



**FOURTH NATIONAL SYMPOSIUM: RELIGIOUS
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OFFICIAL OPENING

by

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I am honoured to be here representing the Vice-Chancellor, Professor Peter Sheehan AO, who regrets he could not be present this evening and wishes you well in your deliberations over the forthcoming days. It is pleasing that so many people, with an interest in and commitment to religious education, have joined us in Canberra for this symposium.

With philosophy and theology, religious education is a core discipline of Australian Catholic University (and Catholic universities more generally). I am delighted to have this occasion to address the importance of religious education prior to opening your conference and announcing the 2005 winner of the Award for Excellence in Doctoral Research in Religious Education.

In his 2001 Apostolic Letter, *Novo Millennio Ineunte* (NMI) – *At the Beginning of the New Millennium*, Pope John Paul II invites the church to find fresh enthusiasm in the fundamental task of making the Good News of salvation known to the people of our time and to the cultures of the world. In this letter, there are important theological principles that the Pope invites the church to discern, to interpret and then to apply. Three of these principles are the following:

1. In every age the Church's task is to promote 'the universal call to holiness' (NMI, # 30).
2. It is 'in the actual situation of each local church that the mystery of the one People of God takes the particular form that fits it to each individual context and culture' (NMI, # 3).

3. The plan for salvation is 'found in the Gospel and in the living Tradition' of the church 'but it must be translated into *pastoral initiatives adapted to the circumstances of each community*' (NMI, # 29).

Further, in his 1999 Apostolic Exhortation to the Church in Oceania, *Ecclesia in Oceania* (EO), the Pope provided a number of insights to enable the church in our region of the world to carry out its mission with confidence:

1. We need 'a greater awareness of the power of the media, which offer an excellent opportunity for the Church' to carry out its mission. 'The media's impact on people's lives illustrates how strongly a new social reality demands fresh ways of presenting the faith' (EO, # 21) (Catholic Archdiocese of Melbourne [CAM], 2004).
2. 'It is essential that Church leaders study the culture and language of youth, welcome them and incorporate the positive aspects of their culture into the Church's life and mission' (EO, # 44).
3. The Bishops felt that 'the Church in Oceania as a whole is at the crossroads' and that the time had come 'for a re-presentation of the Gospel' (EO, # 18).

Beginning with the Second Vatican Council's Declaration *Gravissimum Educationis* – *Declaration on Christian Education* (Pope Paul VI, 28 October 1965) over the succeeding 40 years the church has published a series of key documents

relating to Catholic schools and to religious education within those schools. These include:

- The Sacred Congregation for Catholic Education document on *The Catholic School* (19 March 1977);
- The Apostolic Exhortation of Pope John Paul II *On Catechesis in our Times – Catechesi Tradendae* (CT) (16 October 1979);
- The Sacred Congregation for Catholic Education document on *Lay Catholics in Schools: Witnesses to the Faith* (15 October 1982);
- This Congregation's document on *The Religious Dimension of Education in a Catholic School* (7 April 1988);
- Its document on *The Catholic School on the Threshold of the Third Millennium* (28 December 1997) and
- Its document on *Consecrated Persons and Their Mission in Schools* (28 October 2002). (*Church Documents*, 2004)

A theme in these documents is that 'the special character of the Catholic school' and the underlying reason for its existence 'is precisely the quality of the religious education integrated into the education' of its students (CT, # 69).

When taken together these principles and insights offer a powerful message for religious educators helping students face the challenges presented by materialism, illicit drugs, international terrorism, genetic research, the cultural shifts caused by the spread of mobile telephone technology and the rapid movement of electronic information following the internet revolution, the domination by the media of the form, flow and exchange of information, the pandemic of the HIV/AIDS, the growing gap between rich and poor nations, and what some have called in the West a cultural restlessness characterised by high rates of marriage failure, youth suicide, depression and destructive behaviour.

In the face of these challenges how are religious educators implementing the principles and insights set out in separate papal letters? I will give just two local examples – there is a wealth of others from your own work, which I could also have utilised.

