

*Professor Richard Rymarz, Director of
Research and Head of Religious Education*






That's a Good Questionand Some International Perspectives



**The questions students ask? A preliminary
examination of the questions raised in religious
education classes in Catholic schools**


next issue of *BJRE*, co-authored with Angelo
Belmonte




Some things I won't be talking much about
today!




K-2 student questions



and how, pedagogically, do teachers answer student questions (maybe a smidgen on this).



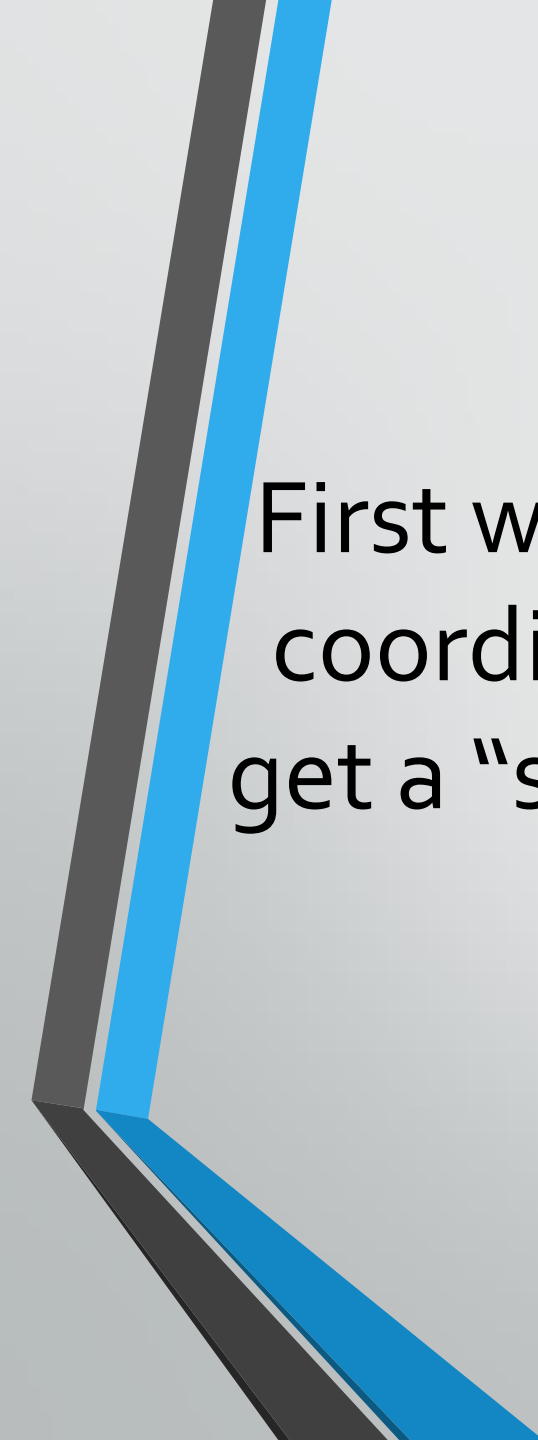
2 questions for you:
How often do students ask questions in RE?
What questions do they ask?




Some methodological consideration... did anyone say focus groups?

Some general points about focus groups


- Privileged sample
- got something to say
- knowledge of students/but no direct student voice
- students are much more responsive and authentic?



First we did interviews with religious education coordinators REC (school based RE leaders) to get a “sense of the field” and to frame the probe questions for the focus groups



11 focus groups (6-8 members) were conducted comprising 4 secondary teacher groups (7-10), 3 K-2 teacher groups and 4 middle and upper primary RE teachers groups.



Do students readily ask questions in religion class?

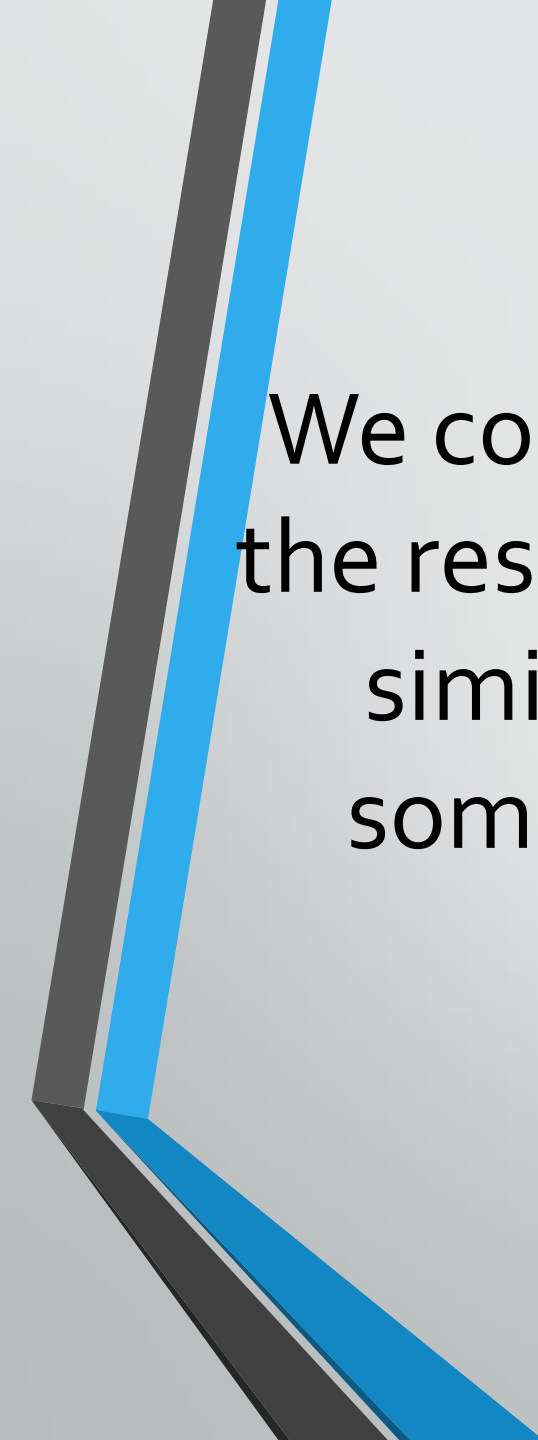
List the questions that in your experience students ask in RE class?



