

# THE DISTINCTIVE CURRICULUM OF THE CATHOLIC SCHOOL

## GUIDELINES FOR SCHOOL REVIEW



*'In your Catholic schools, there is always a bigger picture over and above the individual subjects you study, the different skills you learn. All the work you do is placed in the context of growing in friendship with God, and all that flows from that friendship. So you learn not just to be good students, but good citizens, good people. A good school provides a rounded education for the whole person. And a good Catholic school, over and above this, should help all its students to become saints.'*

Pope Benedict XVI *The Big Assembly*, Twickenham, 2010

## CONTENTS

1. **Foreword**                      **Bishop Peter Doyle**
2. **Introduction**                **Monsignor Kevin McGinnell**
3. **SECTION A**  
What makes the curriculum in the Catholic school distinctive?
- 6 **SECTION B**  
Distinctive elements in the curriculum of the Catholic school
- 8 **SECTION C**  
The Catholic Curriculum in your school

*A loose leaf response sheet is included*

## FOREWORD

*To those who work in and for Catholic education.*

This document is useful especially now for it offers to our Catholic schools an important message about the curriculum. I am conscious of the great effort schools make to provide rich and relevant experiences to help the young in their learning. So I encourage all schools to consider how the vision for the curriculum reflects the school's mission and purpose for the young. I look forward to the development of this work and to some share in the findings.

I am grateful to the people who have prepared these guidelines within NBRIA and I pay tribute to everyone who has given their ideas and support to this task.

The Core Group members:

Rita Price	Diocese of Wrexham
Paul Mannings	Archdiocese of Liverpool
Bernard Stuart	Diocese of Salford
Peter Ward	Archdiocese of Westminster



**+Peter Doyle**

**Bishop of Northampton**  
**President of NBRIA**

# INTRODUCTION

## THE PURPOSE OF THIS GUIDANCE

Over the last two years a small working group has been considering the characteristics of the curriculum in the Catholic school and what makes it distinctive. This is part of a much wider discussion at home and abroad. The work rests on the following question. What do we mean by the Catholic school curriculum, how is it distinctive and how does it reflect the overall mission and purpose of Catholic education?

This guidance has had some initial response from dioceses and from head teachers and we are grateful to them for their insight. We see this document as a starting point, a reference document to support the work of curriculum review, planning and development. It is here to encourage thinking, discussion and consensus about the Catholic school curriculum and how it is and can be, more distinctive in what it offers.

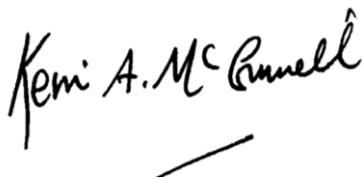
The document is set out in three sections.

In Section A, it describes some characteristics of Catholic education and gives some key points of reference for those who manage the curriculum and its development.

In Section B, it considers the curriculum broadly, its organisation, some of main elements and influences on the Catholic school curriculum.

In Section C, it lays out a series of questions for school leaders and governors to help a curriculum review.

The key references are marked in blue for your reflection. Please consider the document well, how it can help your plans and your work in this important field.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Kevin A. McGinnell". The signature is written in a cursive style and is positioned above a short horizontal line.

