

The Cultural Dimension of Catholic Liturgical Rites in Catholic Religious Education in the Context of the Objectives of the Education System in Italy

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Abstract: This article aims to show the possibility of an academic approach to teaching the Catholic religion at school to the liturgical rites of the Catholic Church from a cultural perspective. Liturgical rites consist of numerous signs and symbols that refer to the human dimension, which seeks what is beautiful, true, and good. At all levels, one of the main objectives of Italian and European schools is to teach, educate, and raise responsible and upright citizens. Therefore, while contributing to the general formation of the human being at school, the teaching of Catholic religion also draws students closer, in cultural terms, to the great code, i.e., the liturgy of the Catholic Church. It is certainly a form of public and social communication. It is education in action. In this sense, for example, it could be a considerable and systematic cultural opportunity for Ukrainian students residing in Poland, a chance to learn the symbolic language of the Catholic liturgy in the perspective of reaching human maturity without fear of proselytism from the Catholic Church. This article in no way intends to diminish the intrinsic value of the liturgy in the life of the Church, understood as a celebration, proclamation, commemoration, promise, and moral call whose purpose is to transform or transfigure the person so that he/she is oriented toward the highest good, i.e., God, and able to live a life of mutual love.

Keywords: teaching Catholic religion, liturgy, culture, public school, human formation

The war in Ukraine, triggered by the invasion by Russian troops on February 24, 2022, has shaken all of Europe and the world. According to UN estimates, more than three million people have fled the conflict-stricken country, more than half of the refugees being children. To help those fleeing the war, the European Union decided to activate the Temporary Protection Directive. The Directive came into force on March 4, 2022, ensuring, among other things, the right to education for children and adolescents. Furthermore, all the rights of Ukrainian refugees were published on the official website of the European Commission and came into effect forthwith.¹

¹ Commissione Europea, *Informazioni per le persone in fuga dalla guerra in Ucraina*.

The Polish Border Guard Main Headquarters reports that 4,233,617 Ukrainian citizens, mostly women and children, crossed the border with Poland in the first quarter of 2022.² According to the Polish Minister of Education and Science, in April 2022, 185,000 Ukrainian refugee children attended Polish schools, with 35,000 in kindergartens and 135,000 in elementary schools. At the same time, about 540,000 children participate in online classes held by Ukrainian schools, connecting remotely from Poland.³ This unprecedented situation generates numerous practical problems, including the issue of Ukrainian students attending religious education classes in Polish schools. Religious education in Poland follows a confessional model of religious education; Orthodox and Greek Catholic refugees spread throughout urban and rural areas of Poland, with mostly Catholic students,⁴ are having difficulties reaching schools where their churches provide religious education. In addition, the Orthodox Church in Poland is autocephalous, and making a central decision about organizing separate classes for students of Moscow or Kyiv Patriarchates is very hard.

This article attempts to present the teaching of the Catholic religion according to the denominational model implemented in Italy. An important aspect that comes to the fore here is the cultural dimension of teaching Catholic religion in the context of education standards in Italy, whose specificity is guaranteed by the concordat signed with the Holy See. It seems to us that this particular aspect could become a genuine and systematic cultural opportunity for Ukrainian students in Poland, allowing them to learn the symbolic language of Catholic liturgy without fearing Catholic proselytism.⁵ More broadly, these reflections attempt to provide a scientific response to the demands of the President of the Polish Bishops' Conference, who recently stressed the need to create a reformed educational and didactic project on the teaching of the Catholic religion in Polish schools with greater attention to the educational aspects of Christian culture.⁶

For the reasons mentioned above, the overall goal of this two-author Italian-Polish paper is indeed a cultural approach to the liturgical rites of the Catholic Church as a viable educational opportunity for schools. Rites involve many signs and symbols that relate to the human dimension, which seeks what is beautiful, true, and

2 Komenda Główna Straży Granicznej (Polish Border Guard Main Headquarters), *Informacja Statystyczna za I kwartał 2022 r.*, 1.

3 Minister Przemysław Czarnek, Ministerstwo Edukacji i Nauki@MEIN_GOV_PL 21.04.2022 (accessed 10.06.2022).

4 Bishop Wojciech Osiał, Head of the Catholic Education Commission of the Polish Bishops' Conference, states that the Catholic Church in Poland is undertaking initiatives to make Ukrainian children feel at home. First professional courses for Catholic teachers on teaching Ukrainian children are already taking place, e.g., KAI (Catholic News Agency) *Kościół w Polsce reaguje*.

5 It is worth recalling Pope Francis' statement, "To have lost the capacity to grasp the symbolic value of the body and of every creature renders the symbolic language of the Liturgy almost inaccessible to the modern mentality." Francis, *Desiderio Desideravi*, no. 44.

6 Gądecki, *Rada Stała*.

good.⁷ The cultural dimension of the Church's liturgical rites has not been analyzed so far. At the same time, there are other scholarly studies devoted to the teaching of the Catholic religion in Italy⁸ or the place of the liturgy itself within the teaching of Catholic religion or parish catechesis.⁹ The principal method used here is a critical analysis of the source texts carried out using theological hermeneutics¹⁰ and analysis and synthesis methods that make it possible to isolate and then compare the essential elements of the cultural dimension of the Church's liturgical rites in the teaching of the Catholic religion in the context of the objectives of Italian education.

In no way does this study intend to diminish the intrinsic value of liturgy in the life of the Church, understood as a celebration, proclamation, commemoration, promise, and a moral call whose purpose is to transform or change the person so that he/she is oriented toward the highest good, i.e., God, and knows how to live a life of mutual love for one another.¹¹ Instead, this study aims to draw attention to the cultural approach to teaching religion, in which a school subject such as Catholic religion 'can' and 'must' fit into the school goals. The recipients of 'cultural religion lessons' can be believers and non-believers, Christians and non-Christians. If the school is a place for the humanization of the human being, then teaching the Catholic religion by assuming a cultural approach to the great code of liturgy will help all students to confront themselves critically to grow in humanity through the construction of a personal life project.¹² Moreover, it may be another opportunity to deepen the human foundations of their religion for Catholic students.

1. Preliminary Remarks

Before moving on to the main argument, it is necessary to understand the importance of two key aspects of this topic: (1) teaching Catholic religion and (2) liturgy.

⁷ Pope Francis (*Discorso al mondo della scuola italiana*) said, "The school's mission is to develop a sense of what is true, a sense of the good and beauty. This happens through a rich journey made up of many 'ingredients.' This is why there are so many subjects! Because development is the result of different elements interacting and stimulating the mind, conscience, feelings, and body."

⁸ See (in Polish), e.g., Misiaszek, *Koncepcja nauczania religii katolickiej*.

⁹ See, for example, Offmański, *Współczesna katecheza liturgiczna*. Piotr Tomasik, Zbigniew Marek, Andrzej Kiciński, Tadeusz Panuś, Anna Zellma, Stanisław Dziekoński, and others have published interesting articles in Polish on contemporary challenges of liturgical education and finding the right relationship between liturgy and catechesis and teaching religion at school.

¹⁰ See Napiórkowski, *Jak uprawiać teologię*, 70–72.

¹¹ Annicchiarico, "La liturgia nella catechesi," 655.

¹² It should be clarified that a 'life project' (within Catholic religious education) does not necessarily mean a Christian project; the student, confronting the system of Christian meanings, will be able to draw from it the tools to make personal choices of civic and responsible life.

1.1. Catholic Religious Education as an Academic Discipline

Teaching Catholic religion, through enriching religious culture, fitting into the objectives of the school, and borrowing a system of meanings from Christianity in the form of the Catholic creed, may offer the student a confrontation with the human being, the world, God, and the search for truth linked to the ultimate meaning of life. Moreover, it may help the student's personality to mature in religious terms and plan his/her role in society and history (see Figure 1¹³).

