

Embrace the Spirit

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Religious and Moral Education Council**

The Alberta Teachers' Association



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A Note from the Editor

Life passes by so quickly. When my dad retired from teaching in 1983, he had been in education for 37 years. I asked him how he had done it for so long. He said something to the effect that when you enjoy what you are doing, the time just goes by. He originally went into teaching when one needed only a couple years of training. As someone who loved math and science, he intended to teach for a few years to save up money for a degree in engineering. Another strand of the story is that his mother (my grandmother) wanted him to be a priest. When he met my mother (also a teacher), he told her that the world needed more good Catholic teachers rather than more priests. And the rest, as they say, is history.

Why am I being so nostalgic? I started teaching in 1978, and with a few years off for time home with children, I have now been teaching for 30-some years. A dear friend, the maid of honour in my wedding, retired in December. Things are really starting to hit home.

With this issue of *Embrace the Spirit*, we will be saying goodbye to two dedicated members of the Religious and Moral Education Council (RMEC). Sharon Malec, our president, and Michael Marien, an *Embrace the Spirit* columnist, will be retiring at the end of this school year. We wish them both well as they embark on this new stage of life with its plethora of opportunities, and we thank them for their many years of service and their positive influence on students and colleagues.

With their departure, we are now in need of new members of our editorial board. As a member of the board, you would not need to write articles for the journal but you would help us locate people to do so. You would also be our eyes and ears in your part of the province, letting us know about great things happening in faith, moral education and service that should be highlighted in *Embrace the Spirit*. If you (or a colleague) are interested, please contact me for further information at dburns@redeemer.ab.ca.



Dorothy Burns



From the President



As members of RMEC, we have been on a journey together for the past three years. I am preparing to retire from teaching, but teaching will remain forever part of my being.

My dream in September 1967 as a young 20-year-old was to be the best teacher in the world. I have had the most wonderful experiences. Students I have had the privilege of guiding have come back into my life. I meet them in the strangest places. One was in a fabric store I frequent, talking about her Grade 2 teacher. She said that she'd admired that teacher and wondered what ever had happened to her. I had to introduce myself, as she was talking about me. Yes, I have aged—gracefully, I hope—but I remain the same. One high school boy I have taught wants me to hand him his graduation certificate in May as one of my last acts as a teacher. He was not always the best student, but I know that he appreciates everything I have done for him.

Remember to write down the experiences you have with your students. Some will make you laugh and some, of course, will bring tears to your eyes. All will be rewarding.

Remember first and foremost Jesus, the Master Teacher. We place our dreams and our cares before Him. We hope and pray that He will walk with us and give us the courage and strength for the long, winding journey ahead.

I close with a thought from Mary Oliver, a Pulitzer Prize-winning poet, from her poem "The Summer Day":

I do know how to pay attention, how to fall down
into the grass, . . .
how to be idle and blessed, how to stroll through the fields
. . .
Tell me, what else should I have done?
Doesn't everything die at last, and too soon?
Tell me, what is it you plan to do
with your one wild and precious life?¹

For me, the answer was and is to be a teacher.

Note

1. From "The Summer Day," by Mary Oliver, *New and Selected Poems* (Beacon Press, 1992).

Sharon Malec



Editorial Board 2012

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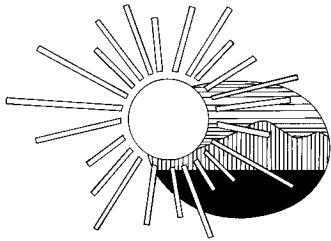
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Religious and Moral Education Council of the Alberta Teachers' Association

Mission Statement

The Religious and Moral Education Council exists to inspire and foster learning communities by providing professional development for teachers to help them nurture the moral, ethical and spiritual lives of students.

Vision Statement

The Religious and Moral Education Council will, in search of peace and the common good, be a principal resource for Alberta teachers.

Values

We are committed to serving teachers of all traditions and cultures, through the values of faith, dignity, respect and collaboration.



Lakeland Catholic Schools

Lea Foy

Lea Foy is the religion coordinator for Lakeland Catholic Schools. She also serves as secretary of the Religious Education Network (a committee of the Council of Catholic School Superintendents of Alberta) and is a member of the Embrace the Spirit editorial board.

The Lakeland Catholic School District is located about 250 kilometres from Edmonton. The two major communities in the jurisdiction are Bonnyville and Cold Lake. Within these communities, the district operates six schools: three in Bonnyville and three in Cold Lake. All six schools offer dual-track programs (English and French immersion). In 2006, the district expanded to include the counties of Smoky Lake and Thorhild, and Lakeland Catholic Schools opened a K–9 Catholic school in the village of Waskatenau to meet the needs of the Catholic community in that area.

For the 2011/12 school year, Lakeland Catholic Schools has a student enrolment of approximately 2,000 K–12 students who are served by 196 staff members. We are proud to offer high-quality Catholic education, and our staff is committed to serving the needs of all students through new and innovative initiatives such as a

moral intelligence program, youth ministry, enhanced literacy and French immersion programs, Alberta Initiative for School Improvement (AISI) projects, instructional coaching, career and technology studies (CTS) courses, Health Pathways projects, and a mentorship program for new teachers. Our staff are engaged in ongoing faith formation, professional learning and job-embedded support, with the help of district learning coaches.

As stated in *The Religious Dimension of Education in a Catholic School* (Congregation for Catholic Education 1988), “The Catholic school finds its true justification in the mission of the Church; it is based on an educational philosophy in which faith, culture and life are brought into harmony.” This educational philosophy is the foundation of our work in Lakeland Catholic Schools. Our Catholic identity continues to grow, with a focus on permeation across the curriculum. Our motto “Christ Our Model, Children Our Focus” continues to guide our schools and central office as we explore ways to celebrate, live and

grow in our faith through liturgical celebrations, justice and service projects, and a vibrant youth ministry program.

