Mary Perkins Ryan: Visionary in Modern Catholic Religious Education

Ann M. Heekin

Mary Perkins Ryan remains one of the least recognized of the twentieth century figures in the modern renewal of Catholic education in the United States. The reasons why are many but none satisfactory. Ryan was an intellectual without a scholarly credential beyond her bachelor’s degree. She was an educator without an affiliation to an academic institution. A leading voice for professional standards in church religious education without ever serving in either a parish or diocesan role, Ryan worked alongside the giants of twentieth century Catholic educational history—Gerard Sloyan, Johannes Hofinger, Gabriel Moran, Berard Marthaler, Maria Harris, Gloria Durka, and Thomas Groome. Despite her leadership in the American liturgical movement and her visionary stance on adult religious education, Ryan still remains in the margins of Catholic educational history.

The purpose of this chapter is to illustrate how Ryan’s intellectual corpus that includes twenty-four authored works and forty years of editorial direction at The Living Light and Professional Approaches for Christian Educators (PACE) justifies her place alongside the more established figures of her time. It is also intended to reclaim a leadership role for Ryan as a visionary in the modern renewal of Catholic education and in so doing to move her contributions from the margins to the main text of that history.

Nearly three decades before the Second Vatican Council (1962-65) convened, Ryan and other leaders of the American liturgical movement
envisioned a pastoral orientation to the religious education of the laity. It was a renewal focused on the full and active participation of the laity in the liturgical life of the Church. Its aims were to correct the apparent sterility that had characterized Catholic parish life at the start of the twentieth century. As a catechesis for the liturgy, the early movement understood the liturgy in the broad sense of the public prayer life of the Church. It included all the liturgical practices of the Catholic tradition—the Mass, the sacraments, the praying of the Divine Office, and participation in the annual cycle of the liturgical year—as formative of the Christian life. Moreover, these early reformers advocated for popular liturgical education at the source of individual and social transformation in Christ.

Formative Influences on Ryan’s Life and Work

Mary Perkins was born in Boston on April 10, 1912, to Charles Perkins and Elizabeth Ward Perkins. One of four children, Mary was a member of a highly educated Catholic family. Her father was an architect but it was the combined influence of Ryan’s mother, Elizabeth Ward, and aunt, Justine Bayard Ward, that inspired Mary’s early appreciation of the liturgy. In a pre-Vatican II Church, Elizabeth and Justine were progressive Catholic educators in the application of art and music to the liturgy. Mary’s mother—an arts educator by training—collaborated with Dr. Thomas E. Shields of the Catholic University of America in his pioneering work of integrating religion and the general curriculum. Elizabeth’s involvement with the National Liturgical Conference preceded her daughter’s. In 1945 she addressed the conference with a presentation entitled, “The Perennial Art of the Liturgy.” Also, Justine Ward, a renowned music educator, applied the directives of Pope Pius X’s Motu Proprio (November 22, 1903) for sacred song in her publication of the Ward Method of Gregorian Chant. The Catholic Education Press began publication of Ward’s method textbooks in 1910, establishing her as one of the early pioneers of the liturgical movement in America. In Elizabeth and Justine, Mary found strong role models for women’s leadership in education for liturgical reform.

Mary was formally educated in Boston, Connecticut, and New York. Upon graduation from high school at age fourteen, she studied in Europe for two years before entering Manhattanville College of the Sacred Heart in New York City. She graduated with honors in 1933.
with a Bachelor of Arts in English Literature. By this time Mary was fluent in both French and Latin. Her knowledge of Latin actually began in the Perkins’ home around the practice of her mother, a Benedictine Oblate, reading the Breviary to her children. In the period prior to the Second Vatican Council when there was a need for accessibility to the Mass and other prayers of the Church in the vernacular, Ryan’s command of the Latin language served her well as a writer and translator of popular liturgical books for Catholics.

With her sights set on a writing career, Mary found her first job as a secretary at the Catholic publisher Sheed & Ward in New York City. It was a brief tenure and Mary acknowledged that her meager secretarial skills made her perhaps Sheed & Ward’s “worst employee.” She returned to the publishing house two years later after a discussion with Father Leonard Feeney, S.J., who served on the editorial staff at Sheed & Ward. He convinced her to write a popular book on liturgical practices for Catholics. *At Your Ease in the Catholic Church* was published by Sheed & Ward in 1938 when Mary was also rehired by the publisher, this time as an editor. It was on an editorial assignment in 1940 that Mary met Father Michael Ducey, O.S.B, the chief architect of the Benedictine Liturgical Conference, which became the National Liturgical Conference in 1941. During the interview, Father Ducey described a presentation for an upcoming National Liturgical Week in Chicago on lay participation in the divine office. When he learned that Mary prayed the Breviary, he requested she lead the discussion following the session. For the next two decades, Mary was a leading figure in the National Liturgical Conference.

In 1942, Mary Perkins married John Julian Ryan, a Harvard graduate and professor at Holy Cross College in Worcester, Massachusetts. The couple shared an enthusiasm for liturgical reform, with John also participating in the National Liturgical Conference and joining Mary as a board member in 1953. Mary’s publishing and active involvement in the National Conference continued as she and John raised a family of five boys. In 1963, the Ryans relocated to Granger, Indiana, when John accepted a faculty position at St. Mary’s College, Notre Dame, Indiana. This move proved to be yet another fortuitous chapter in Mary’s life and work. There she met Father Michael Mathis O.S.B., who founded the Liturgical Institute at Notre Dame in 1947, and was soon hired as a staff member. At the Liturgical Institute, Mary
translated the works of European liturgical giants Louis Bouyer and Jean Danielou. Soon after Johannes Hofinger, S.J. arrived at the Institute as a visiting scholar, she edited his classic work, *The Art of Teaching Christian Doctrine* (1957). The experience at Notre Dame and her work with Father Hofinger helped to sharpen her vision for the close relationship between liturgy and catechesis and what she later described to friend and colleague, Sister Mary Charles Bryce, as the realization that “religious education was the missing factor in the whole picture of [liturgical] renewal.”

