

EDUCATOR'S GUIDE TO

Catholic Curriculum

LEARNING FOR 'FULLNESS OF LIFE'



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VAUGHAN PUBLISHING

Contents

Introduction	1
Chapter 1 Being 'Catholic'	6
Chapter 2 Jesus at the Heart	10
Chapter 3 Faith in Action	13
Chapter 4 A Catholic Curriculum	18
Chapter 5 Teachers reflecting	26
Chapter 6 The Humanities, Social Sciences and The Arts	31
Chapter 7 The Sciences, Maths, Health/PE	39
Chapter 8 Vocational Education	45
Chapter 9 Religious Education	49
Conclusion	56

Introduction



Its task (the Catholic school) is fundamentally a synthesis of culture and faith, and a synthesis of faith and life: the first is reached by integrating all the different aspects of human knowledge through the subjects taught, in the light of the Gospel; the second in the growth of the virtues characteristic of the Christian. *The Catholic School* #37

One afternoon while I was sitting in the hairdressing salon, a conversation between two young mothers caught my attention. 'I know you're happy with the Catholic school and I'd really like Alice to go there too; it seems to have a great reputation, but I'm concerned they might influence her with too much religion'. This alerted me again to the reality ... we live in a largely secular age, and yet Catholic schools remain an attractive option for many families. What signs of hope and opportunities for a meaningful life can the Catholic school offer in these times of crisis, when faith is no longer a taken-for-granted aspect of our culture?

In my experience, most parents are looking for a school they hope can equip their children to succeed in a high tech, competitive society. They expect the curriculum will prepare their children to find a meaningful and fulfilling place in the world. But above all, they want their children to be happy, to value their young life, relate well to others, make sensible decisions and be engaged in their learning, even finding joy in new knowledge and skills, while steadily growing in self-awareness, self-discipline and maturity.

Parents are also aware that our culture offers many false, even destructive attractions and promises. They hope the school can help prepare their children to develop the capacity to recognise which are the noxious 'weeds' and which the life-giving 'seeds' to be found in their culture as they grow into young adults.

Teachers also have high hopes for students. They know that the relationships and sense of community teachers develop with students, together with the way they plan and deliver the curriculum are critical if they are to foster in young people what Pope Francis

described as the harmony between 'the heart, head and hands'.¹

Catholic schools have an intrinsic faith dimension, as the mother in the salon recognised. A Catholic school exists in response to Jesus' mission to bring the Good News of life, love and hope to all humanity. The Catholic school by its very nature aspires to be a place where the lessons taught and the community life are 'enlivened by the spirit of the Gospel', with Christ at the centre, every day and in every activity. This is at the heart of the 'identity' of the Catholic school.

So it is that the Catholic school is dedicated to offering students learning opportunities that develop their God-given gifts and dignity, empowering them to understand and appreciate the true meaning and values of life and the part they are called to play in building the Kingdom of 'justice, peace, love and beauty', as Pope Francis describes in 'A Prayer for our Earth' from *Laudato Si*, 'A Prayer for our Earth', #246.).

It seems to me that 'these theological understandings' that underpin the Catholic school are not far removed from the hopes of parents, who do not for the most part use 'churchy' language but at the deepest level want the 'best' for their children. The Catholic school is built on the belief that Jesus Christ came to offer 'the best' for every person. He announced, 'I am the Way, Truth and Life', (John 14:6). The challenge is to bring this understanding alive for staff, parents and students within the very busy, focussed context of the 'real' world in which the school exists. It requires reflection, prayer and above all respectful dialogue and communication between all parties. The challenge is to be a Catholic school that it true to its deepest 'Identity'.



Religious Education Expo, Hobart, 2012.

Catholic identity and Curriculum

'Catholic identity' has been explored in the *Educator's Guide to Catholic Identity*, (Paul Sharkey 2015)². Sharkey introduces several essential elements that go towards building the Catholic identity of what is increasingly being referred to as a 'recontextualised' Catholic school.

These elements include the centrality of Jesus, the 'frontier' nature of our times, shared liturgy and prayer, pedagogy, curriculum, data analysis, 'ecological conversion', staff formation, family, parish and school relations, charity and justice, befriending difference and 'doing theology'. When a school community consciously works to develop these elements in a unity inspired by an ever-renewed understanding of the mission of Christ, the school can be both relevant to contemporary educational needs and truly 'Catholic'. In contemporary research terms, it might be recognised as a 're-contextualised' Catholic school.

Curriculum

Each of the elements of Catholic identity listed above has its own challenges and deserves detailed analysis. In this guide it is the element of the 'curriculum', the mandated set of key learning areas to be taught, that is my specific focus.

