

EASTERN CATHOLIC STUDENTS IN CATHOLIC SCHOOLS

Challenges and Responses

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THERE HAS BEEN much discussion recently, especially in the Catholic media, on the situation of Eastern Catholic students in Catholic schools in Australia. This follows a report commissioned by the Eastern Catholic bishops which will be discussed at the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference meeting in May 2009. (Cf. pp. above.)

The report draws attention to difficulties faced by Eastern Catholic students. In helping to frame an on-going conversation on this issue, this paper will propose three points that provide a pastoral framework on how best to respond to the needs of Eastern Catholic students in Catholic schools. This framework takes into account the unique status of the Eastern Churches within Catholicism as well as the educational reality facing Catholic schools in Australia today. For the sake of brevity differences between the Eastern Catholic Churches will not be elaborated on and the focus here will be on those Churches which are generally classified as Byzantine.

Who are Eastern Catholics?

Eastern Catholic Churches are in communion with Rome but do not follow the liturgical and disciplinary norms of the Latin Church. They share a common theology and history and are sometimes referred to as Eastern Rite Churches. This term does not, however, do justice to the autonomy of these groups as it implies that what distinguishes them from the Latin, or the more commonly used descriptor Roman, Catholic Church are merely liturgical

practices. Eastern Catholics, amongst other things, also have quite different histories, spiritualities and are governed by a separate code of canon law. Thus many who work in this area prefer the designation Churches rather than Rites to distinguish them from the numerically dominant Roman Catholic Church. Four significant Eastern Catholic Churches in Australia are the Maronites who are the most numerous, Melkites, Chaldeans and Ukrainian Greek Catholic¹. Within Eastern Catholic Churches there is considerable diversity. Maronites and Chaldeans both follow a different Syriac Rite and are historically associated with the Antiochian Tradition. Both the Melkites and Ukrainians follow a Byzantine Rite and are part of the Tradition derived from Constantinople.

After many years of working in Catholic schools and with Eastern Catholics I have come to the conclusion that the key distinction that needs to be made, especially by teachers working in Catholic schools, is that Eastern Catholicism is not an ethnic expression of Roman Catholicism. If only differences of worship and culture are mentioned many teachers are confused about what is the difference between say, Melkite Catholics from Syria and Catholics from Chile. The latter group has a range of cultural practices and celebrates the liturgy in Spanish. They are, nonetheless, Roman Catholics. Melkites share many similarities with other Byzantine Rite Catholic Churches such as the Ukrainians but are quite distinct from Roman Catholics. Once this dis-

inction is made then, in my experience, teachers working in Catholic schools see Eastern Catholics in a different light and are receptive to more information that can usually be delivered from existing resources without taking a protracted amount of time. The deeper issue, however, is how to respond to the needs of Eastern Catholic students in Catholic schools.

The Need for a More Empirical Edge

As far as I am aware there has never been a substantial survey of Eastern Catholic students in Catholic schools in Australia. Such an investigation would be an important first step in framing any future discussion. Firstly, it would provide some insight into the needs, concerns and aspirations of Eastern Catholic students. Until now too much of the discussion has been based on non systematic, anecdotal reporting. While this has its place, certainly as a departure point, there comes a time when a more rigorous approach to identifying salient issues is required. One comment, for example, that is often made in this context is the fact that Eastern Catholic students receiving all the sacraments of initiation at baptism is not readily acknowledged in Catholic primary schools. Is this a widespread phenomenon or a relatively isolated occurrence? The only way to be sure is to do careful investigation. At the same time such work will shed light on the experience of Eastern Catholic students in Catholic schools.

The second feature of a survey should centre on current practices in schools. One critical area is the religious education curriculum. An audit of existing curricula, for example, would give a clearer picture on how Eastern Catholic Churches are covered. It is important to know what is being done now in order to adequately plan for the future. In the *To Know Worship and Love* textbooks series, for instance, there is a chapter in the Year 8 text on Eastern Catholic Churches. Is there other material that is being used? Finally such a survey would help to determine the number of Eastern Catholics students in Catholic schools. The exact numbers of Eastern Catholics in



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Australia is difficult to ascertain because official census questions fail to distinguish between Roman and Eastern Catholics. The size of the student cohort is a critical feature of any planned pastoral response. It is highly unlikely that any Eastern Catholic Church, certainly those which follow a Byzantine Rite, would have a sufficient population to even contemplate developing their own schools system. The exception here are the Maronites who have a number of independent schools in Sydney and who in recent years have established a school in Melbourne which is affiliated with the local Catholic Education Office.