By 1963, the Ryans relocated back east to Goffstown, New Hampshire, after John accepted a faculty position at St. Anselm College. The following year, during the closing sessions of the Second Vatican Council, Mary published her provocative work, *Are Parochial Schools the Answer?* (1964). Despite biting criticism of the book in certain Catholic circles, Mary was recruited by Father Russell Neighbor (then associate director of the National Center of the Conference of Christian Doctrine) to launch a new catechetical journal, *The Living Light*. Father Neighbor was a leading proponent of adult religious education and shared Ryan’s vision for moving beyond the parochial school model of education in the Church. The two were founding members of The Catechetical Forum, a loosely structured think-tank of authors, publishers, academics, and practitioners in religious education who gathered annually in Grailville, Ohio, from 1964-72. Ryan spent nine years editing and writing for *The Living Light* (1964-73) before embarking on a new United States Catholic Conference (USCC) publishing venture, *Focus on Adults*. When the launch of the new journal failed to materialize, she joined the editorial staff at *Professional Approaches for Christian Educators* (PACE), a hands-on scholarly reference for religious educators published by St. Mary’s Press. Mary became the principal editor for PACE in 1978. From 1988-93, she continued her contributions to PACE under the title of Editor Emeritus Senior Consultant until her death from Parkinson’s disease in October, 1993.

**The Early Liturgical Movement**

Ryan’s work in promoting the early liturgical movement in the United States can be described as educating to a new vision of Church. It is through the lens of Ryan’s theology of church that her concept of
education in the Catholic faith tradition comes into sharper focus. Her early writings, between 1930 and 1950, took place against the backdrop of the liturgical movement in America that had its origins in eighteenth-century Europe and the Benedictine spiritual revival focused on the liturgy. In its modern form, the origins of the European liturgical movement may be traced to the mid-nineteenth century (Reeder 1997, 806). By the turn of the century, the centers of European liturgical renewal had spread to monasteries in France, Germany, Austria, and Italy. With the publication of *Liturgy the Life of the Church* by the Belgium Benedictine, Dom Lambert Beauduin, the movement went beyond monastic enclaves with a distinct pastoral approach to the liturgical practices of the laity. Beauduin’s work responded to the rise of popular devotions in Europe that had begun to overshadow participation in the liturgy. He emphasized the communal nature of the Mass and the role of the liturgy as the common prayer of the Church that unites the corporate body into the Mystical Body of Christ. In his work, the role of the liturgy in forming greater solidarity among the faithful as the Body of Christ was explicitly linked to Catholic social action and ecumenical unity. The metaphor of the Church as the Mystical Body of Christ resisted the growing tendency of passive participation in the liturgy with a pastoral approach to “a mystical body which overflowed with passion for justice [and] a mystical body united, where Anglican, Orthodox, and Roman Catholics might dwell together in mutual respect, open to dialogue” (Pecklers 2001, 11).

The European liturgical renewal sought a living engagement with the liturgy that had been diminished by centuries of a manual approach to theology as the dominant form of catechesis. Moreover, the concept of the Mystical Body of Christ pointed toward a new model of church. The expression of church as mystical communion was in sharp contrast with the institutional model of church that held sway since the Middle Ages. More precisely, it was not the Church as institution that Beauduin and other European reformers objected to. Rather, it was the institutionalism of the Church that had calcified the Catholic response to the Reformation. In its most extreme form, the institutional model of church manifested a culture of clericalism and juridicalism that the liturgical reformers saw as undermining the active role of the laity in the liturgical life of the Church and the connection between the liturgy and social transformation.
The reformers also attacked this lifeless and institutional model as lacking in biblical and early patristic traditions in its foundations. Following the European suit, Ryan was among those early formidable leaders in the United States—Virgil Michel, Gerald Ellard, Godfrey Diekmann, Reynold Hillenbrand, and Martin Hellriegel—who saw this model as promoting the laity as spectators rather than participants in the life of the Church. This static model was the culture of church that Ryan sought to reform with her early works in popular liturgical education. Her first published work, *At Your Ease in the Catholic Church* (1937), focused not only on adult education on the parts and meaning of the Mass but also the entire liturgical tradition of the Church. *At Your Ease* provided a history of these practices and an understanding of how conscious participation in the liturgy integrates the Christian “body and mind to the great mysteries of the Faith” (Ryan 1937, 4-5). Ryan argued that becoming knowledgeable in the language of the faith leads to the cultivation of a more intense spirituality that is necessary for any kind of social action. She wrote:

> Therefore, study and work towards the acquisition of Catholic poise and culture is part of our duty of Catholic Action. As we awake more and more fully to the terrible need for such action in the world today, we shall work more intelligently to discover and take our share in it. (Ryan 1937, 4)

Ryan’s publishing in popular liturgical education continued with *Your Catholic Language* (1940) and *Speaking of How to Pray* (1944). In all three major liturgical works, Ryan wrote to the theme of a more intelligent participation in the liturgy among adult Catholics.

More than a decade before liturgical reform in the United States coalesced into a national religious movement with Ryan and others as its leading spokespersons, Dom Virgil Michel and his collaborators at St. John’s Abbey in Collegeville, Minnesota, laid the groundwork. Michel encountered the liturgical movement while studying in Europe “and his contact with Lambert Beauduin who would exercise great influence on Michel’s early liturgical thought and writing” (Whalen 1996, 6-7). Whalen observes, “Michel’s real contributions did not revolve around an isolated liturgical theology” (1996, 64). Instead, Michel’s distinct interpretation was an integrated vision of the
relationships between liturgy and catechesis and liturgy and social justice. With the Mystical Body of Christ as the core theological concept, Michel taught how the communal aspects of the liturgy could be translated into full participation by the faithful in the action of the liturgy and shape the religious life of the Christian outside of the action of the liturgy as well.

