

INTERVIEW WITH SISTER TERESITA KAMBEITZ FROM THE FACULTY OF NEWMAN THEOLOGICAL COLLEGE SITE IN SASKATCHEWAN, CANADA

Interview conducted by Quentin Wodon

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EXCERPTS:

- “Our teachers and students are learning about and respecting the early treaties with the First Nations people. They are learning about native spirituality and incorporating some of their spiritual practices into religious education. They are teaching ... and developing ways to overcome racism.”
- “[The Pope] upholds Catholic education as initiating and promoting a universal culture that promotes the values of care for others, peace, justice, goodness, beauty, acceptance, and community in order to build hope, solidarity and harmony everywhere.”

Sister Kambeitz, could you please explain your current responsibilities and how you are engaged in Catholic education?

For the past 12 years I have been the Assistant Director of Religious Education on the faculty of Newman Theological College in Edmonton, Alberta. My responsibility is that of coordinating the 42-credit Master of Religious Education (MRE) degree program offered through the College's extension-site here in the neighboring province of Saskatchewan, with headquarters in the city of Saskatoon. I arrange for professors to teach the courses in the program, plan for classroom space with the Greater Saskatoon Catholic School Division, teach some of the courses, recruit students (all of whom are full-time teachers) and tend to administrative tasks.

We presently have 32 teachers pursuing their MRE degree and have so far graduated over 40 MRE students, most of whom are classroom teachers. Some have assumed leadership positions by becoming Religious Education consultants, High School chaplains, Elementary School faith facilitators, and school principals.

Box 1: Interview Series

What is the mission of the Global Catholic Education website? The site informs and connects Catholic educators globally. It provides them with data, analysis, opportunities to learn, and other resources to help them fulfill their mission with a focus on the preferential option for the poor.

Why a series of interviews? Interviews are a great way to share experiences in an accessible and personal way. This series will feature interviews with practitioners as well as researchers working in Catholic education, whether in a classroom, at a university, or with other organizations aiming to strengthen Catholic schools and universities.

What is the focus of this interview? In this interview, Sister Teresita Kambeitz, Assistant Director of Religious Education on the faculty of Newman Theological College site in Saskatchewan, Canada, talks about her work at the College and in particular the coordination of the 42-credit Master of Religious Education degree program.

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A few statistics about Saskatchewan: Our population is 1.8 million, with about 82% white, 15% aboriginal, and 3% Chinese, South Asian, African. The Catholic population is about 32% with significant numbers belonging to the Ukrainian Catholic rite and some to the Chaldean rite.

What do you believe are the current strengths of Catholic education and in particular the strengths of the activities you are involved in?

The main strength, of course, is Christ the Risen Lord. In complementing the faith education of children given by parents and church, Catholic Schools enjoy a huge strength in that they can build on the students' baptismal commitment to participate in the mission of Jesus to build the Reign of God, the reign of justice, compassion, love and peace. This baptismal faith provides a powerful motivation for everything that students learn and do at school. In Saskatchewan, parents who want their children to have a faith-based education choose Catholic schools, whenever possible. The Government estimates that about 23% of the students in Catholic schools are not of the Catholic faith.

In our province of Saskatchewan, there are 124 Catholic schools with just over 43,000 students (105 elementary, grades K-8; 19 high schools, grades 9-12) which are fully tax-supported by the government. Our teachers receive good salaries and our school buildings are modern with the latest in technological equipment. All the classrooms have crucifixes and other religious symbols in full view and the school entrances feature statues or murals of the school's patron saint. Schools have daily prayer, regular liturgical services, religious education projects and activities, and teachers are encouraged to do "faith permeation" as much as possible in all their subjects.

In the elementary schools, students have religious education classes every day. In the high schools, "Catholic Studies" is a credit course that students take toward their diplomas. High school students are required to do various forms of community service as well. All students, whether Catholic or not, are required to take Catholic Studies for credit. The Saskatoon Catholic Cyber School offers Catholic Studies courses online for High School distance education students. In towns and villages where there are no Catholic schools, the public schools are allowed to offer one-half hour of religious instruction at the end of the day.

