

The following excerpt is from the Ontario Catholic Elementary Curriculum Policy Document for Religious Education, 2012 and is reprinted here with permission from the Institute for Catholic Education. The full text of the document is available on their website at www.iceont.ca.

1.5 ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES IN RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

The educating community of the Catholic school requires that those involved strive to be exemplary in character, confirming such authenticity through selfless dedication to the life and truth of the Christian faith that they teach. As Pope Paul VI stated “modern [persons] listens more willingly to witnesses than to teachers, and if they do listen to teachers, it is because they are witnesses”⁷. This also means that the Church must provide and ensure the necessary support and formation for those who have long been involved in the work of religious education (teachers and parents, educators, catechists, priests and bishops). This formation and pastoral care must be spiritual in nature so that one is only able to evangelize when they have been evangelized and allow themselves to be evangelized. This spiritual renewal is only possible through a personal encounter and lived communion with Jesus Christ.

Attention must also be given to the relationships which exist among those who make up the educating community of the Catholic school. Teachers have a place of privilege and a great responsibility to participate in this new evangelization. Parents have a primary and natural responsibility to become engaged and support their children through the school and the parish if the goals of education and the transmission of the faith are to be effectively achieved in light of our present culture and society.

PARENTS AND GUARDIANS

The General Directory for Catechesis reminds us that parents are the first educators of their children in the practice of the faith. They bear the greatest responsibility for the transmission of faith to their children for theirs is the responsibility of forming the child for the reception of the Good News of the Gospel. From the moment of their birth, children begin to develop the resources that will determine their participation in a life of faith. Through a loving relationship with their parents or guardians, children develop “a sense of trust, of freedom, of self-giving, of invocation and of joyful participation.” (GDC no. 180) All of these are important attributes necessary for a life-long journey in the development of their faith. Transmission of the faith in the family happens when children and parents experience together:

- a practice of regular participation in the Sacraments, especially the Sunday Mass;
- the ritual of daily prayer in the morning, at mealtime, and at bedtime;
- reflecting on the Sacred Scriptures and sharing ideas about the importance of a particular passage for their lives;
- the practice of *devotions* and seasonal rituals: praying the rosary, prayer before the advent wreaths or Christmas crèche;
- forgiving and being forgiven;
- freely offering service and love to each other;

⁷ Pope Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 41.

- reaching out to the greater community in acts of charity and justice to develop a sense of compassion and the common good.

Parents can encourage their children to better understand the Christian heritage - specifically the Catholic tradition, to develop their inner spiritual life and make a judicious choice of values and to make a commitment to build a more humane world. They can share their faith with their children and introduce them to the Sunday Eucharistic celebration, the sacraments and other community celebration of their faith.

Collaboration between parents and teachers can promote and deepen faith development in children. When parents are familiar with the proposed religious education program, they can better communicate with the teacher to provide useful information and ask pertinent questions about the progress and performance of their child. Their commitment to the preparation of their children for the sacraments, involvement in parish-school liturgies, attendance at parent meetings and participation in the school council is invaluable.

THE PARISH - CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY

The whole Christian community has a role to play in the passing on of the faith to children and youth for the parish is the primary location in which the Christian community is formed and expressed.⁸ The first catechetical task of the parish priest and leaders is the fostering of “a sense of common responsibility for catechesis in the Christian community - a task that involves all the faithful - and recognition and appreciation for catechists and their mission.”⁹

The Parish Priest

Catechesis prepares the Christian to live in community and to participate actively in the life and mission of the Church. The Second Vatican Council indicates the necessity for pastors “to form genuine Christian communities” and for catechumens “[to] learn to co-operate actively in building up the Church and its work of evangelization”. (GDC # 86)

The parish priest has a significant role to play in this partnership. The General Directory for Catechesis states that in filling his role as parish priest, he is to “integrate catechetical activity into his program of community evangelization and foster the link between catechesis, sacraments and liturgy.” (no. 225) The priest fulfills an important part of this role when he works to create a bond of cooperation and friendship with all members of the school community: principal, teachers, students, parents, and support staff by:

- supporting the principal of the school in her or his role as spiritual leader of the school;
- providing spiritual and religious support and guidance to enable staff and students to grow in their understanding and commitment to the faith;

⁸ General Directory for Catechesis, no. 257.

