

MAKING RELIGIOUS INSTRUCTION AND VALUES FORMATION RELEVANT TO 21ST CENTURY LEARNERS

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The 21st century landscape of religious education poses challenges to religious educators engaged in formal education of the Christian faith of young people. With the fast changing times, how one can cope with the demands of re-inventing and re-articulating the faith in such a way that it remains faithful to Christian Tradition and relevant to the present context is a daunting task. Through the years, the church has continually inspired and guided teachers to make the proclamation of the Gospel effective in different cultures across time and history. The article examines the possible causes of young people's dissatisfaction and indifference to the understanding and living out of the Christian values. Some suggestions to make religious education and values formation more meaningful, dynamic and relevant to the 21st century learners are cited for possible adoption by religious educators.

*Your beliefs become your thoughts, your thoughts become your words,
Your words become your actions, your actions become your habits,
Your habits become your values, your values become your destiny.*

Mahatma Gandhi

INTRODUCTION

Religious education is an essential part of a person's holistic development toward the transformation of society. No less than St. John Baptist De La Salle advocated the teaching of religion in schools especially those which he established and sustained. In one of his meditations, he reminded teachers (who were brothers or part of the fraternity/brotherhood he formed) that the kind of behavior teachers exemplify could be easily assimilated by the

students if there is consistency in what one will say in words and what one does in life. “It is, then, not enough to procure the Christian spirit for children and to teach them the mysteries and doctrines of our religion. You must also teach them the practical maxims that are found throughout the holy Gospel.”¹

VALUES FORMATION AND RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

Values formation is never separated from the formal religious education received through the elders, parents, catechists in parishes and teachers in schools. The study of one's religion for Christians and non-Christians alike has always assumed that the values adhered to by the faith community will be imbued in the people they are educating. Catholic schools in the Philippines often claim that the core of their curriculum is the Christian faith. Integration of values across disciplines and other areas of study had been relegated to religious educators in the campus. It is as if all are subsumed within one overarching umbrella, namely, the religious values (or Christian virtues) to be taught to their students. Most Catholic schools even identify the core values they wish to inculcate in their students. One would just have to look at their vision-mission statements in order to have an idea of this, not to mention that some institutions even resorted to strategically post these values in bold prints inside the campus or classrooms with the presupposition that this will help the community become familiar with them. Sometimes these values are used as the distinct marks of an institution to highlight their brand of education. In this sense, values formation is one of the goals of religious education. They are understood as one and the same thus, may be used

¹ John Baptist De La Salle, *Meditations*, trans., Richard Arnandez, FSC & Augustine Loes, FSC, accessed July 19, 2016, <https://lasallian.info/wp-content/uploads/2012/12/Meditations-2007.pdf>. In this set of meditations, John Baptist De La Salle reminded the brothers of their crucial role as educators of values. As educators, witnessing to the values one teaches is of crucial importance more than words or theoretical discussions about them.

interchangeably. The process of "enculturation"² remains one of the most relied upon ways of ensuring that students are formed according to the values of the faith congregation or religious community they belong to.

SIGNIFICANT LEARNINGS FROM THE PAST

Looking back at history, we realize that at the onset of missionary works in the territories outside the Western world, especially the Philippines, missionaries put premium on the education of the converts to the Christian faith. Through these efforts, the values expected of these converts have to be achieved through the catechism classes provided for the *catechumen*. Initiatives to make our Filipino ancestors understand the faith may be gauged through the use of *baybayin* (syllabary or the ancient Filipino alphabet) as could be seen in the translation of the Christian faith from Latin to the local tongue used and understood among the people during that period in our history. Perhaps this is one of the reasons why many Filipinos embraced the faith easily. It was presented with the local context in mind. It is truism then that when the culture of the people being addressed by another person belonging to another culture is recognized and respected, friendship may be forged easily.

