

Teaching Religion in the Primary School

Issues and Challenges

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Promoting Truth?

Inter-faith Education in Irish Catholic Primary Schools

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We must seek religious harmony among people not through crusades and inquisitions, but through mutual respect and joint research and, especially, through dialogue. ¹⁶

The potency of popular and stereotypical images and ideologies concerning Catholic education should never be underestimated. In a recent study of Catholic schools and schooling Gerald Grace attempts to deconstruct and critique popular images of Catholic education:

Pervasive historical myths and images of Catholic schooling, such as the well-known statement attributed to the Jesuits, "Give me the child until he is seven, and I will give you the man," make many external observers believe that Catholic schooling is, in practice, a strong and effective form of indoctrination. ¹⁷

One enduring myth associated with Catholic education is that indoctrinatory teaching methods are used in an attempt to produce children who view everything Catholic as acceptable and good and everything non-Catholic as alien and evil. Literary texts such as James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*¹⁸ and Frank McCourt's *Angela's Ashes*¹⁹ testify to a narrow interpretation of what it means to be Catholic as well as the use of indoctrinatory methods of religious education (RE). The

16 Raimon Panikkar, *Intra-Religious Dialogue* Paulist Press 1999, p112.

17 Gerald Grace, *Catholic Schools: Mission, Markets and Morality* Routledge, London, 2002, p15. Of course this statement has also been attributed to other groups – most notably communists.

18 See the famous sermon delivered in Belvedere College Chapel in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. Penguin London, 1992, pp137-146.

19 Frank McCourt, *Angela's Ashes*, Flamingo, London, 1997, p84.

novel is not the only literary genre which highlights the limitations of Catholic religious education. Brendan Kennelly's poem *Catechism* illustrates the impotence of reducing complex religious concepts to rote learning as well as the brutal violence meted out to those who failed to provide the correct answers in religion class.

Religion class. Mulcahy taught us God... "Explain the Immaculate Conception, Maguire, and tell us then about the Mystical Blood." Maguire failed. Mulcahy covered the boy's head with his satchel, shoved him stumbling among the desks, lashed his bare legs until they bled.

In her play *Once a Catholic* Mary O'Malley reflects on the impact which her pre-Vatican II Catholic education had on her vision of the world and, in particular, upon those who were not Catholic.

I was an expert in bigotry. That was what they taught us although at the time I didn't even know the word. The Catholic Church was all that mattered; anybody else could go to hell – or limbo – literally.²⁰

This raw, unapologetic face of bigotry is totally out of place with the orientation of the contemporary primary curriculum which identifies 'pluralism, a respect for diversity and the importance of tolerance' as a key issue in primary education.²¹ However, the stereotype that, in essence, Catholic education is bigoted still prevails. According to this reading Catholic education is disinterested in, or actively hostile towards, the religiously plural world. It is vital to stress that Mary O'Malley's experience of a restrictive Catholic education came in the decades prior to Vatican II. This is not to particularise or reduce the significance of her own or indeed other fictional or actual testimonies to the limitations of some forms of Catholic education but merely to state that Vatican II began a new phase in Catholic thinking about education and about the relationship of the Catholic church to diverse cultures, peoples and religious groups. At Vatican II, John XXIII, in his opening message to 'all men and nations', as opposed solely to all Catholics, envisaged a vigorous spiritual renewal, an *aggiornamento* or updating,²² designed to permeate the Catholic church and the world. The Roman Pontiff and the Church wanted to engage in reconciling dialogue with the modern world:

We shall take pains so to present to the men of this age God's truth in its integrity and purity that they may understand it and gladly assent to it...²³

20 Mary O'Malley, *Once a Catholic*, Bennett and Forgan 1991, p149

21 *Primary School Curriculum: Introduction*, Government Publications, Dublin 1999, p9.

22 For a brief account of the impact of Vatican II on RE see Ryan, M & Malone, P, *Exploring the Religion Classroom, A Guidebook for Catholic Schools*, Social Science Press, Australia, 2000, p16ff.