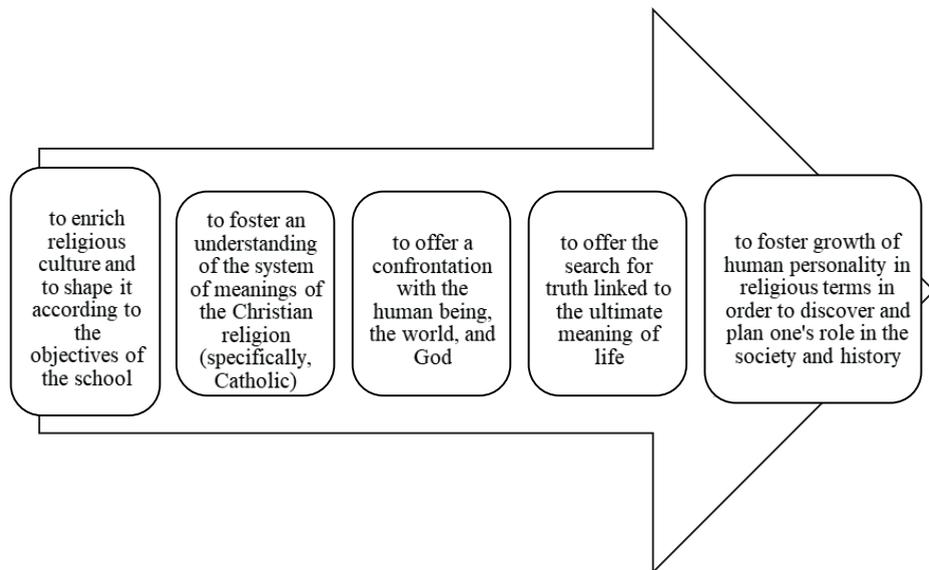


Figure 1. The goals of teaching the Catholic religion in the Italian school.

Like all academic disciplines taught at school,¹⁴ Catholic religious education has its epistemological status, which can be defined in four constitutive dimensions: biblical and theological, historical and cultural, anthropological, and pedagogical and methodological,¹⁵ as shown in Figure 2.

The Bible, with its historical, cultural, and anthropological significance, is the basis of the teaching of the Catholic religion and makes it a particularly formative subject whose theological approach to the Bible must not be merely philosophical and speculative or liberalist, but it must follow the principles that regulate the interpretation and guide the study of texts of proper nature.¹⁶

¹³ All figures in this paper have been prepared by the authors.

¹⁴ When speaking of the 'academic discipline' in a school context, we mean to help the student to think like an expert in a specific academic field, to see the world in a specific way, and not just 'the content' in the sense of collecting knowledge. See Gardner, *Cinque chiavi per il futuro*, 36–40.

¹⁵ Annicchiario, "L'Irc tra continuità e innovazione," 30–45.

¹⁶ Lorizio, "La dimensione relazionale," 24–40.

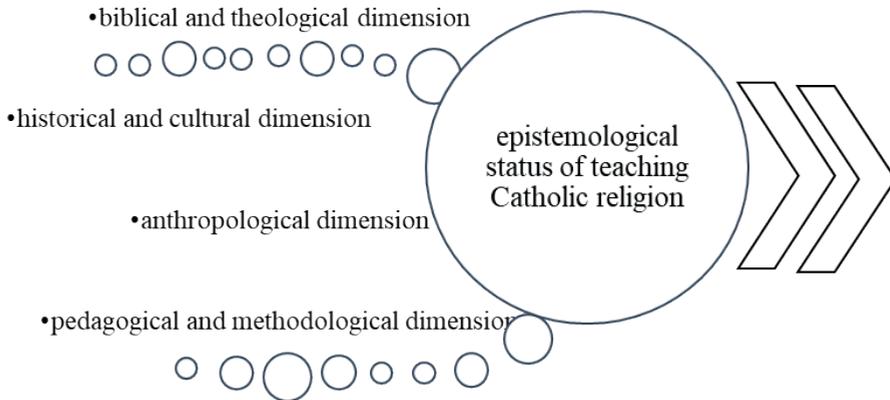


Figure 2. Teaching Catholic religion as an academic discipline at school.

Looking at teaching Catholic religion from a cultural-historical perspective, the post-biblical history of the Christian event characterizes the root-fruit relationship, that is, the religious reality that has constantly been developing in the history of the Church, the relation between faith and culture in Christian life. In this way, Christianity is brought closer to the student, demonstrating its connection with many aspects of the Italian and European cultural tradition, which, apart from giving the experience of faith, the understanding of reality, situations, and events, determine history, life, language, as well as express themselves in art, literature, social life, the development of thought, philosophy, and many other areas.

The anthropological dimension in teaching Catholic religion emphasizes the idea of the human being in which a dialogue between the humanities and theology is evident, for the human being is presented as a 'personal being' in relation to God, and he/she holds a special place among creation. Moreover, in relation to God, human lives in a state of dependence. He/she is therefore aware of his/her own responsibility, possesses a spirit with life force, knows that he/she is rational and conscious; he/she is rooted in time along with his/her existential wholeness and is called to live through history as a protagonist and a collaborator of God. From these premises follow the basic anthropological topics that can be further explored at school: interpersonal relations, sexuality, corporeality, symbolism, historicity, experience, conscience, and freedom.

The pedagogical and methodological dimension of Catholic religious instruction places the student in the center and is based on an idea of the integral vision of a person; learning is supported by the law of 'educational unity,' to which all academic disciplines contribute, conceived not as separate hermetic chambers but as

interconnected blocks. Furthermore, teaching Catholic religion helps to establish a dialogue in the cultural and historical dimensions of the fact of Christianity, encouraging interest in religion, deep existential questions, and the growth of personality in the religious sphere. In a historic address to Catholic religion teachers, Pope Benedict XVI stated, “Consequently, the religious dimension is not a superstructure, it is an integral part of the person from the very earliest infancy; it is fundamental openness to otherness and to the mystery that presides over every relationship and every encounter with human beings. The religious dimension makes the person more human.”¹⁷

1.2. Liturgy as the ‘Great Code’ of the Church

The semantic evolution of the term ‘liturgy’ is not the primary concern of this study. However, it is worth mentioning some fundamental aspects related to this term: its origin, meaning, the biblical context, and its relationship with the Second Vatican Council.

The word ‘liturgy’ comes from the Greek λειτουργία (= leitourgía), derived from λαός (= laós) ‘the people’ and ἔργον (= érgon) ‘work’ (in the sense of ‘the effect of effort; something we create or do through work and effort’). In ancient Greece, the term meant work, action, and initiative undertaken voluntarily by an individual or a family (out of their own will) for the good of the people, the neighborhood, the city, or the state.¹⁸ The LXX¹⁹ always uses it as a technical term, denoting public and official worship in accordance with Levitical cultic regulations, as opposed to private worship, which in the same LXX translation is mainly referred to through ‘latría’ (from Greek λατρεία = latreía) or ‘dulía’ (from Greek δουλία = doulía).

It should be noted that in the New Testament, both in the Gospels and in the Apostolic writings, the term ‘liturgy’ never appears as a synonym for ‘worship’ except for Acts 13:2: “One day while they were offering cult to the Lord and keeping a fast, the Holy Spirit said, ‘I want Barnabas and Saul set apart for the work to which I have called them,’” [in our translation]). Although this term does not appear in the New Testament, probably because in early times, it was too closely associated with the Levitical cult; nonetheless, it is present in noncanonical writings of Judeo-Christian origin.

¹⁷ Benedict XVI, *Discorso agli Insegnanti di religione cattolica italiani*.

¹⁸ Benedict XVI, *Discorso agli Insegnanti di religione cattolica italiani*, 726–727.

