

## **INTERNATIONAL PERSPECTIVES ON CATHOLIC RELIGIOUS EDUCATION**

Dr Gerard Rummery fsc has made a significant and lasting contribution not only to Australian Catholic religious education but at an international level. This article celebrates that achievement; drawn from an interview with Br Gerard in May 2005, it includes reflections on his many years of involvement in religious education and church ministry, together with details of his professional involvements.

### **Professional Profile**

Brother Gerard Rummery, De La Salle Brother, studied for his undergraduate and educational degrees at the university of Melbourne. He taught primary and secondary classes in Melbourne before being involved in teacher-education programs with younger members of his own congregation as well as with those of the Christian, Marist and Patrician Brothers. After MEd studies at Sydney University, he studied in Europe, completing a Master's degree in Moral Education with Richard S. Peters and Paul Hirst at the London Institute of Education (1969-1970) before beginning doctoral studies with the late Ninian Smart at Lancaster University. During his studies of the post-war European catechetical movement he lived in France, Belgium and Germany, completing his doctorate on the topic *The Concept of Catechesis and the Concept of Religious Education in a Pluralist Society*. The book, based on this thesis, *Catechesis and Religious Education in a Pluralist Society*, was published in Australia and in USA in 1975.

Because of his experience as editor of the Australian catechetical journal *Our Apostolate*, he was an official delegate of his Congregation to the 1971 International Catechetical Congress in Rome in 1971. His participation at this Congress led him subsequently to found the journal *Word in Life* as a successor to *Our Apostolate*. Prior to his return to Australia in late 1973, he was a staff member at the International Lasallian Centre, a religious renewal program, in Rome. After being recalled to the International Lasallian Centre Rome in late 1977, he continued to serve for one half of the year as a staff member of Polding College and Catholic College of Education until 1982 when he was nominated as the full-time Director of the international centre in Rome. Competent in French, Spanish, Italian and German, he was elected to serve on the General Council of his congregation for 14 years until June 2000. In this

capacity, he was involved in the development of many educational programs aimed at passing on the Lasallian educational heritage to lay people. Since 1987 he has written many such programs and has been a regular presenter of Lasallian programs in different countries in Europe, USA, Asia and Australia. He is the principal author and editor of *The Mission of Human and Christian Education: A Shared Mission*, the official international text of the De La Salle Brothers used in their formation programs. He published numerous articles and editorials in *Our Apostolate* and *Word in Life*.

In 1993 he was named to the international working group that was to prepare the October 1994 *Synod on Consecrated Life* and subsequently was named by Pope John Paul II as a participant in the synod as a *peritus*. He has been involved internationally in the presentation of the synod document *Vita consecrata*.

Through his writings and seminars, Brother Gerard brought many aspects of the international Moral Education movement of the 1970s to Australian audiences. The experience of working with Ninian Smart gave him the opportunity to follow seminars given by international experts on World Religions. He continues to see the development of interreligious dialogue as one of the priorities of this millennium, especially for all those engaged in education through Catholic institutions.

As a member of some international standing committees of the De La Salle Brothers, he continues his keen interest in catechesis and religious education through the international contacts he maintains in his regular visits to Europe and USA.

**Q: Will you comment on what you consider have been significant formative experiences for you?**

Living two lengthy periods in France (1970-1971) after the student riots of 1968 confronted me with a very different church and society. Researching the development of the post world war II catechetical movement in France, Belgium, Holland and Germany, I experienced the liturgical exuberance of Saint-Severin and took part in a catechumenal group at Saint-Odile. Some participated from a strong stance of faith, while others were seeking a meaning in life. I came to realise that it was only a

matter of time before this rapid secularisation would affect Australia.

Being free to attend graduate seminars in Lancaster University on Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam and Judaism led me to reflect deeply on other religions. I experienced prayer in these different traditions as well as in Quaker and Anglican forms. I think I came to realise how impossible it was to confine the mystery of God in any one religion, even though I have always believed in the uniqueness of Jesus as the Revelation of God, the One Redeemer, and the importance of this proclamation through the church.

Learning other languages was an important and necessary discipline. I have gradually come to realise how each language helped me to think differently and to appreciate that the inculturation of the Gospel was an urgent necessity. Being able to read the different emphases in France, Spain, Italy, German and England helped me greatly to appreciate the *core* elements of catechetical programs as well as the centrality of culture in the formulation of such programs.

