

# *Embrace the Spirit*

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Volume 15, Number 2, Winter 2013



Newsjournal of the  
Religious and Moral Education Council  
The Alberta Teachers' Association



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# Embrace the Spirit



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Individual copies of this newsjournal can be ordered at the following prices: 1 to 4 copies, \$7.50 each; 5 to 10 copies, \$5.00 each; over 10 copies, \$3.50 each. Please add 5 per cent shipping and handling and 5 per cent GST. Please contact Distribution at Barnett House to place your order. In Edmonton, dial 780-447-9432; toll free in Alberta, dial 1-800-232-7208, ext 432.

This newsjournal is available on microfilm from Micromedia Limited, Acquisitions/CEI, 20 Victoria Street, Toronto, ON M5C 2N8.

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## *A Note from the Editor*

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As I write this, snow is gently falling; a couple of days ago, someone pointed out to me that there are just eight more weekends until Christmas. Time passes so swiftly. Life passes so quickly. This has been brought home to me in the past few months by so many things, especially the deaths of four people to whom I am connected, ranging from 21 to 83 years old. We have no guarantee how much time each one of us has been given, so we should not waste a single moment of it but use it well doing as much good as we can. In some of the articles in this issue you will meet many people who do just that—spend their time doing good.

For only the second time in eight or nine years I was unable to attend the RMEC conference. Much to my surprise, about five days before the conference I learned that I was to be the recipient of the Dr Peter Craigie Leadership Award. I am deeply touched—it is always humbling and a privilege to be recognized by your peers. The other award recipients are examples of people who spend their time doing good.

As promised in the spring, there is an article on the legacy of Pope Benedict XVI. As I did the research for this article, my love and respect for this gentle and holy man deepened greatly. When I consider the challenges my mother faces as an octogenarian, I see that it is truly the work of the Holy Spirit that a man of his age can carry the workload he did for eight years. A great complement to my article is Michael Coren's on his newly published book, *The Future of Catholicism*, which was precipitated by the new and thought-provoking pontificate of Pope Francis I. Coren was the keynote speaker at this year's conference.

The good people in Holy Family Catholic Regional Division No 37 have hit upon a great way to engage students and families in their faith, which you will enjoy learning about.

We are pleased to offer an article in French about the mission trip to Nicaragua by the staff and students from l'École Maurice-Lavallée, in Edmonton.

We continue with our "Fides et Ratio" series and bring back our "Reflections" section, which has been missing for a while. All in all, I think you will find everything a good read.

Have a blessed Advent and Christmas—we will see you in the spring.

*Dorothy Burns*



## From the President

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**I**t has been an exciting and historic time in the Catholic world. With barely a warning, Pope Benedict announced his retirement and officially relinquished the chair of Peter on February 28, 2013. For a brief time the seat was vacant—*sede vacante*. Two weeks later, the white smoke plumed from the smokestack; the Argentinian Cardinal, Jorge Mario Bergoglio, was elected and became Pope Francis.

Pope Francis has impressed right from the beginning. Everything, from paying his own hotel bill to riding a bus with other cardinals after he became pope to making personal phone calls to people who have lost loved ones,

shows that Pope Francis is a pope of the people. A woman who was rejected by her boyfriend after he got her pregnant was consoled by a phone call she received from the Pontiff, who commended her for not considering abortion and offered to personally baptize her baby.

The new pope has not shied away from the media. He has called for a refocus on the entirety of Christ's message because there are many who, when they think of the Church, focus on the unpopular teachings, which are almost exclusively of a sexual nature (for instance, no one condemns the Church for being against tax evasion or unjust wars.)

Catholics and non-Catholics alike need to realize that the Church is more than a condemner of moral evils. The Church is a purveyor of the love, compassion, forgiveness and justice of Christ. In Catholic schools, teachers whose faith truly permeates their classrooms embody all of these characteristics in every interaction with fellow staff, parents and, especially, the students.

As the late Cardinal Jaime Sin of Manila once wrote,

Strength without compassion is violence.

Compassion without justice is sentiment.

Justice without love is Marxism.

And ... love without justice is baloney!

*Carl Fakeley*



## *Editorial Board 2012/13*

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Dorothy Burns, Editor, Christ the Redeemer Catholic Schools, Okotoks

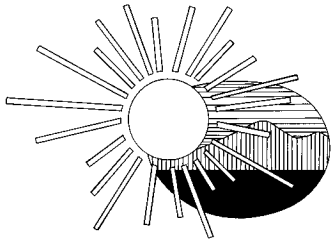
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Lea Foy, Lakeland Catholic Schools, Bonnyville

Brenda Hamilton, St Angela Elementary School, Edmonton

Sharon Malec, retired , Lethbridge

Sandy Talarico, Newman Theological College and Edmonton Catholic Schools



### **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.



# RMEC Awards 2013

Sharon Malec

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*Sharon Malec is past president of the Religious and Moral Education Council.*

## Dawn Kirvan Award of Merit—Collaboration

Presented to the school communities of Holy Family Academy and St Joseph's Collegiate, Brooks, Alberta

The schools were nominated by Dorothy Burns, director of religious education. Letters of support were provided by Bonnie Annicchiarico, associate superintendent, Christ the Redeemer Catholic Schools, and Kelly Timmons, president of Chinook Local No 29.