¹⁹ Benedict XVI, *Discorso agli Insegnanti di religione cattolica italiani*, 726–727. The term LXX refers to the Greek translation of the Old Testament called the *Septuagint*. It is worth mentioning here that the full Greek translation of the Jewish Torah was produced in the early third century BC, and the term the *Septuagint* reflects the Latin notation ‘seventy,’ referring to the approximate number of translators mentioned by Aristotle. This version is used to refer not only to the Pentateuch in Greek but - in Christian circles - to the entire corpus of the Greek translations and compositions of the Old Testament.

After some remarks on the origins and meaning, it is worth looking at the meaning of the term ‘liturgy’ in Vatican II’s *Sacrosanctum Concilium*. This constitution was the first conciliar document approved by an overwhelming majority. It states, “The liturgy then is rightly seen as an exercise of the priestly office of Jesus Christ. It involves the presentation of man’s sanctification under the guise of signs perceptible by the senses and its accomplishment in ways appropriate to each of these signs. In it, full public worship is performed by the Mystical Body of Jesus Christ, that is, by the Head and his members. From this, it follows that every liturgical celebration, because it is an action of Christ, the priest, and of his Body, which is the Church, is a sacred action surpassing all others. No other action of the Church can equal its efficacy by the same title and to the same degree”²⁰ (SC 7) (see Figure 3).

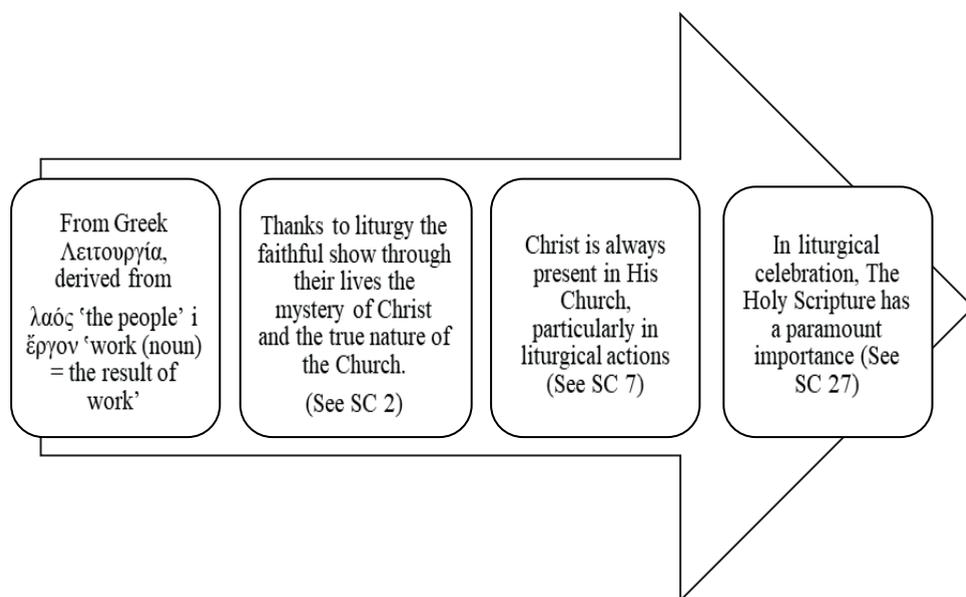


Figure 3. ‘Liturgy’ according to *Sacrosanctum Concilium*.

The teacher of Catholic religion has the duty to assume a cultural approach toward this great code, i.e., the liturgy, following the school’s objectives which aim at human maturity toward religion and Christianity, and not just the strictly Christian maturity offered within the ecclesiastical community.

In short, Italy, Poland, and the whole of Europe are experiencing pluralism which is not so insignificant at all, has different facets, and which any educational system

²⁰ Second Vatican Council, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, no. 7.

must accept. Undoubtedly, this is a challenge for teaching the Catholic religion in public schools. This unprecedented situation we are witnessing in Europe creates the need for a change of vision to which the instruction of the Catholic religion must also give an educational and cultural response. In fact, the increasing number of non-native students professing a faith other than Catholicism or no religious affiliation invites teachers of the Catholic religion to confront this unprecedented element of school educational practice, namely religious pluralism. Students (and their families) bring to school with them, often unconsciously, their perception of the world, the truth, and the rules of life marked by a significant difference in values.

This mainly affects religious education but applies to philosophy, humanities, history, and other disciplines. This is cultural pluralism crystallized in the pluralism of scientific disciplines. To this religious and cultural (academic) pluralism, we add the third factor, albeit less perceptible but objective, which manifests itself in Christian identity and is revealed in Catholic religious teaching, namely, confessional pluralism, namely, the non-superficial difference between Catholics, Orthodox, and Protestants.

Studying the ritual form in the liturgy, we discover that it involves the whole person and his/her senses, as well as objects, sounds, colors, lights, words, and gestures. In essence, it is not just a way of expressing the already processed content but an act of revelation and the beginning of new communication. For this reason, the understanding of liturgy has a symbolic character before it is developed at the conceptual level.²¹ The right communication environment fosters the realization of the liturgical celebration. For the teaching of the Catholic religion, liturgy is a reality that we have to draw from in order to learn about the cultural heritage of a given nation, with particular attention given to the anthropological meanings associated with liturgical signs, such as gestures and words, signs and symbols, lights and shadows, moments of fullness and silence, songs and proclaimed words, the space within which the congregation moves, places of worship, the liturgical calendar, feasts, sacraments, rites, and folk traditions. At the cultural level, everything provides rich material for the discovery and reflection on attitudes toward human life that each person can put into practice. For this reason, the instruction of Catholic religion at school can explain and interpret the religious and spiritual elements present in the culture to discover in them the deepest meaning of human existence; in other words, the teaching of liturgy in Catholic religion classes from a cultural perspective demonstrates the reasonableness of faith.

²¹ With regard to the distinction between conceptual language and symbolic language, it should be emphasized that conceptual language, one of the greatest historical achievements of mankind, enables precision, rigor, and linearity in words and discourse, as well as the ability to analyze, abstract and synthesize; while symbolic language is best suited to communicate realities that are 'compressed' into overly precise definitions, such as speaking of beauty, love, faith, God, etc. See Annicchiarico, *Lomelia nell'era digitale*, 86–93; See also Kiciński, "Verso la didattica del simbolo," 253–284.

2. The Catholic Religion Teacher's Use of Symbolic Language Typical of the Liturgy

If the essence of the liturgical celebration is the mystery of God revealed and given in Christ and His Passover, then we can assume that for Christians, this is a reality in itself challenging to express in conceptual language alone; in fact, the proper language of the liturgy is symbolic. It best expresses the unspeakable. However, symbolism in the liturgy is always accompanied by the word that clarifies its meaning, and it must be understood in the biblical context from which it originated and on which its meaning is based; in fact, liturgical symbolism is always dynamic and leads to action.²²

That said, the question arises whether a cultural approach to liturgy (especially to its signs and symbols) at school can have a constructive effect on the student's maturity. While we will come back to this issue later, let us point out here that for the approach to liturgy to be cultural, the Catholic religion teacher should avoid careless liturgical preparation that lacks specific technical language²³ (see Figure 4). The Catholic religion teacher should competently explain that the liturgy consists of multiple signs and symbols which, on the one hand, refer to inner and profound truth and, on the other hand, tend to elevate the relationships of those who participate in it to the maximum humanization of the human being, emphasizing the 'God-human' and 'human-God' relationships. From a cultural point of view, the teacher helps the student recognize the goodness of human endeavors and discover their value when the theandric mystery of the human being is presented in all its beauty.