The importance of Lancaster university on the development of 'Religious Education' (sic) in the Great Britain of the late 1960s enabled me to obtain entry into many different projects in England, especially the Moral Education movement being run by John Wilson in Oxford.

The suggestion towards the end of Vatican II about a universal catechism was strongly opposed by the giants of the French catechetical movement. Their suggestion, to respect cultural differences, was a *directory* by which they meant guidelines rather than prescriptions. The opposition to the first *General Catechetical Directory* at the International Congress in Rome in 1971 was precisely because it was so prescriptive.

My experiences of frequent visits to Czech, Slovakia, Hungary, Romania and Poland while the Iron Curtain was still in place made me see how each of these Communist countries began by destroying the Catholic schools and ensuring that Sisters and Brothers were neither to be allowed to live in communities nor to teach! It was a wonderful backhanded tribute to the important influence of such schools!

When I look back over the development of my own thesis, I continue to see the important distinction between the concepts of catechesis and religious education as fundamental to both true catechesis and good RE.

**Q: Of the various articles and books you have read over the years, what has been one that you**

**think has great significance for religious education today?**

**A:** Jacques Audinet and *The Church Building the Church in a Given Culture*: Pope John Paul II's use of the term "*The New Areopagus*" in *Missio Redemptoris*.

There is an enduring importance of Jacques Audinet's teaching and writing, especially his understanding of catechesis. A most significant publication is his *Catechesis: The Church Building the Church within a Given Culture*. He was Professor at the ISPC – Institut Supérieur Pastoral Catéchétique – and he delivered this address at the plenary assembly of the French bishops in Lourdes in 1975. It was published in *Our Apostolate* in August 1976, and I have recently re-translated it with more attention to footnotes and so forth. The article was seminal and figured prominently at the beginning of the *INC*ulturation and *ACC*ulturation debate of the 1977 Synod on *Catechetics in our Time*.

This idea of church building itself up within a given culture is a very interesting one; the determining factor is then about the kind of church you are going to get; it will function in relationship with the culture. But what happens in a postmodern or a post-Christian kind of society? Well, the church has to become *missionary* in a very important sense and I think this is one of the most important intuitions that came out in Pope John Paul II's document *Missio Redemptoris*, the *Mission of the Redeemer*, about 1992. As with many papal documents, somebody drafted it and then the Pope added his own contribution. This document was originally written by Marcello Zaga, the Superior-General of the Oblates of Mary Immaculate who had spent thirty years in Thailand and in Asia with other Christian denominations. What is so prominent in the document is the idea of the *Areopagus*. In other words, the *new Areopagus*. In the Acts of the Apostles story, Paul goes to the *Areopagus*; he does not talk to them the way he talked to other people; and the marvellous story shows him saying at the beginning "I see you are most religious of people because I see you have a statue here to the unknown God. Well, this is the one I'm talking to you about." And they listened to him until he mentioned the resurrection of the dead; and they laughed and said, "Well, we'll listen to you some other time."

Now, the Pope talked about the new *Areopagus*. There are three kinds of situations:

- The old Christian countries where the faith seems to have gone: they need a *new hearing* of the Gospel; I say this rather than using the word evangelisation which has many complexities to its connotation. What is

needed is a new hearing of the Gospel, a new encounter with the Gospel.

- Secondly, the Pope talked about today's particular kind of missionary situation – the mission *ad gentes* to people who have not heard the Gospel message.
- And thirdly, the pluralist world in which we live where there are other religions; in which there is the search for this unknown God, as it were, still going on.

It seems to me that that is a most prophetic message. And it comes back to what Audinet was saying in the 1970s. Yes, his intuition was correct that as the culture changes, then the kind of church you are going to get will have to be changed as well; and you will not always recognise it in terms of past models. While this is a key issue, we are not always terribly good at recognising it: we tend to think of an unchanging God and therefore of an unchanging church. So we feel that nothing must change, when in reality the whole adventure of life, the whole realisation of living in God's creation and meeting all people and manifestations of God in people and events – the whole of revelation – is obviously going to force us to change. And this was Cardinal Newman's point, "To live long is to change often".