With the shutdown of the XL Meat Packing Plant in Brooks, coupled with a 32 per cent student population increase, the staff of both schools mobilized to make sure that both the learning needs and basic needs of their students were met. In collaboration with the community of Brooks, they met the challenge. Free lunches and a breakfast cart operated in the schools. The annual "Cultures of Christmas" evening was held, giving parents the opportunity to shop free for Christmas gifts for their children. Other schools within Christ the Redeemer School

Division, St Vincent de Paul emergency services and food banks aided the staff.

The staffs of these schools are very deserving groups who have collaboratively demonstrated the values of faith, dignity and respect.

Jennifer Stengler, acting principal of Holy Family Academy, and Rob Hartery, teacher at St Joseph's Collegiate, represented the schools. It is a great pleasure that the first Dawn Kirvan Award was presented to Holy Family Academy and St Joseph's Collegiate. Dawn would have been proud!

## Dr Peter Craigie Leadership Award

Presented to Dorothy Burns, journal editor, *Embrace the Spirit*  
Nominated by Sharon Malec, with support letter from Cynthia Malner-Charest and supporting comments by Carl Fakeley.

Dorothy is a steadfast, organized and very active executive member. She assumed the editorship of *Embrace the Spirit* in 2003. Under her leadership, the journal has grown and become an invaluable source of information and inspiration for teachers. The journal also regularly includes artwork, information about school divisions, and

contributions from Newman staff and students.

On another note, Dorothy saw the great contributions of the schools in Brooks and nominated them. She is always looking for the good in teachers, schools and communities.

Dorothy has been an integral part of the preschool/junior kindergarten religion program and other programs that have contributed to the well-being of the students. Dorothy has made such a positive difference in our lives. Thank you, Dorothy.

## William D Hrychuk Memorial Award

Presented to Mark Nixon  
Nominated by Carmen Mombourquette, supported by Fr Gary Sedgwick, Cynthia Malner-Charest and Sharon Malec.

Mark has been a member of the Religious and Moral Education Council of the ATA since 1988. He has served as conference director, vice-president, president and past president. As past president, he initiated the review of the mission statement, vision and values of the council through strategic grants. Mark began the review, addition and reclassification of the awards

that are presented at the annual RMEC conference.

Mark is a tireless worker. He helped young men and women form a solid foundation in their own faith development journey. He has served as a teacher, lead teacher and chaplain at Catholic Central High School, in Lethbridge. Mark was a major

contributor to Holy Spirit School Division faith days and the DREC council.

Fr Gary relates that Mark introduced him to other Christian communities. In all his work, Mark has always demonstrated his faith in God and his belief in the goodness of all those he has encountered; he has sought to build

bridges in the community for his students and to build and affirm relationships within the community at large.

Mark's unwavering commitment to RMEC, his great sense of humour, wisdom and common-sense approach to leadership make him a very deserving recipient of this award.



# The Legacy of Pope Benedict XVI

*Dorothy Burns*

**E**lected at the age of 78, Pope Benedict XVI was the oldest person to have been elected pope since Pope Clement XII (1730–40). Our world is very different from that of Pope Clement—at a time when many people, especially in North America and Europe, plan to retire by the age of 55, the pace that Benedict maintained during his almost eight-year reign is a testament to the power of the Holy Spirit. Here is a man who, after the example of Christ, has poured out his whole life for the Church and the world.

From 1981, long before he was elected Pope, Benedict, known as Cardinal Ratzinger, was serving the church in the position of prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. A major contribution in that role was the publication of the catechism of the Catholic Church, in 1992. There had not been an official catechism published since the Council of Trent (1545–63).

Blessed John Paul II made 104 trips outside of Italy during the 27 years of his reign, but remember—he started at the age of 58. Benedict's itinerary (21 trips) is pretty impressive for an octogenarian who was in the position for only eight years.<sup>1</sup>

## A Chronological List of Pope Benedict's Trips Outside Italy

- August 16–21, 2005—World Youth Day in Cologne, Germany
- May 25–28, 2006—Poland
- July 8–9, 2006—Fifth World Meeting of Families, Spain
- September 9–14, 2006—Germany
- November 28–December 1, 2006—Turkey
- May 2007—Brazil
- September 7–9, 2007—Austria
- July 13–21, 2008—World Youth Day, Sydney, Australia
- September 15, 2008—Our Lady of Lourdes Shrine, France
- March 17–23, 2009—Cameroon and Angola
- May 8–15, 2009—Pilgrimage to the Holy Land
- September 26–28, 2009—Czech Republic
- April 17–18, 2010—Malta
- May 11–14, 2010—Portugal
- June 2010—Cyprus
- September 16–19, 2010—Great Britain
- June 4–5, 2011—Croatia
- August 18–21, 2011—World Youth Day, Madrid
- September 22–25, 2011—Germany
- November 18–20, 2011—Africa
- March 23–29, 2012—Mexico and Cuba (where he met Fidel Castro)

## List of Synods

When he wasn't on the road, Benedict often met with bishops from around the world on special topics. These meetings, called

*synods*, usually result in some publication approved by the pope.

