

# Catholic religious education in Germany

## The sustainability of formal and non-formal learning

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### 1. Starting point, concerns, and design of the study

A clear distinction can be made when it comes to religious education in Germany: There is, on the one hand, a formally organised religious education, which provides religious instruction that is oriented to and designed by a particular denomination as an ordinary subject at school. And, on the other hand, a non-formal religious education that is organised by churches and religious communities, and that includes the various sacramental catecheses, especially the field of church youth work and altar service as a part of youth work. In the wake of the Second Vatican Council, the ideas and goals of religious education were decisively shaped in the Catholic Church of the Federal Republic of Germany by the so-called “Würzburg Synod”. This church assembly met in various sessions between 1971 and 1975, and set as its goal the implementation of the resolutions of the Second Vatican Council in the German church. Many of the documents approved by the Würzburg Synod are still very influential today. Thus, documents such as the resolution setting out its program, *Unsere Hoffnung* (“Our Hope”), the resolution *Ziele und Aufgaben kirchlicher Jugendarbeit* (“Goals and Tasks of Church Youth Work”), and the resolution on *Religionsunterricht in der Schule* (“Religious Education at School”) still exert an influence today.

Finally, the Würzburg Synod also introduced a distinction that is characteristic of the German system of religious education: namely, between the formal place of learning of Religious Education, and the non-formal places of learning, such as catechesis and youth work. This distinction is due primarily to the fact that as part of the public education system, Religious Education cannot be justified only on theological and ecclesiastical grounds. Rather, it also has to be legitimised from a theologically independent perspective, one that is exclusively pedagogical and grounded in educational theory. Therefore, Religious Education is intended to facilitate meaningful and structured basic knowledge, “responsible thinking and behaviour with respect to religion and belief” (Resolution 2.5.1, 139), and an independent decision of faith. On the other hand, catechesis is intended to facilitate a more lively and independent interaction with the faith, and an experience of the communal dimension of the church, and especially its liturgical dimension. Because church youth work is seen as a further important place of learning, the Synod emphasises especially the importance of the relationship and social dimension of the “group” as a youth group. With its so-called “personnel”, comprising not only the group leader but also the young people themselves, it is the place of learning

of youth work that particularly emphasises the dimension of experience within the group as an independent form of expression of belief, and thus enables the development of attitudes and opinions that are often neglected in formal learning arrangements.

In contrast to Religious Education as a formal context of learning, the contexts of non-formal education have in recent years rarely been the subject of academic research, so that there is a certain need for research on the Catholic side. Below the level of academic debate, however, there is in the field of catechesis a real abundance of concepts and work materials that are used in catechetical procedures on the ground. To provide an overview of, and to sort out this multitude of concepts, which exist in very different states of abstraction, would be a research undertaking in itself.

The project presented here is concerned with catechesis and Religious Education as traditional contexts of learning in religious education. The background of the project is a discussion by the German Bishops' Conference concerning the following question: What long-term learning outcomes are achieved by processes of religious education at the different contexts of learning represented by *Religious Education at school, catechesis, and church youth work*? The initial question pursued here is therefore concerned with the sustainability and effectiveness of processes of religious education, and is closely linked to the issue of how the different contexts of learning relate to each other. Research has rarely dealt with the sustainability and effectiveness of processes of (religious) education, and when it has, it has tended to focus on the short-term effects of learning arrangements (e.g., Religion und Gesellschaft 2015; also see Altmeyer and Boschki in this volume). These issues gave rise to the idea of an exploratory study whose aim was to examine religious education with regard to sustainability and effectiveness, and thereby work out parameters that allow for the use of the concepts of sustainability and effectiveness in the field of (religious) education. The aim here is to use the findings of the exploratory study for a larger representative study.

