

Questions for Catholic Parents in Parramatta

If you knew that a certain man was a heretic, would you allow him any involvement in your child's religious education? Put the issue in another context. If you knew that he was a pedophile, would you allow him any involvement in your child's physical welfare? A Catholic parent would hardly regard his child's physical welfare as more important than his eternal salvation.

This is the issue faced by parents whose children are taught under the Parramatta Diocese's religious education curriculum. For the man whose teaching method is used in the curriculum is a heretic. He is an American named Thomas Groome, an ex priest. Indeed, the very title of the program *Sharing Our Story* is borrowed from a 1980 text of his called *Christian religious education; Sharing our story and vision*.

Contrary to the teaching of the Catholic Church, Groome believes—

- That sacred scripture is not inerrant
- That the Pope is not the direct successor of St Peter
- That the Pope does not have absolute authority to bind the Church
- That Catholic doctrine is not fixed
- That no statement of faith can be guaranteed free from error
- That the Catholic Church should ordain women
- That Christ did not consecrate his apostles priests
- That the priesthood is not passed on by ordination
- That the priest has no distinctive character rendering him unique
- That the priest has no unique power to confect the Eucharist
- That any powers the priest may have are given him by the community

Heretics come in different categories depending on their point of departure from the teachings of the Church. Arians refused to believe that Christ was God. They asserted that He was merely the first and greatest creature of God, a super-angelic being, but not identical with God. Pelagians thought that man could get to heaven by his own power without the help of God's grace. They denied the Catholic doctrine of Original Sin, that is, that man lost his state of original grace through the sin of Adam.

Protestants denied (and continue to deny) the authority of God and of His Church and held (and continue to hold) that each may be his own authority in interpreting sacred scripture and in deciding what he should, or should not, accept of the Church's teaching.

The particular heresy to which Thomas Groome subscribes is called *Modernism*. It is derived, as its name suggests, from modern philosophy. Of all heresies it is the most comprehensive. It doesn't just deny this or that point of doctrine, it denies *the very foundation of all doctrine*: it says that one cannot be sure whether there exists anything at all beyond the material order. For this reason it is also the most dangerous of heresies. For, while we can admit to feelings about God, if there is no certainty of the existence of anything beyond the material, how can we be sure that he really exists? Mustn't we admit that all our assertions of God's existence and of his interventions in history are nothing but a holy fantasy? This is *Modernism*. It seeks

to reduce the teachings and practice of the Church to conformity with the standards of the modern world. From agnosticism it proceeds to atheism: it ends in despair.

Now, knowing that Groome is a Modernist heretic, and that *what he teaches* is utterly poisonous to those who hold the Catholic faith, would you allow that *his method of teaching* should be used to give religious instruction to your children? Would you not be concerned that the poison of the *content* of his teaching might not leach through in his *method* and bring about results just as fatal as if the content was taught?

This article will explore Groome's method, will offer criticism of it and explain why such concerns are reasonable. It will give reasons why Catholic parents in the Parramatta Diocese should press the bishop of Parramatta, Bishop Kevin Manning, to scrap the religious education curriculum *Sharing Our Story* which embodies Groome's methodology.

Groome's Method

Groome's method uses group psychology. The pupil is required, as part of a group, to pass through several processes as he considers, for example, some passage from sacred scripture. These are the processes:

- 1) Naming some life experience;
- 2) Reflecting on it;
- 3) Applying 'Christian story and vision';
- 4) Integrating the life experience with 'the Christian story and vision'; and,
- 5) Making some response.

It all seems simple enough. Groome says there is no magic about the steps numbering only five. They could be more, or less. In fact there are really only three steps.

Groome calls his method 'shared Christian praxis'. 'Praxis' is a Greek word. Our word 'practice' comes from the same root and the two can be used interchangeably. Like 'practice' it can mean a process or procedure. But Groome uses 'praxis' to mean an art or skill of interpreting by which a certain end will be achieved. 'Christian' signifies the thing to be interpreted, the scriptures and tradition—'the Christian story and vision', to use his terminology. It is 'shared' because carried out in a group session.

What is the end to be achieved by Groome's praxis? What is the agenda which the Parramatta Catholic Education Office has adopted and embodied in the curriculum? Is it, as Parramatta's Bishop Manning says in his Preface to the *Sharing Our Story* Core Document, '[to lead] students to a full and rich appreciation of Catholic faith and tradition?' Let us see.