- October 3–23, 2005—Synod of Bishops on the Eucharist, followed by the publication (March 13, 2007) of the apostolic exhortation on the Eucharist, *Sacramentum Caritatis* (The Sacrament of Charity)
- October 8, 2008—Commencement of the Synod of Bishops on the Word of God, followed by the apostolic exhortation on the word of God in the life and mission of the world, *Verbum Domini* (September 2010)
- October 4–25, 2009—Synod of Bishops on Africa
- October 2010—Synod of Bishops on the Middle East

At Pope Benedict's initiative, we had three special years: Year of Saint Paul (2007–08), Year of Priests (2009–10) and Year of Faith (2012–13).

## Pope Benedict's Other Writings

He published three encyclicals, which are of an official nature, and completed a three-volume reflection on Jesus of Nazareth, which is a personal reflection and not an official church document. Benedict's writing style is engaging and accessible and will provide much food for thought for years to come.

- December 25, 2005—Encyclical *Deus Caritas Est* (*God is Love*)
- April 2007—*Jesus of Nazareth* (volume 1)
- November 30, 2007—Encyclical *Spe Salvi* (*Saved in Hope*)

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<sup>1</sup> Source for dates and events: "His Papacy, 2005–2013," *National Catholic Register*, March 10, 2013

- June 29, 2009—Encyclical *Caritas in Veritate* (*Charity in Truth*)
- March 10, 2011—*Jesus of Nazareth: Holy Week* (volume 2)
- November 20, 2012—*Jesus of Nazareth: The Infancy Narratives* (volume 3)

In addition to all of this, in other documents and letters he addressed the liturgy, made it possible for congregations of Anglicans to enter the Catholic Church and retain aspects of their liturgy and traditions, and dealt with the sex abuse scandal. On some of his trips he met with victims of sexual abuse.

When in Rome, Pope Benedict also maintained the schedule of Wednesday audiences, which traditionally are catechetical sessions in which he discussed Church fathers, saints, biblical commentary and the art of prayer.

In his pre-Vatican life he was a theologian and professor known for his excellent lectures. He

continued to use this style of communication as pope. There are four lectures of particular note:<sup>2</sup>

- 2006, Regensburg, Germany—He said that “faith cannot demand what is contrary to reason, especially in regard to violence.” This set off a series of protests, especially in the Muslim world.
- 2007, Paris, Collège des Bernardins—He pointed out that “reason without faith becomes turned in on itself and unable to answer man’s fundamental questions.”
- 2010, Westminster, Great Britain—In reference to St Thomas More he underlined “the importance of conscience in political life.”
- 2011, Bundestag, Berlin—“Politics without truth renders the state a ‘band of robbers.’”

Then there was the day-to-day administration: meeting with foreign diplomats, appointing bishops and cardinals, and the *ad*

*limina* visits of bishops from around the world—every five years all the bishops of the world by country or continent groupings get a meeting with the pope to report on the state of the church in their part of the world.

He also brought the papacy and the Vatican into the 21st century with respect to communication. On April 25, 2005, he announced his e-mail address, benedictxvi@vatican.va; on January 23, 2009, the Vatican YouTube channel was launched; and on December 12, 2012, he debuted on Twitter as @Pontifex.

This reserved, cultured man, one of the greatest Catholic theologians of the 20th century, in eight years made a gargantuan contribution to the Church and the world. We are truly blessed that such a learned and holy man has committed the rest of his earthly life to praying for us and our world. Well done, good and faithful servant (Matthew 25:23).

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<sup>2</sup> Quotes from Father Raymond J de Souza, “Teacher of Truth,” *National Catholic Register*, March 10–23, 2013

# Reflections on the Future of Catholicism

Michael Coren

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*Michael Coren was the keynote speaker at the 2013 RMEC fall conference. His recently released book, *The Future of Catholicism*, reflects on the shaking up that appears to be happening with our new pope. Michael Coren is a television host, a weekly columnist with the Toronto, Ottawa, Calgary, Edmonton and Winnipeg Sun, and best-selling author of 14 books.*

When my publisher phoned and asked me to write a new book, quickly, what could I say? That publisher is Random House, which has published my last two books so well and successfully. Of course, I agreed, I wrote the book, they and I are pleased with it, and *The Future of Catholicism* (Signal Books) was released on November 5, 2013.

The reason for the request, of course, is that there is a new Pope—one who is shaking things up quite a lot, leading Catholics and non-Catholics alike to ask questions about, well, the future of Catholicism.