23 Message to Humanity, *Documents of Vatican II*.

Forty years later Vatican II still stands as a mammoth achievement in reconfiguring the theology and topography of the Catholic Church. The results were painful, powerful and liberating but in some senses aspects of the domestic Irish church seem to have been largely untouched or only slightly grazed by certain conciliar teachings. The latter had huge implications for religious education and gave rise to a dramatic shift in emphasis in its content, method and nature. To witness what a huge impact the council's teachings had on Catholic primary religious education one has only to compare the standard Catechism text books that were used as a basis for religious instruction through rote learning in the primary schools in the first half of the twentieth century with the more child-centred, experiential, biblically based texts of the nineteen seventies. The Catechism described those who had not been baptised and who did not believe in God or Jesus Christ as infidels²⁴ and in many instances provided horrific and lurid details²⁵ of their eternal punishment in the "fire of hell".²⁶ Fortunately, since Vatican II Catholic theology has undergone a radical renewal and "the ideas proposed by the Second Vatican Council... influence profoundly the shape of religious education in Catholic schools".²⁷ However, there are areas where the teachings of Vatican II have made surprisingly little direct impact on the life of the primary teacher in Ireland. One such area is in the Church's failure to translate and embody the teachings of *Nostra Aetate*, the Declaration on the Relationship of the Church to Non-Christian Religions, into the religious education programme in Irish Catholic primary schools.

To date many children, in many Catholic primary schools, are given little or no formal knowledge or understanding of the Church's relationship to non-Christian religions. Furthermore, they are not afforded an opportunity to explore the beliefs and practices of those religions as part of their Catholic religious education programme. In the absence of such knowledge one may suppose that children fill in the blanks by assuming that, at best, the Catholic church has an attitude of tolerant indifference or, at worst, of hostile contempt for different world faiths. Primary teachers in Catholic schools generally avoid teaching children anything about world faiths in religion class because they, in turn, fear confusing the children or compromising the schools' Catholicity. It is, therefore, important to consult the Church's teaching in order to prevent Catholic education from becoming hostage to a partial and incomplete, sectarian, stereotypical interpretation of what it means to be Catholic. For, if Catholic religious education stems from "a theology which emerges from Catholic liturgical

24 *A Companion to the Catechism*, Gill & Son, Dublin 1906, p93. cf *The Christian Doctrine* CM Warren, Dublin, p40.

25 A particularly horrific and lurid account of the fate of the damned is to be found in *Catechism: Doctrinal, Moral, Historical and Liturgical* Vol III, Richardson & Son, Dublin, 1864, p603ff.

26 *The Explanatory Catechism of Christian Doctrine*, Burns Oates, London, 1921, p22.

27 Ryan, M & Malone, P. *Exploring the Religion Classroom: A Guidebook for Catholic Schools*, Social Science Press, Katoomba, NSW, 2000, p17.

practice and spirituality,” it should open up “positive perspectives on other Christian traditions, not to mention those of other persons of faith”.²⁸ Vatican II stresses, “All should take pains, then, lest in catechetical instruction and in the preaching of God’s Word they teach anything out of harmony with the truth of the gospel and the spirit of Christ”.²⁹ All Catholics, and particularly those involved in religious education, should be reminded that “the Church rejects, as foreign to the mind of Christ, any discrimination against men (sic) or harassment of them because of their race, colour, condition of life, or religion.”³⁰ Indeed, far from discriminating against or marginalising people of different world faiths, church teaching encourages its members to work collaboratively with them.

What does the Catholic Church Teach about World Faiths?

