

Good News for Living: the heart of our curriculum

We can get a bit too preoccupied with the details of our curriculum, with the nitty-gritty of *what* we are to teach, *when*, *where* and *how*. I'd like to invite you to step back from the details and consider the big picture and the *Why* of what we do as educators in a Catholic school.

It's time to step back from the trees and take a look at the forest.

And to help us do that, may I suggest that a much richer and more helpful way to think about *Good News for Living* is with the organic, living and wholistic metaphor of *person* rather than the more mechanical, myopic and anatomical one which cuts the curriculum into pieces, and then into ever smaller pieces in order to examine them in minute detail. Let me suggest that a better way to think about it is to imagine *GNfL* to be a living person. In fact, *Jesus ...* because that is what it's all about: *GNfL* is all about Jesus.

Jesus is not just one disembodied, free-floating "element" in an RE syllabus. *Jesus* is the *whole* of RE in a Catholic school. In fact, he is absolutely *central* to the *entire* curriculum in a Catholic school, the Catholic Curriculum as a *whole*, and not just RE.

Student focused, Christ centred, learning for life.

Similarly *Prayer* is also not just one of eight; but, like "*Jesus*", and in relationship to him, it plays a unique role in *GNfL*: it is the *how*, the animating principle, the *spirit* in which we "live and move and have our being" as we do RE—and therefore *everything* in the Catholic school, in its entire curriculum (which, of course, refers to *everything we do as a school, an "educational community"*, not just the "formal" but also the "informal syllabus/curriculum", call it what you will).

Think of it this way: if *GNfL* is "a person", that person *is* *Jesus*; and since every person is at once body-and-soul, a physical-and-spiritual being, the other seven elements of the *GNfL* curriculum are his body and soul: *Prayer* is his "soul", the living, life-giving power of the Spirit animating his "body", which is the other six elements: *God, Church, Sacraments, Christian Life, Religion, Culture & Society*, and *God's word: the Holy Scriptures*.

These six are like the inner vital organs, the flesh and blood, the bones and skin and senses of the person—*Jesus*—whose body they compose:

The *God* element is about his "inner vital organs"—his heart, brains, lungs, etc.

The *Church* is his "flesh", his ongoing incarnation.

The *Sacraments* are his "life-blood", feeding and renewing the flesh.

Christian Life (spirituality and ethics) are his "skeletal structure", his "bones and limbs"; how he acts and moves and *lives-in-the-world*.

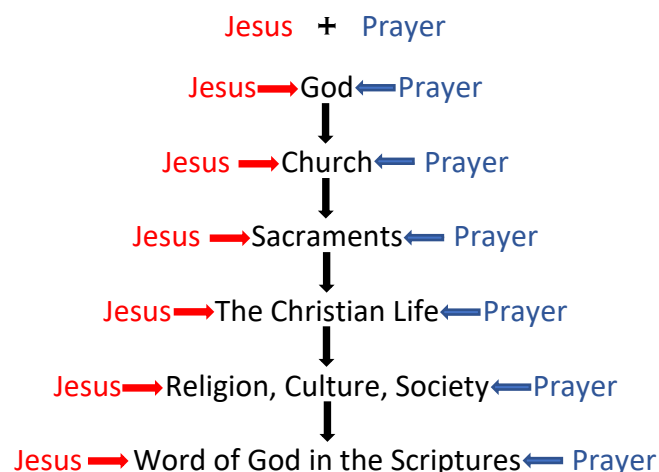
Religion, Culture & Society are his “outer vital organs”: the skin that holds the body together, the appendages and features that manifest him in the world.

And the *Scriptures* are his “senses”—and must be received through our senses, *all* the senses, the full human sensorium: at once spiritual and practical, personal and political, sacramental and mystical.

So, Jesus is the *person* of *GNfL*; prayer is the *life* of *GNfL*; and the rest of the *GNfL* elements are its *living body*. Cutting it up and separating out its various elements *kills it*. You don’t have a living body then, you have a corpse. Or to put it another way: when RE feels dead in the classroom it may well be because it was anatomized in the lesson plan: if it didn’t breathe prayer, it couldn’t work together as one integrated and coordinated whole: it didn’t *live* Christ.

How can we engage in this process as educators so that it can be a living and life-giving experience for our students? *By making sure that it is that first of all for us!* And the best way to do that is to always begin with Jesus as the “substance” of what we do in the classroom—the *who, what* and *why* of every lesson—in the context of prayerful encounter and personal relationship—the *how* of all that we do. So, start with asking what does Jesus reveal about God, Church, Sacrament, etc; and do it prayerfully. Ask him. Open your mind and heart to what he has to offer you—and through you, to your students—on whatever topic or element or task you will focus on in the classroom and the lesson. If you do that, you will then be doing what *GNfL* is for: you will be teaching in accord with the curriculum.

