the lives of three notable figures who have made a significant contribution either to Catholic education, or to South African society at large.

Again we present a selection of writings aimed at piquing your curiosity, broadening your experience and encouraging you to grow in knowledge and develop your teaching talents in Religious Education.

## Contents

# The ladder, a guide to spiritual elevation

*A ladder serves as a tool for communication between heaven and earth, between humans and God. It's also a symbol of structured methods for each person's spiritual growth.*

(Stéphane Bataillon)

The ladder is one of the symbols of reconciliation between God and humanity.

(Photo from pixabay.com)

At first glance, the ladder seems like a simple everyday object stored away in our closets or garden sheds, but it encapsulates a deeper pursuit. We use it when something appears beyond our reach: two side rails connected by rungs, allowing us to ascend or descend. The ladder symbolizes the *axis mundi*—the mythical axis of the world, connecting heaven and earth. In this way, it shares its meaning with the rainbow, the tree, or the bridge. The ladder represents verticality, ascension, spiritual elevation, and mystical fulfilment. It also serves as a symbol of reconciliation between God and humanity.

The most well-known ladder is Jacob's Ladder, described in the Book of Genesis (Gen 28:10-19). While sleeping outdoors, Jacob dreams of a ladder (or staircase, depending on the translation) "resting on the earth, with its top reaching to heaven, and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it." The fact that they ascend before descending symbolizes the action humans must take. Upon waking, Jacob exclaims, "How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God; this is the gate of heaven." In the Gospel of John (Jn 1:51), Jesus recalls this episode to Nathanael, saying, "You will see heaven open."

But this symbol isn't exclusive to the Judeo-Christian tradition. In Islam, the *Book of Muḥammad's Ladder* — part of a set of traditional accounts — recounts the Prophet's ascension (Miraj) to God, accompanied by the angel Gabriel during a night journey (Isra). A ladder to the heavens is also found in

Shintoism and Buddhism; it allows Buddha to descend from Mount Meru, the realm of the gods, via a ladder made of two nagas, serpent deities. In Ancient Egypt, Ra's ladder connected two worlds and allowed the gods to be seen. The ladder was considered a symbol of good fortune, and people would carry small ladder-shaped amulets for protection.

However, the ladder goes beyond being a mere channel between worlds. Its rungs provide valuable guidance for one's spiritual evolution—a progressive, structured ascent leading to the heavenly realm. When complete, the ladder ensures a person's safe ascent toward union with God without fear of stumbling.

### "May this ladder teach you the spiritual sequence of virtues"

The number of rungs on a ladder is highly symbolic. A ladder with seven rungs — often a significant number in the Bible — represents completeness and the fulfilment of a cycle. This is the number chosen by Flemish mystic John of Ruysbroeck (1293-1381) for his "ladder of spiritual love": Will, voluntary poverty, purity of heart and body, humility, nobility, and introspection should lead to the union of the soul with the divine essence, the ultimate stage of contemplative life.

The image of the ladder is frequently used in monastic literature. In *The Ladder of Monks*, Guigo II the Carthusian (1114-1193), prior of the Grande Chartreuse monastery, systematized the practice of *lectio divina* in four steps to move from receiving the Word to divine contemplation and action: "Seek by reading (lectio), and you will find by meditating (*meditatio*); Knock by praying (*oratio*), and you will enter by contemplating (*contemplatio*)."

No one embodied the celestial ladder symbol better than Saint John Climacus. A hermit and then abbot of the Sinai Monastery in the 7th century, John Climacus (whose name derives from the Greek *klimaks*, meaning "ladder") developed a detailed guide to the inner life in his work *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*. "May this ladder teach you the spiritual sequence of virtues," he wrote, outlining 30 rungs that correspond to various aspects of contemplative life, from renunciation to charity, the ultimate stage of spiritual elevation. Always dynamic, the ladder represents not only an external ascent but also a simultaneous inward descent to the deepest part of oneself—the heart—allowing one to "move from the shell to the almond."

### It's not just about climbing up—but knowing how to climb down

Whether a ladder has four, seven, or 30 rungs, the real task is not just climbing it but also knowing how to descend and return to the world, applying the lessons learned, and inspiring others. As art historian Christian Heck notes in his book *The Celestial Ladder in Medieval Art* (Flammarion, 1999), "This allegory is also a reinterpretation of the Neoplatonic theme of the return to the place of origin, but through the specifically Christian understanding shaped by the theology of the Incarnation. It's a paradoxical image that invites elevation through humility. The celestial ladder doesn't separate the ascent—through contemplation—from the descent—through compassion." Ultimately, it

encourages serving others with humility, which is the hallmark of true wisdom, connecting heaven and earth in a continuous movement.

But be careful of missteps! According to persistent superstitions from the 17th century onward, "walking under a ladder" is bad luck. The horizontal movement, as opposed to vertical, promises dire consequences depending on the culture—ranging from hanging to never being able to marry or even falling into the devil's hands! More subtly, this could symbolize the passerby's refusal of spiritual elevation — a thought to ponder during our next household task. Of course, as long as the ladder is securely held!

## Champions of Catholic Education

### Bonum Commune Award for Sr Brigid Rose Tiernan SND

(Mark Potterton – The Southern Cross)

*Sr Brigid Rose with Mark Potterton and fellow Notre Dame sisters*

*– Sr Brigid Rose Tiernan SND de Namur has been honoured with the Bonum Commune Award, the highest distinction St Augustine College (University) can bestow. This award celebrates her remarkable and lifelong contribution to the common good, her dedication to justice, and her tireless work in transforming Catholic education in Southern Africa. Her impact extends across several decades of leadership, social advocacy, and scholarly achievement, all of which have left a lasting imprint on society and the Church.*

Born in Bulawayo, Zimbabwe, to a Rhodesian father and an Australian mother, Sr Brigid Rose grew up in Zambia before completing her secondary education as a boarder with the Sisters of Notre Dame (SND) in Kroonstad, South Africa. She later earned a BA in History from Rhodes University before joining the Sisters of Notre Dame in 1963. Her novitiate training took place in England, after which she returned to South Africa in 1967, where she devoted her life to teaching, social justice, and educational leadership.

