

curriculum for excellence:
religious education in
Roman Catholic schools
principles and practice

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Religious education in Roman Catholic schools

Principles and practice

What is the context of religious education in Roman Catholic schools?

Scotland in the 21st century is an increasingly multi-cultural and diverse nation. The great majority of Scottish denominational schools are Roman Catholic, while a small number serve other faith communities. The curriculum in a denominational school will reflect its particular faith perspective. In Roman Catholic schools, it will build on the openness of Catholic schools to other young people regardless of denominations and faiths.

This framework of experiences and outcomes, the principles which underpin it and the practice that arises from it maintain continuity with established practice within Roman Catholic schools but develop that practice further in the light of *Curriculum for Excellence*. Full understanding of these principles and practice can only be achieved by reading them in conjunction with the Supplementary Guidance *This is Our Faith*, provided on the Scottish Catholic Education Service website, <http://www.sces.uk.com>.

It is hoped that this guidance will also be useful for the religious education of Catholic children who are attending non-denominational schools and do not have access to the provision of Catholic education.

Religious education

The position of religious education in denominational schools is set out in statute.¹ In Catholic schools, the Catholic Education Commission has responsibility for the faith content of the curriculum on behalf of the Bishops' Conference of Scotland. The Scottish Government is working in partnership with the Catholic Education Commission in the development of guidance for Catholic schools in keeping with the values, purposes and principles of *Curriculum for Excellence*. In Catholic schools the term 'religious education' is used in preference to 'religious and moral education'.

Religious education in Catholic schools takes place within the context of the wider Catholic faith community, in partnership with home and parish. It is an integral part of the Catholic school, which is itself a community of faith. It is designed to assist children and young people to be increasingly able to make an informed and mature response to God in faith and to nurture that faith. It offers opportunities for both evangelisation – proclaiming the Gospel message to all – and catechesis – the deepening of existing faith commitments among believers.

What will learning in religious education in Roman Catholic schools enable children and young people to do?

As many schools and teachers recognise, the curriculum is more than curriculum areas and subjects: it is the totality of experiences which are planned for children and young people through their education – a canvas upon which their learning experiences are formed. Learning through religious education in Roman Catholic schools is no exception, contributing to the four aspects of the curriculum from *Progress and Proposals*: the ethos and life of the school, interdisciplinary studies, curriculum areas and subjects, and opportunities for personal achievement.

Within Roman Catholic schools children and young people will be at different places in the spectrum of faith development. While most young people will be of the Catholic tradition, some will be of other denominations and faiths or have stances for living which may be independent of religious belief. Religious education should support all children and young people in their personal search for truth and meaning in life, and so it is central to their educational development. This is recognised in Church documents which offer guidance on Catholic education:

¹ Please note that the statutory position of religious education relates to schools and not to pre-school centres.

Students will surely have different levels of faith response. The Christian vision of existence must be presented in such a way that it meets all of these levels, ranging from the most elementary evangelisation all the way to communion in the same faith.

Lay Catholics in School, Sacred Congregation for Catholic Education 1982, 28

Learning through religious education enables children and young people to:

- develop their knowledge and deepen their understanding of the Catholic faith
- investigate and understand the relevance of the Catholic faith to questions about truth and the meaning of life
- highlight, develop and foster the values, attitudes and practices which are compatible with a positive response to the invitation to faith
- develop the skills of reflection, discernment, critical thinking, and deciding how to act in accordance with an informed conscience when making moral decisions
- nurture the prayer life of the individual and of the school community
- understand and appreciate significant aspects of other Christian traditions and major world religions
- make a positive difference to themselves and the world by putting their beliefs and values into action.

Teachers will remain faithful to the mission of promoting an understanding of the Catholic faith and they will also teach respect for persons of different religious convictions. Religious education in the Catholic school considers the significance of faith from the perspective of the life of the person and of the faith community. It does not study religion as a phenomenon from an external perspective.

In addition to developing their understanding of the Catholic faith, children and young people will also learn respect for, and understanding of, other Christian traditions. They will also come to an appreciation of significant aspects of major world religions, recognising and respecting the sincere search for truth which takes place in other faiths. Where appropriate they will learn similarly about stances for living which are independent of religious belief.

How and when will children learn about other world religions?