In the face of the Mystery of God and the mystery of the human being, the liturgy – a source and summit of the Christian life – reveals the divine-human nature of the human being and thus emphasizes his/her identity. If the search for truth is one of the tasks of the human being that the school knows how to interpret, the goal of teaching Catholic religion is to demonstrate the validity of the Christian response to the human religious question of otherness and openness to transcendence, to the 'Other' par excellence, that is, to God himself. The figure and work of Jesus Christ can be approached culturally from a liturgical perspective to understand the Paschal mystery and, thus, the heart of Christian revelation.

²² Tilliette ("Réflexion et symbole," 583) remarks, "Le symbole véhicule un contenu de pensées, il pousse vers l'expression spéculative, il est, non pas une pensée inarticulée et confuse à proprement parler, mais l'inauguration d'un mouvement qui finalement se résout ou se sublime en langage rationnel." (The symbol conveys the content of thought, which leads to speculative expression. This thought is not inarticulate or confusing, but it is the inauguration of a movement that eventually resolves itself or sublimates into rational language. – Translation from Italian). See also Ferrer Grenesche, "L'adeguamento delle chiese," 232–244; Lameri, *Segni e simboli riti e misteri*, 64–66.

²³ An example is the celebration of November 2nd, commonly referred to as the 'Feast of the Dead,' but in fact it is the 'Remembrance of the Faithful Departed.'

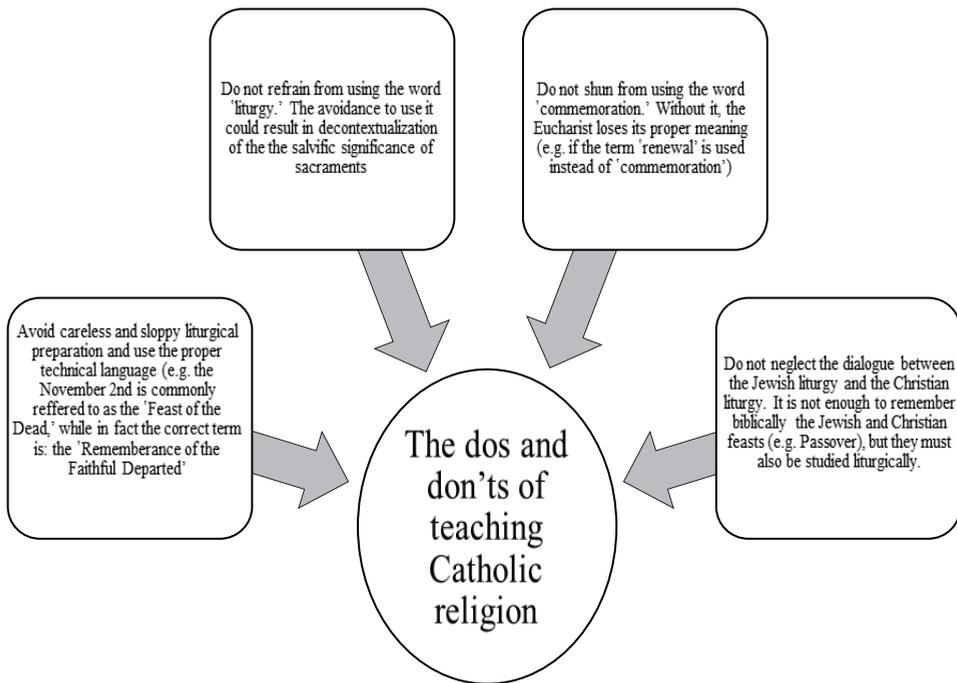


Figure 4. Teaching Catholic religion and liturgy: what should the teacher avoid

In this sense, liturgy can be considered an expression of the human search for beauty and, at the same time, a laboratory of art, precisely because of the elaboration of the rite itself, which the human being defines by employing human signs, figures and symbols, sounds, lights, chromatic nuances, words, and gestures to narrate and recount his/her encounter with God, thus creating this physical and ‘immaterial’ heritage of human history. It is a cultural heritage that is the object of Catholic religious studies. Pope Francis emphasizes, “We face a universal tension toward truth and the bimillenary witness given by believers in the light of faith, with the extraordinary heights of knowledge and art accomplished by the human spirit, and with the fruitfulness of the Christian message that so deeply permeates the culture and life of the Italian people.”²⁴

Therefore, the religious competence that the student acquires in Catholic religion classes will manifest itself in maturity toward religion, where attitudes and behavior will express, in terms of humanization, a determination with greater responsibility and freedom toward religious values and meanings. For this reason, teaching the Catholic religion presents this determination in terms of service to the student’s human maturity.

²⁴ Benedict XVI, *Discorso agli Insegnanti di religione cattolica italiani*.

3. The Cultural Approach to the 'Rite' in Catholic Religious Teaching

When we study the liturgical rite of the Catholic Church, we notice that various communicative codes interact, namely: word, gesture, music and singing, architecture, silence, dress, color, images, light, movement, smell, and taste. In fact, five human senses are involved: sight, hearing, smell, touch, and taste.²⁵ Therefore, at the anthropological level, it can be said that by observing the rite, the student will be able to grasp its three aspects from a cultural point of view: (1) a rite provides a break in the daily routine, (2) a rite is not a function of something but expresses selflessness in a relationship, (3) a rite expresses the principle of being together, of being a community.

The rite provides a break in the daily routine. It prompts a re-reading of the time spent in an attempt to give it meaning and direction. In this context, it is interesting to refer to Saint-Exupéry's interpretation which puts a profound explanation of the meaning of ritual into the mouth of the fox in *The Little Prince*, "It would have been better to come back at the same hour," said, the fox. "If, for example, you come at four o'clock in the afternoon, then at three o'clock I shall begin to be happy. I shall feel happier and happier as the hour advances. At four o'clock, I shall already be worrying and jumping about. I shall show you how happy I am! But if you come at just any time, I shall never know at what hour my heart is to be ready to greet you... One must observe the proper rites..." "What is a rite?" asked the little prince. "Those also are actions too often neglected," said the fox [...]"²⁶ In this sense, the rite is really an opportunity to give meaning to the flow of time, which is not always the same.

The rite expresses selflessness in a relationship. In a social context, typically guided by the criterion of 'useful relationships,' that is, relationships for their own sake, by emphasizing the centrality of God, the rite invites the human being to go beyond himself/herself and seek the Other, the Absolute. Relationships are the fundamental center of the human being, and, at the cultural level, Christianity, also through the rite, is the bearer of a profound novelty in the vision of the human being: a life in fraternity. Pope Francis stresses that living as brothers is good for humankind and states, "Goodness always tends to spread. Every authentic experience of truth and goodness seeks by its very nature to grow within us, and any person who has experienced a profound liberation becomes more sensitive to the needs of others."²⁷

²⁵ "Humans receive information through five senses: sight, hearing, taste, touch, and smell. The reality created by the mind is the result of partial information obtained from these senses." Siemieniecki, *Introduzione alla pedagogia cognitiva*, 79–80.

²⁶ De Saint-Exupéry, *Il piccolo principe*, chapter XXI: 131. The English translation quoted from the version available online at <https://books-library.net/files/books-library.online-12201041Ti6B3.pdf> (accessed 8.06.2022) 52.

²⁷ Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, no. 9.

Therefore, a cultural approach to the rite means learning to construct interpersonal relationships that are authentic and oriented toward truth, goodness, and beauty.

The rite expresses the principle of being together, of being a community. It represents the desire to identify/recognize oneself in a group and to be part of its culture. The symbolic language which expresses the rite is unifying; it links the individual to the community, making the community perceptible also in its mystery as the Church of Christ; in short, the rite as a symbol is an act of communion. Of course, to give reasons for their faith, the believers use cultural categories to express the reason-faith binomial; this supports understanding and encourages dialogue also with the so-called ‘cultural world,’ so dear to the school. In fact, in line with the scientific method of the study of the Catholic religion, drawn from the collaboration between religious studies and theology, one enters into a debate with many other opinions, using one’s own categories and language, highlighting foundations and rationales, and yet maintaining one’s autonomy and singularity on the scientific path.

