

The Sacred Call of Religious Education in Our Catholic Schools

National Religious Education Conference

Keynote Address - Bishop S. Sipuka

06 October 2025: Johannesburg

Introduction

My dear friends, educators, and fellow servants in Christ's mission,

Welcome to this important gathering. We are here because we share a sacred responsibility - Religious Education in our Catholic schools. We stand in a great tradition that began in 1847 with St Augustine's Primary School in Gqeberha and continues today in your schools, classrooms, and daily work with young people.

The Challenge We Face

Our young people today have access to more information than any previous generation has had. Yet at the same time, we see so many of them struggling - anxiety, depression, feeling empty inside. They know how to use technology, but they struggle with the deeper questions: Who am I? Why am I here? What is my purpose?

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, writing from prison, said that we have learned to cope with everything "except ourselves." Our students can navigate the digital world, but they cannot navigate their own hearts. This is exactly why Religious Education matters so much. It is the compass that helps our students navigate life itself.

Two Kinds of Learning

A Muslim poet named Rumi discussed two types of intelligence. The first flows into a student from books and teachers—facts, information, and knowledge. The second flows out from within - from the heart, from the soul, like a fountain that keeps flowing. In Religious Education, we need both. Yes, we teach about the Bible, the sacraments, and Church history. But more importantly, we need to help that fountain within each student to start flowing - that spiritual awareness that helps them see God's presence in their lives.

Students Are Not Empty of God

The great African theologian John Mbiti said that "Africans are notoriously religious." Our people, our cultures, have always had a deep sense of God, of the sacred, of the spiritual world. Our students are not empty vessels. They already have what we call the *sensus fidei* -

a sense of the divine, an awareness of God. **Some scholars refer to this as an "anthropological constant" - it's simply part of being human, like having emotions or a conscience.** The Holy Spirit is already at work in them.

Think of a child who knows instinctively that lying is wrong. A teenager who feels awe when looking at the stars. A young person moved to help someone in need. This comes from that spiritual dimension that is already there. Our job in Religious Education is not to create something from nothing. Our job is to help students recognise what's already stirring in their hearts, to give them language for it, to connect it to Jesus Christ and the Gospel, and, most importantly, to help them live it.

Learning to Listen

The Catholic Church is on a journey of synodality - which means "walking together." And at the heart of walking together is learning to listen. We need to learn to listen to our students. Not just their answers to our questions, but their real questions, their struggles, their experiences. The Holy Spirit also touches our students. They have their own spiritual experiences, their own insights, their own questions about God.

Research shows that about two-thirds of people have had spiritual experiences - yet many never talk about them for fear of being laughed at or thought strange. What if our Religious Education classes became safe spaces where students could share these experiences? Where they could ask their real questions without fear? Where we teachers listened as much as we spoke?

Making Religion Real - Facing Difficult Questions

Sometimes we teach religion in a way that's too safe, too polished. We present everything so nicely that it doesn't look like the real world. But we must remember that our students watch the news. They see religious violence, hypocrisy, and people using religion to justify terrible things. Then they come to RE class and we act like none of this exists. Our students ask real questions about themselves and the world.

Here's a real example. I recently visited a school where there were concerns about students showing different sexual orientations - LGBTQ+ issues. Some teachers said, "Bishop, we need to use Religious Education to eliminate these behaviours."

This shows how Religious Education can be misunderstood. These young people with questions about their sexual identity are not a problem to be eliminated. They are children of God whom we are called to love and protect. If students are questioning their identity, telling them they are wrong or sinful will only drive them away from God and may harm them deeply. We need to focus on the holistic development and well-being of every child, helping all students understand human sexuality with dignity, teaching respect for themselves and others.

This is not easy. But this is exactly where our students need Religious Education - not as a weapon to shame people, but as a light to help everyone understand their dignity as children of God. Our students also face relationships, peer pressure, and even exploitation. At the same school, I heard that some young learners were having relationships with taxi drivers, which put them at risk of exploitation. These are real issues in our students' lives. Religious Education must address these things, not pretend they don't exist.

What Religious Education Really Includes

Religious Education is much more than classroom instruction. It's the way we greet students, how we handle conflict, how we treat the poorest student just as we do the richest, our prayers and liturgies, how we care for creation, and the example we set.

All of this teaches faith. They learn more from what we do than what we say. As the saying goes, "Religion is more caught in action than taught in theory."

The Spiritual Hunger in Every Person

We are not just bodies and brains. Every human being has a spiritual side - it's part of being human. We must educate the whole person - body, mind, and soul. Here, I would like to raise a concern about the broader educational culture in South Africa. While our Catholic schools generally respect the need for rest and family time, the majority of children attend public schools. In many of these schools, students are required to attend classes seven days a week, including Sundays. I experience this reality firsthand: when I visit parishes for confirmations, I often struggle to find the young people because they are at school on weekends.

