

“Among the Most Catechised but among the least Evangelised”?

Religious Education in Ireland

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It has been said that the Irish are the most catechised but among the least evangelised in Europe. This article examines the contemporary situation of religious education in Ireland with a particular focus on its ecumenical aspects. It begins by outlining the historical journey in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries that led Ireland to the current situation. On that basis it considers some of the issues that have arisen in recent times that have seen a dramatic change in religious practice in Ireland. It explores the issue of the relationship of parish, school and family.

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Since the coming of Patrick to Ireland in the fifth century, the issue of religious education has been important in Ireland. According to a legend, the Celtic princess Eithne asked Patrick: “Who is God, and where is God, of whom is God and where his dwelling?... This God of yours? Is he ever-living? Is he beautiful...? How will he be seen, how is he loved, how is he found?”¹ To respond to questions such as this Patrick evangelised, catechised and inculturated the Gospel faith. And in a remarkably short span of time, there was a Celtic Christian body of poetry and literature. In particular it was the monastic communities that drove the Irish Christian experience of religious education and the transmission of the Christ-event in the first millennium.² Traces of the *Biblia pauperum*, the religious education carried out in forms other than the written word, are very evident in Ireland. The country is dotted with magnificent Irish High Crosses, there are many ancient Mass vessels made of precious metals, and, of course, texts such as the Book of Kells are well known.

The contemporary setting of religious education is very different. It is post Reformation and all that meant in Irish ecclesial history. Religious education is entering a dramatically critical period. A recent affirmation by the

¹ Whitley Stokes, *The Tripartite Life of St. Patrick*, London 1887, p. 100. See also John McSweeney, “St. Patrick and Celtic Spirituality” in *The Furrow* 41 (3/1990), p. 163-167.

² For an excellent historical overview of Christianity in Ireland see Patrick Corish, *The Irish Catholic Experience: A Historical Survey*, Dublin 1985 and Brendan Bradshaw and Dáire Keogh, *Christianity in Ireland: Revisiting the Story*, Dublin 2002.