The idea of the project rests on three pillars. First, the investigation of the goals that teachers and catechists actually pursue in Religious Education and catechesis. This raises the question of how far these goals are at all compatible or even overlap with the official magisterial goals for instruction and catechesis at the different contexts of learning. For this purpose, a detailed analysis was carried out of all Vatican and episcopal pronouncements on catechesis and Religious Education, which was then related to the findings of various empirical studies in research on religious education. Second, the current research literature in educational studies and the social sciences was examined in terms of its understanding of and criteria for effectiveness and sustainability – besides providing a survey of the state of research, this also yielded points of reference for viable criteria to study effectiveness and sustainability. Third, the qualitative and exploratory interview-based study aimed to investigate in a biographical-reconstructive manner the effectiveness and sustainability of processes of religious education in individual life contexts, which allowed

the development of further points of reference and criteria for effectiveness and sustainability. It is above all this third pillar that is the focus here.

## 2. Methodological design of the study

Twelve structured, biographical-narrative interviews were conducted for this qualitative study. A first preliminary decision for the composition of the sampling was to select people for the investigation whose religious socialization through Religious Education and sacramental catechesis was on the one hand complete, but on the other hand, whose processes of religious education were not so long ago that the memories of them had been largely superimposed by other events in life. Thus, two groups of people came into focus for the study: firstly, pupils at the end of their time at school, who had at this point completed their formal religious socialization; and, secondly, young adults in employment or at the end of their studies, who were in, or about to begin, the process of making biographically significant decisions, e.g., the decision as to what shape their lives will take or career decisions (the transition between studies and career). The sample therefore comprised 16- to 18-year-olds and 26- to 28-year-olds. Since the question of sustainability and effectiveness is directed at all those who have undergone the processes of religious education mentioned, a second preliminary decision was made to select similar cases for the investigation, with this investigation then being based more on the so-called “normal case” as a sociological-heuristic and non-normative category, rather than on strongly contrasting individual cases which would simply have tended to emphasise the exceptions.

A further factor of selection in the sampling was to take into account different educational paths and attainments in order to ensure that the interviewees had the broadest possible range of social backgrounds. This also implied that the interviewees come from different family backgrounds since the educational path taken by children today is still relatively strongly influenced by the educational path taken by their parents, and is therefore dependent on social background. For the same reason, the career path was also important for the sampling. Thus, with regard to their educational path, the interviewees were assigned to the following four categories: pupils without A-levels as their goal, pupils with A-levels as their goal, career newcomers with vocational training, and career newcomers with a higher degree. Besides age in correspondence to religious socialization and the educational path or level of education acquired, the third criterion of selection was gender.

Finally, as the fourth criterion, the sampling selects four interview regions to take into account the religious-political or religious-demographic conditions in the Federal Republic of Germany. Münsterland was selected to represent a traditional Catholic area. A second region represented the situation of diaspora Catholics in a Protestant heartland: here, the Hanover/Brunswick area was selected as an urban and Protestant area in the northwest of Germany. As the third region, Greater Frank-

furt/Mainz was chosen as an urban mixed-denominational, albeit rather Catholic, region. And, finally, the Magdeburg area was chosen as the fourth region to depict the situation of diaspora Catholics in a strongly de-churched area. In addition to these four criteria used for the composition of the sample, a further criterion was to study adolescents and young adults who, beyond Religious Education at school and catechesis, were not especially involved in religion or the church. However, this was possible to only a limited extent. Especially in the Magdeburg region, the willingness to participate in the study was very low and, in order to be able to cover this region at all, it was necessary to fall back on pupils and young adults who were involved in the church. However, the willingness to be interviewed was lower than had originally been assumed in the other regions as well, so that finding people to participate in the study was on the whole quite time-consuming and complicated. Thus, the sampling included more people involved in church or parish beyond the specific processes of religious education focused on than originally intended. The results presented below should therefore be read against this backdrop.

The interviewees were recruited according to a snowball system: for the search, colleagues from the investigators' work context were asked to act as disseminators, as were friends and acquaintances of the project group (also using social-media channels); and institutions were also approached. Through these initial personal contacts, a brief exposé outlining the concerns and aims of the research project, as well as its expectations, was given to the potential interviewees. The decisive criterion here was to pursue the snowball system so far that the interviewees were no longer acquainted with a person from the research team, and did not move in the same church or religious circles as a member of the research team.

