



Boston Catholic Journal



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CCD Crisis in Catholic Doctrine



The Grave State of Religious Education in America

“What is urgent is the evangelization of a world that not only does not know the basic aspects of Christian dogma, but has in great part lost even the memory of the cultural elements of Christianity.” **John Paul II, January 26, 2004**

Your child is in the 10th grade, the 10th year of Religious Education — and does not know Who God is, what the Church is, and why either should have any impact or influence on their lives. Except for their Baptism in Christ and their First (and probably last) Holy Communion — the significance of which they know nothing — they are effectively pagans. This sounds harsh. It is meant to be. We need to be shaken out of our indifference and awoken from our illusions.

Our children — *your* children — do not know their Catholic Faith. In fact, most of them do not even know God.

And they are in the 10th grade of Religious Education. Think on that for a moment.

They have already had nine years — **9 years** — of something dubiously dubbed, “Religious Education”.

In less than a year they will make their Confirmation, which is to say, they will publicly “confirm” their belief in a God they do not know and ritually assent to the teachings of the Church ... of which they know nothing.

We will congratulate them and shower them with money and gifts, and tell them how proud we are of them. They will wear caps and gowns, as befitting graduates of some form of learning, and be absolutely clueless as they stand before the Bishop who would not dare embarrass himself or them by asking them the most basic question about what — in this defining moment — they are assenting to, what they are standing in Confirmation of — fully aware that, with rare exception, the student will be unable to answer.

This is not the sad state of CCD *today* — or as we more disingenuously call it now, “Religious Education”. It is the dismal and utterly reprehensible state of Catholic Religious Education everywhere in America, and likely elsewhere, *for the past 50 years*.

WARM BODIES

“How can this be?”, you ask.

It is stunningly simple: students know little or nothing about God and the Church because, by and large, their teachers know little or nothing about God and the Church. Religious Education north of Boston is the only venue of formal education in the world in which the recruitment process for teachers has two criteria only: a warm body and a willingness to teach what one does not know.

There is no formal training for a Catechist. Not in this “faith community” (the awkward New Age neologism for the apparently now defunct, “Church” or “Parish”) in this small town just North of Boston — and very likely not in America at large. The “DRE”, as they prefer to be called, or “Directors of Religious Education” do not question the prospective Catechist in any way pertaining to his or her grasp, knowledge, or understanding of the Faith that they will be teaching. If the candidate can read, they are qualified to teach. Period. There are no such things as “competencies”, no courses, no required readings, no demonstrable qualifications.

To fully grasp the egregious nature of this absurdity, try to imagine your local school hiring a teacher of Ancient History who never studied it, does not know Homer, Thucydides, or Virgil, nothing of the culture and politics of Classical Greece or Rome — but who has sufficient visual acuity to read the text of *The Iliad* or the *Aeneid*. The only credentials required for the position are a warm body and a willingness to teach something of which the candidate knows little or nothing. This absurd disproportion is not likely to inspire confidence in parents. But it does in DREs ...

The first thing to grasp is that, in many parishes, the DRE is a “Professional Catholic” — not in the way that, say, a Catholic physician is said to be a “Professional Catholic” — a practicing Catholic who is in “one of the secular professions”. “DRE”s are “professional Catholics” in another way. That is to say, they are *paid* Catholics who are paid to teach Catholicism through *unpaid* Catechists. **Catholicism is not just presumably their Faith, but their livelihood, their living, their income — in a word, it is their “job”.** The DRE typically — and most often defectively — knows her faith, and is selling it to the highest

bidder. The Catechist, hopefully learning as he or she is teaching, at least follows the injunction of Christ Himself: "*Freely you have received; freely give.*" For all their admirable charity, many, regrettably, have little to give because they themselves were not taught by *their* Catechists who had, in turn, been given little — or much that was counterfeit — by *their* Catechists.

Before the decimation of the teaching Orders of Sisters — and vocations in general — following the Second Vatican Council, our children were taught their Catechism by Nuns (Sisters, really) who were unpaid consecrated women who taught with a passionate conviction not only what they knew well, but, by and large, lived well. This had been the case almost universally until the confluence of Vatican II and the anti-culture of the 1960's. It was a climate saturated with permissiveness, and a clamoring not so much for freedom as for license. Any notion of "authority" and anything less hedonistic than what verged on euphoria became synonymous with "repression" — ecclesiastical, civil, moral, and sexual. As the doors — behind which incense and silence had stirred for 2000 years — were flung open, the miasma — and the animosity — of the world rushed in. The vocations — unable to accommodate this inimical influx — either rushed out or were systematically driven out. Social manifestos replaced religious evangels; the *Realpolitik* of man became the *summum bonum*, the greatest good, not the salvation of his immortal soul — a quaint and at best, anachronistic notion effectively abolished by the now socially enlightened masses.

