



Teachers' Guide

RE offers a space like no other: for encounter, explanation, and empathy; for expression, interpretation, and imagination; for interrogation, questioning, and reflection. ...It gives an opportunity for students to experience and to bring into dialogue with one another both insider and outsider perspectives with regard to religious issues. (Sullivan, J., 2017)

Welcome to *Credible Catholic*! This Teachers' Guide answers the following questions:

- What is *Credible Catholic*?
- How does *Credible Catholic* support the ethos of Catholic schools?
- How does *Credible Catholic* build on learning at Junior Cycle? How is it connected to Senior Cycle RE?
- How can the RE teacher adapt and broaden the use of *Credible Catholic* depending on his/her context?
- What would a Senior Cycle RE plan look like using *Credible Catholic*? (See *Accompanying Scheme of Work*)

What is *Credible Catholic*?

Credible Catholic is a Religious Education programme made available for senior cycle RE by the Council for Catechetics of the Irish Bishops' Conference. It was designed for use in Catholic Voluntary Secondary schools in Ireland, north and south.

An earlier version was written and produced by the Magis Centre (California, USA) in 2018. It was presented to groups of RE teachers, Diocesan Advisors and others in 2019 and since then has been almost entirely re-developed for the Irish context, in line with feedback from RE teachers and theological advisors. The Council for Catechetics acknowledges the generosity of the Magis Centre in their work with RE teachers, Catechetics Council members, Schools' Trusts and others in the work of re-developing this programme.

Credible Catholic aims to stimulate dialogue, encourage reflection and critical reasoning, foster religious literacy, build community, and nurture faith, and in doing all of these things, to promote student wellbeing.

The programme speaks to, and is built around, very important questions young people of all beliefs (religious and non-religious) have about themselves, their world, God and others. These are just some of the questions *Credible Catholic* explores:

- Do we have souls?
- Is there a spiritual dimension to reality?
- What is the relationship between science and religion?
- What can philosophy say about the existence of God?
- What is happiness and how can it be pursued?
- Did Jesus really exist and is there any reason to think that he is divine?
- How is the Church relevant or even credible today?
- Why would an all-loving God allow suffering?
- Can meaning be found in life's struggles?

In addition to the seven modules, the Irish version of *Credible Catholic* provides a helpful introductory lesson for teachers which prepares students for engagement with the seven modules. This introductory lesson reminds students that ultimately, in the Christian tradition faith is a gift and God is mystery. While we can of course engage in a serious way with questions relating to faith, faith itself is a free response to God who gently reaches out in love to us first. Bishop Donal McKeown put it well when he wrote,

Faith is not merely an intellectual conviction that God exists or that Jesus's death on the Cross has changed everything. Faith involves magic moments of discovery, a treasure uncovered under the dirty clay of a nondescript field of our lives or one valuable pearl in a mountain of oyster shells. Faith is closer to the magic of being surprised by love than to being convinced. Of course, like any committed relationship, it involves both your heart and your head. (July 2020)

In this context, *Credible Catholic* might be understood as a support to the wider mission of the Catholic school which lies ultimately in helping students know how much they are loved by God. The 'heart' of Catholic education is first an experience. Perhaps the 'head' of Catholic education also involves experience: the experience that there are credible answers to the vitally important questions students have about faith.

How does *Credible Catholic* support Catholic schools in living out of its ethos?

Credible Catholic supports the Catholic school in the living out of its ethos. It does this by generating the kind of engagement students need in order to understand and to discuss the meaning, importance, and credibility of the Catholic faith. It promotes respectful, incisive, and constructive dialogue between people whose perspectives differ and in doing so it builds the meaning-making skills so central to the wellbeing of young people.

Credible Catholic's focus on respectful reasoning contributes towards a more tolerant society, one that approaches different worldviews from the perspective of reason and dialogue. Such an approach encourages reflective thinking, and values all efforts at finding philosophical and religious truth. Last but by no means least, *Credible Catholic* gives

students of faith the knowledge and skills to meaningfully articulate their faith while attending to important philosophical and theological questions.

