Chapter 1: Evangelisation and the Catholic school

Introduction

The present study represents a personal quest for knowledge and understanding of the role played by the imagination in the religious conversion of adolescents. It was undertaken in the hope that the findings would be of use in the teaching of religious education and to the education system that belongs to the Catholic Church in Western Australia. The personal nature of the study dictated the narrative quality of the study; the ownership of the assumptions, the scholarship, the research, the analysis, the findings and the conclusions are the responsibility of the researcher.

This study of the role of the imagination in the religious conversion of adolescents emerged from reflection upon the practice of teaching religious education in Catholic secondary schools, over a period of almost 40 years. During that time, there were significant changes in the field of religious education in Australia (Crawford & Rossiter, 2006; Hamilton, 1981; Ryan, 2002; Ryan, Brennan & Willmett, 1996; Ryan & Malone, 1996; Treston, 1993). The personal experiences of the following changes and developments impacted on the researcher: the emphasis on creativity in teaching; the shift in focus from process to content in religious education; a growing awareness of the meaning of evangelisation and its goal of conversion; and the impact of technology on teaching and learning. It occurred to the researcher that the two strands that ran through the experiences named above were faith and the imagination. The study was born, then, out of the desire to learn about the role

that the imagination plays in the faith development and religious conversion of adolescents attending Catholic schools. For the purpose of the present study, the imagination was succinctly defined as the intellectual faculty that “unifies the processes of the mind and heart” (Bednar, 1996, p. 169). This is a key concept in the study and it will be developed as the study progresses. It should be noted at the outset that the definite article was attached—“the imagination”—to distinguish the intellectual faculty or power from the concept of “imagination.”

Faith is another key concept of the study. Fowler (1978) believed that God gave faith to every human person at conception. In this context, faith is primal trust between the tiny human being and the mother who bears the child in her womb. This human faith has the potential to become religious faith. The relevance of this understanding of faith can be found in the experience that is typical for most Catholic Christians who are baptised just months after their birth. Their Christian faith is received in Baptism as a divine gift long before they are capable of making the choice to trust God, that is, they receive the gift of Christian faith before they develop religious faith, meaning to be “in a trusting relation to the divine Being and Spirit from whom creation issues” (Fowler, 2004, p. 412). The movement from the human faith of the child in his or her parents and other significant persons to faith in God comes about through religious conversion.

The research intention

The aim of the study is to show the role played by the imagination in the religious conversion of adolescents. The participants will be Year 12

students from selected Catholic secondary schools in the Archdiocese of Perth, Western Australia. Because Catholic schools in the Archdiocese of Perth are required to formulate evangelisation plans (*M01*, para. 19), the findings of the research will be used to generate a set of recommendations relevant to evangelisation in Catholic secondary schools. The recommendations will acknowledge the role of the imagination in religious conversion.

In line with phenomenological thinking, the study was based on the assumption that people construct reality, that is, the statements students made about their faith in God were constructed to make sense out of what happened to them in their lives. It was assumed that the role of the imagination in the religious conversion of adolescents could be recognised in the statements provided by the participants in the study. It was assumed also that inductive research methodologies would be appropriate for this study because they tend to reveal data that are both valid and reliable, provided sufficient care is taken to counter the effects of bias on the part of the researcher and the subjects (Ary, Jacobs, Razavieh & Sorensen, 2006).

Background to the study

The present study draws together reflections on religious conversion, evangelisation, which has been described as “the fundamental duty” of all Christians (*CSSTM*, para. 3), Catholic education and the imagination. James (1960/1902) investigated the phenomenon of religious experience. He acknowledged the work of Starbuck (1899) who concluded from his studies of religious experience that religious conversion is a normal adolescent

experience. Gillespie (1976) drew on the work of Coe (1900), Johnson (1959), Pratt (1926), Starbuck (1899) and Stewart (1967) to develop his thesis that adolescence is the most favourable time for religious conversion because of the development of self that takes place in the teenage years.

Stories that revealed the drama of religious conversion, such as that of St Paul, or the definitive break with past beliefs, values and behaviours, such as that of St Augustine, pointed to meaning of the word “conversion” as a radical change of mind and heart. Conversion is a human intellectual activity involving the faculties of reason, memory, imagination and intuition. All four faculties play a part in the decisions people make, including those decisions affecting a person’s relationship with God. The present study was governed by the belief that the process of conversion begins in the imagination.