We recall also that in the education provided by St. John Baptist De La Salle for the poor boys in his community, he introduced one radical reform, namely, the use of the local language in instruction, *French*, instead of using *Latin* language which was the normative medium of instruction in his time. It is safe to assume that the primary concern of religious educators is to communicate the faith more effectively by utilizing the resources, approaches and medium of instruction easily understood by the people or one that is familiar to them or close to their heart. Such

² This implies the socialization process which a person undergoes in order to assimilate a culture. The dictionary defines it as "the process by which an individual learns the traditional content of a culture and assimilates its practices and values." Retrieved from Webster.com/dictionary/enculturation, accessed July 19, 2016, <http://www.merriam->

medium opens the potential of the Gospel to be embraced freely and eventually bear fruits in their lives.³

A CALL FOR RELEVANT AND CONTEXTUAL APPROACHES

Furthermore, the challenge of the 21st century education calls for a more meaningful, relevant and contextualized approaches to learning. Religious education or values formation is not exempted from this pedagogical shift. As reiterated in *Evangelii Gaudium* by Pope Francis, "renewal of preaching can offer believers, as well as the lukewarm and the non-practising, new joy in the faith and fruitfulness in the work of evangelization."⁴ The education to faith which establishes and sustains our life values is not a preference but a Christian duty. Sharing the joy of the Gospel is a testimony to how we highly prize our faith. Since the establishment and development of Catholic schools, the formation of character has been the primary thrust of the church. Several attempts at renewal in pursuit of this goal may be evident in numerous synods, councils, conferences and re-tooling initiatives for religious educators around the globe. In the Philippines alone, we come across documents like *Maturing in Christian Faith* in 1978, the *Acts and Decrees of the Second Plenary Council of the Philippines* in 1991, the *New Catechetical Directory of the Philippines* in 2004 among others, thereby, reminding all those involved in the education of Catholics to revitalize, vivify and re-invent the proclamation of the Gospel. While many attempts have been done to make this a reality, there

³ In *Gaudium et Spes* article no. 48, one sees a strong encouragement to use the language of the people in the evangelization process for effective proclamation of the Gospel. See Pastoral Constitution in the Modern World, accessed July 19, 2016, http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html.

⁴ Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, accessed July 19, 2016, http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html.

are still traces of dichotomy between orthodoxy⁵ and orthopraxis⁶ among many Catholics who received formal religious instruction in schools. One may ask why a gap between what is taught and what is done as regards doctrines may be observed among Christians. Would efforts like using more creative methods in teaching, updating contents of catechesis, or presenting the creed in a more dynamic techniques unable to bridge this chasm?

THE TURN TO CULTURE

Paul VI suggested one possible explanation when it posed this challenge: “The split between the Gospel and culture is without a doubt the drama of our time, just as it was of other times. Therefore every effort must be made to ensure a full evangelization of culture, or more correctly of cultures. They have to be regenerated by an encounter with the Gospel.”⁷ If culture and all its riches are taken for granted, effective religious education may not be expected. Unless religious education takes seriously the impact of culture only then can we expect the Gospel to bear fruits. *Gaudium et Spes* reiterates this point clearly in the following way, “there are many ties between the message of salvation and human culture. For God, revealing Himself to His people to the extent of a full manifestation of Himself in His Incarnate Son, has spoken

⁵ Orthodoxy refers to adherence to the set of beliefs (creed) approved officially by the church. It also suggests faithfulness to the teachings of the early Christians who were the first witnesses to the spirit of Jesus Christ. Confer *Catholic Encyclopedia* on line, accessed July 20, 2016, <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/11330a.htm>.

⁶ Orthopraxis refers to the right behavior or correct practice expected of Christians. Confer R. M. A. Bowman, “Biblical Guide to Orthodoxy and Heresy,” *Christian Research Journal* (1990), accessed, July 20, 2016, <http://www.apologeticsindex.org/461-orthopraxis>.

