“Faith Seeking Knowledge: Knock and the Door will be Opened”

Religious Education Symposium held at the Australian Catholic University, Canberra

on Thursday, 4th April 2013

It is with a sense of honour that I come to give this paper. As Chairman of the Bishops Commission for Catholic Education, it is an important opportunity to express some reflections in view of the commitment shown by people here to the ministry of religious education in our schools. It is a time when we have been reviewing the structure of the National Catholic Education Commission, and it is interesting to note the new issues that have come as a result of the review, issues well-known to you. The NCEC is adjusting itself in an effort to also take into account the dimension of faith formation, surely one of the great needs of the Church in our country these days.

The poet Matthew Arnold, son of the famous Thomas Arnold, Headmaster of Rugby School, was a young twenty-nine years old when he went on his honeymoon to the ferry port of Dover, where he composed his poem *Dover Beach*, in 1851. It is not the cheeriest of poems, with phrases such as “With tremulous cadence slow, and bring the eternal note of sadness in”, and “the turbid ebb and flow of human misery”, and

“The Sea of Faith

Was once, too, at the full and round earths shore...

But now only I hear its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar…”

One hopes that the honeymoon was happier than the poetry.

Here is T.S. Eliot in 1945 – “the trouble of the modern age is not merely the inability to believe certain things about God which our forefathers believed, but the inability to feel towards God as they did.” Notice that the poet says the trouble of the modern age, not simply a trouble in or with the modern age, but the trouble of the modern age. He gives it that wider dimension.

Belief about God and feeling towards God is an instructive distinction.

I put these quotations at the beginning of this paper not to give gloom, but to freshen us up with a sense of perspective. Matthew Arnold was writing in 1851, and T S Eliot wrote his passage sixty-eight years ago, so despite the challenges that face us in faith formation among our young – which includes many of our teachers – a sense of perspective can embolden us, and remind us of the Gospel reassurance that the Lord is Emmanuel – God with us.
I sat down to compose this paper, assisted greatly by Mr Michael Vial of the SA Catholic Education Office, in the week before Holy Week and took a phone call out of the blue from one of my contemporaries from school. His purpose in ringing was social but the conversation soon turned to a note of sadness on his part. He was getting ready to attend the wedding of his third son that day, and the lad was getting married before a civil celebrant on Henley Beach. His middle son also married outside the Church, has two children, and neither are baptised. His first son was married in the Church, has had the children baptised, and is regular at Mass. It is a story familiar to possibly every person in this room. We all have family members for whom identification with the institutional Church or involvement in its sacraments is now a thing of the past. This man and his wife had scraped and saved to send their three sons to a Catholic school, and they themselves are very committed Catholics. The alarming thing about that story is that neither the second or third son chose to associate a defining life moment – their marriage – with a very special sacrament of the Church, and opted for a secular ceremony devoid of all mention of Christ. We can miss Mass, but life-defining moments are a special category. I tell the story because the eldest son had left the school before my time there, but it was I who was Head of the school during the time of the second and third son, and in fact I taught both of them Religious Education in Year 12. So here I stand among you.

I contend that the ways we have been undertaking religious faith formation in our schools needs to change to meet cultural realities. With cultural shifts go learning shifts. With changing context there is a need for changing adaptations. We have travelled from Religious Knowledge to Religious Instruction to Religious Education in our terminology. We know that ideally the faith is caught in the home, nurtured in the school, and celebrated in the parish community. Clearly there is now a skew in that equation, so that the issue of faith formation, embracing all the key elements of former models needs to be considered deeply, now in this age of the full laicization of our schools.

I know that the Church will not be reborn again until the Word is born again in our homes, in our families. The disaffiliation of the young from a worshipping community, outside of school, is known to all of us, and is particularly apparent in a country situation. In a city, the absence of the local school children from the Church worshipping community may not appear as stark, but in a country town it is very obvious. We might have one hundred and twenty Year 12 students at the local school, and see three of them at Mass. There is also the issue of religious illiteracy which I will address later. I believe there will be no vibrant Church of the future unless there is a family Church. I look to the people of the Jewish faith who centred their worship and prayer in the home, with the mother lighting the candles on the Friday evening, chanting the Psalms and giving thanks, and fostering a faith that has stood two thousand years of persecution, pogroms and holocaust. We know that the faith is caught in the home, nurtured in the school, and celebrated in the parish. But we know that in many of our homes there is no Word of God read, no prayers or grace or devotions practiced, no religious imagery to reinforce the sense of the presence of God in that sacred place, the family. Our boys and girls are not at Sunday Eucharist, so there is no regular exposure to Scripture and Gospel teachings and the presentation of Jesus as more than a fine man. Of the four high schools in my diocese, with a total of about three hundred and sixty students in Year 12, one does not need two hands to count the number frequently at
Mass in those four towns. Absenteeism from a Church of the Word of Life and the Bread of Life is the norm, a conformity enforced by a peer group pressure of the strongest order. Why?