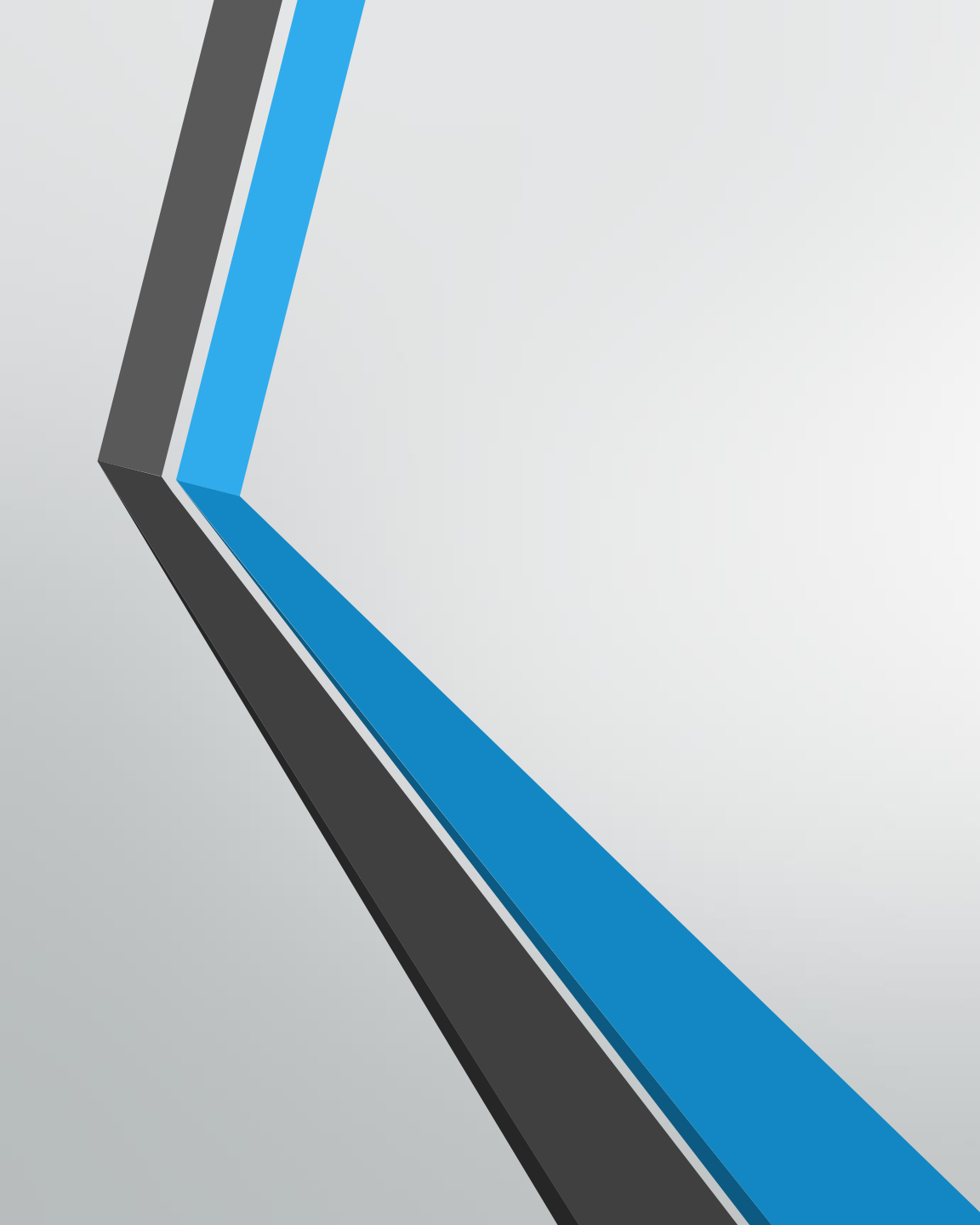
Nominate the 5 most frequent questions

How do teachers respond to questions?

How can teachers be better supported in responding to student questions?



We combined upper primary and secondary as the responses of the focus groups for both were similar. K-2 responses were detective and somewhere in middle primary the “switch” occurred.




First Category of Questions metacognitive




How do we know God exists?

How can I believe in a loving God when there's so much evil and destruction in the world?

All religions can't be right can they? So, aren't they all wrong?



Science and religion are in conflict and science provides the best answer to life's questions. A major variant of this question specifically addresses the supposed conflict between evolution and the presumed Church teaching.

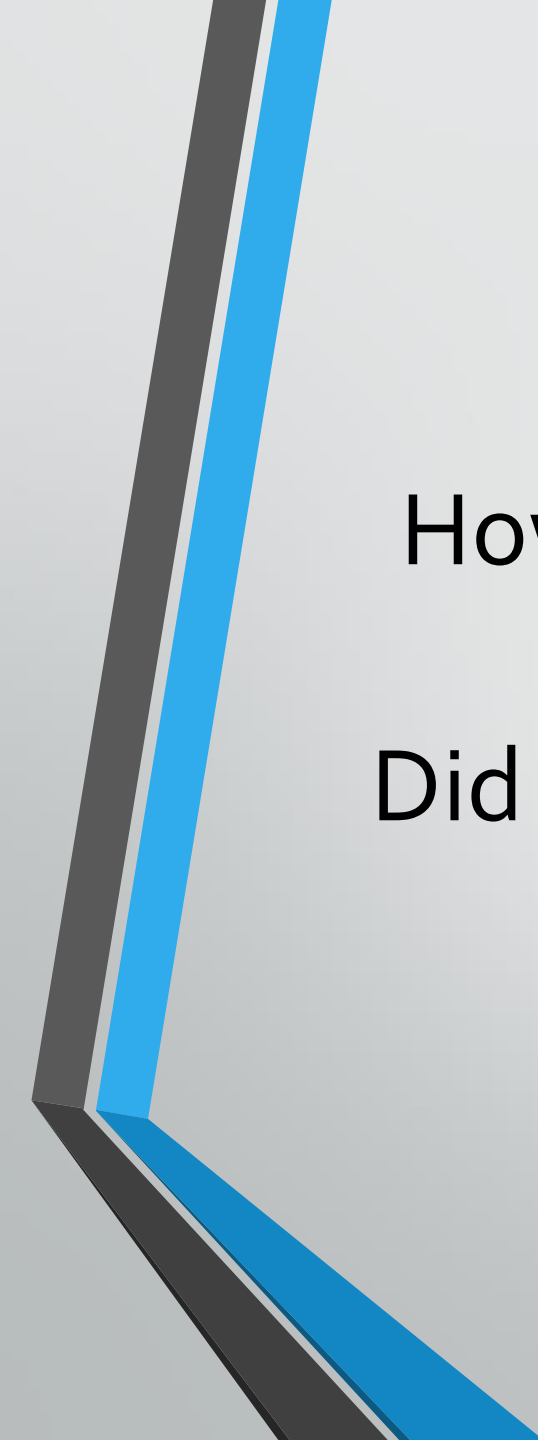


Questions on the resurrection of Jesus. These are hard to classify as straddle the metacognitive and thematic cognitive.




Second category

Thematic content questions



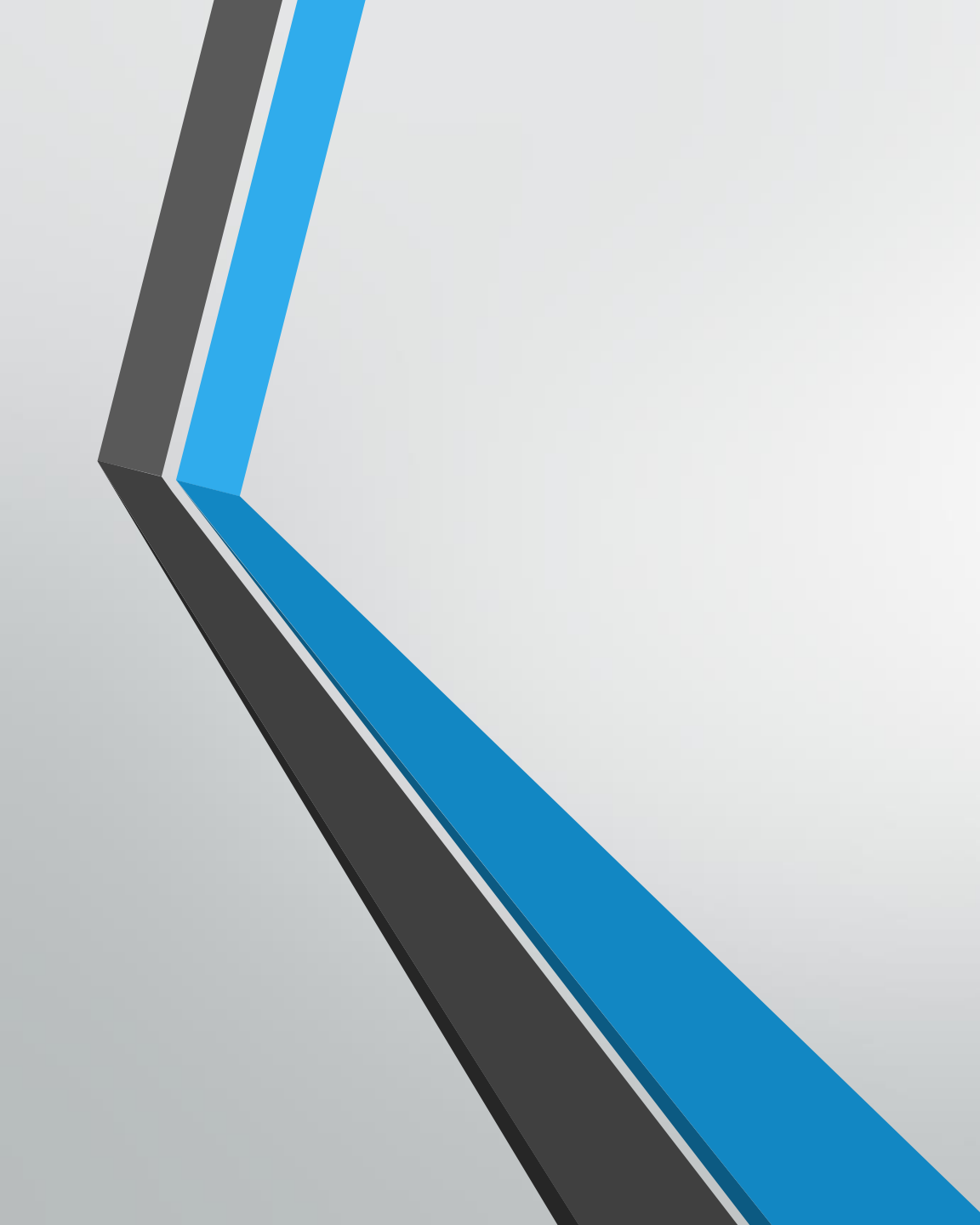
How do we know the Gospels are true and is
God's word?

