

Religious Education an Ideal Conduit for Child Spirituality

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Children are spiritual by nature. It is innate and essential to their well-being. They are enchanted by the world around them, caught up in the present moment, with a great curiosity to explore relationships—seen and unseen. They possess an ability for wonder and awe, capable of profound and significant beliefs and always open to more.

One of the areas where this spirituality is nurtured and developed is in the primary school. It takes place through the ethos and across the curriculum. If students are taught their maths and geography well, this will also nurture their spiritual lives.

In the Catholic primary school, however, religious education most explicitly honours the spiritual dimension of the child. The school brings the spiritual life of the child into conversation with the Christian tradition – a source of spiritual wisdom, just as other religious traditions do. Although recognising the distinct identities of spirituality and religion, Christian religious education believes they can be partners. Religion without lived spirituality is dead and at times deadening. Spirituality without the structure and resources of a religious tradition and community is without roots and may be held the prisoner of ever-changing fashions.

At the heart of the Christian religious tradition is the belief that God comes looking for us. Christian religious tradition tells stories of how people have tried to tune into this presence and live in response to the revelation of God, particularly through the person of Jesus Christ. As Elizabeth Barrett Browning puts it, “Earth is crammed with heaven/and every common bush afire with God.”

Religious education in Catholic primary schools seeks to nurture the innate spirituality of children by introducing them to this Christian tradition, giving them access to it as a source of spiritual wisdom. It tries to bring their natural curiosity about relationships, God, their questions about life and death into conversation with the Christian tradition – exploring its insights and questions about these issues in a sustained, critical and reflective manner.

The conversation between religion, spirituality and the life of the child can form a life-giving identity. Such an approach helps children to *learn about* the tradition or other religious traditions but just as importantly, to learn *from it* for their own lives, in the spirit of openness, awe and wonder. In that context, reason and revelation go hand in hand. Critical thought and one’s religious faith are not mutually exclusive.

In the Religious Education class, the aim is to bring the children’s lives, their questions, curiosity, hope, and stories into conversation with the Christian tradition. This dynamic needs to

engage the memories, imaginations and critical intelligence of the children, helping them develop their own understandings, judgments, and decisions.

The teacher helps children to reflect, in as much as they are developmentally ready, on certain aspects of their lives, for example, friendship or fairness. They then bring this part of their experience to the faith tradition – what does it have to say about friendship or fairness. Having entered into dialogue and begun to learn *about* the tradition, the children will be invited to wonder about it, what do they make of it for themselves – does it make sense, what does it have to say to the world today? Finally, the children are asked if there are any implications for their own lives from their conversation with this particular spiritual tradition. In this way, there is the opportunity for children to learn *from* the tradition for their own lives. It is important that children are agents of their exploration and come to know things for themselves.

Religious education is a required and important curriculum subject in primary schools throughout this country. Religion can have a very positive role in society and in the lives of individual persons. The Colleges of Education prepare their student teachers to teach Religious Education in an informed, critical, respectful and open manner. It highlights the life-giving potential of religion to engage and educate well the spirituality of the child.

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