Religious education coordinators first attend a compulsory 'professional development program' where they are shown how to induct the teachers under their care in 'shared Christian praxis'. They are required to absorb and make their own 'three convictions' of Thomas Groome which must inform their teachers' application of Groome's method in the teaching of religion. These are—

1. God is active in our lives now in our own stories and visions;
2. God is disclosed or revealed in the Story and Vision of the Christian community; and

3. Life and faith, society and religion (by which he means 1. and 2. above) must be placed in dialogue leading to their harmonisation in form of a decision/response.¹

According to these ‘convictions’ the teaching and practice of the Catholic Church (the ‘Story and Vision of the Christian community’) must be reduced to the level of the ‘God who is active in the lives [of the participants] in [their] own stories and visions’ and then be placed in dialogue with it so as to produce some third thing which is a ‘harmonisation in form of a decision/response’ of the participants.

It is not a matter of the Church’s teaching and practice being the determinant, the dominant. That teaching and practice is only one of the contributors to the decision/response. It must be submitted to ‘the God who is active in the lives of the participants’. But the Church’s teaching and practice require of its members that they submit themselves to its rule without qualification. It follows that the end to be achieved by the curriculum *Sharing Our Story* is **not**, as Bishop Manning claims, to lead students to a full and rich appreciation of Catholic faith and tradition. On the contrary, it is to lead them to reduce the Catholic faith and tradition to the same level as their own stories and visions! And since it is inevitable that these ‘stories and visions’ will be informed and established by the secular humanist world in which they live, the end to be achieved by Groome’s ‘praxis’ is the submission of the authority of the Church to the mores of the modern world.

This is enough to condemn the curriculum but there is plenty of scope to damn it even further. Among the reference documents provided to teachers of the curriculum is Groome’s book *Sharing Faith: A Comprehensive Approach To Religious Education And Pastoral Ministry*². In this book Groome gives vent to his heretical beliefs in the interpretation of sacred scripture and tradition. These heretical views are recommended to teachers involved in administering the curriculum. Under the influence of such material the diminution of the influence of the Church’s teaching in the ‘decision/response’ referred to above is guaranteed. Anyone who doubts the evils in *Sharing Faith* should read Eamonn Keane’s work *A Generation Betrayed*³ or his *Crisis in Religious Education*⁴.

We will now provide a more detailed criticism of Groome’s method and expose his agenda.

Criticism Of Groome’s Method of ‘shared Christian praxis’

First, it is unnecessary. The principle of economy deplores the addition of means beyond what is necessary to achieve the end. As Occam’s razor puts it—*entities must not be unnecessarily multiplied*. Any reasonably competent Catholic teacher is capable of conveying the faith to children by word and example without recourse to complicated methods. Christ didn’t require his followers to engage in professional development programs before sending them out to preach the gospel.

¹ *Shared Christian Praxis*, Barry Dwyer, CEO Parramatta, 2000, pp. 19, 21, 29.

² Harper, San Francisco, 1991

³ Hatherleigh Press, New York, 2002

⁴ Eamonn Keane, *Crisis in Religious Education*, Sydney, 2003, pp. 40-48

Second, the complexity of the method excites suspicion that there is some hidden agenda which the method will aid and which its absence will hinder. As has been shown and as will be further elaborated, this suspicion is amply born out.

Third, Groome's method is strictly not a method of teaching at all but of training⁵ using group psychology. It fails to treat the pupil with the dignity due to him as a person to be educated in the faith. It subverts his education to the demands of the group dynamic and in so doing inverts the process by making his education subservient to this training. Even without the agenda referred to above, the method serves to hinder rather than help in the child's education in the faith.

Fourth, Groome's method, which he calls a 'praxis', is in fact a process with a questionable history. The German Idealist George William Frederick Hegel [1770-1831] postulated the development of the universe by a process of countless instances of what he called dialectic: *thesis* was met by its contrary *antithesis* and resolved in something third which was the compromise of the other two, which he called *synthesis*. Like all modern philosophers since Descartes, his world view had nothing to do with reality, and was simply a personal hypothesis.

