

# Religious Education in Catholic Schools

a statement from the Catholic Bishops'  
Conference of England & Wales  
May 2000

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## Introduction

At the Low Week meeting in May 2000, the Catholic Bishops of England and Wales approved the statement *Religious Education in Catholic Schools*. This statement is the fruit of a long period of discussion, public consultation, and the symposium on classroom RE which was held in January 2000. Following these, the Bishops themselves continued to discuss and reflect on this important theme. This statement is the result.

I am sure that all involved in Catholic schools will find much food for thought in this statement. In particular, I have in mind foundation governors and governing bodies of our Catholic schools; headteachers and senior management teams; heads of RE departments and RE co-ordinators; and all who contribute to the Catholic life of our schools.

I hope that this statement will be reflected upon with care and attention, as I believe it can help to renew the efforts of all who work so generously for the life of our Catholic schools. The tasks that they face in education today are not easy. However, within our faith there is much to inspire and encourage them.

May God bless all who contribute to this great work of the Church.

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "+ Vincent Nichols". The signature is written in a cursive style with a small cross at the beginning.

*The Most Rev Vincent Nichols*  
*Archbishop of Birmingham*  
*Chairman of the Department of Catholic Education and Formation*

## Growing in faith

- 1** The Gospel of Jesus Christ invites all who follow its teaching to the fullness of life. Discipleship in the Gospel is life-long, a journey of faith coming to complete fulfilment only in the presence of God in heaven. The entire life of the disciple is marked by learning and growth. Life-long growth in faith is to be a characteristic of Catholic life. An understanding of the educative task of the Church must start from this perspective, and increasingly opportunities for life-long learning need to be developed for every member of the Church.
- 2** The first educators in the faith are parents. It is they, above all others, who establish in their children the first sensitivity and responsiveness to the presence of God, to the practice of prayer and to the patterns of life in the community of faith, the parish. By their example in the home, and in their participation in the Mass and other sacraments, the foundations of life-long faith and discipleship in their children are laid down.

## The Catholic school

- 3** This partnership between home and parish is enhanced by the role of the Catholic school, in which the educational mission of the Church finds a particular and important expression (cf. Congregation for the Clergy, *General Directory for Catechesis*, 1997, n. 259). This educational mission entails the on-going development of the entire potential of every person. It seeks to promote the well-being and freedom of every person, made in the image and likeness of God and finding fulfilment in God alone. This is the vision which shapes the daily life of a Catholic school as a community in which faith is expressed and shared through every aspect of its activity. Through the pattern of daily prayer, through the celebration of the sacraments of the Church, through works of charity, through a striving for justice in all it does, a Catholic school seeks to be a catechetical community in which the content and the life of faith is shared (cf. *GDC*, nn. 218, 259). We recognise that in a Catholic school the witness of its life is, for some, a first announcing of the Gospel, or even preparation for that announcement. In these ways, the meaning of life, as understood in the Catholic faith, is explored and experienced by all those taking part in the life of the school, whether they are baptised Catholics or not, practising their faith in their own parish or not. This vision of the Catholic school lies at the heart of the firm expectation that Catholic parents send their children to Catholic schools, if at all possible. The partnership between home, parish and school is the best setting for the formation of maturing Catholic young people.

## Religious education

- 4** In the life of faith of the Catholic school, religious education plays a central and vital part. At the heart of Catholic education lies the Christian vision of the human person. This vision is expressed and explored in religious education. Therefore, religious education is never simply one subject among many, but the foundation of the entire educational process. The beliefs and values studied in Catholic religious education inspire and draw together every aspect of the life of a Catholic school. We are committed to classroom RE, then, because all pupils have the right to receive an overall education which will enable them, in the light of the faith of the Church, to engage with the deepest questions of life and find reasons for the hope which is within them (*1 Peter* 3:15). Religious education is, then, the core subject in a Catholic school.
  
- 5** In 1996, we published the *Religious Education Curriculum Directory for Catholic Schools*. This stated clearly the overall aims of classroom RE and its more precise objectives. They can be summarised as stating that religious education in a Catholic school is the comprehensive and systematic study of the mystery of God, of the life and teachings of Jesus Christ, the teachings

of his Church, the central beliefs that Catholics hold, the basis for them and the relationship between faith and life; in a manner which encourages investigation and reflection by the pupils, develops the appropriate skills and attitudes, and promotes free, informed and full response to God's call in everyday life. In the words of the *Curriculum Directory*, the outcome of Catholic religious education 'is religiously literate young people who have the knowledge, understanding and skills - appropriate to their age and capacity - to think spiritually, ethically and theologically, and who are aware of the demands of religious commitment in everyday life' (p. 10).