⁷ Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, accessed July 19, 2016, http://w2.vatican.va/content/paulvi/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_pvi_exh_19751208_evangelii-nuntiandi.html on July 19, 2016.

according to the culture proper to each epoch.”⁸ Results of some studies validate this claim.⁹ As religious educators, the first responsibility to take seriously is to allow the Gospel to be born in the present context of society. For many educators, it is easier to be complacent and keep the “old” way of doing things than to venture into something new which is perceived too risky or complicated. For example, the classical way of instructing students about the Christian faith still follows this process: First, the teacher presents the doctrinal statements of the church (or set of faith statements often lifted out of Catechism books written by Western scholars and theologians). Second, the teacher will prove this “truth” through reference to biblical sources, or “official” teachings of the church. These will serve as proof texts of the prescribed doctrine. Third is a lengthy explanation of the doctrine or sometimes referred to as in depth exploration (deepening of faith?) of the set of beliefs which are delivered via lecture of the teacher. Finally, (that is, if time permits) the lessons derived from such discourse will have to be linked with the ethical implications for Christian living. The application to life of the specific doctrine learned in class should be manifested through the right behavior exhibited by students in the form of assignment, project or through a required service learning activity.

AN INDUCTIVE STYLE

This deductive style of understanding the faith has already been shelved, so to speak, since 1965 through the Second Vatican

⁸ Paul VI, *Gaudium et Spes*, accessed July 26, 2016, http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vatii_const_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html.

⁹ See the results of studies done by Eduardo Domingo, *The State of Catechesis and College Theology in Four Catholic Schools*, (Ph.D diss., UST, 1986). ; See also, R., Cacho, *Bakas ng kagandahang-loob ng Diyos: A Proposed Inculturated Approach to Sacraments for Religious Education* (Ph.D. diss., De La Salle University, 2004).; A. Gonzalez, FSC, *Towards an Adult Faith: Religious Themes in Contemporary Language* (Manila: De La Salle University Press. 2002).; G. Snyder, *Inculturation of the Jesus Tradition* (Pennsylvania: Trinity Press International, 1999).

Council. The shift from a deductive to an inductive style is strongly advocated by John XXIII and Paul VI in their call for "renewed evangelization" in the church. This shift is further endorsed by John Paul II and Benedict XVI in their advocacy for "new evangelization". Pope Francis, for his part, speaks of "the joy of evangelization" which gives premium on present human experience as the starting point of understanding how God relates to us. The Philippine church aligns itself with this thrust in evangelization by promoting the holistic formation of the faithful in catholic educational institutions. It reminds catechists and teachers to consider the three aspects of faith, doctrine, morals and worship or *DMW framework*¹⁰. This framework should inform the conduct of religious education of the youth in Catholic educational institutions. Reflections on the Christian faith must begin from where people are, i.e., with their context and the way they live their lives as a community. This shift in perspective necessarily demands a re-appropriation and re-articulation of the faith in a manner that is relevant and meaningful to the present age without disregarding fidelity (*sensus fidelium*)¹¹ to the faith legacy that is being handed on.

DRAWING FROM HUMAN EXPERIENCES

There are many themes that a religious educator can derive from human experience in order to make the Christian faith meaningful and relevant to the present age.¹² By doing so he/she

¹⁰ This framework was introduced by the Catholic Bishops' Conference in the Philippines through the National Catechetical Directory of the Philippines which bore the title, *Maturing in Christian Faith* in 1984. The thrust of catechesis is holistic formation where the creed, code and cult aspects of the Christian faith are to be consciously incorporated in all classes of religion. CBCP, *Maturing in Christian Faith: National Catechetical Directory for the Philippines* (Quezon City: St. Paul's Publications, 1984).

¹¹ Also called "sensus fidei" or the consent of the whole church regarding faith and morals. See the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, nos. 91-93 (Manila: Word and Life Publications, 1994).