The potential of the formal curriculum to be a means of grace for students has always excited me. It has been a sacred experience to see eyes light up in a Science or English class as students learn and develop, discovering both the strengths and shadow sides of culture and gaining insights into the mysteries of the natural world. I have been privileged to know many teachers who bring to their classroom a sense of what Pope Francis calls the 'joy of the Gospel'³, teachers recognised not only as excellent professionals, but also as 'evangelisers' (bearers of the 'Good news' of Christ). They recognise each student as a precious child of God, and bring the Good News of freedom and hope alive through their enthusiasm and commitment to their areas of teaching expertise.



Catholic schools, in this case Larmenier in Launceston, publicly proclaim their identity.

It is important to consciously plan for a high quality curriculum that takes full advantage of Catholic life and a Catholic worldview. Much work has been done already towards a 'Catholic' approach to curriculum.

In the 1990's I was part of a team in Sydney Catholic Education who developed a curriculum project titled 'A Sense of the Sacred'. The project identified key Catholic understandings and associated Gospel values, relating these to the prescribed courses of study in English, Science, Business Studies, Economics, Legal Studies and Mathematics, and suggesting an extensive resource listing and practical examples of implementation to assist teachers in Catholic secondary schools⁴. In this guide I set out to explore how such connections can be drawn in twenty-first century professional teaching practice. This guide features some examples of how a 'Catholic' approach to curriculum is emerging in various Australian and New Zealand Catholic schools and systems.

Foundational to this guide is the exploratory work of Therese and Jim D'Orsa, *Catholic Curriculum: A Mission to the Heart of Young People* (2012). The work offers an in depth study of how the mission of Catholic schools is expressed through the curriculum, by means of a dialogue between faith and culture. The book outlines key principles that underpin a Gospel-

based approach to curriculum, inviting reflection on the historical, anthropological, theological and philosophical developments that have shaped the diversity of cultures in our own times and the challenges and opportunities these developments present for Catholic educators.⁵

This guide aims to support teachers by bringing a practical, on-the-job approach to this significant academic work.

Can there be a 'Catholic curriculum'?

This question has challenged educators responsible for the implementation of the public curriculum in a Catholic context, prompting them to ask related questions such as, Can the public curriculum ever justifiably be referred to as a 'Catholic' curriculum, without becoming problematic? Will reference to a 'Catholic curriculum' place the integrity of the curriculum at risk of manipulation?

On one level, one could argue that a 'Catholic hospital' or a 'Catholic school' are descriptors well accepted in society; the popularity and track record of these institutions demonstrate that they are able

to carry out fully the agreed purpose and standards society has set for health and education in a hospital or school. Catholic hospitals and schools are subject to the same public scrutiny and accountability as are government ones. They must follow the same universal regulations and policies. However, they have their own expression, a 'Catholic' expression of these requirements.

Similarly, it can be argued that the Catholic worldview that influences these institutions can also be applied to implementation of the public curriculum, as a 'Catholic curriculum'.

We do not speak of 'the' Catholic curriculum any more than we speak of 'the' Catholic school or hospital, out of respect for the fact that local cultures influence their unique development, including the ways in which faith comes alive within them.

A 'Catholic curriculum' will necessarily emerge from the cultural context in which the public curriculum has

been developed. In the case of 'Catholic' hospitals, there will rightly be some critique of the policies and methods by which public health needs are delivered if these do not reflect the spirit of the Gospels and Catholic faith.

Similarly, Catholic schools need to meet expectations that they will deliver the curriculum in a way that is faithful to their mission as instruments of the Church to bring human development and the new life of Jesus to all, through formal learning. Hence, we can reasonably speak of a 'Catholic curriculum'.

As Therese and Jim D'Orsa point out, the content of any curriculum is limited; none of us know the future for which students are preparing, but we do know that the future will be shaped, not only by 'human action' but by 'the creative action of God in the world'. Hence for a curriculum to be future-oriented, it requires courageous leadership to 'promote a deep, intelligent and meaningful relationship with Jesus, which becomes the axis on which all else turns'.⁶



Larmenier Catholic School, St Leonards.

Scope of the guide

In Chapters 1, 2, and 3, the guide looks firstly at some of the features that distinguish the Catholic faith: its worldview and values, Christ its heart, its rich heritage and mission in the today's world.

In Chapter 4 we explore the possible scope and meaning of a specifically 'Catholic curriculum' that aims to link faith and spirituality with the subjects taught.

In Chapter 5, we introduce a reflective process of 'doing theology'. This is a simple method students and teachers can engage in as a way to enrich their planning and their learning, empowering them to make decisions based on sound evidence and spiritual reflection, building reflective habits that can last a lifetime.