The document *Nostra Aetate* is one of the shortest and most exciting documents of Vatican II. Of course, it has to be viewed in the context of all of the other documents as it literally originated as chapter four of the Decree on Ecumenism. As it was felt that a discussion of interfaith relations, initially focusing on Christian-Jewish relations, was outside the remit of the Decree on Ecumenism it was decided that a separate document dealing with the Church’s relationship to non-Christian religions was necessary. What began as a chapter on Jewish-Catholic relations grew into a much larger position statement on the church’s relationship to Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, Judaism and to ‘followers of other religions’.³¹ The basic starting point of the document is that all human beings, in their various religious and social groupings “comprise a single community, and have a single origin, since God made the whole race of men (sic) dwell over the entire face of the earth”.³² This emphasis on the common origin and interconnectedness of all humans as creatures made by God, is at once a foundational premise and the methodological orientation of this document. *Nostra Aetate* consistently emphasises what positively unites all human beings, what they share in common, as opposed to emphasising or indicating irreconcilable differences that disunite humans. This is not a naïve refusal to acknowledge the cultural and doctrinal differences between the world faiths but a recognition that it is only by acknowledging and building upon what we have in common that we can engage in productive dialogue on that which separates us. While *Nostra Aetate* tended to minimise differences in the religiously plural world it must be stated that more recent trends in inter-religious dialogue have tended to emphasise the importance of voicing

28 Michael Barnes, *Walking the City*, Delhi: Indian SPCK 1999, p 1.

29 *Nostra Aetate* (NA), par 4. This phrase is used in the context of Christian anti-semitism but is equally applicable to teaching about any world faith.

30 NA par 5

31 NA par 2

32 NA par 1

distinctive differences between the world's religio-cultures as a prelude to genuine understanding and acceptance. *Nostra Aetate* articulates the view that within the communal human context different religious traditions provide answers to the perennial human search for ultimate meaning in life and illustrate a "profound religious sense" in "diverse peoples".³³ The document provides a very brief account of some very basic characteristics of Hinduism and Buddhism. It does so by allocating two sentences to each of these religions. *Nostra Aetate* deals briefly, in two paragraphs of unequal length, with the two monotheistic prophetic faiths, Islam³⁴ and Judaism.³⁵ Of all of the religious traditions mentioned it is not surprising, given the origins of Christianity, that Judaism is given most coverage. However, it would be a total misrepresentation of *Nostra Aetate* to suggest that it attempts to give any kind of comprehensive treatment of the great religious traditions of the world. While it does state that diverse religious traditions "strive variously to answer the restless searchings of the human heart by proposing 'ways', which consist of teachings, rules of life, and sacred ceremonies"³⁶ nowhere does it attempt to identify or analyse the philosophical, spiritual, ethical or doctrinal aspects of various world faiths or to give a comprehensive analysis of the religiously plural world. *Nostra Aetate* is far more pastoral and is concerned with emphasising what these religions hold in common with the Catholic faith and with repudiating religious persecution and discrimination. The document paints a general picture by using broad brush strokes which help to orientate Catholics in their relationships to members of non-Christian faiths so that they will relate lovingly and peaceably to their fellow human beings. It emphasises that, "We cannot in truthfulness call upon that God who is the Father of all if we refuse to act in a brotherly way towards certain men."³⁷

By far the most radical and important aspect of the document is the exhortation to Catholics to engage in dialogue and collaboration with the followers of world faiths.

The Church therefore has this exhortation for her sons: prudently and lovingly, through dialogue and collaboration with the followers of other religions, and in witness of Christian faith and life, *acknowledge, preserve, and promote (italics mine)* the spiritual and moral goods found among these men (sic), as well as the values in their society and culture.³⁸

