

Children negotiating their own beliefs: The religious education of young children in families in the Republic of Ireland

Irish Families: Historical and Cultural Context

Ireland is situated at the most western frontier of Europe. The cycle of invasion and assimilation has given the island of Ireland a diverse and often contradictory, cultural, social, political and religious history that makes even generic statements concerning national identity and family life difficult. Foreign invasions and settlements were a feature of Irish life since the Middle Stone Age. Celts, Vikings (from mixed backgrounds of Norway, Scotland and later England) and Normans from Wales, England and France, have settled in Ireland (Irish Episcopal Conference, 2010, Kieran 2010). George Bernard Shaw recognised this hybridity when he said ‘I am a genuine typical Irishman of the Danish, Norman, Cromwellian and (of course) Scotch invasions’ (Shaw, 1911). Given this syncretistic historical backdrop it is unsurprising that contemporary Irish society is characterised by linguistic, social, cultural, ethnic and religious diversity. The 2006 national census revealed that the Republic of Ireland has a substantial non-indigenous population and that 10% of its people originated outside of Ireland (Central Statistics Office,[CSO], 2006).

The country is currently undergoing a period of population growth and preliminary results for the 2011 census indicate that its population of 4.5 million is the highest recorded since 1861 (CSO, 2011c). Recent population growth has resulted from a combination of factors including the wealth, and almost full employment, associated with Ireland’s years of economic boom. From 1994 to 2007 Ireland’s miracle economy, widely termed the ‘Celtic Tiger’, attracted young immigrant and migrant workers at the family formation stage of life. Although the Celtic Tiger economy ended dramatically in 2008, population growth has continued. Ireland’s current financial crisis has effected Irish families and required them to adopt new coping skills to deal with rising

unemployment (14.7%), as well as widespread government expenditure cuts in education, social welfare and health.

A classical study of Irish family life by the anthropologists Conrad Arensberg and Solon Kimball portrayed rural Irish family life in the early 1930s as predominantly hierarchical and patriarchal. In the early part of the 20th century arranged marriages, close networks of neighbours and a gender-based division of labour were not uncommon (Arensberg & Kimball, 2001). In recent decades the traditional family, encompassing two heterosexual married parents with biological children, has undergone dramatic reconfiguration. Marital break-up, cohabitation, single-sex couples, lone parent families and an increasing number of family units without children, have contributed to a variety of forms of family life. Indeed one might legitimately describe the changing structure and social and religious position of the family as having undergone momentous revolution. In 2008, in an attempt to analyse and profile the extraordinary changes impacting on families in Ireland, a national Céifin conference was organised on the theme of ‘Family Life Today, The Greatest Revolution?’ In summary contemporary Irish families are heterogeneous, dynamic and complex and are characterised by changing structures and functions (Bohan, 2009).

The legal position of the family in Ireland

Since the founding of the Free State in 1922, the family has been accorded powerful legal, social and religious status. Articles 41 and 42 of the 1937 Constitution were heavily influenced by Catholic teaching (Maher & O’Brien, 2011). Article 41 recognises the family as the ‘natural primary and fundamental unit group of Society’ (Irish Government Publications, 2004). The Constitutional privilege given to the family means that the State guarantees to protect it from anything that might threaten it, since the family is ‘the necessary basis of social order’ and is ‘indispensable to the welfare of the Nation and the State’ (Irish Government Publications, 2004). The Constitution’s emphasis on the family, founded on the institution of marriage, has accorded marriage economic, legal and social protection in Irish legislation on tax, inheritance and social welfare. Article 42.1 of the Constitution also recognises that that family is ‘the primary and natural educator of the

child' (Irish Government Publications, 2004). However the introduction of same sex partnerships in 2011, 18 years after the decriminalisation of homosexuality, provides State protection for gay and lesbian families. Legal and social understandings of what constitutes a family have been radically reconfigured. Research indicates that same-sex couple households represent 0.15% of the contemporary population in Ireland (Lunn, Fahey & Hannon, 2010). In a 2008 poll 80% of Irish people supported the introduction of equal marriage rights regardless of a person's sexuality (Lansdowne Market Research, 2008).

The Irish Constitution allocates a largely domestic role to women when it pledges that the State will endeavor to ensure that women will not be economically obliged to work outside the home 'to the neglect of their duties in the home' (Article 41.2). In reality many women are committed to working outside the home and are more likely to have a third-level qualification than men, although they are also less likely to be employed than men (CSO, 2010). While there is a growing trend for fathers to become the primary carers of children in the home it must be noted that in one recent study the overwhelming percentage of primary caregivers of infants was 99.6% female, relative to 0.4% male (Williams, Greene, Mc Nally, Murray, & Quail, 2010).

