“No Affective, No Effective – Faith Formation’s Challenges”

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A rolling stone gathers no moss, but nor does it develop any other form of life. Among our aspirations for our senior students in our Catholic schools is that they grow as reflective young persons, looking at the world and their own role in it. Immanuel Kant ended his *Critique of Pure Reason* with the three questions – What can I know? What ought I to do? What may I hope for?

We need to ask such questions if educators are to take their students to those deeper levels of human meaning, and to the area of wonder and imagination, because without that sense of wonder there will be little scope for prayer or for philosophy. We know that the mere acquisition of information is not education. We know that knowledge alone does not lead to virtue. Look at the Wannsee Conference held on the 20th January 1942 in Berlin, attended by fifteen highly educated men. Among them were three judges, six or seven lawyers, the majority possessed doctorates, at least two were sons of Lutheran pastors, and others were musicians. The leader was Reinhard Heydrich, a gifted musician himself, son of two highly respected opera singers. The meeting lasted only one and a half hours, and sketched out the framework of the Final Solution, which resulted in the death of 6 million Jews, 1.5 million of whom were children. Education is more than the just instruction. We want to help produce young men and women who are agents of light for the world, not points of darkness. As Catholic schools we want to produce students for whom the morality of an action is a major consideration, be that in business methods or the use of the media, or towards a fellow creature. We want to produce people for whom virtues like integrity, compassion and justice are not just good manners, but anchor-like values. And at the centre of it we want to have established a schooling context in which the fascination and beauty of the person of Christ has been put before our students, in an effort to engage their hearts and yearnings. Growth is a continuum; young people develop their interiority, their spirituality, gradually. By the time they leave us our students might not yet have grown to the stage of knowing what Pope Francis calls “the divine allure”, or “the amazement born of encounter” with Christ, but some might have, and hopefully all would be disposed towards wanting to know more about Him. Through our efforts in the school, has Christ been able to intrigue our boys and girls? As educators we are engaged in no less than what is a ministry of meaning, taking up Kant’s questions, “what can I know, what ought I to do, what may I hope for?” And as Catholic schools pointing to the person of Jesus and teachings of the Gospel is central to any sense of meaning in life.

Socrates, the Epicurieans, the Stoics and others produced educational philosophies that saw virtue as a consequence of knowledge. The Christian insight saw that as an inadequate response, that it ignored grace and that learning and values must interplay. In Jesuit schools, for example, *virtus et doctrina*, virtue and learning, became a common motto. In
Ignatius wrote to his men in Portugal outlining reasons why colleges should be established:

Our present students will in time assume various roles, some in the religious life, some in the government of the land and the administration of justice, others in all sorts of responsible occupations. For the children of today become the adults of tomorrow, so their good formation in virtue and learning will benefit many others, with the good results of that spreading more widely every day, to the great glory and service of God our Lord.

Knowledge by itself is not enough; proper human formation demands it be joined to the teaching of virtue.

For those who believe that a primary role of education is formation, we must acknowledge the complexity of the challenges facing us. Young people are now described as children of change, who rely heavily on connectedness with each other. It is their world of iPhones, internet, YouTube, Instagram and so on that has helped form a startling world of communication links, a connectedness even when they are not physically together. We are familiar with all the sorts of analyses of the attributes of our modern youth, most blindingly obvious, from Generation Y and X, to Charles Taylor’s description of the Enchanted Age, the Modern Age and the Expressive Individualism of these days. We live in an Australia of burgeoning secularism, one where individual choice is seen as its own justification. There is no obligation to check against the moral code of others, or the elders, and quite contrary life styles can be seen to be of equal value, as for example with same-sex marriage. Like life style, religion is an option, and its absence is not necessarily regarded as a vacuum in one’s life. The Catholic tribalism of yesteryear has gone, and for many young people and their parents, and even their teachers, the Church has now become but one voice among many, a voice rather cracked and weakened through the impact of scandals.