In line with the interview guidelines developed, the interviewees were first asked about their experiences of Religious Education at school, preparation for Communion, and catechesis for Confirmation; what they remembered and how they felt about it; what importance religion had then and still has in their lives; and what is especially important to them. Second, they were asked various questions to gauge how they understand themselves in terms of their ideas on life and on their own personalities: What can you say about your current situation in life? What have been defining events in your life? How would you describe yourself as a person? What values are important to you personally? Which people have been particularly important to you, and why have they been important or even role models for you? At the end of the interview, the interviewees were asked a few questions about their social-structural data. The guidelines were tested in a few sample interviews before they took on their final form. The interviews were conducted in the environment of each interviewee, who also decided on the precise location of the interview. The interviews lasted between 45 and 90 minutes. The audio recordings were transcribed and the personal data anonymised. In addition, research protocols were prepared for each interview, recording anomalies, hypotheses, and the atmosphere in which the interview took place.

The interviews were transcribed in their entirety. The data analysis follows the multi-step method as developed by Schmidt (2012, 447–456). This facilitates the development of dimensions in line with the research assumptions that structure the material into evaluation categories. It also allows for the reconstruction of new categories through the open coding of individual passages that are in line with the object at hand. This method, developed by Schmidt from the work of Hopf (1996) and from Grounded Theory (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Strauss and Corbin 1996), makes texts accessible to interpretative analysis, without (as is the case, for example, in qualitative content analysis) having to leave the text as text itself (see Gläser and Laudel 2009, 47). On the one hand, the creation of the coding guidelines and the codebook, as well as the subsequent formation of categories used in the evaluation, took place *deductively*, i.e., with the help of empirically non-saturated, theoretical assumptions and everyday concepts (Kelle and Kluge 2010, 70), and on the basis of the so-called “concept of theoretical sensitivity” (Kruse 2015, 108–114). On the other hand, and in line with the open coding, the theoretical categories were based on the material, expanded, or modified *inductively*.

The interviews were then evaluated by means of this deductive and inductive coding system: categories from the concentrated codes were extracted, and then analysed comparatively. A coding schema and a codebook with a description of the code and examples were created across all categories and codes. One such example of a code is given below. Code: idea of belief. Subcode: importance of religion/belief. Example:

*Yes, but not as much as it used to be. It has become less. But I was also an altar girl for 10 years. Maybe you then also had a different connection in school, because privately, you dealt with it more, then school lessons themselves were not so uninteresting any more. But now, for about the last five years, it has become a bit less.*

Besides the individual interpretations of the interviews, the categories were used to create a portrait and to sketch a biographical schema for each interview. The substantive categories, the portraits, and the biographical schemas were then used to capture and work out possible influences and effects regarding processes of religious learning and the general idea of belief held by the interviewees, correlations between the different categories and places of learning, and significant events in their biographies.

### **3. Sustainability of religious education – criteria**

Before the results of the study are presented, it is necessary first of all to establish some initial indicators or factors so as to illustrate what is meant by the sustainability or effectiveness of religious education. A few comments are required here that deal with the first two parts of the study.

As already mentioned, the ideas and goals of religious education that the Catholic Church has in Germany have been decisively shaped by the Würzburg Synod. Thus, the Synod resolution “Religious Education at School” argued powerfully for the clear separation of tasks between Religious Education at school on the one hand, and catechesis on the other. According to this resolution and to all magisterial documents that have been issued ever since, Religious Education is intended above all to facilitate a meaningful and structured basic knowledge, an independent decision of faith, and the capacity for religious dialogue and judgment. Catechesis, on the other hand, is intended to facilitate a lively and independent exploration of faith and an experience of the communal dimension of the church.

This separation makes clear a distinction that may well only exist in the German-speaking context, i.e., in Germany, Austria and parts of Switzerland: while the formal place of learning represented by the school is expected to teach basic knowledge about the faith and the theological capacity of judgement, the catecheses offered in the parish aim to deepen the (cognitive) decision of faith through providing religious experiences and social events in the actual religious community. Such a “semantic split” in the didactics of religious education, a split that has its roots in the special status of Catholic Religious Education as an ordinary subject in the otherwise secular school, is not common in most other countries and cultures. In other areas, catechesis (which, for example, in the United States often takes place as Parish School of Religion or Confraternity of Christian Doctrine in the Catholic school of the parish) continues to be responsible for teaching knowledge about the faith, as well as for facilitating religious experiences.

