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TO REMEMBER, REPENT, RENEW

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The National Catholic Educational Association (1998) reports that 13.6%, or 359,146, of all students in Catholic elementary, middle, and secondary schools are non-Catholic, manifesting the importance of educating Catholic school students to understand and appreciate the diversity of cultures and religions other than their own. This article examines some ways that Catholic schools can educate students about the Jewish Holocaust, or Shoah, and through its study embrace a truly Catholic approach.

TO REMEMBER

At the request of Pope John Paul II and after the careful review of several Vatican departments, a 14-page text, *We Remember: A Reflection on the Shoah* (1998), was prepared over an 11-year period by the Pontifical Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews (CRRJ). The document was released on March 16, 1998. In it the Vatican expressed sincere repentance for Christians who did not oppose the Nazi persecution of Jews by saying, "We deeply regret the errors and failures of those sons and daughters of the Church" (CRRJ, 1998, p. 12). The document also acknowledged that anti-Jewish attitudes and practices in the Church may have contributed to the lack of resistance to the Nazi regime.

Pope John Paul II called the Jewish Holocaust, or Shoah, an "indelible stain" on history and encouraged Christians to "purify their hearts" by examining their actions in preparation for the year 2000. The Pope hopes that the document will "help to heal the wounds of past misunderstandings and injus-

tices” and looks with faith to the future where “the unspeakable iniquity of the Shoah will never again be possible” (CRRJ, 1998, pp. 3-4).

A first step toward educating for diversity and understanding is to remember the past and recognize the present. The Shoah document states that “there is no future without memory” (CRRJ, 1998, p. 6). From a Catholic perspective, the retelling of human history is more than being attentive to empirical analysis and sociological categories. In the face of soft scholarship and the selective amnesia of some revisionist historians, remembering means teaching children to have the courage to do accurate research that also includes a “moral and religious memory” (CRRJ, 1998, p. 7). Reverence for life, respect for others, justice, truthfulness, virtue, and self-sacrifice are all moral values that strongly anchor the identity and religious memory of the Catholic tradition for the future.

When Catholic schools teach social studies or religion, teachers have the responsibility to remember honestly the challenges of past relations with the Jewish people. “In effect, the balance of these relations over two thousand years has been quite negative” (CRRJ, 1998, p. 7). In the early centuries there were disputes between the Church and Jewish leaders. As time went on, perhaps because of their particular dress and customs, Jewish people were looked upon with suspicion. Additionally, there were anti-Jewish interpretations of the New Testament which caused mob violence and murders of the Jewish minority. “Forced conversions” were considered appropriate for the salvation of a Jewish person’s soul. Priests would engage rabbis in “disputations” which would unfortunately result in a beaten or dead rabbi. These are just a few of the historical scars that are reminders of human weakness and encourage all people to work for future healing and solidarity. Remembering these events helps us to recognize, that is, to rethink our pre-judgments, our prejudices.

“The Shoah was the work of a thoroughly modern neo-pagan regime. Its anti-Semitism had its roots outside of Christianity and, in pursuing its aims, it did not hesitate to oppose the Church and persecute her members also” (CRRJ, 1998, p. 10). This statement is accurate, but in Holocaust studies it is also important to ask the moral and religious question whether “the Nazi persecution of the Jews was not made easier by the anti-Jewish prejudices imbedded in some Christian minds and hearts” (CRRJ, 1998, p. 10). The Shoah document honestly admits that alongside courageous men and women, “the spiritual resistance and concrete action of other Christians was not that which might have been expected from Christ’s followers” (p. 12).

By remembering the Shoah or any event in history we are led to recognize how we are influenced by that history. We are heirs to a rich culture and heritage and we are also the recipients of a world flawed by sin. Sin affects everyone. Virtue strengthens everyone. To have the courage and faith to remember our mistakes and recognize our potential can lead to sincere repen-

tance. To remember the past, therefore, means that we allow students to recognize the part that they play in history today. This is an appropriate occasion to surface experiences where students have been discriminated against. It is also the time to recognize the tendency to fear and mistrust that which we do not understand. Racism, sexism, and ageism are still present because of what people say and do and because of what they do not say and do. This can become an opportunity for an examination of conscience where the God of history is intimately involved in the events of every human life. This connection of all life to God in history reminds students to "re-see," that is, respect that all peoples are related and have dignity.