The two terms “education” and “teaching” go hand in hand. They are two related aspects of the work of schools. Dewey once wrote that education “testifies to a generous conception of human nature and to a deep belief in the possibilities of human achievement” (Kneller, 1958, p. 29). The Sacred Congregation for Catholic Education (1977; 1997) emphasised the role of education in the development of the whole person. Catholic education is about the integration of faith and culture (*CS*, para. 38). The teacher guides the student “to a deepening of his faith and to enrich and enlighten his human knowledge with the data of the faith” (*CS*, para. 40). To be engaged as a teacher in the education process is a noble calling, which Groome (1998) described as “a sacred privilege and an awesome responsibility” (p. 34). In the Catholic school, teachers are called reveal the Christian message through

imitating Christ in what they say and do (*CS*, para. 43). The role of the teacher is vital to the process of integrating culture and faith as well as faith and life. The integration of faith and life is part of the process of conversion that happens throughout life, as people become what God wants them to be (*CS*, para. 45). What has been said of teachers can be applied to all those who work in a Catholic school.

In Australia, as in other parts of the world, the Catholic Church established its own education system that functions at the primary, secondary and tertiary levels. Catholic schools and universities participate in the Church's mission to evangelise the purpose of which is conversion. Pope Paul VI (1975) defined evangelisation in the following way:

> … the Church evangelises when she seeks to convert, solely through the divine power of the Message she proclaims, both the personal and collective consciences of people, the activities in which they engage, and the lives and concrete milieux which are theirs" (*EN*, para. 18).

According to Groome (1998), conversion, in the sense of "a deep change of heart and way of acting" is directly related to the "Church's mission of education" (p. 43) as outlined above.

Catholic education is oriented towards the development of the whole person "freeing him from that conditioning which would prevent him from becoming a fully integrated human being" (*CS*, para. 29). Such development is built on love, the sort of love that will, as Palmer (1983) stated, "implicate us in the web of life" and "wrap the knower and the known in compassion, in a bond of awesome responsibility as well as transforming joy..." (p. 9).

These understandings of education propose a development, a movement towards an arguably more satisfying lifestyle, one that is marked by ever increasing integration of all human faculties and dimensions and the freedom that comes as a result of this maturation. The role of the Catholic school in the mission of the Church is to impart the knowledge that will contribute to the freedom that is promised to those who follow Christ. However, it is too easy for busy religious education teachers to view this mission in a “mechanical” way, that is, with little thought as to how it impacts on them personally and on their students. Moran (1981) challenged them to broaden their understanding of knowledge and freedom:

> Religious traditions know that the knowledge education should be concerned with is not just the knowledge we can acquire but the knowledge we must listen and wait for - perhaps at prayer, perhaps in a nursing home. Religions know that the freedom we can hope for is not liberation from the earth or the dominance of necessity but acceptance of our finite selves in a dying and rising universe (p. 46).

Knowledge is of little use if the students do not also gain something of the passion that characterises, or at least ought to characterise those who evangelise. It is the passion of such evangelists who love God and seek to reveal that love to others in the hope that they, too, will fall in love with God, that turns knowledge into charism. As Moran (1981) proposed, this passion can have its source in the life of prayer and worship. It is a passion that is not dampened by patience and recognition of the limits of being human. Such passion and the freedom that comes with it are outcomes of religious conversion.

The mission to evangelise in the Catholic school is undertaken by the whole staff, from the principal to the gardener. Students receive the Good News of salvation in many ways; however, it is the divine power of the message the Church proclaims through its schools and elsewhere that will "save" them — if they want to be saved. In this context, the word "save" refers to the "development of man from within, freeing him from that conditioning which would prevent him from becoming a fully integrated human being" (*CS*, para. 29). Catholic secondary schools provide students with opportunities to learn the meaning of their experiences "and their truths" (*CS*, para. 27). These opportunities include all aspects of the curriculum of the school, including religious education classes, prayer and worship experiences, retreats and reflection days, and involvement in service programs and events.