Celebrating Our Faith

The joyous connection between school and the Church is celebrated regularly in Lakeland Catholic Schools. All schools celebrate Mass several times a





year at their local parishes. It is amazing to see students and staff walking in procession down the street to their parish to celebrate Mass as a school family. The conclusion of the school year also takes place at the parish, giving students an opportunity to reflect on their blessings. All schools participate in a regular parish Mass twice each year (in conjunction with Catholic Education Sunday in the fall and Education Week in the spring), and students contribute to the music or serve as lectors or other ministries. Local priests are welcomed at our schools to celebrate school liturgies at least once a month and for the Sacrament of Reconciliation during both Advent and Lent.

At Notre Dame Elementary School, in Bonnyville, we are blessed with our own school chapel—a sacred space used for many occasions. Staff meetings begin with song and prayer in the chapel; individual classes gather there for readings and reflections; and annual grade-level celebrations are held there, to the delight of students and their families. The chapel was the pre-retirement dream of former principal Vivianne Plouffe. Generous donations from the Lafond Parish of the Diocese of St Paul have added historical and treasured pieces, such as pews and an altar, to our chapel. Current principal Valerie Hanson has

embraced and expanded the function of the chapel, including having the space blessed. Our ability to celebrate His love as a school family in our own chapel is a gift beyond words.

Twice a year all Lakeland Catholic Schools staff come together for Spiritual Development Day to celebrate our calling to His service as Catholic school employees. These days of prayer and reflection are led by guest speakers, such as David Wells in August 2011 and Jerry Goebel in February 2012. These gatherings are held to open the school year and at the midway point to inspire and help staff focus on our district theme throughout the year. Our bishop, Luc Bouchard, and our parish priests join us to celebrate Mass at the beginning or conclusion of these faith-filled days. As it is our celebration, Lakeland Catholic Schools employees fulfill all ministries, further acknowledging and celebrating the various gifts and blessings we have received from God.

Living Our Faith

Social ministry has been flourishing in Lakeland Catholic

Schools this school year. All of the district's seven schools have been actively serving and reaching out to their communities through various social justice and service projects. Justice continues to be an integral part of our religion and moral intelligence programs, giving students and staff many opportunities to learn how our faith calls us to serve others, especially those in need. Here are a few ways students and staff have acted and lived our faith.

In Bonnyville, Dr Bernard Brosseau School raised \$1,500 for Knights of Columbus Christmas hampers through its Quarters for Christmas campaign, with the intention that all families in need would receive a hamper of goods to help them celebrate the holiday season with joy. The generous response to this campaign also allowed the school to contribute \$500 to a local family who had recently lost their home and business to a fire. In addition to Quarters for Christmas, one class collected Toys for Tots in conjunction with the local Kool 101.3 radio station. The students were thrilled to donate over 250 toys.

The Cold Lake schools have been acting as strong shepherds to God's



people in their communities. For the second year, Holy Cross Elementary School gave to the community through the Festival of Peace. Thirty students and six staff members participated in this youth ministry activity to give back to the community. Students decorated a tree with decorations they'd made themselves, and submitted the tree to the city's annual auction to support the Dr Margaret Savage Crisis Centre in providing second-stage housing. The school works for justice locally and also globally by sponsoring a child through Chalice. In November, a coin drive raised enough money to sponsor a child (Bruce from Kenya) for \$396 and to send him an additional \$130 as a Christmas gift. Students, staff and parents also rallied over the Christmas season, raising nearly \$3,000 to help two local families in need. At St Dominic School, students brought mittens and toques to decorate their Christmas tree, and these items were then donated to the local women's shelter.

Holy Family Catholic School, in Waskatenau, is a small school with a big heart that has supported the local food bank for the past two years and is committed to ongoing support. Every Friday is Food Bank Friday, and students are encouraged to bring in items. Students learn about the importance of food banks in all communities and how people access the food bank monthly in Alberta and throughout Canada. Holy Family contributes between 100 and 130 pounds of nonperishable goods to the food bank every month. This year, in addition to regular food bank donations, Holy Family participated in Free the Children's Halloween for Hunger campaign. The goal was to collect at least 130 pounds of food to match their September donations. The

junior high class delivered flyers and informed the community about the campaign. Residents were encouraged to participate by dropping off donations or passing them along to students as they toured the community at Halloween. The community response was overwhelming, and just over 730 pounds of food was collected, giving Holy Family the Free the Children distinction of having collected the greatest amount of food per capita. All schools in the district have participated in fundraising or collections for local food banks.

Through these and many other acts of service, the educators of Lakeland Catholic Schools are hoping to create a unified group of believers committed to serving their communities beyond the doors of the school. "Together we are Christ's Body, each of us a different part" (1 Corinthians 12:27). Together we can make a difference in our communities and promote the "preferential option for the poor" as we follow our motto "Christ Our Model, Children Our Focus."

Growing in Faith Through Youth Ministry

The youth ministry program in Lakeland Catholic Schools is as vital as ever. Last year, the district piloted a project that put teachers into half-time youth ministry positions in three schools: Dr Bernard Brosseau School (Bonnyville), Notre Dame High School (Bonnyville) and Assumption Junior/Senior High School (Cold Lake). The extremely positive feedback from students and staff has led to a second year of this project.

The youth ministers have been involved in several activities in the schools and across the district. Highlights include ministry workshops; grade-level retreats; days for our youth liturgical leaders (YLLs); and visits from various groups, such as the Catholic Youth Leadership Program (from the Lloydminster Catholic School Division) and Face to Face Ministries (out of Saskatoon). NET Ministries provided grade-level retreats, and NET Massive Worship



put on a music ministry workshop for our YLL students.

The goal of our YLL program is to enhance school liturgies in terms of quality and participation. Music ministry is a focus for YLL, as many students take part in school Mass and celebrations, as well as regular Saturday/Sunday Mass at local parishes. Notre Dame and Dr Brosseau YLL students lead the music ministry for the youth Mass at St Louis Parish on Sunday evenings. Students who are not involved in the music have other responsibilities, such as setting up sound equipment and running the soundboard. Some students have also been trained to be lectors or ministers of the Eucharist. YLL teams in all schools

play important roles in school liturgies and the prayer life of the school. For example, St Dominic School's Grade 6 YLL team prepares and leads prayer around the Advent wreath for every grade during Advent, and Holy Cross's Grade 6 YLL team prepares and leads the Holy Week celebration for the whole school.