4. Teaching Catholic Religion and Symbolic Language of the Liturgy

The relevance of the relationship between liturgy and symbolic language becomes most evident if we consider the elements that are fundamental to both: sign and action. Communication is essentially a ‘transmission of signs,’ which takes place ‘through signs.’²⁸ The liturgy shares two communication features, namely, sign and action. For example, when one studies the sacraments in the liturgy from a cultural point of view, one speaks of ‘efficacious signs;’ when one speaks of a celebration from a cultural point of view, it becomes a more or less long sequence of actions and behaviors that often modify the ordinary meaning of signs. Therefore, the liturgy, as ‘sign’ and ‘action,’ has a clear connection with human communication; moreover, the subjects of celebration exhibit communicative competence because they are engaged in interpersonal communication in their own ways.²⁹

In the following part of this study, we want to show how the current *Indicazioni Nazionali* (National Guidelines) for teaching Catholic religion at school relate to liturgy as a cultural heritage, a great communicative code.

²⁸ By signs, we mean various forms of expression, such as words, gestures, music, and space organization, among others. Communication through signs and symbols, as in the liturgy, is essentially the organization and usage of human languages as language in action, where the sign is not a mere structure but a behavior. See Bonaccorso, “Liturgia e comunicazione,” 679–680.

²⁹ Bonaccorso, “Liturgia e comunicazione,” 680.

4.1. Teaching Catholic Religion and Symbolic and Liturgical Language in the Kindergarten

In the Italian kindergarten, teaching Catholic religion offers opportunities for the integral development of children's personalities (3 to 5 years of age), opening them up to the religious dimension and strengthening it. It also promotes reflection on the children's heritage of experiences and contributes to responding to the need for meaning/sense, also present in the youngest children. In order to support children's personal growth, the learning objectives of teaching Catholic religion are distributed across different areas of experience: self and others, the moving body, language - creativity - expression, speech and words, and knowledge of the world.³⁰ The cultural approach to teaching Catholic religion with reference to the liturgy as a whole is particularly present in the area of language - creativity - expression, as illustrated in Figure 5.

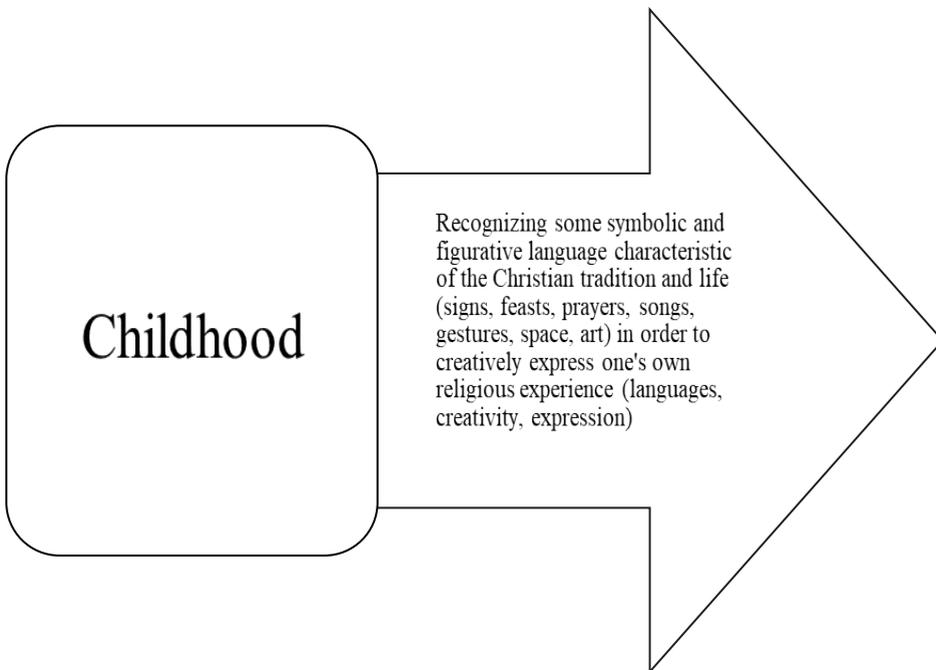


Figure 5. National guidelines for teaching Catholic religion to children: examples related to the liturgy.

³⁰ "Decreto del Presidente della Repubblica Italiana," 11.02.2010, *Premessa*.

Of course, other areas of experience should not be excluded or forgotten. For example, in the so-called ‘speech and word’ area, the child learns some Christian terms by listening to simple biblical stories; in addition, the child learns to narrate the content using the re-learned language, thus developing meaningful communication also in the religious sphere.

4.2. Teaching Catholic Religion in the First Cycle of Education

It must be noted that in Italy, the first cycle of education is an important moment in the overall development of the student (6 to 13 years of age).³¹

This stage is divided into primary school (6 to 10 years of age) and secondary school (11 to 13 years of age). At the end of this course, thanks to schooling, individual studies, and educational experiences in the family and the community, the student can deal independently and responsibly with life situations typical to his/her age, reflecting and expressing his/her personality in all its dimensions.³² On a side note, at all levels, one of the main objectives of Italian and European schools is the education, formation, and raising of responsible and upright citizens.³³

The path we are discussing comprises the *Objectives for the Development of Competences and the Learning Objectives (Traguardi per lo Sviluppo delle Competenze e in Obiettivi di Apprendimento)*. As far as the teaching of the Catholic religion is concerned, these objectives are formulated to express the desire to create a cultural map to help the students develop a unified understanding of reality and apply the various knowledge and skills through the lens of meaning that highlights the existential potential of each student. For this reason, the objectives for teaching Catholic religion by age group are divided into four thematic areas: (1) God and the human being, with the main historical and doctrinal references to Christianity, (2) the Bible and the sources, to provide an objective and documentary basis of knowledge, (3) religious language, in its verbal and non-verbal declensions, (4) ethical and religious values, to illustrate the link between purely religious elements and the development of a moral sense to promote civic and responsible coexistence.³⁴

³¹ For the structure of the Italian school system, see MIUR, *Sistema educativo di istruzione e di formazione*.

³² MIUR, “Indicazioni nazionali,” 16. See also “Decreto del Ministero dell’Istruzione della Repubblica Italiana,” no. 254, 16.11.2012, establishing national guidelines for curricula in pre-school education and in the first cycle of education, in accordance with Article 1, paragraph 4, “Decreto del Presidente della Repubblica Italiana,” 89/2009.

³³ Parlamento europeo e il Consiglio dell’Unione europea, *Raccomandazione del Consiglio*, 22.05.2018. Point 2.7 can be taken as an example, as it states that “promoting the development of civic skills in order to enhance awareness of the common values identified in Article 2 of the Treaty on European Union and in the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union.”

³⁴ “Decreto del Presidente della Repubblica Italiana,” 11.02.2010.

4.2.1. Teaching Catholic Religion as a Method of Examining Symbolic and Liturgical Language in the Primary School

It is worth noting that the preamble to the *National Guidelines for the Teaching of Catholic Religion in the First Cycle* states that the educational proposal aims to form people capable of dialogue and respect for differences, capable of behavior based on mutual understanding in a context of cultural and religious pluralism. That is why “it encourages comparison with the response matured in the Christian tradition with regard to the process of development of the person and in a manner adjusted to a specific age group, deepening the implications related to anthropology, society, and values; and encouraging a comparison through which the person, exercising his/her freedom, reflects and is guided in the choice of a responsible life project.”³⁵ Nowadays, the school provides a learning experience that students go through to acquire specific skills. Therefore, schools cannot dispense with promoting pupils’ ability to make sense of various experiences, including out-of-school experiences, to reduce the fragmentation and episodicity of their experiences that may characterize their lives.

