

# Junior Cycle Religious Education in the Catholic School



Council for  
Catechetics of the  
Irish Episcopal Conference

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## INTRODUCTION

This document for trustees/patrons, boards of management, and senior management teams in Catholic schools explores how Religious Education (RE) at Junior Cycle should be planned for and implemented. It will also be helpful to RE teachers in Catholic schools.

In line with Department of Education circulars outlining teaching, learning and planning requirements for the implementation of the *Framework for Junior Cycle* (2015), schools will plan for their Junior Cycle programme – and for the subjects within it – attending to the learning needs and interests of their students, and the characteristic spirit of their school (cf. Circular Letter 0024/2016 and subsequent circulars on the implementation of the *Framework for Junior Cycle*).

These guidelines are informed by four important documents:

- 1) The *Framework for Junior Cycle* (Department of Education and Skills, 2015) and its accompanying circular letters.
- 2) *Junior Cycle Religious Education Specification* (National Council of Curriculum and Assessment, 2019).
- 3) *Share the Good News: National Directory for Catechesis in Ireland* (Irish Episcopal Conference, 2010). This document provides a rationale and vision for RE in post-primary schools under Catholic patronage.
- 4) *Religious Education and the Framework for Junior Cycle* (Irish Catholic Bishops' Conference, 2017). This document outlines the implications of the *Framework for Junior Cycle* on RE in Catholic schools.

Relevant documents from trustees on RE and ethos should be closely attended to as individual schools plan for their Junior Cycle RE programme, and indeed their wider Junior Cycle programme. When taken together, these documents provide a solid educational, religious educational and Catholic understanding to underpin the teaching of RE in a Catholic school. It should be noted that Circulars 13/2018 and 62/2018 do not apply to Catholic or other voluntary secondary schools.

***Religious Education and the Framework for Junior Cycle (Irish Catholic Bishops' Conference, 2017) reminds leaders in Catholic schools, that, in a Catholic school:***

- There is always a provision of two hours for RE at both Junior and Senior Cycle.
- Religious Education is always taught by qualified RE teachers.
- Religious Education is understood as one expression, among many, of the school's ethos and faith life.
- In line with guidance provided by the *Framework for Junior Cycle* (p.9), existing subjects, including RE, are not reduced to short courses.

As school leaders and RE teachers will be aware, there are three ways in which Catholic post-primary schools can engage with the Junior Cycle RE Specification:

- 1) The first is by using the NCCA RE Specification with a view to students undertaking the classroom-based assessments and presenting for the final assessment at the end of third year. In this way, learning in RE will be

certified as part of each student's Junior Cycle Profile of Achievement (JCPA).

- 2) Second, schools and students may decide to complete the two Classroom-based Assessments through their work with the Specification for RE but not to participate in the state-certified examination at the end of third year. In this approach, students will still be recognised for their work in RE as part of their JCPA under 'Other Areas of Learning'.
- 3) Third, schools and students may decide to follow the Specification without completing the CBAs or participating in the state-certified examination. Again, in this approach, students will still be recognised for their work in RE as part of their JCPA under 'Other Areas of Learning'.

Any other approach to RE at Junior Cycle should attend to the Junior Cycle framework's eight principles, twenty-four statements of learning and eight key skills.

Individual schools, in consultation with their trustees, and supported by the relevant documents on RE from their trustees, choose the approach to RE that will lead to the richest possible experience of RE for their students. Excellent RE is at the very heart of a Catholic school's life and mission. Catholic schools have a responsibility to assist in providing for an interesting and richly-educative experience of RE for all students, including those of other faiths and those who do not have a religious faith.<sup>1</sup> It should also be remembered that Catholic parents who send their children to Catholic schools have an expectation that their children's faith will be deepened in and through RE and the wider lived faith life of the school. In a Catholic school, the faith tradition is

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1 For further guidance on the inclusion of students of other beliefs, see *Guidelines on the Inclusion of Students of Different Beliefs in Catholic Secondary Schools (2<sup>nd</sup> edition, JMB, 2019)*.

presented to students in an open and invitational manner as a rich resource that can bring meaning to the young person's life.

### **PART A: What general principles should underpin a Catholic school's approach to Junior Cycle RE?**

The following general principles suggest how RE in a Catholic school might interface with the vision underpinning the *Framework for Junior Cycle*. These principles apply regardless of what approach is taken to Junior Cycle RE. It might be noted that many of these principles are also relevant to the study of RE at Senior Cycle level.

- i) Religious Education has, in line with the vision set out in the *Framework for Junior Cycle*, a positive role to play in supporting young people as they ask **significant questions**, begin to express their responses, and seek to understand, formulate, and integrate for their own lives a caring and responsible way of living. Religious Education is a 'space like no other' in education and is a vital space in a Catholic school for the asking of these questions. Catholic schools are called to provide suitable opportunities for students to engage with how these questions might be addressed, particularly in and through the Christian tradition.
- ii) The *Framework for Junior Cycle* has an additional expectation that, through education, the young person will be ready, willing and able to make a **contribution to the community** to which they belong – including their faith community – and to the world. Religious Education in a Catholic school provides significant encouragement for students to engage not only in reflection but also in action; to make that contribution to the world in which students live, including, of course, in terms of the care for our common home.