In 1926, Michel and his colleagues provided the needed infrastructure for the birth of the liturgical movement in America with the founding of *The Liturgical Press* (originally called *The Popular Liturgical Library*) and the liturgical journal, *Orate Fratres* (later renamed *Worship*). Initially, Michel’s work remained outside of institutional parish life. In the effort to reach a more popular audience for liturgical reform, he created the *Christ-Life Series*, a liturgically-based curriculum for Catholic schools and release-time programs. The series was developed along with Dominican Sisters Jane Marie Murray, Estelle Hacket, and Benedictine biblical scholar, Basil Stegmann. These educators were convinced that the traditional catechism approach was too abstract for communicating the essential sacramental message of Christianity. Their pedagogy was a progressive experiential one advocating that “the truths of the faith cannot simply be explained to children; children must experience these truths with the liturgy” (Whalen 1996, 76).

Whalen describes Michel’s distinct contribution to the American renewal as the concept of the sacramental quality of all human existence that forges the relationship between the Christian life as celebrated in the liturgy and the Christian life as lived in the world. It was a theme that later expressed the mission of the national organization of liturgical reform—The National Liturgical Conference.

**American Liturgical Renewal Comes of Age**

The establishment of the National Liturgical Conference by the United States bishops in 1944 galvanized liturgical renewal into a national Catholic movement. Ryan was one of the dominant figures in the Conference from its inception and served on its board of directors beginning in 1950. The Conference reached a mass audience of adult Catholics through a program known as the National Liturgical Weeks that “gave liturgical study a popular, pastoral outlet” (Kinast 1997,
The keynote address of the first Week given by Dietrich von Hildebrand (“Liturgy and the Cultural Problem”) signaled the breadth of the renewal’s mission.

The movement embraced a spiritual, historical, and social transformation in Christ. Ryan’s comments, following Hildebrand’s talk, were characteristic of her call for more intentional forms of popular liturgical education among a more educated and culturally assimilated generation of American Catholics. She explained:

There are indeed, ways of bringing everyone, however old, however uneducated, into the life of the liturgy. Anyhow, there are now very few people in this country who are illiterate. We all have to go to school. We all have to learn how to read. Why then don’t we take advantage of this, and show people how to use their education in God’s service? If people can read the comic strips and the newspapers, they can be shown how to read the Missal. (Ryan 1948, 198)

Ryan’s growing involvement in the National Liturgical Conference led to her editing *The Sacramental Way* (1948), a collection of the papers delivered by liturgical leaders over the first five years of the National Liturgical Weeks. Between 1940 and 1945, the Weeks grew in popularity, as did annual parish missions, a kind of traveling liturgical show-and-tell inviting leading liturgists and educators to gather at a local parish or diocese for a series of themed talks, small group discussions, and liturgical celebrations.

The National Liturgical Weeks were an undisputed success. The theme of the 1941 week, “The Living Parish,” attracted “over 1200 bishops, priests, and lay people, gathered in a ‘serious’ manner but with ‘enthusiasm and piety’ to witness for themselves what the movement was recommending for parish worship” (Reeder 1998, 805). In her introduction to *The Sacramental Way*, Ryan cited the influence of Pope Pius XII’s encyclical, *Mediator Dei* (1947), as the impetus for the growing audience of Catholics drawn to “the fruits of study, meditation and practical experience in the liturgy” (Ryan 1948, xi). *Mediator Dei* legitimized both the liturgical movement and the work of liturgical educators like Ryan in its call to promote the active participation of the faithful in the liturgy. Its publication signified that the liturgical
movement had come of age. The modern liturgical movement, said Ryan, is not merely concerned with “the purely archeological or aesthetic preoccupations . . . of the outward aspects of Catholic worship,” but more properly understood in the context of the full sacramental life of the Church (1948, x). Ryan wrote:

We hope therefore that this book may do something to remove such misapprehensions and misunderstandings of the Liturgical Movement, as a whole. Perhaps the phrase, “the Sacramental Apostolate,” now coming into use, better describes the same reality. For the many-sided work which both terms designate consists in the effort to make the full sacramental life of the Church once more appreciated and lived by our Catholic people, so that in closer, more vital contact with Christ Our Lord, they may begin more effectively to carry out their vocation of re-establishing all things in Christ. (Ryan 1948, x)

Ryan’s thinking and influence on Catholic sacramental life reached another level in the 1950s, when the issue of the Catholic family in a pluralistic society emerged as a pressing concern of the Church. Both Mind the Baby (1949) and Beginning at Home (1955) reflected Ryan’s life stage as a married mother of five boys and her growing pastoral interest in new forms of Catholic family catechesis. These factors reflected the social reality of American Catholics at mid-century. Catholics were now two generations removed from the immigrant church experience of the prior century and the assimilation of Catholics into mainstream society would pave the way for the first American Catholic president (John F. Kennedy) by the next decade.

Ryan’s theological conviction held that the meaning of the Church in the metaphor of the Mystical Body of Christ directs the faithful towards increasing engagement with the wider culture. In a series of articles appearing in Orate Fratres/Worship on the theme of family catechesis, Ryan acknowledged religious pluralism as a reality of modern life. She urged parents to move beyond a sentimental longing for an idealized Christian past and to become engaged in the “sacramental way” in modern Christian family living:
To sum it all up, let us not be in any way afraid of the manifestation of modern American culture, simply because they are new, different from what we were accustomed to, etc. But let us try, with the help of the Holy Spirit, to find whatever is of value in them, and to show the children what this is and how to use it, while rejecting what is wrong and meretricious. Thus they will be on the way to becoming truly sophisticated men and women of creative Christian taste, ready, if God wills, to help in the formation of a true American Christian culture. (Ryan 1952, 502)

The engagement by Catholics with the broader culture marked the beginning of a characteristic stance on faith and culture that Ryan and other reformers whole-heartedly embraced in the period leading up to the Second Vatican Council. The shift represented a critical turn in ecclesiology from the Church’s “nineteenth-century defensive, intransigent position relative to the world to a more affirming, open stance” (Boys 1989, 177). While the social dimension of liturgical renewal was central to European reformers and the early work of Virgil Michel in America, this action-oriented theme gradually took on even greater significance in the birth of American splinter movements under the leadership of Dorothy Day of Catholic Worker and Catherine van de Heuck of Fellowship House. By the 1950s, the social justice dimension of liturgical renewal developed into “a crusade to establish a Christian social order” (Hughes 1990, 15). Ryan likewise insisted that the transcendent value of the liturgy culminated in concrete service and Christian love of neighbor.

