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 limits and possibilities 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 can be confusing because its content overlaps the first but its method overlaps the second. Teaching a single 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 most natural context for this teaching is liturgical, although not necessarily within the liturgy itself.

The second kind of teaching – teaching religions – finds its usual context in the classroom. An understanding of the religions of the world is sought. As a difficult subject that can involve historical knowledge, it 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. 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 the 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 inside 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 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, or the relation between Catholic moral teaching and contemporary science are critically examined. In this context, heresy and orthodoxy are irrelevant terms, except perhaps that all orthodoxies are suspect in the classroom.

This third kind of teaching is common in Catholic colleges and universities. The teacher is judged by academic standards not standards set by ecclesiastical orthodoxy. If a church official thinks his job includes trying to control what is taught in the classroom, universities usually protect 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. 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 not catechizing; it is teaching (the Catholic) religion with whatever critical tools of scholarship can be enlisted.

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 entirely rethought without the teaching of the Catholic religion.