I put it squarely, faith formation is the greatest challenge placed before those who lead our schools – unless they are content to run simply what Pope Francis has described very recently as some Christian works becoming an NGO without Christ. We cannot do the impossible, and the realistic outcomes may be limited, but at least we must look at it, and think again, and not just shrug our shoulders helplessly and try to meet this new challenge. I am not criticising the fine efforts of teachers – that is why I included myself in the story – but my reading of the situation is that we cannot remain doing what we were doing. Really, how much has Religious Education changed since the 1970s? New ways need to be explored and embraced, communicating the beliefs of our tradition, the faith content of our community as Church, and the development of the affective and the imaginative. We must attempt to develop a model, at least in our secondary education, that embraces content (the tradition) and the imaginative and affective core that is the heart of each individual student. To hear T.S. Eliot again, “the trouble of the modern age is not merely the inability to believe certain things about God which our forefathers believed, but the inability to feel towards God as they did.”

This may require a whole new recasting of the models used by our principals and religious educators in our schools, a two-stream approach of Religious Knowledge (content) and Faith Formation (an affective spirituality). Perhaps a re-naming, such as Theology and Spirituality (T & S).

The phenomenon facing us of the distantation of our young from the institutional Church puts us back to asking the question why we conduct our schools. They are a vast enterprise in the life of the Church in Australia. The first Church building erected in our land by Fr Joseph Therry was a school, not a church. We know the history and the struggle and the enormous generosity of hundreds of men and women in Religious Orders, most coming from overseas to work here, and now we have an educational movement, the Australian Catholic schools, which claims one child in five as a student.

We do not conduct our schools in order to get every child to go to Mass. We conduct our schools for the same reason we conduct Homes for the Aged, because we are Church. The mission of Jesus is to reach out to care for all, especially the young and the vulnerable, the frail and the weak. All our ministries as Church should be conducted with the two wings of mission and justice. For our schools, justice demands that we provide the best education we can to help the development of a young life placed on this earth but once, and charged with unknown potential by the loving Father.
We conduct these works of charity, be they schools or hospitals or homes for the aged or homeless shelters or refugee work or social justice schemes because that is how the Church interprets being the Body of Christ in the world, sent to the world. When the disciples approached Jesus about the size of the crowd who were hungry, at the time of the loaves and the fishes, the reply of Jesus to them was, “go feed them yourselves”. So at one level, just as we do not run Homes for the Aged in order to convert the elderly to Catholicism, nor do we run schools in order to fill up the pews of the parish church. All of our works of charity as Church, including our schools, are based on the three great pillars of faith, hope and love. We do all that we do because this school is founded on faith – faith in the child, faith in the future, faith in the culture, and faith in the love of God for this child. They are based on hope, the hope that this child will be an instrument of peace, a servant to his or her neighbour, that his or her God-given potential will be realised. And all these things, including our schools, we conduct because of love. That is the inspiration that distinguishes and motivates us. We conduct our schools only because of love. Faith, hope and love.

Most of our children are baptised, and the vocation to baptismal ministry is one that must be fostered among them. When baptised a child was anointed with chrism and told that he/she was priest, prophet and royal person. The royal person was the one who cared for the widow and orphan in ancient times, the need to look after those in need, wherever our neighbour is. The prophet: one who is to live a life that reflects the model and teachings and actions of Jesus. The priest: the person who blesses and anoints, who heals and opens up a path between the Divine and the human, to bring blessings on our neighbour and to communicate a sense of God’s love for them.

So although we do not conduct our schools to fill up the pews in the parish church with our young people, it is of vital concern that somehow a knowledge and love of the mission of Christ and His person enters their makeup, that we help awaken in them the calling given by their baptismal calling to be the Body of Christ. The absence of faith formation at home does not excuse us from attempting to bring about the wondrous journey for a child as they grow into early adulthood of not simply knowing about Jesus, but knowing Jesus. The cognitive to the affective; the most difficult of journeys, as Teilhard de Chardin called it, the journey within. To enable this, to allow God’s grace to work, demands a multiple approach from our religious educators, because no human being can be served by a single approach, as every human being is multi layered; in faith formation there is no one size fits all.

In dealing with faith formation for our young people there is a passage from the Acts of the Apostles that strikes home. Our young people are a little like Paul’s listeners in Athens, where he noticed the Altar to the Unknown God and he preached near it, telling the Athenians about their human condition, and that

\[
\text{they would search for God, and perhaps grope for Him, and find Him – though indeed He is not far from each one of us. For in Him we live and move and have our being.}
\]

To search for, to grope (a kind of struggle) and to find the God who is not far from each of us. In the age of the Unchurched and the Unchurching, and with a Church pitted with scandal and failure, we are something like preachers at the altar not of the Unknown God,
but of the Forgotten God, or the Neglected God, or the Overlooked God, but still the God who moves in the hearts of those He has created.

