



RELIGION AND SOCIETY: A Narrative

Whilst people may not understand others' beliefs because they have not had the same experiences, Catholic teaching holds that openness, respect for the dignity of all, and dialogue is fundamental to the mission and teaching of Jesus. "Catholic" is not merely a title, it is a call to act in a certain way because it means *universal*. As Pope Francis (2013a) said:

Dialogue is born from a respectful attitude toward the other person, from a conviction that the other person has something good to say. It supposes that we can make room in our heart for their point of view, their opinion and their proposals. Dialogue entails a warm reception and not a preemptive condemnation. To dialogue, one must know how to lower the defenses, to open the doors of one's home and to offer warmth.

An attitude of respect for cultural and religious diversity through dialogue invites Catholics to better understand the beliefs, symbols and social structures of Catholicism and explore how other religious traditions and lifestyle choices celebrate and live out their core beliefs and convictions.

There are theological and historical reasons for divisions between Christian denominations, but an attitude of ecumenism is encouraged in order to give hope for greater unity. According to Enhancing Catholic School Identity data, most participants in the Diocese of Sale have multiple Christian belief stances (Post Critical Belief and Literal) or, a nonbelief stance (Relativism and External Critique). As well as this, there are multiple religious traditions and life philosophies within a school and its local community. Therefore, a Catholic school that provides a safe space (hermeneutic space) where students can engage with personal beliefs and the beliefs of others is in keeping with a recontextualised, dialogical approach.

It is also important to have an understanding of religious beliefs and stances other than Christian in order to help students recognise that perspectives can influence personal and communal codes of ethics and morality. For Catholics, engaging in dialogue with an attitude of openness and respect is a way to better understand not only the other, but also themselves. The three monotheistic religions, Christianity, Judaism and Islam provide a starting point for discovering similarities rather than differences. In Australia, the spirituality of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders provides spiritual support for some. Catholic prayer and liturgy often looks to these as a source for creating meaning and developing a distinctive Australian spirituality.

In today's increasingly secular, pluralist world, religion is sometimes portrayed as having a negative influence on society, but also, it may be promoted as the reason behind extremist actions that result in war, social chaos and intolerance of other religions. This means that an entire religious group is held accountable rather than the individual or group perpetrators responsible for antisocial and violent actions. If people have a better understanding of the beliefs and traditions of others, they can make informed decisions about media reports and whether certain actions are in keeping with the faith of a particular religious group. *"We know how much violence has resulted in recent times from the attempt to eliminate God and the divine from the horizon of humanity, and we are aware of the importance of witnessing in our societies to that primordial openness to transcendence which lies deep within the human heart"* (Pope Francis, 2013b).

Every religion has its own symbols and identity markers expressed through art, architecture, music, dance, literature and film. Catholic schools in the Diocese of Sale have many Catholic identity markers that express their particular identity, and communicate something of the Christian tradition. Not only should a school's Catholic

identity be evident in physical markers, but in the everyday life and relationships within the school, in the curriculum, classroom, the policies, and in communications within the school and with the wider community. A distinctive Catholic identity (its particularity) should be recognisable to all in the community, and to those who enter this space. The markers have to make sense, the story behind them has to be known; otherwise they are meaningless. This requires continual recontextualisation and ongoing induction.

The Catholic Tradition, inspired by Jesus, guided by the Holy Spirit, informed by faith, openness, dialogue and cultural sensitivity, has much to offer the world. To be Catholic in the contemporary world means that challenges have to be confronted and scrutinised in light of Jesus' life and mission, Scripture and Church tradition. Therefore, threats to religious freedom or the dignity of the human person, whether it be environmental disasters or violation of basic human rights for economic domination, need to be identified and named in order to bring about right relationships and action. Every human is entitled to the life-giving experiences of justice, freedom and truth.

References

Pope Francis. (2013a). The Façade as a mirror. In *On heaven and earth: Pope Francis on Faith, Family and the Church in the twenty-first century*. Trans. Alejandro Bermudez & Howard Goodman. London: Bloomsbury.

Pope Francis. (2013b). *Audience with representatives of the churches and ecclesial communities of the different religions*. Address. Downloaded from http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2013/march/documents/papa-francesco_20130320_delegati-fraterni.html