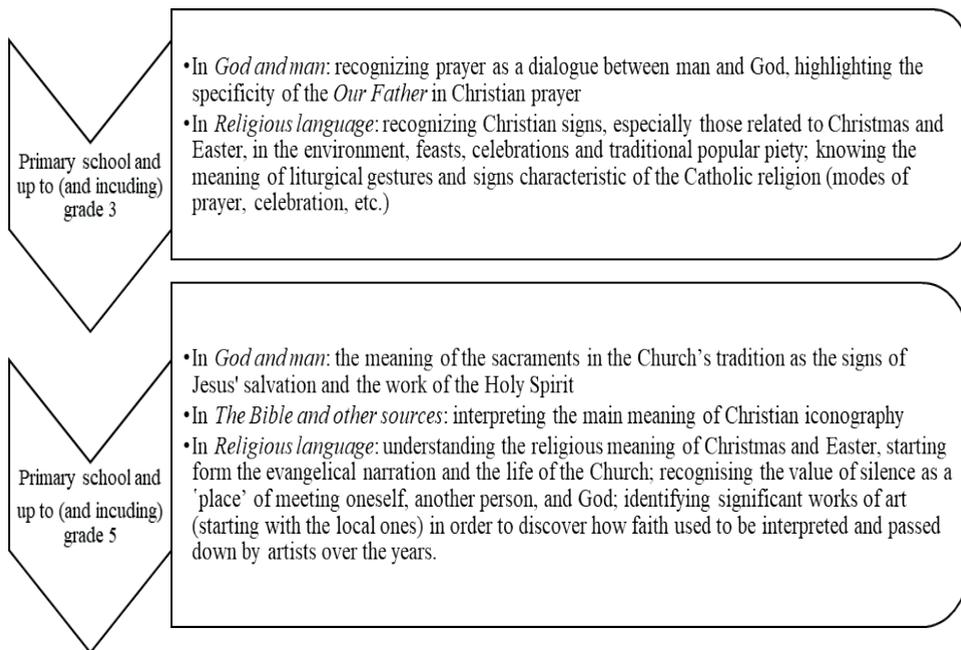


Figure 6. National guidelines for teaching Catholic religion in the primary school: examples related to liturgy.

³⁵ “Decreto del Presidente della Repubblica Italiana,” 11.02.2010, *Premessa*.

Regarding the teaching of liturgy in Catholic religion classes from a cultural perspective, it can be observed that the learning objectives in primary school, both at the end of the third grade and at the end of the fifth grade, draw attention to symbolic language in the following aspects: prayer (in particular the *Our Father*), Christian feasts (for example Christmas or Easter), the meaning of liturgical signs and gestures, sacraments, and so forth (see Figure 6).

It is clear from Figure 6 that this kind of program allows the student to see that the liturgy abounds with messages mediated by multiple codes, verbal and non-verbal. To acquire religious skills, we can say that through a cultural approach to the liturgical rites of the Catholic Church, students, both believers and non-believers, learn to make full use of their verbal, paraverbal, and non-verbal language.³⁶ In addition, students learn that all aspects of human expression are needed for authentic interpersonal communication by studying gestures, movements, music, organization of space, placement of objects and people, and images.

Symbols assume great importance in forming authentic religious expression, which can be a source of inspiration for the person's life project and developing a civic, responsible coexistence and solidarity. In fact, through the study of liturgical symbols, Catholic religion classes foster an educational experience that can change the behavior of students, constructively orienting them toward tasks involving responsibility (= personal action) and directed toward themselves and others. For example, being guided by knowledge related to the symbolic Eucharistic language allows the historical and cultural deepening and learning about Christian values such as thanksgiving, listening, and living together as brothers, among others.

4.2.2. Teaching Catholic Religion as a Method of Deepening Symbolic and Liturgical Language in the Lower Secondary School

The objectives for developing competences in the lower secondary school state that the student develops various religious competences at the end of the third grade. “[The student] recognizes the languages of expression of faith (symbols, prayers, rites), identifies their traces in the local, Italian and European areas, as well as in the world, learning to appreciate them from an artistic, cultural and spiritual point of view.”³⁷ In order to develop such competences, with regard to the cultural approach to the liturgy in teaching the Catholic religion, the teacher chooses the most appropriate learning objectives, as demonstrated in Figure 7.

Based on the learning objectives mentioned above, we can see how students can be helped to develop critical thinking and a spirit of observation. This creates an opportunity to culturally understand the meaning of Christian symbols, liturgical

³⁶ Mehrabian, *Nonverbal Communication*, 178–190.

³⁷ “Decreto del Presidente della Repubblica Italiana,” 11.02.2010.

celebrations, and sacraments of the Catholic Church in Italy and Europe. Education that begins with liturgical symbols will help students become accustomed to finding connections, similarities, and differences both with respect to their own way of life and to other religions, thus cultivating respect for cultural differences while enabling them to recognize their own religious identity and prompting them to action. For instance, by observing how the liturgical space is used for meeting people, though it is primarily the place for meeting God, the student learns how to manage this space not in a selfish and self-referential way but as a place of proximity to another person with the view of an authentic relationship.³⁸

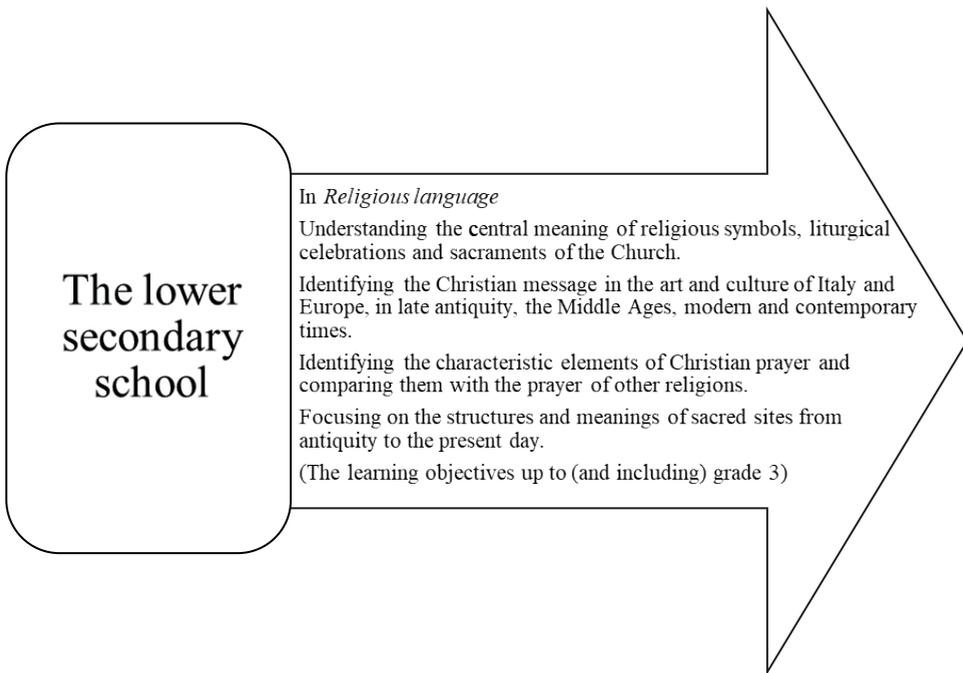


Figure 7. National guidelines for teaching Catholic religion in the lower secondary school: examples related to liturgy.

