

# RELIGIOUS EDUCATORS AS TEACHERS OF SPIRITUALITY

By GLORIA DURKA

**T**O THE QUESTION, 'are religious educators functioning as teachers of spirituality?' I reply, 'How could it be otherwise?' Religious educators are teachers of spirituality because of the very nature of the religious education process. Religious education is not primarily tradition-centred or scripture-centred. Its main purpose is not the transmission of a fixed tradition or knowledge of its sacred writings, even though these are vital to a religious community. Religious education is not primarily learner-centred or experience-centred, because its goal is not the nurturance of self-expression and personal experience of creative individuals. Nor is religious education mainly society-centred, even though working towards a just reign of God is a necessary dimension. Religious education is also not primarily church-centred, that is, it is not the initiating of members into the life of the church community. Scholars like Rogers and others argue that the *basic purpose of religious education* is 'to deepen people's capacities to see and to be taken by the reconciling activity of God in our world and in our lives and to empower their capacities to participate in that activity with increasing fluidity'.<sup>1</sup> For them, religious education should be Spirit-centred. Spirituality is at its core.

One has only to peruse the field to observe how religious educators claim the activity of teaching spirituality for themselves: there are essays on the teaching of spirituality in religious education books written for the professional religious educator; themes of national conferences and regional gatherings celebrate the spirituality dimension of all educational ministry; workshops at religious education conferences offer methods and techniques for including spirituality in the religious education curriculum of parishes and schools. At our own university, a conference for religious educators had, as a keynote address, a talk entitled, 'The DRE as spiritual guide'.

Such events are products of two phenomena which peaked at the same time during the years following the Second Vatican Council: a

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maturation in the religious educators' own understanding of their role in the pastoral life of the Church, and a refinement in the distinctions between *religious education* and *catechesis*, and between *teaching* and *formation*. These developments resulted from the rapid professionalization of the field of religious education and the deepening of the intellectual base of the profession.

#### *An expanded sense of vocation*

First hired as directors of educational ministries in the parish, most professional religious educators were very well equipped for their jobs. They came appropriately educated, many with graduate degrees in religious education and/or theology. They had organizational skills and teaching skills. They were versed in educational psychology. The programmes they developed were grounded in sound methodology and theology. Networks of DREs were formed at local, regional and national levels, and strength was found in the collaboration of like-minded professionals.<sup>2</sup> But shortly after this period of initial growth, a deepening sense of personal vocation began to emerge. DREs found themselves leading prayer groups, offering counsel to parents, ministering to people in physical and spiritual need. Their roles as *teachers of catechists* soon expanded to that of *companions on the spiritual journey*. From a job to vocation; from profession to ministry; the DRE's role in parish life has emerged to that of collaborator in ministry and spiritual companion. And DREs like it this way. For many, this new set of functions makes the politics of parish or church ministry worth the effort.

#### *A refinement of key distinctions*

*Catechesis and religious education.* From the beginning of the modern Catholic catechetical movement, there were those leaders who emphasized the Church's *pastoral* mission rather than its *educational* ministry, which they associated with schooling and academic structures. They preferred to speak of 'catechesis' rather than 'religious education'. As they described it, catechesis is the process whereby an individual is initiated into and instructed in the life and thought of the Church. For example, according to the *National catechetical directory of the United States*, catechesis is a process that should include 'sharing faith life, experiencing liturgical worship, taking part in Christian service, and participating in religious instruction'.<sup>3</sup> Catechesis is education *in* the faith, not merely instruction *about* the faith.

More recently, the conversation has shifted. Many leaders would agree with John Westerhoff, who believes that one of the most pressing

issues facing the educational ministry of the Church in the decades ahead is the necessity of maintaining the paradox of catechesis *and* evangelism, nurture *and* conversion. He cautions that the Church can no longer surrender to the illusion that child nurture, in and of itself, can or will rekindle the fire of Christian faith either in persons or in the Church. Westerhoff submits that we have expected too much of nurture. We can nurture persons into institutional religion, but not into mature Christian faith, because by its very nature mature faith demands conversion. To be Christian is to be baptized into the community of the faithful, but to be a mature Christian is to be converted.<sup>4</sup> The insights of theologian Bernard Lonergan are being explicated for catechesis by Roman Catholic religious educators. For example, Berard Marthaler has written that personal faith is caught up in the dynamics of human development. Growth in faith implies ongoing conversion, a gradual transformation of consciousness. Conversion brings individuals (and, though it is not to the point here, communities) to a new awareness of themselves and a fresh orientation to the world around them. It is in this sense that conversion is a principal goal of catechesis. Conversion implies a shift or at least a broadening of one's horizons; and it implies self-transcendence.<sup>5</sup>

Lonergan distinguishes three types of conversions: *intellectual*, *moral* and *religious*. Since each of the three is connected with the other two, the goal of catechesis comprises them all while being primarily concerned with religious conversion.