During the pre-school period and from experiences within their local community, most children will have learned something about other world religions, for example through festivals and celebrations, and teachers will want to build on that knowledge as they gradually introduce learning about other world religions. Depending on the context of the school and its local community, other world religions would normally be taught from P3 onwards.

To provide coherence and appropriate balance in the delivery of Catholic Christianity and other world religions, Church guidance is as follows. Normally learning about aspects of Judaism and Islam would take place from P3 onwards and be further developed in S1 and S2. This will not exclude reference to the beliefs of pupils of other faith traditions represented in the school, but such references should be in response to questions or on the occasion of religious festivals, for example. This means that they are likely to be exceptional. This can widen to learning about Buddhism, Sikhism or Hinduism in the secondary stages with fourth level providing some study options in this regard.

What learning and teaching approaches might be used in religious education in Roman Catholic schools?

The process of learning in religious education in the Catholic school can be seen as a journey of faith, a quest for personal growth and response within the community of faith. To ensure that the young person is able to participate fully and actively in this journey, it is essential that they are accompanied by adults who can engage, question and explain in such a way that the young person is enabled to reflect, understand deeply and respond appropriately.

The learning approach, referred to as 'The Emmaus Approach', which can be useful at appropriate stages on the journey of faith is described overleaf.

Engaging

The teacher establishes a relationship of respect and trust with learners. They recognise the importance of the learner's understanding of his or her own life experience and affirm the unique capacity of each person to reflect upon events. Activities are constructed which allow the teacher to walk with the children and young people in a supportive and discerning fashion.

Reflecting

Varied, stimulating learning opportunities are presented which catch the imagination, and focus attention on a selected aspect of life. Learners are led to think in such a way that they enter their own, or another person's, life experience. They are invited to respond by identifying and declaring the thoughts and feelings which they experience.

Questioning

Through questioning, the learners recognise key issues common to all people, which lie at the root of the life experience under reflection. This demands much skill and awareness on the part of the teacher and can often be best achieved through the use of open-ended questioning.

Explaining

The teacher explains the meaning of aspects of Sacred Scripture and Tradition which help the learner make sense of the particular element of life experience under consideration.

Deepening

The way that the teaching is unpacked contains elements which help the learner engage and understand at levels that go beyond cognitive understanding alone. Experiences such as poetry, prayer, meditation, music, drama and faith witness can open not only the mind but also the heart and soul of the learner.

Responding

The teacher creates a climate of respect for the beliefs of all learners and affirms the worth of each person being able to reflect, identify and describe their personal understanding of what they believe in the context under study. Within this ethos learners are led on to reflect upon the challenge to respond to God's call which lies at the heart of the study under consideration. They are asked to describe and explain their response and how this may affect their own life and that of others.

Responding in this way, when connected to the other five elements above, presents learners within the Catholic tradition with the opportunity to deepen their existing faith commitment. Within this ethos, learners of other denominations, faiths and stances for living which may be independent of religious belief are presented with the opportunity to progress their personal search for meaning and truth.

Such dynamic experiences of learning and teaching will be achieved where teachers in their planning seek to:

- build in time for personal reflection and encourage in depth discussion of ideas, experiences and moral challenges
- help learners to recognise the significance of their experience and nurture their capacity to reflect on and evaluate it
- incorporate experiences of prayer, liturgy and reflection and other opportunities for spiritual growth, enabling children and young people to experience the life of faith
- provide opportunities for learners to experience participation in service to others and meet people who show their faith in action
- highlight the relevance of faith and learning in religious education to the lives of young people in modern society
- encourage children and young people to probe the basis of different beliefs within an ethos of inclusion and respect
- recognise and build on the considerable scope for linking with learning across the curriculum and the ethos and life of the Catholic school community
- take account of the developmental stage of children and young people and their capacity to engage with complex ideas
- help children and young people to develop critical thinking skills
- maximise opportunities for collaborative and independent learning
- draw upon a variety of creative approaches which promote active learning
- engage learners in the assessment of their own learning
- make imaginative use of resources.

What are broad features of assessment in religious education in Roman Catholic schools?

Assessment in religious education in Roman Catholic schools should assist children and young people to become increasingly more able to understand and make informed, mature responses to God's invitation to relationship. Personal faith commitment is not being assessed in any shape or form. In the educational context, the assessment of children and young people's response to God's invitation to relationship demonstrates the knowledge, understanding and skills that learners have gained to support their response to learning in religious education and in the wider life of the school.