- iii) In our contemporary world, there is an increasing expectation that RE will equip students to engage constructively in a pluralist society by promoting **religious literacy**. This is reflected in the *Framework for Junior Cycle* and might helpfully be attended to in the approach taken by RE teachers in their classrooms. In the wider life of the school, religious iconography, religious symbolism, the school's sacramental life and inputs from teachers other than RE teachers (including of course, principals and members of the school's management team) will assist students in a variety of ways in developing this religious literacy.
- iv) Religious Education in a Catholic school, in line with the *Framework for Junior Cycle*, **speaks to the needs of all students**, including students with special needs. Religious Education in a Catholic school attends to the variety of learning styles and abilities in a Catholic school, as a place where a diversity of learners are welcome and nurtured.
- v) At the heart of Junior Cycle reform lies the need to provide students with quality learning opportunities that strike a balance between **gaining knowledge and developing a wide range of skills, attitudes and thinking abilities** (*Framework for Junior Cycle*). This kind of learning in the new Junior Cycle is informed by **Eight Principles** that will underpin the planning for – as well as the development and the implementation of – Junior Cycle programmes in all schools, by **Twenty-Four Statements of Learning** and by **Eight Key Skills**. Religious Education in a Catholic school clearly illustrates how these principles, statements of learning and key skills are attended to through the school's RE programmes.<sup>2</sup>

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2 For a further elaboration of this principle, see *Religious Education and the Framework for Junior Cycle* (Irish Catholic Bishops' Conference, 2017).

## PART B: Methodological and Content Focus of RE in a Catholic School

The following nine overarching principles should be borne in mind for the teaching of RE in a Catholic school in line with the Junior Cycle RE Specification.

- 1) The approach taken is in compliance with the NCCA *Specification for Junior Cycle Religious Education*, addressing the specific learning outcomes indicated there, based around the three interconnected strands and incorporating, in an ongoing manner, the three crosscutting elements.
- 2) Regarding the three crosscutting elements underlying and uniting the RE Specification, as well as focusing on **Enquiry** (stimulating students' curiosity) and **Exploration** (researching for the purpose of discovery and dialogue), particular emphasis will need to be placed on **Reflection and Action**. In all schools, and certainly in a Catholic school, this element focuses on students reflecting on what they have learned and on their own experience of, and/or response to, the topic.

An important example that illustrates this kind of learning is the engagement students are invited into with our created world. Students are encouraged to reflect on the challenges facing our world in terms of climate change, and the impact of these challenges, especially on the poor and marginalised. They are also invited to contemplate and engage with the created world, all of which is loved by God, at a level deeper than simply intellectual knowing (Pope Francis, *Laudato Si': On Care for Our Common Home*). Out of this knowing, this deeper contemplation, students are then invited to consider how this learning relates to their own lives, to the lives of others, to all of creation and to their relationship with God. This kind of rich engagement promotes active and responsible citizenship.

- 3) **Support for ecumenism, interreligious dialogue, and intercultural dialogue all emerge strongly in and through RE in Catholic schools.** The contemporary Christian life is lived in dialogue with the world and all its peoples. There are many opportunities in the RE Specification by which to encourage respect, inclusion and learning to live as a committed person within a pluralist society. Religious Education in a Catholic school embraces this kind of rich dialogue.

When addressing all five major world religions designated in the RE Specification, an approach is taken that is appropriate and respectful. Reference to other worldviews and a non-religious engagement with the world is also treated respectfully. Students understand that people who do not espouse a religious way of life can live moral lives within their own belief systems. This rich understanding of the faith lives of fellow students is also reflected in and through the school's wider living out of its ethos.

- 4) Attention is paid to the approach highlighted in the rationale and aim of the *Specification for Junior Cycle Religious Education*:
- Religious Education promotes the **holistic development of the person**. In a Catholic school, this is considered central. Religious Education seeks to further the intellectual, social, emotional, spiritual, religious and moral development of students.
  - Religious Education provides a particular space to **encounter and engage with the deepest and most fundamental questions** relating to life, meaning and relationships, including with God. In RE in a Catholic school, reference to God is extensive. Religious Education encourages students to reflect, question, critique, interpret, imagine and **find insight for their lives**. Therefore, the students' own experience and



continuing search for meaning is to be encouraged and supported through RE in a Catholic school.