YLLs have experienced great success over the years. Participation at Assumption Junior/Senior High School has more than doubled this year, and students are now taking on the responsibility of planning school celebrations. This includes music ministry, reflection, the creation of liturgical atmosphere, and control of the sound system and projector. Reflections

may take the form of skits, testimonies, music, videos or questions for students to ask themselves after the readings. The YLLs do such an excellent job planning and carrying out these reflections that staff and students are drawn into their sharing, making the liturgies more meaningful for all.

Reference

Congregation for Catholic Education. 1988. *The Religious Dimension of Education in a Catholic School: Guidelines for Reflection and Renewal*. Washington, DC: United States Catholic Conference. Also available at www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/ccatheduc/documents/rc_con_ccatheduc_doc_19880407_catholic-school_en.html (accessed March 8, 2012).



Behold, the Democracy of God Is at Hand

Carl Fakeley

Carl Fakeley is a teacher at Notre Dame High School, in Red Deer, and the RMEC webmaster. He is currently working on a master of religious education (MRE) degree through Newman Theological College.

“Not many of you should become teachers” (James 3:1 NRSV). The Bible refers to teaching as a vocation appointed by God (1 Corinthians 12:28). Jesus tells us that it is better for a millstone to be tied around the neck of the person who causes a young one to go astray (Mark 9:42). These promises and warnings apply to many in a general sense but in a very specific sense to teachers in a Catholic school. It would be detrimental for a teacher to lead students away from the truth of Christ, but what of the teacher of teachers? What if the teachers themselves are led astray by those who teach them? Would Christ’s warning apply to them as well?

The Second Vatican Council document *Gravissimum Educationis* (Declaration on Christian Education) states that the “principal purpose” of a Catholic school is to help “the baptized” come to know “the mystery of salvation” and, particularly “in liturgical action,” to help students learn “how to worship God the Father in spirit and truth” (paragraph 2). As well,

the baptized should be “aware of their calling, [that] they learn not only how to bear witness to the hope that is in them (cf. Peter 3:15) but also how to help in the Christian formation of the world” (paragraph 2). These purposes are not easily taught by those who have not learned them themselves. Teachers in a Catholic school are to permeate the Catholic faith. There is more to faith permeation than having an attractive prayer centre. Teachers who realize this rightfully conclude that faith will never truly permeate their classrooms until faith first permeates them.

Learning more about one’s faith can develop an intimacy and appreciation similar to that of a couple spending hours getting to know one another. When one half of that couple is with others, there is no doubt in anyone’s mind that this person knows and loves his or her chosen one. This love and knowledge permeate the person who is in love and thus permeate everyone else around, bringing them to a deeper appreciation of the beloved.

One way to develop and deepen one’s Catholic faith is through formal academic study. Teachers turn to Catholic colleges for this formal instruction. These teachers often have little or no familiarity with Scripture and Church documents,

and lack even a basic understanding of theology. For many, this is the first in-depth look at Scripture or Church teaching. Despite their enthusiasm and desire to learn, many of these teachers do not have a strong formation in the Catholic faith. They have instead been formed by their secular culture. Formation by secular culture does little to prepare one for formation in the Christian faith, since Christianity in general and Catholicism in particular are profoundly counter-cultural. The Beatitudes are evidence of this. These teachers are not well equipped to recognize teachings that are contrary to the teachings of the Catholic Church.

Groomed by Groome

Thomas Groome is a teacher of teachers. His books are widely used in Catholic colleges and universities around the world. Through his books, many teachers have had their religious training and formation at the feet of Groome.

In his religious education manual *Educating for Life*, Groome (2001) discusses several aspects of Catholic education. He describes valuable teaching strategies that are useful whether one is teaching in a Catholic school or not. The strategies, however, are more often

catholic than *Catholic*, a differentiation he makes throughout his book.

Despite including useful teaching strategies, Groome is concerned with the “sectarianism” that may occur in a Catholic school. Without citing a source, he suggests “that of the violent conflicts presently raging in our world, 96 percent of them draw upon religious legitimation and some are directly caused by religion” (p 42). Groome then suggests that as an “antidote to sectarianism,” he will note what he perceives as “failures of [his] own Catholic Christian community” (p 42). He wants to avoid “absolutizing one’s own tradition,” out of concern that this might somehow “legitimize prejudice” (p 42).

Groome promotes culturally accepted notions that religion is the cause of violence and that no one should be so bold as to claim that their religion is the one true religion, and he frequently makes derogatory references to the “authoritarian nature” of the Catholic Church. Groome reinforces the negative stereotypes of the Catholic Church typically found in secular culture. As an author of a text used in Catholic colleges and universities, Groome is perceived as an authority on these issues. For teachers whose primary formation has been by secular culture, his claims will ring true. This will do little to enhance their appreciation for the Catholic Church and will likely reinforce and validate the prejudice and resentment they already have toward the Church. This cannot help but lead the little ones astray from the truth of Christ and the Catholic Church that He established.

Rather than nurturing a love for the Church established by Jesus

Christ, Groome continually makes statements that put doubt in the mind of the reader. Describing the “negative stereotypes” the Catholic Church has invited, Groome suggests that one such stereotype is that the Church “presumes to possess the fullness of divine truth” (p 17). He suggests that “loyal Catholic Christians . . . recognize such negative stereotypes as either exaggerations or humbling evidence of how much the Catholic church is ever in need of reform” (p 17). In *Unitatis Redintegratio* (Decree on Ecumenism), it is stated that “the very fullness of grace and truth has been entrusted to the Catholic Church” (paragraph 3). “Grace and truth,” quite logically in this context, refers to divine grace and divine truth. Since the Church does teach that it possesses the fullness of divine truth, it is not an exaggeration. One is then forced to conclude that this teaching is one that Groome believes to be in need of reform. One is also forced to wonder just how many other Church teachings and doctrines he feels are in need of reform.