The Liturgical and Kerygmatic Movements

The modern reform of Catholic education in the United States that began under the influence of the liturgical renewal took place at the intersection of multiple but complementary movements. By the mid-twentieth century, when Ryan had joined the staff of The Liturgy Program at Notre Dame University, a second movement was underway. The groundbreaking work of Austrian liturgist Josef Jungmann and his principal spokesperson in the United States, Johannes Hofinger, ushered in the kerygmatic orientation to catechesis, with its emphasis
on the proclamation of the gospel message. Hofinger offered a systematic approach to a pastoral education in the faith. He worked at restoring the proclamatory nature of the good news in the schema of salvation history, with its deep moorings in the ancient liturgy of the Church and the practices of the early catechumenate as a model of lifelong formation in the context of community. Hofinger frequently lectured at Notre Dame’s liturgy program, where he helped to synchronize the liturgical and kerygmatic movements. At Notre Dame, Ryan collaborated closely with Hofinger in the editing of his classic, *The Art of Teaching Christian Doctrine* (1957). Ryan’s own work, *Perspective for Renewal* (1960), also linked the liturgical and kerygmatic renewals in her thinking. Their collaboration was crucial and timely in the history of the liturgical movement. There was a growing opposition among traditionalists, who feared that the direction of liturgical reform had gone too far. In a later conversation with her friend and colleague, Mary Charles Bryce, Ryan recalled becoming acutely aware of the opposition to liturgical renewal and her growing realization that “poor catechesis was largely to blame” (Bryce 1975, 278).

For Ryan, Hofinger, and other leaders of the catechetical movement, the Notre Dame experience opened the door to a necessary corrective to the liturgical movement. The kerygmatic appeal to “a profound change to catechizing by bringing content more in line with scripture and liturgy” and “a pastoral renewal that would overcome the ineffectiveness of current approaches” resonated with Ryan (Moran 1966, 36). Ryan discovered in the kerygmatic approach what had been lacking in liturgical reform efforts, namely, a theology of progressive revelation integrated into an educational schema. In the context of a salvation history framework of revelation, the message and method enhanced the response of the learner by paying attention to the psychosocial stages of development that informed both learner readiness and style of learning. For Ryan, Hofinger’s approach provided the much needed link between liturgy and catechesis and a more systematic understanding of how the liturgy educates. Concomitantly, the pedagogical principle espoused by John Dewey and the experiential movement in general education—the concept of “learning by doing”—was elucidated in the formative role of active liturgical participation. In describing how the liturgy educates,
Hofinger said: “The liturgy gives what it teaches. It not only presents the Mystery of Christ concretely, it also lets us immediately participate in this mystery” (Hofinger 1957, 34).

The Changing Relationship of Church and Culture

With the publication of *Perspective for Renewal* (1960), Ryan framed her proposals for a more kerygmatic orientation to educating in the faith within a broader critique of older Catholic ecclesiology. In her view, the strictly institutional bound ecclesiology had created an ambivalent and harmful relationship between faith and culture. Ryan argued that full participation in the life of the liturgy was limited by the Church’s own failure to act as a transformative agency in culture. She judged this truncated vision of the Church in the world to be the chief obstacle to formation in a religious way of life based on the Catholic sacramental principle of God’s grace mediated through history. Ryan advocated that a more thorough theology of the Christian lay vocation demanded the traditional stance *vis-à-vis* culture be reoriented. Educating in faith, urged Ryan, must be understood as educating to “a religious way of life” rather than merely “teaching about religion.” Ryan averred:

It is this outlook which, it seems, is ultimately responsible—beneath the various sociological and economic causes—for the dearth of Catholic intellectuals and artists, for the continuation of the ghetto-mentality among so many groups, for our lack of a positive impact on society. And it is this outlook also which is responsible for a great deal of the indifference and “leakage,” not only among those whose religious instruction has been received in weekly classes more or less faithfully attended, but also among those who have received their whole education under Catholic auspices. (Ryan 1960, 14)

In the immediate preconciliar period, the changing character of American Catholicism was the result of greater assimilation of Catholics into mainstream society and the spirit of Americanism. In the late-1950s, the themes of Catholic mobilization and anti-ghettoism focused primarily on the question of Catholic intellectual life.
Burgeoning Catholic liberalism’s message was often accompanied by praise for American pluralism and “the call that Catholics should abandon separatism, outgrow their siege mentality and break out of their Catholic ghetto” (Gleason 1981, 3). Matters came to a head in 1955 with John Tracey Ellis’s essay, “American Catholics and Intellectual Life”. Ellis’s critique of the miniscule contributions among Catholics to American science, scholarship, and literature argued that this “intellectual backwardness” was predisposed by a Catholic “self-imposed ghetto-attitude.”