In her early years as an SND sister, Sr Brigid Rose taught high school for over a decade. Her commitment to education was deeply shaped by St Julie Billiart's pedagogy, which became a guiding light throughout her career. However, in 1971, the Notre Dame schools in South Africa were forced to close due to their bold Mission Statement opposing apartheid. This experience was a painful one for Sr Brigid Rose, and it marked a turning point in her vocation.

Following the Southern African Catholic Bishops' Statement of Commitment to the transformation of South Africa, Sr Brigid Rose shifted from teaching to advocacy work. For nine years, she worked with the Justice and Peace Commission, serving both in the Archdiocese of Cape Town and for the Southern African Catholic Bishops' Conference in Pretoria. These were challenging times during apartheid, and Sr Brigid Rose's formation was deeply influenced by the call for social justice that her congregation's sociologist, Marie Augusta Neal, championed.

Her journey as an advocate for justice continued in adult education, where she played a significant role in the Christian Education and Leadership Training movement in the Western Cape. Through her work with adults from various Christian backgrounds, Sr Brigid Rose embraced a more inclusive, ecumenical approach, believing that narrow views of faith betrayed Jesus' teaching and mission. She was particularly influenced by the 1971 Synod's declaration that action on behalf of justice is a constitutive part of evangelisation. Her experiences in marginalised communities—such as her time spent with tent dwellers in Crossroads and her work in the Langa Magistrate's Court—deepened her commitment to empowering the oppressed.

In 1986, Sr Brigid Rose embarked on a sabbatical that broadened her horizons. She spent time in Jerusalem studying scripture and later joined the Columban Fathers' Faith and Justice Programme in Ireland. These experiences enriched her spiritual and professional life, offering new perspectives as she continued her work in South Africa.

When she returned, she took up a leadership role in the newly formed Catholic Institute of Education (CIE). For the next 13 years, Sr Brigid Rose led the CIE through the closing years of apartheid and the early years of South Africa's democracy. Her participatory leadership style, deeply rooted in the SND tradition, involved collaboration with both lay and religious colleagues, as well as international support networks. Sr Brigid Rose travelled extensively across the country, visiting Catholic school communities in some of the most remote areas, helping to reshape the Catholic education system during this critical time.

Her leadership was not confined to education. Over the years, Sr Brigid Rose has held various positions within her congregation, including serving on the Executive of the Leadership Conference of Consecrated Life (Southern Africa). Her understanding of leadership as a form of service, rather than a pursuit of status, challenged conventional hierarchical norms, especially within the context of African cultures. Her belief in counter-cultural living, inspired by her

congregation's founders and the legacy of the French Revolution, has been a guiding principle in her life.

Sr Brigid Rose's contributions extend beyond leadership and advocacy; she is also a historian and a dedicated archivist for her congregation. In 2004, she edited The Empandeni Journal, an early diary of the first SNDs to arrive in Southern Africa, and has since published several historical works, including Journey under the Southern Cross. This book, widely regarded as her seminal work, provides an in-depth exploration of the lives of the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur in Southern Africa from 1975 to 2001. Her writing not only chronicles the evolution of religious life but also offers a valuable feminist perspective on the history of the Church in Southern Africa. By weaving together archival materials, interviews, and personal reflections, Sr Brigid Rose paints a vivid picture of the congregation's role in addressing social injustices during turbulent times.

Her historical work highlights the importance of women in the Church and serves as an inspiration to new generations of sisters. Her documentation of the Notre Dame congregation's journey in Zimbabwe and Botswana, as well as the broader context of Catholic education in South Africa, adds a critical chapter to the region's religious and social history.

Now residing in Johannesburg, Sr Brigid Rose continues to serve her community in various capacities, including managing the archives of her congregation and remaining active in the two Notre Dame schools in Kroonstad. Her commitment to education, justice, and the transformation of society through faith continues to shape her work and inspire those around her.

Sr Brigid Rose Tiernan exemplifies the values of the Bonum Commune Award. Her lifelong dedication to education, her fearless pursuit of justice, and her leadership within the Church and beyond have made a profound and lasting impact on society. Through her scholarship, advocacy, and ministry, she has embodied the spirit of service, working tirelessly for the common good and leaving a legacy that will inspire future generations.

### Sr Florence Henkel

We note the passing to new life of Sr Florence who worked for many years in the Religious Education Department of the CIE before retiring to Schoenstatt in the Cape. Many students will remember her meticulous presentation of the Echoing The Word course in Johannesburg. Her full story is yet to be written.

Sr M Florence Henkel, (age 93) passed away on 21 October 2024 at Schoenstatt, Constantia

# Embracing the truth regardless the cost

*The life of Reverend Beyers Naudé is inspirational, especially on account of his receptiveness to embrace the values which Catholic Social Teaching upholds, such as respect for human dignity, solidarity and common good, deviating from a context in which these values were trampled on.*

(Marian Pallister - Chair of Pax Christi Scotland)

**NOTE: This article first appeared in Worldwide, Vol 34 No 3, May 2024. It is reprinted here with permission.**

They say that Catholic Social Teaching (CST) is the Church's best kept secret. Certainly, many Catholics feel on shaky ground when it comes to identifying what should be ingrained in our DNA. And sometimes we must admit that there are members of other denominations, other faiths, who lead their lives in such a way that we couldn't slide a sheet of paper between them and CST.