33 NA par 1

34 NA par 3

35 NA par 4

36 NA par 2

37 NA par 5

38 NA par 3

This is a remarkable statement in that it formally marks a moment when the Church relinquishes any claim of having a monopoly over spiritual and moral good. Once it acknowledges that non-Christian faiths contain spiritual and moral worth it urges Catholics to enter into dialogue and collaboration with the members of these faiths. The boundaries separating Christian from non-Christian are to be traversed precisely in order to give witness to the Christian faith and life. An isolationist policy of religious segregation is not viable for the Catholic. For within the religiously plural world, as Dermot Lane states, "When one religion is diminished all religions are diminished".³⁹ Equally, a policy of bland and indifferent tolerance of world faiths is rejected. *Nostra Aetate* instead actively urges Catholics to work collaboratively with members of diverse faiths, to acknowledge, preserve and promote, the truths found in those faiths.⁴⁰ The uses of the passionate and dynamic term 'exhortation' along with the trinity of verbs highlighted above bears witness to a remarkable shift in understanding. The Catholic is not in competition with the Hindu or Buddhist, or Muslim or Jew. Indeed, the Catholic is called to be actively engaged in advancing, and maintaining and recognising the truths found within those religions. Now, of course, the whole question arises as to what the truth of these faiths is and indeed who is interpreting that truth. *Nostra Aetate* fails to address this issue but subsequent Catholic theology has engaged in a more detailed exploration and analysis of interfaith dialogue. Indeed *Redemptoris Missio* returns to this issue and consistently seeks to emphasise the link between inter-religious dialogue and the proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Although the Church gladly acknowledges whatever is true and holy in the religious traditions of Buddhism, Hinduism and Islam as a reflection of that truth which enlightens all people, this does not lessen her duty and resolve to proclaim without fail Jesus Christ who is "the way, and the truth and the life"... The fact that the followers of other religions can receive God's grace and be saved by Christ apart from the ordinary means which he has established does not thereby cancel the call to faith and baptism which God wills for all people".⁴¹

What *Nostra Aetate* does stress is that passive indifference should give way to active, collaborative promotion of the positive aspects of world faiths. As a point of departure for this, the Vatican Council "deplores the hatred, persecutions, and displays of anti-Semitism directed against the Jews at any time and from any source".⁴² In relation to Muslims "this most sacred Synod urges all to forget the past and to strive sincerely for

39 Dermot Lane, *The Irish Times*, 22 January, 2002.

40 Of course, a major question which arises is "what are the truths of these faiths?"

41 *Redemptoris Missio*, Encyclical Letter: on the Permanent Validity of the Church's Missionary Mandate, December 1990, par 55.

42 NA par 4.

mutual understanding. On behalf of all mankind, let them (Christians and Moslems sic.) make common cause of safeguarding and fostering social justice, moral values, peace and freedom".⁴³ The relevance of these teachings for contemporary Irish society and indeed their global significance needs to be brought to the attention of all Catholics.⁴⁴

The Catholic Church's teaching was powerfully enunciated in 1986 and again in January 2002 when the Pope and representatives of the religions of the world prayed together in Assisi for an end to hostilities and the advent of peace in the world. On a recent visit to India John Paul II stressed that the:

*Catholic Church wants to enter ever more deeply into dialogue with the religions of the world. She sees dialogue as an act of love which has its roots in God himself. "God is love", proclaims the New Testament, "and whoever remains in love remains in God and God in him... Let us love, then, because he has loved us first... no one who fails to love the brother whom he sees can love God whom he has not seen" (First Letter of St John, 4:16, 19-20).*⁴⁵

Now the call for Catholics to actively respect and acknowledge the truths found in diverse world faiths is not numerically conditioned. As John Courtney Murray stresses:

*The Church does not deal with the secular order in terms of a double standard – freedom for the Church when Catholics are a minority, privilege for the Church and intolerance for others when Catholics are a majority.*⁴⁶

Ireland has a long history of religious diversity and has been multi-ethnic for many years.⁴⁷ If Catholics move from a mindset of competitive conflict between the Catholic faith and other world faiths to a respectful acknowledgement of their differences and an appreciation of how much they share in common and of the mutual advantages of collaborative inter-religious dialogue, then there is considerable benefit for all involved. In one sense the more one engages in inter-religious dialogue the greater the opportunity one has to appreciate one's own faith as well as the faith of others. A Catholic who witnesses Muslims journey through the holy month of Ramadan can be led to a rejuvenated appreciation of fasting and penance. This is not

43 NA par 3.

44 In 1964, Pope Paul VI established the Secretariat for Non Christians, a department of the Roman Curia with responsibility for relations with people of other religions. In 1988 its name was changed to the title of the Pontifical Council for Inter-religious Dialogue (PCID).

45 *Meeting at Vigyan Bhavan with Representatives of Other Religions and Christian Confessions*, 7 November 1999. cf. Message of the Pontifical Council for inter-religious dialogue to the Hindus on the feast of Diwali, 27 October, 2002.

