

The Interfaith Classroom

How do we welcome non-Christians and Protestants into our schools and our religion classrooms, and at the same time give witness to our own Christ-centered and Catholic faith? When covering topics that are strictly Catholic in nature, subjects like the Mass, Mariology, or Catholic sacramental theology, we need to acknowledge that not every student in the class shares the Catholic experience or viewpoint. But how do we demonstrate respect for other faith traditions without sending the message that Catholics believe all faiths are equally true?

A Continuum of Responses to Diversity

In an attempt to be open-minded and accepting, many people choose relativism as a way of dealing with conflicting beliefs, ending up valuing all things equally. Relativism acknowledges difference but doesn't offer any rationale for one's own view. Relativism represents one end of the continuum.

Candidates for political office sometimes choose the other end of the continuum. We have all seen ads in which candidates try to win the audience over by making their opponents' ideas look inadequate, without ever stating their own views. Of course, ridiculing another viewpoint is hurtful: it is a form of attack.

When we acknowledge difference in religious traditions, we land somewhere along this continuum. Though relativism is respectful of diversity, it doesn't leave room for passion, or even for evaluation. Criticism of other faith traditions is clearly passionate, but it is not respectful.

Religion and Objective Truth

The Catholic Church finds a mark somewhere near the middle of the continuum. Catholics affirm the path of salvation through the Church, and hold that Church teachings are objectively true. At the same time, they respect the many good aspects of other faith traditions. Catholics would say that affirming belief in one's own tradition does not discount the value found in other faiths. In *Declaration on the Relations of the Church to Non-Christian Religions (Nostra Aetate, 1965)*, the Church teaches, "Let Christians, while witnessing to their own faith and way of life, acknowledge, preserve and encourage the spiritual and moral truths found among non-Christians, also their social life and culture." (2).

Regarding divisions among Christians, Catholic teaching defines these divisions as offenses against the unity of Christ's Church. Catholics are called to engage in ecumenical efforts with Protestant Christians, praying together, studying the Scriptures together, learning about one another's traditions, and working together for justice. Ultimately, the Church is committed to the restoration of unity among all Christians. Though Catholic teaching recognizes that the Holy Spirit works through other churches for salvation, it also acknowledges real differences—some of them quite significant—among the various Christian traditions.

Teaching Catholic Topics

In a Theology classroom, relativism, at one end of the spectrum, might mean stating that not everyone believes in the divinity of Jesus, or that many Protestants recognize only two sacraments, without further comment. Students may feel confused, or even abandoned, when teachers make statements about what others believe without offering any support for belief in Catholic teaching. This kind of indifference to doctrine doesn't reflect the beliefs of the Church.



At the other end of the spectrum, refuting the religious views of students who are not Catholic or not Christian may upset students as well. Today's youth embrace diversity, and a teacher who doesn't tolerate difference may be perceived as out of touch, or even mean-spirited. As we have seen, criticism of other faith traditions doesn't model the Church's teachings either.

In any interreligious dialogue, whether it takes place in a Catholic school or elsewhere, two skills are key: listening in order to understand and stating one's own view clearly. Listening to understand involves setting aside preconceived notions and asking questions for clarity. It is listening for the sake of learning more, and it is distinguished from listening in order to refute.

Stating one's own views is motivated by a desire to inform another person. The speaker helps the listener to understand the basis for one's belief, showcasing the values, insights, and contributions of one's tradition. Stating one's own view doesn't have to involve showing how one's own faith is superior to another person's.

When teaching a topic that is unique to Catholic theology, teachers must acknowledge the beliefs and practices of students in the class who are not Catholic or not Christian. It may be appropriate to ask those students to highlight differences they observe, or to allow Catholic students to pose questions about diverse views. Rather than expect students who are not Catholic to be theologian-representatives for their faith, you may wish to note the class's questions for further research later. Depending on how central the issue is, you may consider inviting an expert to speak about another faith tradition represented in the classroom. Hearing teachings that are different from their own can help to teach Catholic students that not everyone shares their views; it can also help them to understand Catholic doctrine in a new way.

In addition to listening to other views, it's equally important for students to hear clear and meaningful statements about the Church's doctrine. Regardless of who is in the classroom, the teacher's words should be grounded in solid Catholic theology. Religious diversity in the classroom challenges the teacher to present that doctrine in a way that is unfailingly respectful of other views. At the same time, it offers the opportunity to model the Church's teachings about the value of other faith traditions.

(This article draws on "Wrestling with Diversity," by Christine Navarro and Lorraine Kilmartin, in *Connect: A Newsletter for High School Religion Teachers, Campus Ministers, and Principals* [Winona, MN: Saint Mary's Press, January 2002].)