- 6** In January 2000, we were able to host a symposium on 'Expectations of Classroom Religious Education in Catholic Schools' to which we invited many diocesan RE advisors, RE teachers and representatives of Catholic colleges and institutions. This enabled us to look together at some of the issues surrounding RE today and, in particular, the needs of our Catholic schools. We are grateful to all who took part in this symposium, and to all who contributed to the consultation which preceded it.

## Expectations of classroom religious education

- 7** The symposium emphasised the importance of the definitions of aims and objectives of classroom RE given in the *Curriculum Directory*. It also asked for greater clarity about the precise role of classroom RE, in the context of our understanding of the catechetical task of the whole school. In this context, we are clear that the specific contribution to the life of the Catholic school of classroom RE is primarily educational, for its primary purpose is to draw pupils into a systematic study of the teaching of the Church, the saving mystery of Christ which the Church proclaims. Excellence in religious education, then, will be characterised by a clarity of succinct religious learning objectives and of key content, by appropriate methodologies, rigour, richness of resources, achievement of identified outcomes and accurate methods of assessment. Classroom RE will be a challenging educational engagement between the pupil, the teacher and the authentic subject material.
- 8** RE teaching in a Catholic school will be enlightened by the faith of the school community and by the faith of the RE teacher. Its educational focus will be formed and enhanced by the vitality of faith. For some in the classroom, religious education may well be received as catechesis, deepening and enhancing their personal faith; for some it will be evangelisation, the first time they will have been presented, personally, with the truths of living faith. Nevertheless, its primary purpose is the step by step study of the mystery of Christ, the teaching

of the Church and its application in daily life. The criteria by which it is to be judged are educational.

- 9** When classroom RE displays these educational characteristics, then its specific contribution to the life of the Catholic school, which as a whole is a catechetical community, becomes apparent. Then the complementarity of the various roles which contribute to the life of the school is also clarified: the role of the leadership of the school as a catechetical community, the role of the chaplaincy of the school, and the partnership in the religious life of the pupils between the school, the parishes and the families. All these have a part to play in the handing on of faith and its expression and exploration in daily life.
  
- 10** If this kind of classroom RE is to be achieved, then it is to be taught, developed and resourced with the same commitment as any other subject. We are aware that sometimes classroom RE suffers from low expectations and lack of challenge. Tasks given to pupils need to be clearly focused and sufficiently demanding. The objective of religious education is to include analysis and reflection, critical appreciation of sources and examples, and a real sense of progression through the different stages of education. As such, it requires the unequivocal support of the management of every Catholic school. It also requires 10% of the length of the taught week for each Key Stage of education. This is what we reaffirm and expect.

## The role of the teacher

- 11** The success of classroom RE in our schools will also depend, as does every subject, on the quality and dedication of the teachers. We are aware of the need to do all we can, as a Church, to recruit, educate and support good teachers of religious education. We believe that the clarity of expectations which can underpin RE will serve to enhance the attractiveness of the subject to potential teachers. We also recognise the need for RE teachers to have particular opportunities to continue their own life-long formation in faith, as well as for professional development. We need to make the best possible use of those diocesan resources given to the support of RE teachers. We acknowledge the limitation of these resources, especially in the number of RE Advisors in our secondary schools, and we will look at ways in which their number and effectiveness can be enhanced. We are also grateful to all those who have been developing effective resources for Catholic RE, and wish to encourage a lively exchange of good practice, not least by use of internet sites and other modern means. Good teachers also always require the support of parents and the wider Church community. Learning in the faith is not completed when school years are finished. A responsibility remains on every Catholic to continue their growth in faith throughout life.

**12** The importance of the teacher of RE cannot be exaggerated. We are most grateful to all those teachers who, week in and week out, have contributed to the religious education of pupils in our schools. We recognise the difficulties that are faced in this task, especially in a society like ours which does not encourage the natural religiosity of the individual, nor offer popular support for faithful adherence to the practice of faith. We salute the generosity of our teachers who have brought not only a love of their faith to their teaching but also a deep concern for the well-being of every pupil. We offer them every encouragement and support as they strive to develop their professional expertise in this vital subject. We also salute and thank the senior management teams and governors of our schools for their work in fostering our schools as communities of faith. We encourage them to give every possible support and importance to the RE departments and coordinators. A Catholic school which promotes the best possible teaching of religious education is fulfilling its true purpose.

## Conclusion

- 13** Teaching is a noble calling and profession. It can be a source of great satisfaction, and we ask all Catholics to pray for our teachers and for vocations to the teaching life. 'Teaching has an extraordinary moral depth and is one of our most excellent and creative activities. For the teacher does not write on inanimate material, but on the very spirits of human beings' (Congregation for Catholic Education, *The Catholic School on the Threshold of the Third Millennium*, 1998, n. 19).