Even when I started to read into the French literature in late 1969-1970 and live in France, I encountered a Catholic church that was at that stage of change. I thought it was incredibly vibrant but incredibly different from the church that I had known in Australia, because the culture was different and because so much of the new catechetical movement had come out of the experience of priests and bishops and others in prison camps during World War II. In that context, they were no longer like authorities in the official church, with vestments, rituals and authority, but as human beings justifying their existence to one another and so on. These new experiences led some to see the importance of Jungmann's thesis of 1936 – the Good News and its proclamation – translated into French in the prison camp and therefore offering a new challenge just at the moment when there was a veritable revolution in the interpretation of scripture following Pope Pius XII's encyclical of 1943.

#### **A New Dimension to the 'Hermeneutic Circle'**

So a new view of interpretation in all the Christian churches seems to me an important development. This was evident in the recent congress in Leuven in Belgium in 2004. There is a change from what was regarded as the traditional 'hermeneutic circle'. Traditionally there were the documents of

the tradition, and the official interpreter – the church. But when you read the text in terms 'of life' and interpret it personally, this tends to make the classic hermeneutic circle seem very controlled. We still have interpreters, official teachings of the church, scripture and scholarship, so that we have made great progress in understanding the bible so much better. But then there is *life* as the interpreter, and this is where I see that the notion of the Areopagus becomes very relevant for us today. You can have the text, you can have the interpreter, but what is the actual experience of life of these people? I remember a French colleague telling me some years back about his work on the Gospel of Matthew with a volunteer group in one of our schools. These kids were reading Matthew's Gospel and one said: "This Jesus is marvellous, isn't he! I really like this. But that bit at the end about rising from the dead, you don't believe that, do you? It is like the story of Philip and the eunuch: 'How can I know unless some man show me?'" So I think what has happened, is that the whole hermeneutic circle has changed radically. Consider what happened to us here in Australia in the sixties and seventies, when we started to use Rosemary Crumlin's *Come Alive*. There was an outcry. For example: It would take something out of a modern play and that became a vehicle for looking spiritual and religious questions. This all shows how the hermeneutic circle has changed so radically – especially as regards who is doing the interpreting.

Is interpretation just a matter of experience? No, probably the key word in all of this is the dialogue between experience, life, and the person who can help; it is between the kind of intellectual thing you can do now – with the internet and things like that – and going back to understand the text better. But to expect that the individual who has heard this text explained then goes off and accepts it completely and lives it, that is a wholly different kind of expectation.

What we did relatively unconsciously in the intermediate period of the sixties and seventies was listening to the experience of the kids. I don't think this was always well understood then or even now!. People who were not in class never understood how important it was for the kids to be able to express themselves. Yes, the danger on one hand was relativism. But the danger on the other hand was that the text might never connect with the lives of the students. I think we have refined this in an interesting way since then. I have been out of teaching in schools for years now, but what has fascinated me about the way schools operate now – at least good schools, in Europe and England, and the United States in particular, but also some schools I am aware of in Australia – is the whole

way in which at some stage of a secondary school, Catholic education in all these places have some *hands-on activity* for the students. For example, American Catholic high schools for many years (especially the De La Salle schools) in an eight-semester program for the four years of high school have a complete semester where students are engaged in service activities for about five months. For example, students would be signed into something like Meals on Wheels; it might be the soup kitchen once a week; it might be visiting people living in 'shut-ins' and reading to them. This was usually done in the sixth or seventh semester so when the student is getting up towards 15 or 16.

What they soon discovered about this service – and there is supporting research – was that debriefing the students after their first experience was very important. I remember one article reporting on students who worked in a kind of a soup kitchen where the majority of people were either African-Americans or Hispanic – Mexicans who had come over the border.

Initially, students showed the stereotypes they had of the homeless: "You would expect to find those groups here! That's what they're like." As the debriefing proceeded they worked through questions like: What did you expect? What surprised you? Were they grateful? At one visit, when the students who had served the food sat down to eat themselves, the men at their table got up and walked away; the students were indignant: "We'd put in our time, you know. And they weren't even grateful." The debriefing teacher asked: "Why did they do that?" Silence. Then one response: "I suppose, when we were all there shampooed, in our latest designer jeans and loafers, they must have thought we came from Mars or somewhere. They knew we weren't the same race as them." When the discussion concluded, the teacher asked: Well, what about next week; do we go back?" The common response: "Yeah, we've got to go back!"