Did those miracles in the Bible really happen?
What do we need sacraments at all?

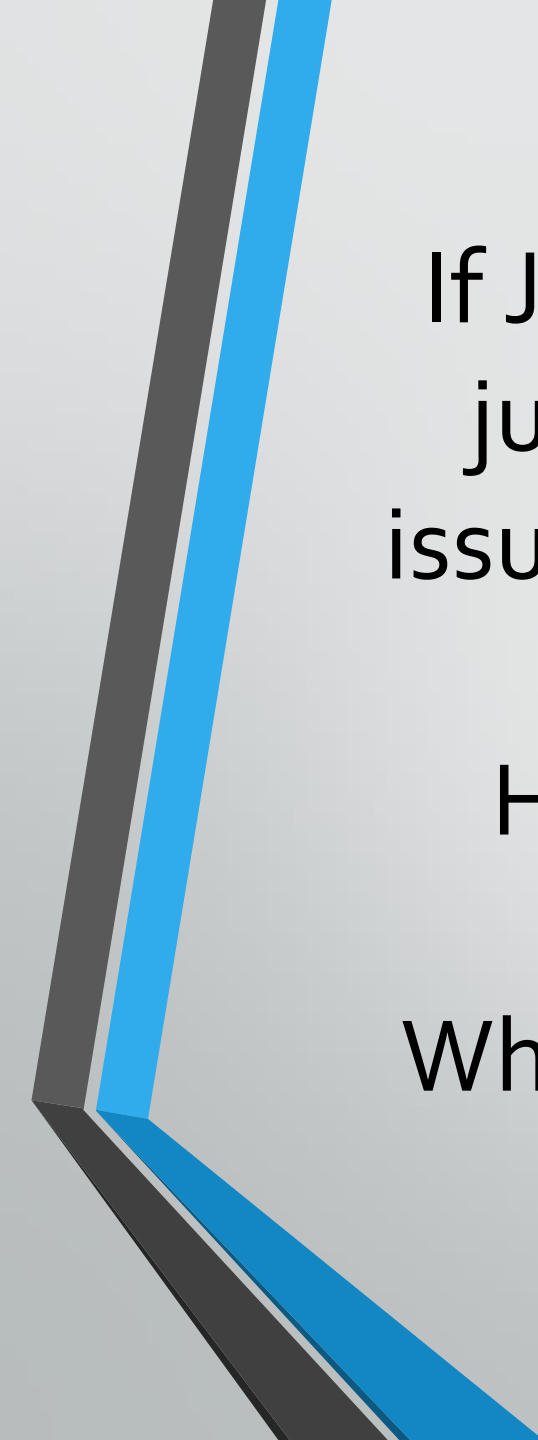


How can Jesus be God? (and similar questions
on the Trinity)

Why is it wrong to let a suffering person die?




Third category
Why does the Church...



If Jesus was all about loving people and not judging, why is the Church so hung up on issues of sexuality? (special reference here to same sex marriage)


How come priests can't get married and women can't be priests?

Why does the Catholic Church not like gays?



Why do Catholics have to go to Mass to have a relationship with God?

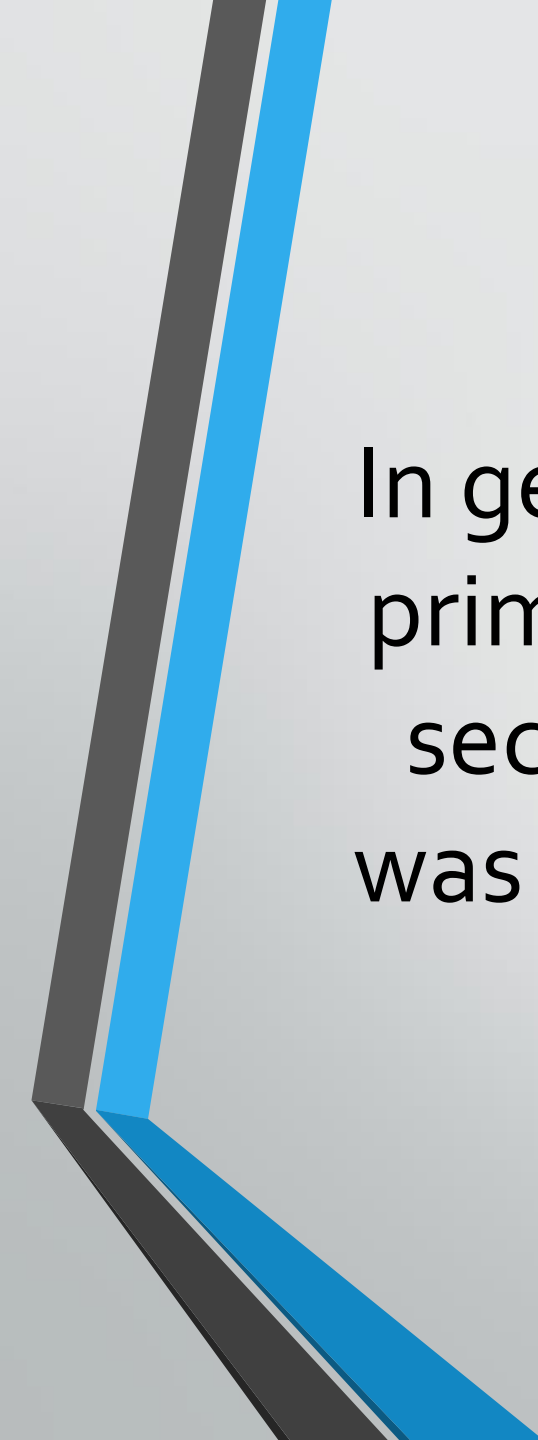
Why is the Church so wealthy?




Just one global comment. These categories are not post modern or post secular they are cognitively derived and are questions that are perennial




Some comments on primary school questions



In general, the classification of questions from primary school students was similar to that of secondary students. One notable difference was that at this level there were less questions in “why does the Church...” category.



