Prominent among the most significant American contributors to Christian education and theology in the last century stands Gerard Stephen Sloyan. Born in 1919 and once proudly proclaiming himself, “a Catholic longer than Pope John Paul II” (Efroymson and Raines 1997, 5), Sloyan is among those few scholars whose progressive work throughout the 1950s and the 1960s, although considered by some to be suspect at first, “contributed to rather than derived from” the Second Vatican Council (Efroymson and Raines 1997, 6). This is a fact Gerard Sloyan himself proudly recounts and boasts as quite accurate.

A prolific writer, Sloyan has made enormous contributions to the fields of religious education, liturgy, scripture studies, moral theology, and other areas over the course of his distinguished and continuing career. Involved in various capacities with ecumenical and interreligious dialogue since their infancy, Sloyan’s influence transcends the boundaries of his beloved Catholic Tradition. This chapter attempts to frame a portrait of this highly respected educator and theologian and to assist the reader in appreciating his influence over contemporary Christian education and practice.

Context: The Catholic Church of Sloyan’s Youth

As a priest and scholar, Sloyan came of age in the 1940s and grew to prominence in the 1950s, an era notably different from the one experienced by the Church—and surely the whole world—today. Few at the time, particularly in the Catholic Church in America, could have
foreseen the profound change waiting on the ecclesial horizon. At the
time, Pope Pius XII was reigning in Rome and Catholicism was
booming in the United States, with John F. Kennedy poised to carry
Catholics into the mainstream of American life.

Many sincerely devout Catholics went about their days “hearing”
the Tridentine Mass and offering prayers with myriad indulgences
attached. In the classroom, young people dutifully memorized essential
passages from their Baltimore Catechisms and worked hard to master
basic Catholic doctrines so that they might, in effect, graduate from
catechism class and move on to adult Catholic life.

This catechetical climate in which Sloyan found himself coming of
age had deep roots in the Tridentine period, influenced by a number of
significant factors. Most significant of these factors was the Counter-
Reformation emphasis on the teaching of doctrine, usually with an
apologetic or even polemic slant. In his work on Catholic educational
philosophy, James T. Byrnes outlines this situation:

From the foundation of the first European universities until
the close of the nineteenth century, Catholic educational
philosophy (indeed, all Catholic teaching) had rested securely
upon Scholastic thought, particularly that of Thomas
Aquinas. Spurred on by the “siege mentality” of the Counter-
Reformation, the Church saw no need to engage
Enlightenment thinkers in debate, nor was it thought that
these thinkers had anything to add to the work of the Angelic
Doctor, as Aquinas was referred to, or to the Divine
Revelation of which the Church was custodian. It was only
after observing the major social and intellectual changes of the
later nineteenth century that some Catholic intellectuals
began to look toward some aspects of Enlightenment thought
for answers. (2002, 10)

As these select few intellectuals began exploring Enlightenment
ideas, the ordinary magisterium of the Church was seeking to revive
and reinforce the use of the scholastic philosophy and theology. Thus,
the revival of a Thomistic approach, spurred by Pope Leo XIII’s 1879
encyclical, Aeterni Patris, which successfully sought a return to
scholastic methods according to the mind and method of Saint
Thomas Aquinas, also contributed significantly to the situation in which Sloyan found himself. This Thomistic turn, not without its merits, led to what some would label an arid, overly systematized catechesis, with almost exclusive emphasis on the classroom teaching of doctrine. A certain level of suspicion toward non-Thomistic methods and approaches often accompanied this emphasis, as if somehow Thomism was not only the favored approach to theology but the sole approach for Catholics.

During the twentieth century, as Sloyan was first appearing on the ecclesial scene, theologians around the world, but particularly in France and Germany, were exploring newer ways to engage in theological discourse and to teach the faith. Some theologians were now more willing to entertain different approaches and dialogue with the contemporary sciences in their theological investigations and pedagogical work. They were also willing to dialogue with contemporary philosophical approaches, some of which had been given blanket condemnations by the ordinary magisterium as “modernist errors.” The average Catholic in the pew, and not a few clerics as well, were largely unaware of this phenomenon. They assumed that every aspect of the Catholic faith, its practice and transmission, was sacrosanct and immutable.

There were some, however, who possessed the unique ability to read the signs of the times and, in light of these signs, work for changes and adaptations in the way the Church lived and the way the Church educated. Suspect at first, many of these brave and visionary souls would eventually be numbered among the heroes and giants of nineteenth and twentieth century Catholicism. Sloyan himself would eventually note, with a hint of playful sarcasm, that it was these visionaries who were truly responsible for the changes of the Vatican II Council, not the bishops who seemed to think they were the ones accomplishing reform. This is the situation in which Gerard Sloyan found himself as a priest and educator.

Biographical Background

Gerard Stephen Sloyan is a second generation American of Irish decent. He was born into a relatively comfortable family in the Fordham section of the Bronx in New York City. Eventually, after some
moves in between, the family settled in Central New Jersey when young Gerard was seven (Efroymson and Raines 1997, 1). Financially, the Sloyans enjoyed the roar of the twenties and endured the depression of the thirties. Like each of us, Sloyan’s personal experiences as a child and young adult would have an enormous influence over his later work and philosophical approach.

Sloyan’s parents were both educated and professional people. His mother, Marie Virginia Kelley, was particularly influential, as she received a solid education in an age when most women were not permitted a voice in society. She was a graduate of the New York Training School for Teachers, but “her classroom career was brief because in those days at marriage you resigned” (Efroymson and Raines 1997, 1).