In terms of broad aims, the programme supports parents who choose to send their children to Catholic schools. Many parents choose a Catholic education for their children on the understanding that they will be assisted in the vital faith nurturing work done at home and within parishes, work which supports the spiritual development of their children.

Each of the seven modules of *Credible Catholic* helpfully aligns with sections of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* and is developed with the specific educational aims of Catholic schools in mind (although many sections/modules could be used in schools with different trustees as well). It also fully aligns with an understanding of Religious Education contained in *Share the Good News: National Directory for Catechesis* (Irish Bishops' Conference, 2011). In particular, the programme attends to the importance of promoting critical thinking (SGN, 108), and addresses the clear need for Religious Education to be both intellectually challenging and personally stimulating (SGN, 107). *Share the Good News* is clear that, "all students, Catholic or otherwise, should be able to attend second level Religious Education classes" while also ensuring support for the faith lives of the Catholic pupils in its care (SGN, 108).

In terms of senior cycle RE, *Share the Good News* proposes that the NCCA curricula provided to schools can be adapted imaginatively to encourage active religious commitment. *Credible Catholic* is one such expression of this imaginative adaptation.

Specifically, in terms of Catholic Schools in the Republic of Ireland, how does *Credible Catholic* build on learning at Junior Cycle? How is it connected to Senior Cycle RE?

Credible Catholic clearly builds on and deepens learning from the Junior Cycle and is in line with much of the learning proposed by both the Leaving Certificate Syllabus for RE and Leaving Certificate Non-Examination Framework for RE. It uses methodologies with which teachers and students will be familiar and is underpinned by a similar understanding of the importance of the students' experiences, questions, and hopes at the centre of all worthwhile learning.

Building on Junior Cycle Religious Education

Credible Catholic builds on student learning from the Junior Cycle in two important ways:

- It provides access to a rich meaning-making space for young people that allows them to engage with important religious, philosophical, psychological, and other questions.
- It fosters religious literacy and a capacity for meaningful, reason-based and respectful dialogue with people of different belief perspectives.

The Rationale to the *Junior Cycle RE Specification* states that:

Religious Education provides a particular space for students to encounter and engage with the deepest and most fundamental questions relating to life, meaning and relationships. It encourages students to reflect, question, critique, interpret,

imagine and find insight for their lives. The students’ own experience and continuing search for meaning is encouraged and supported. (NCCA, 2019).

Credible Catholic centres on a number of important questions young people ask (some of which are outlined above) and takes these questions seriously, providing space not only for the voicing of and deliberation over these questions, but also intellectual resources in terms of how one specific faith tradition – the Catholic/Christian faith – proposes answers to these questions. The RE teacher is of course free to, and often will, engage with answers to these questions that other religious traditions provide.

The Junior Cycle RE Specification also clearly identifies the importance of religious literacy. Students should be helped in developing the language and skills needed for dialogue, thus

contributing to greater understanding and helping young people see beyond stereotyped and polarised portrayals of religion (Background Paper, NCCA, 2017).

Credible Catholic for Senior Cycle builds on this by providing all students with an opportunity, as Stephen Parker puts it, “to get under the skin” of a particular religious tradition. For students who are not Catholic and who engage with *Credible Catholic*, they will be able to imagine what it is like to exist within the “scheme of another’s worldview”. (Parker 2020). For Catholic students, they will be able to understand better this worldview and allow this worldview to impact on how they live their faith. All students who engage with *Credible Catholic* will benefit from the development of their critical reasoning skills as applied to important philosophical and theological issues.

The JC Specification is also clear that Religious Education helps to equip students with the knowledge, understanding, skills, attitudes and values to support their life journey and enable them to participate in their communities and in the world as informed, respectful, responsible and caring members of society. Again, *Credible Catholic* builds on this learning.

