

*The Role of the*  
Diocesan Advisor  
*for Post-Primary*  
Religious Education



IRISH CATHOLIC  
BISHOPS' CONFERENCE  
COMROHÁIL EASPAID CAITLÍCEACH ÉIREANN



## Introduction

The family, the school and the Church are overlapping communities, with shared responsibilities in the moral and spiritual formation of young people. The expectation that adequate religious education be provided in schools follows from the wishes of parents. The local bishop assists the school in this responsibility by appointing Diocesan Advisors that support and guide the religious education programme of a school. This document sets out the role of Diocesan Advisors in greater detail by describing their activities.

The Diocesan Advisor is a person appointed by the local bishop(s) to act in the name of the local Church in relation to schools within the diocese. This appointment brings with it certain responsibilities and requires certain qualities in the Diocesan Advisor.

While the bishop's authority is to watch over the orthodoxy of religious instruction and the observance of Christian morals in Catholic schools, it is the task of the whole school community to ensure that a distinctive Christian educational environment is maintained in practice.

This provision, in relation to the role of the diocesan bishop as regards education, is included in the Code of Canon Law. The Code is clear that bishops have a responsibility in relation to religious education which is not just confined to Catholic schools.

The formation and education in the Catholic religion provided in any school is subject to the authority of the Church. It is for the Episcopal Conference to issue general norms concerning this field of activity and for the diocesan bishop to regulate and watch over it. The local Ordinary is to ensure that those who are to be appointed as teachers of religion in all schools are outstanding in true doctrine, in the witness of their Christian life and in their teaching ability (Code of Canon Law #804).

## Qualification for the Post

The person nominated as Diocesan Advisor must be a person of faith. Furthermore, as the Diocesan Advisor will be working in collaboration with teachers, schools and school management, it is important that he/she has experience of working within a school and holds professional qualifications in education/religious education. In addition, the person should have taught religious education within a post-primary framework. The Diocesan Advisor must be freely available to visit schools during the school year.

## The Role of the Diocesan Advisor

Since the Diocesan Advisor is appointed by the local bishop, he decides the role of the Diocesan Advisor within that particular diocese. However, the functions can be described under the following broad headings. These should not be regarded as exhaustive and may be added to or varied, depending on local circumstance:

### 1. School Visits

It is by making regular personal visits that the advisor builds up familiarity and trust with the principal, chaplain and religious education team of each school.

The Diocesan Advisor is obliged to make at least one substantial visit to each school in the diocese in a given year. The visit should be arranged in advance for a mutually acceptable time and a notice of the visit sent to each school for the attention of the religious education teachers. The visit should be arranged for a day when the religious education team is available to meet the advisor.

Ideally, a timetable for the advisor's visit is drawn up by the school prior to the visit. On arrival, the advisor should meet with the principal and then with the head of the religious education

department. The Diocesan Advisor should then meet with the religious education teachers, individually and/or as a subject department. These meetings will involve the bringing of new resources and ideas to the teachers' attention, as well as listening to and discussing issues that arise in the school's religious education programme. The advisor will help the religious education team to evaluate their work and provide support. All these meetings should take place in a suitable room.

The advisor may visit classes timetabled for religious education that day, to encourage and review the students' participation in religious education. The Diocesan Advisor should visit the oratory, where one exists, and any designated sacred space within the school, as well as appraising the other resources which the school provides for religious education. Ideally, the visit should conclude with a second meeting with the school principal – this is to appreciate the work being done and also to state concerns, when such are warranted.

The formal visit to the school is, if possible, made in the first term, when there is less pressure from examinations. In the second and third term follow-up visits are made, for example, during morning break, to make teachers aware of new resources, events or to welcome a newly appointed religious education teacher or chaplain. Towards the end of the academic year, it is useful to visit schools to assist with forward planning and facilitate decision making around the choice of textbooks, teaching methodologies, the provision of retreats, etc.

## 2. Reporting

In every subject in the curriculum, the Department of Education and Skills (DES) in the Republic of Ireland and the Department of Education in Northern Ireland have a group of qualified inspectors who report to the Ministers of Education and ensure standards are maintained. Canon Law assigns the role of the oversight of religious education to the local bishop (Code of Canon Law #801–806). The Diocesan Advisor is appointed by the bishop in the exercise of this pastoral responsibility. The Diocesan Advisor reports to the bishop at regular intervals on issues that call for his attention.