Sloyan’s father, Jerome James Sloyan, was an engineer who had attended the prestigious Stuyvesant High School in New York City, an alma mater to which he remained dedicated throughout his life. After graduating from Stuyvesant, Jerome Sloyan received a degree from Cornell University and went on to specialize in what was called “scientific dairy farming” in various locations throughout the United States, both before and after World War I. After several other jobs and varying degrees of accomplishment and struggle, the elder Sloyan eventually found success as the owner of Automatic Motor Base Company. During this time, Jerome was successful in building, developing, and marketing “an oil burning unit designed after the jet principle and after that an automatic coal furnace” (Pelletier and Panganiban 2006, 1). Sloyan would later recount, with a strong hint of lament, that his mother never lived to see these more comfortable days for the family (Efroymson and Raines 1997, 2).

Having educated and industrious parents, as well as a financially and geographically mobile childhood, helped to form Gerard Sloyan into a disciplined and studious young man. He and his three sisters, Jean, Elizabeth, and Virginia, were given an education in their younger years by the Sisters of Mercy, who staffed both the grammar and high school that Sloyan attended. Later commenting on the quality of education afforded him by the good sisters in his parish’s Saint James Grammar School and Red Bank Catholic High School, Sloyan recalled that the sisters ran “an intelligent, no nonsense operation” (Pelletier and Panganiban 2006, 1).

In retrospect, it was in his family life, centered on schooling and his parish of Saint James, that the seeds for Gerard’s vocation to the priesthood were planted and nurtured. The liturgy, in particular, which
would remain a love of Gerard’s life, was particularly formative. Years later, Sloyan wrote,

If I were ever to write an autobiography it would mention, somewhat incidentally, that I got an elementary and secondary education, played all the sports indifferently and got to be an Eagle Scout, but mostly was an altar boy. I was so deeply in the Church’s offices in my youth that they all but defined me. . . . The only thought that came to me and stayed was: “This is pretty serious business. Some priests do it better than others. I think I’d like to be in group A.” (Sloyan 1986, 312)

After these many years of being formed in the context of the lived Christian experience, centered on the Church’s public worship that mesmerized him, Sloyan then matriculated at Seton Hall College in South Orange, New Jersey, in 1936 (Pelletier and Panganiban 2006, 2). He looks back on these years of schooling happily as well. It was during these equally impressionable years that Sloyan discerned his vocation to the priesthood and the seeds nurtured earlier by his family and parish life came to bear fruit. It was here that he began to seriously consider joining the seminary, as he encountered more “men like the genial, athletic priests of my parish devoting their lives to study and teaching. This bore looking into” (Efroymson and Raines 1997, 3).

Sloyan has also noted, however, that the curriculum adopted by the institutions he attended was “unimaginative,” an insight that was most likely formed retrospectively, in a manner of speaking, by his many years of studying and living the Christian life and being exposed to Christian scholars and their writings. Soon after receiving his education, in fact, Sloyan would begin imaginatively rethinking the manner in which the Church educated its members.

In his second year of college, Sloyan applied and was accepted as a candidate for the priesthood in the Diocese of Trenton, which sent him to the seminary of the Archdiocese of Newark, Immaculate Conception Seminary, located in Darlington, New Jersey (Pelletier and Panganiban, 2006). Sloyan then spent six years in the seminary studying theology, another phase of his education that he describes as “earnest but uninspired, as had been the two years of philosophical study before them” (Efroymson and Raines 1997, 3).
Sloyan was afforded around this same time the unique experience of spending his summer vacations working as both a checker in the local hotel and a cashier behind the bar of a nightclub. This was not typical work for the average young man of his day who was preparing for ordination to the priesthood. Sloyan himself described these jobs as “different worlds” from the seminary (Efroymson and Raines 1997, 3). This, perhaps, gave Sloyan a unique view of the “real world” not often afforded to aspiring clerics of his day. As it was for Karol Wojtyla, the only modern pope to have been a laborer prior to his priestly ordination, these distinctive and formative experiences would soon find their way into Sloyan’s thought and approach to ministry.

His summers, however, were not all labor and bartending. They were, in fact, quite significant in the development of his thought. Often, he would spend time during the summers absorbing what was new and cutting edge in the world of theology:

Sloyan devoted his summers to seminars exercising his zealous intellectual energy and acumen for the theological panorama of the initial waves of European *nouvelle theologie* that drifted across the Atlantic through guest lecturers and professors and directed summer seminars in patristics, Hebrew, the theologies of the Orthodox Churches, and *Fundamental theologie*. (Pelletier and Panganiban 2006, 2)

During these years in the seminary, Sloyan attained the traditional pre-conciliar ecclesial offices, rising to subdeacon and then to the penultimate step in his preparation, the diaconate, in 1943. In 1944, with World War II still raging, Sloyan was ordained a Roman Catholic priest for the Diocese of Trenton, New Jersey (Efroymson and Raines, 1997). A gifted student throughout his academic career, Sloyan was among a small handful of his seminary class chosen to earn the Licentiate in Sacred Theology from the Catholic University of America. Given the University’s residency requirements, Sloyan then found himself studying in Washington, D.C., residing in the Theological College of The Catholic University for his last year of formal priestly formation. There, while pursuing the S.T.L., Sloyan met and studied alongside seminarians from around the nation (Pelletier and Panganiban 2006, 3).
Although demonstrating a keen personal interest in education for much of his adult life, as well as a tremendous talent in his studies, Sloyan never sought to study education itself in any formal way. His first official foray into the study of education came, not at his own direct initiative, but when his Ordinary, Bishop William A. Griffin, requested that Sloyan earn a Ph.D. in Education in order to be eventually appointed the diocesan superintendent of schools. As Sloyan suggests in his own personal reflections, those were the days when an episcopal request was synonymous with a binding demand, and so it came to pass exactly as his bishop requested. Sloyan began his studies for the doctorate in Education at The Catholic University of America and would become superintendent over his diocese’s twelve high schools and forty elementary schools, all located in central New Jersey (Efroymson and Raines 1997, 4).