Children in Ireland

In Ireland a child is defined as a person under 18 years old who is not married. For the purposes of this article, the term 'young children' refers to those from birth to age 12. The Irish National Children's Strategy, *Our Children Their Lives*, aims to protect the rights of children, to co-ordinate and develop agencies, organisations and research and to give children a voice and improve their lives (The National Children's Strategy, 2000). Recent years have witnessed the growth of a widespread movement (*Children's Rights Alliance*) to amend the Irish constitution and to acknowledge children in their own right and not as a unit in a family (Bernardos, 2007).

As part of a multi-agency attempt to improve the lives of children, *Síolta* a the national quality framework for early childhood education (2006), and *Aistear*, an Early Childhood Curriculum Framework (2009), identify the kinds of learning experiences that

children up to six should benefit from in Ireland. *Aistear* provides parents with themes, ideas and examples of ways of enabling children to grow and learn in the home. The spiritual dimension of young children's learning is central to this overall development as the child's sense of wonder, awe and curiosity is nurtured (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, 2009). While these frameworks provide practical support for parents in families they are used largely by educators in formal childcare settings and not routinely by parents in families. Children's development in primary school is covered by the 1999 Curriculum which includes Religious Education as one of the seven curricular subject areas (Government of Ireland, 1999). In recent years there has been widespread popular debate about the appropriateness of the inclusion of Religious Education as a curricular subject in Ireland's schools (Kieran, 2008).

Religious influences on family life in Ireland

When it comes to the religious affiliation of families in the Republic of Ireland, the census figures reveal that 86.8% of the population is Catholic (CSO, 2007). Irish society has been heavily influenced by Catholic mores with a keen emphasis on children being raised in a family based on marriage. The Roman Catholic Church teaches that marriage and family are '*willed by God in the very act of creation*' (John Paul II, 1982). This understanding of married family life is based upon a divinely blessed heterosexual, monogamous, freely given, life-long, indissoluble commitment which provides the context for a loving sexual relationship which is open to procreation. The Irish Catholic bishops have repeatedly emphasised this point.

As a Church we have always promoted the ideal of a man and a woman, committed to each other in married love, as the best situation in which to bring children into the world (Irish Bishops' Conference, 2006).

Ireland's National Directory for Catechesis, *Share the Good News*, stresses that parents carry out the first and vital work of educating their children in faith. Parents are called to introduce their children to a family life of faith where prayer, gospel values, love and moral formation form the foundation and bedrock of all of their children's subsequent

religious education (Irish Episcopal Conference, 2010). However the Catholic hierarchy is increasingly aware that family life in Ireland is complex and pluriform.

‘Research has shown that marriage is best able to provide the stability that allows children to flourish. However, for a variety of reasons, some of them outside the control of the people concerned, this ideal is not always reached. At times we may have been less than sensitive to the goodness to be found within all kinds of families in our Church (Irish Catholic Bishops’ Conference, 2006).

For most Catholics birth, marriage, and death are marked by religious ceremonies (Inglis, 2007). The 2008 European Values Survey results for Ireland show that nearly 70% of the population self-describe as ‘religious’ and only 1% self-describe as convinced atheists. Over 66% of Irish people pray once a week or more and 45% pray everyday. Just 10% of the population never pray (European Values Survey, 2008). Statistics for religious observance are relatively high as 45% of the population profess to attend religious service at least once a week (O’Mahony, 2010). While these results suggest that Ireland is one of the most religious nations in Europe and that young children are brought up in a society where religion is a significant social factor, it must be noted that relative to levels of religious practice and attendance at religious ceremonies in previous decades, Ireland has recently experienced a seismic shift in religious thinking and practice. Furthermore *Growing up in Ireland*, the largest longitudinal study of 11,100 infants (from 9 months to 9 years) and 8,500 children (starting at 9 years), shows that approximately 8% of mothers and fathers of infants self-describe as having no religious affiliation (Williams, Greene, Mc Nally, Murray, & Quail, 2010).