Groome suggests that one should have a “healthy scepticism” or a “critical consciousness” toward the Catholic tradition, “given how much untruth is in every statement of faith” (p 142, emphasis added). He does not explain this statement; he just states it as fact. For those who desire to learn more about the Catholic faith and assume that Groome is an authority, their faith will be more damaged than nurtured. How is a teacher supposed to teach the Apostles’ Creed or the Nicene Creed with any certainty? How would a teacher respond to questions about the creeds? Would he or she respond by telling students not to take them too

seriously since much of them isn’t true anyway? One can only imagine the “faith” permeated in the classroom by a teacher who has been groomed by Groome.

Behold, the Democracy of God Is at Hand

The authoritarian nature of the Catholic Church is of particular concern to Groome. Throughout his book he makes several negative references to this authoritarian nature (pp 41, 240–43, 273, 299). He disdainfully suggests that the “undue emphasis on the church’s authority amounted to ‘the church has already done the thinking for you and now you must think as it thinks’” (p 299).

The reality is that this 2,000-year-old Church has had a long time to think about a number of issues. When a new issue arises, there is always plenty of research, debate, discussion, consultation, reflection and prayer before a conclusion is drawn. In many cases, the issue has been resolved and there really is no need to dwell on it further. At this point, the Catholic is obligated to inform himself or herself in order to come to an understanding and acceptance of the Church’s teachings.

As a parent, I do not have to reopen discussion with each of my children about whether hitting a younger sibling is right or wrong. As the parent—using my knowledge, wisdom and reason—I have come to the conclusion that it is wrong. It is not open for discussion. The Church has, over many centuries, come to similar conclusions about many issues of faith and morals. On the other hand, as adults we arrogantly eat fruit from the tree of knowledge of good and evil, thinking that we somehow have equal knowledge with God.

Our pride then leads us to conclude that the Church is authoritarian and needs reform when she teaches something that goes against what our finite minds consider right and good. In reality, is it not we who are in need of reform?

Groome suggests that the teaching authority of the Church “cannot be limited to the institutionalized magisterium” (p 241). He refers to the democratic spirit of Catholicism in America (p 56), suggesting that the “official magisterium should act as a consensus builder, articulating positions that reflect the faith of the community over time” (p 241). This implies that the Church should have its finger on the pulse of the faithful, determining what *they* feel is right or wrong. This could be likened to the inmates running the prison, the students running the school, the children running the household.

If the consensus is that same-sex relationships are morally acceptable, then they should be condoned by the Church. If the majority want to own black people, then that should be condoned as well. Right and wrong become the arbitrary choice of the majority. What we end up with is the “dictatorship of relativism,” something Archbishop Miller (2006), quoting Pope Benedict XVI (then cardinal Ratzinger), warns against. Boston College professor Peter Kreeft (1999, 20), in his book *A Refutation of Moral Relativism*, states, “Moral relativism eliminates [the] law, thus sin, thus repentance, thus salvation.” Faith permeation based on moral relativism is neither Catholic nor Christian.

Groome accuses the Church of being authoritarian, but the founder of the Catholic Church, Jesus Christ, was very authoritarian.

Although He was compassionate and forgiving beyond compare, Jesus never wavered on issues of faith and morals.

On issues of faith, Jesus did not at the Last Supper say, “This is a symbolic representation of something that is supposed to stand for my body.” He said, “This is my body” (Luke 22:19 NRSV). In the Gospel of John 6:53–56 (NRSV), Jesus told his disciples that in order to have life in them, they must “eat [his] flesh and drink [his] blood.” When many turned away and left, Jesus did not become a “consensus builder”; instead, He turned to the apostles and asked if they wanted to leave too. There was no compromising of the truth.

When it came to moral issues, Jesus’s mission 2,000 years ago was to clean up the mess made by those with hardened hearts. We see this in His teaching on divorce and remarriage. Jesus said that there must be a return to the way marriage was intended (Mark 10). He told the people that to get divorced and remarried was to live in a perpetual state of adultery. Despite the fact that the moral climate had devolved to the point that divorce and remarriage was an acceptable practice (much the same as in our contemporary culture), Jesus insisted that the people return to the original intention of the marriage commitment. In Matthew 25, in a very authoritarian way, Jesus said that unless we willingly commit acts of charity toward those in need, we will go to hell. He even told the woman who was caught in adultery, “Go your way, and from now on do not sin again” (John 8:11 NRSV). In Matthew 18:8–9, Jesus said that it is better to pluck out our eyes and cut off our hands than to go into hell with a whole body.

When it came to issues of faith and morals, Jesus did not ebb and flow with the tide; He controlled the tide. The Church has been entrusted with these teachings and does not have the authority to change them. Kreeft, in his ever so eloquent way, suggests that “the Catholic Church is the only church that doesn’t claim to have the authority to change Christ’s teachings and is then called authoritarian.”¹

Is Our Conscience God, or Is God God?

In discussions about moral issues, it is often suggested that one must always follow one’s conscience. This raises the question, Is our conscience God, or is God God?

In Chapter 5, “A Tradition to Inherit: ‘Our Family Heirloom,’” Groome refers to the need for a person to follow his or her conscience, implying that this must be done even if the decision is contrary to Church teaching. He suggests that the “conscience is always the last court of appeal” and goes on to quote Vatican II documents, stating that in order to come to God, a Catholic in all activity must faithfully follow his or her conscience (p 242).

Once again Groome offers a limited explanation, potentially leading the reader astray. The implication is that the person in question has a properly formed conscience. It is not likely that many people would acknowledge or even be aware that their conscience has not been properly formed. People whose conscience has been formed by secular culture would likely reject the notion that their conscience should be congruent with the teaching of the Church. The Vatican II document

Gaudium et Spes states that the “conscience [can] go astray through ignorance . . . without . . . losing its dignity” (paragraph 16). On the other hand, “this cannot be said of the person who takes little trouble to find out what is true and good or when the conscience is gradually almost blinded through the habit of committing sin” (paragraph 16). Later in this same document, in the section “The Fruitfulness of Marriage,” with regard to the number of children a couple should have, the Church teaches that a couple “should realize that in their behavior they may not simply follow their own fancy but must be ruled by conscience—and conscience ought to be in accord with the law of God in the teaching authority of the church” (paragraph 50). It is clear that the issue of conscience is a decision between two good things, not one thing that is good and another that is evil. As stated further in the section “Married Love and Respect for Human Life,” in the discussion on the use of artificial contraception, the Church concludes that “daughters and sons of the church, faithful to these principles, are forbidden to use methods disapproved of by the teaching authority of the church in its interpretation of divine law” (paragraph 51).