## Imbedded in the values of CST

One South African who cannot be separated from the concepts of Catholic Social Teaching is the Reverend Beyers Naudé, who in later life found God in all he met, and especially in the poor, the suffering, and the oppressed. Naudé began his career as a pastor of the Dutch Reformed Church, but later embraced what we recognise as the Catholic call for human dignity, a pillar of CST. He paid the price when he was ostracised by the white community because of his denunciation of apartheid.

"Solidarity" is another pillar of CST that comes to mind when we consider the life of Beyers Naudé: a solidarity that motivated him to stand side by side with Black sisters and brothers during that most difficult of times in South Africa, regardless of the personal cost.

Indeed, what about "the common good"? Catholics are taught that the common good means that the fruits of the earth belong to everyone. At a time when the Black majority in South Africa was denied so much as the pips of those fruits, Rev Naudé sought to ensure a better future in which "the option for the poor" was addressed, and "peace" would be possible for all.

For taking this stance, he was denounced as a traitor.

We could go on, delving into the areas of Catholic Social Teaching that this man adopted, albeit quite possibly unconsciously. He sought not only basic human dignity, but "the dignity of work and participation" during those years when white supremacists saw fit to deny the majority of South Africa's population these rights.

This bravery in speaking out for such a framework of life earned Naudé this accolade from Nelson Mandela: on Naudé's 80th birthday, the then South African President described him as a "shining beacon", saying "It demonstrates what it means to rise above race, to be a true South African."

**Origins**

Let us go back to the beginning of Beyers Naudé's life to explore how a man raised in the Dutch Reformed Church—a church that worked hard to justify the values of apartheid —came to hold as sacred what true Catholics *should* hold at the heart of their faith.

One of eight siblings, he was born on May 10, 1915, in Roodepoort, in what was then the Transvaal. His father was something of a firebrand in the Dutch Reformed Church. Reverend Jozua François Naudé was responsible for some of the first biblical translations into Afrikaans and helped embed it as an official South African language. He was also the first chairman of the Broederbond, a secret society of Afrikaner leaders that liaised with government during apartheid.

All the influences as he was growing up confirmed Beyers Naudé in his father's way of thinking. He gained a Master of Arts (MA) at Stellenbosch University, known for nurturing Afrikaner intellectualism; then studied theology there. Fellow students included Hendrik Verwoerd and John Vorster, who both served as apartheid prime ministers. Beyers Naudé even joined the Broederbond, becoming its youngest member at age 25, and seemed entrenched in their world when in 1940 he was appointed assistant minister at the Dutch Reformed Church in Wellington, a small town near Cape Town. His preaching at that time was undoubtedly founded in the racial segregationist philosophy of the then government.

**U-turn moment**

With men like Naudé, however, there is always that Damascene moment that changes life forever. For him, the Sharpeville massacre was that deciding moment.

It was not the first time that he had begun to question apartheid. There had been chinks of light stabbing at his beliefs. In Potchefstroom, for example, he had discussed aspects of apartheid policies with fellow ministers and, indeed, Broederbonders who were questioning the validity of these racist practices. But it was when government troops massacred 69 protesters in 1960 that his mindset altered completely and brought him so close to Catholic Social Teaching.

It wasn't easy, of course, to change track. He had been preaching in the Dutch Reformed Church for two decades and had been steeped in its beliefs from childhood. The year after the Sharpeville massacre, he was appointed moderator of the Southern Transvaal Dutch Reformed Church, but at the same time helped to found the Christian Institute, an ecumenical organisation that challenged the established church on the issue of apartheid.

His life, his preaching, his very soul was becoming increasingly conflicted. He was beginning to speak out against the core of the white minority's racist strategies, calling out the immorality of the migrant labour system's destruction of Black family life. He concluded that he could not continue within the church that had been omnipresent throughout his life.

In September 1963, he condemned apartheid from his pulpit in Aasvoëlkop. This was a step too far for the Afrikaner community and he was in turn condemned as a traitor.

### Leaving ministry at the Dutch Reformed Church

This was the beginning of a new life for Beyers Naudé, and symbolically he took off his robes and left his church. The Afrikaner community just as symbolically cast *him* off. He could only tell his wife, Ilse, "Whatever happens, we will be together, and God will be with us."

Although he continued to preach in Black Dutch Reformed congregations, this became untenable, and he was forced to resign as a minister in 1965. He was now pursued by the Security Police, who raided the Christian Institute's offices in May of that year.

The nonviolent approach of his campaign against apartheid was met with mixed feelings in South Africa while it was lauded in Europe. In 1972 he delivered a sermon in London's Westminster Abbey, and held talks in West Germany with church leaders. Amsterdam's Free University awarded him an honorary doctorate in Theology in September 1972 for "exceptional merit for the development of theological science".

Back in South Africa the following year, the Christian Institute was investigated by Parliament's Schlebusch commission, a parliamentary commission established in 1972 by then Prime Minister BJ Vorster specifically to investigate four anti-apartheid civil society organizations, including the Christian Institute. The fact that Vorster had studied alongside Naudé perhaps spurred the prime minister to persecute this man who had so radically changed his thinking and was prepared to say so publicly.

1974 saw Naudé receive an honorary Doctor of Law from the University of Witwatersrand. He was also honoured with the Reinhold Niebuhr Award for "steadfast and self-sacrificing services in South Africa for justice and peace". His passport, which had been confiscated, was returned so that he could travel and receive the award at a ceremony in Chicago, US. On his return it was once again confiscated.

### Persecution and arrest

In December 1975 Naudé was refused a passport to travel to London to address the Royal Institute of International Affairs, and his speech was presented in his absence.

On the recommendations of the Schlebusch Commission, four anti-apartheid organisations were denied foreign funding, and funds and documents were seized. In on-going prosecutions, Naudé was jailed in 1976 for refusing to

testify and to pay a fine, although that fine was paid by a supporter, and he only spent one night in prison.