What I have tried to do in the book is respond to the most common questions, and to outline how the Church of the coming years might adapt and reform, or not adapt and reform. The latter is important, because as I explain in a long chapter about same-sex marriage and others about abortion and contraception, female ordination, papal authority, and euthanasia, there are certain aspects of Catholicism that not only will not but cannot change. The moral and Scriptural teaching of Catholicism is precisely that, and morality and Scriptural truth,

Biblical example, and early Church history do not change.

When Pope Francis was first elected, I was interviewed on various Canadian television and radio shows. The questions were invariably based more on liberal wishful thinking than any understanding of Catholic theology. One TV morning show host, dripping relativist enthusiasm, asked me, “Will Pope Francis be softening the Church’s stance on gay marriage and women, and will he be less tough on abortion?” I replied, “Oh yes, and he’s going to become a Muslim as well.” The humour was not understood at all. So I followed quickly with, “No, he will not.” The disappointment on the host’s face was tragic.

The Pope has obviously beguiled the media, and for the moment they adore him. I predict that the honeymoon will not last. He has also, however, rattled a few serious and devout Catholics out of their comfort zones. I explain in the book how his words have been horribly and clumsily misinterpreted, but also argue that occasionally he could and should have been perhaps less opaque in his statements. Still, the reality is that he has at no point led and will never lead the Church and Catholics astray, and what he is really saying is that the conversation has to be moved a little, and that if we are to be heard we do not compromise, but we do approach others more empathetically, more graciously and more gracefully.

He is absolutely correct. We may feel completed and grand when we are attacked or dismissed, but the

Gospel is spread not by our inner feelings of martyrdom but by a relationship with those around us. We are Catholic not to be loved but to love, and we are Catholic not to keep the truth to ourselves but to shower it over a world that often refuses to listen.

The Church of the future will be a different colour, have its heartland in different places, face greater persecution and resemble its earliest ages rather than its middle ages. Once again, this will not be comfortable for everybody; frankly, it might not always make me feel comfortable! But comfort is irrelevant. Christ, His Church, His Sacraments and God’s creatures compose the great, glorious relevance, and it is our privilege and not our tragedy that there is much work to be done.

*The Future of Catholicism* will not please everybody. Those who demand change and reformation will probably think it too conservative and orthodox. Those who are overly suspicious of Pope Francis and some of his actions may think me too supportive and admiring of the Holy Father and his plans. But then, Catholics are supposed to provoke a bit, and I’d provoke a bit even if I weren’t a Catholic. It’s a splendid time to be part of God’s Church, to be a member of the body of Christ that extends from the earliest days of history until the end of time. The future is the past, the past is the future, the present is what we have to grasp and shape.

Michael Coren’s website is [www.michaelcoren.com](http://www.michaelcoren.com), where he can be booked for 2014 speeches.

# La piqûre du Nicaragua

*Témoignage de Chantal Grégoire, enseignante et accompagnatrice des voyages d'éveil, missionnaire au Nicaragua de l'École Maurice-Lavallée d'Edmonton.*

**C**est la quatrième fois que j'y vais. Pourquoi?

Pas pour l'exotisme, ni pour pratiquer l'espagnol, ni pour le soleil ou le besoin d'évasion ...

**Alors, vraiment, pourquoi?**

La première fois que je suis allée au Nicaragua, en 2009, c'était pour vivre une expérience unique avec un groupe d'élèves privilégiés. Je

voulais voir comment ils évolueraient durant les longs préparatifs d'un tel projet puis dans un environnement qui ne leur serait en rien familier. Et j'y ai découvert des jeunes prêts à travailler, à construire, à collaborer et à penser à autre chose qu'à leurs petites misères quotidiennes. J'y ai aussi découvert l'équipe du Père Hébert et de *Roots of Change* à Managua, une famille d'accueil aimante à Cinco Pinos, et un peuple bon, chaleureux et humble.

L'année suivante, je n'ai pu résister à l'envie de joindre un groupe d'employés des conseils scolaires francophones. Il y avait peu de préparation, car nous

finançons individuellement le voyage, nous allions travailler, et j'allais retrouver « ma » famille d'accueil.

La troisième fois, en 2011, j'y retournais pour revivre une expérience avec des jeunes où persistance, résistance et patience se frayent un chemin malgré les embûches. Je n'avais pas oublié les mois de préparation, de réunions, de campagnes de financement et de coopération. Notre projet commençait aussi à faire parler de lui et une équipe de Radio-Canada nous a accompagnés. Ils ont réalisé plusieurs reportages poignants sur la réalité de la vie quotidienne dans cette contrée du monde, et

*Les jeunes de l'École Maurice-Lavallée ont, depuis 2007, contribué entre autres à l'installation d'une salle équipée d'ordinateurs, à l'agrandissement d'une maison, à la construction d'une école, de deux maisons et de sept latrines, au financement de bancs d'église, et de meubles d'école. Ils ont également offert divers ateliers dans toutes les écoles primaires de la région de Cinco Pinos.*





sur les bienfaits qu'une personnalité comme le Père Denis Hébert peut apporter aux Nicaraguayens.