*Intellectual conversion* is a broadening of one's perceptual horizon so that the individual recognizes the world of mediated meaning to be no less real than the world of immediacy. The world of immediacy, in Lonergan's categories, is the sum of what is seen, heard, touched, tasted, smelled, felt. The world of meaning is 'not known by the sense experience of an individual but by the external and internal experience of a cultural community'.<sup>6</sup>

*Moral conversion* changes one's horizons so that one's choice and decisions are made not on the basis of personal gratification but on a basis of values. The person arrives at a point where he or she discovers that choosing affects oneself no less than the objects chosen or rejected. It is a step towards authenticity and becoming 'inner directed'. In sum, moral conversion, writes Lonergan, 'consists in opting for the truly good, even for value against satisfaction when value and satisfaction conflict'.<sup>7</sup>

*Religious conversion* represents a shift in one's ground of being. It is a change from temporal and transitory, particular and personal interests

to a more efficacious ground for the pursuit of intellectual and moral ends. 'Religious conversion', says Lonergan, 'is being grabbed by ultimate concern.'<sup>8</sup> Truth and moral goodness imply holiness, but religious conversion adds a distinct quality of its own. It is a total being-in-love; it is other-worldly fulfilment.

Marthaler concludes that conversion and catechesis are so inextricably linked that they serve to define each other. They work together reinterpreting one's past biography, and checking and rechecking one's judgements and understandings against the judgements and understandings of the community. The transformation of consciousness builds on primary internalizations and, except in those 'first conversions' that represent an about-face and radical repudiation of everything that went before, generally avoids abrupt discontinuity with the subjective biography of the individual.<sup>9</sup> Conversion and catechesis within the context of the faith community do not necessitate a total resocialization so much as they imply that socialization is a continuing process through life. As long as the process is not fixated at some point in one's development, it will result in maturity of faith.

In sum, the debate on what constitutes the uniqueness of catechesis and religious education continues. While subtle distinctions may vary, there seems to be broad agreement that religious education is the process by which the whole community educates the whole community to make free and intelligent choices that reach out to the world. It embraces a wide range of activities, and it is not a distinctive Christian activity. Buddhists, Jews, Muslims, for example, engage in religious education. Catechesis, on the other hand, is usually construed as taking place in settings related to the sacramental life of the Christian community. It is much more particularized than religious education.

Where does the teaching of spirituality fit? Is it best described as religious education or as catechesis? Are these categories mutually exclusive? If catechesis includes the processes of formation, education and instruction, what is unique about the teaching of spirituality? What can teachers of spirituality learn from the experience of religious educators and catechists, and vice versa? These are questions worth pondering. Some further distinctions might prove useful to fashioning a response.

#### *The distinction between teaching and formation*

Recent work on theoretical foundations of religious education has yielded distinctions between *formative education* and *critical education* which have enhanced the broad field of religious education and

which might be useful to teachers of spirituality as well. Many of us who teach in graduate schools of religious education have attempted to emphasize *critical education* more than *formative education*. *Formative education* aims 'principally at the formation of learners', whereas *critical education* is organized so as to 'maximize evaluative thinking on the part of the learners'.<sup>10</sup> Therefore, formation is a process by which a learner is shaped by an educator according to some a priori ideal or model. In *critical education*, the learner is engaged with the teacher in 'a systematic inquiry relating to the issue at hand'.<sup>11</sup>

Leon McKenzie notes that the distinction needs qualifications. All *critical education* involves some formation of values, including, presumably, the value of critical thinking; and most *formative education* goes along with at least some elements of critical education. Further, formative and critical education really occupy two points on a continuum along which *actual* education programmes may be plotted. He describes *formative education* as systematized, instructional enculturation (the learning of the culture into which one is born) or acculturation (learning aspects of a 'new' culture) where the stress is on the learner's acquiescence in, and acceptance of, society's ways. *Critical education*, on the other hand, fosters individual insight whereby this 'cultural furniture' is taken apart and reassembled in new ways. *Formative education* that excludes critical education is little more than indoctrination; whereas without long-term and long-lasting processes of formation, a person's identity and belief system will not be established strongly enough to enable a person to have sufficient confidence in himself or herself to embark on *critical education*.<sup>12</sup> So for many teachers, religious education is made up of the two interrelated processes of *formative education* (formation) in the tradition, and *critical education* (education which takes seriously prophetic critical reflection on the Christian tradition and the learner's experience).