Think of it this way: there is, in every RE lesson, a clear line from Jesus to prayer through the particular element:



Jesus, in prayer, reveals God. All we *need* to know about God—and principally that “God is love”, absolute, infinite, eternal self-giving love—is revealed in and by Jesus: he *is* that love in person. This is not just a piece of information, it is a lived experience, something we “know” in our own deepest self by prayer, by our participation in Jesus, by his Spirit praying within us beyond words, beyond images, concepts, feelings. Between Jesus and prayer, as it were, God is meaningful; which is why we’ve called this the “meaningful structure of *GNfL*”:

it is structured in such a way that it enables us to discover the deeper meaning of God, Church, etc.

But not only is *GNfL* structured along this “horizontal line” of meaning, there is also a vertical line, a kind of “learning sequence” to the elements that runs from *God* to *Church*, from *Church* to *Sacraments*, *Sacraments* to *Christian Life*, *Christian Life* to *Religion, Culture & Society*, and, finally, *Religion, Culture & Society* to *Scripture*. In other words, when we have properly opened up the question of God in the light of Jesus and in the context of prayerful openness, we inevitably ask the question: so, who are we as church, as disciples of Jesus? What does Jesus reveal about the church as a community of people in (prayerful) relationship with him and through him to God?

Having opened up that question sufficiently well and deeply, we then ask the question of sacraments: for as Christ is the sacrament of God, and the church is a sacrament of Christ, what does Jesus reveal to us about the nature of the church’s (seven) sacraments as (prayerful) encounters with God in Jesus?

Consequently, a sound theological appreciation of sacraments will raise the question of how to live these “mysteries” (an older and better word for “sacraments”) at once *personally* and *concretely* in the world—the question of the Christian life (spirituality and ethics). What does living the Christian life have to do with Jesus and prayer? How do Jesus and prayer form, inform, and transform our spirit and our actions in the world as Christians?

With that question now open and operative in our thinking we can turn more directly to the world at large: to asking what Jesus reveals about the very nature and meaning of religion, culture and society; and ask that question in the context of a prayerful listening to the heart of the One whose world we are here considering: the world God so loved, He gave his only-begotten Son in order to save (cf. John 3:16).

By the way, this is not the “soft option” (where we teach about the world’s religions, like Buddhism or Aboriginal Spirituality, etc) for those who don’t want to do *Religious Education religiously*—that is to say *theologically*, from a faith perspective. Just as we study science *scientifically* so we study religion *religiously*. It’s called *Religious Education*, not “Study of Religion”. In a state school religion should be studied in as non-committal and objective a way as it is possible to do so. There the approach should not be either exclusively religious or secularist (i.e. anti-religious), but inclusive of both, since the state includes both religious and secularist people. If, however, we were teaching in a *secularist* private school—one that openly declared that it was offering an anti-religious education (which it has every right to do in a liberal democratic society such as Australia) then we would approach some or all of the elements of *GNfL* in order to show how they are all very bad ideas and detrimental to the world. But we live and work within a *Catholic* school; and our approach in unambiguously, unapologetically and unequivocally *Christian*. And that includes how we teach about *Religion, Culture & Society*: we do it from a Catholic *theological, Christian faith perspective*. We ask the question: what does Jesus reveal about the nature and meaning of

religion, of culture and of society, and the interaction of these three—in short, what does Jesus reveal about the world?

Only then, only once we have some insight into what Jesus reveals about the world, are we really ready to engage in a serious and meaningful study of the Scriptures (by far the most difficult and challenging of the *GNfL* elements): the inspired and inspiring, the revealed and revealing “word of God” which attempts to make sense of the world, our Christian life, its sacramental sources of nourishment and strength, of our very identity as church, and (to the limited extent that this is possible) even who and what “God” really is as revealed to us in and by the person of Jesus through our encounter with him in prayer.

Once we start to think about *GNfL* as a *living organism*, indeed a *person*, it becomes clear why it is (or should be) the heart and soul of the *entire* Catholic Curriculum: because then it is *all about Jesus* encountered in that loving relationship we call “prayer”. Always starting with him as the Teacher we encounter in prayerful, contemplative openness of mind and heart is the key to teaching in a Catholic school—and not just RE. For RE, however, it is impossible to do without *him* doing it. Please note: Not just “without him”, but *without him doing it ...* He is *the* Teacher. Trust him to do the real work. You and I are fellow disciples with our own students. We are learning as much (if not more) than they; and often learn *from them, through them, and certainly with them.*

In the RE “space” we are *all* learners, “disciples”, in a life-long process of learning how to live: “learning for life”. As the (usually) only (or oldest) adult in the room it is our responsibility to accompany, encourage, support, and guide *our fellow disciples/learners* as we—all of us, together—learn from Christ, who is both closer to us than we are to ourselves, and knows us better than we know ourselves, and—most importantly—loves us absolutely just as we are. Then our schools will be what we say about them: **student focused, Christ centred, learning for life**; not just “safe places” but open spaces of a liberating process through a life-transforming encounter and a meaning-giving relationship with a person: the person of Jesus.