Very helpfully the Specification shows connections between RE and the 8 key skills provided for in the *Framework for Junior Cycle*. Of particular note, in terms of this introduction to *Credible Catholic*, are the following:

Key skill	Key skill element	Examples of student learning activities (RE)
Managing information and thinking	Being curious	Through classroom activities and research, students will learn how to ask questions and probe more deeply in order to gain knowledge and insights about religion and beliefs.
Staying well	Being spiritual	As students explore some of life’s big questions they will grow in awareness, grounded in a sense of purpose, meaning and connectedness.

The *Credible Catholic* Programme for Senior Cycle students builds on these key skills and the relevant elements within each. By providing a 'deep dive' into one particular religious tradition (while of course being sensitively aware of other traditions), *Credible Catholic* affords students in Catholic schools a unique opportunity to probe more deeply and gain knowledge and insights about the religious tradition that has undoubtedly had the most profound influence on Irish society and culture, and Western culture more generally. To leave a Catholic school without the opportunity to gain these insights would be unfortunate.

The NCCA is also clear RE can make a real and positive contribution to wellbeing in the Junior Cycle. This is not surprising for Christians and for other believers. We believe that the ultimate invitation from Christ, in communion with the Church, is to fullness of life. Good RE cannot do it all but it can assist students in terms of reaching this fullness in their own lives, with God's help. *Credible Catholic* provides numerous opportunities for students to engage seriously with the question of personal wellbeing as it relates to their own spiritual lives.

Making connections to Senior Cycle Religious Education

In addition to building on learning from the Junior Cycle, *Credible Catholic* attends to the learning proposed for Senior Cycle. It does this in terms of RE as both an examination subject and RE as a non-examination subject.

RE as a Leaving Certificate Examination

In the rationale to the Leaving Certificate Religious Education Syllabus, we learn that Religious Education can justly claim to be an integral part of any curriculum which aims to promote the holistic development of the individual (NCCA). The rationale also clearly states that

While the whole curriculum, built around the principles of knowledge, understanding, skills and attitudes, is concerned with promoting personal growth and facilitating the spiritual development of students, Religious Education is well placed to provide students with opportunities for reflection on human experience, as well as for understanding and interpretation of that experience. Such opportunities encourage the students' participation in their own conscious and critical development.

For those students opting to take RE as an examination subject, much of *Credible Catholic* connects very well with RE as a Leaving Certificate examination subject and could be used to supplement student learning across a number of different units. For example, questions related to the search for meaning and values in Section A, through Section B of Unit 2, (Christianity: origins and contemporary expressions), through Section D (Morality in Action) through Section F (Issues of justice and peace), Section G (Worship, Prayer and Ritual), Section H (the Bible) and of course, Section J which explores the relationship between Religion and Science.

Credible Catholic develops not just knowledge but also the understanding, skills and attitudes of students. (See table, page 9, Leaving Certificate RE Syllabus). In terms of *Credible Catholic* this might be summarised as follows:

Knowledge:

- In each *Credible Catholic* module, key terms and definitions are provided. Students are encouraged to engage with these throughout the module and to see connections across each of the seven modules where these terms re-occur.
- *Credible Catholic* develops students' knowledge in the areas of theology, religion, philosophy, science, spirituality, wellbeing, literary interpretation, and history.

Understanding:

- In each *Credible Catholic* module, students are provided with opportunities through group work, class discussions, research and other opportunities for learning (including cross curricular learning) to demonstrate their understanding of arguments, ideas and concepts.
- Again, in line with the thinking behind the Leaving Certificate RE Syllabus, students will develop an awareness of the interplay between the physical, emotional, spiritual, intellectual, moral and social aspects of human experience.

Skills:

- The skill of religious literacy is particularly fostered in each of the seven modules. Students are provided with opportunities to engage not just with the world view presented by Catholicism (and thus by Judeo-Christianity more generally) but also to compare and contrast that with the world view presented by, in particular, non-religious perspectives.
- The skill of critical reasoning is also fostered by the programme. Throughout *Credible Catholic*, students are provided with opportunities to critically reason about positions and arguments presented. Emphasis is placed on reason and evidence, and the content is question driven.