There are stark challenges facing us. In our schools we are called to be missionary in a special way. The movers and shakers, the atmosphere makers within the school staff must work to create an ethos whereby the Catholic identity of the school is almost palpable. We are being moved from not simply being engaged with religious education, but now with faith formation as the major challenge. We are not content to run simply what Pope Francis described recently when he said that some Christian works have now become “an NGO without Christ.” We have gone from religious instruction in our schools to religious knowledge, and then to religious education in our terminology. That may do to face the need to confront religious illiteracy, but faith formation is a further challenge for our age. We know that ideally the faith is caught in the home, nurtured in the school, and celebrated in the parish, but clearly there is now askew in that equation. We 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. But we know that there will be no vibrant Church of the future unless there is a family
Church. Look at 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. It may be that the faith should be 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, not even a bible to read, no family prayers, or grace at meals, or devotions practiced, no religious images, not a crucifix, to reinforce the sense of the presence of God in that sacred place, the family. So apart from what happens at school, there is no regular exposure to Scripture and Gospel teachings and the presentation of Jesus as Word of Life and Saviour.

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, what actually of knowing Jesus. It is a journey from the cognitive to the affective; the most difficult of journeys, as Teihard de Chardin wrote, is the journey within. We cannot rest until our boys and girls know in their hearts that they must pray in order to be human.

Charles Taylor puts the challenge to us directly when he states “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, as I understand this.”

This is obviously a formidable challenge for a Catholic school today. The leaders of the school, the atmosphere makers, the movers and shakers, the religious educators, 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. I don’t think we have even started in most of our schools, to reconstruct our faith formation programmes to accommodate the individualism of this age to give much greater scope and time to the fostering of the affective, the interiority, the growth of the personal prayer life of the students. It takes time. The timetable God is a fearsome God, and the most powerful of deities. Any school leader knows that the question of faith formation is one not simply concerned with our students, but also involves significant numbers of our staff. Is it unrealistic to say that many of our teachers had stopped listening in RE classes around Year 10, and have had not much more than a smattering of religious formation since then? In our primary schools, where every teacher is involved in religious education, how are prayer styles to be modelled, and how can such teachers tell the children that the Eucharist is the source and summit of the Christian experience, when it is an absence in their own lives outside of school term?

The nub of the matter is the need to develop religious affectivity, the tug at the heart, which can draw along the mind. In Athens Saint Paul noticed the Altar to the Unknown God. Today it might well be the Altar to the Forgotten God. It is a phenomenon that has been with us for some time, growing stronger. In 1945 T.S. Eliot wrote “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.” It is not just the trouble with the modern age, but the trouble of the modern age. And that was written seventy years ago.

A work by American lay Theologian William Cavanaugh has the arresting title, “Torture and Eucharist”, and it relates to education for 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. 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?

When speaking to the European parliament last year Pope Francis said that “a Europe which is no longer open to the transcendent dimension of life is a Europe which risks slowly losing its own soul and that humanistic spirit which it still loves and defends”. Another phrase of Pope Francis oft repeated is that we need “to warm people’s hearts”. For many of our pupils and younger teachers it is in the first instance a question of them discovering a sense of God, the transcendent in their life, a warming of their heart.

Fr Michael Paul Gallagher, the Irish Jesuit who was a key member of the Vatican Commission on Atheism, makes the strong 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, to get young ones back in to the pews, will adopt a different starting point from those who wish rather to approach the challenge of the deadening of spiritual desire or sensibility, to confront the need to reawaken the question of God as a personal hunger. For those who wish to emphasise faith formation as the greatest need, this is a profound nuance. There will be no golden age of the 50s and early 60s to reform to. Proper learning programmes to ensure a decent understanding of Church belief and teaching are necessary, but the re-attachment to the Sacraments will not come through re-enacting devotions or practices that do not engage the imagination and heart of the students. The basis challenge is that described by Gallagher, to look at the deadening of spiritual sensibility. That must be our starting point. Gallagher quotes Grace Davie who describes many of our age as “believing without belonging”. Gallagher adds, pointong to the frequency of inactive, passive Church membership, those “belonging without believing”. There is no fire of faith in their belly or heart. But for many of the searchers of today who are not touched by our present Church language there is another line, he says, that of “longing without belonging”. Each of our schools would contain such a triage. It seems to me that it comes back essentially to giving our students, and our younger teachers a vision of themselves, a sense of what it is to be a human being, and then a Christian. We steer towards our vision. And as Scripture says, the old men shall dream dreams, and the young men have visions. If the constant message in our age, transmitted to our young people, is about autonomous self-fulfilment as 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.