In his book *On Conscience*, Pope Benedict XVI (2007, 38) suggests that “it is never wrong to follow the convictions that one has arrived at—in fact, one must do so.” This does not legitimize the actions if they are not in accord with the teachings of the Church but is an indication of greater guilt in that the conscience has been “made . . . deaf to the internal promptings of truth” (p 38).

In 1973, the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops (CCCB) published a document entitled

Statement on the Formation of Conscience. In this document, which some suggest is a response to the Winnipeg Statement of 1968, the bishops state,

For a Catholic “to follow one’s conscience” is not, then, simply to act as his unguided reason dictates. “To follow one’s conscience” and remain a Catholic, one must take into account first and foremost the teaching of the magisterium. When doubt arises due to a conflict of “my” views and those of the magisterium, the presumption of truth lies on the part of the magisterium. In matters of faith and morals, the bishops speak in the name of Christ and the faithful are to accept their teaching and adhere to it with a religious assent of soul. This religious submission of will and of mind must be shown in a special way to the authentic teaching authority of the Roman Pontiff, even when he is not speaking *ex cathedra* (*Lumen Gentium*, #25). And this must be carefully distinguished from the teaching of individual theologians or individual priests, however intelligent or persuasive. (paragraph 41)

In Groome’s intelligent and persuasive way, he omits a complete explanation of conscience as taught by the Church. This could lead many to act in a way contrary to the law of God, thinking that because their conscience is not screaming at them, they are doing nothing wrong. It is of the utmost importance to do all that we can to act in a way that is not contrary to God’s law, since “before the judgment seat of God everybody will have to give an account of their life, according as they have done either good or evil” (*Gaudium et Spes*, paragraph 17). Groome’s

teaching, once again, has the potential to lead people astray.

Gopher Poison

An administrator of a Catholic school told me that his beliefs about a certain moral issue were contrary to the teachings of the Church and that he thought the Church was wrong. I asked him if he had studied any Church documents on the issue, and his answer was no. I asked if he had studied what Scripture taught; the answer was no. I asked if he had prayed about it; the answer was no. It seemed as though the thought that the Church may have a valid point was lost to him.

In *Catholic Education: Ensuring a Future*, Mulligan (2005) quotes a Catholic priest, stating that “too many Catholic teachers and administrators are not ‘confident Catholics.’ They do not seem to know the story, so how can they reasonably be expecting to transmit the story and share their own faith?” (p 98). Archbishop Miller (2006) states, “Laypersons who teach in Catholic schools need a ‘religious formation that is equal to their general, cultural, and, most especially, professional formation’” (p 5).

If I were an administrator of a Catholic school, hoping to have the Catholic faith permeated throughout the school as well as in the classroom, I would want to know that the teachers who took courses in an attempt to learn more about their faith would not return with greater doubt and mistrust toward the Catholic Church. I would want my teachers to proudly, boldly and without reservation proclaim the Catholic Christian faith. I am not convinced that studying Thomas Groome would achieve this. As mentioned earlier, there is some value in what Groome has to say

about teaching in general. If the pages littered with anti-Catholic and anti-Church sentiment were removed, it would be a small but valuable book.

I grew up on a farm. Whenever we had a gopher problem, we would poison them. We wouldn't simply put out poison, as they would not touch it. We would mix the poison with good oats. The gophers would eat the oats and then die. I worry that a book such as Groome's could have a similar effect on those whose faith is not so strong and, consequently, affect the students they teach. The good teaching strategies mixed with anti-Catholic poison could result in the death of one's faith and trust in things Catholic, and ultimately a rejection of the Church.

In the Great Commission, Jesus instructed the apostles to teach "all nations" on issues of faith and morals. It is the modern-day apostles, the bishops, who make up the teaching body of the Catholic

Church. We cannot reject the teachings of those Christ commissioned to teach on His behalf without at the same time rejecting Him. When we reject Christ, we also reject the one who sent Him, God the Father (Luke 10:16). Can we reject the Father and the Son and still reasonably have an expectation for salvation? Nothing could be more detrimental to faith permeation in a Catholic school.

Note

1. "Happiness" (MP3), 2003, www.peterkreeft.com/audio/06_happiness/peter-kreeft_happiness.mp3 (accessed March 20, 2009; no longer available).

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What Do You Bring to the Table?

Tim Cusack

Tim Cusack serves with Edmonton Catholic Schools in the St Jerome Science Academy learning community.

Have you ever been asked, “What do you bring to the table?” This question seeks to identify a person’s skills, talents and abilities. It asks an interviewee to articulate the abilities, affect and assets he or she might bring to a team, department or organization. Whether through a resumé, a curriculum vitae or another form of personalized presentation, when asked this question, we have to assess, evaluate and demonstrate those things that would make us worthwhile in the eyes of another, particularly the interviewer.

It can be daunting at the best of times. What we bring to the table is not always revealed by an examination of skills and talents. Without considering the dignity of the whole person, it is difficult to gain a true sense of a person. This is particularly so if we only get an executive summary or a snapshot. Truly, what any person brings to the table transcends abilities and objects. We all bring a great deal more to the table, and there are different types of tables.

We all have encumbrances. That is to say, we all carry many things

throughout our day, both literally and figuratively. In the literal sense, we carry the items we need to get us through our workday: keys, wallet, cellphone, handbag, briefcase. We carry books, paper, laptops, tablets—an array of daily-use items that accompany us day in and day out. If you are like me, you may have a table or nightstand where you set said items at the end of each day. I have a small coffee table near the kitchen where my ritual evening unloading of pockets and my ritual morning reloading occur. Often we do not pay these items much mind—unless we misplace them. Losing a cellphone or another electronic device these days is, sadly, almost like losing a limb. That’s why my table is a great place for me. I am able to find those objects I have come to rely on for work and communication.

