

Touching the Sacred

REVISIONING RELIGIOUS EDUCATION IN THE CATHOLIC SCHOOL

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Deepen the spirituality of our students: give them what is necessary for life.

I believe that every person, (including adolescents), is endowed with a ‘spiritual competence’ which, when enabled and encouraged, may grow into faith.

We do not always speak the same language as adolescents, nor do we see, interpret or understand the world in the same way. Adolescents have the great gift of what I call ‘outsight’, but little insight! The cognitive capacity for insight is in its early stages in adolescence.

So what is this ‘outsight’? It is the capacity to make judgements about what is perceived. So adolescents can say, “Call this a catholic school? Make one mistake and you’re never forgiven.” “Church is full of hypocrites.”

And words can get in the way of spiritual development, too many words, too little time for quiet reflection. The spiritual development of our students should be at the heart of our school curriculum. I will focus on the spiritual development of young people rather than their faith development because my experience has taught me that to focus on spiritual development, on spirituality, is to *create contexts* where young people can have a more heightened awareness of the spiritual dimensions of life that in turn make possible a developing faith.

My basic premise is: first there is spirituality, the encounters with divine mystery made possible because we have an innate capacity for wonder and awe, and then there is faith – the personal encounter with the living God, in Jesus Christ, *lived out* within the community we call the Church within our time and world.

Noam Chomsky (*quoted in M.Grimmitt. Religious Education and human development (McCrimmon, 1987)*) recognised that ‘human beings are endowed from birth with linguistic competence allowing them to draw on a deep linguistic structure which is common to all human beings’. Surely it can be argued that human beings are also endowed with a similar spiritual competence which enables them to access and draw deeply upon that which is held in common. It *is* possible to develop young people’s awareness of the spiritual dimension of life, a dimension which shares the characteristics of other forms of learning – imagination, emotions, cognition, reason.

We all hope that what is offered in our schools is a balanced curriculum. Certain life skills which promote and enhance every student’s capacity for reflection, need to be built in,

consciously. It is only a capacity for reflection, critical reflection that will enable and enhance spirituality. And this assumes time and space and patience.

'... every mode of learning is a mode of waiting, of hope of expectancy. The pause is important in speech, the incubation period in creative work. The different modes of learning are grounded in the possibility of a different future.' (D.E.Huber, *Spirituality and Knowing*, quoted in *Mary Boys, Educating in Faith*, Sheed and Ward, 1987, p viii)

Whenever we have the opportunity to follow a class through a whole day we can be struck by the little opportunity there is for being quiet, still, or reflective. If there is space for quiet and reflection, often the young people do not know how to use it. It is not about leaving our students alone, 'to be quiet' but that they are actually taught *how to reflect*.

Spaces for silence and reflection need to be constructed, built into each day. If they already exist in your school day, and if they are used effectively, congratulations, 'blessed are you!' (In the Beatitudes, Blessed can be translated as congratulations!)

If there is one hope that I have for our schools it is this: That as (Catholic) educators, we gift/empower our students with a capacity for reflection upon their own life-experience within the worlds that we inhabit. How do we provide opportunities for this kind of reflection? There is a model within Ignatian spirituality – it is called the examen. It is simple to use and can be taught. It is a tool for discernment which can develop within an individual increased sensitivity to the movement of the Spirit within.

This model provides an effective framework within which young people can learn how to reflect, in a structured way, on their lives. In a culture that does not encourage thought or reflection on one's actions, to stop, make space and reflection of one's life is counter-cultural. The examen works like this:

- Take time to look at what has happened since you got up this morning.
- Look at the people you have met or thought about; the events that have happened.
- Identify where you encountered goodness, where you yourself were goodness for others.
- Give thanks for these.
- And now look at the same encounters/events and be aware of the people/events where your word, actions thoughts did not build up those persons or events.
- Give thanks, being aware of these for they are the gentle nudge of the presence and goodness of our God.
- And in the light of both of these 'moments' of discernment, how will you act for the rest of the day, with God's grace?

Your students come with an appreciation of the aesthetic dimension of life. Let us as educators cherish and develop their capacity through music, art, literature and dance and through structured reflection.

Let us accept the goodness in ourselves and in one another; let us accept the goodness in our students. Let us create learning communities where our students and all our co-workers experience that the mystery of the Good God is tangible in the support given and received.

In Jesus, God has experienced what it is to suffer, to be misunderstood, to be betrayed, rejected, unfalsely judged and condemned, to be deserted, and yet remain faithful to God's call. This Good God is a God of compassion, a God who is not apathetic, but has pathos, feeling the experience of humankind because of the Incarnation, God becoming enfleshed in

our humanity. The Hebrew word for compassion is *rachmanut* and for compassionate is *rachum*. The word for womb is *rechem*. Both words have the same three letter root in Hebrew, so this good and compassionate God is as close to us as were were to our mothers in the womb! Listen to the heartbeat of God, this Good and compassionate God .

Two Images

I offer two images for your reflection. The first is that of homecoming, coming home. As I look around the group I notice that many of us have probably had most of our lives already. This can be a sobering thought. We are on the home run, we in the midst of our own homecoming. And how should we be, how would we like to live out the rest of our lives, for :

... we cannot live the afternoon of life according to life's morning for what was great in the morning will be little at evening; the afternoon of life must also have a significance of its own and cannot be an appendage to life's morning. Whoever carries over into the afternoon the law of the morning must pay for it with damage to his soul ... (Stages of Life, C.Jung)

Before we look at developing spirituality in our students, we need to take some time to reflect on our own. As St. Paul says, 'when I was a child, I thought like a child,... but now I am adult, I have to put away childish things'. So, with the time we have left, what do we need to let go – what people, events, memories?

Letting go creates psychic space which can be filled with love, with the Spirit of God. There is a scene in the Mission, where Robert de Niro has killed his brother and decides on a life of penance. He accompanies a group up the mountains and rapids – he is hampered because he has weights tied around his waist. As he climbs up the mountain, he is continually dragged down, dragged back. Eventually one of the indians cuts him free from what he has chosen to hang on to. This is a parable of what *letting go* does for us. It sets us free from the habit of hanging on and refusing to let go. There are times when we need others to set us free. So, as we become aware that our time is limited, what gifts do we need for our homecoming.

The second image is taken from the Celtic tradition. It is called *grieshog*. This was the tradition of backing up the fire last thing at night in order to preserve the embers. This backing up of the fire is called *smoothing* and there are many *smoothing* prayers. The new fire of the next morning was kindled from the embers of the old fire. We have to do the same – decide what embers of our lives are worth preserving in order to rekindle the fires of our spirits:

*Lord preserve the fire as Christ preserves us all. May its warmth
Remain in our midst as Christ is always among us.
May the fire rise in the morning.*

Our call, at this stage in our spirituality is to become wise, growing in maturity and insight as we move towards the contemplation of God within us and at the heart of our world.

This is an edited excerpt of a talk delivered to teacher in Johannesburg and Pretoria on 23-24 April 2012.