In 1977, Naudé and the Christian Institute were banned. He was placed under house arrest and was only allowed to speak to one person at a time. Even so, he managed to set up a ministry to council pastors and he continued one-on-one talks with other activists, including Archbishop Desmond Tutu.

### Awards

The world outside South Africa continued to hear of his activism and to award him prizes, such as one from the Swedish Free Church for reconciliation and development and the Bruno Kreisky Foundation award that recognised his "untiring work in race relations".

When he finally broke completely from the Dutch Reformed Church in 1980, the Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk in Afrika welcomed him. This was the year when his house arrest was lifted, but he still wasn't allowed to leave the Johannesburg magisterial district.

Amid all this persecution, it seems amazing that in 1983 he was awarded an honorary Doctorate from the University of Cape Town. This was a year before his banning order was lifted completely and he was able to immerse himself entirely in his mission to end apartheid. In 1985 he became the secretary-general of the South African Council of Churches, stepping into the shoes of Archbishop Desmond Tutu. Two years later, he would be a member of the Afrikaner group meeting with ANC representatives in Senegal.

During the seven years that he was banned, he chose his allies but did not take instruction from them. This led to the ANC criticising his support of other organisations, including Steve Biko's Black Consciousness Movement, which empowered and mobilised much of the urban black population. That element of "dignity of work and participation" that Naudé no doubt recognised and supported in Biko's Movement reminds us again that while Naudé might have remained true to his Protestant background, his philosophy embraced all these elements of Catholic Social Teaching.

### Spirit of reconciliation and peace

In 1990, despite the restraint he retained in his relationship with the ANC, he joined its leaders, including Nelson Mandela, Walter Sisulu and Joe Slovo, to meet for the first time with members of the apartheid government. He still, however, preferred to stay out of the headlines—until the day in 1994 when he heard F.W. de Klerk's speech declaring a new South Africa. He publicly declared "What I had dreamt, hoped and worked for is becoming a reality."

Societal change is slow, but it is interesting to learn that after 1994, Naudé was not only welcomed back to the Dutch Reformed Church, but on a personal level he and his family were no longer ostracised.

His work in the final decade of his life included speaking to conservative congregations around South Africa, nurturing in resistant pockets the spirit of reconciliation sought by Nelson Mandela. It was difficult work, but when he

died in September 2004, he had come a very long way from the bitter prejudices that surrounded him in the first half of the 20th century.

Beyers Naudé again reminds us of Catholic Social Teaching, which has peace at its heart: peace is a cornerstone of the Catholic faith, and it clearly became the cornerstone of Beyers Naudé's beliefs.

## Consider Curriculum: Part 4

Written and compiled by Paul Faller for the Catholic Institute of Education

This series of reflections is intended to refresh our understanding of the subject and the contexts within which it takes place and to promote discussion among religious educators about the theory and practice of what we might regard as the living spring at the heart of curriculum.

Here is an overview of the series.

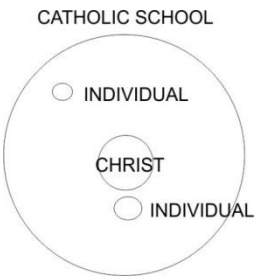
Part 1 Religious Education – What is its nature? (Vol 10 No 1)
Part 2 The Rationale – Why do we have it? (Vol 10 No 2)
Part 3 the Student and the Teacher – Who is involved? (Vol 10 No 3)
**Part 4 Contexts and Perspectives – Where does it happen? (Vol 10 No 4)**
Part 5 Scope and Sequence – What does it contain? (Vol 11 No 1)
Part 6 Methodology – How do we do it? (Vol 11 No 2)
Part 7 Assessment – How do we rate it? (Vol 11 No 3)

We began this series considering the nature of Religious Education. We then turned in Part 2 to the question of rationale: why do we insist on it when the State effectively has pushed it to the sidelines? In the third part we considered who is involved, namely the student and the teacher. Now in this fourth part we look at where it happens as we explore key contexts and perspectives.

## Contexts & Perspectives

### Where does it happen?

#### *The Catholic School*




Christ is the centre in the vision of the Catholic school – Christ, the Way, the Truth, and the Life, the Word through whom all creation has its being. But the school does not inhabit this centre; it strives towards it on its journey in faith, called to realise ever more fully the Reign of God.

And so it recognises that every member of its community – parent, student, or teacher – is on a journey or pilgrimage, responding in different ways and from different places to the invitation to walk the way in the spirit of Christ.

The starting point in any educational enterprise is the body of learners we teach. The Catholic school welcomes all, regardless of their religious identity, and so we need to take into account, when fashioning our religious education curriculum, a number of different realities. Among our learners are possibly

- those who come from religiously supportive homes
- those for whom the school may be the first and only experience of a faith community
- those who come from different Christian traditions
- those who come from other faith backgrounds
- those who are committed to their tradition
- those who are not committed to a particular tradition

While the Catholic school' s curriculum will take the Christian story as its central focus, and approach it with a Catholic vision, it will not attempt to judge the relative value of different religious traditions and standpoints. It will regard each as uniquely valuable and something from which we can learn. Religious education will be undertaken in a spirit of dialogue of equal partners, realising, in the words of Pope John Paul II that

"...every quest of the human spirit for truth and goodness, and in the last analysis for God, is inspired by the Holy Spirit. The various religions arose precisely from this primordial human openness to God. At their origins we often find founders who, with the help of God's Spirit, achieved a deeper religious experience. Handed on to others, this experience took form in the doctrines, rites and precepts of the various religions." (John Paul II, General Audience, 9th September 1998)

In essence, our religious education will focus on the common human experiences that underlie different religious expressions. It will offer the Christian story as a starting point for uncovering the meaning of these experiences, inviting dialogue with the stories of other religious traditions and the religious realities of the learners. In such exploration, learners will come to know one another through the lens of each other's particular stance or tradition, while coming to a deeper understanding and appreciation of their own. (CIE 2013: 17)

### Partnerships

*The school's job is not preparing and initiating, but educating, that is, extending the students' religious knowledge, experience, and skills in a spirit of critical reflection and challenge, in order to help them in their personal process of coming to own a faith that they inherited.*

(SACBC 1991: 59)

Religious Education in school cannot achieve a full education in faith all on its own. A three-way partnership is needed between the home, the parish or faith community, and the school.