The religious life of the Catholic school is intended to be a rich tapestry of learning opportunities, which focus on the acquisition of knowledge and skills related to the Catholic faith tradition in which the school shares. It is presumed that some students will experience the nurturing of their lived faith, while others will learn about how Christian faith addresses issues in the lives of people and in society. Undoubtedly, there will be moments when the decision, no matter how small, is made by individual students to change, to adopt a way of believing and behaving that is religious, or more profoundly religious and hopefully, Christian and Catholic. The purpose of the present study is to describe how the imagination is involved in the mental activity surrounding these decisions and what contribution, if any, religious education makes to religious conversion.

The research problem

In the Catholic school, as in other environments, conversion happens "solely through the divine power of the message" (*EN*, para 18) that the Church proclaims. The "message" is the Good News of salvation that Jesus proclaimed and effected through his life and his mission, through his suffering and death. In Luke's Gospel, Jesus proclaimed his mission in the synagogue in Nazareth:

> He opened the book and found the place where this is written: "The Lord has put his Spirit in me, because he appointed me to tell the Good News to the poor. He has sent me to tell the captives they are free and to tell the blind that they can see again. God sent me to free those who have been treated unfairly and to announce the time when the Lord will show his kindness." 4:17-19 (New Century Version).

Jesus lived in a religious state. The expectation would have been for every member of the Jewish community to be present in the synagogue on the Sabbath. In a real sense, he had a captive audience. Lohse (1976) described the synagogue as the centre of Jewish faith in each locality during the time of Jesus. People gathered there to worship, to learn, to litigate, to discuss and debate (p. 158). The Catholic Church of today presents quite a different scene. A significant proportion of those attending Catholic schools have been characterised as "not only indifferent and non-practising, but also totally lacking in religious or moral formation" and showing "a profound apathy where ethical and religious formation is concerned" (*CSSTM*, para. 6). Ang (2008) reported that 4 out of 5 Catholics in Australia do not attend Sunday

Mass. In *Pathways* (2008), the Australian Conference of Leaders of Religious Institutes reported: “Now at 14 per cent each week, Sunday Mass attendance is declining and probably will eventually plateau at about 10 per cent.” The Catholic Bishops of Western Australia (2001) stated: “Many students have little experience of the Church and its life. Many learn about the Gospel for the first time in our schools” (*M01*, para. 20). The conclusion that can be drawn from the above is that most Catholics in Perth no longer attend Sunday Mass regularly; and most Catholic students attending Catholic secondary schools in the Archdiocese of Perth are “unchurched”, that is, they do not contribute to the life of the Church through their parish. Is the message that the Church proclaims through its schools meant to attract young people into parish life? Is conversion a realistic expectation? Can Catholic schools evangelise effectively when apparently Catholic faith is not taken seriously? If conversion does happen, is it serendipitous? How can Catholic schools assist the religious conversion of their students?

Following the release of the *General Directory for Catechesis* (1998), the Catholic Bishops of Western Australia produced the *Mandate Letter for all involved in Catholic Education 2001-2007*. Emphasis was placed on “new evangelisation” (*M01*, para. 23-26, 38, 41, 44) by which was meant the evangelisation of those who had been baptised but who had not experienced conversion to Christ (*M01*, para. 23). The Bishops instructed their parishes and schools to draw up evangelisation plans. They stated: “The handing on of Catholic beliefs and practices in the Catholic school needs to be planned so that this is done ‘explicitly and in a systematic manner’ (*CS*, para 50)” (*M01*, para. 19). The handing on of the faith is part of evangelisation and therefore,

is presumed to make a contribution to the goal of conversion (*EN*, para. 18). Catholic schools use a range of strategies, activities and events to hand on Catholic beliefs and practices to their students. Research has been carried out into the effectiveness of Catholic schools in carrying out their mission (Flynn, 1993; Flynn & Mok, 2002). This study will focus on one small aspect of the effectiveness issue, namely, the experiences of conversion evident in students' reflections on their faith. What role did the imagination play in their conversion?