A few days later, when the group was reflecting on their study of the judgement section in Matthew 25, one of the students noted: "You know, it doesn't say anything here, about being thanked while on earth for the good things you do. Just do 'em; You've got to do 'em; don't expect to be thanked for it."

This shows how the interpreter now is not simply the teacher. It is not the authority, it is the enabling dialogical activity of talking and listening, and taking one another seriously and helping people to come to an understanding of the text. It is almost like the classic theological principle from centuries

back, *Secundum modum recipientis* – according to their ability to understand, and therefore interpretation is in one sense open-ended.

And so that faith is not just faith coming by hearing. It is going to come by doing something. This kind of act of involvement of young people certainly was not there when I was at school and certainly – except for groups like YCS and St Vincent de Paul. It seems to me that what Audinet argues in his article too is that the person who is trying to catechise others is always at the cutting edge. He/she is the mediator between generations – the one who comes out of a particular culture but sees these kids are not part of that culture; they are not just a generation away – in some ways they are light years away. Therefore the teacher has to be not just a proposer but also an incredibly good listener.

This reminds me of the importance of Pope Paul VI's first document, *Ecclesiam Suam*, written between the first and second stages of the Second Vatican Council. It has about 120 paragraphs and some 60 of them are about dialogue – that dialogue means speaking and listening and because you have listened you can then speak again; but you are not a parrot, with unchanging words to speak. Of course it changes because the message has to be received and talked about. That is really what catechists deliberately, almost instinctively, came to do in the late sixties and seventies. The new style community retreats, the community service and the sort of classroom religious education proposed in the book *Missionaries to a Teenage Culture* were very important. The catechist/educator was 'sent' to offer something to a culture in which they were necessarily 'outsides'. They had something to share; they were the classic interpreter in the hermeneutic circle, but the young people themselves also need to interpret. And the interpretation will now involve all in dialogue. You can help them to understand something that you understand and value and perhaps this may lead some of them to some kind of commitment, but this is always open-ended. It is now no longer as it once would have been in the strictly Protestant German tradition or in the Catholic tradition with a kind of hermeneutic circle that was closed. The dialogue has now always to be open and the interpretation is always through the mediation of conversation, of dialogue.

There is a wonderful expression in the Russian Orthodox church which says "The one who shares the Gospel with another is like one poor beggar telling other poor beggars where good food is to be had." This is a wonderful example because there is a kind of humility to that. You do not come in simply relying on authority but with this wonderful

gift that you are prepared to offer and tell other people about. I do not like the expression "new evangelisation"; to me it is about new ways of sharing the gospel with others.

When I think about the articles I have read that have influenced me over the years, I think of the French literature, the *Lumen Vitae* material and getting some insight into where the Germans were at the same time – everybody was going through the transition. There was a loss of the old certainties. It was the loss of the dogmatism that once might have prevailed; and it was also in some ways the breaking of the hearts of those closed kind of Christian communities, whether they were Catholic Christian or Lutheran or Methodist and so forth.

The other thing that was important to me in my own doctoral thesis was this whole coming to understand the phenomenon called pluralism; I saw something of this by going to other cultures in Europe in the period between 1969 and 1972. But that was but a glimpse of what I see pluralism has now become.

The question of religious pluralism is even more striking in the case of somebody like the Jesuit Jacques Dupuis whose book *Towards a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism* attracted the attention of the Holy Office. Because of his 30+ years in Nepal and the north of India and because of his dialogue with the Brahmans, his understanding of Hinduism and Buddhism, Dupuis had new perspectives to offer an interreligious dialogue. The great world religions have always been in some way tied into a culture. The big question in this pluralist world is where are the great world religions standing now? They were always in some way tied into a culture. So if you are Indian you tend to be Hindu; or if in Egypt, a Muslim – even though there are different varieties. Nowadays, whether we like it or not, the dialogue with the other great religions is something that is ongoing. While we have had Buddhism in the West now for a long time, it is a very self-selective sort of Buddhism. But we now are beginning to realise that all the great religions in some way are addressing fundamental questions about who and what we are as human beings; and I think what Dupuis and other people have pointed us to is that no one system can ever completely explain the mystery of God. In other words, that if we approach our study of other religions with respect it is through a dialogue. Indeed we need to be strong in our understanding of what we believe and what we do, but it is in that very dialogue of sharing what we believe and do, and in listening to what others believe and do, that we can come to at least some kind of tolerance that leads to respect. And

out of that respect you can have, as it were, humanity in a common search for understanding which is above all respectful and heading in some way towards understanding not with the self-sufficiency as if we had all the truth, but rather with the idea that God is so far beyond our understanding and so far beyond what any one system can encompass. So then to fidelity, complete fidelity to the church and the church's teaching, but always open to this deeper understanding and to what that will involve.