Teachers will gather evidence of progress as part of day-to-day learning and through carefully planned use of specific assessment tasks. Approaches to assessment will take account of:

- knowledge and understanding of key aspects of Catholic Christian faith, including an awareness of other Christian traditions and other world religions
- each child and young person's responses (for example through self-evaluation) which demonstrate broader and deeper understanding, through critical analysis, moral reasoning and discernment
- their awareness of ways in which they put their beliefs, values and attitudes into action.

By its nature, learning in religious education involves children and young people visiting and re-visiting topics and relating them to real-life situations as they grow and develop. They can demonstrate progress through their abilities in analysing, evaluating and communicating their increasing understanding with coherence and confidence, and through reflecting on their own and other people's experience of life. Children and young people can also demonstrate progress in how they respond to questions and issues, in the extent to which they engage in reflection and discussion on issues of belief and morality, and through their developing abilities to think critically. Examples of progress will include increasingly thoughtful responses to questions demonstrating progressive breadth in their knowledge and depth in their perceptions.

How are the religious education in Roman Catholic schools experiences and outcomes organised?

The experiences and outcomes have been organised under Strands of Faith which outline the aspects of Catholic theology underpinning Catholic religious education. By indicating associated areas of reflective focus, each strand also provides an outline of the experience from within which learning takes place. They are not discrete entities – they naturally entwine with one another. While actively exploring and responding to one strand with learners, the teacher is able to draw on some aspects of other strands.

The experiences and outcomes framework will enable teachers to create the experiences of learning outlined in the Strand of Faith, enabling the learner to reflect upon their personal response to God.

The experiences and outcomes within each strand map progression which is not always linear across levels. They do have their own distinct and intrinsic value which must be addressed in order to develop the next steps in learning. The contexts for learning include self, family, school community, local/parish community, national and international community. The role of the school, parish and diocese as source and witness in the growth of the pupil is central.

These experiences and outcomes will involve the children and the young people in active learning as they mature in faith. The outcomes envisage the children and young people on a journey of unfolding encounter with God within the context of their total experience of life. This relies on a child-centred approach where children and young people are provided with opportunities to experience such encounters, built around the key facets of Catholic faith.

Such opportunities are not only provided by teachers but by parents and families and in local parish and community settings where young people are invited to consider their beliefs and values, their actions and commitments, their traditions and practices across a range of contexts, with the support of various adults and other young people.

The nature of these learning outcomes describes, in part, some of the experiences. The active use of verbs highlights the need for children to be engaged in quality interaction with the strands.

Mystery of God

- exploring situations of wonder and mystery in life
- in the light of the Word of God as expressed in the Christian scriptures and the teachings of the Catholic Church, considering how these situations can affect the way that we understand ourselves, our lives and the world around us.

In the Image of God

- reflecting on the Christian belief that all our lives have meaning and that our gifts, talents, background, experiences, family and faith can help us value the vocation which God reveals in our life.

Revealed Truth of God

- reflecting on the Christian belief that God who made us and invites us to fullness of life is revealed to us as Father, Son and Holy Spirit through personal relationships with Him and one another
- expressing our thoughts and feelings about how it affects the way that we understand the inner experiences of our spiritual life in particular conscience, will and prayer.

Son of God

- reflecting on the Christian belief that God is revealed in Creation in a particular way through special events and people in the unfolding history of salvation, and that this revelation was made complete when God became human in Jesus Christ, Son of God and Son of Man
- expressing our thoughts and feelings about this in the light of the words and actions of Jesus
- reflecting upon the extent to which the words and actions of Jesus can affect the attitudes, values and behaviour of ourselves and others.

Signs of God

- reflecting on the Catholic Christian belief that the Risen Christ is present in the Community of the Church by the power of the Holy Spirit and that its members are nourished by sharing in the life of the Trinity through the Seven Sacraments
- understanding that the Sacraments are encounters with Jesus who continues to guide us on our journey of Faith
- having considered examples of prophetic and missionary church witness we can describe our thoughts and feelings about the impact Sacraments and witness can have upon our lives and our world.