It was at this point that the great teaching orders of Religious Sisters either evolved into, or were subsequently replaced *in toto* by the Professional Catholic, the Catholic for whom Catholicism became a profession, not of faith, but of emolument. Much like the Sophists of Classical Greece (the great antagonists of Socrates) who "sold" their wisdom and made a handsome living off it (ever proving themselves clever, but never wise), today we confront the Professional Catholic who sells Catholicism for a living, and with a vested interest in what is sold because it redounds to their wages. That the goods they sell are shoddy and defective is of no concern to them. They have a captive market: every Catholic with children must pay them each and every year for ten years. Not bad work if you can get it ...

It is true that St. Paul said that "the workman is worth his wages", but it remains equally true that St. Paul sewed tents — not Christianity — for a living. The DRE, you must understand, does not sew tents.

ALTERNATIVE METHODOLOGIES

One DRE north of Boston appears convinced that the way to reach the children is not through tiresome doctrine, text and study (as, for example, Jewish children learn their faith), but through the oxymoron called “Christian Rock and Roll” (the term, “Rock and Roll”, we will remember, derives from the bodily movements associated with copulation) to which she herself sprightly dances in her office. She is not alone. The “Ministers of Music” (among the many “Ministers of this and that” which proliferate throughout the “Faith Community” and within the “Worshipping Spaces” — neologisms for Church, pew and Altar respectively — have even brought in drums complete with trap sets to punctuate the Mysteries of the Mass. It appears to be a mind-set that prevails among those employed by the Church as “Professional Catholics”.

And yet the numbers of the young who appear at Mass (especially those unaccompanied by a parent) continue to diminish. Given the failure of “Religious Education” through what can only be loosely construed as formal and textual instruction, is “Rock and Roll” really the inducement our children need? Will syncopation suffice where formal instruction does not? Can we “Rock and Roll” our children to God through “Christian Rockers”? After 9 years of “formal” instruction with so dismal a result, perhaps another, some alternative, non-textual pedagogical avenue is open? Perhaps the new evangelizers are not the Catechists (if ever they were), but the musicians, the “Rock and Roll” Catholics?

Piqued by this, I began to ask around — first my own children, and then their acquaintances.

“Can you please tell me the name of a Christian “Rock and Roll” group”?

“No.”

“How about a Christian “Rock and Roll” artist?”

“Mmmmm ... no.”

“Well, what about the *music* at Mass?”

Their eyes roll and they giggle.

This is cause for uneasiness.

“NO CHILD LEFT BEHIND ...”

It is also why children can pass through 9 years of “Religious Education”, end up in the 10th grade preparing for Confirmation — *and not know God and what He expects of them, or the most basic precepts of the Church* to which they will formally ... and obliviously ... bind themselves.

It is also why no one fails “Religious Education”. There is no “staying back”. The bindings of the Bibles given the students remain unbroken, as well as their Newer-Age Catechisms-of-sorts. The queue leading to the Bishop is always as long as the year before.

Why are there so few young Catholics at Mass? To begin with, no one has taught them even the simplest and most basic Catholic precept: that attendance at Mass on Sunday is obligatory — even if you are oblivious to why you are there.

NOT A MEMBER OF THE BETTER BUSINESS BUREAU

But you have paid to have them — your children — taught their religion. It is you who drive them to “CCD”— and it is you who go back to pick them up. Cash and carry ... So why are they — your children — as oblivious to the Faith — as you are ... too?

“I have paid the tuition!”, you complain — *and the return on my investment is total ignorance?*

In the world of business, had you *paid* that money for a *product* — and received in the mail an *empty envelope* in return, you would call the owner of that business a con-man, a “rip-off”. But for the next 8 years you continue to buy “the product” and receive an empty envelope. *Who is the fool?*

I encourage you to ask your “DRE”: **“Why does my child not**

know God?”

The Church has ever taught that we, as parents, are our children’s *primary teacher* — and we have failed. It is an uncomfortable truth.

Ask your DRE why she has, *too* ... if only to know where your money is going, and why. If you do not receive a satisfactory answer —and you will not — acknowledge that you have been a fool and demand a refund, as is reasonable and just. But be advised: you cannot call the Better Business Bureau and tell them that you have been scammed. *Still less* can you call the Chancery, or the bishop. The BBB will at least reply to your letter. The Chancery will just “push the empty envelope”, and in the unlikely case that they do reply, they will most likely tell you that your Bishop deems your “CCD” program an outstanding model of religious education, and that he personally holds your pastor and DRE in the highest regard.” (I received such a reply when I asked Cardinal O’Malley’s office.)

In truth — at least here in Boston — Cardinal Seán Patrick O’Malley is as clueless of the *reality* of “Religious Education” as your children are of their Faith.

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