**Mgr Kevin McGinnell**

**Chair of NBRIA**

**May 2012**

# SECTION A

## 1. WHAT MAKES THE CURRICULUM IN THE CATHOLIC SCHOOL DISTINCTIVE?

- a. The curriculum includes all the experiences planned and offered by the Catholic school. It provides a rich pool for learning, though one that changes often with the flow of initiatives. When the school plans and makes changes to the curriculum, inevitably it asks ‘what, why when and how’ questions. These questions create a pause for the school to think about the school’s overall aims and how its approach is distinctive. The decisions taken about the curriculum, the activities and programmes chosen by the school are important in shaping the full learning experience and be ‘*attentive to the needs of today’s youth and illuminated by the Gospel message*’.<sup>1</sup>
- b. The Catholic vision of education is distinctive and the beliefs it holds, the values and aspirations it has must inspire the whole of the curriculum. This needs a clear overview of the curriculum and a focus that takes account of the values and many influences on the curriculum, some of which may be hidden. It has to consider the scope, design and intentions of the curriculum. It needs also to consider what makes for an authentic learning environment and ethos.
- c. Catholic education can draw on a rich treasury of resources gathered over centuries, in literature, art, philosophy, music and they are gathered also from the modern day so that they can engage young people and equip them for life and work. The resources chosen for learning, the opportunities given and the task ascribed to the educator cannot be left to chance. At this point we are reminded that, ‘*The future lies in the hands of those strong enough to provide future generations with reasons for living and hoping*’.<sup>2</sup>
- d. This first section now goes further, to remind us of some key principles that underpin Catholic education. They are not exhaustive but serve here as prompts for curriculum leaders and governors to help them reflect on the distinctiveness of the curriculum, its essence, its coherence and its educational purpose.

## 2. The Curriculum is informed by the Church’s philosophy and theology of education.

- a. At the heart of the Catholic school is the belief in the human person, called by God into being and offered the fullness of life. (*cf John 10:10*). The school community shares its belief in God, the creator of all, visible and incarnate in Christ, and in the Spirit, abiding in the school. Pope Benedict, in his address to Teachers and Religious in 2010 said that the school should be “*first and foremost ... a place to encounter the living God who in Jesus Christ reveals his transforming love and truth*.”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Congregation for Catholic Education, *The Religious Dimension of Education in a Catholic School*, Rome 1988, n.22

<sup>2</sup> Second Vatican Council, *Gaudium et Spes - Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*. Rome 1965, n.31

<sup>3</sup> Pope Benedict XVI, *Address to Teachers and Religious*, Twickenham, 17 September 2010

- b. The task of education requires of Catholic schools a sincere, ongoing engagement between faith and learning, including a critique of what is taught, 'a synthesis of culture and faith, and a synthesis of faith and life; the first is reached by integrating all the different aspects of human knowledge through the subjects taught, in the light of the Gospel; the second in the growth of the virtues characteristic of the Christian.'<sup>4</sup>

### **3. The context for learning in the Catholic school is that of a 'Community of faith'.**

- a. The Catholic school strives to be a faith community, a place of belonging, growth and service. These characteristics are not confined to one part of the school and they need common effort. The beliefs, values and practices of the school define its truth and distinctive offer in learning.
- b. Within the community is learned a profound regard for one another, and with it a growing inter-dependence and responsibility. Good relationships across the school are very important, for they set a trustful climate and rich environment for human growth. For, 'by giving witness -- the Catholic educational community is able to educate for communion, --- for living together in harmony, and being welcoming'<sup>5</sup> Thus the community experience is an important mark of all educational activity and it greatly strengthens the learning experience.

### **4. The 'Educator' is held in high esteem by the Christian Community.**

- a. Parents are respected as the first educators of their children and this recognition is of real importance and worthy of much reflection. Further, everyone who contributes to the work of education, in school, and in the parish, is valued for their part in serving this great work of the Church.<sup>6</sup>
- b. 'The Teacher' is held in special esteem by the Christian community. '*Teaching is a noble calling and profession, for the teacher does not write on inanimate material but on the very spirits of human beings*'<sup>7</sup>. For many pupils the teacher is a significant adult in their lives, imparting knowledge, influencing them for the good and guiding them towards their futures. The task of teaching is described by Thomas Groome; '*It is a sacred privilege and an awesome responsibility to be an educator. And it may be the closest we have to a universal human vocation.*'<sup>8</sup>
- c. It is the teacher who is able to connect with and convey an optimistic, Catholic understanding of life and of the human person, referred to as 'a positive anthropology'. It is important that the teacher gives hope and inspiration to the young. So the teacher must reflect on what they bring of themselves to their work. It is vital then that the school gives time and resources to support the personal and professional development of its teachers and staff, to help them know what they bring of themselves and of their gifts to the work of the Catholic school.