Students can learn respect by supporting the originality of others and themselves. We are in a unique situation in the United States, where multicultural education is valued because diversity is seen as a legitimate expression of our democratic identity. At the heart of the multicultural movement is a celebration of the distinctive expressions of goodness, beauty, truth, unity, and diversity. Cultural days filled with music, prayer, art, drama, stories, and history can all lead to a greater understanding and acceptance of differences. The role of the Catholic school in the multicultural enterprise, as well as the cultivation of the common good of society, becomes even more apparent when students are encouraged to respect the dignity and originality of others. In this way, a Catholic education can become a moral enterprise where all are given the opportunity to learn in a caring, communal environment, governed by an inspirational ideology of social justice and full democratic participation (Bryk, Lee, & Holland, 1993).

TO REPENT

A second step toward educating for diversity and understanding is to adopt a sincere and humble attitude of repentance. The act of repentance (*teshuva*) is more than an apology, it is an invitation to a deeper relationship with self, others, and God. To remember and recognize the blessings and recidivisms of human history is an invitation to penitence and an opportunity to teach children the value of responsibility.

One of the great gifts that the faith community can give to children is the courage to make repentance for their mistakes and take responsibility for their actions. Students live in a litigious society where the immediate response by many to an incident is to point the finger at someone else. This constant, unconscious blaming of others robs them of their dignity, as if they are helpless victims in the clutches of fate or other people's choices. Conscience formation of the young is a social and religious responsibility. The act of sincere repentance can lead students to respect the value of life, the value of others, and the importance of their free will and choices.

Admittedly, the Sacrament of Reconciliation can be somewhat intimidat-

ing for a nine-year-old. But there are few, if any, places or situations where students are offered the opportunity to take responsibility for their actions, repent, and be encouraged to live a better life. Without responsibility there is no dignity. Without repentance there is no responsibility.

The experience of a Catholic education can offer students the opportunity to say they are sorry and to be reconciled with God and the community. This can be accomplished, in addition to the Sacrament of Reconciliation and at prayer times, by appropriately sharing stories of faith and repentance in the curriculum, and through peer ministry, peer mediation, nonviolent conflict resolution sessions, peace clubs, service and social justice clubs, or even the modeling of repentance by teachers and administrators when they make mistakes.

By encouraging students to enter into the process of repentance they are invited into a renewed joy and understanding about themselves, others, and God. Indeed, there is much for which to repent, but there is even more for which to hope.

TO RENEW

The Shoah document reaffirms that all racist and hostile interpretations of the New Testament, particularly against the Jews, “have been totally and definitively rejected by the Second Vatican Council” (CRRJ, 1998, p. 8). The Vatican II document *Gaudium et Spes* (1975) speaks about the joy and hope of the Church for a “deep solidarity with the human race and its history” (p. 903). It is a history that remembers the grief and anguish of past errors but looks forward to a common future with confidence and hope. The authors echo Pope John XXIII’s words when they write: “The ties which unite the faithful are stronger than those which separate them. Let there be unity in what is necessary, freedom in what is doubtful, and charity in everything” (*Gaudium et Spes*, 1975, p. 1000).

With this unity in mind, a third step toward educating for diversity and understanding is to renew our commitments to a common future based on shared values grounded in the respect for the dignity of all peoples. Pope John Paul II advocates that people of good will can embrace their relatedness and can “work together for a world of true respect for the life and dignity of every human being, for all have been created in the image and likeness of God” (CRRJ, 1998, p. 4). Well before Vatican II, Pope Pius XI (1938) recognized the unity of Christians and Jews when he said: “Spiritually, we are all Semites.”

In the groundbreaking Vatican II document *Nostra Aetate* (1975), the Council reproves “as foreign to the mind of Christ, any discrimination against people or any harassment of them on the basis of their race, color, condition in life or religion” (p. 742). The creators of the document realize

that by removing the barriers of discrimination and fear from our interactions, we are able to open the doors of dialogue and understanding. Understanding does not mean agreement, it means a willingness honestly and respectfully to hear the faith experiences of others.

The renewing work of dialogue and understanding does not have the agenda of converting unbelievers who are destined to damnation. Rather, dialogue and understanding are for the sake of evangelization; that is, to share and celebrate the good news of God's working in human history.