Father Sloyan successfully completed his doctorate in Education in 1948, writing a dissertation entitled *Christian Concepts in Social Studies in Catholic Education*. In many ways, this work was an indictment of the state of Catholic education in most traditionally operated Catholic elementary schools, with his diocese of Trenton very clearly included. In his dissertation, Sloyan demonstrated that significant Catholic social values and teachings did not permeate the social studies curriculum. This was the first significant step in Sloyan’s call for a new vision of education in the Church. The dissertation, later published under a similar name, offered some significant challenges in regard to social studies teaching in Catholic schools:

Sloyan drew seven conclusions that challenged the status quo of social studies curriculum on the 1940’s. His research revealed that only two of the twenty five elementary social studies curricula integrated Catholic social doctrine. . . . Catholic courses in geography contribute almost nothing to the socialization of the child. . . . history courses seldom include a religious vision of history. . . [and] racism, as a social reality was not addressed; hence, there was no serious application of the theology of the Mystical Body. . . Catholic mission activity was presented in isolation from the growth of Christianity. Christianity’s contribution to the alleviation of social, cultural and economic ills was not linked to the mission
Sloyan acknowledged within the dissertation that his criticisms may have seemed harsh or difficult to accept for those in Catholic education, but he saw the criticism as necessary and called for much needed change. In this regard, he noted, “The writer sincerely trusts that such remarks will be taken as merely antiseptic” (Sloyan 1948, 180).

Despite being the original purpose for his pursuing the doctorate, Sloyan’s appointment as superintendent of schools for the diocese of Trenton never actually came to pass. After he spent some time in pastoral work as well as in the diocesan schools’ office as assistant superintendent, Bishop Griffin died. In 1950, Trenton’s new bishop George Ahr acquiesced to the petition of The Catholic University of America to have Sloyan released from diocesan assignment so that he might join their ranks in the Department of Religious Education. It seems Sloyan had left quite an impression on his professors and colleagues while earning his doctorate. Rather than heading a diocesan school system, Sloyan was granted a larger forum in which to work, with the opportunity to share and develop ideas with fellow scholars and students from around the nation and the world. Theoretically at least, this also meant more freedom in which to conduct his work. It was in this capacity as professor and respected author that Sloyan would begin to make his mark in various theological and ecclesial fields, especially the field of religious education.

Sloyan spent seventeen years in his first stint at The Catholic University of America. Upon joining the faculty, Sloyan became part of a groundbreaking and innovative project that offered Religious Studies to non-clerics (Pelletier and Panganiban 2006, 4). He began humbly enough, with the rank of instructor despite his doctorate and a salary of $2,625 per year, plus laundry, room, and board (Efroymson and Raines 1997, 5). At first he taught undergraduate courses in the faith of the Church and Christian Morality, and then only biblical theology. Later, he taught graduate courses on the Gospels (Efroymson and Raines 1997, 5). Sloyan achieved the rank of full professor and was eventually named chairperson of the Department of Religious
Education in 1957. In this capacity he had the good fortune to work with such noted religious education scholars as Mary Charles Bryce, Joseph Jensen, and Berard Marthaler (Swartz 1997, 46). It was during this time that Sloyan became quite influential in his work and writing on religious education:

In his headship, he actively promoted graduate and undergraduate courses in religion and theology for religious sisters, laymen and women. During his tenure the department progressively became a center for research in the history of religious education and for the preparation of professors and teachers in Catholic schools and religious education programs throughout the United States and the world through missionaries earning graduate degrees. (Pelletier and Panganiban 2006, 6)

In all, during his time at Catholic University “Sloyan produced two books and fifty-three essays and articles in a variety of professional periodicals dealing with religious education and related fields” (Swartz 1997, 55).

In 1967, Sloyan accepted an appointment in the Department of Religion at Temple University in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. (It is interesting to note that Sloyan’s successor at the Catholic University of America was Berard Marthaler, an influential religious educator in his own right. Sloyan brought Marthaler into the Catholic University fold a few years earlier, after a meeting of the two at a convention of the College Theology Society.) Despite his prominence in the field of religious education, Sloyan was apparently unhappy with his work output and sought to leave the administrative dimension of academia behind. Concerning this particular career move, Sloyan wrote,

My chief motivation was the desire to return to full time teaching and research. I had never left the classroom, despite the demands of ten years in the department’s headship; the work of serious scholarship had suffered badly, however. Two extended entries in an encyclopedia and a half dozen journal articles, the bare minimum for academic promotion, were all I had to show for that decade. (Sloyan 1968, 7)
Although his love for Scripture predates this appointment, it was during (and immediately prior to) these years at Temple University that Sloyan would turn his interest, as well as his teaching and writing talents, primarily toward biblical theology and liturgical studies. During this time, he contributed to the development of liturgical practice and understanding emanating from the reforms of the Second Vatican Council. He also immersed himself in contemporary exegesis of Scripture.

Sloyan published *Worship in a New Key: What the Council Says about the Liturgy* in 1966. In this volume he combined his passion for education with his love for liturgy, as well as his desire to educate the average reader about the post-conciliar liturgy and its significance. Sloyan also wrote many works on the importance and meaning of preaching and even tried his hand, successfully, in the area of moral theology, publishing several pieces in this field, most notably *How Do I Know I’m Doing Right? Toward the Formation of a Christian Conscience* (1976). A man of many interests and gifts, he even delved into the realm of Christology, publishing *Jesus in Focus: a Life in its Setting* in 1983. This work examined biblical Christology from the point of view of the ancient culture in which Jesus lived. All these works, although not written specifically on the topic of Christian education, flowed from Sloyan’s vision of religious education and his gift of presenting the Christian Faith to the modern person without clinging to outdated methods.