#### *Areas of commonality*

What the teaching of religious education (and catechesis) and the teaching of spirituality share with each other is what they share with the teaching of any subject, namely, the very *nature of the teaching process*. First, *teaching is distinguishing*.<sup>13</sup> Teaching is an intentional and distinctive goal-oriented activity rather than a distinctively patterned sequence of behavioural stages. It is differentiated from other activities such as propagandizing, conditioning, suggestion and indoctrination. Teaching is aimed at the achievement of learning in such a way as to respect the learner's intellectual integrity and capacity for

independent judgement. It must encourage the appraisal by the learner of the evidential adequacy of all knowledge claims – including the teacher's own convictions. This leads to the second quality: *teaching is proposing*.

There are no 'hard' facts which are to be dogmatically delivered through the teaching process. Whether we approach knowing analytically or phenomenologically, reports agree: there is no datum unpatterned, no figure without ground, no fact without theory. Instead of a one-way process whereby through perceptual archaeology irrefragable primitive elements are first spotted and then built into wholes, knowing (we now see) is polar. Part and whole are in dialogue from the start. There is no way to look at the world with pristine eyes. What we experience is a product of the data in our environment and the images, models, ideas and expectations we bring to it. These may come from a number of places and function in a variety of ways, but they have a significant influence in shaping our experienced world. When these images and models constitute our fundamental world-view or model, they become religious. Religious symbols and images provide the fundamental archetypes or paradigmatic models for organizing and shaping the religious person's environment. The distinction between living in a sacred or profane world lies in the way people relate to things and events in their environments and not in the objects or events themselves. It can be argued, as Eliade does in his works, that modern people have lost the dimension of the sacred, because they have lost sight of the way in which their experienced environment is a product of the images, symbols and models they bring to it. The teaching of religious education, as I see it, ought to focus on helping people to discriminate between qualities of experience.

Teaching, then, is proposing the information, skills and criteria which are necessary for judging the adequacy of models, and they are the conditions of critical fidelity to the process of educating religiously.<sup>14</sup>

If spirituality has to do with how persons are related to the world (human and non-human) and to the God who suffuses all reality, then the model or epistemological framework of how creation is related to God and how God is related to creation is germane to the teaching of any model of spirituality *and* to formation and instruction in catechesis. Teaching will propose ways to distinguish one model from another, and will suggest criteria for choosing one model or framework from among many. The teacher of religious education *and* the teacher of spirituality will propose that some models are better than others, that one becomes

more human by embracing these models, and that there are criteria according to which one can judge or evaluate the model in which one lives out one's existence.

Learning is the incorporation, that is the *em-bodying*, of the information, skills and criteria that are taught. In an entire section devoted to 'The catechist's spirituality', the recently published *Guide for catechists* acknowledges the necessity for catechists to embody what they teach:

The work of catechists involves their whole being. Before they preach the word, they must make it their own and live by it . . . Hence the need for coherence and authenticity of life. Before *doing* the catechesis one must first of all *be* a catechist. The *truth* of their lives confirms their message.<sup>15</sup>

What has been counselled for catechists in particular can be advised for teachers in general. As the fields of religious education and spirituality continue to evolve, those who teach in them must become critics of the teaching process and move to overcome its shortcomings by developing standards for ongoing criticism of educational practices. Not only is criticism desirable on the part of teachers, it is part of their trust. Self-criticism is necessary because it enables us to exercise some control over the future. But self-criticism is difficult, particularly in teaching, because so few have attempted it in any systematic manner, and because so much of what passes for criticism is merely the projection of one's own biases.

Most teachers are very aware of the difficulties involved in socializing young and old into the traditions of the Christian community in an era of cultural and religious pluralism, but still too few have paused to subject their methods and models to critical examination. They are like so many of their contemporaries for whom, in Tracy's phrase, 'a common sense eclecticism . . . mask(s) intellectual chaos'.<sup>16</sup> Yet, whether teachers are conscious of it or not, they confront the same cognitive, ethical, linguistic and existential crises which the theologians face.

Older ways of formulating the Christian faith, whether these are from Catholic or Protestant sources, seem not to speak meaningfully to many people, yet somehow these same people feel that the Christian faith itself is or might be meaningful. Especially in recent years, with the growing secularization of culture, but with an increasing awareness that human beings require some sense of purpose and direction if their lives are to be more than trivial and inane, there is a yearning for some

interpretation of Christian faith which will be both true to the historical emphases of the Christian tradition and alert to contemporary experiences and knowledge.