Attitudes:

- Students are encouraged to develop an appreciation of and respect for the richness of theology and philosophy generally, and indeed for the reasonable, dialogical pursuit of truth in these areas.
- Because the learning takes place in a Catholic school and the material is presented through a Catholic lens, students will be encouraged to develop an appreciation of and respect for the richness of the Catholic tradition. Far from ruling out the presentation of serious critiques of the Catholic faith, this appreciation is encouraged through genuine engagement with many of the most important and influential critiques of Catholicism (and Christianity generally).

- Students will demonstrate through each of the modules an openness to dialogue within and outside the classroom with others, including fellow students, around the mutual search for meaning.

RE as a non-examination subject at Senior Cycle

The NCCA has also helpfully provided RE teachers with a non-examination *Framework for RE*. Mirroring the Leaving Certificate RE Curriculum (examination), the following are the Framework's various sections;

- Section A - The Search for meaning
- Section B – Christianity
- Section C – Religious faiths in Ireland today
- Section D – Morality in action
- Section E – God-talk
- Section F – A living faith – doing justice
- Section G – Celebrating faith
- Section H – Story

Clearly *Credible Catholic* speaks to many, if not all, of these sections. In particular, it provides fascinating material for Sections A, B, D, E, F, and G.

In addition, *Credible Catholic* attends to the Non-examination Framework in terms of teaching methodologies. In line with the Framework, *Credible Catholic* has been carefully designed to offer opportunities and support for a variety of learner styles and methodologies including:

- group work
- project work
- self-directed learning
- investigations
- cross-curricular linkages
- the use of ICT, particularly the use of the internet

In particular, the efforts to make cross-curricular linkages with science subjects, history, English, art and music, philosophy, and well-being are clear. The use of ICT is also to be noted.

Other Approaches to Senior Cycle Religious Education

RE teams and teachers sometimes opt to design their own programmes, sometimes using elements of the non-examination framework. RE teams within schools plan together for RE sometimes on a modular basis organised, for example, over three or four six to eight-week periods in fifth year and sixth year. While modules of *Credible Catholic* might be used in these six to eight-week modules, planning should seek to engage with all of the modules

over a one or two-year time period. A scheme of work demonstrating how *Credible Catholic* could be engaged with through Fifth Year and into Sixth year is provided here.

How can the RE teacher adapt *Credible Catholic* depending on the learning context?

A. Adapting to the learning needs and interests of your students

The first way in which the material can and should be adapted is in terms of the learning needs and interests of your students.

Credible Catholic is clearly connected to and builds on learning at Junior Cycle and is also clearly aligned to learning outcomes at Senior Cycle for Religious Education. Religious Education teachers engage with curricula and programmes according to the learning needs and interests of the students in front of them. The process of adapting is part and parcel of good teaching.

*(Note what is below is guided by https://ncca.ie/media/2502/pp_religion.pdf Teachers might find this resource helpful in terms of any further differentiation they may wish to employ. While this resource speaks to the Junior Cycle Specification, much of what is here can be adapted to the Senior Cycle context. Of particular assistance in this resource is the advice provided on engaging students in terms of challenging religious concepts and language (pages 7, 8 and 9). This advice is important in the context of the intellectually challenging content provided within *Credible Catholic*).*

In general terms the NCCA advises the following strategies in terms of differentiation and Religious Education:

- ensuring that learning intentions are realistic for the students
- ensuring that the learning task is compatible with prior learning
- providing opportunities for interacting and working with other students in small groups
- spending more time on tasks
- organising the learning task into small stages
- ensuring that the language used is pitched at the students' level of understanding and does not hinder their understanding of the activity
- using task analysis to outline the steps to be learned/completed in any given task
- posing key questions to guide students through the stages/processes and to assist in self-direction and correction
- using graphic symbols as reminders to assist in understanding the sequence/steps in any given task/problem
- modelling task analysis by talking through the steps of a task as it is being done
- setting short and varied tasks
- creating a congenial learning environment through the use of concrete and, where possible, everyday materials, and by displaying word lists and laminated charts containing pictures.