¹² For examples on themes which may be derived from human experiences of young Filipino students refer to the textbooks co-written with Jose de Mesa, *In Love with God: Doing Theology for Students*; *Jesus, God's way of Friendship*; *Becoming Church*,

will not only engage the students but will also give them the opportunity to critically consider the present realities in the light of faith. With resources or data about the Christian faith easily accessible nowadays, religious education today is not so much about providing information but teaching them the skills to critically appropriate and manage data of faith which will help them nurture and develop Christian values in themselves. Students need to be given the space to create, critique, and use their technological expertise to deal with the issues and concerns of the time. Gone are the days when they passively sit in class while we feed them with information. Now more than ever, developing the values of students would require more than the transmission of knowledge. It calls for versatility, dynamism, openness and a lot of risk taking or experimentation in order to communicate effectively with the learners.

Many religious educators who work at the grassroots level of the church are undeniably doing their best to respond to the challenge of making religious education engaging to 21st century learners.¹³ However, religious educators who are serving catholic educational institutions are confronted with the difficult task of making religious instruction appeal to present day learners. In this age where rethinking about the value of spirituality for contemporary times is apparent and where faith in God may not

Being Sacrament; When Beauty Beckons: Theological Ethics of Filipino Aesthetics (Manila: St. Scholastica's, 2012).

¹³ See the numerous studies/works done by religious educators from curriculum redesigning to proposed programs in order to improve religious education in different schools and contexts such as S. Elton-Craft, *Teaching Religious Education Creatively* (Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon : Routledge, 2015); K. Gearon, *Masterclass in Religious Education: Transforming Teaching and Learning* (London : Bloomsbury Publishing, 2013); P. Ng and L. Lu, "Spirituality and Morality: A Study of Communal Aspects from Eastern and Western Perspectives," in *Journal of Religious Education* vol. 63 no. 1 (April 2015), 13-24; H. S. Bautista, "Towards an Integrated Religious Education Curriculum for the St. Paul University System (Tertiary Level) in the Philippines," (Ph.D., diss., Manila: DLSU, 2004); P. Gilmore, "Educating the Educators: A Fifty-Year Retrospective of Religious Education in the Catholic Context," *Religious Education* vol. 11 no. 5 (Oct/Dec 2015), 555-568.

necessarily be expressed only through traditional ecclesiastical structure, the value of instruction given formally in classrooms to learn the Christian faith is put in question. The ontological, philosophical or clergy-centered manner of understanding one's faith in God may now be considered irrelevant, meaningless or even oppressive to believers who may be forced to sit in a classroom under the tutelage of a teacher who guards "the deposits of faith" passionately but fails to proclaim the good news of Jesus effectively in order to engage students.

No matter how many church documents, pastoral or encyclical letters may be produced to show that our church responds to the "signs of the times" if religious educators continue to transport their students to the middle ages in terms of their theological content, and pedagogies, we should not be surprised, if we have students who are not only bored, dissatisfied, and indifferent but are also alienated from the Christian God and the current church community they are supposed to be connected with. Some of them desperately move out of the institutional church to seek for answers to their questions elsewhere and in order to find their own space in order to practice their "privatized"/personalized forms of spirituality. In fact today, young people claim to be "spiritual" even if they do not associate themselves to any specific church or religion.

RELIGIOUS EDUCATORS AND THE 21ST CENTURY LEARNERS

The mission of religious educators is to proclaim the Gospel in ever new and fresh ways. Hence, religious educators are challenged by the 21st century learners to distance themselves from prescriptive stance in order to assume a more descriptive approach in understanding the wisdom of the past. In this way, religious educators can truly respond to the present issues, questions or problems of students.¹⁴ Approaches that promote relational,

¹⁴ T. H. Groome, *What makes us Catholic?* New York: Harper Collins Publishers, Inc., 2002.

dynamic and holistic educational methods are promoted. Moreover, an inclusive, multi-dimensional and critical vision of one's faith seems to be the preferred mode. Young believers want a personalized expression of beliefs more than academic understanding. This kind of "valuing" among young believers could not be set aside by religious educators.