This particular German construct and tradition is very clearly reflected in the goals of the teachers of religion who in recent years have been investigated in numerous empirical studies (Englert and Güth 1999; Feige et al. 2000, 2005 and 2006; Lück 2002 and 2003; Bucher and Miklas 2005; Jakobs et al. 2009). These studies show consistently that they primarily understand religious education in the context of Religious Education at school as the opportunity to help young people in life and to provide them with some kind of ethical orientation. Furthermore, they want to contribute to developing religious identity among pupils. The focus here is less of a denominational goal, and more based on the capacity for interreligious dialogue, which is intended to equip pupils for the social plurality of the modern world and its various challenges.

Finally, analysing the discourse in the social sciences on effectiveness and sustainability has shown that research on effectiveness appears above all in the field of the media and of media research; in contrast, there has been little or virtually no research on effectiveness and sustainability in the area of education, with the terminology generally being used here with little uniformity, and in an extremely diverse and heterogeneous way. Furthermore, the question of effectiveness is mostly related to short-term effectiveness. This also has to do with the fundamental difficulty of not being able to clearly differentiate sharply between the various factors of influence in educational processes.

This finding led in the study of sustainability/effectiveness conducted here to a working out of several indicators or factors of influences that could be used to formulate an initial working definition. First, traditional parameters in which the effectiveness of processes of religious learning and teaching have clearly lasted up to the present day. These parameters are, for example, religious practice, a civic involvement that is religiously motivated or has direct links to the church, a sense of belonging to a parish, and a certain degree of confidence in the church and its officials.

Second, the biographical-reconstructive interviews could be analysed inductively, which yielded further indicators that the interviewees had located as constituting religious learning experiences in their lives: for example, learning arrangements that had long remained in the memory; influential people at the various contexts of learning; the development of their own values and ideas on life and faith; the actual contents and themes of teaching that became important. Crucial for sustainability was above all that these learning arrangements, experiences and occurrences, as well as people, were remembered cognitively and/or affectively in a positive way.

One finding that can therefore be identified is that a cognitively and affectively positive memory of a process of religious learning, or of something from that process, will be considered sustainable, even where it is not possible to distinguish precisely between the different factors of influence that led to this memory.

## **4. Findings – the contexts of learning**

Evaluating and interpreting the interviews provided a number of interesting observations on the traditional contexts of learning in Catholic socialization.

### **4.1 Context of learning: Religious Education at school**

Religious Education at school was for most of the interviewees the first formal context of learning in religious education, and thus an important point in their religious socialization. As a rule, Religious Education begins in the first year of primary school and is, unlike preparation for the sacraments, compulsory for children of the Catholic faith. Preparation for First Communion and for Confirmation also differ from Religious Education in that they take place only over a limited period of time. Religious Education normally takes place from the first year of primary school to the end of secondary school, whereas preparation for Communion and Confirmation are very short-lived. This might account for the fact that there are no significant differences between older and younger interviewees in how they look back on and assess Religious Education.

How the interviewees remembered Religious Education was in most cases specific to the school year. Thus, as in other empirical studies (Bucher 2000; Kliemann and Rupp 2000), Religious Education at primary school was remembered particularly positively: it appeared in retrospect as lively, clear and holistic. There was, though, dissatisfaction with Religious Education in the first few years of secondary school (*Sekundarstufe I*), before a renewed interest in the later years of secondary school (*Sekundarstufe II*) – but only if it had relevance to life, was based on discussion, and was presented well. Example: *“Because you could focus on yourself there and find out what you yourself believe ...”*

The interviewees mentioned a wide range of topics that they still remembered both positively and negatively. What stands out is that nearly all remembered topics that they could link to their own lives. *“Yes, at primary school we also had religion, that was, for example, very different there. You could, you then talked much more about personal things. That was more interesting than talking about history and stuff like that”*. The link to life also had something to do with the favourite topics named by the interviewees. For example, the topics *“interreligious dialogue”* and *“other religions”* were remembered positively and particularly often: *“I find that really exciting, these religions, or these differences. I used to be really interested, also in things like Hinduism and stuff”*.