Ryan joined the debate on Catholic intellectual life in her classic work, *Are Parochial Schools the Answer?: Catholic Education in Light of the Council* (1964). Gleason observed that Ryan’s book made “parochial schools a major focus of the controversy” (1981, 7). *Parochial Schools* was foremost a sociological critique of the ethos of separatism that the schools fostered and which Ryan deemed inconsistent with the new and open spirit of the Second Vatican Council. Both *Lumen Gentium* and *Gaudium et Spes* encouraged the Church to dialogue with the modern world. In his opening address to Vatican II, Pope John XXIII ushered in a new era in the life of the Church with this pivotal question: “What does it mean to be a believer, to be a Christian in the modern world?” Ryan’s *Parochial Schools* in no small way tried to answer that question. Ryan sensed that the Catholic schools fed off of and into an institutionalism that could not serve the Council’s call for renewal. Her work affirmed the call of the Council for “forcing our reasoning process out of worn paths” as well as its mandate to “find fresh expressions.” Further, Ryan urged a serious reappraisal of the schools in light of the forms of education that best served the needs of the modern Church.

**Ryan’s Vision for Educating in the Faith**

The publication of *Are Parochial Schools the Answer?* stirred great debate at the annual meeting of the National Catholic Educational Association in 1964. Commenting on the book, Gerard Sloyan astutely observed that its title and content were largely misunderstood in Catholic circles. He opined that Ryan was neither concerned with the issue of parish schools not being a good thing for the Church nor with the question of whether they are perfectible. Sloyan cleared the air by
writing, “Mrs. Ryan asks whether parochial schools will be part of the
answer when a total pastoral care is undertaken, and she answers in the
negative” (Sloyan 1964, 52).

The question that Ryan raised concerned the prospect of Church
reforms initiated by the Second Vatican Council. It is in the context of
urgent reform and renewal that Ryan argued against the schools as the
normative basis for total religious education. She explained:

But if the outlook and directives of the Council indicate the
need for a new approach to the problem of religious
formation—it seems likely that in five, ten or twenty years a
Catholic school system will neither be necessary nor as
desirable as it has been in the past—then much of our current
effort is misdirected, quite apart from the considerable ill will
it is producing towards the Church. If there is even a
possibility that such waste of effort and slowing down of
ecumenical progress might be prevented, surely that
possibility should be seriously examined. (Ryan 1964, 5)

The “ecumenical progress” that Ryan considered at-risk was
situated in the political climate of the time. The prospect of public aid
to Catholic schools in the form of a voucher program placed the
Church at the center of a national and constitutional debate over the
separation of church and state. Ryan’s proposal that Catholic schools
should be reevaluated cast doubt over the educational value of these
schools which Catholic supporters and lobbyists for public support had
successfully defended in order to garner public support. The official
Church position was that Catholic schools aided the wider public by
educating children who would otherwise be an added cost to the public
school system. The Catholic educational enterprise in the general
education of children was the basis for the position that these schools
(like their public counterparts) should be eligible for assistance.

Ryan dismissed the public assistance solution for revitalizing
Catholic schools as a stopgap measure that only delayed the inevitable
reality that parochial schools were not financially sustainable. She had
done the math. Her calculations projected a school system that would
become less viable over time due to decreasing student enrollment,
rising personnel costs associated with an increasingly lay-dominant
school faculty, and the bricks and mortar expenses of building new schools as Catholics followed the general migration from the cities to the suburbs. If Ryan’s analysis was correct, a main symbol of American Catholic identity—the parish school—hung in the balance. Since the turn of the century, the rally cry of “every Catholic child in a Catholic school” had become a quasi-article of the Catholic faith. By emphasizing its diminishing financial stability and pointing to the growing numbers of Catholic parents choosing public schools over parochial ones, Ryan advocated a new model for Catholic religious education. She questioned

whether it would be more realistic, even for the sake of our children, to plan our educational efforts to reach the whole Christian community, in accord with the new mentality now taking shape in the Church and diffused by the Council. (Ryan 1964, 7)

Ryan’s vision for total parish religious education placed adults at the center of its activity. Because most parochial schools were already operating at a deficit and surviving on the subsidies from the parish, Ryan called into question the fairness of this strategy for the growing numbers of families who did not use the schools. More important, Ryan queried whether this investment might not be better directed toward educational efforts benefiting the whole faith community.

For those critics who declared Ryan’s proposal in Parochial Schools as “anti-Catholic,” history has proven them short-sighted. However, there were other naysayers who dismissed her idea that the liturgy should become “the central formative force in Catholic life” as “astonishingly naïve.” One reviewer characterized Ryan as creating a “post-Council Utopia . . . a dreamland where clergy, without the worry about parish schools, must rely mainly upon the recently updated liturgy to form parishioners, young and adult, into dynamic, fruitful Christians” (McManus 1964, 53). Catholic University of America professor, Roy Deferrari, in his A Complete System of Catholic Education is Necessary (1964), charged that Ryan failed to understand the philosophical principles of Catholic education. Deferrari recalled the words of Pope Pius XI in “The Christian Education of Youth” (1939):
The true Christian, the product of Catholic education, is the supernatural man who thinks, justifies and acts consistently in accordance with the example and teaching of Christ; in other words, to use the current term, the true and finished man of character. (Deferrari 1964, 10)

Despite Deferrari’s attempt to undermine Ryan’s position on the value of the schools, she outflanked his attack. In response, Ryan claimed that the historical conditions that gave rise to parochial schools in the previous century were invalid assumptions for twentieth-century Catholic life. Modern Catholics, argued Ryan, had not only assimilated into a fundamentally pluralistic society but had achieved leadership roles. The renewal of the Second Vatican Council affirmed this new sense of Catholic public identity and the profound shift in the relationship of the faithful to culture. This was the spirit that now urged a new role for the church in dialogue with the universal human community. Arguing from the tradition of the Church, Ryan asserted the more appropriate model of formation for the modern Christian life was to be found in the first and not the nineteenth century’s concept of the Church. The catechumenate, remarked Ryan, was the more viable historical precedent for our present educational aims. She contended:

