

## WHY TEXTBOOKS? A reflection on New Zealand experience.

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### INTRODUCTION

In 1986 preliminary work started on *Understanding Faith*, a religious education curriculum and programme for Catholic secondary schools (years 9-13) in Aotearoa New Zealand. The programme was phased in between 1991 and 1996.

The first book produced was a Syllabus Document, which provides a philosophy, aims and objectives for the programme. Then came over 30 Student books on topics such as scripture, church history, sacraments, and justice. For each student text there is a teacher guide. Other support documents include a Prayer Resource and the Personal Development and Social Issues component of the programme consisting of books on Self Esteem, Caring for the Body and Staying Healthy, Relating to Others and Moral Development.

*Understanding Faith* is the official programme for Catholic secondary schools in New Zealand. Parts of it are used in schools affiliated to other Churches. There is also an Australian edition, produced by Emmaus Publications in Port Macquarrie, which is used quite widely in Australian schools.

In the early 1990s NCRS started preliminary work on a new Primary school (years 1-8) religious education programme. This programme was phased into schools between 1996 and 2000. As with *Understanding Faith*, the first book produced was a Curriculum Statement, which sets out a philosophy and aims for the programme. The programme matches the structure of the new National Curriculum for state schools, which is followed by Catholic schools (Finlay & Kennedy, 1998). Thus there are books for children and teachers for each year for each of six Strands - God, Jesus, Holy Spirit, Church, Sacrament and Communion of Saints. There are also teacher books for four Learning Modules: Prayer, Sacramental Celebration, Liturgical Year, and Myself and Others. This is a total of over 80 books. There is also a Music/Prayer Resource at each level, consisting of audio tapes of songs, and large clearfiles containing the words of songs and prayers.

An Australian edition of this programme is also in preparation.

### WHY TEXTBOOKS?

So why all this emphasis on texts? There are three main reasons. The first is related to the recognition of the need to move from a catechesis approach to an educational approach in the religion classroom. This move developed momentum in many countries in the 1980's. Much has been written about this and there is no need to rehearse the arguments here (Crawford & Rossiter, 1985; Malone, 1984; Moran, 1992; Nichols, 1978; Rossiter, 1981; Rummery, 1975; Warren, 1986). In 1986 I wrote a discussion paper for the Working Party which was considering a new secondary religious education programme. In this paper I proposed that, "the pupils in our Catholic secondary schools (and therefore the Church) would be better served by a change in our Form 3 to Form 7 Religious Education syllabus designed to provide more direction or coherence and involving a shift in emphasis from a 'catechetical' to an 'educational mode'." (Finlay, 1986) . This proposal was accepted by the Working Party and formed a basis for the future development of the programme.

One implication of a more 'academically challenging religious education' (Crawford & Rossiter, 1988) is the need for good quality teaching methods and aids which match those in other subjects. In the 1970's when faced with a religion class, some teachers who were experienced in other subjects often seemed to leave their usual teaching skills at the classroom door. This was, apparently, because they thought they were engaged in something of an entirely different order, called catechesis. On the other hand the resources available for pupils tended to consist of exercises on often dog-eared sets of duplicated handouts. There was little to match the well-presented textbooks found in other subjects. Neither of these practices was calculated to engage the interest of pupils.

#### SUPPORTING TEACHERS

A second reason for a move to the use of textbooks was related to the teachers of religious education. By the 1980's the trend towards the replacement of teachers from religious orders by lay teachers was well underway, and has continued apace. Unlike Australia, for example, the Catholic Church in New Zealand had no established system of tertiary institutions at which teachers could receive qualifications in theology, scripture, catechetical and religious education theory and practice. The sole Training College for teachers in Catholic schools was closed in 1984. This meant that the lay teachers who volunteered, or were prevailed upon, to teach one or two classes of Christian Living, as it was generally called, often had little formal background in religious education beyond their own Catholic schooling. From 1978 The National Centre for Religious Studies offered a three-year extra-mural course leading to a Diploma in Catechetics. The various Dioceses offered good in-service courses and many teachers attended these, and made serious efforts to improve their own knowledge through reading.

