

witness  
specialist  
moderator

the critical role of  
Catholic Educators in  
our changing world

**Bernadette Mercieca & Ann Rennie**





Published in Australia by  
Garratt Publishing  
32 Glenvale Crescent  
Mulgrave, VIC 3170  
[www.garrattpublishing.com.au](http://www.garrattpublishing.com.au)

Copyright in this work remains the property of the contributing authors.

Copyright © 2023 Bernadette Mercieca & Ann Rennie

All rights reserved. Except as provided by the Australian copyright law, no part of this book may be reproduced in any way without permission in writing from the publisher.

Cover by Guy Holt  
Cover image and page 182 © iStock  
Inside images supplied by authors  
Typesetting by Mike Kuszla  
Edited by Greg Hill

Printed by Tingleman Printers

Scripture quotations are drawn from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible, copyright © 1989 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the USA.

Used by permission.

All rights reserved.

ISBN 9781922484741



A catalogue record for this  
book is available from the  
National Library of Australia

Cataloguing in Publication information for this title is available from the National Library of Australia.

[www.nla.gov.au](http://www.nla.gov.au)

The authors and publisher gratefully acknowledge the permission granted to reproduce the copyright material in this book. Every effort has been made to trace copyright holders and to obtain their permission for the use of copyright material.

The publisher apologises for any errors or omissions in the above list and would be grateful if notified of any corrections that should be incorporated in future reprints or editions of this book.

*We dedicate this book in gratitude to our first educators in faith:  
our parents, Margaret and Des Harty and James and Barbara O'Neill.*

*For their understanding that the writing of this book was a priority for  
us, we also dedicate this book with love to our husbands,  
Paul and Robert.*

*We offer our thanks for those many teachers who encouraged us  
as we grew up.*

*We honour the memory of those pioneering religious congregations  
who founded schools across the country. In particular, The Faithful  
Companions of Jesus and The Institute Of the Blessed Virgin Mary  
(IBVM) – Loreto Sisters.*

*We continue in solidarity and companionship with all those who teach  
in Catholic schools today, in the hope of the ongoing mission of Catholic  
education in Australia.*

*Bernadette & Ann*

*Bernadette and Ann have lived this book for decades. Every idea has been tested in the rough and tumble of the classroom. Don't look here for high falutin theories. Come to appreciate the passion and resilience of women who actually know what spiritual formation is all about. Somewhere along the way, we have forgotten that religious education is not just a sacred trust but also a truckload of fun. Bernadette and Ann remind us with wisdom and grace.*

– Michael McGirr

Author, Mission Director of Caritas Australia

*In this book, Bernadette and Ann lead us in a journey through their lives. Personal and humble, the touching text is accompanied by emotive images that together weave a story of two Australian women showing the importance of the Person in the Professional. Beginning with their own formative years, we progress through the book to acquire a keen insight to the current context of Catholic Religious Education in Australia. Not only does it provide the reader with concrete examples of present-day approaches and theories on RE in Australia, it can easily transfer to other educational settings, prompting deep reflection and meaningful discourse for religious educators the world over. It is an important contribution to document these personal memoirs of two witnesses, specialists and moderators and overall leaves the reader with a strong sense of hope for Catholic Religious Education in the future.*

– Dr Bernadette Sweetman

Post-doctoral researcher, Dublin City University

# Preface

This book has arisen out of a friendship that has grown between two Religious Education (RE) teachers, who have spent almost their entire professional careers involved in Catholic education in Victoria. Both of us were raised in strong Catholic families in the 1960s, one in Melbourne, the other in regional Victoria. In the course of our respective working lives we came to know each other, and eighteen months ago it transpired that we had a similar strong feeling about the state of Religious Education in Australian Catholic schools. As we look towards the end of our professional lives, we want to do what we can to pass on what we know to the next generation of teachers, especially those who will take up the gift and challenge of this faith-based discipline.

We feel that Religious Education is battling a crisis, the same crisis the Church is confronted with in this secular age. It is the crisis of relevance that is impacting many former institutional strongholds that are now looking outdated. Care and attention needs to be taken as we go forward with this, the educational mission of the Church.

Younger teachers may view this book as a primer to help them in discerning their own faith story. It may assist them in how they might travel differently with new understanding, enthusiasm, and commitment. Pre-service teachers will also find it helps to provide background details about Vatican II and the story of how Religious Education has changed in recent decades.