The situation facing us is known to all of you. I was taken by something that Fr Chris Middleton, Headmaster at St Aloysius College in Sydney, and he has the gift of keeping his ear to the ground concerning youth culture. He referred in his school newsletter to the YouTube clip of the twenty-two year old American Jefferson Bethke reciting a poem in rap style. More than 18 million people had hit on that clip – 18 million! It was entitled Why I hate religion, but I love Jesus. Older people might class this as naiveté, but this young man has addressed a contrast we are all familiar with, namely that between personal spirituality and organised religion and religious institutions, such as the Church. Spirituality in; Church out. In these our days we face a phenomenon that religious educators up until the seventies did not have to face, the distantation of the young from the institutional Church, a distancing not helped at all as the wave of scandals of sexual abuse bedevils the Church. These scandals may have brought the Church to its knees, which is not a bad posture for the Church.

We must always look at context. Our Secular Age. There is a confusion of terminology in the debate between what the terms secularisation and secularism might mean. They have gone from being hoorah words to boo words, and back again. Unfortunately, secularisation usually tends to end up as secularism, a concept of the world according to which the world is self explanatory, without any need for recourse to God, who then becomes superfluous and an encumbrance. In order to recognise the power of humanity, secularism can end up by doing without God, and even by denying Him.

The guidelines that were established for the October 2012 Synod of Bishops on the New Evangelisation gave a summary of insights which portray well the challenges in front of us

1. Secularisation involves a loss of the capacity to encounter the Gospel as life-giving.
2. Secularisation as an essentially cultural phenomenon is more widespread in the Western world often presented as a liberation from an oppressive past.
3. Although militant atheism has become a phenomenon, secularisation involves a more subtle style, a lived mentality which invades human consciousness and leaves God out of the picture. This is the colonisation of the soul that shall be mentioned later.
4. A secular outlook can also affect believers in the form of everyday relativism which does not have a religious view of what it is to be a human being, and which can rob people of spiritual depth.
5. Secularised attitudes can undermine Christian values, especially through the powerful influence of images and consumerism that makes an idol of the individual.
6. In such a situation of erosion of faith, evangelisation will involve helping weary communities to discover again the joy of the Christian experience.
Those outlines were presented clearly enough, even refreshingly so, far more so than the document which was finally produced, sadly, in its clogged Vaticanese dialect. We are in murky waters here. There can be a tendency to demonise the secular, to revert again to seeing the world as a hostile place, forgetting that “God so loved the world, He sent His only Son”. It is against any spiritual tradition as Ignatian to shy from the world – to find God in all things is the motto. When God completed all creation and made a human being, He looked and said it was very good. The world is charged with the grandeur of God, as the poet said, and not just through nature but through every human being, every one of whom is made in the image and likeness of God. We must take the world where it is, and look for the signs of God’s presence in it. For example, some preachers can decry the commercialism of Christmas, but a positive Christian response is to look and rejoice at the fact that people are celebrating, resting, spending time with family, pausing in the rat race, and perhaps through a Christmas carol or two glimpsing again the reason for the season. That being said, I was taken aback a bit on the Tuesday in Holy Week when I went to do some shopping in Woolworths, and was served by a middle-aged woman at the checkout counter wearing a large pair of yellow Easter bunny ears, like some Playboy image that had gone disastrously wrong! Jesus replaced by a bunny.


His outline is known to all of you. He speaks of the three ages – medieval, modern, and our present, contemporary age. He calls the medieval era the enchanted age, where all political society was transfused with the belief in the presence of God in all things. Life was permeated with specific reference to the sacred, and the sacred was in clear contrast to the profane. Commencing with the Renaissance and through to the Enlightenment and Hagel and Darwinism, the Modern Era gave birth to the individual, in art and philosophy, so that individuals rather than their feudal Lords began to adopt initiatives and enterprises that worked for the common good. The rights of the individual were asserted. Liberalism was born, and so was socialism. Taylor maintains that through this period, despite what they might profess, the religious cultural construct and religious principles still formed and guided individuals. As they worked to help produce a society that would benefit others, people operated out of a conviction about order and design. Consciously or unconsciously, the writings of Karl Marx, for example, presume an altruism in people, a common desire for justice, a willingness to sacrifice oneself for the sake of the good of others, all in the context of a dynamic that would transcend individual human efforts.