In recent decades the nature of the Irish family has changed dramatically. Ireland has the highest fertility rate in the 27 European Union states with an average of 2.07 children per woman (CSO, 2011b). In contemporary Ireland more people are becoming parents at a later age and having fewer children (Fahey & Russell, 2002). In 2006 one in six families consisted of lone-parent families and a majority of couples getting married cohabited prior to marriage. Commentators suggest that cohabitation is not always selected as a long term alternative to marriage (Fahey & Field, 2008). One survey of

parents and children in Ireland uncovered higher rates of cohabitation and lone parenthood among lower socio-economic groups (McKeown, Pratschke, & Haase, 2003). In the last twenty years the least popular type of family in Ireland is the family based on marriage. Furthermore at the age of 25, people in Ireland are twice as likely to cohabit as they are to be married. The *Growing up in Ireland* study shows that 14% of 9 months to 9 years old children live in lone parent families. Interestingly, the research also shows that the younger the child, the more likely it is to live in a two parent family and 86% of nine-month-olds live in two-parent families (Williams, Greene, Mc Nally, Murray, & Quail, 2010).

Clerical child-sex abuse and its impact on families in Ireland

It is important to note that since the 1990s, revelations about the Irish Catholic Church's involvement in child abuse and its mishandling of complaints of clerical child-sex abuse have had a significant impact on religious belief and practice in families. For instance the Ryan Report in 2009 identified over 800 known abusers in over 200 religious-run institutions in Ireland during a period of thirty five years. The report's findings indicated that beatings and humiliation by nuns and priests were common at institutions that held up to 30,000 children (The Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse, CICA, 2009a). Furthermore the Murphy Report, also released in 2009, investigated a sample of cases documenting the rape and molestation of 320 children by 46 priests in the Dublin Archdiocese, over a period of 30 years (CICA, 2009b). The national outrage after the publication of these reports led to the resignation of four bishops as well as an extraordinary meeting between the Irish hierarchy and the Pope and the issuing of a papal pastoral letter in 2010. Pope Benedict XVI acknowledged 'In almost every family in Ireland, there has been someone – a son or a daughter, an aunt or an uncle – who has given his or her life to the Church. Irish families rightly esteem and cherish their loved ones who have dedicated their lives to Christ, sharing the gift of faith with others, and putting that faith into action in loving service of God and neighbour' (Benedict XVI, 2010). Benedict simultaneously recognized the weakening of faith and loss of respect for the Church's teachings in Irish families as a consequence of a variety of factors,

including child sex abuse. His encyclical speaks directly to the victims of abuse and their families by saying ‘You have suffered grievously and I am truly sorry’ (Benedict XVI, 2010).

Any examination of religious education and faith formation in families in contemporary Ireland must take cognisance of the crises of public confidence in the teaching authority of the Irish Catholic Church to deal with issues of morality, social justice and child-protection (Littleton & Maher, 2010; Irish Catholic Bishops’ Conference, 2011). The education of young children in faith within families is particularly effected by the shame and outrage felt at the abuse of young children. This has left many Catholic families disorientated and disconnected from the Church (Irish Episcopal Conference, 2010).

The religious education of children in families

In exploring the religious education of children in families in Ireland it is important to distinguish between two overarching approaches. One the one hand catechetical or faith formational approaches to religious education are those which are transmissive in intent and nature and explicitly nurture faith in children. However religious education is broader than faith formation and includes approaches which provide children with education about religion and belief which are primarily informational. Thus understood religious education prepares children to live in a world where religion is a significant cultural, social although not necessarily an important personal factor for the child. In Ireland these two approaches often overlap and intersect in the one family. One parent may favour a confessional or faith formational approach whereas another may adopt a more formal and informative approach to teaching children about religions and beliefs. Furthermore at different stages in children’s lives parents or guardians may adopt different approaches. In early childhood the main emphasis in the family may be on transmissive approaches whereas in teenage years as children develop independent critical cognitive faculties the family orientation may focus on more informational and less overtly transmissive approaches. It would be incorrect to polarise both approaches or present them as mutually exclusive. For the purposes of this article religious education is understood as a broad

category which includes education about religion and which has a strong transmissive and faith formational element.

In families in Ireland the vast majority of education in, for and about religion occurs in a spontaneous, often implicit, organic and unstructured manner. The flexible, and diverse process of nurturing the spirituality of young children is as variable as the multiplicity of idiosyncratic styles of parenting. Very young children are egocentric and their realm of consciousness and concern is limited to their own immediate needs and desires. Parents or guardians, as the most significant people in their lives, and the primary points of attachment, are conduits through which young children's needs and desires are answered. While many parents engage in prayer during pregnancy and experience the delivery and arrival of a newborn baby as one of the most spiritually overwhelming and enriching events in their faith lives (Hebblethwaite, 1984), there is no significant body of literature in Ireland documenting if, how or when, families begin to educate their young children in, for and about faith. Indeed the absence of such research raises serious questions.