This approach allows the student to gain and effectively use the cultural tools which – through the optimal development of symbolization stimulated and supported by the school – enable communication even in the case of otherwise inexpressible and unknowable realities. In this sense, the confrontation with the historical form of the Catholic religion plays a fundamental role in teaching civic coexistence because

³⁸ Lameri, *Segni e simboli riti e misteri*, 69–70.

it allows capturing the important aspects of cultural identity, helping the student to discover ways of relating to people of other cultures and religions.³⁹

4.3. Teaching Catholic Religion in the Second Cycle of Education and Professional Formation

The structure of the second cycle of education in Italy (14 to 18 years of age) is based on knowledge, skills, and competences.⁴⁰ Knowledge aims at 'knowing' per se, for instance, knowing the content of Christianity related to the young person's existential condition, with which he/she is confronted critically and constructively. Skills, on the other hand, express the learning path required of the student and the mental, affective, and practical attitude that fosters such learning. Therefore, in the school of competences, also while teaching Catholic religion, competences stand for personal action, which is "a proven ability to use knowledge, skills and personal, social, and/or methodological abilities in work or study situations and professional and personal development."⁴¹

On such an educational and didactic path, the student adopts the values of religious culture by acquiring correct and well-grounded knowledge and critical thinking expressed in a personal way. He/she can discern the values inherent in the religious vision, evaluate its existential and cultural effects to compare with other religious proposals and intellectual trends and make free decisions about what he/she has learned in view of his/her life project.⁴²

4.3.1. Teaching Catholic Religion as a Method of Improving Symbolic and Liturgical Language in the Secondary School

In secondary school, the competences related to the instruction of the Catholic religion are grouped into three areas of meaning: anthropological and existential, historical and phenomenological, and biblical and theological. In addition, they recognize the value of religious culture and how the human principles of Catholicism can significantly contribute to the student's overall formation in relation to the historical, cultural, and civic heritage of the Italian and European nations. Indeed, the instruction of the Catholic religion adopts the cultural, educational, and professional profile of secondary schools by participating in developing the cultural axes with its own

³⁹ "Decreto del Presidente della Repubblica Italiana," 11.02.2010, *Premessa*.

⁴⁰ Ministero dell'Istruzione, dell'Università e della Ricerca (MIUR), *Sistema educativo di istruzione e di formazione*.

⁴¹ Parlamento europeo e il Consiglio dell'Unione europea, "Raccomandazione del Parlamento," 23.05.2008.

⁴² Annicchiarico, "L'Irc tra continuità e innovazione," 71.

academic identity. Moreover, it situates itself in the linguistic and communicative field, taking into account the specificity of the religious language and the relational scope of every religious expression. It thus makes a specific contribution to the methodological field, enriching the epistemological opportunities of interpreting reality, to the logical-argumentative field, providing critical tools for reading and evaluating religious data, to the historical-humanistic field, through the effects that the Catholic religion has historically produced and is still producing in Italian, European, and world culture, and to the scientific, mathematical, and technological fields, through its search for meanings and the attribution of meaning.⁴³

Figure 8 shows how teaching Catholic religion improves the learning of symbolic and liturgical language in a manner appropriate to secondary schools.

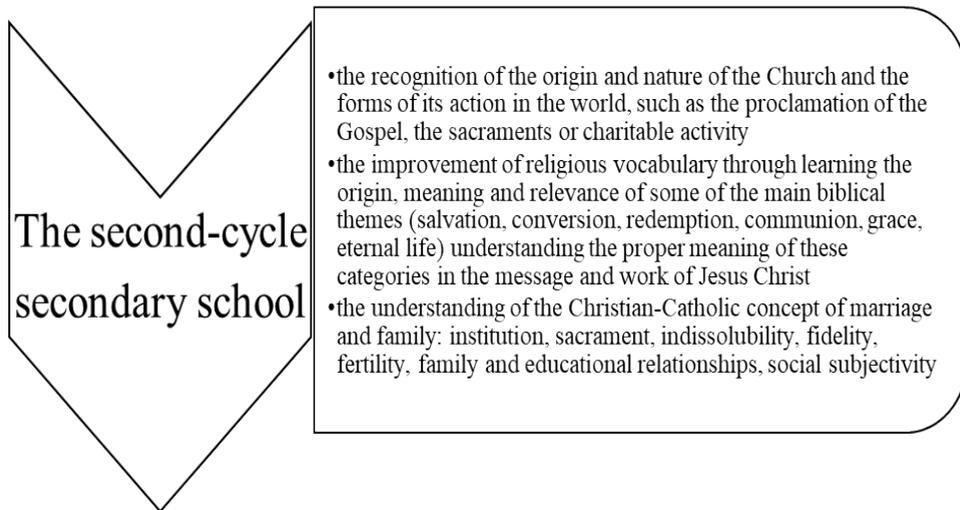


Figure 8. National guidelines for teaching Catholic religion in the secondary school: examples related to liturgy.

If we take a closer look from the point of view of the symbolic and liturgical language, it is possible to see how a high school student can pick up anthropological elements from the so-called 'liturgical processions' and find them useful for his/her own life project. For example, during the celebration of the Eucharist, the four types of processions emphasize the human value of walking together according to one's responsibilities.⁴⁴ At the level of the humanization of the human being,

⁴³ "Decreto del Presidente della Repubblica Italiana," 20.08.2012, *Allegato* no. 1.

⁴⁴ The procession to the altar of the priest and altar servers passing through the assembly; the procession from the altar to the pulpit with the Gospel for the proclamation of the Gospel; the procession to the altar for the offering of bread and wine; the procession of the faithful to receive the Holy Communion.

the student learns that authority by observing and studying the initial procession in the Eucharistic celebration, where entering the liturgical space last demonstrates the Christian concept of authority as service and not as the exercise of power. Indeed, the priest expresses this Christian concept by taking the final position in the entrance procession.⁴⁵ The student, believer or non-believer, Christian or non-Christian, critically confronts these elements and formulates his/her own beliefs in the context of his involvement in civic society.

Another example may be the study of the symbolic and liturgical language of the marriage rite. Here, the student can grasp the communicative and symbolic, and ritual value in its biblical and theological, historical and cultural, anthropological, and pedagogical-methodological sphere; he/she learns to distinguish the Christian-Catholic concept of marriage from other forms of union, discovering their meanings and responsibilities; if we assume that at a cultural level, he/she has a precise linguistic, cognitive, heuristic, and methodological knowledge that allows him/her a comparison with a concrete situation and with the interpretative tools of a religious fact in a socio-cultural context, in order to acquire a religious competence capable of helping to build one's own life project.

4.3.2. Teaching Catholic Religion as a Method of Improving Symbolic and Liturgical Language in Technical Institutes and Professional/Vocational Institutes

Catholic religious education in technical institutes offers specific approaches to the critical reading of the relationship between human dignity and technical, scientific, and economic development in confrontation with Christianity.⁴⁶ Similarly, in vocational schools, specific approaches are proposed for the critical reading of the relationship between human dignity, social development, and the world of production in open dialogue with Christianity.⁴⁷

As the approaches to teaching Catholic religion in these two types of schools are similar, it is possible to see how a cultural approach to the Catholic Church's liturgy helps students acquire religious skills concerning authentic forms of religiousness, distinguishing them from superstition and many other forms of esotericism. Moreover, in today's multicultural context, the school curriculum offered by the Catholic religion program encourages participation in an open and constructive dialogue, raising the student to exercise freedom in the perspective of justice and peace.

Figure 9 presents the national guidelines for teaching Catholic religion in technical and professional institutes.

⁴⁵ Lever, "Rilevanza della Messa," 1207–1223.

⁴⁶ "Decreto del Presidente della Repubblica Italiana" 20.08.2012, *Allegato* no. 2.

⁴⁷ "Decreto del Presidente della Repubblica Italiana" 20.08.2012, *Allegato* no. 3.