**Q: Where do you see the document *Evangelii Nuntiandi* with respect to this interest in culture and pluralism?**

Recently I reread *Evangelii Nuntiandi* of 1976 and it confirmed my view that in some ways that must be one of the truly great church documents of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

I reread it deliberately having just read the document *Ecclesia in Europa*, which followed the Synod on Europe. All I can say is read one and then the other, firstly to appreciate the incredible difference between the two. The optimism and joy in the duty of sharing the Gospel with others that comes through in *Evangelii Nuntiandi* and the cautious, almost at times rebuking, attitude and pessimistic overtones that I seem to find in *Ecclesia in Europa*.

If you are too concerned about the loss of certainty, you might be upset because the Constitution of Europe is not including the particular Christian things that the church wanted; a pessimistic view could feel that the Christian birthright was being lost. Whereas the thrust of *Evangelii Nuntiandi* would suggest that is precisely **why** you have to get out there and share the Gospel in a spirit of dialogue. It may be too strong to say that there has been some 'loss of nerve' as far as the church's role in culture is concerned, by contrast with the optimism in *Evangelii Nuntiandi*.

**The Orientation of Key Catholic Educators in Europe**

However, this mood change may be more an ecclesiastical and episcopal thing. The concerns of key religious educators like Flavio Pajer and others about religion and pluralism is far from being negative.

What is most interesting about this question is that my own work, and the follow up work of Rossiter, in distinguishing catechesis and religious education would strengthen the Catholic viewpoint on catechesis as well as on religious education; a catechetical approach was never just "drumming ideas into people's heads" and that sort of thing. What I see happening in Europe now is a

concentration on improving **religious education** in the broadest sense. It is almost at an epistemological level of saying, "Look, it's not enough to talk about why people built cathedrals and why you have stained glass windows, and why you have religious art. In other words, it can't be simply about all these manifestations of the religious imagination, religious truths and so on. It has to be about something much more fundamental. It has to be about why these things happen." While for reasons of objectivity, you have to start by not presuming that students are necessarily religious believers of any kind whatsoever, you will never get inside the topic until you understand what the distinguishing beliefs between religious groups were and why. For example why there were Lutherans, why there were Anglicans, why there were Calvinists and so forth. It is almost as though having solved the legal question of saying, "Yes, we want religious education in schools, otherwise we are denying an important part of our culture" they can move on to the important questions of religious education – for example, looking at the influence of religion in the building of Europe. They are now getting beyond the *what* and the *how* and the things you see to the *why*. In other words, it has to do with the integrity of the subject in its own right, the forms-of-thought and experience approach that says, "This is distinctive". Religion has these sorts of basic philosophical things about it. It is a distinct form of thought and experience and good religious education has always been about this.

I find some interesting developments along this line in the European catechetical literature. For example, in Spain there is religious education in Catholic schools as an integral part of the curriculum, but there is a conscience clause. People can ask that the child not have to undergo a confessional religious education from a Catholic viewpoint; but the school then has to provide another kind of moral teaching. This issue is evident in the big cities, particularly Madrid. Schools in a poor area of Madrid have many immigrants from North Africa, usually Muslim. They are not good in language, often because the parents have never really grasped the language. Previously such people came to the church school and were subject to the same religious program provided for all; but now under law they must provide the alternative.

So this is a logical thing to do because of the separation of church and state in most western European societies. Once the religious education was exclusively catechetical in orientation. But now a great deal of religious education is concerned with deepening that sense of what it means to be *educated in a religious way*, not

necessarily with the assumption that students are committed to what is being proposed. This is an interesting, radical change from the kind of cultural Christianity – a change that was beginning to come into French *lycees* at the time that I was living in France, say, in the early seventies.