The time has come to examine afresh the way in which the early Church formed Christians both old and young, with a view to its possible application. Already, there has been a convergence of many lines of though—theological, scriptural, catechetical, pastoral—toward a belief that participation in the sacramental rites of the Church is, by the very nature of Catholic faith, the focus of Catholic life and of formation of that life. With the example of the early Church in mind, we cannot dismiss as wild fancy the idea that participation in the worship of the Church—understood in a far fuller sense than has been possible in recent centuries—could once more become the central and most important formative force affecting all member of Christian community, and that around this focus other means of religious formation could be organized to supplement and extend it—without the need for providing young people with a general education. (Ryan 1964, 43-44)
Ryan envisioned “parish schools of education” as adult centers of religious formation within the context of the whole community. With the reformed liturgy as the axis “of Christian community in which everyone present has an active part both inwardly and outwardly,” there would be full, conscious and active participation in the liturgy as called for by the “Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy” (Ryan 1964, 108). In Ryan’s view, the restoration of the ancient catechumenate that fostered participation in the sacred rites, study of Scripture, and the mystagogy would reorient worship towards service of the wider human community. In short, religious education and the practice of religion could no longer “be kept tidily apart from life”.

In Ryan’s judgment, Catholic worship as merely a “Sunday affair” or “conformity to private devotions” was a dead end: “One cannot help wondering how long, if the old mentality should continue to dominate, the practice of religion would continue among the intelligent and truly religious members of the coming generation” (1964, 101). In her essay “Liturgical Piety for American Catholics?” Ryan’s view of the liturgy pointed to a mode of liturgical catechesis that moved beyond a catechesis for the liturgy to the role of the liturgy as a catechesis for life that “makes possible and fructifies further personal encounter with Him both in prayer and in the service of our neighbor” (1963, 239). In this way, to educate in the faith “is not to teach people to know their religion in such a way that at the end of grade school or high school or college . . . they feel they know everything they need to know for life” (1963, 238). A catechesis centered on the experience of the liturgy, maintained Ryan, creates a lifelong adventure of love and response to God. She stated:

A catechesis centered on the liturgy will thus be completely realistic leaving out of account none of the realities of human experience and, as such, will correspond to the best desires both of young people and their elders today—the desire for reality, for vital experience, for meaning-fullness in life. (Ryan 1963, 240)

**The Living Light Years**

In 1964, the United States bishops launched the catechetical journal, *The Living Light*. Ryan worked alongside of Father Russell Neighbor, who served as editor. Father Neighbor was a veteran
advocate of adult education and alternative models to the school-based approach. The journal was intended to promote dialogue between practitioners and scholars on the theological relationship of revelation and catechesis based on the Second Vatican Council and the ways that new learning from the social sciences might inform new models of educating in the faith. However, only two years into the appearance of *The Living Light*, Gabriel Moran’s *Theology of Revelation* (1966) effectively reopened the discussion on revelation and its relationship to catechesis. Moran argued, and modern biblical scholarship agreed with him, that the kerygmatic approach to catechetics was based on an inadequate theology of revelation. In his proposal for the continuing revelation of the risen Christ, Moran contended that catechesis began in the experience of the believer and not in the isolated facts of God’s intervention in history, as formulated by the salvation history model. In Moran’s view, the graced response of each individual must be informed by Scripture and tradition, but it can only be experienced as a free and personal response to God’s initiative.

It was during this phase of catechetical debate that Ryan collaborated with Gabriel Moran, Raymond Lucker, Gerard Sloyan, and Gerald Pottebaum, among others, who referred to themselves as the Catechetical Forum (1966-72). Serving as a think-tank for leading religious educators in the United States, the forum “was a loosely structured group which brought together leaders in the field–authors, publishers, academicians, administrators–together with successful practitioners for the discussion and exchange of ideas” (Bryce, *The Living Light* 1975, 281). Bishop Lucker provided the unofficial episcopal presence and was already an established advocate of the new experiential catechesis and the renewal of parish education. He spearheaded the national acceptance of the Confraternity of Christian Doctrine in 1966, serving as its director between 1958 and 1969. The Catechetical Forum published only one article in its history that was jointly penned by its members, “Catechesis for Our Time,” which appeared in *Bible Today* and identified its contributing writers as Moran, Ryan, Lucker, and William Reedy. It appealed to an audience of biblical scholars, many of whom were already critical of the salvation history hermeneutic in catechesis for its limited understanding of the relationship between Hebrew and Christian Scriptures with serious implications for Christianity’s identity *vis-à-vis*
Judaism (Boys 1980). The authors defended the fundamental relation of biblical theology to catechesis grounded on more existential categories. They wrote:

[Freedom is] the full development of persons in society with the freedom to love as Christ loves [by] taking account and reflecting [on God’s self-revelation] that has been done in the past as the new needs and possibilities for reflecting in the present and the future are opened up by new human thought patterns, new human questions, vocabularies, cultures, etc. (Ryan et al. 1967, 1972)

Ryan’s tenure as executive editor of *The Living Light* extended over eight tumultuous years (1964-72) in the ongoing development of catechetical theory following Vatican II. As early as 1966, Ryan redirected the editorial expanse of the journal to explore dimensions of theory and practice in experiential catechesis and the new theology of continuing revelation.