46 John Courtney Murray in an introductory essay to *Dignitatis Humanae*.

47 Lentin R, in Tormey R, *Teaching Social Justice*. Centre for Educational Disadvantage Research, Limerick, 2003, p 27.

to blur the boundaries between religions or to engage in religious relativism which homogenises the distinct aspects of different religions and views them all as being interchangeable or of equal validity. This is simply to state that the experience of participating in inter-religious dialogue and prayer can awaken the religious imagination of all participants.

No religious community can live in isolation and it is in the interest of all to promote dialogue and good neighbourly relations. Dialogue begins with a single act – the decision taken by one person to take the first step to be open to another person of a different religious tradition. In many places small beginnings have resulted in the growth of communities that have built strong ties across religious barriers.⁴⁸

Research carried out in the United Kingdom illustrates the benefits which students, staff, and indeed the whole school community, can reap in a Catholic educational context which has a dynamic interfaith programme.⁴⁹ However, inter-religious dialogue can often be difficult. Recent research carried out in the Netherlands explores the difficulties associated with inter-religious dialogue in primary education.⁵⁰

Contemporary Practice in Catholic Primary Schools

The 2002 INTO survey *Religion in Primary Schools* shows that 86.1% of teachers support teaching children in primary schools about other religions. While little research has been carried out into the teaching of world faiths in Ireland teachers implicitly believe that this is a worthwhile area, as one member of a focus group commented: “I would think that you have to teach children about other religions, because if you didn’t then it would create ignorance, racism and discrimination.”

These sentiments are not inconsistent with the Catholic Church’s official teachings on the importance of religious dialogue in *Redemptoris Missio*.

Those engaged in this dialogue must be consistent with their own religious traditions and convictions, and be open to understanding those of the other party without pretence or close-mindedness, but with truth, humility and frankness, knowing that dialogue can enrich each side. There must be no abandonment of principles nor false irenicism, but instead a witness given and received for mutual advancement on the road of religious inquiry and experience, and at the same time for the elimination of prejudice, intolerance and misunderstandings.⁵¹

48 *Guidelines on Dialogue with People of Living Faiths and Ideologies* (4th edition) World Council of Churches Publications, Geneva, 1990, p viii.

49 Vince Murray, *Other Faiths in Catholic Schools: General Implications of a Case Study* in McLaughlin T, O’Keefe J and O’Keefe B (eds), *The Contemporary Catholic School: Context, Identity and Diversity*, Falmer, London, 1996, p242.

50 cf. Carl Sterkens *Inter-religious Learning: The Problem of Inter-religious Dialogue in Primary Education* Bill, 2001.

51 *Redemptoris Missio*, par 56

Unfortunately it appears that, in many Irish Catholic primary schools, that first single act necessary to build up interfaith dialogue has not been taken in the subject area of religious education. That is not to say that it does not occur in Catholic schools in a variety of curricular areas, rather it is to say that it is not an integral part of the religious education programme in primary schools. Indeed it is ironic that in many Catholic primary schools it is in the area of SESE, of history or geography, that the issue of the rituals and cultures of diverse human communities are explored. For instance in the history SESE curriculum, the strand unit for third and fourth classes on 'Feasts and festivals in the past' attempts to familiarise the child with the origins and traditions associated with some common festivals in Ireland and in other countries. It explicitly mentions "feasts and festivals celebrated by various members of the school and local community, including Christian, Hindu, Jewish, Muslim and other celebrations..."⁵² Numerous examples abound where the revised curriculum provides children with the opportunity to explore the culture and beliefs of diverse religious communities. The history strand on 'Story' enables the third and fourth class child to "become aware of the lives of women, men and children from different social, cultural, ethnic and religious backgrounds..."⁵³ In the geography strand 'Human Environments' the third and fourth class child is enabled to "learn about and come to appreciate and respect the people and communities who live and work in the locality..." This includes "links with people in other parts of Ireland and the world".⁵⁴ The strand unit 'People and Other Lands' explores the basic ingredients of religious belief in the form of the "myths, stories, art, culture, clothes"⁵⁵ of people in another part of the world. These are constituent elements of religious education and are integral to the religious beliefs and practices of faith communities. The opportunities for integration with religious education are enormous and yet, in many Catholic primary schools, this does not occur because the vast majority of religious education teaching occurs from within a mono-faith perspective.