As religious education is now a multi-denominational examination subject offered at both Junior Certificate and Leaving Certificate level in the Republic of Ireland and General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) and General Certificate of Education (GCE) A Level and AS Level in Northern Ireland, the Department of Education in both jurisdictions has appointed an inspector for religious education. An element of evaluation and consequent reporting is also part of the work of the Diocesan Advisor in the area of faith formation. An Annual Report should be made for the local bishop. Diocesan Advisors have traditionally involved themselves with the resourcing and support of the mainstream syllabi for RE – including those for State examinations. This is alongside the professional development services of the DES.

In general terms, the Diocesan Advisor should report to the following:

- i. The school principal, with whom the Diocesan Advisor should meet during school visits. Furthermore, there may be merit in submitting a report to the school's Board of Management/ Board of Governors;
- ii. The local bishop, who has a role in relation to the religious education of Catholic students and the religious education curriculum. The Diocesan Advisor's report should include information on syllabus, qualification, resources, time-allocation and methodology, and evidence of the living ethos of a Catholic school;

- iii. The local Education and Training Board (ETB) in the Republic of Ireland. Since the ETB has responsibility to provide 'religious instruction' in vocational schools and community colleges, under the provisions of Circular 7/79 and the Model Agreements of Designated Community Colleges and the Deeds of Trust of Community schools, the Diocesan Advisor should foster links with the local ETB, ideally through the CEO or Education Officer. This could be done through an annual report or meeting.

### 3. Appointments

Since, 'in his own diocese, the local Ordinary has the right to appoint or to approve teachers of religion and, if religious or moral considerations require it, the right to remove them or demand that they be removed' (Code of Canon Law #805), the Diocesan Advisor may be required to participate in selection/interview boards for teachers of religion. While undertaking this task, the Diocesan Advisor will conform to regulations governing such boards by, for example, the local ETB or the community schools concerned. Furthermore, the Diocesan Advisor will be mindful that he/she is the representative of the Catholic bishop on such boards.

### 4. Chaplaincy

The Diocesan Advisor will also be responsible for duties in relation to the appointment, support and probation of chaplains as required by the local bishop. For schools under the authority of the Education and Training Boards Ireland (ETBI) these duties are contained in the 'Contracts for Chaplains' as agreed by the ETBI and the Irish Bishops' Conference. In the case of comprehensive and community schools, the duties for chaplains are outlined by contracts drawn up by the Association of Community and Comprehensive Schools. The local bishop may require the Diocesan Advisor to undertake further responsibilities in this regard.

## **5. National Association**

Diocesan Advisors should belong to the National Association of such advisors. This organisation should work in close collaboration with the Council for Education of the Irish Bishops' Conference and with the Council for Catechetics of the Irish Bishops' Conference, in relation to the syllabi for religious education, in relation to identifying resources and encouraging appropriate methodologies. Membership of this association is also important for the support, formation and development of the Diocesan Advisor. In this regard, the programme for meetings of the National Association should seek to address issues/topics of relevance to the Diocesan Advisor and the general aim of these meetings should be to provide faith and professional development opportunities for its members.

## **6. Organising and Leading In-services for Religious Education Teachers**

The Diocesan Advisor should organise an annual in-service for the religious education teachers of a diocese. This gathering introduces teachers to leading speakers in the catechetics or faith development field. It renews a sense of enthusiasm for their work, as well as providing information updates and skills. All Catholic schools, schools under Catholic co-trusteeship and teachers of the Catholic faith in VEC schools are expected to be represented at this meeting.

Other less formal in-services are arranged on a local (school cluster), shorter (afternoon or evening), and particular interest (chaplain, head of religious education, year group) basis. Diocesan Advisors may also organise retreats and days of prayer for religious education personnel.



## **7. Engaging with Schools and the Partners in Education**

The Diocesan Advisor's primary function is to support the school's religious education team in its responsibility as a provider of religious education. A school profile form, a template for which is included here, is sent to each school at the beginning of the academic year. The completed form is returned to the advisor to assist with planning and to provide an overview of the school's religious education activities and personnel. The advisor engages with the religious education team, the principal, the board of management and the trustees of a given school as necessary.