### Catholic Schooling

These questions get down towards some of the 'bread and butter' issues such as "Is there a need for Catholic schools?" My feeling is a resounding "yes" and yet people keep telling us that Catholic schools do not necessarily lead young people to practising their religion as adults. I think that way of talking about Catholic schooling is to misunderstand its nature and purpose. It is kind of functionalism; it almost puts you back into the Catholic ghetto sort of mentality – you go to a Catholic school, bring them up Catholics and they remain Catholics. This was the position we tended to subscribe to in this country for a long time, but we have too many books and articles and stories of memories of a Catholic childhood to think that that was a wonderfully successful thing anyhow. It is like making quantitative 'cultural performance' the measure of success of education, rather than something more qualitative, and more about the individuals.

My experience of working in Catholic schools now in Australia, New Zealand and occasionally in some places in Europe and the United States bears out my conviction. I think they are very successful educational institutions at different levels. They do offer a valuable framework. They are broadly well disciplined and I think that this is a helpful part of growing up to accept the limitations that ultimately help you to be creative. Catholic education is into long-term questions which I am certainly concerned about. There is not going to be a shortage of students because these schools are often very good for all kinds of reasons – because people have to pay more, they have to choose to send children to them. They are sometimes better than some of the government schools and that is a trend in this country that you can follow statistically over recent years. The danger then is that the Catholic school may become based simply on its academic performance, or on being a good school and is perhaps in danger of losing the reasons why it was a good school. I can think of somebody recently who taught in one of the private schools in Melbourne, and was responsible for religious education; but the actual number of class periods for religious education was halved over the last few years, largely because of the pressure of the examinations that come up in years 11 and 12; and this is the time when intellectually, young people are probably most open to some of the most important spiritual challenges.

I have known instances of executive meetings at a particular school when someone proposed that they "should 'get rid of' religious education; kids have had enough of it by that time; you don't really need it in year 12; there are too many other things going on".

I think in relation to this question we are always going to have to keep asking ourselves "What is the purpose of the Catholic school? How do we try to have it achieve its purposes? And how do we ensure that the religious justification of a school is reflected in the quality of the teaching we offer in those senior years?" I have seen some wonderful examples of this in the *Texts and Traditions* study in Victorian schools. I have seen some very good biblical studies; but I am also aware that not all schools do this equally well.

### **Professional Development Work with Teachers in Schools**

My justification for a Catholic school would be that a school is going to be as good as the staff that you have, and the quality of the leadership. That is why my own work now is mainly with our own Lasallian schools. I set out with the idea of giving teachers some understanding of how these schools came into being, what they were about, a particular kind of school that begins in the late seventeenth century to educate poor boys. Why is it that schools like that developed all round the world and still exist all round the world? What was it about these schools that led people to translate French Lasallian documents which were then brought to Australia by the Sisters of Charity in Sydney, and by the Christian Brothers. The translations derived from the work of teachers who in 1705-06 said, "This is how you should run a school!" Those principles somehow carried across cultures. So I think it important to help people understand the richness of their educational heritage. This is not to make a straitjacket out of it, but to give them access to a set of traditions, and to help them understand how from these bases in a different kind of society you try and retain the same values. The chapter on correction begins by saying, "Six ways in which teachers become unbearable to their students!" This had a vision of education, of compassion for children, that you do not find again until Montessori.

So I believe passionately in what I am doing in working with teachers in Australia and New Zealand. I have also done similar work in the United States. I believe there is a kind of heritage there which if you can expose people to it, show them its values, and invite them accept those values, then I think the institution becomes a better place for it. And this takes me back to where we began this interview, with Audinet – it is the building of church within the culture, a particular

culture and a particular school. Some schools I visit seem to me to be much better than others. It is not just socioeconomic. It is hard to put it into words. I have been at a number of commencement ceremonies and at one of them my colleague said "I wish I'd been able to send my children to this school." What was she saying? There was something about this school that was better in terms of quality. It was not just that they were getting good exam results and enjoyed a good reputation. It was something about the attitude of teachers in that school that seemed better than in the other schools we visited.