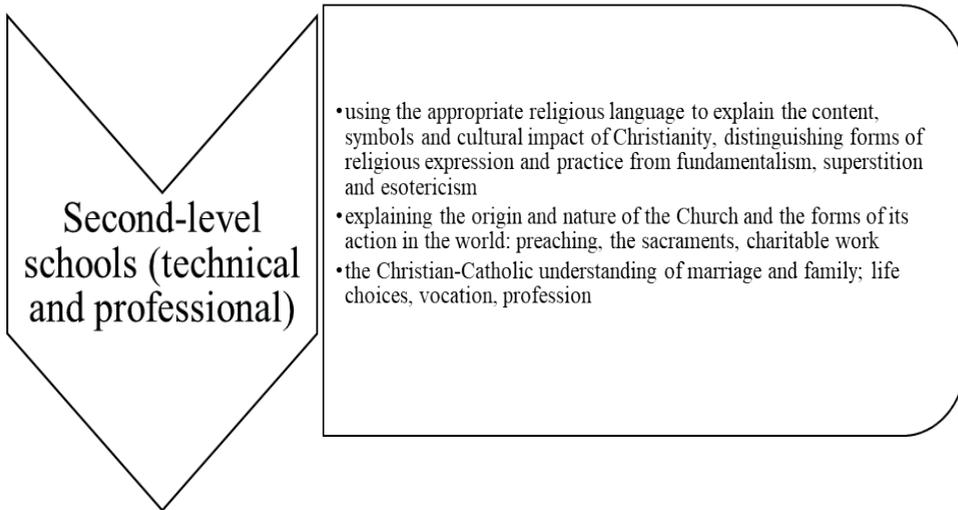


Figure 9. National guidelines for teaching Catholic religion in technical and professional institutes: examples related to liturgy.

Figure 9 shows how the cultural approach to the religious language, symbols, religious practices, sacraments, and marriage, among others, is a source of sound knowledge of fundamental importance for the student who, by studying, for example, the structure of the rite of reconciliation, at the level of humanization of the human being, strengthens the conviction that relationship requires an understanding of oneself, others, and life itself; one cannot live a life as a nomad, isolated and self-centered, but instead, one can be capable of taking a step for the common good, living in reconciliation with oneself and with others (and for Christians also with God). Catholic religion instruction deals with the universal question of the relationship between God and humans interpreted through the figure and work of Jesus Christ and the witness of the Church in history, which should be understood in this sense.

Through studying the cultural approach of the doctrine of Catholicism to the liturgical rites of the Catholic Church, the student can see that they are present in people's lives anyway. It is the presence in the fundamental order. It is a mistake to think that any religion can be entirely internal, without rules, without liturgy, and without external signs of an internal spiritual experience. As in social life, so on the level of religious experience, the external form is the condition of the existence of religion. As a social being, the disciple acquires the knowledge that he/she is also a ritual being. Despite the weakening of certain forms of rituals, it is observed that they recur in

other forms; they are stronger in cases when social interaction is stronger. The presence of rituals is of fundamental importance in the life of the human being because it makes visible to him/her the multiple connections with his/her own experience.⁴⁸

If rituality is intrinsically unimaginable and functions in a symbolic order, the student has the opportunity to become competent in the use of time and space to mediate the complex relationships between nature-culture, thought-action, word-body, and the infinite openness to others, things, society, and history. In this sense, teaching liturgy during Catholic religion classes from a cultural perspective helps the student to situate himself/herself in time and history, orienting him/her toward personal answers to questions of meaning: Who am I? Where do I come from? Where am I going?

The student thus has a further opportunity to mature both in terms of 'knowing' and 'knowing how to act' by expressing in his/her personal experience the achievement of religious competence, for instance, his/her 'ethos' apparent in attitudes and values.⁴⁹

Conclusions

In order to truthfully answer the 'question of meaning' and open hearts to hope, it is necessary to rediscover the purpose of human existence, the purpose that makes one's life worthwhile. All this requires an honest search and a deep commitment. Approaching Catholic liturgy from a cultural point of view within the framework of the guidelines operating in Italy (*Objectives for the Development of Competence, Objectives for Education, Competences and Specific Objectives for the Teaching of Catholic Religion*) means understanding that it is the highest and fundamental expression of communication with God and with brothers. In doing so, it should be emphasized that pedagogical and cultural significance has always characterized the teaching of the Catholic religion as an academic discipline; for example, studying the liturgical rites of different eras and the Church's reforms has never been done merely for the sake of abstract knowledge, but to confront a cross-section of believers' lives that makes the celebrated faith an intrinsic motive for choices concerning one's own life project; this encourages the student to define his/her own criteria of reference.

In the Italian context, the instruction of the Catholic religion is a proposal addressed to all – not only to Catholics. This study aimed to draw attention to the specificity of the school environment, its nature and purpose, the methods of research and in-depth study, and the process of maturation of students. One may venture to

⁴⁸ Maggiani, "Rito/Riti," 1222–1232.

⁴⁹ Maggiani, "Rito/Riti," 1222–1232.

say that teaching Catholic religion at school contributes to creating the school culture and proposes an appropriate method of an interdisciplinary nature, a method of research that does not renounce the Christian revelation but is a serious search for the truth about the human being.

In this regard, the new *Directory for Catechesis* points out that Catholic religious instruction at school has significantly changed over time. Where it has been implemented, it represents a service to humanity and a valuable contribution to the educational project of the school. The Pontifical Council for the Promotion of the New Evangelisation (today the Dicastery for Evangelization) quotes Pope Benedict XVI's words addressed to Italian Catholic religion teachers, "The religious dimension is intrinsic to the culture. It contributes to the overall formation of the person and makes it possible to transform knowledge into the wisdom of life. [...] Thanks to the teaching of the Catholic religion, school and society are enriched with true laboratories of culture and humanity in which, by deciphering the significant contribution of Christianity, the person is equipped to discover goodness and to grow in responsibility, to seek comparisons and to refine his or her critical sense, to draw from the gifts of the past to understand the present better, and to be able to plan wisely for the future."⁵⁰

The example of the cultural approach in teaching Catholic religion toward the liturgical rites of the Catholic Church (in line with the school's objectives) emphasizes, on the one hand, fidelity to the doctrinal aspect of the Catholic Church so as not to betray its message and, on the other hand, it contributes to the human and cultural maturity of students from different backgrounds in order to build a civic society described by respectful and open dialogue, especially during times when positions are easily inflamed to the point of violent ideological clashes. However, the teaching of the Catholic religion as a school discipline cannot be reduced to a single model of reference since it has developed historically as a result of agreements with states and the arrangements of individual European Bishops' Conferences. With regard to agreements between the state and the Catholic Church in today's Europe, one can perhaps cite the example of Italy; this agreement was worked out following the school's objectives on the basis of the Concordat between the Holy See and the Italian Republic (18.02.1984) and followed by later agreements from 1985 to 2012 between the Italian Bishops' Conference and the Ministry of Education, University, and Research.

Especially today, when many European countries host students from Ukraine, this cultural model of religious teaching can be applied to students whose parents would like their children to fully integrate with their peers and learn about the important religious dimension of life and education of the host countries. This proposal

⁵⁰ Benedict XVI, *Discorso agli insegnanti di religione cattolica*. Pontificio Consiglio per la Nuova Evangelizzazione, *Direttorio per la catechesi*, no. 314. For more on the new Directory, see Kiciński, "Rozwój dyrektorów katechetycznych," 5–27. The English translation is taken from the online version of the address available at https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2009/april/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20090425_insegnanti-religione.html (accessed 7.08.2022).

does not require modification of one's own teaching models (including the confessional one), but it only allows learning what is important to Catholics. It can also become an important contribution to the academic debate on the models of teaching Catholic religion in state schools in secularized Europe.

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