The material within *Credible Catholic* is generally organised within each lesson in terms of an introduction, an exposition in terms of content, a response moment and a closure moment. (Or a number of these moments depending on the content). In this context and in the context of the advice offered by the NCCA, differentiated learning within *Credible Catholic* might look like this:

1. In each module of *Credible Catholic* a set of general learning outcomes is provided. It is envisaged that teachers will engage in a planning process and adapt and interpret these outcomes to take account of the diversity in aptitudes among their students. This can be done in a variety of different ways depending on students' needs. Focusing on specific learning outcomes for individual students might, for example, be helpful. Simplifying learning outcomes in terms of breaking down the language used may also be helpful.
2. Introductory material: each module provides for a set of different introductory moments that form the basis for initial engagement within each lesson. These moments are framed as questions or statements that seek students' responses. They are designed to elicit curiosity, to arouse interest, to promote self-reflection and to provide opportunities for communication with others. Some students with mild additional learning needs will require further expansion of these questions or statements. More probing of student responses will be required. This can take the form of an additional question or two, perhaps a song, a film clip or a poem, or a reminder of an experience the student may have had. The teacher can then make more explicit connections between the introductory moment and the elaboration that follows. It should be noted, of course, that these introductory moments are essential for all students and time should be given to ensuring student interest in the topic has been sufficiently aroused before moving on.
3. Exposition: in terms of material within each of the modules that seeks to build on student learning (as per the learning outcomes), teachers will make decisions regarding their students' capacity to engage with this material. For some students, their learning needs and interests will dictate a shortening of some of the expository material. For other students, there can be a fuller engagement with all of the content. RE teachers are skilled at reading their own students' capacity. However, the authors of the material are also clear that the content is all of value and as thorough and complete engagement with the material is therefore advisable. An important way of ensuring this is by explaining some of the concepts and language being used. This will be more of a challenge for some of the modules than others, as undoubtedly there is content that will be intellectually challenging for all students, not only students with additional learning needs. *Credible Catholic* is of a high academic standard and students will engage with the material according to their own capacities and interests. While students will be interested in and learn lots from each of the seven modules, not every student will find every aspect of the material equally accessible or interesting. Teachers will of course adapt as required.

4. Response: each module provides for higher and lower order questions, reflection moments, discussion moments, reflection points, written work and group work. It is the teacher who will be best placed to see how and when these moments can be expanded upon. For students with additional educational needs, more time with questions should of course be given. Lower order questions in particular provide all students with success opportunities, but higher order questions also provide all students with a chance to embed and personally assimilate their own learning, should they wish to do so.
5. Closure: again, *Credible Catholic* seeks to provide 'closure moments' in each lesson where students can pause and assess their own learning in terms of the material covered. However, teachers will, within their own contexts, adapt as they see fit.

Other important adaptations:

In addition, to the above obvious adaptations, RE teachers will also attend to differing learning styles within the RE classroom, using *Credible Catholic* by doing some or all of the following:

- Inserting, as appropriate extended 'break moments' within the content to assess learning
- Making links to learning students would have engaged with at Junior Cycle
- Making links to recent media moments, as relevant, in terms of the content being covered
- Inserting moments for prayer/reflection to allow students to bring their own learning to God and self through quiet time
- Inserting action moments that might engage the whole school in their learning, for example, surveying student beliefs, engaging in social justice outreach on the basis of learning, etc.
- Inviting outside guest speakers from, for example, the local parish, a university, etc.
- Inviting internal guest speakers: for example, the physics teacher
- Inviting students to write a short anonymous essay on 'What Catholicism means to me?' to gauge prior knowledge of students and be better able to engage with some of the issues raised in these essays

Note: this is not an exhaustive list and teachers themselves will adapt their approach to the material as they work with it, year on year.