It would be incorrect to suggest that the Catholic Church has nothing to say on the religious education of young children in families. It has a large body of teaching which presents a broad, general vision of parental roles in nurturing the faith of children. *Gravissimum Educationis* teaches clearly and emphatically that parents are the initial and most important educators of their children. Parents carry the prime responsibility for the faith development of their children and the Church supports them in this role. However, apart from these broad brush strokes parents are left to their own devices, to interpret *what* to do in their own unique family circumstances as well as the methodologies of *how* to do it. Furthermore, in Ireland there are few resources, outside of the formal school or the parish structures, which parents can avail of in the religious education of their children.

It is important to note that every part of family life potentially contributes to the religious education and faith development of children. Through being affirmed, loved and respected by their parents, young children implicitly learn about a loving God who comforts 'as a mother comforts her child' (Is. 66:13). Parents or children may not always

make connections between life and faith. Religious education in the family can often occur in the spontaneous, inconsequential aspects of family interaction as well as in the explicit discussion of religious ideas, prayer and the deliberate communication of faith. Recent research suggests that the transmission of faith in Irish families is under strain and that while 9 persons out of 10 of the Irish population are baptised and socialised into the beliefs and practices of Catholic Christianity, Ireland's Catholics are often sacramentalised without being evangelised (Lewis, Barnes, Kieran, Cruise, Francis & McGuckin, 2009). Where this occurs transmission of faith within families becomes problematic not alone for parents or guardians, but also for children, who are unsure of the content and relevance of faith to their lives. In a *National Survey of Religious Attitudes and practices in the Republic of Ireland* two-thirds of the total sample believed that handing on one's religious views to children is important, although there was a 19.2% increase in the number of respondents who wished to let children 'make up their own mind' (Mac Gréil, & Rhatigan, 2009). Further those in the potential parent and grandparent age cohort perceive handing on the faith as far more important than those in other age cohorts.

For many parents in Ireland, the birth of children challenges them to reassess their values and to articulate their spirituality and beliefs. The birth of a child and the request for baptism is often the catalyst that brings non-practising Catholic parents back to their faith. Through the distinctive rhythm of each family's life, individual and idiosyncratic patterns of faith formation are established. Sometimes this occurs through family prayer rituals in the home, sometimes through discussion or through the transmission of values and love that unites the family community. In contemporary Irish society prayer in the family is less structured than in the past. Christian faith practices have blended with popular culture.

How children are being religiously educated in Irish families: REMC

Religious Education in a Multicultural Society: School and Home in Comparative Context (REMC) is an international research project which examined the transmission of

religious beliefs and values through the education system in Belgium (Flanders), Germany, Ireland, Malta, and Scotland. It also profiled interactions between home and school in shaping the formation of beliefs among children. Results for Ireland are based on interviews and written submissions from 169 12 year old children. REMC's findings highlight the complexity of religious education in Irish families. For example a traditional 'transmission model' of religious education 'whereby values and beliefs are passed on from the parent to the child unidirectionally' (Schwartz, 2006), does not adequately describe the findings of the research. REMC's findings in relation to religious education in the family can be classified under four key points.

(i) Children often act as initiators of Religious Education in the family

Discussion of religious topics in the family is infrequent and is usually initiated by children. One child comments:

If I asked my Mum about it then she'd tell me all about it, because I think that she knows quite a lot about religion, but it wouldn't be a general topic (REMC, 2009).

Furthermore, the subject area of religious education in school sometimes acts as a catalyst for the discussion of religious topics in the family.

My Mam asks what did you do today and I'm going oh the subjects that we do and what we talked about in religion, say if I do religion we just talk about it (REMC, 2009).

(ii) Young children are aware of multiple attitudes to Religion in the family

From a young age children are capable of identifying and accepting a diversity religious and belief systems and values in their families. REMC shows that children encounter and are capable of accommodating both religious and secular belief in society and in their families.

If you are like sad you'd be just be like ... think about God and that sort of stuff and then if you are not you just don't have really any religion, you don't believe in anything (REMC, 2009).