We do have an anthropology of great strength to combat that which erodes a proper self-image of the human being. In Year 12 classes we used to talk about what constitutes a human being, granted that our DNA is only fractionally different from that of a chimpanzee. I used to employ the Cro-Magnon cave paintings which show the earliest homo sapiens to be man the tool maker, the lover, the thinker and the worshipper – all four. They are the oldest cave paintings in Europe, and in essence one might say that nothing has changed greatly. Looking at those cave paintings we see the evidence of the tool (obviously the evidence of the tool in the axe, that unfortunately becomes the weapon), and we see the lover in the pollen of the flowers that were laid around the bodies of the dead, and we see the thinker in scratchings and calculations made on the walls, and the artist in the paintings, and we see the worshipper in the subjects conveyed by the paintings. In other words, there can be no full humanity without those dimensions of creativity, of love, of thought, and of worship being developed. To be fully human we need to develop on all fronts. We must challenge our young that they are called to be worshippers. The question is whom or what do they worship.

Pope Saint John Paul II outlined an anthropology himself in his visit among the aboriginal people in Alice Springs in 1986. He said

The silence of the bush taught you a quietness of soul, that puts you in touch with another world, the world of God’s Spirit. Your careful attention to details of kinship spoke of your reverence for birth, life and human generation. You knew that children needed to be loved, to be full of joy. They need a time to grow in laughter and to play, secure in the knowledge that they belong to their people.

It is a further anthropology, based on the First Australians. Quietness of soul, in touch with the world of the Spirit, beyond the immediate; attention to kinship and reverence for birth and life; the need to be loved, full of joy, with a time for laughter and play, and security by knowing they belong in a strong community. We add our Christian dimension to this anthropology, of what it is to be a human being. We are created in the image and likeness of God, we are so loved that God sent His only Son, by baptism we have become temples of God’s indwelling and are made members of the Body of Christ, by whom we were called not servants but friends. All this is a vision to steer towards, if the glory of God is to be our students “fully alive.”

Students can be challenged by almost self-evident statements of the need for them to grow within as well as without. James Wilson Hogge challenged his students in Sydney Grammar – “what a man believes in is crucial. A belief in Christ produces one kind of society; a belief in Lenin another.” And, “the beauty of stained glass is seen from within.” Good discussion points.
In my time running a school, I attempted to group what we did around four adages. The first was “we are born to praise, reverence, and serve”. The second is “the artist is always painting himself”. The third was “the heart of education is the education of the heart.” The fourth was “no school can rise above its common room”.

The first adage is the opening line of the Spiritual Exercises of Saint Ignatius Loyola. Our challenge as educators was to turn those verbs into nouns, so that our students grow to be praise, to be reverers, to have a sense of calling to service. To praise implies an exultation, rejoicing in one’s talents, a conviction that whatever gifts I have are God-given and are to be developed as fully as possible. Reverence brings with it the sense of the inner life, the gift of silence, or of worship. The world is a theatre of God’s presence, and we are stewards of creation, not conquerors. A human person is an unrepeatable act of creation, to be revered highly because of our God-given origins. Without a sense of revering there can be no wonder, and without wonder there will no philosophy, no prayer, no poetry, no relishing or savouring interiorly.

To serve indicates what we are to do with our gifts, why we appreciate excellence, so that these gifts entrusted to us are for the sake of others. Adages two and three go together, the second being from Leonardo de Vinci. We must address seriously the formation of the inner person, because what is interior will always flow to the exterior. The fourth is a self-evident truth, and no school leader will accomplish anything in his or her school unless they take that one seriously, and invest significantly in staff formation.

The context in which we now move is well summarised by Fr Gallagher when he says we have moved from a situation of faith-as-inheritance to one of faith-as-choice. It sounds like 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 if we are to provide an education that enables the growth of our students within (their spirituality) as well as without (their secular knowledge), education for depth, and education for choice. It is clear that having attempted to give our students a vision of themselves as young Christian humans, we need to do what we can to help them foster that life within which will sustain that vision of themselves.

**Education for Depth:**

When Mr Kevin Rudd, then just very recently retitled Minister for Foreign Affairs rather than Prime Minister after Julia’s assumption, was part of the parliamentary delegation which went to Rome on the occasion of the canonisation of Mary MacKillop, he 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 many places. During the visit, Mr Rudd asked Fr Nicolas what he thought was
the most significant social issue facing the Western world – just the sort of nice, informal Morning Tea question one might ask! The Jesuit General replied without blinking, “the globalisation of superficiality.”