B. Adapting to the cultural/religious context of your students and your school

While the *Credible Catholic* programme focuses on and supports the Catholic faith in particular, the overwhelming majority of the programme is fully consistent with the Christian faith more generally, Catholic and non-Catholic. Furthermore, much of the programme can be endorsed by the other monotheistic faiths, Judaism and Islam, and indeed by anyone with a belief in a transcendent, spiritual dimension to reality.

The JMB/AMCSS *Guidelines on the Inclusion of Students of Different Beliefs in Catholic Secondary Schools* (Revised, JMB, 2020) makes clear that Catholic schools recognise and respect the religious freedom of their students and of their families. Everything that the Catholic school offers in terms of Religious Education and more broadly, in terms of the wider ethos of the school, in terms of faith formation is invitational and recognises that students are coming from a wide range of faith/belief stances. At the same time, as the guidelines clearly state, the Catholic school holds the right and duty to offer faith formation opportunities to Catholic students. *Credible Catholic*, as a programme for Senior Cycle RE, seeks to hold this space of inclusion while also speaking, as outlined above, to the very specific Catholic identity of the school and the educational needs of all students including students and their families who are Catholic.

Catholic schools have RE policies approved by their Board of Management and in line with the advice and guidance provided by the Irish Bishops' Conference and the school's Patron. Individual teachers in individual schools are well placed to judge how exactly, in line with their school's RE policy, *Credible Catholic* can be presented and engaged with in the context of the religious and cultural diversity of their students. Two approaches should be avoided; the first, perhaps the more obvious and arguably a caricature, is any type of religious indoctrination into a particular religious faith that pays no regard to intellectual questioning or critical reasoning, or to the intellectual freedom of students. This is an approach to RE that in the Irish context has no basis in reality. *Credible Catholic* is dialogical, invitational, reason-based, academically robust and entirely respectful (and indeed encouraging) of students' freedom to question the Catholic faith. The second – perhaps less obvious – approach that should be avoided is any approach that fails to propose the beauty and truth that Catholic schools hold about who Jesus Christ is. In short, it is obviously possible to *propose* in a credible way what Christ teaches while also allowing for the religious liberty of all students attending a Catholic school. In fact, this is what Christ himself sought to do; to teach his followers and those who asked questions of him, while always allowing for the possibility that many will not accept him or what he had to say.

All schools are also required by law to have Admissions Policies. These policies require schools to outline how opt-outs from Religious Instruction (the term used in the Admission Schools Act (2018)) will be managed. It is important to have conversations with parents around the type of Religious Education that the school proposes to offer all students. These conversations can happen pre-enrolment, as part of the induction of new students, as students embark on senior cycle, and as necessary. The *Guidelines on the Inclusion of Students of Different Beliefs in Catholic Secondary Schools* states that it should always be made clear to parents that

students will be experiencing the values and ethos of the school in the day-to-day running of the school, not just in RE class. If they are concerned about their child learning about different religious beliefs or the Catholic content of the curriculum, they can be encouraged to see it as part of their civic education to seek to

understand the history and heritage of Ireland, as well as an opportunity to enter into respectful dialogue about their belief.

Credible Catholic is obviously focused on the Catholic faith, but there are any number of learning opportunities within the programme for students to offer other perspectives, and to share their own understanding of the various issues being presented. This is the most important kind of dialogue that can happen within the programme, and it can, and indeed should be actively fostered. *Credible Catholic* encourages students to think of counter-arguments to, and logical problems with, positions presented by the content or shared by some or all the students. *Credible Catholic* will work best in a class where students freely offer different reasons from a diversity of positions on a given topic, while presenting in a clear and unambiguous way the Catholic position that is in accord with faith and reason.

Conclusion

We thank you the teacher for engaging with *Credible Catholic* and your school for supporting your work with this programme. We wish you all the very best in this work and are happy, of course, to accept feedback on the programme so that it can continue to be improved going forward.

Feedback can be offered by emailing the National Director for Catechetics,

Dr Alexander O'Hara at alex.ohara@iecon.ie

More information on the work of the Council for Catechetics and additional faith development resources can be found here:

<https://www.religiouseducation.ie/>

<https://www.catechism.ie/>

