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## Teaching for the future: Framing an environmentally sustainable future through teacher education

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# TEACHING FOR THE FUTURE

Shane Lavery

## FRAMING AN ENVIRONMENTALLY SUSTAINABLE FUTURE THROUGH TEACHER EDUCATION

EDUCATION

### Introduction

This article briefly outlines the development of a Catholic approach to ecological awareness with particular examination of environmental education in Australia. The importance of teacher formation in the area of eco-literacy, both at pre-service and postgraduate level is highlighted. Specific reference is then made to the experiences and perceptions of teachers and pre-service teachers in two case studies at The University of Notre Dame Australia, Fremantle Campus.

### A Catholic Approach to Ecological Awareness

Pope John Paul II (2001) placed the environment and ecological concerns squarely on the Catholic agenda with the words: "Humanity has disappointed divine expectations ... humiliating ... that flower garden that is the Earth, our home." In 2002, the Australian Catholic Bishops published the document *A New Earth – The Environmental Challenge* as their social justice statement for that year. The statement challenged all readers to, in the words of Pope John Paul II, "stimulate and sustain ecological

conversion" (p. 11). This was also the year that the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference founded the ecological agency, Catholic Earthcare Australia.

Since his election, Pope Benedict XVI has been proactive in his statements on environmental issues. In January, 2008, he highlighted the need for ecological responsibility: "We need to care for the environment; it has been entrusted to men and women to be protected and cultivated with responsible freedom, with the good of all as a constant guiding criterion" (Caritas Internationalis, n.d., para. 1). In his 2009 encyclical *Caritas in Veritate*, the Pope clearly reiterated the Catholic Church's environmental commitment when he pointed out that the Church is required to "defend not only earth, water and air as gifts of creation that belong to all", but must "above all protect mankind from self-destruction" (para. 51). In early January 2010, Benedict XVI exercised this responsibility when he denounced the failure of world leaders to agree to a new climate change treaty in Copenhagen, criticising the economic and political resistance to

addressing environmental degradation (Willey, 2010).

### Catholic Environmental Education in Australia

Potentially, the most significant Australian Catholic move towards education for the environment has been the 2006 publication *On Holy Ground*, co-authored by Catholic Earthcare Australia and Catholic Education Offices in Queensland and NSW (Rue, 2009, p. 21). *On Holy Ground* is an ecological vision statement that provides Catholic schools with a pathway to more ecologically sustainable practices (Karena, 2010). The publication highlights the critical role of Catholic educators in promoting the Church's call to 'Ecological conversion'. Further, it presents a long-term vision for Catholic ecological education that involved embedding ecological values into school programs and practices (p. 6).

### Teacher Education

An important support for Catholic schools undertaking ecological education is the provision of teacher formation to link environment and faith. Rue (2009) considers such

formation “a pressing issue” which “needs to be more vigorously pursued” (p. 21). Of equal importance is the issue of pre-service teacher formation. The School of Education at The University of Notre Dame Australia (UNDA) offers one postgraduate unit and two undergraduate units related to Environmental and Ecological Education.

During 2010, a written review was administered to UNDA students in the postgraduate unit *Educating for a New Earth and the Environmental Challenge* and the undergraduate unit *The Universe Story: a New Perspective*. The review asked students (a) to identify those parts of the unit that they had found personally or professionally useful, (b) if involvement in the unit had heightened their appreciation of some of the environmental challenges facing humanity, (c) whether participation in the unit had improved their capacity to address ecological issues personally or professionally, and (d) if undertaking the unit had enhanced the way they

might address ecological issues with the young people with whom they work (or will work)? The fourteen students undertaking *Educating for a New Earth and the Environmental Challenge* included primary and secondary teachers, principals, assistant principals, heads of department and classroom teachers. The twenty-three students undertaking *The Universe Story: a New Perspective* came from all three pre-service teaching courses: early childhood, primary and secondary.

Teachers studying the postgraduate unit identified three major ways the unit had impacted on them. Many acknowledged an increased understanding of those challenges facing humanity. Comments included: “the unit definitely has heightened my appreciation and understanding of concerns”; “highlighted realities, but not in a depressing way”; “Energised me – I have a new understanding of issues and implications for the Church and as an educator”. Teachers outlined how the unit had enhanced

their capacity to personally deal with ecological issues: “it has challenged me to be much more active in being ecologically sustainable in both personal life and in school life”; “it has me thinking about my ecological footprint and spending more time outdoors”; “the unit has definitely heightened my interest and understanding of the environment”. Finally, teachers stated how they now felt more self-assured in addressing ecological issues with their students and colleagues: “I have a new confident attitude in raising issues with staff and students – I have a clear understanding of personal responsibility to be an active participant in change”; “I realise how important is the task of imparting even a basic level of facts to our students about the environmental challenges facing us – in particular, the need to try and present ecological issues in a way that brings about change rather than simply creating panic or denial”; “it has made me think of what more I can be doing at a school leadership





level and how I can inspire other teachers to take charge in regard to ecological issues”.

Pre-service teachers also highlighted three main considerations. Many felt that they were now more aware of humanity’s impact on the planet. Two comments encapsulate the tone of the students’ remarks: “I have really taken to this unit and am shocked to know what is happening in our world”; “I enjoyed the whole unit. It really opened my eyes to how humans are affecting the planet”. Of greater significance was the transformative impact on students: “the course has made me even more environmentally friendly. I do see this as a huge issue for now and for future generations”; “I have now started to change my ways, and to change some of the ways of family members”; “I feel more spiritual towards the environment, appreciating all the good things including rain. I usually hate rain”. Finally, all students indicated that they were now prepared and open to addressing ecological issues within their teaching. Statements include: “I feel comfortable teaching this to my own class and addressing many of the environmental issues. The unit has made an impact on me big time in terms of what we are doing to the planet”; “professionally, I have learnt the crucial role teachers play in teaching and role-modelling to

students about these environmental issues”; “I will be very passionate about teaching these issues and I will do it hands on”.

#### Conclusion

Catholic Education has a significant responsibility in teaching for environmental sustainability. Moreover, while environmental sustainability needs to be embedded in all aspects of a school’s operations to be successful, the contribution that teachers make is vital. As Bishop Toohey observed: “Catholic educators have a critical role to play in promoting the Church’s call to ‘ecological conversion’ which finds its ground in our faith” (Catholic Earthcare Australia, n.d., p. i). How important, then, is the provision of suitable teacher education at the pre-service and the postgraduate level! Such provision ensures Catholic schools have the academic expertise to develop in young people a sense of stewardship for the earth, what Pope John Paul II called “their ‘ecological vocation’, which in our time has become more urgent than ever” (Catholic Earthcare Australia, n.d., p.16) ■

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