

VISION

for Catholic RSE in Primary Schools

Changes to Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) guidelines issued by the Department of Education in 1997 state that 'In Irish schools, RSE will provide structured opportunities for pupils to acquire a knowledge and understanding of human relationships and sexuality through processes which will enable them to form values and establish behaviours within a moral, spiritual and social framework.'¹ In delivering such a programme the Catholic school aims to provide a framework based on the teachings of Jesus Christ and reflecting the dignity of each person created in the image and likeness of God.

In his address to the Association of Management of Catholic Secondary Schools (AMCSS)/Joint Managerial Body (JMB) in May 2018, Archbishop Eamon Martin made the point that 'Catholic schools can assist parents and families by helping young people find moral reference points, by offering a morals and values framework, or roadmap, to guide them.'² He then went on to say that 'The Catholic school ought, therefore, to be a community inspired by Gospel values and transmitting Gospel values, including: the sacredness of human life; the dignity of the person; integrity; peace; tolerance; justice; honesty and truth; holiness; gentleness and compassion; mercy and forgiveness; purity; respect.'

¹ Department of Education, *Relationships and Sexuality Education: Policy Guidelines*, Dublin: Department of Education, 1997, p. 4.

² Keynote address by Archbishop Eamon Martin to JMB/AMCSS 31st Annual Conference Galway. Available at: <https://www.catholicbishops.ie/2018/05/03/archbishop-eamon-martin-address-catholic-schools-supporting-families-towards-a-better-education-of-children/>

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Pope Francis, in *Amoris Laetitia*, acknowledges that it is 'not easy to approach the issue of sex education in an age when sexuality tends to be trivialised and impoverished. It can only be seen within the broader framework of an education for love, for mutual self-giving.'³ There is no such thing as an 'ethos free' approach to RSE since it must be rooted in a particular value system. As Archbishop Martin said 'Catholic schools ...should help educate young people in taking responsibility and making well informed decisions regarding their choices, including being aware of their own values and those of others who may differ from them.'⁴

The *Catholic Preschool and Primary Religious Education Curriculum for Ireland* states the 'Catholic Religious Education always emphasises moral education.'⁵ This has sound roots in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* which says 'Jesus is presented as the model for living a Christian life.'⁶ The *Curriculum* goes on to say that 'moral education aims to develop the skill of making moral decisions with an informed conscience.'⁷ Relationships and Sexuality Education, therefore, must be taught in the Catholic School with reference to moral decision-making. It cannot be taught in some morally neutral way, since this would disregard the sacredness and dignity of each human being as a child of God.

It is equally important for the teacher in the Catholic school to present and teach RSE in a way that is relevant to a changing Ireland. In *Share the Good News: National Directory for Catechesis in Ireland*, inculturation is seen as a very important principle for Catholic Religious Education.⁸ We live in a culturally transformed Ireland which is reflected in the modern

classroom, made up of children from a diverse range of countries and religious beliefs. The assumptions of yesteryear in terms of faith formation within the family no longer stand. In many cases, the classroom will be the first, and possible only, place that the child considers their actions in terms of the teachings of the gospels. The teacher in the Catholic school, They must 'speak a language suited to today's children and young people'.⁹ This is particularly true in relation to RSE where sensitivity is key.

While in the past, the primary school was a safe haven where children were free from outside distractions and influences, now many children have mobile phones and tablets in their school bags and the influence of the internet pervades everything. Relationships and Sexuality Education in the modern Catholic school must take cognisance of this, and must teach children both to protect themselves and to be respectful of others in this environment. Pope Francis has described modern communications as 'a gift of God which involves a great responsibility'.¹⁰ It is the duty of RSE in the Catholic school to help the children develop a moral conscience around their internet usage for their own good and that of others.

The SPHE curriculum for primary schools determines what children will learn in terms of RSE as part of a spiral curriculum. The three strands, 'Myself', 'Myself and Others' and 'Myself and the Wider World' encompass issues to do with self-identity, taking care of my body, growing and changing, safety and protection as well as making decisions. Relating to others and developing citizenship are also covered.¹¹ The Catholic school must consider these topics within a moral framework that reflects the

³ *Amoris Laetitia*, 280.

⁴ Keynote address at JMB/AMCSS 31st Annual Conference.

⁵ Irish Episcopal Conference, *Catholic Preschool and Primary Religious Education Curriculum for Ireland*, Dublin: Veritas Publications, 2015, p. 26.

⁶ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, Vatican: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1999, 459, 520, 564, 1698.

⁷ *Curriculum*, p. 27.