During the same period, Ryan guided *The Living Light* in examining new theories from the social sciences that informed a more enlightened pedagogy. Likewise, the work of feminist scholars had a voice in the journal’s pages, thereby contributing to a more critical understanding of biblical knowledge and the cultural conditioning of human ways of knowing. All the while, Ryan held steady the organizing vision of the journal for adult-centered religious education over the lifetime of the believer. Ryan remained firm in her conviction that adult catechesis was not optional but fundamental to the nature of the Christian faith. In 1967, she co-authored with Russell Neighbor, *There’s More Than One Way: New Programs and Possibilities in Out-of-School Religious Education*. The work was a collection of previously published *The Living Light* articles that dealt with innovative approaches to adult education. Ryan defined Christianity as a religion for adults, based on its mandate for both personal and social transformation in accordance with gospel values. Adult catechesis, claimed Ryan, is precipitated by “an awareness that Christianity is a religion for adults and the summoning of each Christian to a fuller responsibility for himself and his world” (Ryan and Neighbor 1967, 5).
The Identity Crisis in Religious Education

The aims of religious education expanded a third time to include the social dimension of catechesis. Under the influence of the International Study Weeks (in particular, the 1968 session in Medellin, Colombia) and the appearance of the Synod of Bishops document “Justice in the World” (1971), justice was now considered a constitutive element of the faith, with implications for systematically linking love of God with love of neighbor in all catechetical endeavors. The rapid pace of the changes in catechetical theory since Vatican II was the basis of Ryan’s article “Identity Crisis for Religious Education” (1968-69).

Ryan observed that the confusion in parish religious education (an issue familiar to the editors at The Living Light through article submissions, letters to the editor, and subscriber research) was the fuzzy identity produced by multiple approaches to catechesis (traditional, kerygmatic, and experiential/social) that were simultaneously in use in parishes across the country. Even within a particular parish, there were often sharp divisions over the orthodoxy of different catechetical approaches.

Ryan viewed the growing support for a return to the traditional Baltimore Catechism model as retrenchment. She urged patience: “We need to appreciate the kind of security it offers adherents [and that] many people still find this a very comforting approach to life’s complexities, especially in today’s rapidly changing world” (Ryan 1969, 8). Regarding the yielding of the kerygmatic to a more anthropological approach, she explained:

In this new [experiential] approach then, one might say that the elements of the kerygmatic approach are “changed, not taken away.” We find Christ’s presence not only in the assembled Christian community, the scriptural word, and in the liturgical celebrations, but also wherever love is present and active and where there is a need of love—and His “sacral” modes of presence are to help us celebrate and discern and respond to his “secular” ones, not the other way around. (1968-69, 11-12)

Ryan acknowledged that the experiential approach might appear to
some as inconsistent with Church teaching because it did not lend itself to the traditional method of teaching from the text or the usual separation of content and method. But the major shift, Ryan noted, was the role of the religious educator from the task “to teach people religion to help people think and react as Christian persons” (1968-1969, 13). Ryan made the strong case that the identity problem in religious education was both a cause and a symptom of the lack of professionalism in the field of parish religious education. In her mind, the urgent need for professional standards was stymied by the absence of a more general consensus on the purposes and aims of religious education.

Ryan’s most formidable work in consolidating the new directions in Catholic religious education since the time of the Second Vatican Council was *We’re All in This Together: Issues and Options in the Education of Catholics* (1972). Ryan’s editorial and professional agenda was to identify those educational needs that were still largely unmet by the Church. This dual thrust influenced the continuing trend of Catholic children served by out-of-school religious programs that required more equitable increases in parish funding. The needs of adult religious education were also paramount. Ryan argued that this concern included not only specific education offerings but also the range of parish ministries that were now recognized as formative for adults (e.g., social justice). To her experienced eye, these ministries must be seen and appreciated as intentional educative forms of parish life and receive adequate financial and personnel support.

Finally, there was Ryan’s assessment of the role of the Catholic school. Ryan did not retreat from her original position in *Parochial Schools* that the Church should not be in the business of general education at the primary and secondary levels. However, she did find new life in the old schools’ system. In particular, Ryan observed a viable model for Church schools of the future among those urban-based Catholic schools serving the poor in traditionally under-funded public school districts. This model of the Catholic school, Ryan advanced, fulfills a critical mission of the Church in the preferential option for the poor rather than one that merely replicates the public school.
Ryan’s Leadership at *PACE*

Ryan’s pioneering work on behalf of adult parish education continued after she resigned from *The Living Light* to become editor-in-chief of St. Mary’s Press’s *Professional Approaches for Christian Educators (PACE)* in 1974. A market large enough to sustain two journals of religious education was indicative of the vibrancy of the field at the time. In this endeavor Ryan rejoined many of her former colleagues, including Moran, Sloyan, Harris, and Groome. Her editorial mission for the journal was to be a leading voice on issues in Christian religious education. Ryan shaped the journal as a hands-on scholarly reference guide for the religious educator.

The catechetical climate of the time had markedly changed since Vatican II. A spate of catechetical documents appeared between the first *General Directory for Catechesis* (GDC) (1971) and the revised *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (1994). During the time of Ryan’s leadership at *PACE* (1974-88), the centrality of the adult in faith formation had evolved from its minor status in the *GDC* as a “form of catechesis” to a major focus of Church educational ministry. In the document, *To Teach as Jesus Did* (1972), the U.S. bishops asserted that, “the continuing education of adults is situated not at the periphery of the Church’s educational mission but at its center” (43). Other catechetical documents sought to balance life experience and inductive learning with a more systematic presentation of the Christian message. Pope John Paul II’s *On Catechesis in Our Time* (1979) affirmed the full integration of method and message: “Nor is any opposition to be set up between a catechesis taking life as the point of departure and a traditional, doctrinal and systematic catechesis” (22).

In 1979, the first national catechetical directory, *Sharing the Light of Faith*, was a watershed document and a model of in-depth conversation within the entire Church. Although the document failed to address significant social issues (i.e., concerning women, cultural diversity, and sexuality), its strengths were found in its holistic approach to catechesis that endorsed the importance of adult lifelong formation in the faith and the need for adaptation of message and method to different ages, experiences, and cultures. *Sharing the Light of Faith* called for a “total catechetical program” comprised of multiple
educational ministries (adults, youth, children, the schools). This vision resonated with Ryan's editorial direction for *PACE*. Ryan stated:

[Total religious education] ranges from courses in theology and scripture to encounter-type sessions to help persons discover their own potentialities and relate to others. To these should be added the various encounter movements—Teen Encounter groups, Marriage Encounter groups, and others. All these, could be designed to foster participants’ total religious education while achieving their particular objectives.