Substantial and original contribution to knowledge

The Catholic Church has long recognised the imagination as one of the realms of the intellect. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (1994) stated that Catholics need to use their imaginations in meditation "to deepen our convictions of faith, prompt the conversion of our hearts, and strengthen our will to follow Christ" (*CCC*, para. 2708). The place of the imagination in religious development was acknowledged in the draft religious education units developed by the Western Australian Catholic Education Office (1997) through promoting the use of such strategies as journal writing, role-play and creative writing, as well as activities that require students to research the life and history of the Catholic Church, to understand how the Church addresses issues in people's lives and in society. Fowler (1981), Harris (1987), Parks (1986) and others have examined the relationship between faith and imagination. However, to this point in time, as far as the researcher has been able to determine, no one has researched the role of the imagination in religious conversion within the context of the Catholic secondary school. What

is the role the imagination in helping adolescents make life choices relating to their faith in God? What contribution can the Catholic school make realistically to stirring students' imaginations so that they engage in reflection on their need for God? It is the purpose of this study to provide some modest answers to these questions and other related to them, such as the research questions outlined below.

The study will make use of Fowler's (1981) stage theory of faith development, Rambo's (1993) theory of conversion, and aspects of cognitive development theories, including Piaget's (1950) concepts of equilibration and disequilibration, and Bowlby's (1969) attachment theory. These theories will be used to guide the analysis of data collected as part of the study; the framework for the analysis and discussion will be informed by Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), a recently developed qualitative approach that makes use of the phenomenological method informed by hermeneutics and symbolic interactionism. It is hoped that the findings of the research will prove useful to religious education teachers and those responsible for the preparation of the evangelisation plans in Catholic secondary schools.

Research questions

The following questions will guide the investigation of the role of imagination in religious conversion:

1. Is it possible to interpret students' disclosures about changes in their relationship with God as signs of religious conversion?
2. What evidence can be found of the imagination assisting students in developing a relationship with God?

3. What school activities and events do students find most effective in engaging them in the act of reflecting on their relationship with God?

Definition of terms

During the investigation of the role of the imagination in the religious conversion of adolescents in Catholic secondary schools, the following working definitions of key concepts were kept in mind to guide the self-reflection that was integral to the research methodology.

Imagination

As stated above, the imagination is the intellectual faculty that "unifies the processes of the mind and heart" (Bednar, 1996, p. 169). This is a key concept in the study. This definition will be developed further as this work progresses.

Faith

Understanding the relationship between imagination and faith is fundamental to understanding this study, therefore, faith is defined as broadly as possible. At this point in the work, let it be understood as a person's response to God's self-revelation (whether God be recognised or not), a response that is like a "path marked by falls, struggles, repentances and new beginnings" (Rummery & Lundy, 1982, p. 37).

Revelation

Revelation is taken to mean God's self-communication. This is the meaning that is given it by the Second Vatican Council in *Dei Verbum* (1965).

Evangelisation

Holohan (1999) stated that evangelisation "is the process through which the Church cooperates today with God's act of self-communication, calling human beings to conversion and to faith in Jesus Christ" (p. 16).

New evangelisation

The term was used by Pope John Paul II (1991) to describe the evangelisation of "entire groups of the baptised [who] have lost a living sense of the faith, or [who] even no longer consider themselves members of the Church and live a life far removed from Christ and his Gospel" (*CT*, para. 33).

Religious conversion

Religious conversion is taken to mean a radical, but often gradual transformation of a person's faith whereby that person's relationship with God is more intimate than before.

Religious education

To prevent religious education from becoming confused with faith development, and to assist discussion about the contribution of the subject to the mission of the Church, religious education is defined here as a form of the ministry of the word that hands on the Christian faith to students in such a way that it "makes the Gospel present in a personal process of cultural, systematic and critical assimilation (*GDC*, para. 73)" (Holohan, 1999, p. 27).

Summary

In this chapter, the study of the role of the imagination in the religious conversion of adolescents was introduced and placed in the context of the mission of the Catholic church to evangelise and the mandate issued by the Catholic bishops of Western Australia to the Catholic schools in their State. The three research questions that gave direction to the discussion of the data in chapters 5, 6 and 7 were stated and key concepts were defined.

The next chapter will give consideration to the principal concepts of this study and how they are interrelated in the available literature. The theoretical framework that supports Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) will be outlined.