⁹ General Directory for Catechesis, no. 225.

- supporting teachers in their responsibility to educate children and youth in the faith by sharing resources, knowledge and expertise;
- participating in the religious education class to draw links between various themes in the religious education program and the Gospel (e.g. readings for the Sunday Mass) thus contributing within the school environment to the faith development of children and youth;
- providing opportunities for staff and students to participate in liturgical celebrations including the Mass and other forms of prayer and devotion as a community of believers;
- encouraging a collegial effort on the part of parish catechists and school teachers in the preparation of children for the reception of the sacraments of Eucharist, Reconciliation and Confirmation;
- creating opportunities for continued evangelization of parents and teachers that will support them in their role as religious educators and witnesses to the faith.

Lay Pastoral Minister (Catechists)

In many parishes throughout Ontario, the parish priest is challenged by limitations of time and availability of staff to fulfill all of his responsibilities in meeting the sacramental, catechetical and liturgical needs of his parish community. Yet there is a great need for parish-based catechesis for children and youth ministry for pre-teens in order to bring religious education to life. Trained lay pastoral ministers can assist the priest by serving as a link between the school and the parish; by providing catechesis for children, youth and adults, and by working in cooperation with schools to prepare students for the reception of the sacraments of initiation. In schools where there is no chaplain, lay pastoral ministers could be invited to lead school retreats, participate in discussion during religion class, help create and celebrate liturgies, and represent the parish at school council meetings.

Parish Leaders and Laity

It is important that all members of the parish community become aware of, understand and appreciate the effort of the Catholic school to offer religious education programs to children and youth in the community. This same community is invited to pray for those who teach the children and youth of our community. They are encouraged to participate in parish councils, information meetings, and liturgical gatherings.

In addition, there exists in every Christian community men and women whose talents can contribute to the faith development of children and youth. Whether through testimony, presentation or simple support, these community members, through their volunteerism, can provide many learning experiences that enrich the religious education programs in schools. To foster this partnership, it is important to ensure good communication between the school and the parish pastoral council.¹⁰

¹⁰ Translated from: Le curriculum de l'Ontario de la maternelle à la 8e année: Enseignement religieux pour les écoles catholiques de langue française.

SCHOOL - PRINCIPAL & TEACHERS

Catholic schools are an extension of the pastoral and evangelizing mission of the Church and a most important place for human and Christian formation. This close association between school and parish at the service of parents provides students with the support they need to grow into active members of their faith. Working in partnership, they offer a living and genuine witness of the faith while providing the educational and spiritual needs of the students. Parish and school work co-operatively to prepare students to participate in the sacramental life of the Church.

Those in leadership positions within the Catholic system are responsible for providing a community of learning and faith development in our Catholic schools. It is their particular task to establish conditions that promote student success while ensuring religious education programs that not only promote religious knowledge and skills but also have the potential to deepen a student's relationship with God and their life of Christian faith.

The Principal

The principal is responsible for ensuring that the religious education program is taught each year and that there is consistency between the teachings of the religious education program and the actual day-to-day life of the school. The principal has it within his or her power to set the tone of life within a school and to ensure its distinctly Christian ethos both in the experiences our children have and the quality of the religious education they receive. Principals, with the support of school board personnel, can fulfill part of their role as spiritual leaders of the school by:

- providing opportunities for ongoing teacher training and all the resources required for planning religious education programs;
- allocating the time required for teaching the religion program;
- ensuring the integration of Catholic teaching across the curriculum;
- providing chaplaincy leadership, particularly in the implementation of some school-based pastoral activities. (Although chaplains are not usually assigned to elementary schools, board chaplains and religious education consultants/coordinators could fulfill this need.);
- supporting teachers who find themselves in delicate or difficult situations;
- promoting and maintaining a good communication network with various stakeholders, especially parents, the parish priest and parish leaders (particularly those responsible for parish-based catechism programs);
- helping to coordinate parish and school responsibilities for the preparation of students for the reception of First Reconciliation, First Communion and Confirmation;
- providing the opportunity for parish-school relationships by sharing effective practices and new religious education resources;
- inviting parents to deepen their involvement with the parish community and its social and ecclesial activities.