(Ryan 1974, 5, 3)

That Ryan guided *PACE* in step with the catechetical developments in the Church does not mean that she was restricted by them. Ryan was always open to exploring social/political issues that had not yet been given adequate coverage in Church teachings. *PACE* regularly treated the often neglected topics of gender, race, and interreligious dialogue. In addition, *PACE* covered issues concerning divorced Catholics, single parents, teenage mothers, abortion, homosexuality and conscientious objection to war. Ryan vigorously molded *PACE* to communicate an understanding of justice by means of a hermeneutic of suspicion, critically examining conventional social and Church wisdom. In her editorial preface to “The Bible, Liberation and Women,” Ryan remarked:

Today, Catholics with and without a degree in theology need to understand what is meant by the historical conditioning of the Bible, of doctrinal formulations, and of interpretations of both. Agreement on the historical conditioning of our theological truths is perhaps the key issue of all the debates that have become obvious in the Church today. (Ryan 1987, 18, 4-5)

For Ryan, the professionalism of the religious educator was likewise a justice issue. The traditional role of lay women volunteers in parish religious education was radically altered following the Second Vatican Council and the dramatic decline in vowed women religious as well as their shift to new apostolic vocations outside of the schools. While lay women educators increasingly filled the gap, the rapid rise of
professional lay women in religious education occurred without the fleshing out of a new model of the profession. Certification programs, higher education studies, and attendance at regional and national catechetical congresses had yet to draw attention to national standards for intellectual, spiritual and human formation. Likewise, pay scales were at the discretion of pastors, and benefits were often not transferable when a director or coordinator changed employers.

By the late 1980s, Ryan had developed the issue of professionalism for the parish religious education beyond organizational theory. Incisive articles by Thomas Groome, Padraic O’Hare, Maria Harris, Joan Marie Smith, and Gloria Durka reconceptualized the role of the religious educator as a form of lay ministry. While Vatican II had supported the apostolate of the laity in the work of the Church (*Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity*, 1965), the language of ministry was confined to the ordained of the Church. The seeds of the recognition of lay ministry were planted presciently by Ryan and others at *PACE*. It would be another twenty-five years before the United States bishops acknowledged both the validity of lay ecclesial ministry and the professional formation it required in *Co-Workers in the Vineyard of the Lord* (2005).

**Conclusion**

The identity of religious education in the Catholic faith tradition of the twentieth century remains incomplete without reference to the full life story of Mary Perkins Ryan. As a Catholic lay woman born into the pre-Vatican II Church, Ryan did not look back nostalgically to times of the past but rather looked forward to a new form of Catholicism that had yet to materialize. She figured prominently in this transformation as a leading voice in the three major Christian religious education movements of the past century. There is perhaps no other figure in American Catholic history who bridged all three movements—liturgical, kerygmatic, and experiential/social. In this way, Ryan stands tall. But she also stood in the company of giants—Gabriel Moran, Gerard Sloyan, Johannes Hofinger, Maria Harris, Gloria Durka, and Thomas Groome. It is true that Ryan lacked the advanced academic and scholarly credentials of her contemporaries, but these missing tassels arguably make her achievements all the more exemplary. In 1985, Ryan was presented with the prestigious Mathis Award from Notre Dame.
University for her contributions to modern liturgical reforms of the Church. But it was Ryan’s most debated work, *Parochial Schools*, which established her as an educational leader and visionary.

It is common among those who have written about Ryan to commend her prescient prediction that the traditional model of the Catholic school faced a future of struggle (Reidy 2004). But a more balanced evaluation of Ryan’s contributions would place emphasis not on her role as critic but rather on her envisioning new forms of Catholic educational life. Old Testament scholar Walter Bruggemann describes it as the capacity of the prophet to “bring the community to fresh forms of faithfulness and vitality” (Bruggemann 1978, 62). When Ryan cried out against the self-perpetuating mindset of Catholic schools that no longer served a post-Vatican II Church, she offered an alternative vision. Ryan envisioned the energized life of the parish community as the center of ongoing adult faith formation. Later, Maria Harris would articulate with even greater precision this idea in *Fashion Me a People: Curriculum in the Church* (1989). Ryan’s assertion that the liturgy, and not the schools, should be the central axis of parish education forged the link between instruction and sacramental rites as promulgated in the restored model of the catechumenate (Rite of Christian Initiation for Adults [RCIA]). Since its restoration at Vatican II, this catechetical model has been recognized by the Church as the normative model of all catechesis. Ryan also called for alternative models to Catholic primary and secondary schools. Today, one such alternative model would be the Jesuit program of the Nativity Schools.

Throughout her career, Ryan amplified the voice of women in the twentieth century Church. She did so most directly in her leadership at *The Living Light* and *PACE*. In the pages of these journals, Ryan welcomed women like her, who held no advanced academic credential, into the community of religious educators by giving them a model in her own life’s work. In an article eulogizing Ryan, Maria Harris recalled a letter of acceptance from Ryan for her first article in *The Living Light*. Harris wrote, “Ryan put me in touch with the giants of the field” (Harris 1993, 24, 3).

In reclaiming Ryan’s rightful place in religious education, we not only restore a critical link to the past but create the means to empower the future. Ryan educated to a new vision of Church that would liberate the role of Catholic education in making accessible a religious
way of life in the world. Padraic O’Hare wrote that Ryan, “like so many distinguished Catholics of her time, refused to separate her yearning to live a Christ-life from her allegiance to the Church” (O’Hare 1994, 5). He recalls the words of Godfrey Diekmann, who once characterized Ryan as *mulier fortis*, strong woman. The story of Mary Perkins Ryan tells of the strength of the visionary: one who lives into a new future and transforms the impossible into the inevitable.