Similarly, ethical and existential topics were also very popular among the interviewees – for example, current political themes, moral issues, and discussions on questions concerning the beginning and end of life (specifically: abortion, prenatal diagnosis, and euthanasia), as well as anthropological questions. Memory of these ethical and existential topics was accompanied by a methodological component. In particular, the interviewees recalled practical approaches, with discussions, exchanges and conversations about personal experiences and opinions being considered particularly important.

What is worth noting is that the interviewees who were involved on a voluntary basis in a parish and/or had a link to a specific church congregation wanted Religious Education to deal more with liturgical themes. They wanted to know more about liturgy and church services, etc., and they wanted to share their own experiences with other pupils. For example, a young woman told of her activity as an altar girl, something that she would like to talk about more often in Religious Education at school: *“Yes, I think, I’m proud of it, if I know something, because I’m an altar girl, in the religion lesson, if I can always use that. Yes, I also find that interesting in itself, that I know something about what happened in the past or about the mass itself, how the mass runs, what things in the church are, and so on”*.

The field of teaching methods played a major role in all discussions. All the interviewees without exception said that varied teaching methods that were tailored to the respective target group were crucial for the success of Religious Education at school. Some interviewees also stressed the importance of approaches that involved games, above all for pupils aged 14 to 16: *“Well, I still remember, we had in the phase after First Communion, so 5th class, 5th, 6th, 7th, 8th, 4 years with a lot of re-*



*ligious games, quiz questions, where I then, or where I found that also helps, if now there is not only every week frontal teaching, where the teacher says, so-and-so; that you also have to use your brains and – at least from my perspective – I think I really learned a lot*". Where such methods were used, this led, according to the interviewees, to lasting impressions that had their effects beyond the lesson in Religious Education.

Besides discussions, the opportunity to talk about experiences, and conversations of all kinds, the interviewees also experienced approaches that used media positively. For example, some emphasised that an approach that used songs and music had been helpful to them in Religious Education at school. Others mentioned a creative approach through painting pictures, an approach used extensively at primary school, and one that many interviewees still remembered fondly. Similarly, they found approaching a topic through the medium of film useful: *"I still remember that we had a really young teacher who had quite interesting, I think, I don't remember any more if it was Star Trek or Star Wars episodes, had one interestingly enough for each topic somehow and yes, I don't know anything about the (unintelligible) area, but he could say exactly, and after we had seen clips of some of these episodes, how individual people from the stars, say, behaved among themselves, that was (unintelligible) readable from that, the world religions, how they relate to each other, and that was actually very interesting, also interesting in terms of methodology"*.

The teacher of religion undoubtedly plays an important role in the perception and sustainability of Religious Education. There were several aspects here that most interviewees considered significant. For example, a teacher of religion should be open to, and respect the views and opinions of pupils. Moreover, he or she should not judge doubters or non-believers: *"And the teachers that we have now, they give us the freedom to stop, to say and also think what we want ... if someone then says, for example, I actually think football is a religion, I think, then she accepts that. And I just think that this honesty is important"*.

In addition, the teacher should not only respect the opinion of pupils, but also take his or her own position when required. The keyword "authenticity" played an important role here. The interviewees also tended to value teachers of religion who managed to create an open and friendly atmosphere without losing any of their authority. A teacher should be respectful, friendly and communicate on eye-level with pupils. On the other hand, he or she must be able to create a sense of calm and order in the classroom.

The influence of Religious Education at school on personal beliefs and values is difficult to separate from the influence of other areas such as the family, the person's environment and catechesis. None of the interviewees expressed explicitly that Religious Education had influenced their development or formation of values. However, the interviewees often described how, especially in the interplay between Religious Education and catechesis, the Christian faith as a whole had had an influence on their personal values: *"So the commandment to love your neighbour is very much*

*implanted in me. That was also a very, very important topic, also in Religious Education, I think also in the seventh, eighth year, so now, where it just pops up. Exactly, so that's something that still really shapes me to this day in terms of values, but also in terms of these causes, that everything will somehow turn out good".*

