

I Love to Tell the Story *Raymond Topley*

Telling the life and story of Jesus is central for the learning of our students

One of the privileges of a religion teacher or catechist is that of being a teller of the story of Jesus. So conscious was Sunday school teacher, Joseph Bayly, of this honour that he simply called the book he wrote about his teaching experiences, *I Love to Tell the Story*. The inspiration for this title came from an evangelical hymn of the same name that contained the uplifting lines: 'I love to tell the story of unseen things above, of Jesus and his glory, of Jesus and his love. I love to tell the story because I know its true; it satisfies my longings as nothing else can do.' This title captures well the mission of religion teachers as they endeavour to form the faith of young believers. Consciousness of oneself as a teller of the story of Jesus can be energizing. However, telling the story is but part of a sequence in the journey of the religious educator. The first step is that of hearing the story. But even this, on its own, is not enough. It needs to be authenticated by a genuine attempt to live the story. These three elements of hearing, living and knowing need closer exploration.

I Love to Hear the Story

For the teacher, hearing the story of Jesus is more a hearing of the heart and the spirit than that of the ear and the mind. Peter was declared 'happy' by Jesus when he answered a question concerning the Lord's identity because the insight came directly from God and not from any human agency (see Mt 16:17). In his book *Christ in His Mysteries*, Dubliner, Columba Marmion, now a canonized saint, draws attention to the effect of such knowing when he says, 'This knowledge is for us a never failing source of joy,' adding that 'joy is the sentiment born in a soul conscious of the good it possesses.' It is out of such joy that the faith-forming work of the religion teacher truly becomes effective. So one reason a catechist loves to hear the Jesus story is because of the joy it can bring to both teacher and learners. Hearing, however, is but a stepping stone to living.

I Love to Live the Story

Jesus distinguished between hearing the word and doing the word, referring to himself as one who always does what pleases his Father in heaven. Hearing, on its own, is not enough. Authentic Christianity, namely discipleship, requires a lived expression of the story. There is much for religious educators to ponder in the insightful observation of Pope Paul VI that people listen more willingly to witnesses than to teachers, and if they do listen to teachers, it is because they are witnesses' (*On Evangelization*, #67). The catechist therefore is not just a teller of the story but is even more a witness to its reality and its achievability. St Paul sets a high ideal for all Christians, not just teachers, when he declares, 'Take me as your model as I take Christ' (1 Cor 11:1).

I Love to Tell the Story

There are many reasons a teacher might have for loving to tell the story of Jesus. For Edmund Rice, Founder of the Christian Brothers, it was on account of the change it brought about in the children even though the half hour daily teaching of religion was 'the most laborious on the teachers' (1810 letter to the Archbishop of Cashel). Jesus himself declared 'this is eternal life that they may know thee the one true God and

Jesus Christ whom you have sent' (Jn 17:3). Teachers today, however, faced as they are with the challenges of the Bebo generation, find themselves searching for ever more ingenious ways of getting in touch with the lives of their pupils. Catechetical programmes and textbooks constitute a valiant attempt at promoting such a goal. However, every programme that was ever devised is far from perfect. They all have their flaws and are open to criticism. This is neither surprising nor upsetting. Famed Jesuit, Bernard Lonergan, notes that as God alone is good and perfect then only God is above criticism. Everyone and everything is open to legitimate and constructive critical comment so as to improve situations and make them better. Realistically, therefore, the religion teacher will approach with a critical eye whatever catechetical programme is to hand, identify fairly the good in it and try and compensate for what is less than perfect. Pastor Bayly got it right in naming his book as he did. Irrespective of the various methodologies employed today it is essential that the story of Jesus occupies centre stage both in the living of the teachers and the learning of the pupils.

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