In such a situation however, the currently fashionable school-based curriculum was not much help to busy teachers, and often imposed a heavy burden on the Director of Religious Studies, the head of the Religion Department in each school. Thus the advantage, for both students and teachers, of a structured course with clear objectives, and attractive books containing suitable activities and theologically sound information. The textbooks were never intended to be a straight-jacket for either pupil or teacher. They were envisaged more as a launching pad. For the teacher new to Religious Education however, they provide a useful guide. Here I wish to emphasise the importance of involving school communities in all phases of curriculum development. This was done

through consultation and surveys, and by trialling materials in schools. In particular, for both secondary and primary programmes, writing parties of practising teachers produced the first draft of books. Such involvement is likely to result in materials that ‘work’ in the classroom and thus promote a high level of acceptance of the programme by students and teachers.

#### TRADITION AND TRANSFORMATION

A third reason for producing textbooks is that it is a sensible way for Bishops to discharge their responsibility to ensure that the religious education taught in Catholic schools provides a balanced coverage of the Catholic Faith which is appropriate to the age of the pupils. I have argued elsewhere the case for ‘tradition’ (properly understood) in religious education (Finlay, 1987). This does not mean that there is not also a place for an emphasis on ‘transformation’. The key, in a Catholic school, is to strike the right balance between the two. This is sometimes difficult to ensure when people have different theological and pedagogical (not to mention social, political, and ideological) axes to grind, often with little awareness of the appropriateness of certain topics for pupils of various ages.

Some may regard the use of set texts as evidence of a lack of confidence in teachers, or of an undesirable agenda of social control. It is true that such forces may be operating in a given situation, but not necessarily so. From different perspectives, many people have a stake in what is taught in religion classes in Catholic schools – pupils or students, parents, teachers, bishops and the Catholic community at large, not to mention curriculum developers. A consultative approach, which includes circulation of drafts and classroom trials of materials, can help to relieve the pressure of conflicting expectations that sometimes face religious education teachers. In reality there is probably no way that such tensions can be avoided entirely. In my view there are two extremes to be avoided. On the one hand is the danger that the use of set textbooks may contribute to ‘cultural reproduction’ and to lazy, routinised teaching which fails to engage the interest of students, or even actively turns them off the subject. On the other hand, the lack of sufficient guidance and resourcing for teachers may result in repetitiveness, or teachers riding hobbyhorses, with consequent neglect of important aspects of the tradition. A well-designed course drawn up in a consultative fashion, which includes attractive texts, can help steer a path between these extremes.

#### THE QUESTION OF RELEVANCE

In his keynote address at the 1998 National Symposium on Critical Issues in Religious Education and Ministry, Professor Graham Rossiter raised the question of the need for more relevant, issue-oriented topics in religious education at senior levels of secondary school (Rossiter, 1999). With some reservations (see below) I support this view.

*Understanding Faith* has at Year 13 level a topic, Current Religious Issues, which provides opportunities to study issues such as: Bio-ethics, Work and Leisure, Poverty and Wealth and Influence of the Media. The main problem with having such issue-oriented topics in textbooks is, of course, in keeping up to date. This is where a judicious use of the internet can be very helpful. In this country the Society of Mary maintain an excellent website ([www.faithcentral.net.nz/class.htm](http://www.faithcentral.net.nz/class.htm)) which acts as a filter to provide

teachers and students with useful material to supplement, and go beyond, the written texts of the national programme.

The main reservation I have about such topics is that, too much emphasis on them reduces the time available for the study of other topics which - while not so obviously 'relevant' - may arguably be of more value to students in their quest for meaning. The question of what is 'relevant' to young people needs careful consideration. There is no space to go into this matter here. I would simply urge caution and offer the observation that what is most relevant is not always what is most immediate.