The Contemporary Age, commencing four or five decades ago has developed a culture of individualism, “expressive individualism” as Taylor calls it. This expressiveness was clearly present in nineteenth century artists and writers, but now in our time, Taylor contends, this self orientation has become a common trait of our society. Each of us has his or her own way of living our humanity. I do not want to hurt others, but others cannot tell me what to
think, how to act, and certainly no Government or previous generation, or religious body, can impose a conformity on me. To conform for conformity’s sake means I have abandoned my own personal journey. For a contemporary person, lifestyles – such as straight or gay, married or not married, Christian or Buddhist, a gay couple organizing a father or motherless baby – are assessed in terms of what is good for me. It may be quite different to what is good for another person, but what that person chooses will probably be good for him or her. Nobody is wrong on Q&A. Concerning the faith-life, Taylor states that “the religious life or practice that I become part of not only must be my choice, but must speak to me; it must make sense in terms of my spiritual development, and I understand this”.

What this means is that we can no longer act in our schools as if there can be a return to a Golden Age. It is futile trying to put toothpaste back into toothpaste tubes. Being born Catholic and raised in a Catholic culture, symbolised by the twin poles of parish and school, and various devotional practices, meant through the Modern Era that most would remain Catholic all their lives. In the contemporary era there is no longer a necessary link between being in the Catholic group and remaining Catholic. In an Expressivist Age, each person is engaged in making sense of their own spiritual journey.

This is the formidable challenge for a Catholic school today. The leaders of the school, the atmosphere makers, who must include the religious educators and those responsible for faith formation, must create a school context where the Catholic school must recognise that each of its students has an individual religious quest, and we do this knowing that each of our students can be led to discover that the Gospel is God’s clearest word about our lives. It demands a shift in gearing, this approach, and places great demands on those charged with the leading of the school. I don’t think we have even started in most of our schools to reconstruct our faith formation programs to accommodate the individualism of this age.

Those leading to schools and those responsible for religious education, also know that the question of faith formation is one not simply addressed towards our students, but also to significant numbers of our staff, especially the younger ones. Is it unrealistic or too harsh to say that many of our teachers stop listening in RE classes around about Year 10, and have had a smattering of religious formation since then, and perhaps have themselves been disengaged from a worshipping community during their university time, and now as primary school teachers find themselves teaching religious education every day, modelling prayer styles and telling the children that the Eucharist is the source and summit of the Christian experience, as the Book says. We all know the stirring words of Paul VI in Evangelii Nuntiandi that young people will listen to witnesses before teachers, and to teachers only if they are witnesses. Our young, and middle-aged, teachers continue to show all the heroic traits of good teachers. They are generous, devoted to their students, worry about them and ponder how an individual child might be helped better. So how do we add to this, what are our schools to do to enable our teachers to become models of faith, teachers of prayer, witnesses with a conviction about the truth of Christ Jesus in our lives?

The 2012 Pew Report in the United States found that while Americans, in contrast to other Western societies, are quite religious, the number of Americans identifying themselves as
unaffiliated with any religion is on the rise and is now one in five. The theories of explanation given there would pertain also to us. Firstly, there is growing secularisation, which is seen as the process of removing religion from the public square. Secondly, disillusionment with what are seen as conservative views of many organised religions; and thirdly, the social phenomenon of the broader trend away from social and community involvement. In our Australian scene we have commentators reflecting very helpfully in these areas. Jim and Therese D’Orsa argue that young people have to make a choice between two narratives currently in the background of Western education. There is the narrative of a post-religious society in which “religion was a phase of human development that people in the West have passed through”. The other is the post-secular narrative, which takes note of the fact that religion did not die as it was meant to, and is astonishingly still alive. Look at the media coverage of the papacy. Religion does have a claim to have a public presence in our lives. I am one of those who have stated publically that the Church should give thanks to the media for bringing so much light to bear on the Church concerning lack of transparency and sexual abuse, and as a result processes of reform have been undertaken with a greater sense of purpose and alacrity. Nevertheless, at times it seems there is almost a negative campaign to belittle or undermine the standing of the Church in anyone’s eyes, with the highlighting only of the bad news about the Church, and the replaying of the same instances of abusers, compounding that negativity. But when Benedict resigned, and Francis was elected, there was almost a non-stop radio and television coverage of the events. The media realised that enough people are interested and elated about such events, the time and coverage has been invested. The Church is still a sign of hope for many.

The D’Orsa’s argue for a mission theology for Catholic educators, which befriends the culture and human experience and the living religious tradition, so that students might find meaning and purpose in the midst of globalisation, secularisation and pluralisation. There is an emphasis in their work on the orientation of the heart.

Professor Richard Rymarz emphasises the importance of human witness, and makes a case persuasive to my mind about the crucial role of content in our RE curriculum. As many of our schools in the Outback find it difficult to achieve the critical mass of committed Catholics among teachers and families to animate the Catholic culture which he advocates those of us in that impoverished situation must challenge city-based thinking. Rymarz suggests challengingly and correctly, I believe, that pedagogy can focus on process in ways whereby content might be overlooked.