Children whose parents have 'no religion' sometimes self-describe as religious, and children whose parents are 'religious', sometimes self-describe as non-religious.

What happened for me I was learning about Buddhism (in school) and I kind of you know took to it ... So I decided to be a Buddhist (REMC, 2009).

(iii) Children wish to negotiate their own religious belief and practice in the family

Children are not passive recipients of faith traditions. They frequently self-identify as active agents in their own religious and moral formation and are capable of negotiating their own beliefs and differentiating between their own and their parents' beliefs from an early age. As they grew older children are more likely to question parental religious belief. A quotation from a child from a religious background typifies this process of negotiation.

But the thing I don't get with religion is that, do we actually know if this happened or not. Because as you get older they kind of change the story a bit, like when you are younger they tell you like something and then as you get older like they change it (REMC, 2009).

Another child comments:

My Mam made me make my confirmation. ... Yeah but like she still doesn't know that I don't believe in God, the only person who does know is my big brother ... and people in the class (REMC, 2009).

The recent focus on upholding and acknowledging the rights of the child has effected children's self-perception. REMC shows that children are aware of the importance of making decisions for themselves in the area of religion and faith. They accept in principle that:

'while you are still young your parents should choose your religion so that you can kind of like follow the family tradition' (REMC, 2009).

Another child suggests:

When you are younger, you can't really pick your own choice. When you are only like a baby, your Mam has to (REMC, 2009).

However, the children also exhibited how they are being given choice in the area of religious practice and belief.

My Mam always says to me that I can pick whatever religion I want (REMC, 2009).

One child, whose mother ‘made’ (sic.) her make her communion stated:

..so I did that. And then all of a sudden she put me in confirmation classes. And I was like why and she goes because you wanted to and I go so if I don’t want to I can just drop out of it and she goes, she just wanted me to make at least my communion, so I have the choice of making my confirmation (REMC, 2009).

(iv) Gender is a significant factor in faith transmission in the family

The mother’s religious belief influences children more than any other family member. Children’s self- description of their religious affiliation is strongly related to that of their parents, especially their mothers. However once again, what is operative here is not simply a matter of a unilateral transmission of faith but a multilateral negotiation of religious faith and ideas within the family.

Faith formation in Catholic families in Ireland

The fact that Irish families are undergoing serious reconfiguration and that Irish society is under economic, social and cultural transition, inevitably impacts upon the religious education of children in Catholic families. In Ireland the Catholic Church tends to focus most of its resources on parishes and schools as the loci of religious education. Consequently few resources, supports and structures exist for parents or young children in families.

There is little research and no national policy document on family-based Catholic faith formation in Ireland. Ireland’s formerly active National Association of Family Ministry Personnel has dissolved and no replacement organisation currently exists. Pastoral support and care for family ministry is overseen by The Council for Marriage and the Family of the Irish Catholic Bishops’ Conference. While many Irish dioceses do invest in family ministry, provision of personnel and resources varies and currently there is no systematic, overarching national structure. One might conjecture that because adult catechesis is the chief form of catechesis in the Church (*General Directory for*

Catechesis, 1997; *Share the Good News*, 2010) and because schools and parishes are identified as the primary locus for the religious education of young children, insufficient attention is paid to the religious education of children in their families.

Despite the lack of a national programme, organisation or systematic structure to support family faith formation there is evidence that the religious education of children within families is being nurtured in two main ways. (a.) through the National Catechetical Programme which support the development of home-school-parish links and (b.) through Parish based liturgies and sacramental programmes.

a. Religious Education of Children in Families supported by the National Catechetical Programme

In Ireland the Christian community has allocated its main energy, resources and focus on the school and parish as the major centres of religious education. There has not been a sustained vision and resourcing of the religious education of children in families. The prioritisation of Catholic schools and parishes as the locus for the transmission of Christian faith has resulted in a lack of appreciation of the needs of diverse families in the area of religious education. Within Catholic primary schools, the National Catechetical Programme *Alive O* (1996-2004), which will shortly be replaced by a new Religious Education Curriculum, encourages a partnership involving home, school and parish (*Irish Episcopal Commission on Catechetics*, 2004). This collaborative approach connecting parent, teacher and parish attempts to link the more formal and structured religious learning which takes place in the Catholic school with religious learning and living which takes place in the family home (O'Farrell, 2004, 38).