Part of what we are trying to achieve in senior religious education is to induct young people into a 'wisdom tradition' (Rohr & Martos, 1989). The best way to help young people to gain insight into a current issue or problem may be through examining its history. This considered study of the antecedents of, or earlier parallels to, a current issue is the sort of approach particularly suited to a classroom.

We cannot and should not try to do everything at school level. If it ever was true that a Catholic school education was some sort of permanent inoculation against the perils of 'the world', it can no longer be so in today's rapidly changing society. Schools can legitimately aim to do no more (but no less) than make their particular contribution to laying the foundations for students to live a mature, reflective Catholic faith. The truism about the need for lifelong education surely applies as much in religion as in any other sphere of life. This is one reason why the new General Directory for Catechesis describes catechesis for adults as 'the chief form of catechesis.' (Congregation for the Clergy, 1997)

## THE PRODUCTION PROCESS

Obviously textbooks may be produced in a number of ways. I have no wish to claim that the way chosen by NCRS is the only, or even the best way for all circumstances. What I do maintain is that the method has worked well in our situation and may have lessons for others. I have described elsewhere the process involved in the production of *Understanding Faith* (Finlay, 1997). The books for the Primary Religious Education programme were the result of a similar process. I do not intend to repeat here a detailed description of that process. Rather I wish to refer to a few features in order to make some points about the relationship between textbook, teachers and pupils.

Textbooks are not created in a vacuum. Nor do they exist in one. They come with the author's assumptions about the subject matter - and about how the books might be used for learning and teaching - embedded in them. These assumptions may be stated or unstated - or even unconscious.

If teachers are to make best use of texts it is important that they are clear about their own assumptions and those of the programme and texts they are using (Ryan, 1999). That is why, for both New Zealand programmes, the production of texts was preceded by a Syllabus Document, or Curriculum Statement, clearly setting out the philosophy and approach to be assumed in the curriculum. A Working Party produced a draft Curriculum Statement that was widely circulated. Thus the whole issue of catechesis and religious education, for example, was raised as part of the preliminary consultation process. This, and the opportunities offered for in-service by the introduction of a new programme, helped to raise the consciousness of teachers about the significance of the context in

which they were teaching, and of the assumptions made by teachers, textbook writers and editors. If programmes are to continue to be effective, it is important that pre-service and in-service training of new teachers of religious education includes a study of curriculum statements and the analysis of the assumptions stated or discovered.

In New Zealand the six dioceses cooperated to produce a national programme. This makes good sense for the Church in a small country with a mobile population and limited resources. Such a cooperative approach may be largely a function of size, and may not be feasible or desirable in Australia or other large countries. On other hand, perhaps there is food for thought in the fact that, although Australian writers heavily influenced the theoretical underpinning for the New Zealand programmes, no similar programme has yet been produced in Australia.

## CONCLUSION

Textbooks are not the only answer to the question of what sort of religious education is needed today. The quality of teachers is obviously still of prime importance. And religious education teachers need good grounding in scripture, theology and the theory of religious education/catechesis as well as an awareness of the culture and spirituality of children and young people. This is so whether their bias is towards high or low 'educational structure' (Dwyer, 1999). So it is not a case of either/or. Good teachers deserve good resources. Even if every teacher had a doctorate in Religious Education from ACU, for the reasons given above it would still be desirable for them to have appropriate textbooks.

Nonetheless it is vital that good resources form part of a package that includes high-quality pre-service and in-service professional development in religious education for teachers. In their evaluation of religion curriculum guidelines Malone and Ryan found that, 'many teachers did not refer to the basic curriculum document and were not aware of the choices they were making or the basis for their planning and teaching decisions' (Malone & Ryan, 1996). I suspect that this problem is not restricted to the diocese they were working with.

However, if there is a good programme with user-friendly texts, then these can form the basis of in-service for teachers in both the content and the theory of religious education. So even taking difficulties into account, my experience of recent years leads me to second Graham Rossiter when he writes, 'I consider that the use of excellent student resources is the single most effective method of improving the overall quality of classroom religious education.' (Rossiter, 1999, p.13).

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