The home is typically where the seed of faith is planted, and the faith community has the responsibility of nourishing the plant that emerges. The school's special tasks are to prepare the ground for faith, and later on to help the learner to grow in knowledge of the faith that he or she has received and to integrate it into daily life.

This does not mean to say that planting seed and nourishing growth do not also happen in the school context. There are, in fact, no clear lines of distinction between the roles of the three partners, but each does have a particular focus and responsibility while creating effective partnerships. In short we can say that

- AT HOME students learns to live their faith
- AT SCHOOL they learn to know their faith
- IN THE PARISH they learn to celebrate their faith (CEO Brisbane 1986).

## Contextual Issues

### *Religious Education and Catechesis*

In implementing the threefold aim of Religious Education – teaching ABOUT, FROM and FOR religion, the Catholic School needs to foster and maintain a right relationship between catechesis and the curriculum subject. The Congregation for Catholic Education explains the distinction, using the term 'religious instruction' instead of 'Religious Education' for the subject.

> *There is a close connection, and at the same time a clear distinction, between religious instruction (sic) and catechesis, or the handing on of the Gospel message…The distinction comes from the fact that, unlike religious instruction, catechesis presupposes that the hearer is receiving the Christian message as a salvific reality. Moreover, catechesis takes place within a community living out its faith at a level of space and time not available to a school: a whole lifetime.*[1]

In the light of this distinction, Religious Education has its own proper evangelising character, "called to penetrate a particular area of culture and to relate with other areas of knowledge… It is necessary, therefore, that religious instruction in schools appear as a scholastic discipline with the same systematic demands and the same rigour as other disciplines."[2]

### *Religious Education and World Religions*

Teaching about other religions in the Catholic school is important for several reasons:

1. Learning about the religion and cultures of those who do not share the Catholic faith is one of the ways in which Catholic schools embody the call to love one's neighbour.

---

[1] Congregation for Catholic Education. 1988. *The Religious Dimension of Education in a Catholic School*, par. 68.

[2] Congregation for the Clergy. 1997. *General Directory for Catechesis*. Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, par. 73.

"The love for all men and women is necessarily also a love for their culture. Catholic schools are, by their very vocation, intercultural."[3]

2. Many of the children in Catholic schools are practicing members of other faiths and our schools need to be places of hospitality for these children. It is an act of respect and courtesy that our curriculum helps them to reflect on the nature of their own religious identity. As the Church says, "All children and young people [including those of other faiths in our Catholic schools] must have the same possibilities for arriving at the knowledge of their own religion as well as of elements that characterize other religions."[4]
3. It prepares the pupils in our Catholic schools for life, giving them an understanding of the beliefs of others. This in turn will improve social cohesion and contribute to the common good by increasing mutual respect between those of different religions.[5]

### *Religious Education and Evolution*

What do Catholic schools teach about creation and evolution? God is the creator of all things visible and invisible. By this we mean that everything that exists has its ultimate source and origin in God.

Catholic schools however are not "creationist". A "creationist" is someone who believes that the theological truths expressed in the first books of Genesis are also literal scientific and historic descriptions of the beginnings of the world. Some creationists would also insist that the earth is only approximately 6000 years old. This is not the position of the Catholic Church which rejects the creationist interpretation of Genesis. That is, Catholic schools do not teach that God's creation of the world implies anything about how this creation occurred. The Catholic Church is clear that evolution is currently the best explanation of the origin and diversity of life on earth and that the earth is as old as current scientific orthodoxy suggests (approximately 4.54 billion years old). The Church would say that the doctrine of creation expresses the theological truth that all existence derives from and depends upon God, whilst evolution expresses scientific truths about the history of the physical universe.[6]

### *Religious Education and Culture*

Some years ago, in his 1975 Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, Paul VI alerted us to what he called 'the drama of our time', namely the split between the Gospel and culture.[7] In former generations the culture helped carry the faith, but this is no longer so. A generation ago, Karl Rahner made the statement that there would soon come a time when each of us will either be a mystic or a non-believer.[8] Ron Rolheiser explains that "to be committed believers today, to have faith truly inform our lives, requires finding an inner anchor beyond the support and security we find in being part of the cognitive

---

[3] Congregation for Catholic Education. 2013. *Educating to Intercultural Dialogue in Catholic School: Living in Harmony for a Civilization of Love*, par. 61.
[4] Ibid. par. 18.
[5] Catholic Education Service (CES). 2020. *Religious Education in Catholic schools*.
[6] Ibid.
[7] Par. 20.
[8] Quoted in Rolheiser. 2008. April 20. *Mystic or Unbeliever. ronrolheiser.com* .

majority wherein we have the comfort of knowing that, since everyone else is doing this, it probably makes sense."[9]

Two years after *Evangelii Nuntiandi* the Congregation for Catholic Education published *The Catholic School* wherein it emphasised the mission of the Catholic school as "a critical, systematic transmission of culture in the light of faith and the bringing forth of the power of Christian virtue by the integration of culture with faith and of faith with living."[10]