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<sup>4</sup> Congregation for Catholic Education *The Catholic School, Congregation for Catholic Education*, Rome 1977, n.37

<sup>5</sup> Assembly of the Catholic Bishops of Ontario, *This Moment of Promise* – 2002

<sup>6</sup> cf. Second Vatican Council *Gravissimum Educationis – Declaration on Christian Education* 1965 nn 3,7 et al

<sup>7</sup> Congregation for Catholic Education *The Catholic School on the Threshold of the Third Millennium*, Rome 1998 n.19

<sup>8</sup> Thomas Groome, *Educating for Life – A Spiritual Vision for every Teacher and Parent*, RCL Texas 1998 p.34

*'As well as gaining knowledge, students must also have a strong experience of sharing with their educators. For this experience to be happily accomplished, educators must be welcoming and well-prepared interlocutors, able to awaken and direct the best energies of students towards the search for truth and the meaning of existence, a positive construction of themselves and of life in view of an overall formation.'*<sup>9</sup>.

## **5. Teaching and learning are seen through 'the lens of faith'.**

In the recent past there was some caution in describing a Catholic curriculum lest it be accused of distorting the 'objectivity' of the subjects. Now it is recognised that all curricula have their own perspectives and values and the Catholic curriculum likewise be seen as distinctive and legitimate.<sup>10</sup> What is also recognised through the theory of knowledge, or epistemology are the different ways of knowing and of being in the world. So the faith-based school can proclaim with more courage, its particular outlook and belief through which learning gains perspective. This is described sometimes as *'a way of seeing the world through graced eyes'*<sup>11</sup>, and more challengingly, through its *'sacramental consciousness'*<sup>12</sup>.

## **6. The Catholic school aspires to reach the highest standards.**

Catholic schools are ambitious for high achievement and high standards across the school. Success is often described in terms of academic outcomes, though schools themselves recognise and award pupil achievement in many ways. High achievement is for everyone. It is inclusive of all abilities and in line with the school's hopes for every child. So it is right that every Catholic school, reflects well on what it hopes for, reflects on how the learning experience offered in the school contributes to full human growth for everyone, so that the young are clearly on the road to become the people God intends. *'By its very nature, the Catholic school requires the presence and involvement of educators that are not only culturally and spiritually formed, but also intentionally directed at developing them.'*<sup>13</sup>

## **7. The Catholic school is able to offer a more contemplative curriculum.**

This is an example of how a Catholic school can draw on skills from its own tradition to support learning and allow more time for reflection in learning. The drive for *'outcomes can leave little room to pause, to connect, to still or to deepen. The rush of learning can lead to shallower, surface learning.'*<sup>14</sup> The Catholic tradition has long encouraged critical enquiry, reasoning and reflection. These are critical to exploration and appreciation. Such features are worthy of being shared across the curriculum.

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<sup>9</sup> Congregation for Catholic Education *Educating Together in Catholic Schools*, 2007 n.2

<sup>10</sup> cf Thomas Groome, *What Makes a School Catholic?*, 2002

<sup>11</sup> Dr. Tina Beattie *Talk to Head Teachers in the Archdiocese of Westminster*, 2004

<sup>12</sup> cf J. Hanvey, *On the Way to Life*, Heythrop 2005 & D. O'Leary, *Begin with the Heart*, Columba Press 2008

<sup>13</sup> Congregation for Catholic Education *Educating Together in Catholic Schools*, 2007 n.34

<sup>14</sup> cf. John West Burnham *Understanding Deep Learning* to be found in [www.johnwest-burnham.co.uk](http://www.johnwest-burnham.co.uk) 2010

# SECTION B

## DISTINCTIVE ELEMENTS IN THE CURRICULUM OF THE CATHOLIC SCHOOL

8. This section moves on to reflect on the distinctive elements of the curriculum in the Catholic school so that it can be considered in as a whole and in its parts. It begins with an extract from the writings of Pope John Paul II

*'The education which the Church promotes looks to the integral development of the human person. Its purpose is to cultivate the intellect and develop the capacity for right judgement, to help young people to assimilate their cultural heritage and form a sense of moral and ethical readiness for their future professional, civic, family and national responsibilities. An all-round education seeks to develop every aspect of the individual: social, intellectual, emotional, moral and spiritual. For there is ecology of human growth which means that if any one of these elements is overlooked all the others suffer.'*<sup>15</sup>