All kidding aside, we know that the literal carrying of items is part of the world of work and part of life. We also know, however, that we carry much more than physical items; we all carry our own cross, our own burdens. As educational leaders, we often let looking after the needs of others outweigh or take precedence over managing our own needs. Is this healthy? What advice can we find

in Scripture that will help us when it comes to carrying burdens? Is there another more helpful table?

The first place many of us look for advice on carrying our daily burdens is Matthew 11:28–30 (NRSV):

Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.

This is a great place to start! We are reminded that, as in the inspirational story “Footprints,” there are times in our life when God, realizing our great weariness, lifts us up and carries us: “During your times of trial and suffering, when you see only one set of footprints, it was then that I carried you.”¹ The gentleness and humbleness of heart mentioned in Matthew serve as exemplars that it is OK to trust in God and to “let go and let God” take on our pain, frustrations and burdens. It is comforting to know that we can find rest.

The most difficult part of this gracious and unconditional offer is simply accepting it. For many

leaders, it is hard to heed our own advice, which is so often dispensed to those whom we lead and serve. How many times have you told someone to take the time to get some rest and get well, yet not heeded your own advice? Why is it that we become martyrs to the very things we advise others to guard against? In Isaiah 58:6 (NRSV) we are reminded “to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free.” We need to remember to include ourselves in this wisdom.

In his opening remarks at the Edmonton Catholic Schools Faith Development Day (FDD), held at the Shaw Conference Centre on January 31, 2012, Archbishop Richard S Smith reminded the assembly that there is a table whereupon one’s pain, suffering, troubles and encumbrances can be placed. He described this table as a place to set all of one’s troubles before the Lord. In referencing the altar and the Eucharist, Archbishop Smith reinforced the idea that although everyone carries the burden of sin, when we lay it upon the altar before Jesus, who atones for all of humanity, our troubles, worries and burdens will be eased. We need only approach the table with a trusting heart. Unfortunately, many of us do not accept the invitation to do so. Instead, we try to make our own way and get distracted or lost.

In a recent series of keynote talks in Edmonton, including at FDD and at Our Lady of Perpetual Help Church in Sherwood Park, British religious educator David Wells keyed in on the fact that many people are too busy these days to see the big picture. By *big*

picture, he meant the most important things in life, such as our families and our health. He suggested that “we don’t know how to do anything, except to be busy.”² He said that when asked “How are you?” many people in the UK would respond by saying “Busy, very busy, terribly busy.” He joked that people in Alberta probably would not respond in the same way. The truth is, we have let how busy we are define how successful we are, and have even let it define our self-worth. Wells attributes much of our stress-related health issues to the constant busyness that pervades daily life. If we do not seek out quiet time and time to decompress, it is difficult to de-stress. Instead, we begin to *distress*.

This brings us back to the idea of encumbrances. We get so focused on the many little things that we lose sight of the big picture. This is why we need to remember to take time, quiet time, to go to the table and set our burdens before God. In Philippians 4:6–7 (NRSV) we are reminded,

Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Religious leaders like Archbishop Smith and David Wells are a true blessing. Their words offer comfort and solace, point us to Scripture and offer wise advice — advice we can all take to heart, advice that helps us find our path along the narrow way.

Scriptural Readings

For more passages about rest, explore the following:

- “He said, ‘My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest’” (Exodus 33:14 NRSV).
- “For thus said the Lord God, the Holy One of Israel: ‘In returning and rest you shall be saved; in quietness and in trust shall be your strength’” (Isaiah 30:15 NRSV).
- “The effect of righteousness will be peace, and the result of righteousness, quietness and trust forever. My people will abide in a peaceful habitation, in secure dwellings, and in quiet resting places” (Isaiah 32:17–18 NRSV).
- “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid” (John 14:27 NRSV).
- “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and the God of all consolation, who consoles us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to console those who are in any affliction with the consolation with which we ourselves are consoled by God” (2 Corinthians 1:3–4 NRSV).

Notes

1. Attributed to Mary Stevenson.
2. As reported by Gonzalez (2012).

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Natural LIFE

Michael Marien

Michael Marien is the faith life and curriculum coordinator for St Thomas Aquinas Roman Catholic Schools, in Leduc. He is also a sessional lecturer at Newman Theological College.

We all have recurring themes in our memories of childhood—powerful streams of memory, not of isolated events but of rituals and activities that have made us who we are. My father was responsible for one such stream. Countless times during our formative years, Dad would take his three boys for a weekend walk. No matter what the season, we would go for a trip to a nearby nature trail, leaving Mom at home. God bless Mom. She knew this was bonding time for the boys—and no doubt a break for her too.

I remember the glory that is autumn in Ontario—vistas of brilliant red, orange and yellow mixed with evergreen. And there were walks in the dead of winter—snow blanketing the hills and valleys, frost on our breath and a silence that called us to reflection. In spring, babbling brooks announced the melting snow, songbirds proclaimed their joy, and everywhere was the smell of a fresh beginning. I also remember that there was not a lot of loud talk

on those nature walks but a great deal of exploration, questioning and laughter.

I am convinced that this nurturing in the world of nature has had a profound impact on my spirituality and my faith.

Losing the Natural World

Today, there is a disturbing amount of evidence that our children have little or no experience of the natural world. Research based on personal interviews with groups of children varying in age from preschool to age nine found that their attitudes toward various aspects of the natural environment (rain, wildflowers, trees, birds) included more expressions of fear and dislike than appreciation, caring or enjoyment (Simmons 1994).