One of the strengths of the activities in which I am involved is the "Field Education" component of the MRE degree. I supervise the four projects that teachers design and carry out in order to obtain 12 credits in the program. These rather major teaching projects often involve their entire school staff and student body, for example, Advent and Lenten activities, faith celebrations, rosary clubs, social justice projects.

In which areas could Catholic education be improved and how, especially again with regards to the activities that you are personally engaged in?

All our teachers (they number around 3,200) take their Bachelor of Education degrees at a secular university. While they are expected to have at least six university credits in religious studies in order to be employed in a Catholic School, our schools attract teachers who are not necessarily well-informed in their faith, do not go to church and are sometimes living in irregular marriage situations.

Some of our Catholic teachers hold rather outdated, even warped, religious beliefs. Catholic education could be improved if teachers were provided more opportunities to learn about Vatican II - based Catholic faith by attending religious conferences, making retreats, taking part in faith formation programs, etc. I try to obtain instructors that are well grounded in up-to-date theology and I do what I can in giving talks, mostly in scripture to groups of teachers and other adults.

Have you observed recently interesting innovative initiatives in Catholic education? If so, what are they and why are those initiatives innovative?

In Canada we have a sad history with regard to the indigenous people who were forced to send their children to the residential schools that were established by the Federal Government after Confederation in 1867. We are now, as a country, trying to reconcile with our indigenous population.

In Catholic schools our teachers and students are learning about and respecting the early treaties with the First Nations people. They are learning about native spirituality and incorporating some of their spiritual practices into religious education. They are teaching more respect and reverence for creation and are developing ways to overcome racism. Since we have many immigrants from every country in the world, they are teaching stories of saints and faith traditions from other cultures.

Because of the current COVID-19 pandemic, teachers are creating and offering new, innovative on-line courses in religious education.

How do you understand the call from Pope Francis for a new Global Compact on Catholic education?

I see his vision of Catholic education being firmly rooted in the gospel mission to eradicate all forms of domination and to establish genuine communion among peoples. In speaking of Catholic education as planting seeds of hope, I believe he views Catholic schools as "gardens" where the dignity of every student is "germinated" and

encouraged to flourish, to blossom and grow to fruition. He upholds Catholic education as initiating and promoting a universal culture that promotes the values of care for others, peace, justice, goodness, beauty, acceptance, and community in order to build hope, solidarity and harmony everywhere.

How do you think you and your organization could contribute to the Pope's vision?

Our Catholic schools need to grow in awareness of all forms of domination that are so prevalent in North American society that they have come to be accepted as 'normal.' Sometimes these awakenings are painful and are resisted by those who are conditioned to feel entitled to privilege. For example, I have witnessed the anger that can be aroused when male dominance is questioned or challenged in church and society. I have also witnessed conflicts that involve systemic racism and societal distinctions. For people who enjoy wealth, power, or any kind of advantage, any loss of privilege is very threatening and often accompanied with feelings of their being victimized!

An honest exposure of all accepted forms of domination and all ideologies that benefit ecclesial, economic, political, social and cultural realms must be undertaken prayerfully and authentically in Catholic education. Simulation games in which students 'experience' injustice as part of the activity are very helpful in raising awareness of forms of domination, privilege and exclusion. Bold, creative endeavors must be made to call forth and develop the gifts of the marginalized students, thus helping to build systems of respect, inclusion and participation. These efforts will help to promote the values that Pope Francis has articulated so courageously.

What events, projects, or activities could be suggested to strengthen a common identity for Catholic education at a global level? What are your ideas?

An honest look at budgets is a good starting point. A budget is a theological statement! It undergirds the beliefs and values of a school community and its leaders. Does their budget reflect the teachings and actions of Jesus? Does it present a preferential option for the poor?

All forms of domination must be named and addressed. Bullying whether among the teachers, support staff or students must be actively exposed and eradicated. Bold projects of care for the disabled and disadvantaged students on the peripheries of society must be planned and implemented, even over the objection of some parents.