J'ai souvent pensé à eux dans mon monde matérialiste et compliqué. Je me préparais ainsi à retourner au Nicaragua... En 2013, au moment de former un nouveau groupe, et sachant que mes partenaires habituels ne feraient pas partie du voyage pour des raisons familiales, j'ai relevé le défi que je savais immense et pourtant si petit comparé à celui que relève le peuple nicaraguayen jour après jour. Me voilà repartie pour des

mois de préparation avec un nouveau groupe de jeunes et une nouvelle équipe.

Que dire de plus? Je n'oublierai jamais les chantiers de construction où nous avons travaillé en collaboration avec des bénévoles de la communauté de Cinco Pinos. Ce fut une leçon de grande humilité personnelle que celle de vaincre mes faiblesses physiques et psychologiques pour aider temporairement une poignée de frères humains qui, par leur résilience, leur simplicité et leur amour, m'ont donné une leçon de vie

inoubliable. Comme enseignante, il n'y a rien de plus formateur que de guider des jeunes à organiser des activités de financement selon leurs moyens et leurs idées, de les sensibiliser à une autre réalité que la leur, et de les sortir de leur cocon plus que confortable. Il faut aussi apprendre à connaître ces jeunes, les comprendre afin de mieux les orienter, et les aider à réaliser un projet hors norme dans lequel leurs parents peuvent s'impliquer aussi, sachant que le contact avec ce coin du monde changera leur vie à jamais.





## Engaging Students and Their Families Through a Family Faith Event

*John Kuran, Jennifer Collins and Jody Bekevich*

*John Kuran is faith formation coordinator, Holy Family Catholic Regional Division No 37 (HFCRD); Jennifer Collins is faith formation coordinator, Rosary School, Manning, Alberta; and Jody Bekevich is communications coordinator, HFCRD.*

**H**oly Family Catholic Regional Division No 37 (HFCRD) operates seven schools: Good Shepherd (K–6) and Glenmary (junior/senior high school), in Peace River, Alberta; Holy Family (K–6 and junior high), in Grimshaw; Rosary (K–6 and junior high), in Manning; St Andrew’s

(K–12), in High Prairie; St Stephen’s (K–9), in Valleyview; and École Providence (K–6), in McLennan. It also operates Holy Family Cyber High out of Glenmary School, in Peace River.

This year, the division organized family faith day retreats, led by Face2Face Ministries of Saskatoon, Saskatchewan. Each day began with a celebration with the entire school in attendance. All students and staff were treated to songs and humorous skits about faith. Afterwards, each grade spent time with Face2Face Ministries in engaging, age-appropriate activities throughout the day. Jon Courchene and Masson Normand, the masterminds behind the presentations, kept the students’ attention with their creative and energy-filled ways of promoting faith.



Rosary School, in Manning, furthered its faith day experience by hosting an evening of celebration at St James the Major parish to connect the three “ours” of faith—our school, our parish and our families. The event attracted more than 125 guests and consisted of dinner and faith-filled activities hosted by Face2Face Ministries. HFCRD used this event as a pilot project to test its success before hosting a similar style event at other schools within the division.

“When planning this evening event, we wanted to make it a parish event, so we invited different parish groups to get involved,” said Jennifer Collins, event organizer and Rosary’s school faith formation coordinator. “The Knights of Columbus, the ladies at the church, the St James Choir and even the parish youth were all involved in some way. Seeing the community come together made the event even more special.”

One highlight of the evening was a group “Moving Pictionary” game after supper. This game involved a scavenger hunt in the church. Another culminating activity, the family prayer circles, made a powerful impact on all those present. The goal of

providing families with bonding opportunities was successfully achieved through these and other engaging activities.

“The presenters, Jon and Mas-son, created an awesome faith-filled atmosphere through music and testimony for all family

members to be part of! It was definitely an evening of fun, laughter and faith sharing for all in attendance,” said HFCRD’s faith formation coordinator, John Kuran. “We had guests aged 5 to 80 in attendance, and almost half were students of Rosary School. It was great to see students bring so many family members out for an evening of faith-filled energy at the church. Based on the reactions of our guests, the event was extremely successful.”

In this 2013/14 school year, HFCRD will continue hosting events of this nature in partnership with all parishes, ideally hosting them at every school and parish in the future. The combination of the school faith day followed by the family faith event at the parish is quickly proving to be an excellent opportunity of engaging students and families with their faith.