Teachers

The primary role for teachers with regard to religious education is the transmission of knowledge about the faith. The secondary role is to support the catechetical efforts of the parish and the home. This is a participation in the work of the Church in which they become ministers of the Word and teach on behalf of the Christian community. They are called to be transmitters of the faith as they help prepare young people to be “clothed in Christ” and to become “salt for the earth and light for the world”. Teachers teach not only the content of faith to pupils but by the witness of their lives, they help students discover what it means to live their faith. They never forget that students are also their brothers and sisters in faith; they accompany them in prayer and support them in their faith journey. While respecting each student, teachers engage in a dialogue on the meaning of life and the way to happiness revealed by Jesus Christ. In the same spirit, they present the Gospel values which they themselves witness to. They provide opportunities for students to relate their knowledge and skills to everyday life, they encourage them to take a critical look at the world around them and to make a commitment to witness with their lives to the kingdom of God, a kingdom of justice, peace and joy. Teachers transmit the faith to students when they:

- teach not only the content of faith but relate it to the students’ lives;
- speak with integrity on behalf of the faith community while being faithful to Church teaching and the message of the Gospel;
- support and mentor young people in their faith as they strive to understand the value of Christianity and seek to integrate it into their daily lives;
- assist in their Christian moral formation (of conscience);
- witness to the Gospel message in their relationship with each student, participate in the sacramental life of the Church, especially Sunday Eucharist, and the ministries of the Church (e.g. lector, choir member, St. Vincent de Paul Society).

Religious Education is therefore more than teaching life skills or sharing information. It is participation in the essential mission of the Church to proclaim the Good News and to empower young people to live out their baptismal commitment in a mature way.

The Student

Students are sometimes considered to be passive agents in their personal development. All is prepared for him or her. The student has only to follow the approach proposed by the responsible adult. However, the student is the main protagonist / agent in the catechetical process. The Word resounds within our hearts and it is here that Jesus comes to meet with us and where we make a home for Him. Our intelligence is enlightened by the Spirit so that the Word can speak to our heart. The student is not a blank slate onto which they write their own path. In Baptism they were clothed in Christ and opened through God’s grace to receive the gift of the Spirit. Each person is blessed to receive these gifts in their own thirst for happiness, their own questions, and their own life experience.

Gradually children mature; they become increasingly responsible for their own learning, for their own journey of faith. “Students who are willing to make the effort required, and who are able to monitor their thinking and learning strategies and to apply themselves, will soon discover that there is a direct relationship between this effort and their achievement, and will therefore be more motivated to work. Students who develop mental attitudes and ways of behaving that contribute to success in life will benefit as learners.”¹¹ There are other students who, because of extenuating circumstances, find it more difficult to take responsibility for their learning. They must be able to count on the attention, patience and encouragement of their parents and their teachers. However, teaching each student to feel responsible for their learning and to be the architect of its success is an important school task. In particular, religious education helps students develop attitudes toward freedom and responsibility, a desire for the truth and goodness, an openness to dialogue which involves faith and reason in the search for meaning, purpose and understanding in life.

The Ontario Ministry of Education, when describing the nature of self-directed learners, points out in its policy documents that successful mastery of a particular discipline “requires a sincere commitment to work and the development of skills of cooperation. Furthermore, students should actively pursue opportunities outside the classroom to extend and enrich their understanding of [any discipline].”¹² Teachers rely heavily on the efforts of parents to form positive character in their children and to provide opportunities for enrichment of the religious experiences provided in the school. Here too the parish can play a significant role by encouraging active participation of children and youth in the life of the parish.

¹¹ Science and Technology: the Ontario Curriculum Grades 1-8, page 7.

¹² Ibid.