Introduction

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This special issue of the Journal of Religious Education is titled *Religious Education in Catholic Schools: International Academic Conference (Part 2)*. As such, it includes many articles that were developed from papers given at the Conference on Religious Education in Catholic schools. The conference was held in February 2020, not long before the pandemic changed the world as we know it. The international conference comprised some 80 academics who gathered in Melbourne to advance the academic dialogue on Religious Education in Catholic schools. The co-sponsors of the conference were the Australian Catholic University (ACU) La Salle Academy and Catholic Education Melbourne.

Most articles in this edition of the journal were conceived and written before COVID-19, and as such do not reference this profoundly disturbing worldwide event, although Alfred Pang refers to the effects of the pandemic on the most vulnerable in our communities. Future reflections such as those provided in this edition of the journal will undoubtedly be influenced by the still ongoing effects of the pandemic.

The articles in this issue come from a variety of places and illustrate the diversity and vitality of Religious Education. In addition to papers sourced from the Conference, this edition includes other articles of interest and pertinence to the discipline of Religious Education.

The first paper offered by Christopher Reed, who is a doctoral student at the University of Melbourne, provides insights from an ‘insider’s perspective’ on the work of a particular Catholic primary school to create a dialogue school engaged in the hermeneutical communicative model. This model of school is derived from the Enhancing Catholic School Identity (ECSI) project which is research conducted throughout Catholic schools in Melbourne Australia and is done so through a partnership between the Catholic Education Commission of Victoria and KULeuven. The outcomes of the research invite schools to reconceptualise their way of being Catholic in dialogue with students, staff and parents, and the author provides unique insights into how this school has reflected on its ECSI data to create a dialogue school. Insights are provided into the means and effects of the ‘Faith and Life’ curriculum which permeates the whole school. The article includes valuable reflections from staff and students on the impressions this model has made on them.

The second paper, which is based on her keynote address at the Conference, is by Roisin Coll from the University of Glasgow, Scotland. In this paper the author addresses the pastoral, theological and legal imperatives that need to be addressed in the light of the

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increasing numbers of students in Catholic schools who identify themselves as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or intersex. The author acknowledges the tension experienced by LGBTI people and their supporters because of the Catholic Church's moral and legal stance which is at times couched in language that is at best placed in an understanding of the binary nature of sexuality. She argues that the strict legal stance should not be the driver of how these people are included or excluded in Catholic schools and particularly in the RE classroom. The example of Jesus the outsider who welcomed others who were also outsiders should determine how teachers in Catholic schools can provide a pastoral approach that includes all. The author argues for an ethic of hospitality, supported by language of acknowledgement of all the 'others' that form individual identity, is a process by which actions can speak much louder than words.

Antonella Poncini provides the third paper in this edition, based on her doctoral work and her presentation at the Conference. In her home state of Western Australia, the *Bishops Religious Literacy Assessment* (BRLA) has been developed as a state-wide measurement tool for measuring student learning in Religious Education (RE). Loosely based on the National Assessment Plan for Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN), which is an assessment for all students in Australia, the BRLA is administered in Years 3, 5 and 9 across the state in Catholic schools in Western Australia. The BRLA is based on the premise that Religious Education is a scholastic discipline along the lines of all other curriculum areas, with its own clear expectations of student learning and outcomes. However, the lines between the academic discipline and the role of RE in the evangelising mission of the Church are not clear and remain an ongoing issue for policy makers, teachers of RE, school principals and even parish priests. The author's research focussed on the teachers of RE and their perceived 'usefulness' of the BRLA in the teaching and learning of RE. The author identifies possible misalignment between policy and practice in RE and the complexity of the teaching of RE itself, which may call for greater dialogue between policy makers and practitioners and greater professional development for RE teachers.

Stefan Altmeyer from the Johannes Gutenberg-University in Germany offers an article that draws on his research about the contribution that Religious Education might make to the overall educational goal of sustainable development. The author argues that the encyclical *Laudato Si'* has propelled Catholics into thinking about their responsibility in the ecological sustainability sphere and ensuring that it is a constituent aspect of one's personal faith. A second approach is more aligned to addressing the ecological issues as social justice ones, reliant on a broader critical questioning of contemporary issues pertaining to stewardship of the earth. Both approaches to the ecological crises faced by all are pertinent to the teaching of Religious Education. The research method was to provide more than 1100 students aged 14–16 with an ethical dilemma (called the poplar dilemma) and analysing not only their solutions but the potential sources of their solutions. The category of responses called religious stewardship was found to be most influential in students' decision-making, which led the author to explore the origin of this category further. Most interestingly, students who belonged to this group were found to as likely be eco-spiritual as religiously orientated. Altmeyer then discusses the implications of this research for Religious Education.

The fourth article in this edition is provided by Paul Melley, a doctoral student from Boston College. In his article he outlines some of the current contexts for Religious Education, focussing on the post-secular nature of society that encourages personal pragmatism and values a rational individualistic view of the world. In this context, he makes a case for the recovery of mystagogy as a means of discovering the sacred in everyday life. He draws a distinction between the mystagogy of religious experiences and the mystagogy of

lived experiences and discusses how this mystagogy can be accessed by the diverse populations of RE classrooms. He makes this distinction as mystagogy in the early Church was specifically related to the catechetical formation of the neophytes or new believers, and its purpose was to help them deepen their faith. Although the term and its associated understanding were revived after Vatican II, and especially through the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults, the term mystagogy remains somewhat obscure and unknown to most of the faithful. Yet the author argues that the mystery of God is still permeating this earthly existence and is accessible to students through Religious Education, whatever the state of their personal belief system. He describes the process of recognising God in everyday experiences as inductive, beginning with concrete experiences and moving towards insights that might lead to faith. Melley concludes his article with a clear and practical example of how this might be done.

The final paper from the Conference has been offered by Alfred Pang and concerns the social agency of children and the implication of this for Religious Education. He critiques past attitudes towards children as being ‘unformed adults’. This critique of adultism reclaims a respect for children in and of themselves, rather than in comparison to who they might become. The author states that children are entitled to flourish in situations of relational belonging, where they can discover their own agency, rather than be controlled by adult perceptions of what is best for them. He uses the recovery of the Lasallian tradition to explore the contemporary application of this spirituality to the situation especially of children who are poor, abused and otherwise socially disadvantaged. The author highlights the importance of God coming into the world as a child when any other option was available. The importance of the incarnation points to the importance of children in the scheme of making creation whole again. The relevance of the Lasallian tradition to pedagogical practice is also explored—as teachers are called to be brothers and sisters to younger siblings in educating them. Finally, the author reiterates the need for Religious Education to be a space where there is a preferential option for children, and a place for relational belonging where all can flourish.

Other articles in this edition offer insights into some similar aspects of Religious Education. Worsley’s article offers further insights into the faith development of children over time with a report on a longitudinal study that he conducted. Huth’s article discusses the findings of her study involving a small group of teachers from Lutheran schools and their application of thinking skills in the Religious Education classroom. Cronshaw provides a description of a multi-faith program at a university, which provides the opportunity for inter-religious dialogue. The article by Franck considers Religious Education in a different space altogether when he discusses the notion of powerful RE knowledge that is needed in the RE classroom. He bases his analysis on the work of Young, and concludes that researchers and teachers need to collaborate in making subject specific decisions about the constituent powerful knowledge is in RE in varying circumstances.