Marisa Crawford and Graham Rossiter argue in similar vein for a critical attention to culture as one of the fundamental dimensions of Religious Education, especially in the secondary school. They says that "if the media has a subtle influence in conditioning people's expectations and values as well as dulling their ability to think critically, then the 'influence of the media' should itself become a topic for critical examination."[11] Rossiter adds that "if cultural meanings are not brought into the open for appraisal, they can remain deviously influential because they are then regarded as a natural, but hidden part of the normal fabric of life", so "by starting with the identification and appraisal of cultural meanings, individuals can take up *cultural agency*, where they can avoid being just passive 'consumers' of culture by actively contributing to the creation of cultural meanings within their own sphere of influence."[12] Michael Paul Gallagher concurs with this. "Religious education," he says, "needs to become counter-cultural, in the sense of helping students to identify the dehumanizing factors present in life-styles and assumptions of the culture."[13] And as a final note, Harvey Cox, an American theologian, says that we need to be aware that the mass media "provides the heroes, myths, sacraments and beatific visions for more and more people every day."[14]

## South Africa and the National Curriculum

### *Space for Religious Education*

Religious Education, as a separate subject, is not recognised in the National Curriculum. It does, however, have a legally protected space in independent schools and public schools with a distinctive religious character (DOE 2003, par. 16). However, in practical terms, schools struggle to make provision for it according to the requirements of *Fostering Hope*, especially with regard to timetabling (CBE 2018:15) and because of the perception among many schools and teachers that the National Curriculum learning area Life Orientation replaces it.

---

[9] Ibid.
[10] Par. 49.
[11] Crawford, Marisa and Rossiter, Graham. 1985. *Teaching Religion in the Secondary School: Theory and Practice*. Sydney: Christian Brothers Province Resource Group, p. 79.
[12] Rossiter, Graham. 2013. Key Issues for a Relevant Religious Education Curriculum in *The Well*, Vol 6 No 3. Johannesburg: Catholic Institute of Education, p. 9.
[13] Gallagher, Michael Paul. 1997. *Clashing Symbols: An Introduction to Faith and Culture*. London: Darton, Longman & Todd, p.115.
[14] Cox, Harvey. 1973. *The Seduction of the Spirit: The Use and Misuse of People's Religion*. London: Wildwood House, p.303.

### *Religious Education and Life Orientation*

It is clear there is an overlap between the current Religious Education curriculum and that of Life Orientation in the areas of Personal and Social Development. This reality led in 2015 to the proposal for a National Core Curriculum for Religious Education which would focus on certain curriculum processes, while integrating others and leaving the process Education for Personal Growth and Relationships and any other overlapping content to the Life Orientation curriculum.

Further content relating more clearly to the focuses of home and parish would also be removed from the existing curriculum.

This would mean the definition of a manageable national Religious Education core curriculum which would cover essential areas and allow "for local addition according to need so as to facilitate common support and practical cooperation between schools" *(*CBE 2018:14*)*.

It would also mean the adjustment of the Life Orientation curriculum to include, where missing, the content referred to above and also to embed the curriculum within the values of the school.

This strategy would create scope for national assessments and make the production of student and teacher materials more economically feasible.

## Mapping hope and belonging in South Africa's informal settlements

*Millions of South Africans live in so-called "informal" housing, often built illegally and with minimal infrastructure. The absence of official addresses is a constant obstacle among the many daily challenges. A non-profit organization, however, has developed a solution.*

( Joséphine Kloeckner - in Lawley Station)

Lawley Station, 40 kilometres south of Johannesburg. On this arid plateau, thousands of corrugated metal shacks form a dense maze of dirt alleyways. Today, young residents in fluorescent yellow vests are out measuring distances between gates leading to clusters of homes. Each meter is roughly two large steps. Holding a smartphone, Lesego Maphike logs the location of an entrance on an app connected to Google Maps. "This is a place of worship," she explained. "We try to be as specific as possible so people can find their way." She's one of 30 volunteers recruited by the NGO *Planact* to map the neighbourhood and assign an address to each property.

In Soweto, Johannesburg. (Photo by Ana Raquel S. Hernandes / CC BY-SA 2.0)

Since 1985, *Planact* has been working to combat social exclusion for vulnerable communities. With Google's support, the non-profit organization launched a digital address program to map homes in informal settlements, giving each one a unique "Plus Code"—a simplified geographic coordinate that works on Google Maps. A blue plaque with the Plus Code is then posted on each home.

## Easing access for emergency services

Residents are eagerly awaiting this innovation. "Whenever there's a problem, getting help is so hard. We have to meet emergency responders at the police station or the liquor store and guide them, which is tedious, and they're always hesitant," said Elizabeth Tshishonka, a local resident. Across from her home, the charred remnants of a nearby shack serve as a haunting reminder of a recent fire that claimed a neighbour's life. "It happened in the middle of the night," she recalled sombrely. "We heard them crying for help. We called the emergency services, but they only arrived by morning. There was someone inside who died in the fire. We couldn't do anything."

Most households rely on wood or paraffin for cooking and heating, so the fire risk is high, exacerbated by the substandard infrastructure. Though South Africa's Constitution guaranteed the right to adequate housing since 1996, an estimated quarter of the country's urban population still lives in informal housing. Authorities provide essential services like electricity, water points, and communal toilets, but the issue of addresses remains unaddressed.

## Restoring dignity

The lack of formal addresses deepens the marginalization of already underserved populations. "For instance, they can't open bank accounts," explained Mike Makwela, *Planact's* lead program coordinator. "Their only option is to borrow someone's address." For less stringent paperwork,

residents may invent an address. “To enrol my son in school, I just put a random street name and number,” said local resident Nonhlanhla Mabunga. “But a real address is needed for things like a hospital transfer.”

Digital addresses could be the answer. These new addresses are also registered with municipal authorities and, according to Makwela, have the support of local governments, especially Johannesburg. “This project allows them to gather data on the number of homes in these areas, which can improve urban planning,” he said.

So far, the program has provided digital addresses to 8,000 households and financially supported 1,000 volunteers. After these successful pilot projects, the NGO now aims to expand the initiative, marking a first for Southern Africa.