Word of God

- reflecting on the Catholic Christian belief that God speaks to all peoples of all times and speaks to us in a distinctive way in the Word of God, expressed in Sacred Scripture and in the Sacred Tradition of the Catholic Church
- having applied the Word of God to everyday situations in life, we can express our thoughts and feelings about its effects on people's lives.

Hours of God

- reflecting on the Christian belief that the People of God respond to God's invitation to communion through Prayer and the Sacred Liturgy of the Church
- expressing our thoughts and feelings about this and describing how our understanding and experience of prayer and liturgy can affect our lives and those of others.

Reign of God

- reflecting on the Ten Commandments and on Jesus' New Commandment
- responding to the call to grow in holiness in this life and forever as expressed by Jesus in the Beatitudes
- examining the need to respond to moral issues in the light of Catholic teaching
- considering how our response to Christ's proclamation to build God's kingdom of justice, love and peace can affect ourselves and others.

What connections are there with other areas of the curriculum?

The experiences and outcomes for religious education in the Catholic school lie at the heart of the learning experience of all who belong to a school community of faith. School managers, in planning for the effective provision of Catholic education, will take account of the school's purpose and mission, its values, identity and ethos, its partnership with home and parish.

The Catholic Education Commission has published specific advice in the *Values for Life* resource on how the Catholic school can nurture the growth of values and virtues in the lives of its students. It demonstrates how – across the life of the school – schools can teach the values of justice, wisdom, compassion and integrity, thus enabling young people to develop as successful learners, confident individuals, responsible citizens and effective contributors.

If education in faith is at the heart of the Catholic school – if Christ is at its centre – then this should be reflected in the priority it gives to religious education: in its allocation of resources, in its curriculum planning and in its programmes of professional development and formation of staff.

All Catholic schools are expected by the Bishops' Conference of Scotland to follow guidelines established by the Catholic Education Commission on the provision of adequate time for religious education within the school curriculum. These guidelines indicate a requirement for a minimum of 2.5 hours per week in primary school and 2 hours per week in all stages of secondary school.

There are, of course, meaningful links between religious education and all other areas of the curriculum which are important and complement but do not displace the need for the minimum time allocation for religious education. In particular, some aspects of health and wellbeing provide opportunities for learning about some moral dimensions of life – for example, relationships education. Other moral and ethical issues are frequently raised through topics in other curriculum areas.

Active learning approaches to learning and teaching, including collaborative learning, will encourage children and young people to discuss and share ideas, experiences and moral challenges in a variety of ways and also to develop core skills such as communication, working with others and problem solving.

Young people in schools will also benefit from the experience of faith which they gain through acts of prayer, worship, celebration and loving service to others. They should experience participation in service to others and meet people who show their faith in action. In ways appropriate to their stage, they should have opportunities to put their own ideas for living their faith into practice. They will learn from teachers and others who offer witness and inspiration, challenge and support.

What further support is available to practitioners?

Curriculum for Excellence offers an exciting opportunity to us all to review and reinvigorate learning and teaching, which inevitably involves change and challenge. In order to assist teachers across the country in meeting this challenge, further guidance and support is being provided to support teachers in their planning and ensure the experiences and outcomes are translated into very good teaching, learning and achievement for all learners. Such explanation and exemplification is contained in the Supplementary Guidance, *This is Our Faith*, provided on the Scottish Catholic Education Service website, <http://www.sces.uk.com>

How do the religious education in Roman Catholic schools experiences and outcomes relate to existing practice?

The experiences and outcomes draw on the best of current practice as outlined in *Curriculum for Excellence* documentation and build on previous documents emanating from the Catholic community. These include:

Catechism of the Catholic Church (1994)

Compendium to the Catechism of the Catholic Church (2007)

General Directory for Catechesis (1997)

Declaration on Christian Education (1967)

Lay Catholics in Schools (1982)

The Religious Dimension of Education in a Catholic School (1988)

The Catholic School on the Threshold of the Third Millennium (1998)

Educating Together in Catholic Schools (2007)

Religious Education Syllabus for Secondary Schools (CEC, 1992)

Effective Teaching of Religious Education: Personal Search [Roman Catholic Schools] (Learning and Teaching Scotland, 2001)

Religious Education 5–14: Roman Catholic Schools (Learning and Teaching Scotland, 2003)

Religious Education 5–14: Roman Catholic Schools (SOED and CEC, 1994)