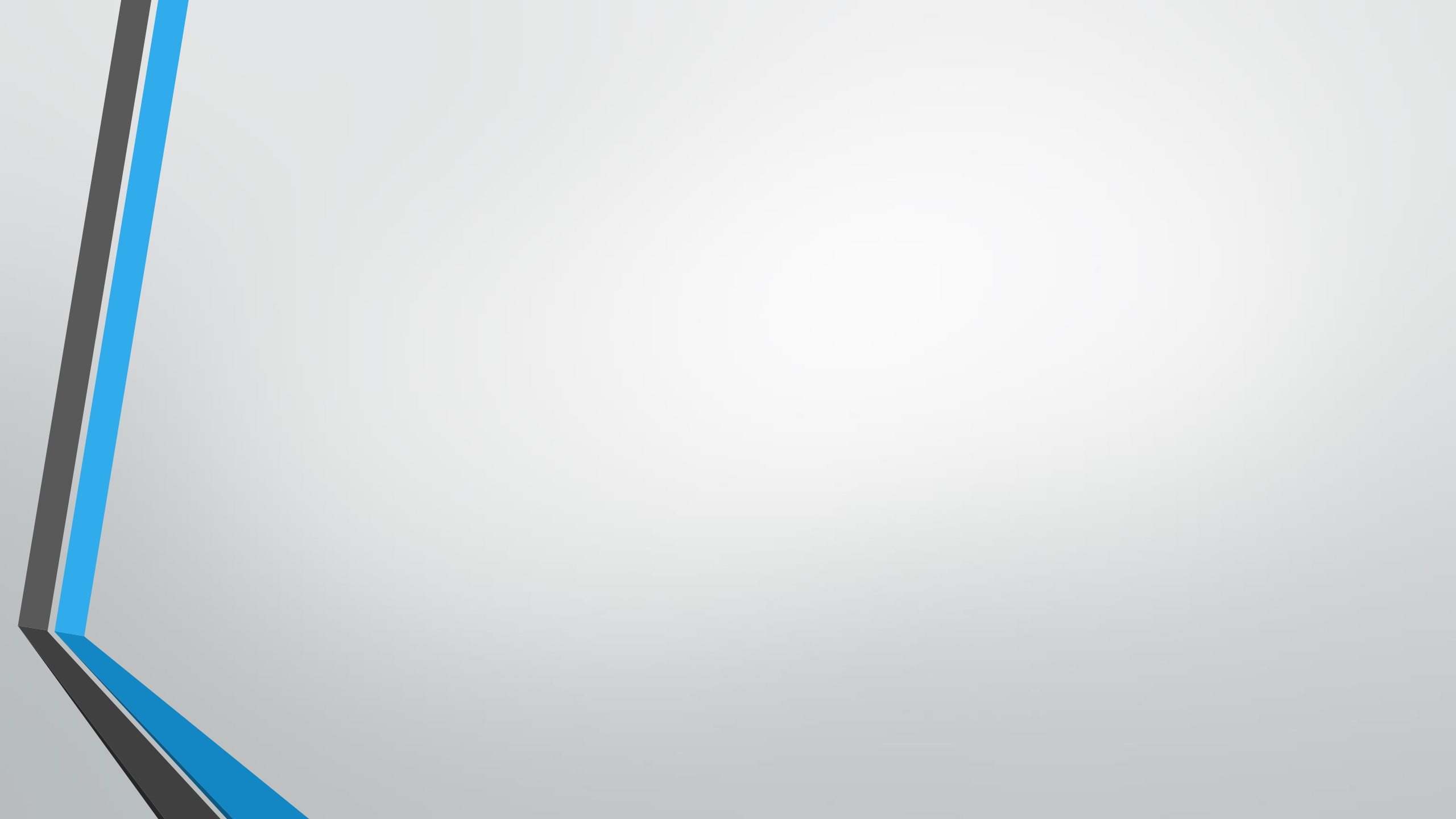
AndTeachers in the primary school focus groups noted that students often do not ask many questions in class although as they progressed to upper primary questions become more frequent.

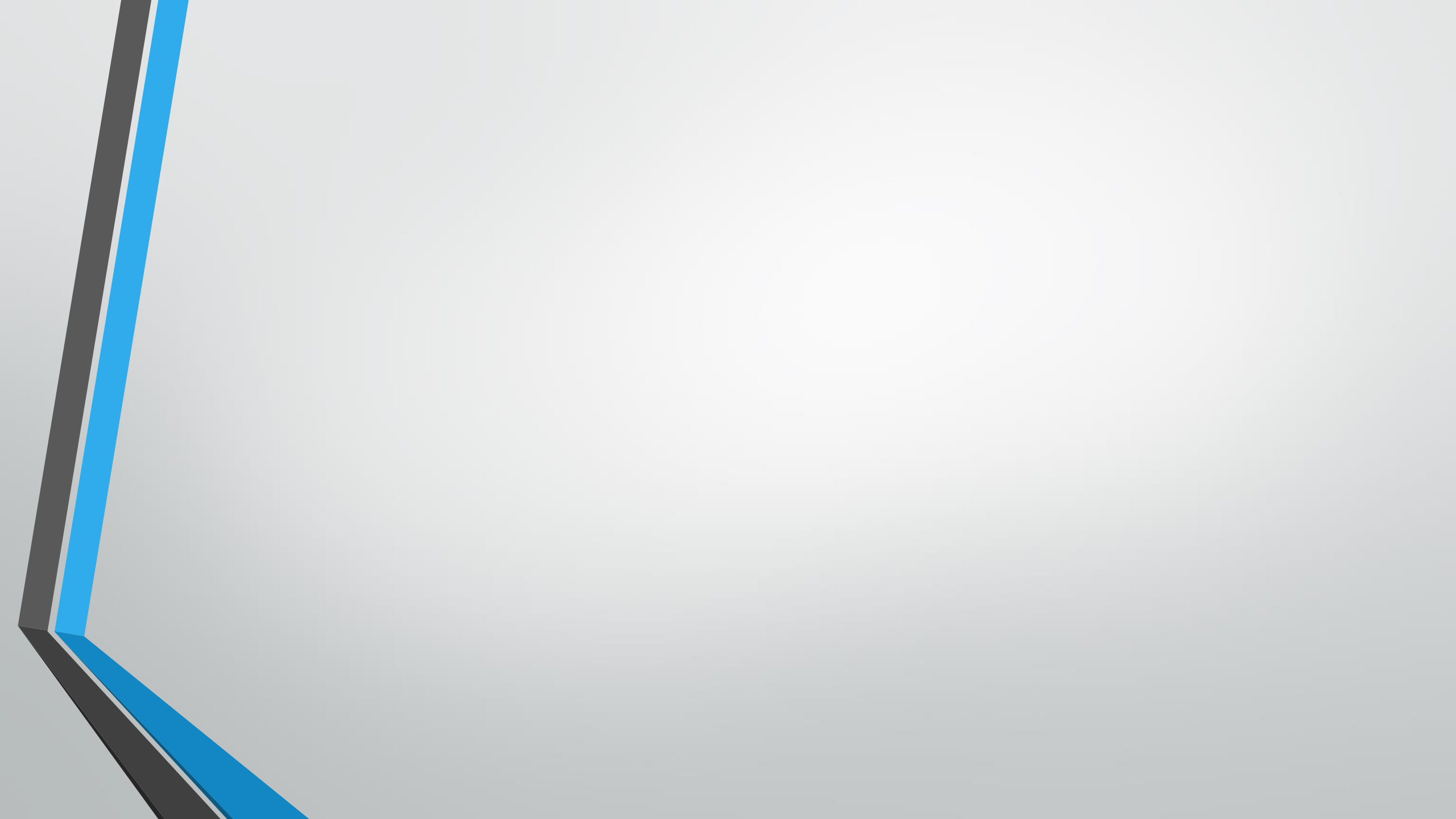



The next phase of the project looks at questions RE teachers ask and a closer examination of how they respond to student questions



So where do questions sit in a conceptual approach to RE in Catholic schools....**seamless segway into international perspectives!!!!**