I have no hesitation in believing in Catholic schools, but I think the crucial thing is how we are forming lay people in that wonderful sense coming out of the Church document, *Lay People Faithful to Christ*. I think the heritage of the religious congregations is such an important part of the Catholic history of this country. And to keep that heritage in individual schools with their own particular qualities is more important than having a system that operates out of some kind of central authority. I am not contesting the idea of a central authority, but I think the individuality of each school, particularly those that came out of a religious congregation's own heritage, needs to be retained – one of the riches of this country's education that we should not want to lose. Certainly not lose it by default.

If I go back to those first of months of my life in Paris, I think over the experience of meeting some interesting people. For example, there was François Coudreau, professor at the ISPC (Institut Supérieur Pastoral Catéchétique, Paris). He had been removed from his teaching post by order from Rome on the grounds that the new scriptural emphases should not be taught to children. However, he was asked by the new Cardinal Archbishop of Paris if he would begin a catechumenate for adults – and this ended up becoming the RCIA, Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults. He was one of the early catechetical pioneers, who were involved in training educators in four-year courses at the Catholic Institute in Paris; in particular he taught the importance of taking into account now the new emphasis in biblical studies. Coudreau was like many of those who suffered from being misunderstood but who eventually brought in something that was initially groups of people who were interested in talking about faith or lack of faith or life. In my first six months of living in Paris I used to go to a group like this and it was so interesting. There were some who were believers, there were some who were certainly not believers but were looking for something. This experience of the church in a changed culture, now a post-Christian culture, has

taken us right back to the early church and to the importance of the Gospel being heard again. As Audinet said, it is within the culture you have to engage people religiously.

### **Religious Education and Identity**

Identity is one of these fascinating things that comes up often in the professional development work that I do with teachers. I remember one of our provinces in the United States where the Brothers complained that in some way they were being neglected, we were more interested in the lay people than we were in the brothers. Their complaint was because they were not quite sure of their own identity any more. If lay people were taking up the educational La Salle identity, what was left for the Brothers? Identity is such a complex thing; it is not just what I think about myself; in a sense identity is also conferred by others. At Antioch in the early church, people said "These Christians; this is what they do." People look from outside and saw "See how they love one another." This is not posturing; and yet the question of witnessing is such a key part of Paul VI's *Evangelii Nuntiandi*. People are not going to listen to teachers, he said, except to the extent that they are witnesses; people see that what they are saying is also what they do and what they live. I think in that sense identity is a statement of what I believe or of what this group of people believes, how they live and so on. But it is also identity in terms of the culture that they live in, their relationship with the culture. You could actually shut yourself away from all of that. You could be living within the culture but taking no part in the fragmentation within that culture. Paul VI said in *Evangelii Nuntiandi* the split between culture and the Gospel is the crisis of our times. I think that is the most obvious way of describing the problem. If you try and analyse the cultural situation you cannot talk about any one culture, but about various kinds of cultures. No one of us lives or embraces the values of all those different cultures, but people draw on different elements that suit them. These cultures are like the different sorts of restaurants and foods that are available; people choose from these cultural resources and construct their own idiosyncratic versions.

Being perplexed by youth culture is like being a certain age and going to a 'rave'. So you may not like the music, not like the performers, and you look like some Martian, as it were, at what all these young people are doing and in no way feeling a part of it. Perhaps you can see they are enthused about something, but you fail to understand why they should be. We do not have the *key* to that cultural experience. The keys to culture I think have become ever more complex and that is where identity is lost. Sometimes it is the perception from

outside that seems to matter when this becomes part of what you believe about yourself.

This is also important in relation to the contemporary interest in 'meaning'. It is interesting to see how important Paul Ricoeur's work has been in Europe today. I noticed in the Leuven symposium, there would have been 20 articles in which there was some reference to Ricoeur, particularly where he was concerned with meaning.

The book coming from the Symposium is *Hermeneutics and Religious Education*, edited by H. Lombaerts and D. Pollefeyt from the University of Leuven Press, 2004. It contains a collection of 20 articles grouped under the headings of Hermeneutics in Recent Religious Education Theories; Biblical and Theological Perspectives; Practical and Empirical Groundwork, based on an international, academic and interdisciplinary seminar. I think this is an extremely important book because the hermeneutical basis allows for exploration of Religious Education from very different religious perspectives – those based traditionally on interpretation of the bible and others making use of scripture and the traditional teaching of the Catholic church – and showing how the actors/teachers/recipients and so forth in the traditional hermeneutical circle have changed in fundamental ways in the postmodern world. It encompasses both catechesis and religious education but particularly religious education in the European sense.