This book is our best effort in sharing our knowledge and experience, what got us to where we are now as we move towards the

end of our professional careers and pass the baton on. We hope that it will illuminate your own teaching journey as you offer your own best effort to those you will educate.

~

We experienced the final days of a pre-Vatican II Church and the earliest euphoria of a Church grappling with the challenges of Vatican II. We have seen the Church grow and change over many decades, alongside parallel developments in school RE programs aiming to catechise and evangelise. We have grown older and (perhaps) wiser as the world has become more secular and pluralist and has raised issues of faith affiliation and the state of the worshipping community.

We hope that this book, and the questions we have provided at the end of each chapter, will guide reflection by individuals and groups. It is hoped that as the reader processes each section, it will give them pause to consider the implications of their own *witness, specialist, moderator* experiences to see where they stand in the light of their own Catholic identity and the consequent desire to share this with the rich diversity of children in our schools. We understand that the reader's formative experiences may well be very different to ours, but that difference also offers an entry point into the reality of the world today and a recognition that new approaches need to be taken for these changing and challenging, some would say liminal, times in Catholic education.

In this book we have offered thoughts and advice from our long involvement and experience in the teaching of Religious Education. We also understand that some of the language, ideas and images of the recent past may appear unfamiliar to future generations. Thus nuanced and sensitive treatment is needed in the contemporary classroom, so that the richness of the tradition is upheld whilst navigating the currents of the time.

## Preface

We hope that we have provided context for the Religious Education landscape in our Catholic schools and that it will be useful for those teachers who are taking up the challenge of helping students make meaning of their life in the culture in which they are immersed. It may also be a reminder of the recent past in Australia and where we find ourselves now as a consequence of vast and irrevocable social change. Our broad personal sweep over the previous half century may resonate with experiences and understandings that have been passed on in family, school and parish circumstances. In this book we trust that there have been moments of recognition, as well as moments of departure, as the as readers look back own formative and professional growth to see how and where it has led them to where they are today.

As we emphasise in the later chapters, Catholic schools and higher education institutions need to actively support graduating students to study theological and religious educational subjects as part of their degree. Perhaps this may lead to a commitment to returning to the Catholic system to teach. This is a significant strategy for building religious expertise and future faith-based leadership density within a school community. It is pleasing to see that there is some recent movement in this direction.

Generational change is a fact, as is the changing face of Australia. In Australia the cultural bedrock of unifying beliefs and norms is no longer what it once was. However, we have much to hope for in the 20 per cent of Australians who identified as Catholic in the 2021 census. In our schools and in our classes we can find common ground, goodwill and dialogue within the diversity of our demographic. We can do this as we boldly take the next chapter of our story in Catholic education into the unfolding landscape of the 21st century.

## **Reflection**

1. How do you think we can create schools where a meaningful Catholic encounter for students takes place?
2. To what extent do you think witness is important in imparting an effective curriculum and/or building a compassionate community of faith?
3. What changes in views about religion and spirituality have you experienced since you left school? How do you view the impact of secularisation on religious practice in Australia?
4. What do you see as the 'currents of the time' that are influencing young people in our Catholic schools?
5. What is needed from Catholic leadership in the education sector?
6. Do we educate for faith or for life? Should one or other of these have primacy in a faith-based school?
7. How do you think we can take the next chapter of Catholic education into the future?



# Contents

<b>Part 1 Witness</b>	<b>1</b>
Chapter 1: Growing Up in Kew – Ann	3
Chapter 2: Growing Up in Ballarat – Bernadette	19
Chapter 3: Teenage Years – Ann	29
Chapter 4: Teenage Years – Bernadette	42
<b>Part 2 Specialist</b>	<b>55</b>
Chapter 5: University Days and Early Teaching – Bernadette	57
Chapter 6: University Days and Early Teaching – Ann	67
<b>Part 3 Moderator</b>	<b>83</b>
Chapter 7: Changing Landscape	84
Chapter 8: Today’s Context and its Implications	101
Chapter 9: Current Issues	143
Chapter 10: Future Prospects	157
Chapter 11: Summary	179
Chapter 12: Concluding Thoughts	183
Acknowledgements	196
Appendix 1	197
Appendix 2	199
Glossary	203