Religious illiteracy among our Catholic school graduates seems to me to be an ignored phenomenon of our times. In my experience it is rarely discussed by Principals. But if we were to do a NAPLAN on knowledge of the faith and the ability to be literate about it, I wonder what the scores would be. Raising the issue with other Principals while still a Principal myself often led to a silent response which nobody seemed at ease to take up. It is the closest I have known in Catholic schooling to us living the fable of the Emperor’s Clothes. We can walk around pretending that our students are fully clothed in their knowledge of the faith, and not see that they are clothed very scantily, in fact. We often point to Catholic
identity expressing ourselves in terms of help for the elderly, service of the poor, involvement in Project Compassion, and so on. Replace Project Compassion by World Vision and you could give the same list for any good Government school. A doctor parent rang me a few weeks ago to expostulate about her son who had just graduated with a TER of 98.85 for his Year 12. With a score that high he was obviously well versed in the academic subjects he undertook, which included languages, mathematics, physics and chemistry. He knew a great deal, his mother said, about quantum mechanics, the origins of World War II, nuclear physics and biochemistry, but knew nothing much at all after a Catholic schooling from Reception to Year 12 about the religious story of his own Catholic tradition. He knew nothing about Augustine or Aquinas, or how we got to where we are, any of the major epochs in the Church, where the Orthodox and Protestant churches came from, what was the significance of Vatican II, where do bishops and popes fit in, the Biblical basis for the Eucharist and the Catholic understanding of the Real Presence, the richness of Catholic social justice teachings, and so on. She claimed her son had received a confectionery religion, consisting of be nice and to do justice. She claimed that we will have a lay population totally ignorant of their own background as religious people, and hence a population of the non-involved.

I would doubt whether there would be many Principals, from my experience, who would argue that their students were able to argue with the same knowledge of content and sophistication the key features of their Catholic tradition compared to how they might analyse an author or a playwright, or various economic theories, or the scientific explanation of Climate Change or human biology.

I am following with great interest the development of the Enhancing Catholic School Identity Project that is being conducted by Victorian and other Catholic schools in association with the Belgian Leuven Catholic University. The developments and processes described in that study seem to echo so strongly with our own Australian experiences. Once we have learned to say eight-syllable words easily – like recontextualization – a picture emerges which provides a fine framework upon which to reflect for further action. The three critical elements in the role of the teacher are dubbed WSM. W is for witness, so that the RE teacher needs to be willing and able to witness to his or her faith; S is for specialist, so that the teacher needs to have specialist understandings of the Catholic tradition and religions in general; M is for moderator, that the teacher needs to be a skilled moderator of the dialogue he or she engenders and facilitates between the different world views held by the students, our pluralist culture, and the Catholic tradition.

The challenge that we face is that secular values are very satisfying in themselves. In his talk to the National Catholic Education Conference last year, Professor Didiet Polleyfet put up a slide which showed a traditional statue of Our Lady on a pedestal in a classroom. The statue had Mary with hands joined looking upwards, rosary beads, flowers at her feet and a votive lamp. On the pedestal were attached a series of placards with values such as “generosity” “kindness” “service” “caring”, and so on. It could have been in the corner of any Catholic classroom. The danger is that these secular values by themselves can satisfy the soul. They can take the place of the religious dimension. When one acts in a caring, generous and
serving manner, our religious core is expressing itself. Those values by themselves could lead the child away from faith, away from any sense of the real religious dimension. The answer is not to make the statue of Mary bigger, he said, but to ensure that each of those values is connected to the Gospel of Jesus. Why do we wish to be caring? Why do we regard it as a value to be generous? Why should we have a sense of service? Each of these must be rooted in the Gospel, that we do these things because that is what Jesus asked of us, that is how we lead the life that Jesus wished for us.

Fr Michael Paul Gallagher makes the point that those whose starting point in religious education is to arrest the decline of Church practice and find ways of inviting people back to Church, will adopt a different starting point from those who wish rather to approach the process of the deadening of spiritual desire or sensibility, the need to reawaken the question of God as a personal hunger. He quotes Grace Davie who has described the phenomenon of “believing without belonging” as a description of many of our age. Others, he says, have turned that round, pointing to the frequency of inactive, passive Church membership as “belonging without believing”. But he says that for many of the searchers of today who are not touched by present Church language there is another line, that of “longing without belonging”. He speaks of the three wounds, the main cultural and spiritual wounds that people might suffer from, and for which evangelisation would require a healing before the Word of God can be heard fruitfully. The wounds are in memory, belonging and imagination.

For memory, “the symbols and narratives of faith have become a foreign or lost language for many. This is the first wound, call it amnesia or absence of roots in any tradition of meaning.” In his book Lost Icons Archbishop Rowan Williams talks about the erosion of spiritual imagination. This may be in the same line as Paul Ricoeur’s insights, where he talks about religious myths, rituals and sacred stories being no longer accessible the way they were before.