As Catholic educators, we should be concerned about all children, not just those in our schools. We should also be advocates for an educational philosophy that respects the whole person. We should not be satisfied with just teaching RE in our schools - we must also

advocate for RE to be taught in all schools and provide children with the opportunity to attend church on Sundays.

When students are exhausted and have no time for family, worship, rest, or simply being children, something is fundamentally wrong. We cannot talk about holistic education while accepting a system that treats students like machines. Our Catholic understanding of education—encompassing body, mind, and soul—should inspire us to speak up for all children, wherever they may study.

Students keep asking those big questions: What happens when we die? Why am I here? Is there more to life than what I can see? But if they're exhausted with endless classes, when will they have time to ponder these questions? And we are surprised when some of them end up taking their own lives.

Our Multi-Denominational Reality

Many of the learners in our Catholic schools belong to other churches, particularly Pentecostal churches, which dominate the religious landscape in South Africa. This sometimes creates tension and even antagonism among learners. But this diversity is actually a gift, not a problem. It gives us the chance to model something beautiful: being deeply committed to our Catholic faith while respecting other Christians and engaging respectfully with those who do not share our beliefs.

As we gather in this conference, we must craft a Religious Education that helps students understand what makes Catholic teaching distinctive without demonising other churches. We can address honest questions from those who doubt without being defensive.

This is what our country needs. If we can teach our students how to talk about faith with respect, honesty, and openness - even across differences - we're giving them skills they'll use for the rest of their lives. We are preparing them for ecumenical dialogue and witness in a diverse South Africa.

Religious Education, when done well, helps learners develop ecumenical and interfaith sensitivity, a strong concern for human rights, and passionate care for the environment. It fosters new awareness, creates understanding, promotes introspection, and encourages dialogue. It leads to a change of heart and cultivates respect, resulting in care-filled actions that build, renew, and repair the integrity needed for self, family, community, civil society, our institutions, our economy, our ecological systems, and our Earth itself. This is Religious Education that transforms not only individuals but also the entire fabric of society.

What We Need as Teachers

To do this work well, as teachers, you need not just knowledge but a living relationship with Jesus yourself; not just teaching skills but the ability to listen deeply; courage to tackle difficult questions with compassion; and the courage to speak up when practices in our schools contradict what we're teaching. This is why conferences like this are so important. We must continue to learn, grow, and support one another.

The Challenges We Face

I know the pressures you face. The national curriculum is demanding. There's pressure for academic results. Some people question whether RE really needs two hours a week when we need to help learners grasp Maths. But I ask you: What good is it if our students pass all their exams but lose their souls? What benefit is there in producing graduates who can get good jobs but cannot answer the basic question: "How should I live?" Yes, our country needs more skilled workers, and our schools must make their contribution in this regard. However, the world also needs good people—individuals with values, compassion, and a purpose that extends beyond merely making money. Religious Education forms these kinds of people.

A Call to Action

So, what am I asking of you?

Have courage. Stand firm on the importance of Religious Education. Don't let it become just another exam subject with no heart. Have the courage to question practices that harm students.

Listen to your students. Really listen. Remember, they are not empty of God; they already possess that spiritual awareness. Create space for their questions, their doubts, their experiences. Help them recognise what the Holy Spirit is already doing in their hearts.

Make it real. Connect faith to the real issues students face: poverty, violence, peer pressure, questions about identity and sexuality, family problems, exploitation, social media, and mental health. These are exactly what Religious Education should address.

Teach with your whole life. Remember that religion is more caught than taught. Students learn more from how you treat them, how you handle problems, how you live your faith, than from any textbook.

Keep growing and support each other. Keep deepening your own faith. Take care of your own spiritual life. Teaching is hard work - don't try to do it alone. Share ideas. Encourage each other. Pray for each other.

Conclusion

My dear teachers, you are doing sacred work. You are helping young people discover who they are and why they're here. You are helping them recognise and respond to the God who is already calling them. You are planting seeds that may not bear fruit for years to come.

This is not easy work. There will be days when you feel discouraged, when students seem uninterested, when you wonder if anything you're doing makes a difference.

However, remember that you are not alone. The Holy Spirit is at work within you. Jesus is walking with these young people, and he's walking with you, too.

Our young people need what you have to offer. They need that compass for navigating life. They need to know God loves them - all of them, with all their questions, all their struggles, all their differences. They need examples of people who live their faith with joy, integrity, and courage. You are giving them all of this. Even when it doesn't feel like it, you are making a difference.

May this conference strengthen and encourage you. May you leave here with renewed passion for this beautiful calling. May you find the courage to speak up for what's right. May the Holy Spirit guide you, and may the love of Christ shine through you to every student you teach.

Thank you, and may God bless you richly in this sacred work.