Nothing is more offensive to the present generation and nothing more useless to Christian revelation than the maintenance of a system of abstractly defined truths which bears neither examination in nor relation to the real world. The metaphysical presentation of theology has become irrelevant for many contemporary Christians because a metaphysical theology that looks at truths in an immutable and universal way cannot properly grasp and present the unique historical events of humankind precisely as unique and historical. Any theory of religious education or model of contemporary spirituality that is informed by such theology could suffer from the same weakness.<sup>17</sup> So both teachers of religious education and teachers of spirituality must attempt to articulate and defend an explicit method of inquiry, and use that method to interpret the symbols and texts of our common life and of Christianity. This is to say that both must take a stand on the basic formal methodological and material constructive issues which face us all.

Elsewhere I have suggested that the teaching of religious education in the post-Christian and postmodern age cannot be satisfied with either the meaning or the meaningfulness of traditional Christian self-understanding. Given the complex crisis that confronts Christians in the present day, teaching must also be concerned with truth claims. Teaching must transcend facile indoctrination even when this is venerated with religious enthusiasm.<sup>18</sup> Indeed, both the teaching of religious education *and* the teaching of spirituality must chart a more appropriate and more adequate way to relate to God, self, others and the world in an age that has been described as both post-Christian and postmodern. Such teaching will not restrict itself to an in-house task of instructing individuals about their responsibility to God, even if it encompasses their responsibilities toward other individuals. It must be concerned with social and institutional life. It is here that we can conclude that *the teaching of religious education and the teaching of spirituality are not mutually exclusive: they are complementary.*

Teachers in both fields not only function as guides, companions and mentors; they also act as strangers, that is, they must often bear the truth that shakes common perceptions and assumptions.<sup>19</sup> The intrusion of strangeness provides opportunities to look anew on familiar things and to be open to restatements of truth and re-creation of reality. Acting as a stranger we not only perform a prophetic deed but acts of faith and hope as well.

David Tracy proposes that the mystics and prophets are alive in unexpected ways among us, and that a mystical-prophetic theology with many centres is being born throughout the globe.<sup>20</sup> It is my confident expectation that teachers of spirituality and teachers of religious education will join in that conversation as partners.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> F. Rogers Jr, 'Dancing with grace: towards a Spirit-centered education', *Religious Education* vol 89, no 3 (Summer 1994), pp 387–388.

<sup>2</sup> G. Durka, 'About DRE power, networks and a symposium', *PACE 14: Professional approaches to Christian education* (Winona MN, 1983), pp 1–3.

<sup>3</sup> Cf *Sharing the light of faith: national catechetical directory for Catholics of the United States* (Washington DC, 1979), p 21.

<sup>4</sup> J. Westerhoff, 'Catechesis and evangelism, nurture and conversion', *Religious Education* vol LXIII (July–August 1978), pp 409–416.

<sup>5</sup> B. L. Marthaler, 'Socialization as a model for catechetics' in P. O'Hare (ed), *Foundations of religious education* (New York, 1978), p 86.

<sup>6</sup> See B. Lonergan, *Method in theology* (New York, 1972), p 238.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p 240.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> Marthaler, *op. cit.*, p 87.

<sup>10</sup> L. McKenzie, *The religious education of adults* (Birmingham AL, 1982), p 36.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, pp 65–66. Also see J. Astley, *The philosophy of Christian education* (Birmingham AL, 1994), pp 78–107. Astley points out that formative education *itself* can also function as a sort of theological/ethical critical education by forming people in a particular position (with a particular set of attitudes, beliefs and valuations) which is the base for their critical thinking not only about other cultures, but also about the received Christian tradition and their own (Christian) position (p 93).

<sup>13</sup> See my essay on 'Christian nurture and critical openness', *Lumen Vitae* vol XXXVI, no 3 (1981), especially pp 284–286.

<sup>14</sup> For a more complete description of teaching as proposing, see G. Durka and J. Smith, *Modeling God* (New York, 1976), especially ch 6.

<sup>15</sup> Congregation for the Evangelization of People, *Guide for catechists* (Vatican City, 1993), p 18.

<sup>16</sup> D. Tracy, *Blessed rage for order: the new pluralism in theology* (New York, 1975), p 2.

<sup>17</sup> G. Durka, 'Christian nurture', p 264.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p 278.

<sup>19</sup> See my essay, 'Facing ourselves, facing the unfamiliar': Association of Professors and Researchers in Religious Education presidential address, *Religious Education* vol 86, no 3 (Summer 1991), especially pp 344–345.

<sup>20</sup> D. Tracy, *On naming the present: God, hermeneutics, and Church* (Maryknoll NY, 1994), p 22.