In 1997, as a means of honoring the significant work and contributions of Sloyan, some noteworthy scholars within different branches of Theology and Religious Education penned essays in his honor. The work, entitled *Open Catholicism, The Tradition at Its Best: Essays in Honor of Gerard S. Sloyan* (1997), contains ten essays on various subjects, and lists the various awards and honors afforded to Sloyan throughout his life, such as the *Pro Ecclesia et Pontifice* Medal in 1970, the John Courtney Murray Award in 1981, the *Berakah* Award from the North American Academy of Liturgy in 1986, and the presidency of the College Theology Society, the Catholic Theological Society of America, and the Liturgical Conference (Efroymson and Raines 1997). The collection also includes an extensive bibliography of Sloyan’s writings and an introductory chapter by Sloyan himself, entitled “I Was There When Some of It Happened” (1997). This essay recalls his long and continuing career with much humility, occasional
hints of well-earned pride and a great deal of happiness and satisfaction in a still active life that has been given over entirely to service of God and the advancement of scholarship.

Contributors to this Festschrift include prominent systematic theologian Elizabeth Johnson and religious educator Gabriel Moran. Topics range from the nature of God to Pope John Paul II's relationship with Islam. Each general topic covered is an area into which Sloyan has, at one time or another, delved. The breadth and depth of the topics covered in the collection are a tribute to the scope and significance of Sloyan's widely respected scholarly work.

Now in his eighties, Sloyan celebrated the sixtieth anniversary of his ordination to the priesthood along with members of his ordination class. Although semi-retired, the indefatigable Sloyan is by no means idle. He continues to write on various issues and has returned to The Catholic University of America with the title of distinguished professorial lecturer. He also teaches courses at Georgetown University.

Formative Influences

As we examine the work and impact of Gerard Sloyan in the field of religious education, it is important to note three distinct and basically contemporaneous movements within the Church, with their roots in the nineteenth century, which greatly influenced Church thinkers and heavily influenced his vision and work. In her dissertation on the work of Sloyan, Alice Marie Swartz notes that these movements or periods were the liturgical movement (1830-1969), the catechetical movement (beginning about 1900), and the modern Catholic biblical movement (beginning about 1940) (Swartz 1997, 4). In order to better understand the context in which he began his work and the motivations behind it, it is necessary to briefly examine each of these movements.

The first movement to influence Sloyan was the liturgical movement. His work in this area has interwoven liturgy and education basically from the beginning, making the liturgy not simply an optional adjunct in the work of Christian education, but an indispensable component of its practice. This is due in great part to the fact that, as mentioned previously, Sloyan himself was socialized into Catholic life primarily through his joyful experiences of the Church's
sacred liturgy. It was and remains his firm conviction that one simply cannot engage in true Catholic religious education without putting the students, whoever they may be, in touch with the liturgy. In regard to the educational power of the liturgy, he wrote:

The Council Fathers of Vatican II have proposed a worldwide program of popular education in the deeper meaning of the Mass. The Mass is of course, at the center of the prayer life of the Church, like the sun in the universe. (Sloyan 1966, 22)

Additionally, Sloyan held that

Preaching within the liturgy is liturgy. This means that it is not only worship proceeding from man upward; it is also God’s incorporative and formative action making the hearers into the living Christ who is forever at work in Glory redeeming us. (Sloyan 1968, 150-51)

With this love for liturgy and his interest in the field of theology, Sloyan was deeply involved in the liturgical movement.

The liturgical reforms of the Second Vatican Council did not suddenly materialize in the minds of the Council bishops. Rather, beginning in the earlier part of the nineteenth century, there was a gradual movement within Catholic circles toward a renewal of liturgy, an appreciation of its history, and a realization of the importance of active participation on the part of the laity. The eventual reforms decreed by the Council were influenced by decades of research and writing by various scholars, many of them Benedictines, such as Abbot Dom Prosper Gueranger, Archabbot Maurus, Abbot Placidus Wolter, and Abbot Idlefons Herwegen (Swartz 1997, 6).

While these monks were attempting to incorporate the Benedictine understanding and rich history of profound liturgical worship and sacred music once again into the Church at large, biblical and patristic scholars were busy reviewing the history and development of the Church’s public worship and the manner in which this worship has been practiced and understood over the centuries (Swartz 1997, 6). Of this scholarly academic component to the liturgical movement, the centerpiece was Josef Jungmann’s *Missarum Solemnia* (1948), translated
into English as *Mass of the Roman Rite*. This highly influential two-volume work traced the development and meaning of the Mass of the Roman Rite (Swartz 1997, 7).

As the twentieth century wore on, scholars began to bring liturgical research and findings to the people, although to be sure this occurred gradually and not without some moments of suspicion. Lambert Beauduin, for example, was a monk who advocated the use of the vernacular language and active participation of the people in the liturgical celebrations. Romano Guardini published *The Spirit of the Liturgy* in 1918, which became a staple of liturgical study. Pope Benedict XVI, prior to his election as pope, published a work that bore the same name in its English translation. He offered this book as a type of homage to Guardini’s work, which “inaugurated the liturgical movement in Germany” (Ratzinger 2000, 7). These liturgical ideas, essentially one movement with three distinct components, eventually began to find their way to the United States, where influential journals such as *Orate Fratres* (later called *Worship*) became means through which scholars and clergy in the United States could remain in touch with the liturgical movement throughout the world. Sloyan would be among those who helped to keep such lines of communication open. (For a more detailed look at the manner in which these movements influenced the work of Sloyan, see Swartz 1997.)