Where it Goes in the Curriculum

Once existing practice has been established then careful consideration could be given to where in the curriculum the story of Eastern Catholic Churches could be heard more clearly. I am assuming here that the case for educating students about Eastern Catholic Churches is incontrovertible. There is a general recognition in educational discourse, certainly in religious education that exposure to other faith traditions is an important part of contemporary approaches to quality teaching and learning. In light of this it is hard to argue against the place of Eastern Catholic Churches in the religious education curricula of Catholic schools. These Churches are after all an integral part of the Catholic Church and at the same time they offer different and challenging perspectives on a range of standard issues that are at the core of religious education in Catholic schools.

Having said this the question remains about

where and how much attention should be devoted to Eastern Catholic Churches in the religious education curriculum. If we follow the current dominant educational paradigm in religious education, then the same discipline and demands that are placed on other areas of the curriculum should apply to RE. A key feature of conventional curriculum planning is a disciplined approach to pedagogical content. So if the current curriculum has a certain scope and sequence and a decision is made to include more material on Eastern Catholic Churches then what will be deleted from the curriculum to accommodate this? My intention here is to focus the discussion on what key elements need to be included in a curriculum model. There is always a tendency in religious education to approach the curriculum as a type of 'wish list' where all ideas are proceeded with but never with a firm resolve to see these suggestions come to any type of practical fruition.

Here I think a real contribution could be made by presenting characteristically Eastern Catholic perspectives on issues that are already a part of the RE curriculum in most Catholic schools. Units on the sacraments, for example, are standard fare in most Catholic schools. Whilst the Eastern Catholic Churches' essential teaching on sacraments is completely orthodox they offer a different way of approaching and understanding, for example, sacramental worship. The Byzantine notion of the Divine Liturgy being a recreation of heaven on earth is a very challenging notion that could greatly enhance students' appreciation of Christian worship. A very similar argument could be put on incorporating Eastern views on prayer into existing units. In my view this approach of embedding some Eastern Catholic insights into existing staples in the RE curriculum is one promising possibility for giving more prominence to the Eastern voice in Catholic schools.

There is also a place for a more focused approach to Eastern Catholicism in the RE curriculum. This work needs, however, to move beyond description and phenomenology,

and into substantive theology. As a first step a range of largely descriptive information on Eastern Churches could be provided. If nothing else, if students in Catholic schools were given a good overview of the Eastern Churches, some key terminology and a brief history then this would be a worthy achievement. But once this is done what is the next step? There is a tendency, even among Eastern Catholics, to distinguish themselves by pointing to matters of ecclesial discipline. Eastern Catholic priests can, for example, marry before ordination. This is, nonetheless, a matter of canon law and not bedrock belief. If Eastern Catholic themes are to be included as distinct units in RE curricula in Catholic schools then they must be derived from the great wellsprings of Eastern Christian thought. An emphasis on the Trinity as the starting point for Christological exegesis, for example, is a characteristic feature of Byzantine theology. The question of how to best present this content to students is a pressing one but with sustained effort and cooperation between theologians, educators and others then these units could be crafted. They would be of value because they are moving beyond the surface and into what makes Eastern Catholic Churches part of what has been poetically described as the second lung of Catholicism.

Importance of Catechesis

In the discussion about how best to support Eastern Catholic students in schools it is of critical importance to stress the common challenges facing both Eastern and Roman Catholic Churches. There is immense pressure on young people today to maintain only tenuous associations with religious traditions. In many ways this indifference is more difficult to deal with than outright hostility. One of the challenges that all Catholic Churches face is how best to provide the necessary catechesis for young adults and adolescents to move them toward discipleship. Catechesis here is understood as a lifelong process where the believer's relationship with Christ is strengthened through prayer, liturgy, education and ongoing relation-

ships. Catechesis is, therefore, a broad concept. Education plays a role in catechesis. A key insight of Catholic educational philosophy is that knowing more about faith can lead to strengthening of faith. Schools therefore have a role to play in catechesis. It is, however, a complementary one. Catechesis must be situated within a faith community. The family, in particular, is the seat of catechesis.