9. **The curriculum, that is all the learning experiences provided by the school can be grouped into four elements, namely:**

- Teaching programmes,
  - Pastoral care,
  - Community activities
  - Relationships.
- a. This is the bigger picture of the curriculum, in its fullest sense, with its pastoral, personal and communal aspects. In its entirety it contributes to a holistic education of the young, in mind body and spirit.
- b. The school can then be clearer about the specific aims and see how best the parts and the whole provide for the pupils. For example, the school might wish to review how art and music or the humanities draw on well chosen works, or on key periods of history. The school may decide to include specific works, in literature, drama or periods in history. It may wish to engage with the discourses between science and religion or ethical considerations.

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<sup>15</sup> John Paul II, *Address to the New Ambassador of the Republic of Malawi to the Holy See*, December 2000

## **10. Religious Education is at the foundation and is a core subject of the Curriculum.**

Religious Education is '*not one subject among many but the foundation of the entire educational process*'<sup>16</sup>. For this reason there is an investment in time and the resource for religious education. This is where the pupils make gains in their religious literacy, knowledge understanding and skills and in their spiritual and moral competence. They access the tools to help them engage with the deeper questions of human existence, of God, of life and death. Faith exploration and questioning is not confined here for all learning encourages deeper thought. It is important then that the teachers know what is taught is religious education and that they are able to connect with it appropriately.

## **11. The curriculum needs to be coherent and connected.**

The task of linking learning across subjects is not easy and staff need help to make connections for themselves and for their pupils. For example, staff teaching science and religious education should be aware of each other's work and be conscious of the questions that will arise. In history, geography and sport, staff should know and have a common attitude to human development and skills, regard for the human body and for global responsibility. There are several successful cross curricular approaches for example, in personal, spiritual and moral development. These links help many teachers to agree common themes in learning across different subjects. More than that, such discussions can lead to a greater understanding of what is involved in educating for the spiritual and moral development of young people.

## **12. The curriculum is shaped through dialogue, review and planning.**

- a. It is important that every subject leader can describe the specific aims of their subject and the reasons for their choice and their resources. Particularly, it is helpful if the subject leader can describe how the subject contributes to the mission, values and educational purpose of the school.
- b. It is helpful if subject leaders share and discuss the content of their curriculum with others. This avoids repeating topics in different subjects and encourages greater collaboration. It enables a conversation about the aims of the curriculum in the Catholic education, '*one that will always be attentive to the needs of the young and illuminated by the Gospel*'.<sup>17</sup> It requires serious reflection, conversation and careful planning.

## **13. The desired curriculum drives decisions about staffing and resources.**

- a. Consequently, governors and school leaders must consider carefully their decisions on staff appointments and on the ability of teaching staff to contribute to the curriculum aims of the school. Further, the school must weigh carefully its decisions when allocating staff so that there is no adverse impact on the aims and priorities of the school.
- b. It is time now to move onto Section C and to consider the questions there.

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<sup>16</sup> Bishops' Conference of England and Wales *Religious Education in Catholic Schools*, 2000, n.4

<sup>17</sup> Congregation for Catholic Education *The Religious Dimension of a Catholic School*. Rome, 1988

# SECTION C

## 14. THE CATHOLIC CURRICULUM IN YOUR SCHOOL

After reading and considering sections A & B, you are asked, to use the following questions to review the distinctive curriculum in your school. It would be helpful to have the following documents for reference; the school's own Trust Deed, the school's Mission Statement and aims, the school's own self evaluation documents and the Religious Education Curriculum Directory, (Second Edition 2012).

*'The task - is not simply to impart information or to provide training in skills intended to deliver some economic benefit to society; education is not and must never be considered as purely utilitarian. It is about forming the human person, equipping him or her to live life to the full – in short it is about imparting wisdom.*

*And true wisdom is inseparable from knowledge of the Creator, for "both we and our words are in his hand, as are all understanding and skill in crafts" (Wisdom 7:16)'.<sup>18</sup>*

### C1. GENERAL QUESTIONS TO HELP YOUR THOUGHTS ON THE CURRICULUM:

- A. What does the school want to achieve for its pupils?**
  - I. Does everyone know this?
  