All of these efforts began to slowly but surely bear fruit, as the Catholic Church eventually responded with some reforms at the official level. In the early twentieth century various decrees were promulgated by Popes Pius IX and Pius X regarding the renewal of sacred music as well as initiatives for more frequent reception of Holy Communion on the part of the faithful, a practice from which many well-meaning Catholics often felt they needed to abstain. This even included moving the reception of first Holy Communion to the age of reason. Pope Pius XII would continue this trend with the groundbreaking liturgical encyclical, *Mediator Dei* (1947). This was the first encyclical written on the topic of liturgy and certainly the most serious signal from Rome that serious reform was possible and imminent. Many, in fact, would consider this the key that opened the gates for the reforms of the Second Vatican Council. The Council would embrace active participation for the laity and a vernacular celebration, which for years had been considered suspect proposals for reform.
Sloyan was heavily influenced by the liturgical movement. Especially noteworthy, however, was a formative moment that occurred in 1947 shortly after he completed his doctoral studies and was preparing his dissertation. It was then that

Sloyan had the unforgettable opportunity to attend six weeks of lectures at Catholic University in Washington under the Benedictine, Dom Godfrey Diekmann. For the new Doctor of Philosophy, this was the beginning of a special friendship and a lifelong dedication to the pursuit of liturgy as an essential element permeating and giving scope to Sloyan’s various primary foci. (Swartz 1997, 46)

From that moment on, liturgy became essential in all of Sloyan’s endeavors. It would be fair to state that among Sloyan’s most significant contributions to religious education was his insistence, along with that of other scholars, upon the essential place of liturgy in the work of religious education. Eventually, he was granted the prestigious Berekah Award in 1986, bestowed by the North American Liturgical Conference. Self-taught yet characteristically humble, Sloyan noted that he felt himself to be, “a little bit of a goose among swans, namely, a practicer of the art of public worship without any formal training in its history or theory” (Sloyan 1986, 305).

The second movement to directly influence Sloyan’s vision and work was the catechetical movement, which both historically and in the thought of Sloyan was intimately connected to the liturgical movement (Swartz 1997, 19). An increased emphasis on Church history and knowledge of the development of doctrine and its transmission led many scholars of Christian education to become increasingly dissatisfied with the question-and-answer catechism methods so prevalent in the Church (Swartz 1997, 19). Influential thinkers such as Jungmann and Hofinger began to propose newer, creative ways of passing on the faith, such as the kerygmatic approach. Many educators were turning to psychology for assistance in developing more appropriate student-centered, effective catechetical methods (Swartz 1997, 18-19). Sloyan himself would become a major player in this movement that had a significant influence upon the field of religious education.
Finally, Sloyan was influenced by the modern Catholic biblical movement, which opened the doors for Catholic scholars to examine Scripture in the light of modern historical and literary means and methods. Throughout the theological world, particularly in non-Catholic circles, scholars were examining the Bible in light of contemporary understandings and approaches to history, textual criticism, interpretation and translation. This led to newer and deeper understandings of the historical context of Scripture. In particular, it brought about numerous questions regarding the historicity of certain aspects of the Bible as well as the dating and purported authorship of its books.

Although at first very suspicious of scientific techniques of studying and interpreting sacred Scripture, the magisterium of the Catholic Church eventually, particularly under Pope Pius XII, became more accepting of modern scholarship. With the promulgation of the encyclical, *Divino Afflante Spiritu* (1947), Pius XII definitively offered scholars the possibility of engaging in scientific examination of the Scriptures in order to better understand their historical context:

Pius XII announced that the time for fear was over and that Catholic scholars should use modern critical methods in their exegesis. This permission along with the permission to translate the Bible from the original languages was an invitation to Catholic scholars to begin to write freely and catch up with Protestant scholarship. (Swartz 1997, 28-29)

The biblical movement led the way for a greater emphasis on Scripture and renewed interest in its study, as endorsed by the decrees of Second Vatican Council.

The biblical movement helped to shape Sloyan’s vision of religious education, as he advocated increased incorporation of sacred Scripture into religious education at all levels. Rather than a simple “add on” to catechetical endeavors, Scripture in Sloyan’s view and that of an increasing number of religious educators had to be foundational for authentic religious education to take place.

These three movements, distinct but certainly connected, are essential in understanding the “movements,” in a manner of speaking, of Gerard Sloyan’s career and writings. In many ways his work in the
areas of liturgy and scripture continued his profound educational work. Sloyan envisioned true Christian education as essentially encompassing each of these areas. He truly believes and continues to live his oft-repeated contention that “liturgical, educational, biblical, spiritual and ecumenical apostolates are interrelated” (Swartz 1997, 47).

Contributions to Religious Education

Few could doubt that Sloyan is one of the most significant contributors to religious education of the twentieth century and that his efforts continue to influence religious education at the present time. While his work eventually grew beyond education in the faith, the focus in this section will be on what can be called his fundamental contributions to religious education and catechesis, both within the Catholic Church and within the Christian community at large. In the outline of Sloyan’s contributions that follows several prominent themes will be highlighted.

Reading the Signs of the Times

During the 1950s and 1960s, Sloyan was at the forefront of major developments in the field of catechetics and religious education. He advocated and worked for reforms and improvements in theory and praxis before these were widely accepted, particularly in the United States. In the Foreword to one of Sloyan’s early books, Sloyan is described as

The man who presides over the Department of Religious Education at Catholic University in Washington, D.C., and who has been largely instrumental in changing the entire approach of teaching religion in the United States is Father Gerard S. Sloyan. His one goal is to renovate for U.S. Catholics an outdated, inadequate, often defeatist approach to the teaching of religion. (Sloyan, 1966)

From the earliest days of his career, therefore, Sloyan was seen as a ground-breaking educator who was introducing significant changes into the Church.