Hegel's successor, Karl Marx [1818-1883], borrowed Hegel's theory of dialectic and applied it to his own world view that the development of man and society depended totally on material and economic conditions. In Marx's hands the dialectic involved a necessary conflict between the working classes and their labour (*thesis*) and the capitalist classes and their property (*antithesis*) which would resolve eventually in the collectivist society (*synthesis*) in which all the riches, lands, factories and means of production would become the property of all. Marx's simplistic theory with its note of necessary conflict, known as dialectical materialism, dominated his thought and has dominated that of his followers.

Groome is a Marxist. He developed his 'shared Christian praxis' from the thinking of Marxists Paulo Friere, Antonio Gramsci and Jurgen Habermas.⁶ In truth, 'shared Christian praxis' is nothing else but Marx's conflict theory of dialectic applied to the teachings and practice of the Catholic Church. There is *thesis*—the 'naming and reflecting on the life experience'; *antithesis*—'Christian story and vision'; and *synthesis*—'the integrating' and 'response'. The crucial thing is the conflict laden *synthesis*, which produces the decision/response involving the subversion of the teachings and practice of the Church referred to above. On page 24 of *An Introduction To Shared Christian Praxis*, one of the CEO curriculum documents, written by Barry Dwyer, the various movements of 'shared Christian praxis' are reduced to these three. They are simply the working out of Groome's 'three convictions' referred to above.⁷

⁵ It is significant that Groome uses as illustration of his method the interchange between a primary school child and his mother over a fight the child has had with one of his peers. The illustration has almost nothing to do with the education of the child (the development of his intellect), but rather his training in self discipline (the strengthening of the will).

⁶ cf. Eamonn Keane, *Crisis in Religious Education*, Sydney, 2003, pp. 36-7

⁷ The Marxian dialectic is to be contrasted with the syllogism of deductive logic. There a principle is stated, eg, *A Catholic must submit his mind and will to the teachings and practice of the Catholic Church*. Then there is stated a fact, eg, *(This child) Mary is a Catholic*. What follows is the conclusion: *Mary must submit her mind and will to the teachings and practice of the Catholic Church*.

The Parramatta Catholic Education Office website tells the viewer—*The ancient Greeks used this word (praxis) to describe a process of gaining greater knowledge by reflecting on life's experience and learning from that reflection.* This assertion reflects the efforts of Marxian inspired educationalists to find authority for their idiosyncratic views in the works of Aristotle. It is not true.

All intellectual activity is either practical, productive or speculative, Aristotle says in the *Metaphysics*⁸. He contrasts three aspects of human life: *praxis* (doing), *poiesis* (making) and *theoria* (the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake). A man may pass from one to the other of these activities a dozen times each day. Of the three, *theoria* alone is concerned *per se* with knowing. The others deal with knowledge in passing, as an instrument of their activity. The three are not, as Groome maintains, three ways of knowing. There is only one way of knowing, the way of intellect, the understanding of the nature or quiddity of sensible things. All knowledge comes through the senses and is rooted in the material of particular things. But man with the power of his intellect uncovers in these the immaterial, their natures or essences. He compares, expounds upon, and in particular instances, praises or blames, loves or hates.

But Groome and the Marxian theorists are blind to anything beyond the material. They neglect essential distinctions and look for distinctions where there are none.

There is a sense, however, in which the Marxian school of education is right to call their method a *praxis*. For the word means a doing, or action, and it suits the Marxian agenda which is that education is not the growth in understanding through development of the intellect but the inspiration of the child to action which will shape and change the world⁹. Marx was a subjectivist, which is another way of saying that he was a liar¹⁰. He worked backwards from a thesis 'seeking the evidence that made it inevitable, rather than forward to it from objectively examined data'¹¹. He was quite blatant about his view of philosophy: *The philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways; the point is to change it*¹² [emphasis added].

It is implied in the *Sharing Our Story* Core Document that 'shared praxis' has a long and venerable history. *The elements of this educative process, it is asserted, can be identified throughout the teaching ministry of Jesus and are most obvious in his use of parables.* In the Introduction to *Shared Christian Praxis*, the handbook according to which teachers are inducted into the curriculum, Dr Michael Bezzina goes further. *As you take up this professional development program, he tells them, you can do so in the confidence that praxis is an approach that has been with us since the time before Christ.* In a letter of February 2003 Bishop Kevin Manning says that Groome's method—

The conclusion is nothing else but the working out of the principle in this particular factual situation. The principle is not compromised in deductive logic; it is applied.