## **8. Developing Links between Home, School and Parish**

In partnership with other diocesan services, the Diocesan Advisor promotes links between school, parish and home, creating possibilities for interaction between these partners in education in a particular area.

- The advisor can discharge this role to parishes by meeting with local pastoral teams to provide information on post-primary catechetics and suggest possibilities for parish–school links.
- For schools, the Diocesan Advisor might facilitate a diocesan-based certification/awards scheme to acknowledge the role schools play in the pastoral life of local Catholic communities. Such links might encourage the setting up of a youth group in the parish or a new choir, or a liturgy group for Sunday Masses. The advisor might also promote programmes which facilitate teenage 'faith friends' for those preparing for First Communion and Confirmation.
- The Diocesan Advisor can support and encourage parent gatherings in schools or parishes where the topic of religious education and the Catholic educational ethos is being addressed.

## **9. Evaluation of Religious Education in the School**

The Diocesan Advisor is an employee of the local diocese whose concern is the catechetical programme in post-primary schools. The Diocesan Advisor should, therefore, remind all the partners in education of the central position of religious education in the curriculum. The advisor recommends the adequate timetabling and resourcing of religious education classes as well as the other features of faith formation such as retreats.

It is good practice for the Diocesan Advisor to write up a personal evaluation of the school following each visit. A template for this is included. This record can be the basis for a report held for the bishop's attention. It can also be used if a letter is written to the principal or the school's board, subsequent to a visit.

In all cases, the evaluation should recognise the strengths of a school's religious education programme and view any shortcomings in the context of a willingness to assist the school's authorities.

## **10. Gathering and Sharing Resource Materials**

The Diocesan Advisor informs schools about the best available resources for the religious education syllabi, faith formation and the celebration of the liturgical year. The advisor can help schools choose the textbooks and other materials best suited to their particular needs. This is done when making personal visits to schools as well as by regular mailings of a newsletter. The Diocesan Advisor's newsletter also promotes religious education in-services and other catechetical and diocesan events.

Each advisor should compile a teacher and Chaplain email database to regularly distribute prayer services and resources relevant to the syllabi. The advisor may, as required, update on a regular basis the section of their diocese's website devoted to post-primary catechesis with resource material and information.



## 11. Overview

A primary role of the Diocesan Advisor is to ensure that the provisions for teaching religious instruction are upheld, particularly in terms of content and in terms of timetabling allocation. Within the Catholic school, there is an obligation on catechists to impart knowledge that respects the teaching of Christ and the Church. This obligation was restated by John Paul II in his jubilee address to catechists:

Your work, dear catechists and religion teachers, is more necessary than ever and requires on your part constant fidelity to Christ and to the Church. For all the faithful have a right to receive from those who, by office or mandate, are responsible for catechesis and preaching answers that are not subjective, but correspond with the Church's constant Magisterium, with the faith that has always been taught authoritatively by those appointed teachers and lived exemplarily by the saints.

*Pope John Paul II, Address to Catechists at St Peter's Rome,  
10 December 2000.*

This 'work' must be supported, evaluated and reported on by the Diocesan Advisor. The Diocesan Advisor is a person appointed by the local bishop to act in the name of the local Church in relation to schools within the diocese. This is a shared responsibility for the moral and spiritual formation of young people.

# Sample School Profile Form

Year: \_\_\_\_\_

School: \_\_\_\_\_

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_ Telephone: \_\_\_\_\_

Email: \_\_\_\_\_

Number of pupils: \_\_\_\_\_

Principal: \_\_\_\_\_

Chaplain(s): \_\_\_\_\_

Teacher	Classes / Cycle

Head of RE: \_\_\_\_\_

Most suitable days for a visit from the Diocesan Advisor: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Please attach the school's RE timetable.

# Sample School Evaluation Form

Name of school: \_\_\_\_\_

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

RE Coordinator: \_\_\_\_\_

Date of visit: \_\_\_\_\_

	State Exam?	Textbook series	Hours of RE per week	Retreat provided?
Junior Cycle				
Senior Cycle				

Outline of visit: \_\_\_\_\_

Arrived at: \_\_\_\_\_ AM      \_\_\_\_\_ PM

Departed at: \_\_\_\_\_ AM      \_\_\_\_\_ PM

Catechetical facilities (prayer room, resources, etc.): \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Strengths noted: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Needs follow up: \_\_\_\_\_