- Religious Education equips students with the knowledge, understanding, skills, attitudes and values to support their life journey and enable them to participate in their communities and in the world as informed, respectful, responsible and caring members of society. In RE, in a Catholic school, the person of **Jesus Christ and his life, ministry, death and Resurrection are central** because, for Christians, Jesus Christ is the model *par excellence* of this way of authentic, free and full human living.
- Religious Education encourages students to critically engage with and reflect on belief systems and **principles of moral behaviour** which serve as a foundation for decision-making. Catholic schools provide ample opportunity for this engagement.
- Religious Education supports students on their life journey and enables them to participate in their communities and in the world as **informed, respectful, responsible and caring members of society**.
- Building on what was learned in primary schools, RE in Catholic schools attends to the **life-long nature of learning in the area of RE** and provides the basis for this ongoing learning,
- Religious Education seeks to facilitate **dialogue and reflection on the diversity of beliefs and values** that inform responsible decision-making and ways of living. An approach that encourages dialogue based on good information and respect for their own experiences and those of others is built into RE classes in a Catholic school.

- 5) The *Specification for Junior Cycle Religious Education* shows how the three interconnected strands are treated in a spiral rather than a linear manner. In terms of the strands, the following points should be specifically noted:

### **STRAND 1: Expressing Beliefs**

In a Catholic school, it is not enough to offer students facts and knowledge about religion. Opportunities to engage with the Catholic school community's beliefs, religious rituals, values, and how these are expressed and experienced in community are provided.

### **STRAND 2: Exploring Questions**

It is not enough simply to pose the questions or even to provide space to the students to ask their own questions. In line with the Specification, this strand also enables students to discover how people have sought to answer these questions. Religious Education in a Catholic school offers opportunities for students to attend to the questions of mystery at the heart of life. Knowing is not limited to seeing; it also includes experiencing, understanding, judging, and, for people of faith, believing. It fosters a deep intellectual and religious journey involving the 'three languages' of the mind, the heart and action.

### **STRAND 3: Living our Values**

It is not enough to provide examples of how others (be they people of faith or people who do not believe in God) have lived their values. This strand focuses on enabling students to understand and reflect on the values that underlie actions and to recognise how moral decision-making works in their own lives and in the lives of others based on particular values and/or beliefs. Religious Education in a Catholic school seeks to richly engage students in the question of values, particularly

as they are presented in the life of Christ and in the teaching of the Church.

- 6) Certain **learning outcomes** within each of the strands seek to develop understanding across two major world religions; in a Catholic school one of these is Christianity. Other learning outcomes focus more particularly on one major world religion; in a Catholic school that focus is on Christianity.
- 7) **In a Catholic school, as well as belonging to their home family, people of faith belong to their faith communities.** In RE, in line with the Specification, students are given opportunities to reflect on belonging in terms of these faith communities. Having a sense of belonging to their school community in all its diversity, and the world family of which they are a part, are key ways of fostering a rich sense of belonging central to students' sense of well-being.
- 8) **Respect for the developmental journey engaged upon by students, and the range of students' interests and abilities is essential.** Religious Education in a Catholic school encourages students to express their questions, test boundaries, and engage with a growing sense of self.
- 9) An experience of RE in a Catholic school always has a **theological, spiritual and pastoral depth.** The following principles suggest this depth of engagement in relation to Christianity and Catholicism:
  - a) Religious Education in a Catholic school provides ample opportunity for students to engage with salvation history, as presented in both the Old Testament and the New Testament, as a history that continually invites us into a relationship with the God of love who seeks to liberate us from sin. When studying the Gospels of the New Testament, Gospel values and the message of Jesus, students are helped

to engage with the key elements of the message itself (the life, mission, teaching, passion, death and Resurrection of Jesus), but also with its meaning for building a community of faith (communion), celebrating faith (prayer, liturgy), and care for others especially those most in need (service) (*Share the Good News*, para. 36), including care for our common home (Pope Francis, *Laudato Si': On Care for Our Common Home*).

- b) Regarding key elements of the Christian creed, the Trinitarian understanding of God are presented, introducing God in a variety of ways and places as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The mission of the Church as the people of God, the community of the followers of Christ in a local time and place are highlighted, as well as the Church universal over the ages, and the journey of the Christian toward fulfilment in the kingdom of God.
- c) The sacramental life of the Church and its people is central to Christianity and opportunities to reference the seven sacraments are sought out and appropriately engaged with.
- d) Living the life of Christ, putting the Christian way of life into action, can be referenced in different ways, particularly in much of Strand 3. One would expect to see references here to conscience, grace, the Beatitudes, Jesus' new commandment of love, and the Ten Commandments (*Share the Good News*, paras. 57–60)
- e) Religious Education in a Catholic school cultivates an understanding of Christian prayer, both personal and with the community (parish, school, prayer groups, etc.) as a conversation with God, in and through Jesus Christ, encouraged by the Holy Spirit. Different methods (vocal, meditative and contemplative)



and examples of prayerful living are appropriately explored and practised. The witness of the saints is acknowledged, with special reference to Mary, our national and local patrons, as well as those women and men of the contemporary world whose holiness has been recognised.

- f) Reference to the Liturgical Calendar is evident in a Catholic school in a variety of ways. The seasons of Advent, Christmas, Lent, Easter, Pentecost, and Ordinary Time, are highlighted.







This document was developed by a working group of the Council for Catechetics of the Irish Episcopal Conference.