# That Our “Nones” May Believe: Arguing Against Atheism and for God’s Existence

*Tomás Rochford*

*Tomás Rochford is district department head of high school religion for Christ the Redeemer Catholic Schools and teaches high school religion at Holy Cross Collegiate. He lives with his family on an acreage outside Strathmore and is pursuing a master’s in theology from Christendom College, Front Royal, Virginia.*

As mentioned in my February article, a growing number of our students now declare themselves “nones” (atheists or agnostics). Many of our youth, lacking the philosophical depth to appreciate such labels, prefer to self-identify as nonreligious or “spiritual but *not* religious.” For Christian schools in general, and for religious education specifically, this growing trend is a cause for concern. How can catechists and moral educators succeed in spreading the Good News to students who appear, at least on the surface, to have no interest in God or the Faith? Should we use the counter-cultural model of the early Church striving to inspire and convert our students to the Gospel by witnessing to the joy that comes from living virtuously for Christ? Might we open their hearts to Christ through the example of charity

and service to our neighbour? Would the silence, beauty and prayer of Christ’s Church draw in those tired of the ephemeral culture of postmodernity? Religion teachers must definitely explore all these different avenues in their attempt to re-evangelize the youth of Western society. However, there is also another approach. We must engage the intellects of our students in such a way that they will be open to the possibility of God’s revelation. We must evangelize our students via their reason—opening their minds to the rationally knowable truths of metaphysical and moral reality (preambles of faith), the first of which is that God exists.

The first step in proving God’s existence from reason—one that I have found very effective with my Grade 10 students—is presenting the antagonists’ (atheists and agnostics) world views. It is very important for students to know some of the key arguments for atheism that have been advanced over the past few centuries. The more significant and popular of these arguments include (1) the lack of need for a creator of the universe because of the self-sufficiency of physical reality, (2) the

lack of scientific evidence for the existence of a divinity or a spiritual world and (3) the problem of evil—that is, the question of how can there be a good, all-knowing and omnipotent God if there is so much pain and suffering in the world. Presenting these arguments for atheism provides students with an opportunity to struggle with some metaphysically challenging ideas and to reflect upon their presuppositions and assumptions about “God questions.” In discussing these arguments, it is essential that they be given a fair, respectful hearing—no insults or ad hominem attacks on the intelligence of atheists/agnostics—for the propositions have, at the least, some superficial attraction and truth for the people who hold them. For example, the argument from the existence of evil quite often appeals to those who have experienced suffering, whether in their personal life, family or society, or in history (for example, “How can there be a good and loving God if events like the Holocaust and Holodomor can occur?”). Such a question is real, pertinent and essential for one’s struggle to know and love the infinite mystery that is God.



After discussing some of the objective arguments for atheism, we should also address the subjective and psychological state of our students. The pain and suffering that many face due to broken homes and lack of love are often the unexpressed cause for difficulty in accepting the love of their Heavenly Father (see Vitz 2013). Also, due to a mistaken understanding of freedom or habitual vices, some students may, like the famous French atheist Jean-Paul Sartre, not want God to exist because He limits their freedom to do and be whatever they want.

The final element in a frank and honest presentation of atheism is exposing students to a thoroughly atheistic view of reality and of the human person. This must cut through the typical pop-atheist drivel that trivializes the existential question of God's existence by merely focusing on the two effects of denying the Creator's reality: people are (1) released from unnecessary guilt, and (2) encouraged to promote peace and happiness in the "here and now" rather than in a fantasized afterlife. Reading famous atheistic thinkers helps students see that there is a great difference between the truth and a reductionistic metaphysical world view that defines the whole of reality as merely physical matter ruled by mathematical laws. For example, the famed atheist and codiscoverer of DNA, Dr Francis Crick, once wrote, "You, your joys and your sorrows, your memories and your ambitions, your sense of personal identity and free will, are in fact no more than the behaviour of a vast assembly of nerve cells

and their associated molecules." (Crick 1994, 3). In even more succinct terms, "You're nothing but a pack of neurons" (Crick 1994, 11). To be faced with such stark assessments of human existence or the universe can be quite jarring to students who think they can get along easily with some form of atheism-lite. When guided in their reading of the conclusions of serious atheists like Lucretius<sup>1</sup>, Nietzsche and Sartre, they quickly recognize that the rejection of God has far-reaching effects—one's recognition of the Creator's reality, or denial or doubting of His existence affects every facet of life.

Once students have the opportunity to reflect upon and discuss atheism and agnosticism, they may be more open to hearing the truth. They will have explored some of the limitations of life without God. They will also have had the chance to seriously engage with an issue that affects contemporary society without falling into shallow parochialism or fideism. The time is now ripe to begin engaging students' reason in search of God.

God's existence is the first preamble of faith. For obvious reasons this truth of reason is considered to be the most basic, because without God there is no existential foundation for the soul or the natural moral law. Unfortunately, one cannot hope to do justice to even one of the many valid arguments and demonstrations (logical-metaphysical) for the existence of God in the space of a few pages. It is therefore my intent to provide a simple reintroduction to some of these essential proofs with the purpose of encouraging

fellow catechists and religion teachers in their own exploration.