## The rise of ecological grief

(Nicole Dickson)

*I recently attended an event with two guest speakers, Nina Callaghan from Stellenbosch University’s Centre for Sustainability Transitions and Dion Chang from Flux Trends. They spoke of the rise of ecological grief in the world around us, and their words struck a chord.*

The rise of ecological grief reflects the growing distress people experience as they witness the accelerating destruction of the natural world. This grief is rooted in observed losses—such as species extinction, deforestation, and ecosystem collapse—and anticipated impacts, including extreme weather events and rising sea levels. Ecological grief is no longer a marginal phenomenon but a widespread experience affecting individuals, communities, and entire cultures. This emotional response has drawn attention from mental health experts, environmental advocates, and religious communities, who recognise that the distress caused by climate change touches deep existential and spiritual concerns.

Christianity and other major religions have increasingly recognised ecological grief as a serious spiritual issue. In recent years, many Christians have begun to interpret the ecological crisis as a call to honour their role as stewards of God’s creation, as outlined in the book of Genesis. This belief in stewardship holds that humanity is entrusted with the care of Earth’s ecosystems and biodiversity and, therefore, has a moral obligation to protect and preserve them. Consequently, witnessing the degradation of creation brings feelings of sorrow, guilt, and responsibility, which align closely with the dimensions of

ecological grief. Many Christians are beginning to see this grief not only as a legitimate emotional response but as a form of sacred lamentation—a form of mourning for the Earth and humanity's failure to uphold its divinely assigned role.

Pope Francis' 2015 encyclical, *Laudato Si': On Care for Our Common Home,* is a landmark document that addresses ecological grief and calls for a "conversion" toward ecological responsibility. In the encyclical, Pope Francis describes how the environmental crisis reflects a crisis of values, emphasising that Earth's degradation should be felt as a deep sorrow and motivate believers to repent, repair, and renew their commitment to care for the planet. Many Christian environmental groups now reference *Laudato Si'* as a guiding text, affirming that grief can serve as a pathway to ecological action rather than hopelessness.

The concept of "creation care" is another facet through which Christian communities address ecological grief. Many Christian denominations, particularly in the evangelical movement, have established environmental ministries to raise awareness of the moral and spiritual imperative to care for the Earth. They frame ecological grief as a collective feeling that can unify believers to act as custodians of the planet, emphasising that love for God's creation must be at the core of faith. In this sense, ecological grief transforms from an individual emotional burden into a collective, spiritually driven motivation for action.

As ecological grief rises, Christianity and other faiths offer ways to process this sorrow through repentance, responsibility, and compassion frameworks. Christian thinkers suggest that ecological grief, rather than being a source of despair, can be embraced as a reminder of the sacred relationship between humanity and nature, calling believers to act from a place of love and respect for creation. By channelling this grief into spiritual and environmental action, Christianity offers a path from lament to healing and honouring the planet as a gift from God that must be protected for future generations.

# The Mystic Heart of Sport

(Brendan McNamee - Academia Letters, June 2021)

In *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* Arthur Dent makes the startling discovery that white mice, rather than being the objects of experiments carried out by humans, were in fact carrying out experiments on humans. I wonder if a similar principle might be applied to sport. Take any high-stakes football match. Passions run high. The passion, on the parts of both players and spectators, is primarily for victory. The players receive a huge ego (and cash) boost, and from the fans' point of view, a win for their team is, by some mysterious process of osmosis, a win for themselves. This lust for victory is so intense that the other source of sporting joy, the quality of the game itself, is often relegated to a secondary position, rendered lip service, of course, but seen really as essentially a means to an end. This, I would contend, is topsy-turvy. I want to argue here that it is the lust for victory that should serve the game, not the other way around, and that this order of things reflects a wider truth about life itself.

"Eternity," wrote William Blake, "is in love with the productions of time." (Eternity here being understood as a state of timelessness, rather than an endless expanse of time.) A game of football is a production of time, painstakingly worked out and evolved. But for what purpose? Two teams are pitched in combat. Naturally, each wants to best the other. This ego-based desire is an intense drive, the need to control which necessitates strict rules which the participants, in their lust for conquest, forever strain against. But out of the cauldron of this drive and this straining (provided the leash is not broken) can come something which transcends the desires of individuals to achieve personal glory, and this something is what really inspires that part of the sports fan indifferent to which side comes out on top. These are moments that justify sport at its best being called "poetry in motion." Moments of sheer grace that stop the breath and remain forever etched in the memory. These moments are the white mice in the equation. Blake's glimpses of eternity. The participants imagine that they hone their skills, put in punishing hours of practice, and follow rigidly prescribed dietary regimes in order to emerge victorious from the contest. They imagine that those sublime moments of grace (which come, if they come at all, only after such gruelling preparation) are simply a means to victory. And seen from their own personal points of view, they are. Their dreams, we may be fairly sure, are of the glory and adulation that will follow victory. Avid young fans may be enthralled by the skills their heroes display, but they too dream of one day holding aloft the Cup at the end of the contest.

But there is one crucial difference between the dreams of glory that spur on a team and its fans, and those so memorable moments of grace. It is a difference which, I hope, justifies the use of a lofty and ethereal term like "eternity" in such a down-to-earth context. The difference is this: the dreams of glory can be trained for, planned for, worked toward; the moments of grace are spontaneous eruptions, deaf and blind to the plans and schemes of ordinary mortals. To employ the mystical phraseology of Meister Eckhart, it is the

difference between attachment and detachment. Eckhart establishes a link between attachment and temporality: “A man attached to things is stretched between a ’before’ and an ’after,’ or between past and future. He lives in duration, while detachment dwells in ’this present now.’ A detached man lives in the instant.” (Schurmann 14). A footballer lives mostly in duration, in the world of plans and projects. The scheme is: project, realise, possess: train for the game, play the game, win the game. If this plan is adhered to, all the way to the end, few tears will be shed if it is achieved without poetry.