A US Environmental Protection Agency (1989) report notes that most people, including children, spend 90 per cent of their time indoors. Dennis Ownby, chief of allergy and immunology at the Medical College of Georgia, says that “maybe part of the reason we have so many children with allergies and asthma is we live too clean a life” (Greene 2002). By limiting our experience of the

natural world, we have stunted our children’s, and our own, natural intelligence. Early experiences with the natural world have been positively linked with the development of imagination and a sense of wonder. A sense of wonder is an important motivator for lifelong learning (Wilson 1997).

Indeed, most children today have “nature-deficit disorder,” a term coined by Richard Louv (2005) in his book *Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children from Nature-Deficit Disorder*. He argues that sensationalist media coverage and paranoid parents have scared children straight out of the woods and fields, while promoting a litigious culture of fear that favours “safe” regimented sports over imaginative play. It is up to us as parents and educators to reclaim outdoor play experiences for our kids, as well as developing activities that will stimulate their natural intelligence.¹

Natural Intelligence in Religious Studies

Bernadette Stankard (2003), in her book *How Each Child Learns*, uses Howard Gardner’s theory of multiple intelligences as a guide for religious education and faith formation. Gardner defines

naturalist intelligence as an ability to discriminate between living things and having sensitivity to the natural world.

So how do we embrace natural LIFE? I suggest four ways:

- *Bring faith and natural science experiences together.* Stankard describes a number of ways a science lesson can easily morph into a lesson in faith. In one ingenious example, a plate, white bread, peanut butter, brown bread, jam and dark rye bread are used to represent sediment layers in a river. She then compares the rock layers to the many aspects of faith development (pp 70–71). When we access our religious imagination, it soon becomes second nature to make faith connections for our students.
- *Look for nature in Scripture.* Besides the obvious example of Genesis 1, the Bible is teeming with passages that connect our souls with our Creator. Stankard uses a variety of gospel stories to bring home the connection (pp 66, 71). One could use the Palm Sunday reading of Jesus's entry into Jerusalem and ask, "What kinds of palms were used? Are they the same as the ones we receive today? Why a palm?" Another powerful example is the narrative of the temptation of Jesus: "When Jesus was tempted in the desert, what dangers did He face?" In fact, Jesus uses the natural order all the time. In Matthew 24:32 (NRSV), He tells us to "from the fig tree learn its lesson." Jesus is pointing out the importance of our natural intelligence as an entry point for understanding the kingdom of God.
- *Pray using natural intelligence.* One way of praying in this way

is to take something from nature—a rock, a flower, a leaf—and ask God to show you what you can learn from this object, or how that object symbolizes you and your life. Sketching nature is another contemplative act that combines a number of our intelligences. Or how about having students plant a garden for the school community? Such a project is a reflection of both interiority and service.

- *Take a walk. Be still. Listen.* Any retreat in a natural setting should contain a nature walk. This can be a difficult task: our kids are too "wired" to pay close attention, or to simply be still. You will need to start in small doses, so they can move into a more contemplative stance. The school playground can harbour all sorts of natural delights, all worthy of God's praise. If feasible, have students come out for a night class, where they can look through telescopes or sit by a bonfire. Above all, teach them to be silent in the woods, to encounter God in the stillness.

A Final Story

This concludes my final Embrace LIFE article, as I am retiring in June and beginning the next phase of my spiritual journey. I would like to leave you with a story-gift from Terry Hershey's (2009, 7–8) *The Power of Pause*.

Every day after school, a rabbi's son would go out in the woods for a half hour or more. The rabbi was troubled by his son's behaviour and asked him why he was going into the woods. This conversation followed:

"Oh, Papa," the son replied.
"There is no need to worry. I go into the woods to pray. It is in

the woods that I can talk to God."

"Oh," the rabbi said, clearly relieved. "But, as the son of a rabbi, you should know that God is the same everywhere."

"Yes, Papa. I know that God is the same everywhere. But, I am not."

Blessings and peace!

Notes

1. See <http://richardlouv.com>.

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Forgiveness and Reconciliation

Dorothy Burns

On Ash Wednesday, as people received ashes on their forehead, they heard the words “Repent and believe in the gospel.” The Greek word for *repent* is *metanoeo* or, as a noun, *metanoia*. The word suggests a complete change of thought or behaviour, with an emotional element of regret or sorrow. It is very easy for us to say we are sorry, but are we truly repentant?

I recall a little boy in my Grade 2 class many years ago who was always in trouble. Even at the tender age of seven, he had a stubborn, defiant streak when it came to classroom order and rules. The word *sorry* rolled off his lips. A few months into the school year, after a very trying couple of days with him, I had come to my wits’ end. He was saying sorry for the umpteenth time, and I’d had enough.

I said, “I don’t accept your apology.”

This stopped him in his tracks and he asked, “Why not?”

“Because you are not really sorry. If you were, you would change your behaviour.”

In that moment, I gained new insight into how repentance is not just about saying you are sorry but about demonstrating through your

actions that you mean it. The young boy and I were able to make some progress that year, but it was slow going, with numerous relapses. Once we do make a change in our lives, in any area, we still have a lot of work ahead of us. Forgiveness is the first step in the much larger task of reconciliation.

In the week or so before Lent, the following question was posed online to the community of religious educators of which I am a member (the Religious Education Network, a working committee of the Council of Catholic School Superintendents of Alberta):

If someone has made a mistake and is truly repentant for their sin and asks forgiveness, is it our obligation to forgive?

Various members of the network responded to this question, and their collective wisdom helped to create an insightful, well-nuanced answer with references to several helpful resources. With their permission, I share their responses.

Ah, to forgive or not to forgive . . . that is the question. And I think Jesus gave us the answer often in Scripture . . . as difficult as it is to put into practice!

- “For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father

will also forgive you; but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses” (Matthew 6:14–15).

- “Then Peter came and said to him, ‘Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?’ Jesus said to him, ‘Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times’” (Matthew 18:21–22).
- “Forgive, and you will be forgiven” (Luke 6:37).
- “If another disciple sins, you must rebuke the offender, and if there is repentance, you must forgive. And if the same person sins against you seven times a day, and turns back to you seven times a day and says, ‘I repent,’ you must forgive” (Luke 17:3–4).
- “Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you must also forgive” (Colossians 3:13).