## **4.2 Context of learning: catechesis**

For all the interviewees, the first contact with religious education in the parish was when they prepared for the sacrament of the Eucharist, i.e., catechesis for First Communion. At the time of the interviews, this period already lay quite some time in the past for the 16- to 18-year-olds, and even longer for the 26- to 28-year-olds; nonetheless, all the interviewees could still call up more or less concrete memories of the period. Indeed, if the interviewees had felt comfortable in the setting in which they prepared for Communion, and were also provided with hands-on, child-friendly approaches to the topics, then they were able to remember the different teaching methods as well as the various contents of teaching in great detail. *"We had grape juice there. ... Red grape juice and bread. And that was always so cool, because then you always felt a bit like the disciples, because you thought we've got bread and wine"*. What had a positive effect was what was dealt with in a clear and (in a literal sense) graspable way: *"During the trip, where we had Jonah and Nineveh, the first trip, I still remember, we rebuilt Nineveh a little bit for ourselves from empty cardboard boxes, so it was already then, I think, done in a way that suited us"*. The vast majority of the interviewees described various child-friendly and creative activities, with frequent mention also being made in general of *"stories"*, *"Bible stories"*, *"parables"*, and *"(modern) thought-provoking stories"* to which the children were introduced. Thus, several interviewees had positive memories of topics dealt with in the preparation for Communion in connection with experiences in the church space or in church services: *"And we, I don't know the motto any more, but something with an illustrated path, and at every service together we moved a wooden figurine that we had painted ourselves one step forward. I think there were four fields and started at the first service and at the end the last field was very grand, just to show, Communion, something special, just to symbolise, we are getting closer and closer to our goal"*.

All the interviewees described regular meetings with a fixed group of people of their own age, which often took place in the context of their own home or the home of another child in the group: *"Yes, so we were divided into groups, and there were five, six of us, and then each time two parents did the teaching"*. It was usually the mothers who were the catechists in this setting. But, even if the groups were not led by their own mothers, but instead by other catechists, the interviewees still had positive memories: *"Yes, so our, the preparation for First Communion, both preparations, the parish assistant helped organise. And she already, she has known me all my life, and I already knew her, in a kind of group for little children"*.

After the preparation for Communion, catechesis for Confirmation is another formal learning opportunity in the parish. For some young people, this period encouraged them and provided them with the opportunity to deal with their own faith more intensively. What can be seen is that, where the interviewees already had a close bond to the parish and a lively practice of faith before this period, then they experienced the voluntary character of Confirmation as something that reinforced their own faith and that strengthened their bond to the parish. The positive group dynamics during the period of preparing for Confirmation were often also experienced as a source of encouragement and affirmation. The interviewees assessed the link between puberty and the sacrament of Confirmation in contrasting ways: while some attributed their low motivation to participate in preparing for Confirmation to this period of transition, others cited their increased interest during this period in existential questions of life as a positive motivation. As a result, some of the interviewees even argued that the time of preparation for Confirmation should be postponed until later adolescence. The interviewees had vaguer memories of the actual topics that they had dealt with in the preparation for Confirmation than they had of “people” and “teaching methods/setting”. What can be observed in general is that those topics that had been taught in a setting that fostered a sense of togetherness, and that had used a broad range of methods, including practical activities, were more likely to remain in the memory. Particularly popular were those topics that the young people or young adults could link to their own lives, and that were taught in an unconventional way, e.g., through the use of modern media: *“Yes, our topic at the time was ‘Media: Broadcasting and Reception’. How the topic came about, I don’t know, we weren’t told. But it was a really fascinating topic, because it was done in a very interesting way by our parish assistant, loads through the media, SMS and stuff like that ...”* The fact that preparation for Confirmation and Religious Education at school were offered parallel had a different effect on the interviewees in terms of their level of interest in the topics dealt with during the period of preparation for Confirmation: *“Yes, OK, some discussions I found a bit, well, I don’t know, because the topics were already a bit worn-out”*. But, looking back, other interviewees saw the deepening of topics that they had dealt with in their preparation for Communion, together with the particular group setting, as being worthwhile: *“But the lessons themselves are not bad, I must admit. The stuff itself, it’s more or less dealing again with the Communion lessons, or continuing them. And sometimes it’s nice to repeat something from the Communion class and then develop something from it”*.