Any discussion of Eastern Catholic children in Catholic schools must never lose sight of the irreplaceable role of family and the wider worshipping community in nurturing religious belief and practice. The idea that the school can 'fill in the gaps' misunderstands the nature of catechesis. Along with questions about how Catholic schools support Eastern Catholic students, the Eastern Churches should also concentrate on how parishes can reach out to families and how they can provide ongoing formation to children, adolescents and young adults. To take one example, how well do Eastern Churches explain the liturgy to young people? Is there a structured program in place that takes young people through the rubrics of the Divine Liturgy and the theology behind them? Education is, however, only one dimension of catechesis. A much more urgent concern amongst young people is the need for supportive peer networks. Here the challenge facing Eastern Catholics is acute and different in nature to that confronting Roman Catholics. There are relatively small numbers of Eastern Catholics in Australia. This is especially true for those Eastern Catholic Churches, such as the Ukrainian Greek Catholics, who have moved beyond the first generation of migration to this country. In the first years after arrival migrants often maintain religious roots as a way of coping with the demands of living in a new land. This effect, though, diminishes over time and religious communities need new methods of retaining the allegiance of those whose memory of the country of origin is limited to being part of the experience of older community members.

There is a wide literature that underlines the importance of peer support for sustaining

and cultivating religious faith. A very pertinent question then becomes how do Eastern Catholic Churches, and Catholic schools, help to provide peer support to Eastern Catholics? What is needed is a much more vigorous discussion on how schools, families and parishes can cooperate to their catechetical role. This may result in radical proposals. Is there, for instance, any merit in the idea of establishing some Catholic schools as centres of excellence for Eastern Catholics? This is not a proposal for separate schools as the numbers of Eastern Catholics could not sustain them but rather schools which express a special interest in enrolling Eastern Catholics. If such schools were established then Eastern Catholic students could be offered a more explicit focus on Eastern Catholicism in religious education classes. Specialist staff could be employed who meet all the requirements of excellent teaching professionals but who have a special expertise in Eastern Catholicism. More importantly, perhaps, Eastern Catholic students could network with others like them. Students who are on the periphery of the Eastern Churches could now have a way of reconnecting with the worshipping community by meeting others who could support them on their faith journey. In such an arrangement Eastern Catholic priests and deacons could visit schools and establish links with students. For this plan and others like it to succeed, however, there is a need for the empirical edge to pastoral outreach mentioned earlier. If, for example, there is a concentration of Eastern Catholics in a particular area then this region could be a candidate for such dedicated, designated schools.

To illustrate the benefits that could arise if some Catholic schools took on an Eastern Catholic focus, consider the Canadian experience. I have just concluded a study which looks at, amongst other things, the religious identity of Ukrainian Catholic young adults in Alberta. It was clear that those with the strongest connection with the worshipping community were those who had multilayered links with the Church. One way these links were sustained

was through Catholic schools. A number of Catholic schools in the Edmonton region have a long running and successful Ukrainian immersion program. This program allows for bilingual instruction, an Eastern Catholic focus in RE and also for the building up of fellowship amongst Ukrainian Catholic students. In the schools Ukrainian Greek Catholic are able to express and cultivate their religious identity and to be supported by peers who share their backgrounds, beliefs and values.

To be sure the schools are only one part of a quite complex matrix of interaction but they do provide important continuity. Certainly the situation in Edmonton and surrounding areas is not directly comparable to that of Australia as the number of Ukrainian Catholics, especially in Western Canada, is far greater than in even the largest Australian cities. This, however, only makes the case for some type of concentration of Eastern Catholic students stronger. If we argue that peer support in schools is important then the fact that there are fewer Eastern Catholics in Australia makes the need for designated schools even greater.

In a similar vein, is there any possibility for collaboration between Eastern Catholic parishes and Catholic schools in developing educational resources and providing structural support? To give one example of possible educational support, could schools and Catholic Education Offices utilize personnel and re-

sources to assist Eastern Catholic parishes develop catechetical materials? On a structural level could schools provide access to facilities to host youth meetings, retreats or camps for Eastern Catholic students drawn from across a whole diocese?

Conclusion

It should be a relatively straightforward task to include information about Eastern Catholic Churches for use in teacher preparation. The discussion needs, however, to move beyond teachers and to focus on student needs. The key task is, on the basis of accurate information, for schools to develop programs that better engage Eastern Catholic students both on a cognitive and affective level. In terms of the formal religious education curriculum there is a case for including more material on Eastern Catholic Churches in existing units as well as developing new ones that have a distinctive Eastern theological focus.

It is important that discussion of the place of Eastern Catholic students in Catholic schools takes place in the wider context of how best to develop links between schools, parishes and families. In many ways the discussion of the place of Eastern Catholic students in Catholic schools is a subset of a much broader concern that anticipates as its goal the catechesis of Eastern Catholic children, youth and young adults.

1. *Ukrainian Greek Catholic and Ukrainian Catholic are used interchangeably in this paper. The former is the more correct term as it designates both the origin of the Church and its classification as Byzantine (or Greek) Rite.*

FURTHER READING

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