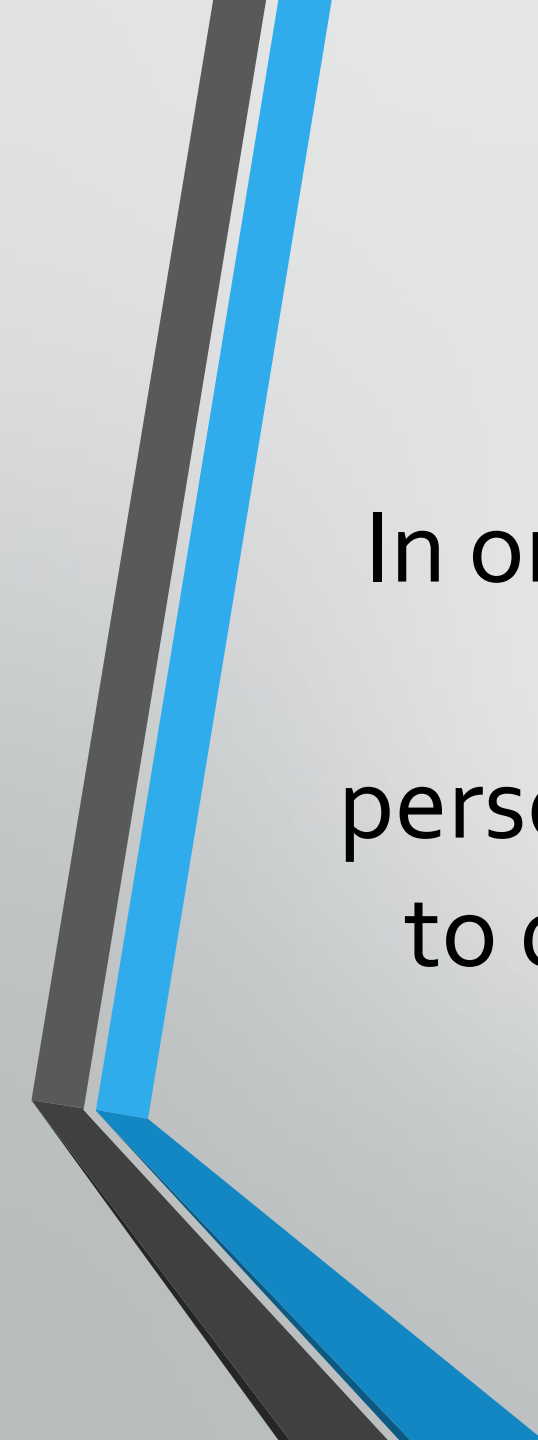




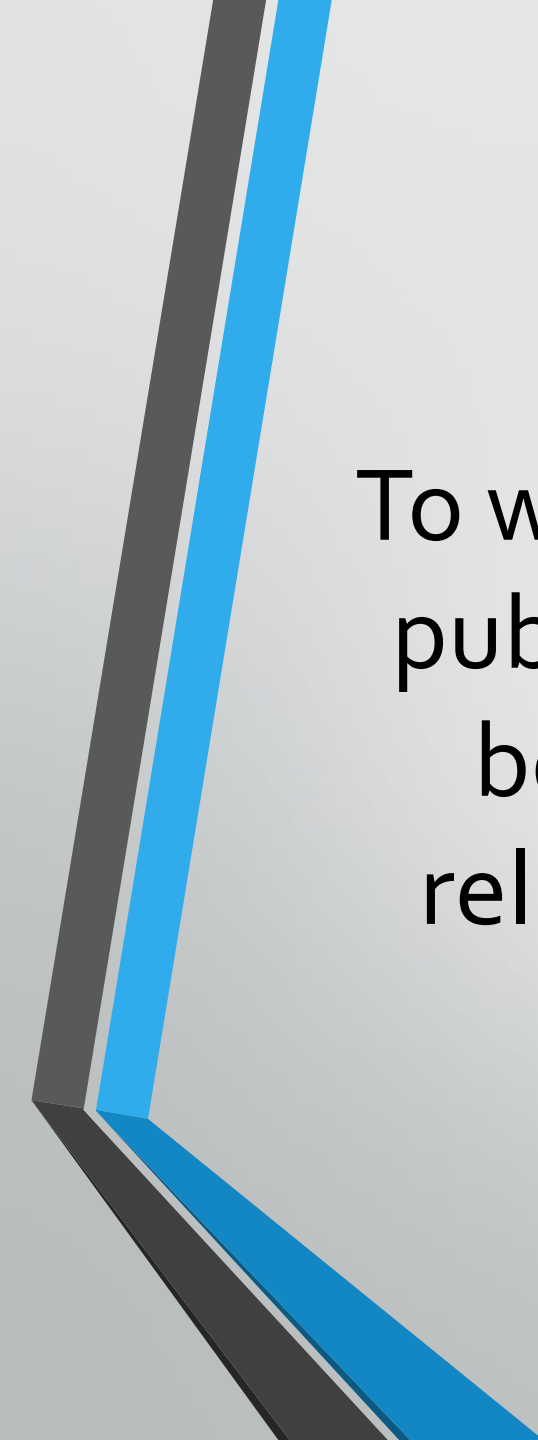
Let me throw in my other smidgen here. The data we have here from this project is that teachers are very dependant on various resources to respond to questions



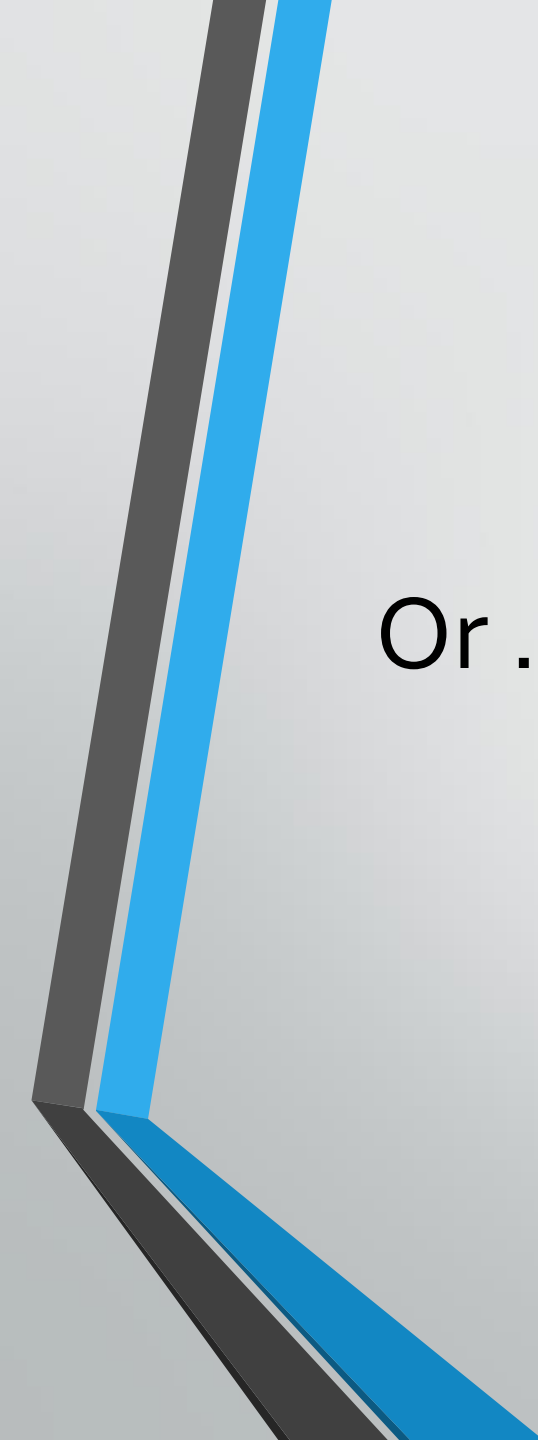
Help me.....



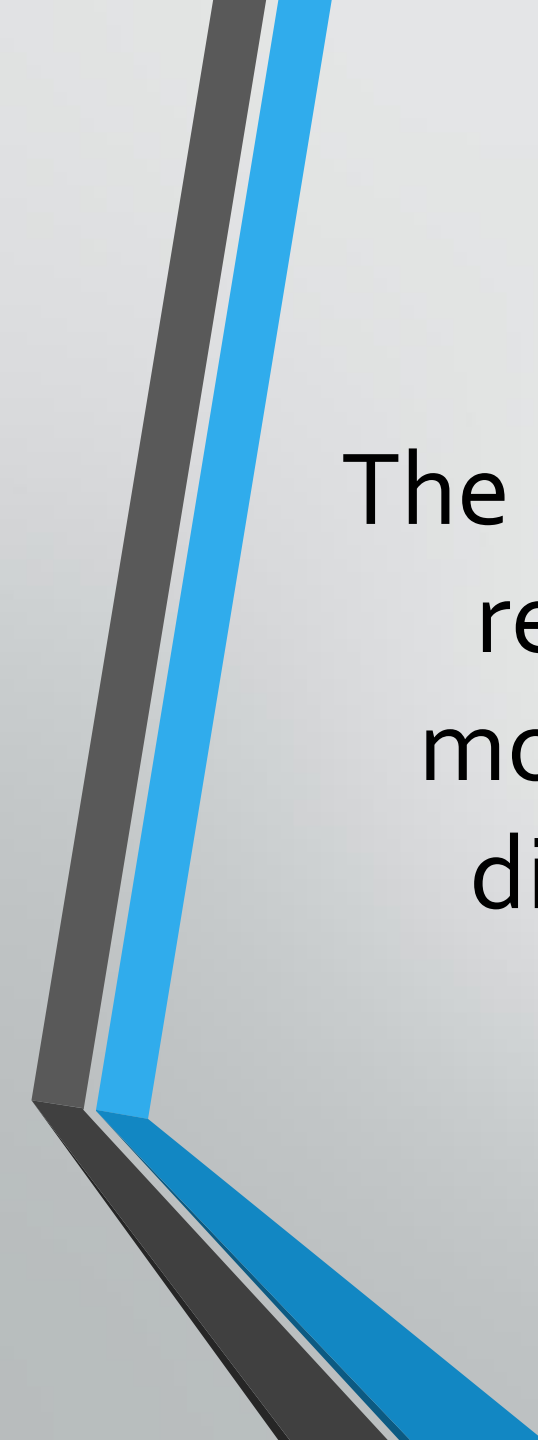
In order to respond well to questions teachers require a strong conceptual base both personally and in the curriculum and responses to questions need to be emerge from these.