Christ must be the centre of Catholic education. Students must constantly be reminded that as baptized disciples of the Risen Lord, they are committed to participate in His mission to build the Reign of God on earth. A Vatican II-based Catholic faith must be the faith we promote and, at times, be modified to be more faithful to the gospel.

More attention must be paid to the care and reverence of creation, based on the early resurrection faith that extended to the entire cosmos. Climate change is a serious crisis and Catholic schools are in a credible position with the guidance of Pope Francis in his letter *Laudato Si*.

Religious education must be based more on sound interpretations of scripture rather than on memorization of catechism answers. The human experience of students at their particular stage of faith development must serve as the basis for developing a relationship with the Risen Lord, as modelled in the gospel account of the journey to Emmaus by Cleopas and his wife, Mary, and their encounter with Christ (Luke 24). As many as possible of the eight intelligences should be addressed in faith formation methodology.

What are some of the priorities in terms of training and capacity building for school principals, teachers, alumni, parents, or other groups to strengthen Catholic education in your country or area?

This is a real challenge, given our secular culture in this middle-class province. The clergy sexual abuse crisis has certainly had a very damaging effect in the church. The Catholic community must be helped to look beyond the sins of its leaders to develop a genuine relationship with Christ and see the beauty of the gospel and our Catholic faith. They must also be helped to forgive.

Much as I admire the dedication of international priests who now staff most of our parishes, the truth is that many of them bring a degree of clericalism that is not in keeping with the gospel vision of priesthood as a ministry of service rather than a position of power. Much of their preaching contains an anti-woman bias.

We are also witnessing a growing negativity in the attitude of women toward church structures and practices, evident in the diminishment of church marriages, baptisms, and participation in other sacraments. With more women as single mothers in the work force, we are seeing less faith education in the homes, and less encouragement of children to attend Mass and participate in parish activities. For many Catholic children, attendance at a Catholic school is their only experience of "church."

Could you please share how you ended up in your current position, what was your personal journey?

As an Ursuline Sister, my current position came about largely as a result of various teaching appointments given to me by my religious superiors and educational opportunities offered by educational authorities. For example, when I was teaching in a large Catholic High School in the 1970s, the Director of Education offered me a fully paid educational leave to pursue a Master's Degree in Religious Education in order to help write a new High School Catholic Studies curriculum for the province.

Then in 1985, upon the prompting of my General Superior, I happily pursued my Ph.D. at the University of Toronto. Upon completing it in 1988, the President of Newman Theological College in Edmonton invited me to establish a Master of Religious Education degree program at the College, an endeavour in which I was engaged with great joy for eleven years.

Upon my return to Saskatchewan, the Director of the Saskatchewan Catholic School Boards Association asked me to establish an extension-site of Newman Theological College so as to enable Saskatchewan teachers to obtain their MRE degree locally. As I indicated above, for the past 12 years, this has been my main ministry. All these challenges and opportunities have been enormously blessing-filled and gratifying. I deeply appreciate the collegiality, friendship and support of the many people with whom I have been in collaboration.

Finally, could you share a personal anecdote about yourself, what you are passionate about?

I am passionate about responding to the Lord's call to engage in faith formation for teachers who then hand on the faith to their students. I find it gratifying beyond words to see the extraordinary work that our MRE graduates are doing in Catholic education. It's all "God's work" and I am indeed humbled to be called to help make it happen, so as to continue the mission of the Risen Lord here and now in our province.

An anecdote: I have given summer courses for teachers in a few other countries. One summer after teaching a course in Sacraments (through an interpreter) to some 80 public school teachers in Latvia, one young Latvian teacher came to me, tearfully trying to tell me something very exciting. I called the interpreter to translate. This teacher was thanking me for having said something that changed her life. And what was it that I had said? That God loves us. When she heard that, she said that she had become so excited that she ran home to tell her mother. However, she said, her mother did not believe her because "she was trained in Soviet ways." I often think of that young teacher and envy her just a bit for experiencing such an ecstatic response to this good news which was so new to her! Alleluia!



Photo: Sr. Kambeitz receives the 2018 Higgins Award for her lifetime of dedication to Catholic education.