Nostra Aetate (1975) reaches out to non-Christian religions, such as Islam, which shares with Judaism and Christianity a common Abrahamic tradition, in an effort to achieve mutual understanding; "for the benefit of all people, let them together preserve and promote peace, liberty, social justice, and moral values" (p. 740). The Council especially encouraged mutual understanding and appreciation between Jews and Christians "by way of biblical and theological enquiry and through friendly discussions" (p. 741).

In short, the documents of Vatican II, when addressing the issue of relating with people of different faiths, encourage Christians to focus on the values that unite people; and engage in the work of peace and justice, theological discussions, and dialogue in an atmosphere of mutual respect and understanding.

Following are a few suggested ways that Catholic schools can look to a common future and renew their mission in the light of the Shoah document, the documents of Vatican II, and the insights of two later documents, *Guidelines on Religious Relations With the Jews* (SPUC, 1975) and *Notes on the Correct Way to Present the Jews and Judaism in Preaching and Catechesis in the Roman Catholic Church* (CRRJ, 1985). Happily, many of these things are already happening, but much more remains to be accomplished.

SIX POSSIBILITIES

First, teachers and administrators should encourage students to speak about their faith and how those beliefs can draw the human community together in peace and harmony by:

- Sharing interreligious values in prayer, schoolwork, memos, newsletters, school newspapers, bulletin boards, and at assemblies.
- Supporting clubs that foster understanding and dialogue, not simply debate teams.
- Choosing religious texts, history books, and media examined in the light of our present understanding and appreciation of other faiths.
- Planning activities such as seder suppers or field trips to synagogues or mosques as wonderful ways to open up the students to appreciate different faiths.

Second, teachers of religious education should continue to affirm that all people are made in the image of God and have dignity and rights. In particular, educators need to renew the awareness in Catholic and Moslem students of their common roots and heritage with the Hebrew people including a monotheistic faith. Jesus, his parents, the Apostles, and St. Paul were all of Jewish descent. The Church has been grafted on the “good olive tree” (cf. Rom. 11:17-24) of Judaism. It is important that biblical studies place Jews in this proper theological and historical context.

Third, teachers of social studies are encouraged to approach the study of the Holocaust with historical accuracy as well as with a contemporary moral perspective. Any attack on the life or beliefs of one is an attack on all humanity. Sadly, the Shoah is “a major fact of the history of this century, a fact which still concerns us today” (CRRJ, 1998, p. 5). In remembering events such as the Holocaust, students can be challenged to reflect on their own actions of discrimination or violence toward others as well as the global situation. War is occurring all over the world. Weapons of mass destruction still exist and we continue to stare sadly into the ugly face of ethnic cleansing and murder. Unfortunately, attitudes of extreme nationalism and racial superiority are not uncommon phenomena in present-day politics. The “spoiled seeds of anti-Judaism and anti-Semitism” (CRRJ, 1998, p. 14) are the same toxic kernels of racism and violence that have poisoned Africa, America, the Balkans, Cambodia, China, and Croatia.

Fourth, prayer times are excellent opportunities for Catholic school students to make connections with their Jewish heritage. The preaching of the Word is a great ministry, especially when shared with sensitivity toward and inclusivity of our Jewish brothers and sisters. Special attention can be given when explaining the roots and meanings of the sacraments, rituals, symbols, and religious language.

Fifth, teachers, parents, and administrators can confidently assert that Catholic schools contribute to the multicultural enterprise, as well as the cultivation of the common good of society when students are encouraged to respect the dignity and originality of others. Furthermore, Catholic schools have the advantage of encouraging discussion among teachers and students about their religious beliefs—a key topic to include in any multicultural education. Interreligious study and world religion classes can bring the rituals, symbols, language, art, and music of other religions to life and enable students to understand their own religious traditions while appreciating the beauty of others.

Finally, Catholic school communities can renew their commitments to a common future with people of other faiths by forming coalitions and working for social justice. There is nothing that creates better understanding between young people than a common goal or project. Interchurch food and clothing banks, interfaith homeless shelter programs, coat and blanket distri-

butions, and collections for people of other religions who have suffered a tragedy are all ways to sow seeds of hope. Collaborating on justice issues of mutual concern that affect the entire human family often helps highlight just how similar we are. We need many more venues, for people of all ages and faith, to work together for the common good.

The ties which unite the faithful are stronger than those which separate them. (*Gaudium et Spes*, 1975, p. 1000)

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