

# **Relationships, relationships, relationships!**

## **A discussion of some key themes in relationship and sex education in Catholic schools.**

By Matthew Dell,

Chair of ATCRE (Association of Teachers of Catholic Religious Education) and Senior Lecturer in Secondary Religious Education and MA in Education at St Mary's University, Twickenham.

---

There is a lot of noise at the moment about sex education, the government<sup>1</sup> has made something compulsory for schools, that the majority of schools already been doing. Catholic schools, in my experience, have usually been good about taking seriously their responsibility to teach sex education well. When I first started teaching over 25 years ago I remember one particular daunting experience in my first year; I had to teach some sex education lessons to a 'challenging' class of 13-year olds. I had not been prepared in my teacher training for this encounter, however armed with a good theology degree I got through it, though on reflection it could have been better. Now as a teacher trainer, preparing RE teachers through the PGCE at St Mary's, I am motivated to ensure that they get the opportunity to prepare and think about this important aspect of education.

### **My thesis**

I have a straightforward argument to make here. When it comes to sex education, the focus needs to be on relationship education. This is not to belittle the sex aspect, but to emphasise that it needs to take place within a wider context of relationship education. This is not a new argument, and it is an orthodox view within Catholic education. Interestingly our government has slowly come around

---

<sup>1</sup> Department for Education - The Relationships Education, Relationships and Sex Education and Health Education (England) Regulations 2019, made under sections 34 and 35 of the Children and Social Work Act 2017, make Relationships Education compulsory for all pupils receiving primary education and Relationships and Sex Education (RSE) compulsory for all pupils receiving secondary education from September 2020. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/relationships-education-relationships-and-sex-education-rse-and-health-education> (Accessed 21/2/2020)

to this view, as over the years the Department for Education has changed the official name: it was for a long time simply called 'Sex Education'; then the name was changed in 1999 to 'Sex and Relationship Education'; now more recently in 2017 to 'Relationship and Sex Education' (RSE). Thus, the right ordering of the topic, relationships first then sex. Too often the focus is on the sex aspects at the neglect to the real foundations on it all, relationships.

### **Learning to love**

This name shift is very helpful as the idea that you have sex with someone first, then secondly start to build a relationship has no basis in the Christian lexicon, nor in the majority of other moral codes. Our tradition emphasises the vital necessity of building a loving committed relationship, that is recognised through marriage, in which sex follows as a natural aspect of that relationship. Therefore, the key task for schools, in supporting and working in partnership with parents in the education of their children, is to teach about love. Within this context, the teaching of the sex aspect is grounded fully in relationships education focused on 'learning to love one another'. Some might want to criticise that this sounds a bit woolly but fundamental to a coherent RSE programme will be a clear focus on developing successful relationships. The adage that 'happiness is being married to your best friend' reveals that learning how to be good at relationships is key. Others<sup>2</sup> would argue that teaching pupils about relationships is part of the wider aim of education to 'socialise' pupils. Schools have always been essentially about trying to help children become functioning adults who can communicate and get along well with others in society. For in RSE the overt focus on relationship skills and the understanding of what it means to love and be lovable is

---

<sup>2</sup> Biesta, G. (2009) Good education in an age of measurement: on the need to reconnect with the question of purpose in education. *Educ Asse Eval Acc* 21, 33–46. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11092-008-9064-9>

the foundation stone for building socialisation. Catholic schools are at a fundamental level 'schools of love'.

### **Relationship education is constant**

To further develop this theme, in one sense relationship education is happening all the time in schools. In the Teachers' Standards issued by the Department for Education<sup>3</sup>, teachers are required to establish 'good relationships' with their pupils in order for learning to flourish. Catholic schools are right to put at the heart of their schools the demand for teachers to model right relationships and for school behaviour management policies to in practice develop positive and moral pupil behaviour. This approach sees poor behaviour as opportunities for moral growth, for acts of mercy and forgiveness and the upholding of justice. However, learning to love is not easy. I was inspired many years ago, by a comedian who acted as an authoritarian teacher, in a monologue, reading St Paul's meditation on love (I Corinthians 13). The comedian started by reading from St Paul 'Love is patience', then snapped his Bible shut and berated an imaginary misbehaving pupil, thus demonstrating the teacher's lack of patience. The humour was found in the juxtaposition of teaching about love but using behaviour management techniques that were not loving. For the RE teacher in particular, the irony of this scene can be acutely painful.

### **Pastoral reality and the ideals of the Church**

This leads irony leads to the tension of communicating the ideals of the Church's teaching on relationships, whilst also developing an understanding of the Church's commitment to living with the

---

<sup>3</sup> Department for Education (2011) Teachers' standards  
<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/teachers-standards> (Accessed 21/2/2020)

pastoral reality. The interesting thing is that in my experience, teenagers often aspire to the ideals of the Church teaching. They can see the connection between love and sex; the challenge of knowing if someone truly loves you. They understand marriage as the ceremony that demonstrates love commitment. It makes sense to them that children need the security of a loving relationship; that ideally there are two parents. However, with all ideals, they can seem very challenging to achieve. That is why I think it is very important to explain to young people the notion of the pastoral reality; that whilst aspiring to reach the ideals, the Church is also grounded in mercy and forgiveness. If you do not make the ideals, there is a way back. Pope Francis' regular exhortations to show mercy are a healthy counterbalance in teaching the high ideals of Catholic moral teaching. In the RE classroom, teaching about the ideals of the Church need to include the discussion of the Church's commitment to mercy and forgiveness, otherwise there is a risk that pupils will erroneously think that the Church is only reserved for the morally upright.