This is not the case for the Educate Together schools which have developed a culturally inclusive and democratic ethos which is committed to multi-denominational education where:

The schools typically use a variety of faith festivals in the school year to promote understanding of different religious views. At the same time, the school is committed to making facilities available to any group of parents who so wish, to organise religious instruction or doctrinal classes outside school hours.⁵⁶

52 Primary School Curriculum History, p 44.

53 Primary School Curriculum History, p 47.

54 Primary School Curriculum Geography, p 54.

55 Primary School Curriculum Geography, p 56.

56 Educate Together Email Newsletter, Vol 2, No 4 – 2 September, 2002

Clearly this option of not endorsing any one faith is not viable in the Catholic school but, nonetheless, Catholic schools should develop a culturally inclusive⁵⁷ and democratic ethos. In Catholic schools religious education is by definition confessional and it attempts to lead children to maturity of faith in the Catholic tradition. So what options are available to teachers in Catholic schools? If we look at contemporary practice in Catholic schools the question arises as to the efficacy of the *Alive-O* programme in teaching children about world faiths. To suggest that there is no awareness of the diversity of world faiths in the *Alive-O* programme is incorrect. There is indeed an acute awareness of the Judeo-Christian rootedness of the Catholic tradition. However, this awareness does not always translate into an appreciation of the importance of Judaism as a religion in its own right. In the programme there are occasions where world faiths make an appearance. For instance in the *Alive-O 5* video there are two five-minute sequences of video footage documenting the beliefs and practices of Jewish and Muslim school children in Ireland. These are very good in themselves but exist solely in visual form, in isolation from any directives or input in the teacher's book or in the children's textbook and workbook.⁵⁸ If the teacher does not feel secure in her/his knowledge of these faith traditions the temptation to fast forward the video and avoid the children's questions about these faiths may be acute.

Michael Barnes notes that the temptation "to retreat to somewhere more safe, to a place which – we feel – is ours to command, a place which is at all costs to be defended against the darkness of an unknown threat", is always a part of inter-faith dialogue and indeed education about different faiths.⁵⁹ But it is unfair to judge the whole *Alive-O* programme on the basis of perceived deficiencies in one area. The *Alive-O* programme has many positive attributes. However, it could not be said that the *Alive-O* programme exhibits a keen awareness of the principles of inter-religious dialogue or of the necessity of teaching children about world faiths within the Catholic sector. If the national catechetical programme does not integrate an interfaith awareness into the programme, linking it to other subjects within the revised curriculum, then it becomes very difficult for teachers to respond to *Nostra Aetate's* exhortation to "acknowledge, preserve, and promote the spiritual and moral goods found among these men (sic), as well as the values in their society and culture". How can a teacher or a pupil acknowledge, preserve and promote something about which they know very little? And if the primary programme remains silent on this issue what informa-

57 For instance *Alive O 5*, Unit 7 'We include others' explores the topic of cultural and religious inclusion for 3rd class primary children.

58 *Alive O 5*, Video Unit 6: 'We relate to God' segment 1 & 2. The leaflet which accompanies the video does include a series of questions which the teacher might ask about the video segments but they are by no means comprehensive. The wisdom of simultaneously introducing children to two world Faiths without giving teachers any detailed guidelines has to be questioned.

59 Michael Barnes *Walking the City* ISPCK 1999, p xiff.

tion is being communicated by its silence? Perhaps in the absence of direct guidance it could be surmised that it is appropriate for Catholics to be unconcerned with or embarrassed by religiously diverse communities. The suggestion that Catholic schools should acknowledge, promote and respect the truths found within different world faiths is not equivalent to saying that Catholics should deny the distinctiveness of their own tradition or cease believing in it. It is not to suggest that a type of religious relativism permeate the school where all religious traditions are accorded equivalent status to the Catholic tradition. Catholic teaching makes this abundantly clear. *Dominus Iesus* sees that the Church's missionary proclamation is "endangered today by relativistic theories which seek to justify religious pluralism".⁶⁰ The Church also rejects "the theory of the limited, incomplete, or imperfect character of the revelation of Jesus Christ, which would be complementary to that found in other religions".⁶¹ It is vital to note that the Catholic Church holds a sincere respect for the religions of the world but it simultaneously rules out "that mentality of indifferentism characterised by a religious relativism which leads to the belief that 'one religion is as good as another'".⁶²