But some will. Despite our saturation in the egoism of winning, there is still a quiet voice within which longs for what Wallace Stevens calls in ’The Blue Guitar,’ “a tune beyond us, yet ourselves” (42). For magic, in effect. We imagine that we invent these conflicts in order to win at them and so stroke our egos, but perhaps they are really invented to allow that magic enter the world. Perhaps they are, as Yeats has it, “forms created by passion to unite us to ourselves” (82). Pragmatism is, of course, vital. In a football match a player has to be fit and ready for the contest. Such readiness is no guarantee that a sublime moment of genius will occur, but it will almost certainly not occur otherwise. And the ego is equally important. Both teams must desperately want to win, otherwise you end up with, at best, a high-class kickabout. So why refer to these moments as detachment when they so clearly cannot be detached from the time-bound structures through which they come into being? Are they not serving the ultimate purpose of victory in the same way as all the other elements such as training, tactics, effort, will, etc? True, they can end up serving it, but seen from the ideal sports lover’s point of view, this is merely accidental, a by-product. Winning in sport is one kind of joy that needs its corresponding sorrow simply to exist. There can be no winners without losers, and from this point of view, both sides are simply serving a higher purpose. Heraclitus’ intriguing aphorism, “Gods and mortals, dying each other’s life, living each other’s death” (Yeats 68) can find some traction here. The conflict on one level, the time-bound level, is between two teams, but on another, the detached level, it is between gods and mortals, and here it is a more creative conflict because these participants, time and eternity, are inextricably entwined. The gods need the mortals because it is only through media - the game - constructed by mortals that their magic can take form. When that magic occurs, there is a sense in which mortals, as time-bound ego-driven creatures, momentarily cease to exist. Mortals need the gods because without them they would die of boredom. And indeed, it may be said that, when immersed in our time-bound ego-driven selves, the gods are dead. The gods within us are dead.

Robert Rossen’s 1962 film, *The Hustler,* features a pool shark called “Fast” Eddie Felson. At one point in the film he tries to explain to his girlfriend the true nature of his passion. It has nothing to do with the money, or with being seen to be the best. These are quantifiable objectives, untransformable phenomena of the everyday world. No, what really inspires him, he says, are those rare moments when the pool cue seems to become an extension of his arm, when he can simply do no wrong, when everything - himself, the game, the world –

become one, indivisible process, a living work of art. Bringing religious terminology to the matter, there is the 1981 film about Olympic runners, *Chariots of Fire*. One of the athletes is a devout Christian who postpones a trip to the Far East, where he is to work as a missionary, in order to take part in the games. When his equally devout wife chides him for this selfish, unchristian attitude, he replies, "God made me fast, and when I run, I feel his pleasure." Eternity opens a chink in the armour of time and Blake's "love" is made manifest. Or, to put it in more down-to-earth terms, skill and spontaneity join hands and, momentarily, dancer and dance are one. It may be no accident that the words "happen" and "happy" have the same root, "hap." A great sporting event is a happening, an event, *because* of its element of spontaneity, the anticipated, longed-for lifting of the soul out of the mundane treadmill of linear time. These are our moments of greatest, most intense happiness, when we are living - if, most of us, only by proxy - on the edge. It is why people climb mountains and skydive. The other kind of happiness, the kind we more habitually chase after, is the happiness of security, which might more accurately be called contentment, the great danger of which is its tendency to sink into boredom. These are the poles of life, the Scylla and Charybdis of tension and tedium: the one exciting but dangerous, the other safe but boring.

The philosopher E. M. Cioran has written, "History divides itself in two: a former time when people felt pulled towards the vibrant nothingness of divinity and now, when the nothingness of the world is empty of divine spirit" (6). It may be that in our ultra-secular Western world, whose oppressive nothingness the advertisers keep us distracted from, sport affords one opportunity to touch, or to witness, the sublime heights that were once the province of religion. But it appears to be a losing battle. The white mice may have to think up another concept.

## References


Blake, William. *Complete Writings*. Oxford: OUP, 1966.

Cioran, E. M. *Tears and Saints*. Trans. Ilinca Zarifopol-Johnston. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995.

Hudson, Hugh. *Chariots of Fire*. Screenplay by Colin Welland. 20th Century Fox, 2004.

Schurmann, Reiner. *Wandering Joy: Meister Eckhart's Mystical Philosophy*. Great Barrington, MA: Lindisfarne Books, 2001.

Stevens, Wallace. *Selected Poems*. London: Faber and Faber, 1953.

Yeats, W. B. *A Vision*. 1937. Rev. ed. 1962. London: Macmillan, 1962.

.


## A Daily Advent Prayer

Dear God, our Creator,

You revealed your love to us and creation once and for all through the coming of our Savior, Jesus Christ. By the grace of Your Creator Spirit, teach us to celebrate our faith in the Incarnation that took place in creation.

Dear Jesus, Savior of creation, we ask that You may be born in us once again as we seek to cultivate hope for our common home. As Your followers, teach us to care for the dignity of all human beings and all creation, now and in the future.

In a season too often marked by overconsumption and excess, let us give thanks and honour the goodness of all your gifts in the natural world. Help us to contemplate the mystery of creation as we celebrate the mystery of incarnation.

We pray for today's victims of global warming, both human and nonhuman. We pray for more ambition in the energy transition, in this country and globally. We pray for our governments to negotiate a global and fair phase-out of fossil fuels.

And, finally, we pray for the courage to be prophets of our time, calling upon our leaders to bear fruits of ecological justice.

Come Emmanuel! Make us ever more hopeful people for a hopeful planet. Let us be part of Your light of hope to the world.

Amen. (Laudato Si' Movement)

Roots & Wings

Catholic Institute of Education
CREATING FUTURES

66 Nelson Road, Booysens, Johannesburg 2091
P O Box 2083 Southdale 2135;
Tel: 011 433 1888 Web: www.cie.org.za