The second wound is similar but faces more towards the community. Without belonging to a community of meaning, there occurs an undermining of the natural ground of faith, “which is community”, he says, “because faith relies more on affectivity than on rationality”. With a wounded affectivity, the inability to feel about God, as T S Eliot said, we are forced to live a humanity that languishes in shallow waters. For today, Gallagher says, faith is no longer thought of as mainly an intellectual assent to truth, but as a relational adventure with God in Christ, through the testimony of the living community that is the Church, and nourished by the heart-encounter called personal prayer.

The third wound concerns “religious imagination”, to use Cardinal Newman’s expression. If the constant message about our autonomous self-fulfilment is the key to happiness, then that creates an impoverishment on the level of our self images and our God images. We need to look at a re-enchantment for the human imagination. The popularity of Tolkein, and the film The Life of Pi might point towards this, as perhaps does the outburst of positive response to the person of Pope Francis.
The issue in front of us is well summarised by Gallagher, when he says we have moved from a situation of faith-as-inheritance to one of faith-as-choice. Charles Taylor again.

There are so many questions a modern Catholic educator must attempt to face as we consider faith formation. I put before you two which must be considered as basic in our enterprise of schooling if we are to provide an education that enables the growth of our students within, their spirituality, as well as without, the secular knowledge, education for depth and education for choice.

**Education for Depth:**

Last year Mr Kevin Rudd, when just very recently retitled Minister for Foreign Affairs rather than Prime Minister, was part of the parliamentary delegation which went to Rome on the occasion of the canonisation of Mary MacKillop. While in Rome, as Minister for Foreign Affairs do, (!), Mr Rudd made arrangements to visit Fr Adolfo Nicolas, the Superior General of the Jesuit Order. There are Jesuit Provinces in more than eighty countries world-wide, so the Superior General receives feed-in from a variety of places. During the visit, Mr Rudd asked Fr Nicolas what he thought was the most significant social issue facing the Western world a nice, informal early conversational gambit! The Jesuit General’s reply was, “the globalisation of superficiality”. I can only imagine Mr Rudd’s reaction – lips pursed, learned nod.

To unpack that, we are an instant society, we have twenty-four hours news sessions, we can Google rather than research, our times mean that emails, internet, blogs and twitters are all immediately available. There is a decline in the readership of newspapers, and bookstores are closing. We are in danger of becoming an age which does not ponder, does not reflect. In our consumerist world we are growing into a society of the more – more computers, more sports facilities, more resources, Smart Boards and iPads, and so on. Perhaps the significant challenge for our age as educators is the challenge to cultivate depth – depth of thinking, depth of analysis, depth of reflection, the ability to ponder.

What clearly matters in the business of becoming human is not many superficial bits of knowledge and information, and acquisitions, but an appreciation of what is most important to us as human beings. Beyond the normal struggles of youth, many young people struggle with families that are impaired, or distorted by secular materialism. There can be problems of isolation and misunderstanding and insecurity within the crowd of their friends, even with their family, deeper than can be dealt with by an unreflective mind. How do we respond to their deepest hungers for meaning and purpose, for strength and hope?

Our young people are growing up in a world where the media floods them with other glittering images of billboards, websites, magazine covers and mtvs. They are images that
are filled with promises. They sell dreams that tell them that they become more human when they have the right gadgets and wear the right clothes. What these images do is hide the face of the poor and the suffering, and make them invisible. How can we help our students see more deeply, to see truly the real beyond the virtual, to see beyond the images that make false promises so that they can see the face of a hidden humanity in a way that moves them to want to serve in compassion? Obviously, the sheer amount of information that comes to us through our computers, and the ease with which one can surf from one page to another can promote superficiality. How deeply do we help our students screen, digest, connect, decide about this flood of data and the accompanying (albeit camouflaged) values that accompany them? Does the rise of fundamentalism of all sorts indicate that the capacity of people for sober understanding and the use of a critical sense has weakened?

**Education for Choice:**

Our young people confront not just choices of websites on the internet, or choices of stations on cable tv, or choices of boutique stores in malls, but more deeply, choices of values and beliefs and lifestyles. Judgement within choice, how to choose, is a real challenge for those of us charged with forming the young.

It was five or six years ago, that Allen Close wrote an article in the weekend Australian that still gives me food for thought. He was reflecting on his generation, then just touching forty, and was struck by the childlessness of so many of his social circle and of the failure of himself and others from his circle to have established sustained relationships. He wrote

> And this made me reflect again on the questions I ask myself of my generation. What happened that so many of us have ended up entering middle age the way we have, on a grim treadmill of hope and disappointment. Our marriages ending, our families are split asunder, our assumptions about life devolving into confusion and loneliness?

> We had choice, is my answer. More, I would suggest, than most of us knew how to handle. We got selfish, or greedy, or something. We left our partners because we could. We terminated our babies because we could. We discarded the rules, loosened the ties that bind, stretched the limits of the allowed, and this left us dependent on instincts, on our untutored human frailty. In the fight for freedom which we considered our right we lost the quiet skills of commitment and relationships. We lost the gentle wisdom of putting our own needs second. Too many of us, we lost the art of love.