The types of catechism used in preparing young people for Confirmation vary from parish to parish, but there seem at first glance to be no regional idiosyncrasies. Most of the interviewees had gone on a trip during the phase of Confirmation, something that they still remembered largely positively. The mode of preparing for Confirmation ranged from an intensive week to a regular fortnightly meeting. Also, the strength of connection that the young people had to the church as a concrete place of worship varied, and especially so because, unlike in the preparation for

Communion, there was no obligation on them to attend Sunday services. The period of preparing for Confirmation also often included recreational activities such as playing football, going climbing and geocaching.

While the memories of the actual contents of what had been taught in the preparation for Confirmation had with a few exceptions faded just as much among the 16- to 18-year-old interviewees as among those in the group of 26- to 28-year-olds, the memories of those participants involved in catechesis were often stronger. Sometimes it was again mothers who, working on a voluntary basis, prepared the young people for Confirmation, but, more often than with the preparation for Communion, it was sometimes also full-time employees. What is worth noting is that the interviewees gave a consistently positive evaluation of the relationship that they had had with the catechists for Confirmation, although there were of course variations in the intensity of the bond.

### **4.3 Context of learning: Voluntary work**

What emerged within voluntary work as a separate and independent context of learning was altar service. This was something that had not been previously considered, which is also due to the fact that until a few years ago altar service was not a prominent context of church youth work. Rather, young people usually belonged to a youth association and were at the same time altar boys or girls as a matter of course. It is only in recent years that the work of altar service seems to have detached itself somewhat from youth work and become a context of youth work with its own importance. It now seems to be the case that the work of altar service can be denoted as an independent and important context of religious learning that plays an important role in enabling young people to acquire knowledge and the practice of faith. This work sometimes occurs alongside traditional youth association work, and sometimes replaces it – for example, in East German dioceses, where often no traditional youth-association work was established after reunification. Children are encouraged to begin altar service as a positive experience when they prepare for Communion, and in many cases altar service also offers a bridge between Communion and Confirmation. The motives are manifold, ranging from the desire for group affiliation, the feeling of being among like-minded people, the sense of taking on a task in/for the parish, the possibility of organising something independently or guiding the younger altar boys and girls – up to feelings of personal vocation and the specialness of serving at the altar. To give just one example: *“Yes, I would now simply speak in my personal situation simply of a call to serve at the altar”*. The analyses presented here have also shown clear synergies between altar service and Religious Education at school, to such an extent in fact that altar service raised religious and theological questions that then entered the Religious Education classroom at school, and vice versa. *“... now, ... I know that what the teacher is saying up there gives me something”*. Young people also often continued with altar service beyond

Confirmation, this however depends on their age at Confirmation. For more religiously minded young people, altar service also seems to be a way for them to live their own religiosity and to deal with religious/theological issues. "... *the church, everything you can do there. That's one thing ... that the church is somewhere you can feel comfortable, but that you don't just sit, stand, kneel and fold your hands quietly ...*" However, taking up this activity is not always a *conscious* decision; in regions that still have a relatively high level of Catholicism, taking up altar service is often simply a result of tradition. To end being an altar boy or girl happens either consciously or by "growing out" of the average age and by experiencing changed living conditions. In summary, though, it can nevertheless be said that altar service is becoming, and has become, an increasingly central place of religious youth work, but that there is also a considerable need for further research here.

The analysis here has also shown that neither the gender nor the educational background of the interviewees was significant. In terms of age, it was especially the group of 18-year-olds that attributed greater importance to the people at the different places of learning. In the analysis of regions, the Magdeburg area must be mentioned – that is, the sampling from East Germany. Here, preference was usually given to religious instruction in the parish, since such instruction at school often only took place in a mixed-denominational class or did not take place at all. In addition, the interviewees noted a close link between school and parish, with the same person teaching religion at school and working in the parish, and this person then often being influential over a longer period of time.

## 5. Comparing the goals

Overall, there proved to be agreement between magisterial goals and the practice of religious education in three areas. First, both the German bishops (see Die deutschen Bischöfe 2005) and teachers of religion at school are concerned with showing the importance of the Christian faith for the lives of children and young people today. Second, both wish to contribute in a targeted way to the development of a religious identity (see Die deutschen Bischöfe 1996). Finally, both are concerned with developing the capacity for dialogue, which means above all interreligious dialogue and dealing with religious plurality (see Die deutschen Bischöfe 2005).