Sloyan was inspired in this crusade by his keen interest in and familiarity with the catechetical movement and by the work of his
counterparts in European religious education who were the heirs to the founders of this movement, such as Jungmann and Hofinger. Sloyan was one of the people through whom the United States caught up with the rest of the catechetical world. In various articles such as “Catechetical Roundup” and “The International Study Week on Mission Catechetics,” Sloyan kept American religious educators abreast of significant trends and writings. His first major contribution to the field, *Shaping the Christian Message: Essays in Religious Education* (1950), is further evidence of this fact. It is filled with essays from influential European religious educators whose ideas and concepts Sloyan was introducing to American readers. A decade after its publication, in reflecting on its significance in the changing approach to religious education, Sloyan wrote:

> At the time of its appearance a few of its contributors were already known in this country—Hoffinger, Jungmann, Drinkwater and Weigel—the greater number like Colomb, Coudreau, Boyer, Decluve, Ranwez and Crichton were new names to an American readership. (1968, 7)

Furthermore, the work was significant in its use of the term “religious education,” not yet widely used among Roman Catholics. In a testimony to Sloyan’s foresight and influence, the term appeared prominently in the title of this volume. In regard to the late arrival of educational progress in the United States at the time, Sloyan observed:

> At the time of its appearance . . . the term, ‘religious education’ was not widely used in the Roman Catholic community. Few were acquainted with the fifty-five-year-old interconfessional association and its journal of that title, whereas only a slightly larger number had heard of an academic department of that name in Washington associated with educators like Russell and Sheehy, Cooper, Kirsch and Dowd. . . . “Catechetics” was still largely a seminary word ten years ago. (1968, 8)

In the pioneering collection, Sloyan, along with his colleagues, advocated a broader approach to Christian education and sought to achieve much of what would eventually come to fruition during and
after the Second Vatican Council. This broader approach had not yet found favor in Catholic circles. Nevertheless, Sloyan held that “every Christian has the freedom to work for the improvement of a situation in the Church provided he has the needed knowledge and can bring his reform to the attention of those who have jurisdiction” (Sloyan 1958, 9). Sloyan did just that. He used his vast knowledge to advocate reforms and bring these needs to those with “jurisdiction,” and eventually saw positive results. His concern in this endeavor was not to demean all that had gone before, but rather, in light of his knowledge of Church history, to demonstrate that the older methods were no longer relevant or effective in the modern experience of Catholic Christians. His purpose was to examine “not how right was what went before, but how right is it in the present, and [how right] will it be in the immediate future” (Sloyan 1968, 8-9).

**Christ-Centered Religious Education: The Kerygmatic Approach**

Sloyan argued for a more person-centered, humanistic approach to the ministry of Christian education. Rather than assuming that all modern modes of thought were heretical and to be avoided, Sloyan warmly embraced humanistic thought. Concerning the importance of understanding the students being taught, Sloyan wrote that “We are hampered from clear thought in catechetics, however, until we have got some notion of the complexity of the child’s nature” (Sloyan 1958, 10).

Influenced in great part by the ideas of Johannes Hofinger, Sloyan was therefore among those who moved from a very traditional method of doctrinally based, question-and-answer catechesis to what is commonly called the kerygmatic approach. Kerygma in Greek means, “proclaiming the message” (Buchanan 2005, 23). This method of catechesis is a Christ-centered approach, and Sloyan was among its most effective and passionate promoters, particularly in the United States. The kerygmatic approach does not deny the importance of having students come to know doctrine, but its primary focus is putting the student into contact with Christ, stressing the importance of knowing the core message of Christianity (Buchanan 2005, 23). Much greater emphasis is therefore placed upon liturgical and sacramental catechesis than on memorization of doctrinal formulas found in the catechism.
Sloyan discussed the kerygmatic approach in the journal *The Living Light*, saying, “Kerygma is an ‘address,’ a ‘speaking to,’ not primarily a matter of communicating religious doctrine or providing information about historical events concerned with salvation” (Sloyan 1965, 103). For Sloyan and others who shared his passion for this particular approach to religious education, the Church’s efforts to pass on the faith had become bogged down in poor methodology, theological non-essentials, and a profoundly inadequate vision of the Church in the modern world. In 1962, standing at the threshold of conciliar change, Sloyan boldly stated:

The basic problem is that the clear lineaments of our biblical and Catholic faith have been blurred somewhat by uncertain unintended omissions and stresses on the accidental. At times, human language has been substituted for the divine speech of the Scriptures, in speaking of the mighty works of God. We have made available in the Church, again unwittingly, a view of the mystery of salvation that is a pale and bloodless copy of the actual deed of God. The Church has been faithful to her master of course; by definition she must be or she is not his Church. But this fidelity, which is undeniable, has not always been paralleled by a concern to go direct to hearts with the challenge comprised by the person of Christ in his redemptive and mediatory role. (1962, 332)

In light of this view, Sloyan felt it necessary and beneficial to encourage the use of the kerygmatic approach. Sloyan then went on,

(1) Search for the form in which the Apostles first preached faith in Jesus in the “Acts of the Apostles” but also in the writings of Paul. (2) Read Paul’s letters to learn what he has to say about God’s eternal plan to bring all of us to Himself in Christ. (3) Study all that it means to Paul to be a new man in Christ. This is the heart of Christian morality. (4) Master the teachings of Jesus by turning to the Gospels. Deliberate often on Jesus as the fulfillment of all prophecy, His stance on the relation to the Law, the Prophets and the Writings. (5) Read all of sacred history itself. (Swartz 1997, 58)
This thoroughly Christocentric and biblical approach was clearly a shift from the established methods and theories of catechesis in the Roman Catholic tradition, particularly the traditional catechism that had become such a staple of the American Catholic experience.

This method of engaging in religious education did indeed become influential and popular among religious educators. In 1962,

The editors of the symposium on “Kerygmatic Catechetics” in the journal, Religious Education pointed out to its readers that, “We can see the fruits of a revolution in religious education within the Roman Catholic Church. . . . Partly it is a change in educational theory and methods, but chiefly it is a new emphasis on the place of kerygma or proclamation. The Bible tells a story in such a way that the one who hears the story also hears the Word of God for him.” (Swartz 1997, 56)

Sloyan himself wrote the lead article for the symposium and spent considerable time justifying and further explaining the recent acceptance of the kerygmatic approach by many Roman Catholics of the day.