Choice makes possible the diversity of life. Nevertheless, when the choices are so manifold at so many levels of life, then we cannot simply expect that external structures and family traditions alone will support our young people in their beliefs or values. Our narrative makes no sense if we do not have reflection. There will be no depth of knowledge, and no learning from a depth of experience, arriving at a depth of conviction, without such
reflection. Who teaches our students how to do that? Do we help them to look in the depth of their hearts to seek the answers for difficult emerging questions in a world of such seductive voices? Do we get them to recognise superficiality for what it is? To ponder, one must in the first place read, not just watch a programme, and one must pause during one’s reading, and reflect, and ask whither or why, and bring matters home to oneself.

A work by American lay Theologian William Cavanaugh has the arresting title “Torture and Eucharist” and it relates to education of depth and choice. He wrote “…the secular state cannot be expected to limit itself to the body; it will colonise the soul as well. A secular faith will not stay long confined to some temporal sphere; the secular god is a jealous god”. As Australians we are probably more at home with secularism than many other cultures, as our European Australian society has been secular for several generations, but I see a truth in Cavanaugh’s remarks about the secular god not wanting to stay confined to the secular sphere. That phrase – “colonising the soul”; who is the more effective in that? Ourselves or the secular state? What do we do to convey the Word of Life as the Voice of Life in such a Babel of noises occupying the ears and minds of our young?

The cultivation of the imagination is crucial to the deepening of young people in their spirituality. Spiritual growth demands our fostering of the power of imagination and reflection. If there is to be the re-enchantment that Fr Gallagher mentions the cultivation of the imagination is crucial. Young people respond. Secularism has not drowned the human spirit. Look at the fascination with Harry Potter, so all-conquering, to see how rich is the imagination as a dimension of human activity. Why leave this to Harry Potter? It is the area of their dreams about themselves and for their futures. Without imagination we remain prisoners of the present moment. The imagination can be one of the ways through which God speaks to us, opening up new possibilities, fresher visions. To those who scoffed at her revelations, Joan of Arc retorted, how else does God speak to us except through the imagination? Cardinal Newman claimed that, “the heart is commonly reached, not through the reason, but through the imagination”. This is the realm of the “holy desires” Ignatius wrote about, the dreams of doing the greater, the more. James Wilson Hogg reflected once, “Boyhood is in itself an existence rich, full and imaginative. It is often composed of fluctuations between violent activity and day-dreaming, and for all we know the reaming at this stage may be as important as the activity”. It is the dreaming that can set us free. The imagination helps our young people transcend the commonplace, to start to see how they might put their thumbprint on the world, being themselves gifts of life never to be repeated. What ripples they might cause, what human shores they might reach, if they have the courage to throw their pebble into the pond of human aspirations.

Gallagher quotes William Lynch when speaking of re-enchantment. Instead of identifying religiousness only with interiority and with passivity before God, we need to reimagine how to live as Christians with a post-magical sense of God and a new responsibility for history. God, in this outlook, becomes the creator of the project called secularity. In this light we can come to “imagine things with God” and to discover a “creative Christ who lets secularity come into its own”. Instead of seeking some separate spiritual realm, faith embraces the adventure of the human as the theatre of the Spirit.
To approach the challenge of the growth of affective spirituality in our young people (and teachers) on the one hand, and the real issue of religious illiteracy among our graduates on the other, the NCEC’s exploration through its RE Committee of a National RE Framework is to be commended. Being mindful of the developments of the Australian Curriculum which is articulating content-based curricula statements, the initial work on a National RE Framework has I think tried to capture a balance between mapping in very broad terms the knowledge which it is reasonable to be expected to be canvassed by and become known in RE, but also the skills and dispositions which we would want a student of RE to develop and utilise as a learner. A fourth strand of Achievement Standards is presented in the NCEC framework is entitled “Thinking, Engaging and Responding”. My understanding is that this strand aims to map the important skills to be developed in the RE learner to enable the student to participate in a pedagogically sound RE in our contemporary contexts. These include:

- Thinking, asking questions, wondering, exploring
- Engaging respectfully with the wisdom of the Tradition
- Dialoguing with variety of religious views
- Responding as learners in meaning making and making connections between their learning and their actions and those of others
- Freely responding to the inherent invitation to grow in faith.

The use of imagination to help deepen religious affectivity is an ancient tradition in the Church. Ignatius commences meditations with a “composition of place”. He concludes them with a conversation, a colloquy. William O’Malley SJ has a challenging article “Plough before you plant” where he makes the observation that most students leaving Catholic schools, he believes, “have never been told to look attentively at a Crucifix”. That is an impoverishment if it is true, and contrasts sharply with a method that Ignatius proposes in one of the colloquies in the Spiritual Exercises:

> “Imagine Christ our Lord hanging on the cross before me, and begin to speak with Him, asking how it is that though He is the Creator, He has stooped to become a man, and to pass from eternal life to death here in time, for thus He might die for my sins. Then turning to myself I will ask:

> What have I done for Christ?