⁸ Book VI

⁹ Cf Eamonn Keane, *A Generation Betrayed*, op. cit., Ch. 10, under *Praxis*

¹⁰ Cf. Paul Johnson's essay on him in his book *Intellectuals*, Phoenix, London, 1996, pp. 52 et seq.

¹¹ Ibid p. 55

¹² *Theses on Feuerbach*: n. xi

*makes explicit a method of teaching practised by all good teachers through the centuries before the term shared praxis was ever coined. It is simply taking a life experience, reflecting on it, interpreting it in the light of Scripture and Tradition and getting on with living the Christian life.*¹³

None of the propositions quoted above is correct. Neither the name ‘shared praxis’ nor the thing it signifies predates Karl Marx. One need not be a cynic to think that the material put out by the Parramatta CEO is designed to disguise the provenance of Groome’s method. Doubtless, the material in the Bishop’s letter was also provided by his Catholic Education Office.

Why has Groome developed this method? Because under the guise of teaching Catholicism, such a process permits of indoctrination. What is the doctrine Groome and his helpers want to impose on the pupil? *Modernism*. What is Modernism? It is that heresy which seeks to reduce the teachings and practice of the Catholic Church to conformity with the mores of the modern world.

Modernism And Its Modus Operandi

Modernism, like modern philosophy from which it is derived, is immersed in the great evil of the age which is subjectivism. What matters to the modern philosopher, as to the Modernist, is not reality, but *what he thinks about* reality.

One of the principles of the realism on which the Catholic Church has always insisted is that *do* follows *be*. In other words, something acts in accordance with its nature. In parallel with this, actions should follow words. If I say that I will do something, I should do it. *Let your yes be yes, Christ said, and your no be no. Anything more comes from the evil one.*¹⁴ This is not the view of Modernists. They may say one thing, but will do another. So, while the Parramatta CEO documents are loud in their assertions that *Sharing Our Story* will develop students’ knowledge and understanding of the Catholic faith and tradition, in fact what the curriculum aims at is, as has been shown, something else.

The Modernist does not want to alienate the Catholic faithful so he is careful never to say explicitly what he would be condemned for saying. Yet he wants to convert the faithful to his Modernist creed. He achieves his ends by the words he uses and the way in which he uses them.

Adolf Hitler wrote in chapter 6 of the first volume of *Mein Kampf*—

Ever since I have been scrutinizing political events, I have taken a tremendous interest in propagandist activity. I saw that the Socialist-Marxist organizations mastered and applied this instrument with astounding skill.

Hitler said he was moved to emulate the Marxists for the purposes of his National Socialist Movement. This is what he wrote in the same chapter about the use of the slogan—

¹³ Letter to the Editor, *AD2000*, February, 2003.

¹⁴ Matthew 5:37

The receptivity of the great masses is very limited, their intelligence is small, but their power of forgetting is enormous. In consequence of these facts, all effective propaganda must be limited to a very few points and must harp on these in slogans until the last member of the public understands what you want him to understand by your slogan.

If you utter a lie and keep repeating it, eventually people will come to accept it as the truth. It is a technique such as this which Modernists use. Thomas Groome uses it. So do the writers of the curriculum documents at the Parramatta CEO. They use a slogan and repeat it, and repeat it, and repeat it.

Consider their use of the simple word ‘story’. Provided it is used in correct context there is no harm in it at all. But used in the way Groome and his satellites use it, it is full of harm. Why? Because while the word may be used for factual events it is more likely to be used of fictional ones. And it is precisely the fictional connotation that they want to get across to readers. That is, they want to convey to Catholic readers, and the pupils subjected to the Groome method, that a narration from the Old or New Testament is not true¹⁵. So we find the word ‘story’ used again and again in the curriculum documentation.

Take this extract from *An Introduction To Shared Christian Praxis* written by Barry Dwyer and designed to introduce teachers to group work so that they can be formed in the Groome method—

If this praxis is to be Christian it must be influenced by Christ and the Christian Story and Vision.

This story is not just a collection of tales of events that happened long ago. It certainly includes narratives but it really encompasses the whole faith story of Christians that is expressed in the Scriptures and in the Tradition of the Church through its teachings, prayer and worship, communal life and mission involving the lives of faithful Christian people throughout the ages.

