

TEACHING THE CATHOLIC RELIGION

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When I was a Catholic high school teacher in the 1950s, there was a course called “religion.” Needless to say, the religion taught was the Catholic religion. A Catholic primary or secondary school understood its mission to be forming good Catholics. Naming the classroom part of its work religion was not a bad idea. In exploring the sacraments, the commandments, or church history, the teacher tried to make sense of the elements in the religion that was assumed to be shared by teacher and students. Much of the contents of those courses would be embarrassingly inadequate for today’s world. Nonetheless, I think that there is still a need for teaching the Catholic religion to inquirers of every age. Unfortunately, there is confusion about how this idea applies in today’s world.

Vatican II initiated a change of language and approach to the education of Catholics. Phrases such as catechesis, faith formation, and preaching the word of God designated something livelier than the old-time religion courses. These new names described the educational work of church ministers, especially within the context of liturgy. But when these terms are used to refer to the classroom, they can distort the possibilities and the limits of academic instruction.

An intelligent practicing of the Catholic religion today requires three different kinds of teaching: 1) catechetical-theological instruction 2) teaching religions 3) teaching the Catholic religion. The third kind of teaching can be confusing because its content overlaps the first kind and its method overlaps the second kind. Teaching a single religion, such as the Catholic religion, involves comparing the present religion and its possibilities, as well as comparing the religion and its secular surroundings

The first kind of teaching – the catechetical-theological – is concerned with presenting the beliefs and practices of the Catholic Church. The teaching and learning take place within Catholic tradition. The teacher speaks as someone who is a committed believer and the students (or at least their parents) profess the same faith. The limits of the teaching are the limits of orthodoxy. The most natural context for this teaching is liturgical, although not necessarily within the performance of the liturgy itself.

The second kind of teaching – teaching religions – finds its appropriate setting in the classroom. Many secular universities have departments of religion and offer courses on various religions. An understanding of the religious world is sought. As religion is a difficult subject that can involve history social science, and philosophy, teaching a course on religions may not be appropriate before senior high school. Adults who have not been to college may not get much exposure to this kind of learning but every citizen needs some knowledge of how religions affect the world. In this kind of course, the stance of the teacher is a neutral observer; all religions are given a fair hearing. The students may be of any religion or no religion.

In the third kind of teaching that deals with one religion the teacher examines that religion from both inside and outside. Usually it is the teacher’s own religion; otherwise it is nearly impossible to know a religion with an insider’s view as well as an outsider’s view. The students are

presumed to have a particular interest in this religion, in this case Catholicism, but their beliefs and their practice of the religion are the concern of the student, not the concern of the teacher or anyone else. The aim of the teaching-learning is to understand the religious elements of the Catholic Church and to criticize what does not seem to make sense. For example, the structure of the church, the philosophical assumptions of its doctrines, and the relation between Catholic moral teaching and contemporary science are critically examined. In both the second and third kinds of teaching, heresy and orthodoxy are irrelevant terms, except perhaps to acknowledge that all orthodoxies are suspect in the classroom.

This third kind of teaching is common in Catholic colleges and universities although there is sometimes confusion about the nature of the university classroom. Until about fifty years ago teachers in Catholic colleges were assumed to be an arm of the church's official teaching. The department called theology provided a further development of catechetical instruction. When the church and the world around the church began to change profoundly, new courses were added in the theology department. Sometimes the name of the department changed to religion or religious studies. The philosophical or educational significance of this change was often not considered. Most often the change reflected a fear of losing state money. State boards considered the term theology to be a sign of an ecclesiastical mission. A few of the biggest Catholic universities kept the name theology and tried to change the connotations of the term. Whether they succeeded is debatable.

In any case, the courses taught in any university today should be called religion courses. It makes sense that students in a Catholic university would mainly concentrate on the Catholic religion. A course might be taught by someone who identifies himself or herself as a theologian but in the university classroom the mission is not catechetical-theological instruction. To understand the Catholic religion one needs to employ academic criticism. That means a dialogue between the language of official Catholicism and the standards of university scholarship. It follows that the teacher is judged by academic standards not standards set by ecclesiastical orthodoxy. When church officials think that their job includes trying to control what is taught in the classroom, any university worthy of the name protects professors against outside intrusion.

A teacher in a Catholic high school who is doing his or her job of exciting the minds of students is likely to run into trouble. That is, good high school teachers teach (Catholic) religion rather than engage in catechetical-theological instruction. High school teachers of the Catholic religion need the protection that college professors have. If they are incompetent they should not be teaching the subject; if they are competent, they should be allowed to do the job without outside interference. A high school teacher's job is to teach (the Catholic) religion with whatever critical tools of scholarship he or she can enlist.

If a high school teacher has little protection for the integrity of this kind of teaching, a parish educator has practically none. It is true that the main educational work of a parish is catechetical-theological instruction within a liturgical context. A DRE or a catechist has to make clear the historic and present teaching of the Catholic Church. Where there is ignorance of the tradition on the part of the teacher or clear contradictions of the church's teaching, correction from the outside is called for. However, parishioners today have questions that cannot be answered by exploring material that leads to doctrinal formulas. A parish has a responsibility to

provide some courses or structured discussions that are the teaching-studying of the Catholic religion, teaching that is clearly distinguished from catechetical-theological learning.

Is such teaching a threat to existing doctrinal and moral orthodoxy? Undoubtedly a certain tension is to be expected. But for the health of the parish and larger church, intellectual exploration of the Catholic religion in the past and present is indispensable. It is not easy to find teachers who can explore the Catholic religion as an insider and also take the view of an outsider. A person who is simply in rebellion against the religion is not a good candidate for presenting a balanced picture of the Catholic religion in the contemporary world. And, of course, the competent and well prepared teacher may be unwilling to take on the job in a parish without clear and explicit protections for the teacher's work.

Is it naïve to think that an institution would sponsor courses critical of itself? Most institutions may not be willing to do that but a large, powerful and intelligently directed institution would recognize the indispensable value of that strategy. The Catholic Church is one of the largest and most powerful institutions in history. Partly for that reason, it is a target for late night comedians and harsh critics who attack the church for a variety of reasons, some good and some unfair. Unless Catholic Church officials allow criticism of their teaching by loyal members of the church, the field will be left to those who wish to destroy the teaching. The equating of education with catechetical-theological instruction in approved doctrine will cause the intellectually curious to drift away from the church. The Catholic Church needs orthodoxy and authority but these ideas cannot be developed and rethought without the teaching of the Catholic religion.