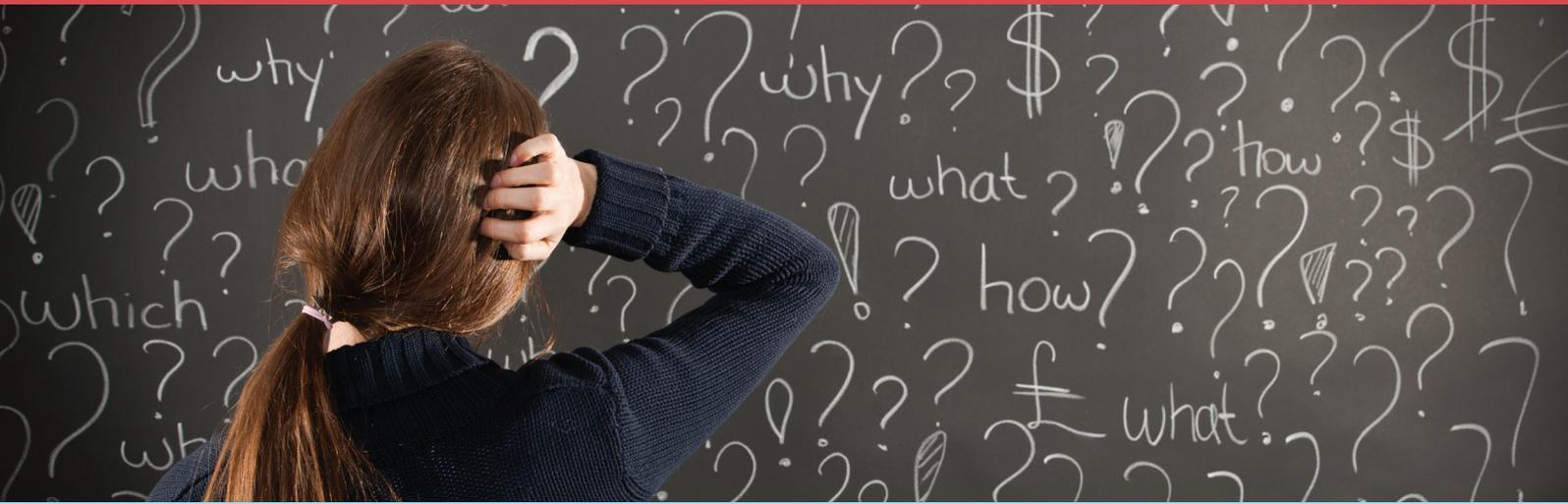
⁸ Irish Episcopal Conference, *Share the Good News: National Directory for Catechesis in Ireland*, Dublin: Veritas Publications, 2011, 16, 21, 29.

⁹ Congregation for the Clergy, *General Directory for Catechesis*, Vatican: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1997.

¹⁰ Pope Francis, Message of his Holiness for the 50th World Communications Day, Vatican: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2016. Available at: http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/communications/documents/papa-francesco_20160124_messaggio-comunicazioni-sociali.html

¹¹ Department of Education and Science, *Primary School Curriculum: Social, Personal and Health Education*, Dublin: Stationery Office, 1999.

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teachings of the Church. The importance of language here cannot be overemphasised. The SPHE curriculum states that:

Language is ... powerful because it both creates and reflects a culture. Through SPHE children can begin to appreciate the connection between language and identity. A planned programme throughout the school also provides children with opportunities to explore the language used in various media and to recognise the values, attitudes and viewpoints being promoted and fostered.¹²

There is no morally neutral way for this to be achieved.

In teaching RSE the teacher in the Catholic school must be sensitive and aware of the family circumstances of the children in their care. Children do not choose their circumstances and should not be made to feel any form of 'otherness' by what is taught in class. In *Amoris Laetitia*, Pope Francis says, 'The Synod's reflections show us that there is no stereotype of the ideal family, but rather a challenging mosaic made up of many different realities, with all their joys, hopes and problems.'¹³ Love, commitment and respect are the cornerstones of family life and these must be reflected in the programme and presented in a compassionate way.

Children in the senior classes in primary school will be aware the existence of LGBTQI and some may question their own identity in this regard. The RSE programme in the Catholic school must not promote shame, but rather seek to affirm that every human being is made in the image and likeness of God and is loved by God as they are. The same moral obligation to respect and treat our bodies with dignity applies to people of all sexual orientation. However, the Church's teaching in relation to marriage between a man and a woman cannot be omitted.

The gift of love should underpin any RSE programme. Love is a gift from God. More than that, Jesus made clear that it is central to a Christian way of life. In John 13:24 Jesus said, 'A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another.' So love in its purest sense, is what we were born to do. Within every tiny infant is the capacity to love. Pope Francis, in *Amoris Laetitia*, confirms the value of love by saying, 'Love opens our eyes and enables us to see, beyond all else, the great worth of a human being.'¹⁴ Throughout the RSE programme in the Catholic school, the children should learn the importance of loving themselves, the power of love within a family and the joy of loving others in a Christian, respectful way.

¹² Ibid., p. 7.

¹³ *Amoris Laetitia*, 57.

¹⁴ Ibid., 129.