Susan Barylo,
Archdiocese of Edmonton

Is it our obligation to forgive? There’s the challenge. Forgiveness truly comes from the heart, and that’s what we see in Jesus’s life and modelling. When we use the

word *obligation*, it somehow suggests that we forgive because of the strength of our will and concerted effort to do so. I think we truly forgive through the grace of God . . . not by some decision and then a powering through it, so to speak. It is only through our surrender in prayer and openness to God's healing in our own hearts that forgiveness begins to overpower us and pours out authentically. It is our obligation to pray and to stay open to understanding how to forgive. We need to want to forgive. It is grace that actually allows us to forgive.

*MaryAnne Murphy,
Holy Spirit Catholic Schools*

Forgiveness . . . I believe that forgiveness is one of the hardest things to do. It is hard to forgive someone for the hurt they have caused you, but I believe it is necessary or it will eat away at you and cause other health problems as well.

Yes, Jesus says we should forgive, but we do not have to forget, but learn from it so the hurt or pain may not happen again.

We have many things that happen to us daily in life or people

say things that can cause us pain or hurt, but if we do not let go and let God take care of it, then we carry too much baggage.

So we should try to forgive; otherwise, we let other people have control over our lives. Is it an obligation? Yes, that is a challenge. I believe, like MaryAnne, that it has to be a choice of the individual and the timing, and a person has to be ready to do so.

Does the person truly want to carry that hurt around and have it cause you negative energy, or do we get to a point and say it is not worth wasting that energy on the issue anymore and finally let go? It does take lots of strength, courage and prayers and a lot of faith as well.

*Alene Mutala,
Elk Island Catholic Schools*

Perhaps the distinctions between forgiveness and reconciliation are useful. Perhaps useful too is the psychological dimension of forgiveness and healing. Dennis Linn, Sheila Fabricant Linn and Matthew Linn have an interesting reflection in *Don't Forgive Too Soon: Extending the Two Hands That Heal* (Paulist Press, 1997). Their approach sees

forgiveness as an ongoing process rather than one simple act.

*Charlie Weckend,
Fort McMurray Catholic Schools*

We are called to forgive, but that doesn't mean we will necessarily forget, or put up with abusive behaviour. Let's say a woman is being physically abused by her husband. She should not forgive the abuse until he has stopped the pattern. Her best option may be to leave him so he can get help. Forgiveness is all about wanting what's best for the other.

A good video of this for youth and adults is *Luggage*, by Rob Bell (www.youtube.com/watch?v=_rNnWDWoWnA).

Another great DVD is *The Big Question*. (See <http://bigquestionthemovie.com>.)

Nancy Reeves (www.nancyreeves.com) is a Canadian speaker on the topic. She also speaks on grieving and loss.

*Michael Marien,
St Thomas Aquinas Catholic Schools*

In a broken world, there will always be need for forgiveness and reconciliation. As followers of Jesus, we must do our part to bring that healing to the world.



We are there for you!



The Alberta Teachers' Association

www.teachers.ab.ca



Specialist councils' role in promoting diversity, equity and human rights

Alberta's rapidly changing demographics are creating an exciting cultural diversity that is reflected in the province's urban and rural classrooms. The new landscape of the school provides an ideal context in which to teach students that strength lies in diversity. The challenge that teachers face is to capitalize on the energy of today's intercultural classroom mix to lay the groundwork for all students to succeed. To support teachers in their critical roles as leaders in inclusive education, in 2000 the Alberta Teachers' Association established the Diversity, Equity and Human Rights Committee (DEHRC).

DEHRC aims to assist educators in their legal, professional and ethical responsibilities to protect all students and to maintain safe, caring and inclusive learning environments. Topics of focus for DEHRC include intercultural education, inclusive learning communities, gender equity, UNESCO Associated Schools Project Network, sexual orientation and gender variance.

Here are some activities the DEHR committee undertakes:

- Studying, advising and making recommendations on policies that reflect respect for diversity, equity and human rights
- Offering annual Inclusive Learning Communities Grants (up to \$2,000) to support activities that support inclusion
- Producing *Just in Time*, an electronic newsletter that can be found at www.teachers.ab.ca; Teaching in Alberta; Diversity, Equity and Human Rights.
- Providing and creating print and web-based teacher resources
- Creating a list of presenters on DEHR topics
- Supporting the Association instructor workshops on diversity

Specialist councils are uniquely situated to learn about diversity issues directly from teachers in the field who see how diversity issues play out in subject areas. Specialist council members are encouraged to share the challenges they may be facing in terms of diversity in their own classrooms and to incorporate these discussions into specialist council activities, publications and conferences.

Diversity, equity and human rights affect the work of all members. What are you doing to make a difference?

Further information about the work of the DEHR committee can be found on the Association's website at www.teachers.ab.ca under Teaching in Alberta, Diversity, Equity and Human Rights.

Alternatively, contact Andrea Berg, executive staff officer, Professional Development, at andrea.berg@ata.ab.ca for more information.



Guidelines

The RMEC newsjournal *Embrace the Spirit* is published to

- promote professional development of educators in the areas of religious and moral education and
- provide a forum for contributors to share ideas related to religious and moral education.

Submissions are requested that will provide material for personal reflection, theoretical consideration and practical application. Where appropriate, graphics and photographs are welcome.

The following areas will be addressed in the newsjournal:

- Classroom and school projects
- Upcoming events
- Book reviews
- Reflections
- Feature articles and interviews
- Humour in religion
- Liturgies

Manuscripts should be submitted electronically, in Microsoft Word format. The manuscript should include a title page that states the author's name, professional position, address and phone number(s). Submissions should be typed and double-spaced and may be any length to a maximum of 5,000 words. References must appear in full in a list at the end of the article.

Send contributions or enquiries to the editor: Dorothy Burns, 1 McRae Street, Box 1318, Okotoks, AB T1S 1B3; phone 403-938-6051 (res) or 403-938-4265 (bus); fax 403-938-4575; e-mail dburns@redeemer.ab.ca.

The editorial board, which reserves the right to edit for clarity and space, reviews all submissions.