To wit, vale ERC course in Quebec? This was in public schools but was premised on teachers being able to deal with a kaleidoscope of religious and non religious questions. (ever taught secularism as religion?)



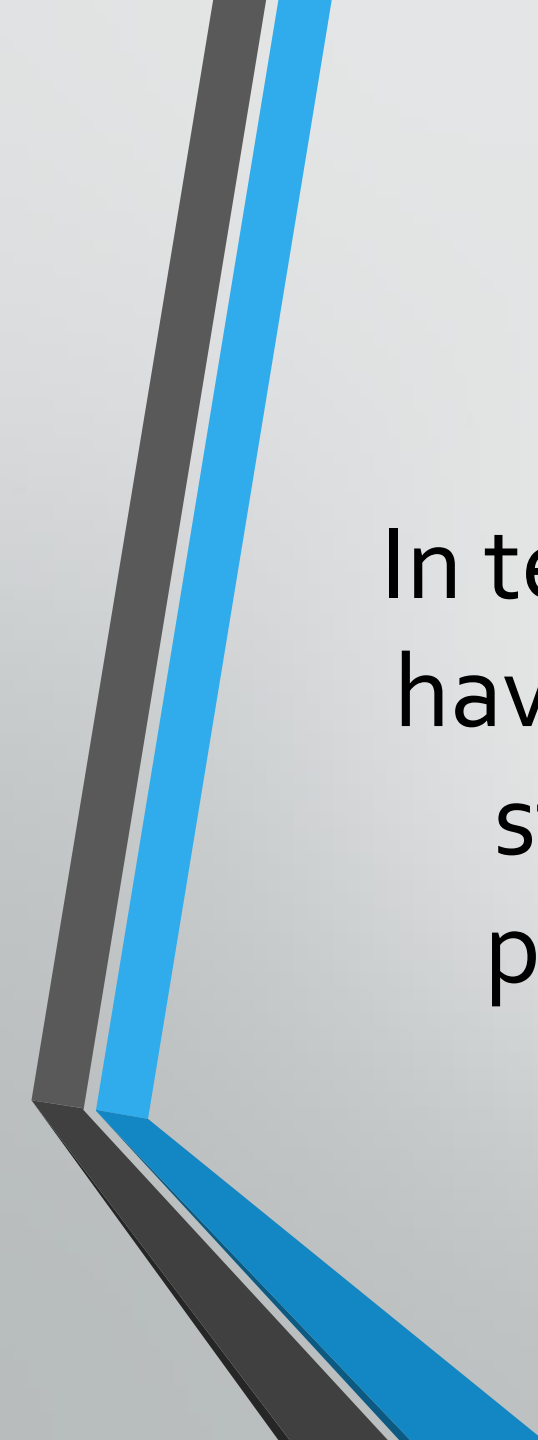
Or ... "I'm sorry I just don't know what a fatwa is and how they are derived in Islam"




The Help Me Dilemma doesn't auger well for a renewed emphasis on discovery learning models in RE.... That's a good question let's discover the answer together or is it 1974 again?

