

PERSPECTIVE OF A RELIGIOUS EDUCATOR IN A SCIENCE CLASSROOM

As Christians we are committed to living and spreading the Good News. This is possible in all areas of academic study and very much so in the area of science. Teaching in a Lasallian school enables us to carry out our mission of teaching science and teaching Jesus.

The science curriculum does not cover religion content as such, but as we give students the content of science we must, at the same time, work to instill in them Christian principles and values. We must be committed to the spreading of Jesus' Gospel message of love, peace, justice, and forgiveness.

It is from our personal relationship with Jesus that our own value system develops. What and who we are as people is what and who we are as educators. If we are committed to the Jesus message what the students will see in each of us is the reflection of Jesus.

As religious educator we must pass on a value system, a science content, as well as teaching them how to learn. Our value system is derived from the Good News, but our technological information must be up-to-date so that we can help students of science and technology to interpret the Good News.

In order to pass on a Christ-centered value system, we must be motivated by a spirit of Faith, and therefore, the Lasallian educator is necessarily a religious person. It is absolutely essential that we stay in touch with God, that we pray and meditate.

As members of a Lasallian community/school, we are called to be ministers of Jesus Christ and of the Church. Since Vatican II there have been many changes in the Church. One reason for the changes is telecommunication, science, and modern technology. However, the Church changes slowly, especially in response to scientific advances. It is difficult but necessary for us to be understanding and patient with the Church. This does not mean that our knowledge and understanding of the latest advances in science should stay behind. We have a responsibility to the students and to the Church to move ahead.

The manner in which we present scientific issues and the same time the Church's present position on issues

is what is important. In fact, the manner in which we teach any subject area is the first evidence to our students of what our value system is – how we treat each individual with respect and dignity; being prepared; being just in disciplinary matters and in grading; establishing an environment where students can learn, where they can have respect for themselves because someone believes in them, where they can respect others and not fall to peer pressure, where each can develop habits of study and do honest work, where they can grow spiritually, emotionally, as well as academically. These are values that they will carry with them for life.

The issues where religious and moral values must be taught in conjunction with content seem to fall into three categories: those that deal with the individual, those more social/global in nature, and those that relate only to the sciences – the interdisciplinary areas that must be of concern to science teachers.

The real issue in the first category is teaching a respect for life, for the importance of the individual. In life science and in other science courses, the topics that may come up are: abortion, birth control, artificial insemination, invitro fertilization, AIDS, euthanasia, biogenetics.

It is clear what our position should be if we are in tune with the Church's teaching about abortion. And in this case, the Church is absolutely right. There is no logical reason to present an opposing view. Abortion is wrong – it is taking a life. The latest case of the comatose pregnant mother that was in an accident that has been in the news lately, does not make it easy for us. However, it is important to be straight forward with the students and that is why our value system must be founded on the teachings of Jesus.

There is great difficulty regarding the issue of birth control. The Church says that rhythm is the only acceptable form of birth control. As science teachers, it is necessary to inform the students of all types of birth control even though we are on touchy ground here. They must make their own decision as to which method they will use. We must rely on the religion curriculum and the religion teachers to give the students the process of making moral and ethical decisions. There is need for communication among religion and science teachers so that the religion teachers know when such topics will be covered.

This brings us to artificial insemination and invitro fertilization. The Church is opposed to test tube babies as she considers this not normal. As in the issue of birth control, students must be aware of advances being made in this area and then must make their own decisions.

We must teach students to have compassion for those who have contracted AIDS, but must do so in a manner that does not promote overt sex acts or drug usage. It is essential that every school develop and implement an AIDS curriculum. Knowing the scientific facts will help us directly and in our caring for others. It will also help our students to deal with AIDS.

Euthanasia is often a topic of discussion. A person may not be killed but one does have the right to die with dignity and this must be the message we impart to students.

As for biogenetics and all scientific research, it is essential that we are first knowledgeable ourselves and present, according to the level and the course that we are teaching, the advances that are being made, the research that is being done, and the importance of these studies. The use of animals in research is often questioned. Undue torture of animals should never take place. Christian ethics in research must be encouraged.

As a religious educator, we must teach a sense of responsibility to pass on to the next generation the planet earth better than it is at the moment. Science topics that naturally fall into this category are nuclear power, nuclear armament, nuclear energy, nuclear medicine, nuclear waste, other toxic waste, pesticides, acid rain, and air pollution.

The topic of nuclear power provides opportunities to discuss student fears of nuclear bombs and nuclear armament. It seems to me that when teaching about the structure of the atom and nuclear energy our social responsibility for a better world must be established. We must include, and not leave to chance, Jesus' message of peace and love. The students must be made aware of the negative effects of nuclear war. There are positive contributions of nuclear power and these, too, should be explored with the students. Yet the question of nuclear waste and what to do with it is a problem.

The whole area of toxic waste, pesticides, acid rain, air pollution, and the diminishing ozone layer are critical concerns of the science educator, especially the Lasallian educator. We must instill in the students a drive to help solve these problems. For example, in the small area of aluminum cans and newspapers – are we teaching the right value system when they see us throw the can away or never mention it in a class setting? Isn't recycling a practical lesson to teach students so that we might preserve the beauty of Mother Earth?

There are opportunities to teach ethics in medicine when we deal with nuclear medicine. Although this advance in science has resulted in the enhancement of life, a major drawback is the disposal of nuclear waste. In fact, disposal of many things connected with a hospital or with medical care needs a lot of updating.

All of our students must be taught that each has a responsibility to mankind with regard to science and/or science information. Lawyers, politicians, those in communication, business people all need to be aware of their responsibility to the next generation in passing on the planet earth. Everyone must respect life. Everyone has the power to preserve, practise, and help others to live in a peaceful and safe environment.

Why are pesticides being used so extensively? What about the food that is covered with pesticides or the ground water into which the pesticides are seeping? The sewage systems of our cities and towns do not take care of the human pollution and waste and hence our rivers, lakes, and oceans are really a mess. We are religious educators when we communicate to the students our/their responsibility to respect all life and to help provide a world environment that will serve each to reach his/her full potential – his/her oneness with his/her fellow human beings – his/her oneness with God.

I would like to end my perspective by addressing an area that falls into both respect for life and for passing on a better planet earth. It is the lab environment in which we teach. In the 30 years that I have been teaching science I have not been in even one properly ventilated lab until this year. It was not until I developed severe toxic poisoning did I realize the full danger in which I have been working. With the toxic waste sweep made throughout Southern California, especially in the Los Angeles area, I became very much aware of the vast problem in our labs. We owe it to ourselves, our families and the students we teach to make sure that all labs are properly ventilated – up to good health/safety standards – and that the toxic waste dump sites in our areas are properly used and/or cleaned up.

I realize there are many other areas of science that we teach that lend themselves to religious input – lasers, communication satellites, Star Wars, etc. It is important to reiterate that being a religious educator demands that we pass on the message of Jesus in a manner that exemplifies Jesus, giving the students all the knowledge which they need to make Christian moral and ethical decisions about their lives, their future and the future of Mother Earth.

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