The first kind of proofs for the existence of God are those that are strong logical arguments that, for various reasons, do not rise to the level of incontrovertible demonstration. The most basic of these are "moral" arguments such as the existence of ethical truth, the universal desire for perfect happiness and Blessed John Henry Newman's argument from conscience. These arguments focus on an element of human experience and reason from its reality to the necessity of a transcendent cause. Although these moral arguments are very popular and often quite convincing, they are not the strongest rational proofs of God's existence, as the conclusion of each argument follows from its premises only *probably*, not *certainly*. Other, stronger arguments offered as proof of God's existence include St Augustine's eternal truths argument (that is, that universal, unchanging truths, knowable by the intellect, such as mathematical laws, are effects of a cause that is God) and St Anselm's famous ontological argument (that is, God is *that than which nothing greater can be thought*). Both of these proofs have a powerful appeal, especially to students with a mathematical mind. The ontological argument, which has vexed philosophers, theologians and scientists for more than 800 years, has recently been reworked as a strictly mathematical proof by the famous mathematician Kurt Gödel.<sup>2</sup> Finally, for those of a more empirical bent, both scientists and philosophers have come to recognize that the

<sup>1</sup> In my RS 15 class we read excerpts from Lucretius's *On the Nature of Things*.

<sup>2</sup> For an excellent and simple introduction to twenty of various rational arguments for God's existence see Kreeft and Tacelli (1994, chapter 3, and 2009). For a more in-depth look at some of these and other arguments for the existence of God, see Craig and Moreland (2012).

scientific view of the universe shows it to be incomplete and perhaps in need of some extra-universal being to account for its origin (cosmogenesis) and its fine tuning (see Spitzer 2010). While such arguments are, again, not strictly demonstrative, they do show how science itself seems to point toward God's existence and creative activity.

The second kind of proof for the existence of God is stronger than the first. These proofs are properly called *metaphysical demonstrations*, which means that their conclusions are necessarily true if their premises are true. Two of the best demonstrations of this sort are the *cosmological argument* and the *teleological argument*. In the former, the contingent, changing and caused state of the physical universe is seen to necessitate the existence of a Being who is existence itself—perfect, unchanging, and yet able to bring all things into existence and maintain them in existence. Without such a Being (God) nothing could have ever come into existence, and nothing could continue in existence. In simpler terms, God's creative and providential power makes Him more like a musician whose creation—music—stops when he ceases to play his instrument, rather than like a carpenter who builds a house then leaves, letting it continue its existence with no further need for his intervention (Feser 2008, 87–88). The teleological argument, on the other hand, demonstrates that the order and

goal-directedness (finality) of all physical reality means that there must necessarily exist a Being that is the final end or Intelligent Designer.<sup>3</sup> Without such a Being, the purposeful activity that is observed everywhere in the universe, especially in nonrational and nonconscious beings, would be impossible. And yet, the universe is chock full of ordered and purposeful (end-directed) activity, from the relations of subatomic particles to the complex processes of cellular respiration and photosynthesis in plants. Therefore, some sort of governing intelligence is required: the providential Being we call God.<sup>4</sup>

At this point it is necessary to deal with some objections, similar to those mentioned in a previous article, against the preambles of the faith. First, there will be those who, for ostensibly pious motives, will declare that proving God's existence by reason is impossible, and therefore we merely need to believe in Him based on the authority of scripture and/or tradition. Second, other objectors will say that since no one has ever been argued into following the Lord with all their heart, soul and strength, such demonstrations are useless for evangelization (Deuteronomy 6:4–6). However, these objections fall flat for a number of reasons, not the least of which is a subtle fideism that denies the importance and dignity of human reason. As rational beings made in the image and likeness of God, reason is one of our most wonder-

ful gifts. Therefore, failing to appeal to reason to bring people to Christ means failing to reach an integral part of the human person. It seems that instead of relying only on emotional or volitional arguments, we must rather appeal to all facets of the human person by evangelizing via truth, goodness, beauty, and Christian witness and service. As an example of this multidimensional evangelization I would recommend St Thomas Aquinas, the "Angelical Doctor of the Church." The very same man who penned the beautiful hymns *Pange Lingua* and *Lauda Sion* and produced famous treatises on demonstrating the existence of God (Five Ways) also wrote of the necessity of God's revelation that "in order that salvation should come to men more suitably and more surely, it was necessary for them to be instructed in divine things through Divine Revelation."<sup>5</sup> Thus, to appeal to reason does not mean that there is less need for the truths of the Faith, but rather that they will be more solidly grounded and more appealing if the preambles are known.

In concluding this brief response to atheism and reintroduction to the proofs for God's existence, I would like to encourage teachers to continue examining the rational arguments for the existence of God that flow from the rich patrimony of our Christian faith and that are reaffirmed by the First Vatican Council and the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*.<sup>6</sup> Because we

<sup>3</sup> Not to be confused with "Intelligent Design," or ID, which tries to argue from the irreducible complexity of living organisms. ID proponents tend to deny the veracity of the evolutionary account of biological development. The teleological argument, or "Intelligent Designer," is only in conflict with a simplistic materialism, not with evolutionary theory.

<sup>4</sup> For more discussion of these demonstrations of the existence of God, written at an accessible level please see Feser (2008 and 2009). For a more in-depth account of these demonstrations, see Garrigou-Lagrange (1934).