BACK TO THE FUTURE

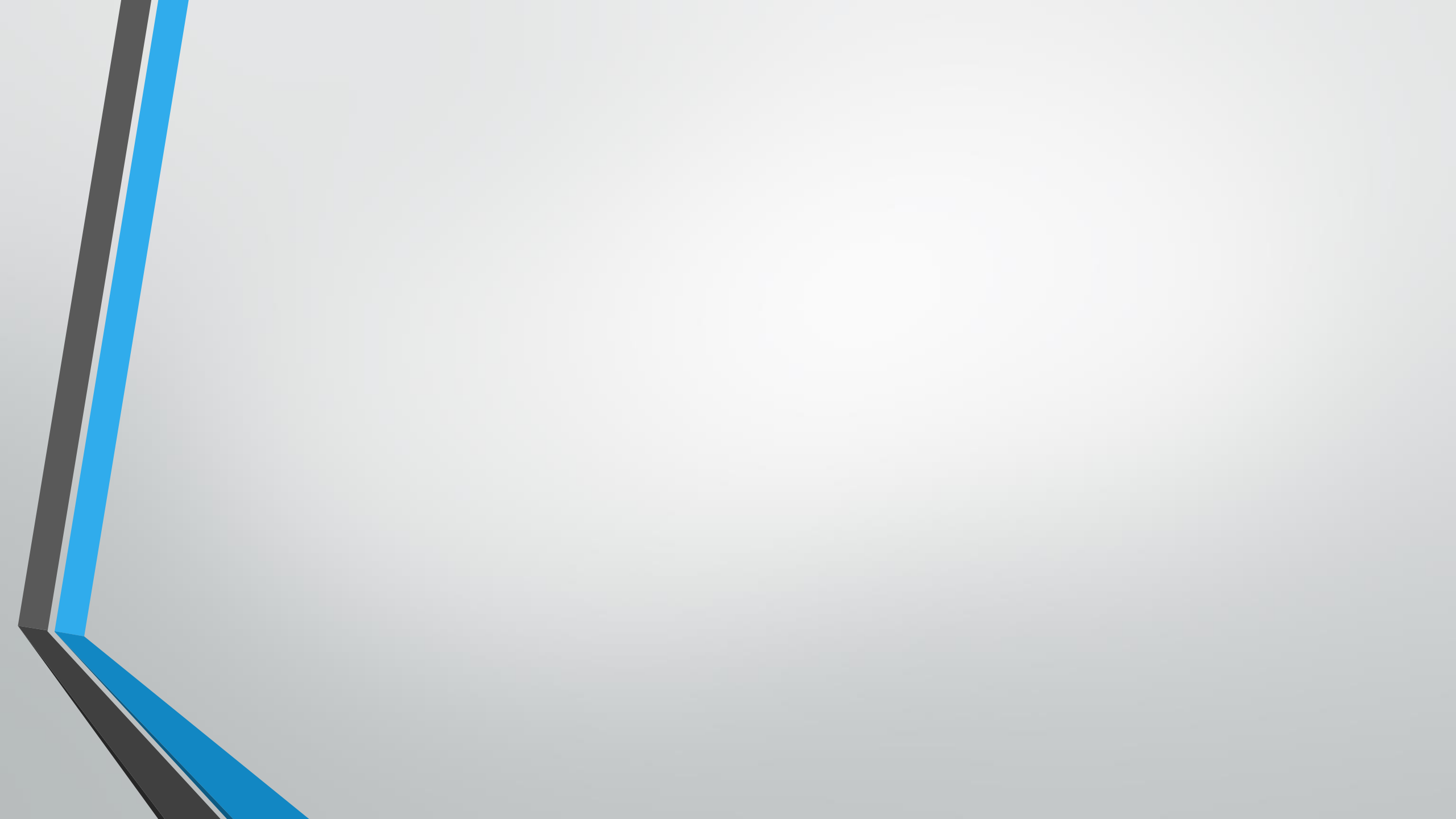




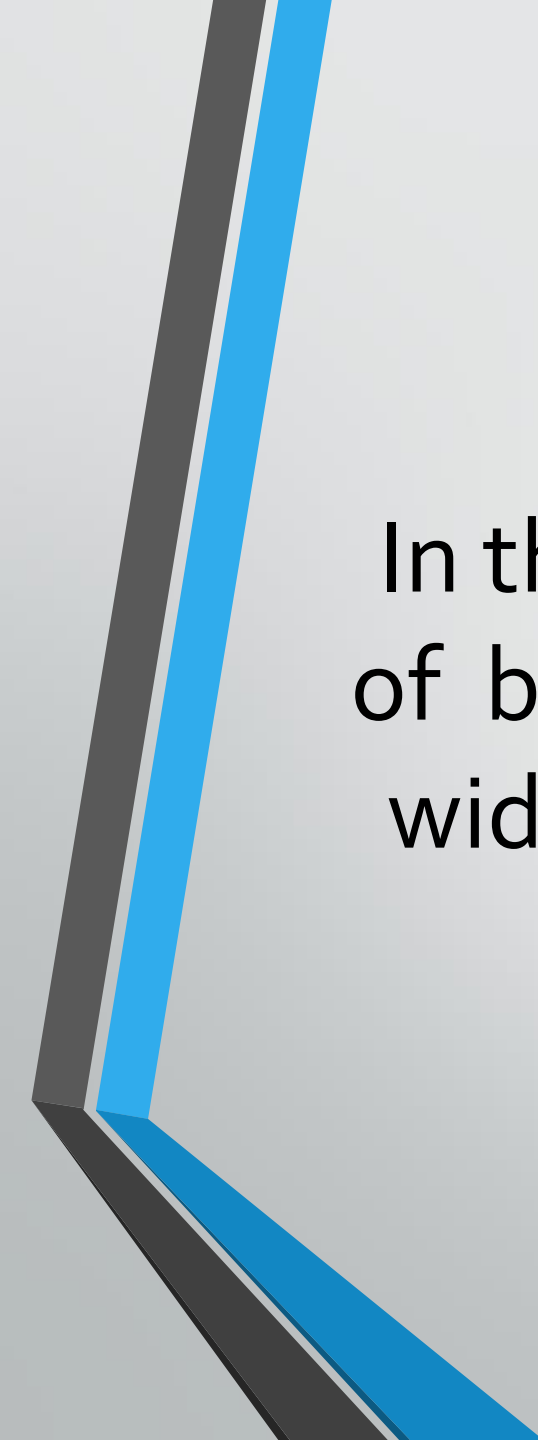
In terms of the questions students raise in RE
have you ever meet anyone who argues that
students will (or should) just sit there be
passive and take in all that I have to say?




So if we agree that questions are to be encouraged and responded to well let's dig a little deeper on how best to do both?







In the context of Catholic schools, be mindful of broadening the field of study to include too wide a range of opinions. This is largely to do with reducing cognitive load.



A firm basis for richer dialogue and engagement is if students focus, not necessarily entirely, with a “home tradition”. Reference here the work of Paul J. Griffiths



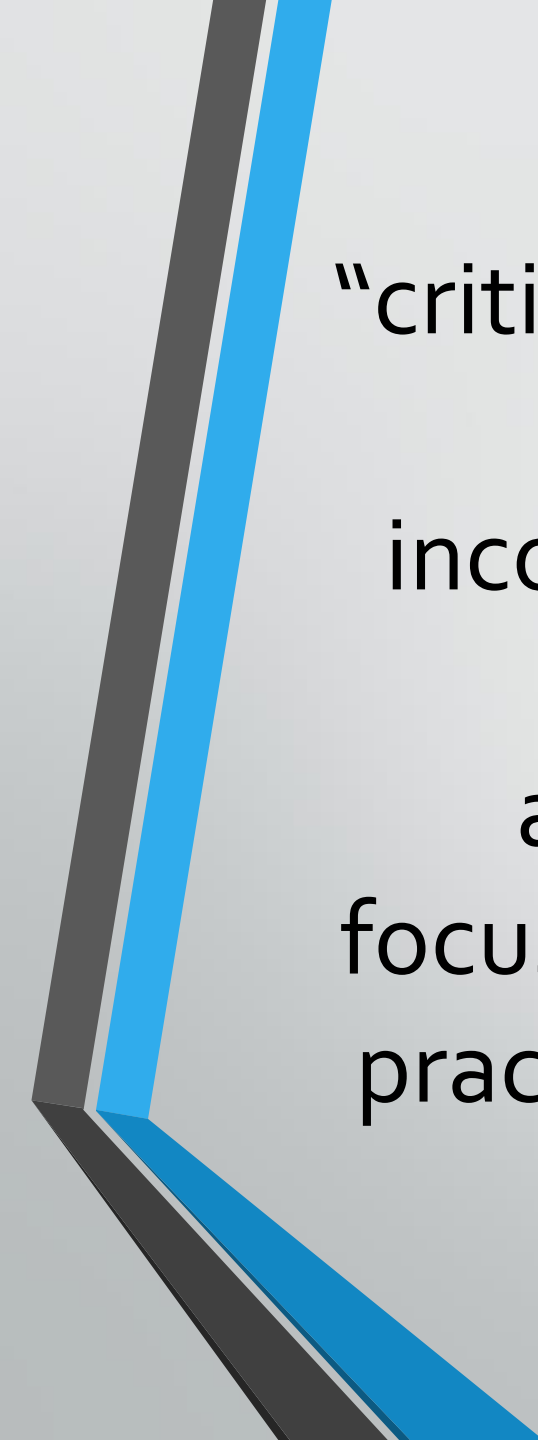
PAUL J. GRIFFITHS

Intellectual
Appetite

A THEOLOGICAL GRAMMAR



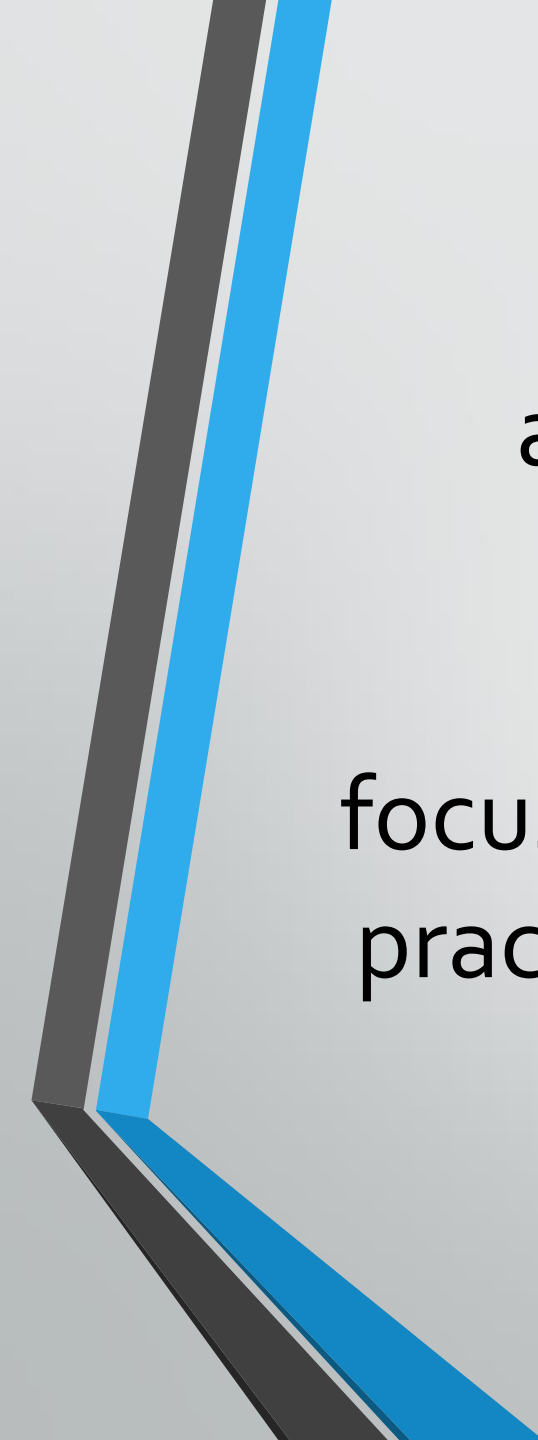
Be cautious of other approaches



“critical engagement with culture, less ecclesial language” (Australia, NZ)

incorporating “non institutional Catholicism”
(Canada, USA)

a whole curriculum based on questions focussing on worldview not religious belief and practice (England, Wales and parts of the EU – yes I’ve made the distinction!)