In Chapters 6, 7, 8 and 9, the guide addresses each of the broad disciplines that make up the public curriculum, with special reference to subjects developed through the national Australian Curriculum. We explore and illustrate how these disciplines can be brought into a dialogue with faith, culture and life.

In Chapter 6, we consider the Humanities, Social Sciences and the Arts.

In Chapter 7, we turn our attention to the Sciences, Maths and Health/PE.

Chapter 8 considers a Catholic approach to Vocational Education and how learning a trade is an aspect of preparation for engagement in full and meaningful life.

Chapter 9 discusses the central role of Religious Education in a Catholic school and how it can be related in a dialogue of learning with the other key learning areas to create an 'ecology' of learning.

Built into each section are some reflective points and relevant quotations for shared discussion. The hope is that teachers, in reading the guide, will engage in individual or group reflection about how to plan and deliver a genuinely Catholic approach to curriculum. This is always a work in progress, gathering impetus as understanding grows. Where practical examples are lengthy, a relevant extract is included and the full version referenced online.

I hope that this guide both honours some of the great work being done towards 'a Catholic curriculum' and opens up exciting future possibilities for teachers to explore new pathways and share their learning both locally and globally.

Developing a genuinely 'Catholic' approach to curriculum is a sharing in God's mission to the world, and a response to the Church's call for a 'new evangelisation'. The curriculum has an essential part in making visible Jesus' promise of 'abundant life' through every aspect of student learning, (John 10:10).

I have come that they may have life and have it to the full.

John 10:10

Being 'Catholic'

The Catholic school tries to relate all of human culture to the good news of salvation so that the light of faith will illumine everything that the students will gradually come to learn about the world, about life, and about the human person. *Declaration on Christian Education # 1* Vatican Council II

It is always a challenge to articulate clearly what being 'Catholic' actually means and implies. As a lifelong member of the 'tribe', I still struggle to find words to express both the privilege and the challenge of belonging. We know that the Eucharist is the 'source and summit' of the Christian life and the sacraments are vital sources of God's grace. We are fired by the sheer beauty and strength of Christ's mission of love to the whole of creation. We believe the Holy Spirit empowers the Church to share in that mission.

Today, the struggle to be authentically 'Catholic' is being lived out in the shadow of great scandals and rapid change in human consciousness. Schools, as one of the 'good works' of the Church, have a vital role in modelling what a genuinely 'Catholic' community can offer society.

Teachers in Catholic schools know that the 'Catholic identity'⁷ of their school is of critical importance to its educational integrity. Other terms that are sometimes used are 'Catholic ethos', 'Catholic character' or 'Catholic worldview'. Christ, his mother Mary, and the Saints are enshrined in the names of Catholic schools: St Mary's, St James, Mary MacKillop, Sacred Heart etc. The Eucharist is celebrated and the Catholic liturgical year guides the prayer life of the Catholic school. Teachers need to be able to recognise and take advantage of the Catholic nature of their school to enrich their teaching.

Catholic faith can help find answers to many questions impinging on a person's life, Biblical questions such as: Who am I? Why am I here? What is life all about? Who is God? Why do some people seem to suffer so much? How can they be better served? Why was

I created? Why should I move from self-centredness to other-centredness? How can this be done? What constitutes a life well lived? Or questions about society: Who is benefitting from these political and economic arrangements? Who is identifying the marginalised and bringing them into the centre of consideration in the way society (or this school) is being led and managed?⁸

Bishop Putney, former Bishop of Townsville, in describing 'Catholicity' for Catholic schools in the Queensland context (Putney, 2008, pp. 18-20) drew on the definition of North American Religious Educator Thomas Groome in his seminal book *Educating for Life*. Groome wrote that Catholicity involves:

... a positive anthropology; a sacramental consciousness; commitment to relationship and community; appreciation for tradition; cultivating reason for wisdom of life; and the cardinal commitments of fostering holistic spirituality formation in social justice and inculcating a catholic worldview ... (Groome, 1998, p. 427).

For Catholics, that 'sacramental consciousness' is most fully celebrated in the Eucharist when the community gathers in memory of Christ to celebrate his life-giving death and resurrection, and to praise and thank God for the gifts of creation.

In the 1990's the Sydney Catholic Education Office wanted to link Catholicity and the curriculum. To this end, the resource, *A Sense of the Sacred*, was developed for secondary schools. The first challenge was to describe what 'Catholicity' looks like and what light it can shed on English, Science, Legal Studies,



Being Christian is about much more than beautiful places of worship; it involves a living community of faith seeking to follow Jesus Christ.