Although quite influential at the time, it was not long before other prominent religious educators, including Sloyan’s own student Gabriel Moran, would sharply critique this kerygmatic approach (Elias 2002, 211). Even Sloyan himself eventually became ambivalent toward the approach, without altogether rejecting it or changing his views: “He was concerned about its becoming a fad. He had a fear of the lack of length and breath of study, and its claims of newness” (Swartz 1997, 58).

A Forward Thinking Knowledge of the Past

As far as the practical means of achieving the goals of Christian education, Sloyan, in light of the methods he endorsed, clearly argued against the traditional use of question-and-answer catechisms that had become so closely associated with Catholic religious education in the United States. For Sloyan, such catechisms were part and parcel of the myopic view of religious education and obviously incompatible with the kerygmatic approach. He referred to the revered Baltimore Catechism, used in Roman Catholic catechetical work throughout the
United States up to and beyond the Second Vatican Council, as a, “painfully inadequate book” (Sloyan 1968, 19). He consistently and loudly proclaimed that the, “exclusive use of the question and answer method is a pedagogical straight jacket” (Sloyan 1968, 16).

While many educators may have assumed that the catechism was the sole acceptable method of passing on the faith, Sloyan knew that this method was neither ancient nor was it being used as originally intended. In Shaping the Christian Message, Sloyan wrote:

In concept, the catechism is a doctrinal handbook prescribed by bishops as a guide to their clergy in providing a pulpit catechesis. It has inevitably made its way into the hands of children as both the first outline of faith presented to them . . . and the last summary many of them see of religious knowledge. This is a development no more than four centuries old, that each child should have a summary of doctrine in the form of a handbook for his own use. (Sloyan 1958, 11)

Armed with this knowledge of Church history, Sloyan avoided ahistorical conservatism, and argued that the catechism was by no means synonymous with religious education. There was, therefore, the possibility of change and a broader, less academic approach.

For Sloyan, what was necessary was an approach to the passing on the faith that did not confine Christianity to a mere intellectual pursuit, and certainly not to a question-and-answer catechism. He said, “Nothing is worse than telling someone that something is joyful when you have not put him in contact with the source of that joy” (Sloyan 1968, 16). What then, should be used instead of the Catechism? Sloyan advocated books and methods that utilized the kerygmatic approach which would

highlight the love of God who created us and sent his Son to save us and who sent the Spirit to remain with us in the living Church. Such a volume would bring out the nature of Christian life as a loving response to the love of God.” (Sloyan 1968, 19)

He was seeking to take Christian education from the arid exercise of memorization to a context of lived Christian experience. Sloyan advocated religious education that was faithful to the Tradition of the
Church, rooted firmly in Scripture, and proclaimed in a manner understandable by a contemporary audience.

As a student of Church history, particularly the history of the Church’s educational mission, Sloyan understood clearly that what was often canonized as the one and only method of passing on the faith was in fact a method very much influenced and changed by different periods in Church history. He consistently reiterated that the catechism method, as it was practiced in the mid-twentieth century, was by no means one that dated back to the early Church:

It is simply false to say that there are no substantial changes required by modern catechetics, merely an updating of catechisms long in use by the addition of biblical and liturgical elements. In many cases the shape imposed on the Christian message by these handbooks in question and answer form is quite foreign to the spirit of the Bible and the liturgy. Hence the work of the whole Church is to make the Gospel in all its purity available to children and adults on optimum pedagogical terms, so that when they gather in liturgical assembly they will know the holiness of all they do there. (Sloyan 1958, 45)

This was in response to those who sought to maintain the use of catechisms and simply “add on” a biblical and liturgical dimension.

Sloyan believed that Christian education could no longer rely on medieval and Tridentine modes of teaching and learning, because the Christian world was no longer functioning in such a manner. Whereas former modes of imparting the Christian message may have had their value in their day, the seeds of secularization, which had already begun to take root in the 1950s, made it clear that newer and more comprehensive approaches were necessary. Sloyan charged, “A further hindrance to fruitful catechetical action is ignorance of the profound inroads made by ‘dechristianized’ modes of thought” (Sloyan 1958, 10). Catechesis that took place exclusively in the confines of the conventional classroom assumed that the young person’s life was being lived in a thoroughly Christian context. Therefore, catechesis was envisioned narrowly as a means of imparting the doctrines in a total Christian atmosphere. Sloyan realized this assumption was simply not the case and therefore different educational approaches were necessary.
Sloyan and Higher Education

Gerard Sloyan did not limit his work and ideas to commentary upon the teaching of religion in the classroom or in parish situations. Always aware of the bigger picture, he clearly understood that if Christian education was to change and improve in his day, the manner in which the educators themselves were educated also needed to be updated and improved. Moreover, the manner in which educators were educated needed not only to improve in quality, but had to be made available for an increasing number of laypersons who were accepting a call to catechetical ministry. If Catholic Christians were to be formed in various ways through the liturgical, sacramental, and catechetical experiences, then those who were planning and facilitating these experiences needed also to be familiar with modern means of education and catechesis. This kind of education meant quality theological and catechetical courses for students besides ordained clergy and the occasional religious sister or brother. While there is little difficulty in finding such programs marketed to laypersons today, such courses were quite scarce before and immediately after the Council.