### **Critical RE**

Another issue that arises in teaching RSE is that that it takes place in a school and therefore, the teaching needs to be grounded in educational norms. The guiding document for RE in Catholic schools is currently the is the Bishops' Conference Religious Education Curriculum Directory (2012). The stated aims of classroom RE are 'to develop the critical faculties of pupils' in order that the outcome of RE is 'religiously literate ...young people who ... think ethically and theologically'<sup>4</sup>. In teaching RSE, pupils need to be taught to develop their critical thinking about the said subject matter. This means that the presentation of Catholic teaching needs to taught in such a way that pupils have a knowledge and understanding of the teaching but are also able to evaluate and

---

<sup>4</sup> p6 - Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales Department of Catholic Education and Formation (2012) Religious Education Curriculum Directory (3-19) for Catholic Schools and Colleges in England and Wales. Catholic Education Service.

critique that teaching. A clumsy one-sided presentation that does not engage pupils in the ambiguity and challenges of religious teaching and practice is seriously unhelpful.

To teach a 'sanitised' view that leaves out the controversial aspects, is to leave the pupils ill prepared to really engage and understand the teachings. Critical RE does not damage the presentation of religions rather it enhances it as it demands an engagement with the reality of the complex. Pope Francis in *Amoris Laetitia* notes 'It is not helpful to overwhelm them [children and young people] with data without also helping them to develop a critical sense'<sup>5</sup>. Pupils deserve and have a right to an authentic educational experience in the teaching of relationships and sex education; to achieve this the teacher will need to skilfully navigate critical RE. Presenting the teaching of the Catholic Church in a positive light can be challenging, especially with older students who, armed with an understanding of situation ethics and natural law can develop sophisticated retorts. With younger teenagers the effect of societal norms as viewed through the TV show 'Love Island' where couples sleep in the same bed, Catholic teaching on pre-marital sex can be seen as almost incredulous. However, the task of the RE teacher is to engage hearts and minds; to develop an understanding of the rationale for Catholic teaching and foster the ability to critique.

### **RSE and child protection**

Catholic schools should be concerned to give their pupils the best RSE they can. In particular, apart from the lifelong potential significance of RSE for individuals, there is the immediacy of safeguarding issues surrounding RSE. The reality of individual sexual predators within the Catholic Church, as well as those who have put the reputation of the Church and Catholic schools above justice and the

---

<sup>5</sup> §281, Pope Francis (2016) Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, *Amoris Laetitia* (The Joy of Love), Catholic Truth Society.

needs to victims, have a been a source of scandal. The cases of child sexual abuse connected to the Catholic Church are a significant stain on the moral authority of the Church, this needs to be discussed in the classroom in a sensitive manner that develops critical faculties. In classrooms, teachers need to need to engage with the damage that sex can do, this gift from God can be seen as a curse for those who have been wounded by it. One of the responses to the historic failure of safeguarding in the Catholic Church is to ensure that Catholic schools get RSE right, that this becomes a source of pride for the Catholic educational community. RSE is about preparing young people so that they can protect themselves and develop healthy life affirming relationships, the moral imperative is palpable.

### **Working with parents and carers**

At the heart of the Catholic philosophy of education is the concept that schools are there to support the first teachers: the parents and carers. This notion of the primacy of parents is vital to ensure right balance, parents have the prime responsibility, teachers are there to serve and support parents. Engagement with parents in regard to RSE is an imperative, however it needs to go beyond just a letter home announcing when RSE is being taught, to opportunities to engage parents in the content and approach of the school. Here trust can be developed and parents can be empowered as the first teachers.

### **Conclusion - It's all about love, really!**

Often those on the outsider of the Church focus on the negative aspects of the official teaching of the Church, the bits where the Church says 'no', as opposed to the life affirming message of love. When I was in the RE classroom teaching RSE, I would use a question box technique, to allow pupils to ask questions in a safe way. On one occasion I was delighted and disappointed with one

anonymous question from my class: “Dear Mr Dell, if sex is such a good gift from God, why don’t nuns and priests get married?”. I was delighted that they had understood the concept that sex is fundamentally a gift from God, that the Church has a very positive understanding of sexuality and hence reserved for marriage, however slightly disappointed that in my previous teaching about the different ministries in the Church, the value of celibacy had perhaps not been appreciated. In RSE there can be a tendency to end up being overly focused on perhaps a few side issues, rather than the key issue of preparing our young people to have healthy relationships in which they understand what love is. With sex education, it is really about relationship education, that is to say, learning to love, summed up by the CES document ‘All of us spend our entire lives learning how to love. We never stopped learning’<sup>6</sup> (p2)

---

<sup>6</sup> Department of Catholic Education and Formation, Catholic Bishops’ Conference of England and Wales (2017) Learning to love, an introduction to Catholic Relationship and Sex Education (RSE) for Catholic Educators. Catholic Education Service.