The Story, defined in this way, gives rise to the Vision, the promises and demands that come naturally and supernaturally from the story of God’s ongoing love for humankind.

The word ‘story’ is used five times in three paragraphs. The Christian story is revealed as ‘just a collection of tales’! The author goes on to talk about ‘the vision’. But if the ‘story’ is doubtful, what must be said of ‘the vision’? The implication is that it is no more certain than is the story. And what of ‘God’s ongoing love for humankind’? That’s just a story too!

Was it Mao Tse Tung who said—*use my words and you will start thinking my thoughts?* Begin to use ‘story’ in the way Modernists use it and you will soon come to think sacred scripture is just a collection of fairy tales.

¹⁵ The late scripture authority, Fr Raymond E. Brown, was a past master at using this technique.

Modernism is poisonous in the subtlety with which it seeks to deceive the Catholic faithful.

Groome's Modernist Agenda Exposed

Modernism was condemned in 1907 by St Pius X in his encyclical *Pascendi Dominici Gregis*¹⁶, at the time the longest encyclical ever written. The saintly Pope analysed the Modernists' view of religion and, in particular, what they mean by revelation—

*' . . . it is a fixed and established principle among them that both science and history must be atheistic: and within their boundaries there is room for nothing but **phenomena** . . . [F]aith . . . must consist in a certain interior sense originating in a need of the divine . . . [It] excites . . . a certain special sense, and this sense possesses . . . the divine reality itself, and in a way unites man with God. . . . Modernists find in this **sense** not only faith, but . . . also . . . **revelation**. . . . Is not that religious sense which is perceptible in the conscience, revelation, or at least the beginning of revelation? . . . It is thus that they make consciousness and revelation synonymous . . . [R]eligious **consciousness** is to be put on an equal footing with revelation, and . . . to it all must submit, even the supreme authority of the Church . . . ¹⁷ [emphasis in original]*

Now Groome teaches in his 'three convictions' that the God who is active in the lives of the participants in their own stories and visions—read *religious consciousness*—must be placed in dialogue with the 'Story and Vision of the Christian community'—read *Divine revelation*. In other words, he places the two on an equal footing. And he requires that the supreme authority of the Church should be submitted to that religious consciousness in '*harmonisation in the form of a decision/response*'. It is this submission which his 'shared Christian praxis' effects.

The Modernist Groome has thus found in the Marxian dialectic an apt means for inculcating his heresy in the religious education of Catholic children.

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The old heresies were relatively honest. You knew where you stood with them. If a man refused to believe that Christ was God, you knew what his position was. But it is different with Modernism. The Modernist fails in all belief, but he pretends otherwise. He calls himself a Catholic. Indeed, he *thinks* he is still a Catholic. But he is not.

Conclusions

It remains, then, that the concerns of Catholic parents of children in schools in the Parramatta Diocese about the involvement of a heretic in the religious education of their children are more than justified. In the 1970s American commentator, Marshall MacLuhan, coined the expression *The Medium is the Message*. Whatever the truth of

¹⁶ *On the Doctrines of the Modernists*, 8.9.1907

¹⁷ *Ibid.* nn. 6, 7 & 8

that expression, the Modernist message of Thomas Groome certainly comes through in the medium of his methodology.

Catholic parents should petition Bishop Manning to remove the religious education curriculum *Sharing Our Story* from Catholic schools in the Parramatta Diocese and replace it with one which teaches the Catholic faith pure and simple. They should resist suggestions that the curriculum be revised. It *was* revised after complaints by priests of the Diocese in 1994. But the modifications did nothing to lessen the damage it has done and in the meantime thousands of children have been deprived of their Catholic faith. The curriculum should be scrapped.

They should, moreover, express to the Bishop their concerns that the staff of the Catholic Education Office are well aware of the potential for damage of the curriculum and insist that these people be removed and replaced with Catholics, that is, staff who will ensure that the curriculum used will in fact *lead students to a full and rich appreciation of Catholic faith and tradition.*

In the event that the Bishop should refuse their requests, parents should refuse to allow their children to be exposed to any further classes of the curriculum. If that is resisted, they should remove them completely from the Catholic school involved and send them to a State school. Alternatively, they should give the closest consideration, if it is possible, to teaching their children at home. The faith of their children would have an infinitely better chance of preservation.

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13th January 2004

St Hilary, Bishop and Doctor of the Church