RELIGIOUS EDUCATORS AS MODELS OF FAITH

Indeed, values are firmed up in our students as we exemplify those which we highly prize in our day-to-day life. But consistency between what students hear and what they see in their teachers is given much priority by the present generation. Children are most likely influenced by the teachers they admire. There were studies which showed that the disruptive behavior of students may be curbed by positive experiences and good rapport with teachers.¹⁵ One's integrity as a religious educator is earned in the process of assuming moral ascendancy. The 21st century learners look for "models" of values because their character and behavior are molded by those they look up to. Unlike norms, values are behaviors which proceed from our personal convictions, thus, there is a need to act according to one's volition. "We can follow norms against our will, but values have the support of our will. We have learned their importance due to the benefits they produce, individually and collectively."¹⁶ As religious educators, we can only help to reinforce, sustain or nurture what was formed at home but we do not have the power to change those values. Unlike habits which we could still change, values instilled through the person's upbringing will stay with the person even as he/she grows old.¹⁷

¹⁵ See studies of J. Testerman, "Holding at Risk Students," *Phi Delta Kappan*, vol. 77 (1996), 364-365.; D.J. Tippins, K. J. Tobin, K. Hook, "Ethical Decisions at the Heart of Teaching," *Journal of Moral Education*, vol. 22 (1993), 160-167.; M. J. Tierno, "Teaching as Modeling: the Impact of Teacher's Behavior upon Students' Character Formation," *The Educational Forum*, vol. 33 (1996), 174-180.

¹⁶ J. C. Jimenez, *The Importance of Organizational Values*, accessed July 25, 2016, <http://significanceofvalues.com/formayion/index.html>.

CONCLUSION: CRAFTING LEARNER- CENTERED CURRICULA

The challenge for religious education specially in the formative years of students is to take on the responsibility of crafting curriculum that highlights the core values of the Gospel; making sure that children are not only expected to memorize doctrines but are treated as active participants in the learning of their religion. There should be meaningful experiences which they could attribute to the divine presence, good models of behavior that they could emulate, and engaging discussions about the Christian faith. Opportunities to act on values learned such as service to the community must be provided. Likewise, language is of primary consideration if these children are expected to comprehend well their religion. Teachers should use the students' *lingua franca*¹⁸ and not resort to "English" which is the medium of instruction for most Catholic schools. Using a foreign language in teaching the faith has more disadvantages than advantages. For example, when students want to express themselves more freely and engage in meaningful discussions, they often ask their religion teacher if they could speak in the vernacular. This is a strong validation that the medium of instruction being used has not really served its purpose of communicating the Gospel effectively. If people do not understand and are deprived to articulate their feelings, thoughts or experiences of God due to language barrier, how can evangelization take place? Language is not only relevant for social communication it is also a tool for learning the fundamental aspects of one's faith, thus instrumental in clarifying the values we want our students to own or assume as theirs. "It is hoped that, as this awareness increases, students will reconsider and perhaps modify poorly founded values while, at the same time, hold more confidently values which stand

¹⁷ E. S. Quito, *Fundamentals of Ethics*. (Quezon City: C & E Publishing Inc., 2008).

¹⁸ This refers to any of various languages used as common or commercial tongues among peoples of diverse speech. This is the first language used or understood by the person. See "Merriam-Webster," accessed July 28, 2016, <http://www.merriam-webster.com/>.

the test of review and comparison.”¹⁹ Through this recent technique, namely, “values clarification” students are able to put in parallel with their own values the values of other people. A non-threatening environment with a compassionate attitude will inspire students to open up, share their ideas and be more critical of their values. On the contrary, students who are exposed to censorship, authoritarian and conservative attitude would not be trained to do self-reflection and analysis of values being espoused. While certain human values still apply due to their universal character, one needs to re-articulate these values with the present context seriously considered. New expressions of values we hold dear should not be perceived as betrayal of age-old traditions but opportunities for re-inventing and vivifying the attributes of being human in the 21st century.

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¹⁹ L.E. Raths, M. Harmin & S. B.Simon, *Values and Teaching*, accessed July 28, 2016, http://mina.education.ucsb.edu/webdata/instruction/hss/Values_Clarification/ValuClarif_Method_Outline.pdf.