Mathematics, History, Geography etc. Five 'big ideas' related to a Catholic worldview were identified. These include the following understandings, closely related to those identified by Groome above, and drawn from the work of Rohr and Martos:

1. The Sacredness of all Creation: All God's creation is good and holy; all is gift of love from the God who is Love.
2. Human Dignity: The Kingdom Jesus announced, knows no borders, but is totally inclusive and respectful of all, especially the poorest and the weak. Human beings are 'God's work of art' (Ephesians 2), made in God's own image and likeness.
3. Communion with all: we form part of the great family of God, a community of life, celebrating God's love and sharing God's mission to make real in our

world the Kingdom of God Jesus announced, which is a way of peace, freedom and love for all creation.

4. Cultural Transformation: We are called to work for justice, peace and ecological responsibility for all, challenging whatever is not life-giving in our culture and affirming all that is.
5. Reconciliation and Hope: God is always ready to forgive sin and failure and a better future is always possible.⁹

We know that a living faith cannot be reduced to disparate elements, to words and concepts. However for the sake of clarity, each of the key understandings described above can be teased out through identifying and describing related values and concepts, as outlined for example in the following table.

Five Foundational Catholic understandings	Associated concepts and values
<p>The Sacredness of all Creation</p> 	<p>Grace: God's gift</p> <p>Unity: The hope that all may be one in God's Kingdom, regardless of creed, race, social class</p> <p>Ecology: recognition of the interconnection of all of life</p> <p>Respect: Honouring all created things as gifts from God not to be taken for granted</p> <p>Stewardship (Conservation): Cherishing creation. Recognising that no-one has absolute power over God's earth</p> <p>Joy: Awareness of the beauty and bounty of creation</p> <p>Justice: the gifts of the earth are to be shared equitably among all</p> <p>Awe and wonder: Capacity to marvel at God's gifts of creation</p> <p>Mystery: A sense of the transcendent</p>
<p>Human Dignity</p> 	<p>Sacredness of life: Seeing God as the origin and creator of all life and expressing gratitude for the gifts of life</p> <p>Human Rights: All people have the right to a dignified life, free from oppression, and to have their basic human needs met.</p> <p>Social Justice: There needs to be a right ordering of relationships in society, an exercise of power that can be life-giving for all</p> <p>Liberation: Freedom from all that oppresses</p> <p>Moral responsibility: Ability to make choices that reflect the ethics of the Gospel</p>
<p>Communion</p> 	<p>Living tradition: An inherited faith, constantly refreshed through the sacramental life of the Church and its response to the signs of the times</p> <p>Conflict resolution: Resolving conflict in a way that respects individual and communal needs</p> <p>Community: A group of people with shared vision and commitment to mutual service</p> <p>Family: The basis of society and church, reflecting God's creative love</p> <p>Interfaith Dialogue: Honest dialogue with people from other faiths, respecting similarities and differences and leading to greater social cohesion.</p> <p>Service: Loving attention to the needs of others following Jesus' foot-washing example and in response to one's vocation</p>
<p>Cultural transformation</p> 	<p>Conversion: A change of heart in response to God's grace</p> <p>Structural Change: Identifying the root causes of injustice in the world and working to bring about positive change</p> <p>Solidarity with the Poor: Acting with and on behalf of the poor to bring justice. Living one's personal lifestyle conscious of global inequity</p> <p>Inculturation: Bringing the Gospel message alive so that culture is affected by the Good News, 'right down to its very roots' (<i>Evangelii Nuntiandi</i>, 20)</p> <p>Openness: Receptivity to new ideas, other cultures and disciplines</p> <p>The Common Good: Total human well-being</p>


Five Foundational Catholic understandings	Associated concepts and values
Reconciliation and Hope 	<p>Reconciliation: Bringing those estranged together, through God’s grace, in mutual understanding and forgiveness</p> <p>Cross-Cultural Understanding: Positive interaction with other cultures for mutual enrichment</p> <p>Empowerment: Giving people power to act in their own right</p> <p>Vocation: One’s life work carried as a response to God’s will</p> <p>Hope: An enduring trust in God’s goodness that can sustain faith</p>

Table 1. Adapted from the original *A Sense of the Sacred* project, Sydney Catholic Education Office, 1994

These concepts and values have direct relationship in many cases to content in the prescribed school curriculum, and can be used as touchstones to identify possible links between curriculum content, Kingdom values and religious faith. The concepts are powerful,

and have the potential to help teachers and learners grasp reality and clarify thinking to create meaning for their lives. A complete expression of the official teachings of the Catholic Church can be found in *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* (1992).

group activities

1. Imagine you are about to interview parents enrolling their child for the first time in a Catholic school. How would you respond to the question, ‘So really, what’s different about a Catholic school?’
2. Using Table 1, and referring to a unit of work you are currently planning to teach, identify some concepts and values listed that would be relevant. Plan strategies that could give ‘wings’ to those concepts. Share your work with a partner or small group of teachers.