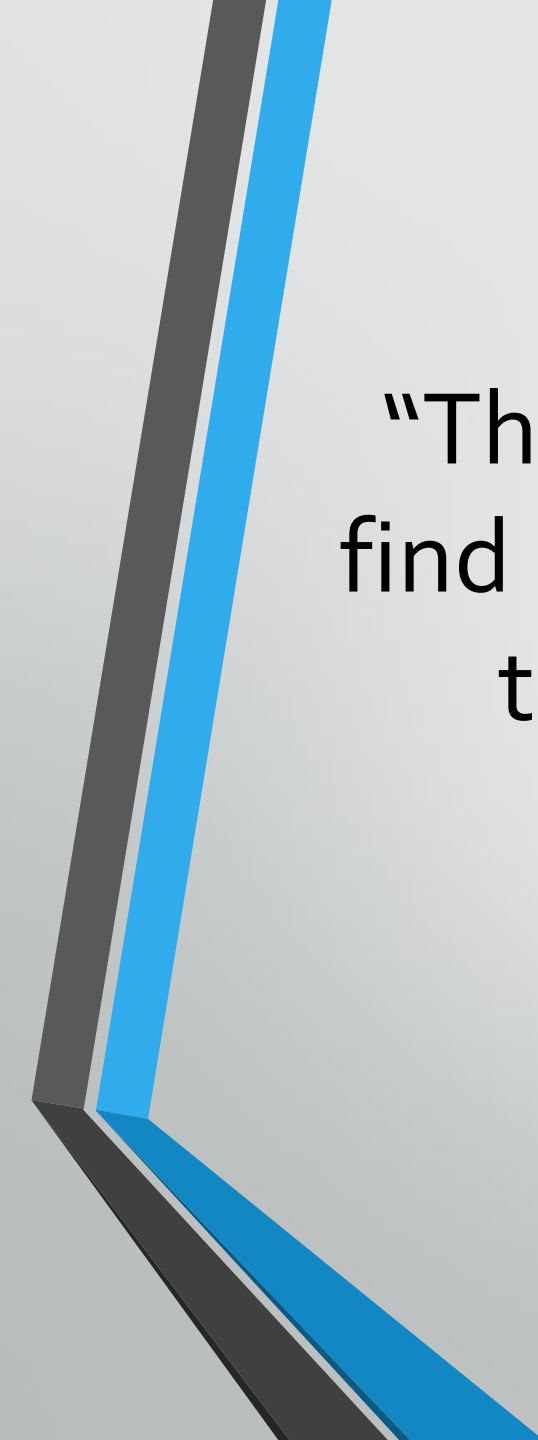
a whole curriculum based on questions
(Australia)

focussing on worldview not religious belief and
practice (England, Wales and parts of the EU –
yes I've made the distinction!)




In the words of Barnes 2020

Barnes, L.P., (2020) *Crisis, Controversy and the Future of Religious Education*. Oxford: Routledge.



“The implicit assumption that ‘young people’ find relevance in religious education only when their own particular worldview, which is inchoate or implicit, is identified and considered must be challenged...”




Pupils are just as likely to find interest and relevance in what is religiously new or novel as learning about their own beliefs." p.87.




Creating an Authentic Catholic School


Richard Rymarz



Being authentic is closely
approximating what you say with
what you do



So what does authentic RE look like?



Welcome to my world.....
Drumroll please

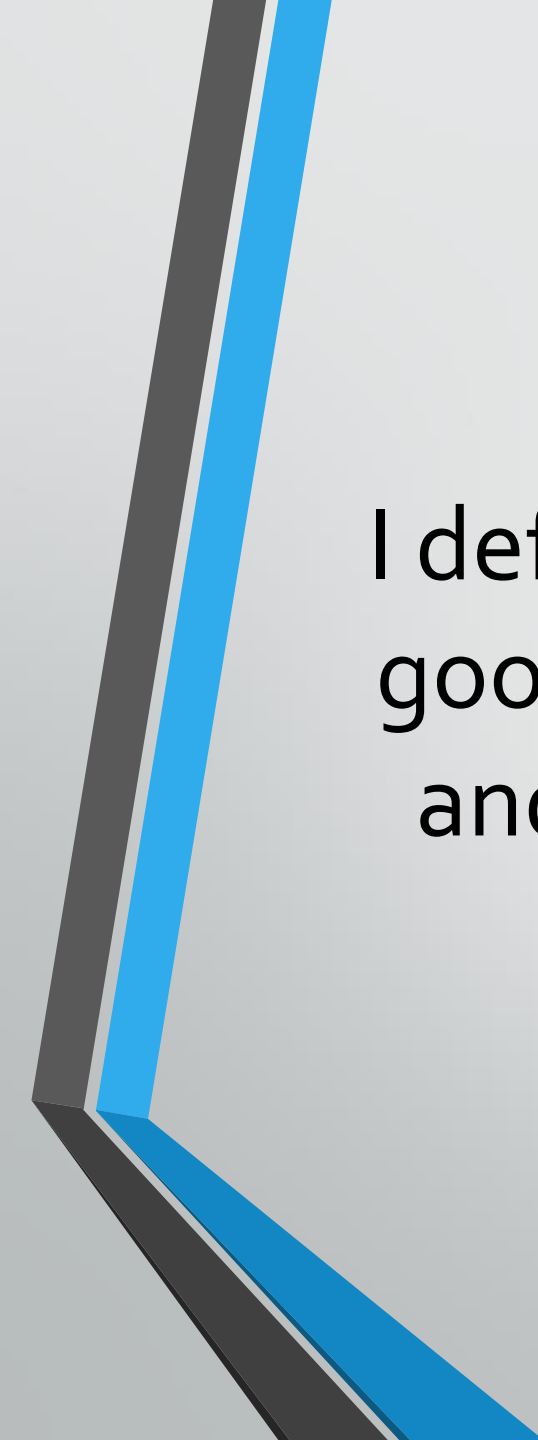





Or even more so



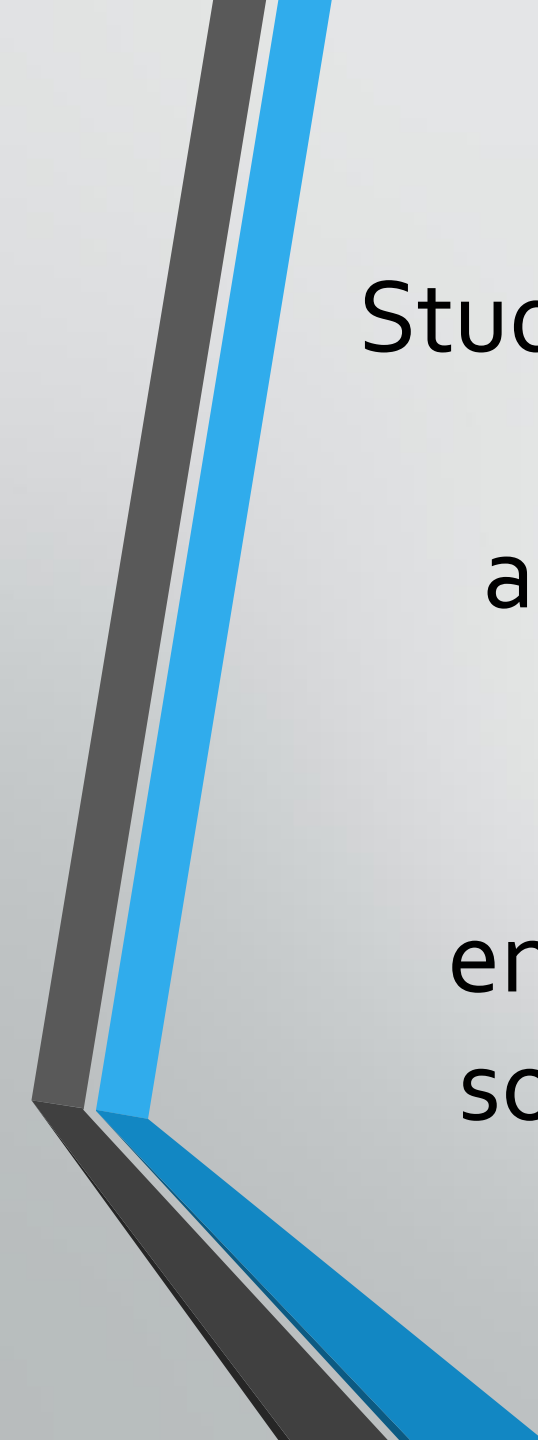
fineart
america



I defer to the standard Vygotskyian playbook,
good scaffolding, challenge don't overwhelm
and limit the cognitive range, at least in the
initial stages so




To highlight just two features of a
general approach:




Students value teachers who engage and who
“know more than we do”
and are respectful of students, esp. their
questions

engagement best comes through offering
something that is serious, systematic and
scholarly (SSS).




Need for Catholic schools to
commit to both curriculum
development **and** implementation in
RE



For instance, once a strong theme such as the integral formation of the human person is recognized how is it realized... in the school down the road?



In conclusion...



In a plural, secular societies RE in Catholic schools must be distinctive and SSS in order to authentic and to, inter alia, make a contribution to the common good.

THANK
YOU



BBI

The Australian
Institute of Theological
Education