Analysing the interviews yielded further insights on all three points. Thus, the interviewees (and particularly those in the older group) valued very highly the common goal in Religious Education at school as well as in catechesis of showing and developing the importance of the Christian faith to life – providing that this took place through discussion that left room for disagreement. Two prerequisites can be identified here. First, an atmosphere of trust, and a way of moderating and leading the discussions that values the pupils, while at the same time structuring and steering the debate towards a particular goal. Second, it becomes particularly clear

in how the interviewees remembered the contents of teaching that they were especially able to recall those topics where they could find points of connection to the reality of their own lives. In short, the objects of learning referred to by Paulo Freire as “generative topics” continue to be relevant to the young people surveyed.

Developing religious identity, which is described as a central goal of religious education both in the magisterial documents as well as in the empirical studies of teachers of religion, seems to depend especially on how the teacher relates to what he or she is teaching; and in a second step, how they relate to pupils. What emerged as a further component in the investigation is the choice and application of (teaching) methods. The interviewees remembered clearly in all interviews the forms and ways of teaching in both Religious Education and catechesis.

Most of the interviewees tended to reject the goal of Religious Education set by the magisterium – namely, to enable a relationship of trust with lived forms of faith. Rather, Religious Education may and should have affective elements, because otherwise it is criticised for being too theoretical; nonetheless, practice in, for example, direct liturgical forms or prayer routines are usually not remembered positively. In catechesis, it is in particular the group focus that is welcome as a setting conducive to learning; if young people are also offered something relevant after Confirmation, then this setting can lead to their further involvement in the church. This enables them to be involved through the church in the parish in a way that is appropriate to their age – probably one of the reasons why altar service is popular. Unlike other contexts of learning, however, catechesis tends to be perceived in biographical memory as a one-time event.

Finally, the interviewees generally experienced the last goal – the capacity for interreligious dialogue – as being too weak and indistinct, and this although their Religious Education and processes of catechesis are only two to five years in the past for one group, and not more than 12–15 years in the past for the older group. Almost all the interviewees wanted to deal even more with the religions of the world, and criticised the frequent focus on Judaism in the time of the Third Reich and the Holocaust. Debates about religious traditions outside Christianity, and thus about the form that interreligious learning should take, barely take in catechesis, something that many of the interviewees criticised.

## 6. The attempt at a model

What is perhaps not entirely surprising at first glance is that the investigation conducted here has shown a close connection between person, method and content of teaching. The connection between person and content – that is, the teacher’s enthusiasm for and commitment to a topic (or, in the language of the magisterium: the authenticity of the witness) – is well-known and pertinent. However, there have been few findings so far in the field of research on religious education on the importance and effectiveness of *methods* as tools of teaching. All the more surprising

when it came to evaluating the study was that, besides the connection between content and person, method emerged as the third factor determining effectiveness and sustainability. A clear distinction between or separation of the three components is barely possible regarding effectiveness. Thus, a model has been developed at the end of the study that speaks of an “amalgamation” of the three factors of person, method, and content determining effectiveness in the context of religious education today. Future research should investigate more closely how these three factors relate to each other – whether they are, for example, equally balanced in their importance, or whether one of the factors is particularly strong in general or in a particular situation. The question of which methods receive particular attention here should also be elucidated more clearly. And, finally, it is necessary to examine more closely the question of what this means for processes of religious education.

These are all initial questions that resulted from evaluating the twelve interviews in a qualitative-reconstructive procedure. This is not a representative study. It is crucial to continue this limited pilot study on a larger scale. Besides the questions just formulated about the relationship between the factors of person, content and method, and methods as a teaching instrument, what should then also be investigated is the importance of the context of learning of voluntary work, and here especially the importance of altar service. The relationship between altar service and traditional youth-association work should then also be investigated again. An interesting hypothesis to be evaluated could be, for example, whether altar service and youth-association work relate to each other in such a way that adolescents more intensely interested in religion are more likely to find themselves in altar service, while young people who are more socially interested tend to participate in the traditional church youth associations. Regardless of these questions, which are more concerned with content, a further study should above all include other age groups.

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