In the Archdiocese of Melbourne a Committee for Mission (2002-2004) was established by Archbishop Denis Hart to examine how best to coordinate efforts to lead people to encounter the Gospel in parishes, amongst families, amongst young people, amongst school parents, amongst the poor and the marginalised. The Committee has reported to the Archbishop who is now acting upon

the Report. In its Report the Committee noted that the fundamental point of contact with the church is through the local parish and the network of Catholic primary and secondary schools, which have been 'the backbone upon which the Church ... has grown and developed'. (CAM, 2004) In its consultations the Committee invited a group of Catholic primary and secondary school principals from across the archdiocese to reflect upon issues related to the church's mission. These principals reflected that helping people to encounter the Gospel works well when:

- Schools and parishes function collaboratively;
- Sacramental preparation is used to develop faith formation of parents;
- Leadership Teams, School Boards and so forth are committed to ongoing formation;
- Schools show a genuine commitment to social justice;
- School communities attempt to expose students to the broad Catholic tradition;
- Teachers and RECs (religious education coordinators) are committed to ongoing formation in prayer, liturgy and scripture (CAM, 2004) – Pope John Paul II has noted specifically that 'despite widespread secularisation, there is a widespread demand for spirituality', including by many young people, expressing 'itself in large part as a renewed need for prayer'. (NMI, # 33)

But these same principals spoke of the following challenges:

- "Schools are taking on more welfare issues in the education of students", (CAM, 2004) an insight borne out across the Catholic school system by research undertaken in 2004 for the Catholic Education Commission of Victoria by the University of Melbourne. (Cahill, Wyn & Smith, 2004);
- Schools, rather than the parish, 'are increasingly becoming the pastoral point of contact with families'. For many families, schools are the "face" of the church but this raises a key question of engaging those families for whom the main focus is education versus drawing them into a faith community in a partnership in faith development;
- "Schools are becoming temporary 'church' communities in people's lives" (CAM, 2004).

My second example is from South Australia, where the South Australian Curriculum, Standards and

Accountability Framework for Religious Education in Catholic Schools has identified five Essential Learnings as crucial for all learners in each curriculum band from the early years of primary school to the senior years of high school. These learnings (namely identity, thinking, interdependence, futures and communication) are “the understandings, dispositions and capabilities which are developed throughout a person’s education and beyond”, and are threads running through the Religious Education Framework. Particular reflections are encouraged for religious educators in Catholic schools as they “reflect on the theological dimensions of the Essential Learnings” (Catholic Education South Australia [CESA]):

- **Identity:** “humanity is fundamentally graced – made in the image of God ... there is the experience of grace, there is also the experience of sin, and one’s growth into human wholeness is a life-long project ... one’s ultimate identity is found in the context of relationships and in the experience of giving oneself to others” that is a call to self-transcendence;
- **Thinking:** here the theme is “the connections between wisdom, discernment and prayer [and] a sense of personal agency”;
- **Interdependence:** “God is discovered in the midst of community” – a sense of stewardship for creation, and the call to justice in reaching out “to those on the edges and most in need” are highlighted;
- **Futures:** reflections are encouraged on “life as a vocational response to a call [and] the eschatological themes of ultimate hope, meaning and purpose”;
- **Communication:** “the word of God is subtle and does not return empty-handed ... a faith that does justice will not rest until all members of the community have access to the literacies that enable participation and access to social goods” (CESA).

This work of religious educators in schools is fundamentally important for our nation. Data released by the Australian Bureau of Statistics on 24 February 2005 show that last year in Australia 18.98 percent of all primary school students attended a Catholic primary school, and 21.39 percent of all secondary school students attended a Catholic secondary school. Taken together, in 2004 some 666,125 Australian children attended a Catholic school, where their teachers would have assisted them according to the students’ level of sophistication to encounter the Gospel (ABS, 2004). The work of providing the ongoing

religious education of these children’s teachers, and the research on which such continuing education will be based, falls largely to the participants of this National Symposium and to your colleagues – I thank you for what you are doing. Let me conclude with Pope John Paul II’s insight into the crucial nature of this academic work:

... all the basic academic activities of a Catholic University are connected with and in harmony with the evangelizing mission of the Church: research carried out in the light of the Christian message which puts new human discoveries at the service of individuals and society; education offered in a faith-context that forms men and women capable of rational and critical judgment and conscious of the transcendent dignity of the human person; professional training that incorporates ethical values and a sense of service to individuals and to society; the dialogue with culture that makes faith better understood, and the theological research that translates the faith into contemporary language (*Ex Corde Ecclesiae*, # 49).

It gives me great pleasure to declare the Fourth National Symposium for Religious Education and Ministry open.

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