

Prayer and social justice key to bringing the faith to the next generation, say Catholic teachers

Through nearly 30 years of teaching religion, Eugenia Chisotti's goal has remained the same: above all, religion class is where students should encounter a personal relationship with God.



Eugenia Chisotti

“What I really emphasize in my department is if we get our students to develop a spirituality and a relationship with God that they can develop over a lifetime, then we’ve succeeded,” said Chisotti, who heads the religion department at St. Francis Xavier High School in Edmonton.

“If they can’t recite Psalm 28 by heart, that’s fine. But having that personal relationship with God – that’s what we have to get kids hooked into to build a better world.”

As of Sept. 3, another school year is underway for Catholic schools across the country. Catholic education in Alberta dates back more than 130 years, and today the Alberta Catholic School Trustees Association includes 24 school districts serving 181,000 students across Alberta, Yukon and the Northwest Territories.

When she teaches religion to her Grade 4 class at downtown Edmonton’s St. Teresa of Calcutta Elementary School, Sara Kovick also hopes she encourages a relationship with God more than all else. For her, that is the very heart of Catholic education.



Sara Kovick using wind as a metaphor for the Holy Spirit during an outdoor Grade 4 religious studies class. photo supplied

“God is love. That is the central focus of everything. That’s how we begin and end our lessons – and because of that, we also need to express that love to each other,” she said.

“As a Catholic, the importance of teaching religion – and why I will send my kids to Catholic schools – is that I want students to always have a relationship with someone who loves them. They can go to Mass anywhere and be a part of that international community, and they will always have that relationship component with God.”

Where that relationship is most noticeable among Kovick’s students is in their prayer life. Prayer is a daily component of school life across the Edmonton Catholic School District.

“At first when you’re trying to open students up to prayer, after a few minutes it’s clear many aren’t praying. They’re making eye contact with their friends or whatever,” she said. “But as the school year goes on, they not only engage in prayer, sometimes students will actually ask to make more time for prayer.”

“I always joke with them that I’m not a morning person, and sometimes students will tell me, ‘Today, I prayed your grumpiness would end this morning.’ ”



Jilian Basanes

The growth in prayer rings true for nine-year-old Jilian Basanes, a fifth-grader at St. Teresa of Calcutta. Not only has her prayer life grown, she's even improved in her Lenten fasts through religion class. During last year's Lent, she reduced her electronics use to only an hour a day.

Coming from an Orthodox Christian background, Grade 6 student Yabsira Wudineh, 11, has grown closer to God and her family through her time in the Catholic school district.



Yabsira Wudineh

"Since I am a believer in Jesus, religion class is really important," said the St. Teresa of Calcutta student. "I've learned a bunch of things about my religion – how to grow in prayer, why we hold to our moral beliefs, and I know there's still more things I have to learn."

At the high school level, the social justice side of Church life is what draws many young students to religion.

"They see what's happening with our environment, with people fighting over supposedly religious wars," said Chisotti, who currently teaches religion to Grade 12 students. "They are so connected with wanting to make the world a better place, and they often come in to class feeling helpless.

"But we can get them to realize through everyday living and through volunteering, they can make a difference."

Ryan Feehan, principal at St. Thomas More Jr. High School, has taught religion

at junior high schools across the district. He too has noticed that the charitable work of the Church plays a major role in attracting students to religious life.



Ryan Feehan

“Faith is more than what we’re learning in terms of scripture or Church history. It’s also going to the Mustard Seed and bringing in cans of food to support families in our area,” he said.

“Students can get so engaged when they have that central goal of helping someone. The social justice work springs out of our understanding that we live for the glory of God. We make our decisions not to benefit ourselves but to benefit our communities.”

Even at the elementary level, students like Jilian Basanes note that charity and helping those less fortunate is a vital part of living a faith-informed life.

“It’s important to learn about God, because He was the one who made us. And because He created us, it’s important we do good things for each other,” she said.

Feehan suspects that social media has been the cause of the increased interest in the Church’s social justice mission. The access to information sparked by the Internet has made issues such as climate change, poverty, or migration common concerns that students bring to the classroom.

He is happy to teach to a much more inquisitive generation. An open environment where students are engaged and willing to ask questions is key in Feehan’s religion classes.

“Students are asking more questions. They’re more curious about faith, and it creates an amazing dialogue,” he said. “Students are in information overload nowadays, so what they want is clarification. They want clarification to direct their own spiritual journey. And for me, being up-to-date on what’s going on in a greater societal context and being prepared to get into the nitty-gritty of where students want to go, is just an amazing opportunity.

“I’ve had students who will put their hands up and say, ‘I’m an atheist, and I’m only here because I have to be.’ And I catch them off guard when I say, ‘That’s great. You believe strongly in something, and that means we can have a conversation.’”

Many non-Catholic students are enrolled in Edmonton Catholic Schools today, and religion courses also devote time to the study of other faiths.

Teacher Kovick was baptized Catholic as a baby, but because her father was not Catholic, she did not attend Mass as a child. This experience has helped in her approach to teaching students who do not come from a Catholic household.

“I can understand what it’s like for our students who don’t have that Catholic background, so I break it down to basics,” she said. “Even if they don’t become Catholic or remain Catholic, I want them to have an accurate and foundational understanding of the faith.”

While she keeps her class focused in the basics of Catholic faith and growing their own relationships with God, Kovick says her ultimate teaching goal is in the realm of vocations.

“It’s my dream to have a student leave class one day and say, ‘I want to be a priest when I grow up,’ ” she said. “I would be so happy to have that happen.”