To unpack that, we are an instant society, we have twenty-four hour news sessions, we can Google rather than research, and the internet helps us reach everywhere. 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. 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. And as we help our students to deepen in such ways, we are helping to open them more to the transcendent.

The glittering media images of the good life hide the face of the poor and the suffering, and make them invisible. How can we help our students see more deeply, to reflect and see truly the real beyond the virtual, to see beyond the images and false promises 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 iPads, and the ease with which one can surf, can promote superficiality. How deeply do we help our students screen, digest, connect, decide about this flood of data and the accompanying (though often camouflaged) values that accompany them? People do not read; they look up. How to promote the need to ponder? Is the rise of fundamentalism in all religions, including ours, a reflection that the use of a critical sense has weakened?

Education for Choice:

Is not just choices of websites, or choices of fashions, but more deeply choices of values and beliefs and lifestyles. The judgement within choice, how to choose, is a challenge for those of us charged with forming the young.

This segment of an article in the Weekend Australian written some years ago by Allen Close still strikes me. He was reflecting on his generation, then just touching their forties, and was struck by the childlessness of so many of his social circle, and 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 is necessary for the diversity of life, and freedom of growth. Nevertheless, when the choices are so manifold at so many levels, then we cannot simply expect that external structures and family traditions alone will support our young people in their beliefs or values. When faced with lifestyle choices that seem more permissive than others, or more open to our sense of acquisition or greed, or sexual play, then how do we help our students develop that inner character which can resist such allures? Without reflection on the issues and the implications, there will be no depth of conviction. How do we get them to look in to the depth of their hearts to see that certain choices are not for their growth, no matter how seductive? How 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 questions like why and whither, and bring matters home to oneself.

In developing their spirituality, the cultivation of the imagination is crucial when dealing with young people. The fostering of the power of imagination and reflection can help lead to spiritual growth very effectively. Secularism has not drowned the human spirit. There is the possibility of the re-enchantment that Fr Gallagher mentions. Look at the fascination with Harry Potter and other fantasies. In this area of the imagination we get in to 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, as Newman said, opening up new possibilities, fresher visions.

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 the meditations with a conversation, a colloquy. A long-term old warrior of the RE classroom, Fr 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”. What do we do to prevent our religious images becoming sanitised? It 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, so 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 after his betrayal, and how do we respond when Christ looks at us.

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, conduct sessions where our gatherings of students are comfortable in their silence. “Be still, and know that I am God”. We need to reflect in order to see the traces of God’s presence in our lives.

The opportunities to enable affective imaginative experiences of their spiritual nature abounds in schools for students. 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? Or, overcome by the context of a multi-purpose hall, 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 for the student. Jesus constructed His parables so that His listeners could enter the story at their own level of appreciation.

In a Year 11 or 12 course of three periods a week, Religious Knowledge (or Student Theology or some other appropriate term), could consist of two of those periods, covering a revision for senior students in their final years of 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, an introduction to the thinkers of the Church, moral teachings, models of the Church, a summary of the Creed, and so on could be taught and assessed like
any other secular subject. The third of the three periods could be a prayer service, containing the elements of reading, student sharing, student homily, ten to fifteen minutes meditation period, songs of praise.

The Road to Emmaus (Luke 24) is a classic model. Jesus drew people to Himself through the power of His presence, through talking with them. Two disciples were walking away from their 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 within 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, and they will get a glimpse that the Eucharist is the profound sacred occasion.

Religious educators and Principals are the prophets of the age in our time. The Principal is perhaps the most significant religious figure many of the students know, not being familiar with priests or religious. The Principal is the religious leader in the school. Faith formation for both students and staff must therefore be considered in the responsibilities placed upon such a person. Others on the staff will work to assist the Principal in this, but ultimately in the eyes of the school community it must be clear that it is the Principal who takes faith formation and religious identity to be one of his or her more serious responsibilities as the leader of that school.

Having moved from the seat which you presently occupy as Principal, and now ensconced comfortably in an armchair, I wish you well! May you continue to be channels and instruments through which God’s grace abounds. Thank you.

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