However, refuting the notion that all religious traditions are equally valid is not the same as saying that Catholic children should only learn about that one faith and ignore all others. Catholic schools, in order to be true to Catholic teaching and to operate on the principles of respect for cultural and religious diversity, should build into all areas of their curriculum, and in the area of religious education in particular, an appreciation of world faiths. The 1999 primary curriculum has identified "pluralism, a respect for diversity and the importance of tolerance,"⁶³ as a key issue in primary education. Here the primary curriculum does not conflict with the Catholic religious education programme but rather provides Catholic schools with an opportunity to bear witness to their Catholic faith.

In Catholic schools children should be taught about world faiths in a sensitive and intelligent manner. Teaching about world faiths should not be based on the number of pupils who come from a variety of faith traditions in a class or school. All children in a Catholic school have a right to learn about the faith of different religious traditions in the world precisely because they are in a Catholic school which respectfully acknowledges, promotes and preserves the truths of those traditions. Each faith should be taught in its own right. The positive aspects of the faith should be explored and the teacher should always attempt to shatter crude stereotypes and superficial understandings of the faith. Ireland is a multi-faith society and teachers in Catholic schools have an opportunity to show children that there are many living faiths practiced by

60 *Dominus Iesus*, 6 August, 2000, par 4.

61 *ibid.*, par 6.

62 *Dominus Iesus*, 22.

63 *Primary School Curriculum Introduction*, p 9.

ordinary people in contemporary Ireland. The school should take the opportunity to ensure in its whole school planning that the major faith traditions (e.g. Hinduism, Judaism, Buddhism, Islam) are given a basic respectful coverage in the primary school. This might mean that every academic year, each class, from second class onwards, (in many countries it occurs prior to this)⁶⁴ could be allocated a specific world faith to learn about in religious education class. This would provide Catholic primary schools with an opportunity to teach children respect and tolerance for the society in which they live, as well as a deeper realisation of what it means to be Catholic. It would also serve to integrate the primary religious education programme with the newly established, state examined, post-primary religion programme which provides modules in the area of world faiths. Inevitably there are resource and in-service implications if world faiths is to become an important aspect of the Catholic primary religious education programme. However, a greater range of inter-cultural and inter-religious resources are being designed for Irish schools.⁶⁵ Indeed many Irish primary schools use the internet⁶⁶ as an excellent resource for researching world faith and indeed for displaying primary children's work on world faiths.⁶⁷

One thing is certain. Catholic schools face a challenge if they are to implement Catholic teaching in their religious education programme. With the recent statement that a new Catholic syllabus may be designed for primary religious education⁶⁸ the Church will be given an opportunity to turn good Catholic teaching into better educational practice.

64 E.g. In the UK children learn thematically and experientially about Christianity and one of the following religions: Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism and Sikhism at Reception and Key Stage 1. cf. *Living Faiths: Today's Model Syllabuses for Religious Education, Key Stages 1 – 4*, School Curriculum and Assessment Authority, London, 1994.

65 For instance, the Intercultural Calendar 2003 which is provided by Access Ireland, The Refugee Social Integration project, or Rafiki, the Interactive CD-Rom for Irish children.

66 One must always be mindful of taking extreme care when using the internet with children (see the FBI guidelines http://www.familyfriendlysites.com/FamilyFriendly/viewcat_ws.asp?ID=241). Also use a children's search engine such as Yahoo!igans.

67 To see an example of children's work on Sikhism in a Dublin (Educate Together) primary school visit the website <http://www.iol.ie/~ndnsp/beliefs/sikh2.htm>

68 *The Irish Catholic*, November 2002