<sup>5</sup> *Summa Theologica*, Q1, A1.

<sup>6</sup> CCC, 31–38

live in a society that considers questions about God to be either irrational or private, it is essential that Christian teachers have both the tools and the confidence to present the rational and demonstrated fact of God's existence. With these we will be able to serve and evangelize our students more effectively, by helping to prepare the soil for the Good News of Christ—for without the certainty that God exists, reason may balk at the possibility of a loving Saviour and the supernatural truths He reveals.

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# A Meditation on Losing a Teacher (I Samuel 17)

Jim Parsons

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## The Story

The Philistine army had gathered for war against Israel. The two armies faced each other, camped for battle on opposite sides of a valley. A Philistine giant named Goliath—nine feet nine inches tall and wearing full body armour—emerged each day for 40 days, mocking and daring the Israelites to fight.

Saul, the King of Israel, and the whole army were terrified of Goliath. Along came David. The youngest son of Jesse, David had been sent to the battle by his father to bring back news about David's brothers. David, just a teenager, heard Goliath roaring and saw the great fear of Israel's men. To make a long story short, David was unafraid, and challenged and killed the giant Goliath.

In the story of David and Goliath, we have a few key facts. Goliath was a giant—huge, scary and arrogant. He challenged everyone, and everyone was

afraid—but not David. David was young, perhaps filled with youthful confidence. But he was also excellent with a slingshot. One can imagine the young shepherd David, in the day-to-day boredom of watching sheep graze, practising over and over again by setting up targets on the hills. A bush here, a rabbit there and a predator whenever it dared sneak up on the sheep. In fact, in Samuel 17, David reports to Saul that he has killed both a lion and sheep and believes Goliath will be no different.

David wasn't even supposed to be at the front. He was bringing his brothers supplies from their Dad and news back to their Dad. But when David saw what was going on, and the intimidation Goliath employed to paralyze his brothers and the rest of Israel's troops, David simply had to act. So, the story goes, he went to the creek and picked up five small stones.

The nature of these stones is the point of my meditation. According to 1 Samuel 17:40, the stones were "smooth stones." Let me ask two questions: First, what makes a stone smooth? Second, why choose smooth stones?

What makes a stone smooth? A stone becomes smooth from friction—the gradual wearing away of rough edges. If you live by

the ocean and walk the beach, that beach is covered with stones that have, day after day, been shaped by the waves rubbing over them and making their surface completely smooth. The water in the waves carries little bits of sand and silt that literally polish the stones into a beauty one can feel and see.

Why would David choose smooth stones? Because, day after day as David practised his slingshot, he found that smooth stones proved straighter and truer than stones with rough edges. And, if David wanted to hit the target squarely, he needed to choose stones that had been polished until all the rough edges were gone. These were the stones of choice.

## The Story's Meaning for Our Children

What does that mean for our children? As an educational researcher, I am interested in helping children succeed in school and life. Research tells us that the sand and silt of life that wear away our children's rough edges are not so bad. Indeed, researcher and Stanford psychologist Carol Dweck coined the concept of *mindset* and outlined the two types she saw: one a "growth mindset," the other a "fixed mindset."

People with a fixed mindset believe that their basic skills—intelligence and talent—are fixed. They use these traits, but spend little time developing them. In fact, they believe that talent or intelligence cannot be developed. But they are wrong, and when they come to a difficult problem they do not have the talent or ability to solve, they usually quit.

People with a growth mindset believe that their basic abilities can be further developed through dedication and hard work. Their intelligence and talents are only starting points. They believe they can get better, and when they meet tests they see these tests as opportunities for growth.

This year, my daughter Olivia and her classmates were heartbroken when the projected

numbers for her school's population were not met and her wonderful Grade 2 teacher—whom in the space of one short week she had come to admire, love, and look forward to being with—was suddenly moved to Grade 3 and Olivia had to move to another teacher's class. This little slap of sand stung her young life and she was, for a long night, deeply sad.

Now what? There are, I believe, two ways to respond. One way is to be devastated—and I won't minimize that temporary devastation. This seemingly small decision sadly disrupted young lives and growing communities. And I feel bad for all those caught in that tiny tsunami. Of course, as her dad, I feel especially sad for Olivia—we, too, had come to

appreciate her teacher in this short week. A second way is to see this disruption as an opportunity towards smoothness—a wearing away of a rough edge. Perhaps Olivia did just that. Perhaps she learned a valuable life lesson about how to deal with heartbreak. She now loves her new teacher and is fully engaged with her new classmates.

Carol Dweck's point is that, as parents and teachers, our job is not to shield our children from problems, but to engage these problems as opportunities for growth—to help our children wear off the rough edges so they may become smooth. Because smooth stones are prized stones—they fly straighter and truer toward the target, refusing to be moved by the little gusts of wind that will certainly blow.



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## 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](http://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](http://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](mailto:andrea.berg@ata.ab.ca) for more information.



## Guidelines

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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](mailto:dburns@redeemer.ab.ca).

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