> What am I doing for Christ?

> What ought I to do for Christ?

Then seeing the state Christ is in, nailed thus to the cross, let me dwell on such thoughts as present themselves.

There are many such imaginative exercises that could be done in the context of an RE classroom – the Good Samaritan, the repentant thief, the lad giving all he had, his loaves and fishes. There is a rich young man whom Jesus gazed on and loved, but who went away sad, carrying himself and his sadness with him, perhaps, for the rest of his days. There is
Zacchaeus, called down from out of his sycamore tree. There are the three glances of Christ – how He looks at the rich young man, how He looked at Judas, how He looked at Peter, and how do we respond when Christ looks at us. The use of imaginative exercises can also help serve to dispel false images of God, images that cripple faith – God the Solemn Bore, God the Pointing Finger of Displeasure, God the Unconcerned, and so on.

Experience without reflection is simply a moment of chronos, an instant of time with scarce significance. It is reflection that turns chronos into kairos, a moment of significant time. To teach reflectiveness we must be teachers of silence. Peter Steele wrote once, the rolling stone gathers no moss, and nor does it gather any other form of life. “Be still, and know that I am God”. Without this pausing for reflection, we will not ponder and if we do not learn to ponder, there will be no wisdom, no seeing of the traces of God’s presence in our lives.

Contrary to what some may think, the opportunities to enable Experience of this spiritual nature abounds in schools, I suggest. It is a question of what exercises we include in our days of recollection throughout their schooling, especially in Years 10 to 12; do we have imaginative exercises or meditation periods for one-third of one RE period a week from Year 7? Lord, teach us to pray. Do we structure a Class Mass with moments of celebration and silence, and what climate do we establish after Communion has been received, and how do we teach them to approach Communion; with reverence and recollection as an explicitly stated ideal, even if the practice falls short in a multi-purpose hall? Or do we simply give up and condone an exercise that looks like bored young people queuing up to collect little white tokens that are slotted away with what scarcely seems a thought, let alone a prayer of thanks or adoration.

A meditation on a Gospel story, like the Ten Lepers or the Blind Bartimaeus, guided properly by a teacher, allows for the individualization of personal application that Taylor’s analysis demands. Also, Jesus constructed His parables so that His listeners could enter the story at their own level of appreciation.

Along with this we need a distinct approach to Religious Knowledge, and I use the former term deliberately. In a Year 11 or 12 course of three periods a week the treatment of content – the story of the gospels, the story of the major moments of the history of the Church, the Theology of the Eucharist, the growth of the Church’s social teachings, the Thinkers of the Church, moral teachings, models of the Church, a summary of the Creed – what and why a teaching is in the Creed – and so on, could be treated and assessed like any secular subject, for perhaps two of those periods. The other period could be one of prayer exercises and dialogue, issues close to them as teenagers. “Spirit education” David Tacey calls it.
Whatever way we adopt, it is worth recalling in conclusion that Jesus drew people to Himself through the power of His presence, through talking with them, through stories and parables. The Road to Emmaus (Luke 24) is a classic model for us. Two disciples were walking away from faith in the Christ who had failed their hopes, who had been smothered by the world, and they were moving on to find other purposes. A stranger (like an adult to our teenagers, one not of their world) joins them. He asks them their story. They tell their stories, expressing the deeper movements of disillusion and dejection that now occupied them. The stranger does not admonish them for their failure to understand, or dispute their experience. He challenges their interpretations, and gives them other lights and lenses through which to view their experience. He says things that make their hearts burn with them, and He throws light on what was happening to them as they journeyed along their road. He seemed about to move off, but having experienced something deep in His presence, they invite Him to come back and stay with them. For a moment they recognise Him in the breaking of the bread. And then He disappears again. Because He is faithful, He will certainly come back if they stay open and listening.

Religious educators and Principals are the prophets of the age in our time. Of all the baptised they are called in a special way to speak and break open the Word of God to the most needy of people, our growing young. They are called to live their baptismal vocation to a degree beyond their fellow Christians. They must be people of prayer and sacrament, and we must pray earnestly for them in their ministry. Their challenge in our age is to provide properly for the Catholic religious literacy of their students on the one Lord, the rediscovery of Religious Knowledge, or else we will never grow a committed lay presence in our Church leadership, a ministry of the baptised. But the heart must be thrilled if grace is to enter, and men and women rejoice to be active instruments of peace, givers of light and healing for our world.

Thank you.

Bishop Greg O’Kelly SJ
Bishop of the Diocese of Port Pirie