However the *Alive O* programme's vision of an interconnecting family, school and parish life is often at odds with the complex nature of Ireland's contemporary family structures. A study of the effectiveness of the *Alive O* Programme, based on interviews with parents, teachers and children, concluded that the programme's vision of three intersecting and mutually complementary realms is overly optimistic. The report described the family home as a place of little or no religious discourse or experience, the

parish as a place of diminishing religious discourse and experience, and the schools as a predominantly positive place of religious discourse and experience for the child (Kennedy, 2000).

b. Religious Education in families supported by sacramental preparation

In order to encourage the transmission of faith in the home and to recognise the family as the primary locus of faith formation for young children, new programmes have shifted the centre of gravity from the school and the parish back towards the family home. In 2004 the *Do This in Memory Programme* was introduced as a parish-based programme for children (c. age 8) receiving First Eucharist in Ireland. This programme has encouraged families to accept their responsibilities for faith formation in the home (Mahon & Delaney, 2004). Each of Ireland's 26 dioceses use the programme. In 2009 a second parish-centred and family-friendly programme of sacramental preparation for confirmation, *You Shall Be My Witnesses*, was launched (Mahon, 2009). Almost half of the diocese in Ireland and in excess of 10,000 children and their families are currently using it. Through these programmes the family home becomes a critically important locus for faith formation and transmission. The family works in tandem with the ongoing liturgical catechesis in the parish. Faith literally became part of the furniture of the home as children are asked to physically demarcate some part of the home for sacred space. Prayers and rituals help to initiate the family into a pattern of behaviour that makes faith part of family life. Children are given a special prayer candle, prayer cards, worksheets and sacred stories to focus their family life regularly around this sacred space. The whole family is invited to participate in the programme and in many instances there is an inversion of the traditional faith formational roles when children become the catechisers of parents.

Concluding Remarks

The Republic of Ireland is in a period of economic, social and religious transition. Families are undergoing rapid transition with a plurality of family types and a dissolution

of traditional Catholic family structures and values. Religious education in families can be characterised by five main features. 1. There is no national organisation, programme or systematic structure to support the religious education of young children in families. This is a cause for concern and one may surmise that many parents are confused, isolated and unresourced in their task as religious educators. 2. In effect, little is known about the nature and efficacy of religious education in families. The scarcity of research or national data makes any attempt at a comprehensive and accurate profile and analysis of the religious education of young children in families difficult, if not impossible. 3. The Catholic Church's overarching emphasis on school and parish as the primary context for faith formation has resulted in the neglect of religious education in the family. As the school becomes the main locus for religious education and faith formation it may unintentionally contribute to inactivity and passivity in the family home. Parents may be disinterested in, or content to delegate, their responsibility as religious educators. One might ask if religious education in the family is sufficiently valued by the Catholic Church in Ireland. Furthermore recent debates about the legitimacy of including religious education within the primary school curriculum in Ireland suggest that families may become more crucial centres of religious education in the future. 4. Frequently parishes do not provide whole family catechesis and the needs of diverse family groups such as lone parent families and divorced family members may not be addressed. While the home-school-parish model of catechesis which suffuses the current National Catechetical Programme in primary schools is undoubtedly worthwhile, in reality parents are often unfamiliar with religious education programmes or more general frameworks (e.g. *Síolta* and *Aistear*). 5. REMC's findings suggest that religious education in families is multi-directional. Children often initiate and negotiate their own religious education and identity in the family. Unidirectional parent to child transmissive models do not describe this complex dynamic adequately. Furthermore in two parent/guardian families one can not assume a synchronicity of beliefs among adults. Children are cognizant of both adults and children being engaged in an ongoing process of negotiating belief. 6 REMC's findings also reinforce the need to ensure that children never view or experience religious education as coercive or indoctrinatory. Children's awareness of their own rights should

be welcomed. Paragraph 11 of *Dignitatis Humanae* enunciates a guiding principle on freedom which is deeply relevant to religiously educating children within families.

‘from the very origins of the Church, the disciples of Christ strove to convert people to faith... not by the use of coercion or by devices unworthy of the Gospel, but by the power, above all, of the Word of God.’ (Abbott, 1967).

6. Gender is an influential factor in faith education and transmission. The support and education of parents, most particularly of mothers as the primary conduits of religious education, is vital. Further research into gender and the transmission of faith in families needs to be undertaken.

In summary one can state that as long as young children enter the current 98% denominational school system in Ireland they benefit from a relatively well resourced and structured approach to religious education. Before they enter this, while they are in the home, there is a noticeable lack of research, resources and support for their religious education in the family.

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