- B. Consider each of the four elements of the curriculum (listed above) and ask,**
  - I. How are decisions made about the curriculum?
  - II. What principles underpin the decision making?
  - III. From where does the school find its guidance on the curriculum?
  
- C. How does the school implement decisions about the curriculum?**
  - I. What strategies are used to support this implementation?
  - II. How does the school deal with competing demands?
  
- D. To what extent is the curriculum successful in meeting its aims?**
  - I. How does the school define success and how is it manifested?
  - II. How is success measured and celebrated?
  
- E. What are your findings?**
  - I. What in the findings affirms the school and what needs further attention?
  - II. What are your strengths in each of the four elements listed in section B1?
  - III. Are there any elements that have not been addressed?

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<sup>18</sup> Pope Benedict XVI, *Address to Teachers and Religious*, Twickenham, 17 September 2010

## **C2 - NOW PLEASE RESPOND TO THE STATEMENTS BELOW.**

**A. Our belief is that we are made in God's image and likeness and so called into the fullness of life. The human person is at the heart of Christ's teaching.**

- I. The curriculum promotes care and respect for self, others and all of God's creation?
- II. The curriculum fosters virtue, truth, goodness and holiness?
- III. The whole curriculum contributes to integral, spiritual and moral development?
- IV. How does the school integrate into the curriculum a keen pastoral care for all pupils, with a special regard for the poor and the disadvantaged; and for those who do not belong to the community of faith?
- V. How does the school welcome and include people with learning disabilities?

**B. The school's curriculum reflects the distinctive beliefs, values and stories of our community:**

- I. How is the history of the Catholic community and culture drawn upon as a resource?
- II. Has the school identified some desired learning to support its distinctive aims?

**C. The school strives for achievement and success for everyone in the school community.**

- I. How is achievement for everyone celebrated?

**D. Learning experiences promote good relationships.**

- I. How does this raise self-esteem aspiration and personal dignity?
- II. Encourage generosity, mutual regard and reconciliation?
- III. Create and maintain good relationships in the school and wider community?
- IV. Interpret and contribute to good citizenship, well being, personal, and social and health education?
- V. Extend and build upon a wider learning community?

**E. the school encourages cross curricular learning by,**

- I. Connecting subjects with the work and teaching in religious education
- II. Engaging with challenging concepts and ideas
- III. Helping pupils to be creative and make full use of their gifts.
- IV. Making progress in their spiritual and moral development
- V. Promoting personal and essential skills in literacy, religious literacy, being able to think spiritually and ethically and able to articulate and question.

**F. Are there some steps you will take in the light of this reading and thought?**

*'Knowing Christ, gives rise to a way of life which we believe fosters true virtue, true, steady life- building habits of mind and action. That's what virtue is. It's those habits of mind and action, which genuinely serve the common good, like honesty and justice and compassion and courage and prudence and temperance; that ability to moderate and use all things with good judgment. There are plenty of indicators in our society today that we need such civic virtues in addition to regulation. Schools are the places where such virtue is generated or where it is neglected. .... It will know not just the how, but also the why. In other words a good school will have a coherent moral discourse; it will be able to present not just its codes of conduct, but also its moral reasoning, why these things are held to be crucial in the enterprise of education. I would trust that a Catholic school is certainly able to do this. It should be known not just where we stand, but why.'*<sup>19</sup>

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This document is the fruit of much discussion and interest in the work of the curriculum. Alongside the core members of the working party, the following people have made a special contribution and for their input we are most grateful.

Ann Fowler	Diocese of Clifton
John Lally	Diocese of Birmingham
Kathleen Gilbert	Diocese of Westminster
Jonathan Veasey	Diocese of Birmingham

We hope it has helped your thinking in this important area and that you will share some of your work with others.

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This document may be found at the NORES website – [www.nores.org.uk](http://www.nores.org.uk)

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<sup>19</sup> Archbishop Vincent Nichols *Address at Conference for Education and Young People*, Heythrop College, June 2009