In advocating for greater academic freedom within Catholic institutions, Sloyan lamented:

The largest number of those who teach theology in Catholic college continue to be priests with seminary educations who have not had the opportunity to do further study. It is sometimes remarked that the seminary was not helpful in making them pedagogues, but this does not comprise nearly the weakness afforded by the inferior quality of theological education in certain seminaries. Some of the best theology teachers in the Catholic colleges are priests with only seminary education and non-clerics who hold Master’s degrees in this discipline by the summer route. . . . The fact remains after thirteen years of the existence of SCCTSD (which changed its name to the College Theology Society in March, 1967) the profession of college theology teaching in Roman Catholic circles is not one that is at ease. Its inadequate preparation continues almost undiminished. (Sloyan 1968, 97)
Probing this problem more deeply, Sloyan discussed the level of academic freedom existing within the Church. The reader cannot help but notice throughout Sloyan’s comments on the subject a hint of personal frustration: “There is still nothing resembling full academic freedom in Catholic theological circles except under such an umbrella as the concept ‘university’ can provide” (Sloyan 1968, 103).

**Sloyan’s Personal Faith**

While Sloyan was and remains a progressive thinker and a groundbreaking reformer in the field of religious education and beyond, his work has never failed to radiate a deep and abiding love for the Church and the Catholic Tradition. In fact, Sloyan has never failed to admit that “It was the Catholic Church that made me, through its incarnation in this country over the present century” (Efroymson and Raines 1997). His work, like the methodology of religious education he championed, is centered firmly on faith in Jesus Christ. This faith, far from being closed or defensive, has led him to collaborate with and appreciate various faiths through his involvement in the ecumenical and interreligious movements.

Even before and after Vatican II, Sloyan has seen himself not as a radical in some negative or anti-institutional sense, but as a reformer who was seeking to assist the Church, particularly with regard to the Church’s educational mission, in becoming what it was (and is) meant to be. A perusal of Sloyan’s work reveals that he never lost sight of the understanding of the role of religious education within the Church as a form of ministry and that he always maintained an intellectual and experiential balance in describing its essence.

In a pre-conciliar article published in *Worship*, entitled “The International Study Week on Mission Catechetics,” for example, Sloyan identified what he describes as the first principle of modern catechetics, namely, that “Catechesis carries out the command of Christ to proclaim God’s message of salvation to all men” (Sloyan 1960, 49). Furthermore, in a 1957 article in *Worship* entitled, “The Eucharist and the Aims of Christian Education,” Sloyan emphasized that the Eucharist is essential in the work of religious education. This should be the focus of those being educated as well as those who are the educators. He counseled that the Eucharist should be the very center of
academic life and teaching: “The Eucharist worthily taken results in a gradual transforming union, imperceptible to the bodily senses, by which Christ is formed in us, in our ideas and thoughts, our ideals and convictions, our desires and choices” (Sloyan 1957, 313). While this Eucharistic teaching is by no means novel, it does clearly demonstrate Sloyan's firm belief in the importance of Christ-centered Christian education that leads the student not merely to intellectual knowledge or understanding of doctrines, but to Christ himself.

Perhaps one of the greatest insights into Sloyan’s understanding of religious education—his understanding of all human endeavors—is his expression of this unambiguous faith and belief in religious education, one that is guided not merely by men and women but by the Lord. Sloyan reminds us, “The supreme blunder would be to forget that all religious education is primarily the work of the Holy Spirit, the ‘interior master.’ Consequently, His is the final word, as it was the first on Pentecost Day” (Sloyan 1958, 10).

Sloyan’s Legacy

The contributions of Gerard Sloyan to religious education and catechetics have been as follows: 1) Sloyan possessed the ability to read the signs of the times and engage in dialogue with the modern world and modern modes of thought in the areas of philosophy, theology and the sciences; 2) Sloyan understood and advocated for a truly Christ-centered religious education, as opposed to the various emphases of counter-reformation catechesis. He championed the “kerygmatic approach”; 3) he was among the champions of the proper integration of liturgy and scripture into religious education; 4) he contributed his forward-thinking approaches to religious education praxis; and 5) he understood that religious education seeks to put the person into contact with Jesus Christ. He was and remains motivated by a love for Christ and the Church and a sincere concern for the faithful and intellectual transmission of the Gospel in the modern world.

In all fields of human endeavor there arise from time to time those who, despite opposition or suspicion, recognized and faced the challenges of their day, leaving the world a better place than the one they entered. Gerard Stephen Sloyan, still active and vibrant more than six decades after his ordination as a priest, is one of those rare few.
Sloyan was among the voices of reform in the field of religious education, and his voice resonated throughout the areas of liturgy, Scripture, and ecumenism. It still can be heard today.

Sloyan, along with other reformers, can rightly claim that their contributions to Vatican II helped to redefine the Church in the twentieth century. He spent much of his career helping to articulate and implement these reforms. For this, all those in the work of religious education, regardless of the perspective from which they operate, owe him a debt of gratitude.

Sloyan describes himself as being simply, “a guy who was around. . . . My sole distinction is that I have been ‘around’ with some splendid men and women, discussing the most important things imaginable in our short life” (Efroymson and Raines 1997, 8). In many ways, the world of religious education today is profoundly altered from the one he entered six decades ago. Many may argue that what remains is an entirely different world. Sloyan, despite his modest regard of his own impact, certainly deserves to be counted among those pedagogical and theological architects who skillfully constructed this new world, with Christ, rather than a catechism, as the center around which it revolves.

Today’s Catholic educators widely accept an encompassing vision of religious education which invites the person into the Christian community through the intimate experience of Christ’s people. Even official documents of the Catholic Church advocate an approach to religious education that is Christ-centered and transcends the once stifling boundaries of a traditional catechesis. The Baltimore Catechism, while remaining an important sacred symbol for some, has in most cases taken been relegated to the annals of educational history. Even with the promulgation of the new universal Catechism in the 1990s, most classrooms remain devoid of a question-and-answer system of memorization. All Christians are indebted to Father Sloyan for his singular ability to read the signs of the times and to move others to do likewise.