**Q: In continental Europe, the role of education in the construction of personal and cultural identities has become a prominent concern. What do you make of this development?**

The question of identity, personal or national, has become a constant theme in much writing on religious education in Europe. At one level, this has been occasioned by the continuing migration of people seeking a better life because of recurring wars, poverty and various forms of ethnic cleansing. In the host countries, this 'invasion' has sometimes provoked fear of the dilution of the national identity especially where differences of ethnicity and religion become marked as immigrant groups retain forms of their national dress and religious practices (e.g., mosques and muezzins) to maintain their own sense of identity. Attempts to avoid the formation of ethnic ghettos of various kinds have generally not been successful.

The overall reluctance of most countries to avoid reference to Europe's Christian tradition in the proposed Constitution may have more to say about the unwillingness of the church to accept that in



this generalised post-Christian society where the separation of church and state is valued, there is a certain wariness about accepting the church as still holding its historical position of influence. Is the church still trying to exert a kind of 'influence' that is no longer part of the overall European consciousness (cf. European Values Study)?

With a general religious education (non-confessional) as an integral part of the cultural heritage in most west European countries, other aspects of the national identity have become important discussion questions especially as some aspects of individual languages and customs are threatened through the effects of globalisation via the internet, film and other forms of media. Even while there is overall acknowledgement of the pluralist society, controversies over girls wearing head scarves in France or non-believers demanding the withdrawal of crucifixes from state schools in Italy are typical of recurring difficulties which appear to threaten the national identity.

Cultural identity cannot be considered as uniformity, nor can personal identity be understood simply as an individual consideration. Identity is conferred also from outside, from the way in which others regard and treat the individual. Recent examples of sexual abuse by a small number of priests and religious were particularly scandalous because of the respect traditionally accorded to persons who freely chose to live celibate lives. The lack of congruity between the public profession of celibacy by those who subsequently abused minors led naturally to a wider questioning of the value and truthfulness of this conferred identity.

If a general, non-confessional religious education has gradually evolved in many west European countries as a blanket solution to the religious questions that divided Europe for centuries, the resulting educational programs are now coming under much closer scrutiny on educational grounds. Studying religious music, art and architecture as part of the cultural history of a particular country – the "teaching about religion" model – does not necessarily help students to get on the 'inside' of the religious as a particular form of thought and experience unless they are led to grapple with the important distinctions between such fundamental concepts as 'faith', 'belief' and 'religion'.

**Q: In conclusion, would you list what you consider to be some significant issues for Catholic religious education in Australia in this early part of the 21<sup>st</sup> century?**

- Catholic schools are successful and places

in them are eagerly sought by families. It is important to be able to identify and justify their *special character*. This has to be reflected in efforts to promote young people's faith development, faith sharing, retreats, hands on work for the poor as well as having a religious education that is intellectually stimulating. Are we in danger sometimes of letting HSC, VCE and so forth so dominate our curriculum models that an intellectually stimulating religious education is non-existent?

- While the provision of adequate texts is one important resource, I sometimes wonder whether there has been sufficient attention to forming teachers to develop contemporary resources in the special ways that religious education as a subject in today's post-modern world requires. A generalised complaint about senior classes in some Catholic schools is that too many teachers are simply assigned some religious education as part of their general program because of timetabling requirements.
- Once young educators have found their feet as teachers, it seems essential for schools to foresee their updating with regard to the WHY, WHAT and HOW of teaching in a Catholic school.
- The role of the parish priest in regard to Catholic primary schools seems to be an unfortunate throwback to a kind of Catholicism that is long gone and no longer relevant. A particular aspect of this is the maintenance of some primary schools when the numbers would not justify it in terms of the state's provision of compulsory education. As citizens interested in the best possible education for all pupils, I sometimes wonder whether we are still too conscious of the 'separation' brought about by the 1870 secular Acts and not sufficiently creative in finding solutions to the diminishing roll-calls in many city Catholic primary schools.
- It is surprising, as a number of serious academic studies show, that in many Catholic schools the Religious Education Coordinator is not part of the executive/decision-making body of the school – even though in some dioceses they are part of the school executive.